

# Reading the Diary of Akinpelu Obisesan in Colonial Africa

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**Abstract:** This article considers the private diary not just as a historical source or literary text, but mainly as a symbolic cultural creation with sociological and psychological dimensions. The multiple identities of Akinpelu Obisesan, a member of the colonial intelligentsia in Ibadan, are analyzed, giving us insight into the transformations in Yoruba masculinity in the colonial period and his own attempts at self-invention. The article also emphasizes the overlap between the personal and the general: between the private and the public domains and how the diarist straddles, and is in turn affected by, sociocultural currents reverberating from these two sites.

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## Introduction

One of the products of colonialism in Africa was a Western-educated elite with a distinct social identity. The political and nationalist activities of this elite have been well researched by several scholars, but with a few notable exceptions (see Echeruo 1977 and Zachernuk 2000 on Nigeria), the same cannot be said of its social history. This study is therefore a contribution to the growing literature on the consumption patterns and life style of this elite. It focuses specifically on an elite pastime, namely, that of the diary-keeping culture. It examines the diary of Akinpelu Obisesan, a member of the local intelligentsia in Ibadan, a city that later became the administrative headquarters of the colonial establishment in western Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> However, while the details of the diary entries analyzed here reflect local developments, they are by no means peculiar to the Nigerian context. In a sense,

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they represent the nuanced cultural creations of the colonial subject in Africa, who, in addition to creating other public platforms of self-articulation, devised a personal outlet for the expression of thoughts about the social environment and his own role in it.

This article views the private diary not just as a literary text but also as a symbolic cultural creation with psychological and sociological dimensions. While these two grids necessarily call for separate conceptual schemes, they are by no means mutually exclusive. They support and sometimes shed light on each other. Central to both paradigms is the issue of the selfhood of the diarist. The cathartic quality of the diary-keeping “ritual,” as well as its other psychological dimensions, are part of diary-keeping as a private and personal experience, while the sociological aspect reveals the attempts of the diarist at self-representation and negotiation of his multiple identities. In the case of Obisesan’s diary this latter preoccupation is particularly significant because, among other things, it unravels the individual experience of the diarist as a masculine subject, emphasizing how he was able to deal with different notions of masculinity in the course of his life. This article also discusses the intersection of other parameters of difference such as age, class (social status), and generation with gender in shaping individual identities.

The background for this study is provided by a discussion of the rise of the educated elite in colonial Ibadan, including the development of Ibadan literary culture and the career of Akinpelu Obisesan. Next I provide an overview of different perspectives on the diary, with special emphasis on the conflict between its public and private aspects. I then provide a conceptual framework for understanding the diary as a symbolic cultural creation, focusing on the sociological and psychological dimensions of diary keeping. The approach throughout is multidisciplinary, combining historical analysis with psychological, sociological, and philosophical perspectives.

### **The Rise of an Educated Elite in Colonial Ibadan**

The role of the missions in the creation of an educated elite in Africa has been well studied (Ade-Ajayi 1965; Ayandele 1966). The foundation for Western education in Nigeria was laid in the nineteenth century by missionary groups such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Wesleyans (Methodists), the Roman Catholic Mission, the American Baptists, and the Presbyterian Mission (Fafunwa 1991:76), with the CMS as the most important in Ibadan. Its pioneer missionaries, David and Anna Hinderer, established the first elementary school in 1853, initially for their converts. It later became known as St. David’s Primary School (Hone 1872:86). In the second half of the nineteenth century schools were established by other missionary organizations in Ibadan, and in 1906, under the residentsip of C. H. Elgee, the colonial administration founded the Baale’s School to train the sons of the chiefs. Unfortunately, this venture was not successful due to

the refusal of the chiefs to send their wards to school, despite the sanctions imposed by the colonial authorities.

