

THE COLONIAL LAGOS BOY IN THE IBADAN ARCHIVES: A REVIEW OF THE STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This paper examines the structural context of urbanity in the daily lives of boys in colonial Lagos. Particularly, it aims to underscore the ways in which their testaments, as conveyed in their petitions, point to the structural composition of livelihood and how they presented urbanity, poverty, fatherhood, employment, benefaction, education, servanthood, the state and the 'interiority complex' that reflected their personhood in the period – a phenomenon that remains inadequately interrogated in existing works. What is also significant here is the attention paid to the words of the boys as they constructed the generic conditions that their specific expressions point to. Here, in addition to livelihood matters, it is the way in which their words present the teenage boy in the period referred to by the correspondences that serve as the data for the analysis that is presented. Thus, this article focuses on the facts as presented showing the manner in which boyhood was portrayed in the very words of the boys themselves.

Keywords: Boyhood, colonial, urbanity, Lagos, livelihood.

Résumé Cet article examine le contexte structurel de l'urbanité dans la vie quotidienne des garçons dans le Lagos colonial. Il vise en particulier à souligner la manière dont leurs témoignages, tels qu'ils sont transmis dans leurs pétitions, mettent en évidence la composition structurelle des moyens de subsistance et la manière dont ils ont présenté l'urbanité, la pauvreté, la paternité, l'emploi, la bienfaisance, l'éducation, le service, l'État et le "complexe d'intériorité" qui reflétait leur personnalité à cette époque - un phénomène qui reste insuffisamment interrogé dans les œuvres existantes. Ce qui est également significatif ici, c'est l'attention portée aux mots des garçons qui ont construit les conditions génériques que leurs expressions spécifiques indiquent. Ici, outre les questions de subsistance, c'est la manière dont leurs mots présentent l'adolescent dans la période à laquelle se réfèrent les correspondances qui servent de données pour l'analyse qui est présentée. Ainsi, cet article se concentre sur les faits tels qu'ils sont présentés, montrant la manière dont l'adolescence a été dépeinte dans les mots mêmes des garçons.

Mot clés: L'enfance, l'urbanité coloniale, Lagos, moyens de subsistance.

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Introduction

Researchers working with petitions written in Lagos between 1940 -1960 cannot but be impressed by the frequency of letters written by boys aged 14 -17 to the office of the Commissioner of the Colonies and the Colony Welfare office and now kept at the Nigerian National Archive Ibadan.¹ The letters written by these young males fall into the category of official correspondence, particularly those written to the Commissioner of the Colony which is combined in the same file with those written to the Colony Welfare Office (Olukoju 2016). The consistent outpouring of these correspondents makes the researcher wonder the reasons why there is very little representation of girls in such writings. One of the reasons that can be recovered from literature is that girls were marginalised in the construction of gender identity in colonial Lagos by the elite; with boys regarded in a more positive light (George 2011). Such analyses point to other denigration experienced by girls in gendered education (Gennaro 2016:68), essentially in the demonstration of character traits like boldness and determination – features that seemed to suggest that girls did not possess the temerity to petition a colonial agent. In any case, the significant number of petitions by boys itself raises questions the same way that the near-absence of petitions by girls do: why did boys write in such a large number? What inspired their convictions? To what extent did the male stereotype influence their writing? What did they seek to achieve by writing? What did they say? In seeking to answer these questions, this article presents an overview of the structural influence on this section of the population of colonial Lagos and to narrow the focus of responses to colonialism to very young males in the period.

The conditions of young people in colonial Lagos have been discussed in the historical literature (see e.g. Aderinto (ed.) 2015). They have been examined from the structural contexts of urbanity, colonialism, patriarchy, crime, poverty and power. The literature shows how poverty was a major factor that drove them to utilise perhaps the most important weapon of social integration (education) to voice their needs and wants to colonial agents and the institutions they represented. Virtually all of them paraded poverty profiles that ranged from orphan-hood to unemployment, neglect, homelessness, minimal education, disempowered parentage, and so on. The debilitating influences of these factors were clear: lack of money, idleness, near absence of assistance from extended family members, and the like. They could not eat well and were virtually unable to afford decent clothing. Housing

¹ All the letters considered in this article were used for my Ph.D dissertation in the department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos and submitted to the Postgraduate School, University of Lagos in 2012. Saheed Aderinto (2015) used some of the letters in his article: “O! sir I do not know either to kill myself or to stay”: Childhood Emotion, Poverty and Literary Culture in Nigeria, 1900-1960” in *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 8, (2), John Hopkins University Press, 273-294. However, the focus and approach deviates from Aderinto’s aim in that particular article and fortifies the position that these writings offer a textuality that is rich not only in content but also in their capacity to effect an entrance into a world of repeatedly new meanings and interpretations. See Barber. 2008.

was a far too distant luxury to conceive much less attain. These basics of poverty were thus directly unattainable at the modest scale.

This article re-examines the letters they wrote to two major colonial offices that directly attended to their petitions: the colony welfare office and the office of the commissioner of the colony. Both offices worked together as they received and processed the letters: reading, referring, inviting the writers, conducting interviews, making on-the-spot assessments of the writers' personalities, scheduling and conducting investigations, and making final decisions such as writing recommendations letters, replying to the correspondence, referring the youth to another body, or by simply writing "no reply needed" on the original letter. This article differs from those that have pointed to the importance of petitions written by these youngsters in the sense that it investigates the ways in which the words and expressions of the boys were part of the larger framework in which urban Lagos subsisted. Hence, it uses the expressions of the boys themselves from their correspondence to make sense of the generic framework of colonial Lagos. Essentially, it brings to the fore those 'issues' that were not referred to higher colonial authorities like that of the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Thus, the decisions taken by the colony welfare office and the administrator of the colony indicated the opportunities available for the agents to take decisions on matters that were not sensitive enough to warrant intervention by the 'very busy' office of the Secretary of State for the Colonies. A re-reading of these petitions offers a radically different perspective of boys - as generally calm despite the obvious challenges: poverty, unemployment, orphan-hood, hunger, half-education. For them to be able to channel such tensions into writing was a remarkable demonstration of a calmness that is often absent in the character presentation of their contemporaries and near-adult counterparts (Salaam and Brown 2012; Uyieh 2018, Soyinka 1995).

Urban Experience

The significant everyday experience of boys in colonial Lagos was of the urban. This connects teenage activity with crime, prostitution, homelessness, negative mentoring by outlaws in the urban centres and unemployment (Heap 2009, Heap 1997). Thus, boys were a central focus in the analyses of those concerned with the changing status of the city. This was in addition to the changing identities of young people (George 2011). Their vulnerability was most pronounced because unlike their adult counterparts, their capacity to understand the urban experience in terms of the policies, ordinances and regulations that administered conduct was unavailable rather than compromised as was the case with adult outlaws in the colonial city (Fourchard 2006, Heap 2009). Hence, as noted by some studies, the level of capacity at which the teenagers lived on an everyday basis was tied to the modest understanding of the superstructure of urban society (the state). However, in their letters, they demonstrated a vague understanding of the state. Additionally, their words contain interesting remarks about colonial society. Since they could not effectively understand the nature of the relationship between the two, they depended more on their understanding of urban culture of writing. We shall therefore examine in the following four sections how their attitudes and writing were affected by the family, employment, education, and stereotypes of maleness, before we consider in the conclusion, two major attitudes that reflected their identities as younger versions of the adult male: self-confidence and decision making.