The first school for postprimary education in Ibadan was the Methodist Training Institution (later known as Wesley College), which was established in 1905 to train teachers. In 1913 the CMS established the Ibadan Grammar School, with the Reverend A. B. Akinyele as its first principal, to provide further education for the graduates of the elementary schools. In 1928 the Methodist Mission and the CMS jointly established the CMS Girls Training College (later United Missionary College), which was the first female training institution in the city, and several other schools were added before the end of the colonial period.<sup>2</sup> Altogether, these institutions contributed immensely to the development of the city's educated elite, who previously had been trained in postprimary institutions outside Ibadan—the Oyo Training Institution (seminary) of the CMS, the several grammar schools in Lagos, and even at the popular Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone. Members of the first generation of Ibadan elite had begun to play important roles in Ibadan politics and social life even before the first grammar school in the city was founded. Such men included W. S. Allen, E. H. Oke, I. B. Akinyele, D. Adetoun, A. F. Foster, and the Reverends James Okuseinde, Daniel Olubi, D. A. Williams, A. B. Akinyele, and R. S. Oyeboode. It was to this group that Akinpelu Obisesan belonged.

As a social group, this elite intelligentsia—men with education (referred to as *Olaju*, the enlightened)—had a distinct life style, which embraced Western ways and values in addition to their own African heritage (see Atanda 1973). The English language was the cornerstone of their literary culture. English was seen not only as a means of communication, but also as a tool for the acquisition of a meaningful voice among the decision-makers in the colonial establishment. English thus acquired a sociopolitical significance among the educated elite in colonial Ibadan. During social functions such as garden parties, cocktail hours, and association meetings, a command of English served as a marker of social status, and the ability to deliver elaborate speeches in English was part of the elite credentials of these educated men. Their literary culture was also manifested in informal discussions of the topical issues of their time, the publication of their opinions in the local press, and in exchanges among them of books, magazines, and journals.

This educated elite also established formal organizations—including the Egbe Onife Ile Yoruba (Society of Lovers of Yoruba land), the Egbe Agba-O-Tan (Elders-Still-Exist Society), the Ibadan Native Aboriginal Society, Egbe Ilupeju (Community-Comes-Together Society), and the Ibadan Progressive Union—all of which played a major role in establishing in the collective psyche of the elite a sense of their own importance in the colonial establishment.<sup>3</sup> These organizations were also positive agencies of internal development and served to uphold the morale of the community during the experience of colonial rule. A few were concerned particularly with the

promotion of a literary culture and of Western education in general. The Egbe Onife Ile Yoruba, established in the opening years of the twentieth century, organized periodic public lectures on issues relating to Yoruba history and culture. The Egbe Agba-O-Tan actually had a publications committee (with I. B. Akinyele as its general editor) and published works of history and philosophy.<sup>4</sup> After 1924 the Egbe Agba-O-Tan was also connected with the publication of *Irohin Yoruba*, a newspaper that reported local developments in Yorubaland. In the 1930s the Ibadan Progressive Union (IPU) had a literary section called the IPU Study Circle, which organized regular debates on issues ranging from religion to politics and economics. It also established a Reading Room, which grew into a club and library, and a Higher Education Fund, which supported a scholarship program for youth seeking to further their education. At the informal level, another activity that characterized the life of the educated elite was the keeping of personal diaries: records of their daily activities, appointments, reflections on socioeconomic issues and more personal family matters, drafts of future plans and strategies. In terms of composition and content, these diaries were meant as strictly private records, not written for any audience. However, some of the diaries that have survived have become veritable mines of biographical information as well as insights into the intellectual, historical, and cultural history of colonial Ibadan.<sup>5</sup>

The Ibadan educated elite thus assumed the role of community “elders” who acted as culture brokers between indigenous sociopolitical paradigms and the novel creations of the colonial state (Zachernuk 2000:6).<sup>6</sup> They strove for self-affirmation in a colonial setting that spawned several contradictions. On one hand, they had been empowered through access to Western education. On the other hand, they were subservient to the processes and priorities of an alien regime. Members of this educated elite were never really trusted by the colonial establishment, particularly under the residentship of Captain Ross in the 1920s. The diary of Akinpelu Obisesan thus provides us with a window through which to appreciate the general anxieties of these privileged men under pressure to distinguish themselves, and to create a sense of self, in the context of the expectations, opportunities, and above all, the constraints of the colonial state. At a more personal level, the diary also gives us insights into the eccentricities of one individual, especially in regard to his preoccupation with the attainment of elite masculinity (“big man” status) and the high price he paid for it.