The family

“It is a great sorrow to announce that I am only a poor boy who cannot attend school, owing to the death of my father and my mother” (N.A.I. Com.Col. 1 File No 2766 Vol. 1, Joseph Adefowokan to Colony Welfare Officer, January 1944) were the words of Joseph Adefowokan in 1944 and one of the most repetitive statements expressing what the boys were convinced was ordinarily an urban safe net and social capital. In another instance, Oluyinka had both parents but was confounded in 1944 because “... to my greatest wonder my parents are not now financially strong and they said that they could not complete this year in paying me school fees. I was at sea when I heard this from my parents” (N.A.I. Com.Col.1, File No. 2766, Vol. 1, Oluyinka Akinyele to Com. Col. 27, January, 1944). Since this ‘safety net’ was already compromised by wider socio-economic factors, he (the boy child - used in the collective sense) already had an experience as a ‘family male’. He used this modest understanding to express the intensity of his needs, rather than bother with the extent to which such understanding could lead him to ‘knowing the state better’. In his estimation and in some instances, this was unnecessary. However, he emphasised it in other instances. When he stated: “My mother who paid my school fees has become old and my father has died in 1942” (N.A.I. Com.Col. 1, File No 2766, Vol 1, Correspondence from Bolaji Agbabiaka to Colony Welfare Office, 7, October 1946), it was a recognition of the immediate repercussion of a compromised social safety-net. This was a concern given that the colonial social fabric had compromised the economic capacity of traditional breadwinners. Hence, his first confrontation with the colonial social structure was death and/or ill-health of his parents and the effects on such events of wider colonial socio-economic contexts. Although the traditional expectations of male breadwinners continued, the implication of the colonial regime increased the vulnerability of women and increased the challenges of breadwinning for men in sense that urban women were either jobless or engaged in petty economic activities that seemed to only be directed at survival, while the fathers were mainly half-educated resulting in efforts too small to effect meaningful economic changes in the family. The following story from an unnamed boy in 1943 indicate the immediate and far-reaching repercussions of the death of a breadwinner (his father):

the reason of my saying this is that when I was two years old, my father died at Aba, by motor accident at the Miller Brothers workshop while he was working, according to the news given to me by my mother and some of my family. From thence, I was brought to Lagos in the same year 1929 and lodge with my uncle, who was sending me to school since I was up to school age, and last quarter March of this year, he said that after the first and the second quarter he will not be able to send me to school and clothe me again, and I send many of my family to beg him before he gave me the school fees for this quarter and he said that is the end of my schooling. I have one younger brother who lodge with one of my mother’s family and now his is in class VI middle at Kano and that is another shamefulness to me... (N.A.I. Com.Col. 1, File No. 2766 Vol. 1, Correspondence from an unnamed teenager to the Commissioner for the Colony, Lagos, 5 May, 1943).

As some of the letters indicate, the economic status of some former soldiers was challenging because of the problems of reintegrating into the economic mainstream. Nwosu’s father had fought in the First World War but his experiences and return did not result in significant financial benefit, so Nwosu went to Lagos looking for opportunities (N.A.I., Com.Col. 1 File

No. 2766 Vol. 1, Correspondence from Nwosu to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 29 August, 1944). This points to the failure of colonial policy to sustain professional soldiers who fought in the First and Second World Wars (even allowing that many of them were not recruited as mainstream members of the army). The implications of this directly impacted on teenagers. For ex-servicemen who could afford to take care of their families, family size and the responsibilities towards the extended family often overwhelmed the male breadwinner striving to keep the family together through some form of employment or another, a trait the boy child noticed and sought to express.

Employment

...unfortunately, my father could no longer maintain me because he was out of job. My only hope for help is in you. I shall be prepared to do any kind of job though a menial one to earn something to continue my evening classes. I am seventeen years of age and think I could do all a man could to earn his wages. (N.A.I., Com.Col. 1, File No. 2766, Vol. 1, Correspondence from Friday Adah, Lagos 16 May, 1944).

Essentially, a boy like Friday Adah understood the meaning of employment and had seen an example in his father – a condition he was willing to experience. He knew that if available, a job for him would not compare with that of his father (it would be “a menial one”) only to come up with a sense of confidence in the words “I am seventeen years old and think I could do all a man could to earn his wages” (ref. above). Employment in any form was a feature of urban life that the teenagers were evidently unprepared to attain, given their age, educational attainment and physical capabilities. In colonial Lagos where the breadwinning ability of adult males was compromised, a boy could not demonstrate he was able let alone compete. Although he was willing to do menial jobs like housekeeping, gardening, stewarding, he felt he could get such positions because he would be exploited. In 1944, Sylvanus felt he could not be an office boy but could do other forms of work:

I could conjecture that this may likely prove abortive just to be an office boy, but I hope you will kindly fix me up as one of the teachers or helpers under the sphere of your management with which I do at present carry on to better my future position. I do not mind to do this free provided I would be giving even three pence everyday to feed myself as I have nobody to feed me now (N.A.I., Com.Col.1, File No. 2766, Vol.1, Correspondence from Sylvanus to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 4 July, 1944).

Since male adults would ordinarily apply for positions that required better treatment, the boys offered themselves to possible employers at lower costs than adults. Significantly, colonial employments regulations were directed at male adults who possessed the required qualifications. Even the regulations recognised the differing capabilities of the workforce and implemented discriminatory wages. Since it was within this structure that the boys subsisted, the opportunities available only reinforced their status as underdogs. Yet it was under this structure that the boys expressed their faith and a desperation to be part of it. With their minimal education, they often expressed a desire to a job that would offer sufficient income for them to further their ambition as scholars: “I would have joined the army as a clerk-in-training but there would have been no sufficient time for me to take my junior Cambridge {exam} in December”, wrote Victor Majekodunmi in 1943(?), (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Victor A. Majekodunmi to the Colonial Welfare Officer,

Lagos, 24 February, 1943(?) showing a determination not to neglect what he believed would ensure a sure footing in any future job.

Education

Furthermore, education drew the boys towards the state's capacity to intervene in urban lifestyle, more so if the urban resident demonstrated willingness to advance in knowledge acquisition. It was obvious, given the implications of the children's letters that colonial agents 'should and would be interested in ensuring the education of those willing to be trained academically'. So convinced was a boy such as William Olusola Shonde, having realised the unlikeliness of his admission to Methodist Boys High School (having written an examination attended by about six hundred candidates), he decided to approach the colony welfare officer in 1943:

But I learnt that few will be taken; so I have to seize this precious opportunity of writing you to help me, so that I may be admitted. I shall come to you in person, with my English and arithmetic papers together with my report of attendance, conduct and progress in the school, if you will like to see them. I have bought everything that is needed and my uniform altogether against next year because in the course of time, things will be scarce. (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from William Olusola Shonde to the Colony Welfare Officer, Lagos 21 October 1943).

Others conceived the education they desperately sought to attain as culturally significant given the negative connotations of its absence: 'Please Sir help me. It is not that you will pay all of my school fees only when it is complete. Excuse me Sir "The Yoruba people use to say one proverb. Half knowledge is usually make a boy to suffer in his life" and God will help you too.' (N.A.I., Com.Col. 1, File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from an unnamed boy to the commissioner of the colony, Lagos, 2 December, 1943). They perceived education as a means to attain success in life and showed desperation in the extent they were willing to go to be counted as 'worthy subjects' of the colonial state. They understood the factors needed for this: good grades in school examinations, money for tuition and recommendations. The first of these factors was the only one substantially within his individual capacity; the second pointing to the extent to which his family was able to sustain the costs of schooling, and the third was depended on social networks. These factors reveal the vulnerability of these boys – intellectually, financially and in terms of character – in the sense that a writer needed to demonstrate to the officer (who knew very little of him) that he was worthy of trust. However, he knew that once his ability to get good education was hindered, he would have to stoop low to access the available alternatives: "I heard that you are getting some of boys which is don't going to school. When they promot me to Std VI, my mother says that she cannot pay my school fees so that I am not going to school now and I want you to get in your department in any kind of work, which you wants I will do it for you sir [errors in the original]." (N.A.I., Com.Col. 1 File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Ramonu to the Colony Welfare Officer, Lagos, 24 February 1943). These were the words of Ramonu, a fifteen-year-old in 1943 who was aware that should he miss the opportunity, he would have to search for alternatives.

The male stereotype

Aware of their vulnerability, these boys desperately attempted to convey to the colonial agents their willingness to be responsible. The many references in different contexts to the death of their fathers showed them as orphans who knew the value of breadwinning and responsibility. Although, as already noted, the absence of an adult male in the family setting was hugely challenging whether from irresponsible absent fathers or more significantly, the death of father-figures. This was a major reason why Aderinto underscores the perception of the colonial officer as male (Aderinto 2015: 273-294). The writers may not have been fully aware of the responsibilities of fatherhood but knew many of the implications of its absence or being compromised. The first implication was the pressure it bore on mothers whose helplessness were often described by the boys (N.A.I. Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. 1, Correspondence from Akinola Ajose, to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 April, 1943; N.A.I. Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from E. A. Durojaiye to Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos 5 April, 1943). Next was the benefaction of male figures who were often cited as helpers and who assisted up to a point but eventually stopped due to other constraints: “I was too small over since my parents had died. Suddenly I got a kind man who had school me for five years. Ho! he consulted me three weeks ago that he won’t be able to school me anymore throughout this third term” wrote Layiwola Folawiyo in 1943 (N.A.I. Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Layiwola Folawiyo to Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 7 August, 1943). It is significant that the boys often portray mothers as dependent on the leadership of fathers, and the compromised capacity of a mother to take responsibility:

I have got no father but only my mother which is very poor. She sells firewood and did all her best to put me in a day school. After some years, I passed to standard four. But frequently she becomes very old that she cannot even walk or take food and by so doing she was unable to carry on my responsibility anymore (N.A.I. Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from John Egungunnuwo to the Commissioner for the Colony, Lagos, 3 August, 1944).²

In one extreme case a teenager referred to his mother as ‘a church rat’ – emphasising her poor financial conditions and inability to pay for his school fees. However, this kind of exaggeration is prevalent in many letters written by the boys to convey the extremity of their conditions. Instructively, they were influenced by the character of adult males they had been accustomed to – to be responsible, to be patriotic, to be ready and willing to engage in demanding jobs, to attain success and to advance in educational pursuit. Hence, responsibility was at the core of the male lot – an example of which had been represented in the father: “On your honour Sir, I appeal to see if you can render a helpful hand to me, so that I may pay back some of my mother’s kindness to me before she could die for she is old as I am the first son of my parents and my father has died. As you know, I will carry up the responsibility of my father’s family, for I am now the father” (N.A.I., Com. Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Nwosu to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 29, August, 1944). These words were written in Nwosu’s letter in 1944, expressing a condition he expected the Commissioner to understand and then act in the role of father-figure. So engrossed in the desire for responsibility were these boys that many of them felt irritated at their incapacity at

² There are two versions of this letter sent to the commissioner of the colony in August 1944.

an age they were supposed to still be supported by their parents. Between 13 and 17, many felt compelled to assume breadwinning roles that were impossible to attain. In the words of Jack Phillip in 1944:

“It is rather unfortunate to see that I am still fed by my aged mother, considering my age and the period since I have left school. I have tried days in day out to secure a job to earn a living to render her any possible help that can lies in my power. I am now left to roam about in the world as a lard without a nest ‘HELP’ is the target I am aiming at any angle it can be found..... Sir, I do not doubt of gaining a chance of help through you, whether in your department or elsewhere. On tecknical line or any job you think fit. Help me sir to free me from this entanglement of mine. I am now in dire predicament. I do not know where to fly to....[errors in the original]”(N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Jack Phillip to the Colony Welfare Office, Lagos, 23 October, 1944).

The colonial state was far removed from their everyday perceptions yet they could directly engage with it through the colonial officials. Their use of words to indicate preference for the perpetuity of British rule in some letters and the elevation of the colonial agent’s authority in others demonstrate the writers recognition and understanding of power, efficacy and authority – the realms at which the colonial state operated and which stereotyped male adults. Thus, it was at the level of intimacy with direct realities of poverty and the demonstrable capacities of the male stereotype that they came to perceive the colonial state. Therefore, whoever represented the state was ‘a benefactor and a provider’. To Nosiru Lawal for example, he seemed convinced of the minimum standards of decent livelihood expected from a British subject. The first paragraph shows how he perceived the colonial state viz-a-viz its representation – as one imbued with power and authority that must be respected by any subject but which also presents an opportunity for the subject to take advantage of. In effect, the state is a moral zone represented by equally moral agents willing to demonstrate such ‘welfarist’ feature: “I am too low to appear before your Honourable seeking for any obligation, but being a British subject in the protectorate region of Nigeria, I trust very strongly that your willingness and kindness to assist your son will be extended to me and thereby disregard my humility [whatever this meant]” (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Nosiru Lawal to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 26 June, 1943). Therefore, ‘based on this standard’, “It is not a fair thing for a youth like myself to be wandering about the street under this protected region of the British” (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Nosiru Lawal to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 26 June, 1943). If Nosiru had understood that the city in which he lived was a British colony with a higher status than a protectorate, perhaps he would have added statements to further configure his request.

The Interiority of Requests

Beneath the context of these requests lies the interior life of the boys expressed in words that provide a significant glimpse into their collective persona and the trends that bound (in this particular case), two major features of their interiority: self-confidence and decision-making or assertiveness.

Self-confidence

One of the most prominent features of petitions written by everyday people in colonial Lagos was the expression of self-confidence among teenage boys: “I am walking like a hooligan boy in the street and I don’t want to steal because I am a good boy. I have no cloth but my family is giving me as they can” (N.A.I. Com.Col 1 File No. 2766 Vol. 1, Correspondence from Bolaji Agbabiaka to the Colony Welfare Office, Lagos, 7 October, 1946). In other words, there are minimum standards in self-conduct and pride and care must be taken to maintain them. The literature has alluded to the significant number of these writings and the fact that the petitions from boys were almost as significant in orientation and agency as those written by ex-service men. As Aderinto has shown, the lived experience of both boys and girls was a major factor for the establishment and activities of the colony welfare office, an agency that dealt with a remarkable array of young people who demonstrate in the letters a positive assessment of self despite the challenges of urban livelihood (Aderinto 2015). First, they expressed pride in the fact that they were serviced by an educational system within which they could demonstrate skills that ‘should’ merit attention and thus be worthy of encouragement and reward. When Abdul Hameed Fashola wrote his letter in 1943, the colonial agent commented that his *mien* - seen in his writing, could only be that from a much older ‘young fellow’ (Aderinto 2015). This, notwithstanding, demonstrated the boy’s understanding of the notion of superiority based on his intellectual capacity: “I am the cleverest boy in that class [Class II Middle]” (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Abdul Hameed Fashola to the Commissioner for the Colony, Lagos, 5 March, 1943), an ability (in his assessment) empowering enough to attract financial reward in subsequent years. Hence, he would be able to repay financial benefaction extended to him by the colonial agent: “I promise faithfully that I shall D.V. repay every farthing you may expend on me whenever I begin to work” (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Abdul Hameed Fashola to the Commissioner for the Colony Lagos, 5 March, 1943). Beyond financial responsibility, Hameed was confident of his psychological make up to live up to expectations in character and gratitude – in “filial deeds” that would be a mark of his willingness to “exert [his] utmost” (N.A.I., Comcol. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Abdul Hameed Fashola to the Commissioner for the Colony Lagos, 5 March, 1943). For some who did not directly express their intellectual capacity, they had a positive reflection on their innate capacity to excel if given an opportunity: “... and I shall be so good so as to testify to my qualification for the position I desire. I shall endeavour to prove out satisfaction in all my duties [errors in the original]” (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Joseph Ade Fowokan to the Welfare Officer, Lagos, n. d.).

Decision-making

It is instructive to note that some of the boys were quick to make decisions as to what they wanted to do forthwith as a result of their situations. So easy and readily did they make statements that one is left to wonder if they knew the implications of their ‘decisions’. Typical of such letters was that written to the colony welfare officer in 1944 by Festus Osetumobi Lumowo (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Festus Osetumobi Lumowo to the Colony Welfare Officer, Lagos, 27 December, 1944). There are nine statements that indicate a youth who took decisions easily as the situation demanded: “I have left school since December 1942”, “Since then, I have never attended any school”, “I came down to Lagos very early this year”, “I have written so many applications”, “I will be satisfied with what you might ask me to do...”, “I will not care for any amount you pay

me....”, “...the money I get from there, I will use it in paying my lesson fee.”, “The reason why I have written this is that I do not want to be practising thievery or to be following bad company” (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Festus Osetumobi Lumowo to the Colony Welfare Officer, Lagos, 27 December 1944). These affirmative words are significant because they indicate decisions taken long after he lost his parents as an infant. Despite the fact that he would have been guided by adults while growing up, his words emphasise someone engrossed in what he has done and what he is able to do. He was aware that his age and physical appearance would fit into a servant-like activity which in his estimation was acceptable and which would generate some financial return.

It is interesting to note the boys’ conception of servanthood as representing gratitude. It is possible that this understanding was derived from the observation of male role models or from their education in school as typified in teacher-student, father-son, father-mother, benefactor-client relationships. In M. Olu Lukula’s letter for example, he indicated how he had met with a benefactor to help him with funding of his education when he observed that his parents could no longer afford his fees (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from M Olu Lukula to the Commissioner for the Colony, Lagos, 23 February, 1943). Several of the writers had been in receipt of help and assistance from relatives and benefactors outside their immediate family (Joseph Ogunwande for instance was assisted by his cousin while in school. See N.A.I. Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Joseph Ogunwande to the After Care Committee/ Education Officer, Lagos, 10 June, 1943). But the colonial officer occupied a unique role in their estimation because they envisioned him as privileged enough to disburse assistance beyond what they had been used to. Hence, offering to be in his service was a duty they would gladly consider, often without reference to cost-counting. The boys believed that being a servant to the colonial officer was a certain way of repaying his kindness as well as demonstrating, in form and character, an appropriate understanding of benefaction.

Conclusion

That teenagers wrote petitions was an indication of the social challenges of colonial society and the manner in which many of them reacted to those challenges. The letters show the extent to which education had impressed the notion of civility in their mindset and point to the reluctant and (in some instances) a definitive attempt of the teenage boys to resist the temptation to act in ways that they themselves condemned: “The reason why I have written these is that I do not want to follow a bad company. I do not want to be a thief boy according to the eight commandment which says ‘Thou shall not steal.’” (N.A.I., Com.Col. I File No. 2766 Vol. I, Correspondence from Richard Omofileyemi to the Colony Welfare Officer Lagos, 6 December, 1944). They were strongly influenced by the notion of morality and never failed to impress it upon the attention of the colonial officer: “If I am engaged, I vow to discharge any duty that may be allotted to me faithfully, honestly and satisfactorily” (N.A.I., Com.Col., I File No. 2766 Vol. I Correspondence from Ben Suberu to the Colony Welfare Officer, Lagos 11 June, 1943). It was clear that Christian principles and doctrines informed their convictions and they used it sparingly through words that showed the preponderance of Christian values within the families they were raised. Hence, this article has presented an additional but significant version of the character of boys in colonial Lagos. Using the words of the boys themselves, it has sought to present a version of their identity to expand the partial representations that are widespread in the literature.

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