### **Akinpelu Obisesan**

Akinpelu Obisesan was born in 1887 to the family of the Aperins in Ibadan. His father, Obisesan Aperin, a hunter and warrior, was also an Ibadan chief with the title of Agbaakin Baale (1893–1901) and a signatory to the 1893 Agreement between the British and Ibadan chiefs (Johnson 1921:637). His son, Akinpelu, attended St. Peter’s Primary School, Aremo, Ibadan, before

proceeding to the Oyo Training Institution of the CMS. Thereafter, he worked with the Lagos railway and rose to the position of stationmaster at Ikirun before he resigned in 1913. He promptly returned to Ibadan and worked for several European trading firms and local merchants, including Adebisi Giwa, for whom he was an agent, and Salami Agbaje, for whom he worked as a cocoa buyer. From 1923 to 1930 he was an agent for Messrs Miller Brothers, a subsidiary of the United African Company (UAC).

It appears that Akinpelu did not reap the financial benefits he had anticipated from either the produce trade or his "apprenticeship" with the European mercantile firms, and the 1920s were particularly harsh years for him. In 1930 he began full-time cocoa farming on his family land, and soon after he founded the cocoa cooperative movement in Ibadan. His previous experience with the European mercantile firms had given him an understanding of the exploitative practices of foreign trading firms, whose control over the marketing of local agricultural produce left little room for African traders. Also helpful in Akinpelu's rise as a leader of the farmers' movement was his status as a member of the Aperin family, which owned vast tracts of tenant-farmed land in Aperin, Akanran, and in many of the surrounding villages.<sup>7</sup> In 1934 the various cooperative societies established in Ibadan and environs through the instrumentality of Akinpelu federated to become the Ibadan Cooperative Cocoa Marketing Union (ICCMU). By 1936 thirty-six cocoa marketing societies were attached to the ICCMU. By 1938 Ibadan had become the leading center for the cooperative movement throughout the country. Obisesan represented the movement's interests not only before the foreign trading firms, but also before the colonial authorities. He remained active in the cooperative movement till his death in 1963.

Obisesan was also active in the political realm, both at the local and national levels. Twice he was councilor in the Ibadan Native Authority: first between 1939 and 1942, and again from 1949 to 1951. He was also a traditional chief and customary court judge. At the national level he was a member of the Western Nigerian House of Assembly in 1946 representing Agriculture and Cooperative Societies. From 1943 to 1951 he was also a member of the Nigerian Legislative Council. In 1960 he was appointed to the Western Nigerian House of Chiefs.

But surely Akinpelu Obisesan's most enduring legacy is the cooperative movement, which has been embraced not only by farmers, but also by other working-class groups. He was the first president of the Nigerian Cooperative Federation, of the Cooperative Union of Western Nigeria, and of the Association of Nigerian Cooperative Exporters. Since the death of Obisesan, cooperatives have proliferated and the movement has become increasingly popular. The Ibadan cooperative movement honored him in the naming of Obisesan Hall, a one-thousand-seat civic hall in the central business district of Ibadan.

Akinpelu Obisesan, then, was a public figure whose rise to fame, though

not without its difficult moments, was based on his educated status, leadership abilities, and family connections. But as his diary shows, throughout his adult life he experienced intense internal struggle as he grappled with his multiple masculine identities vis-à-vis societal expectations. What vital issues did Akinpelu deal with in understanding himself and in interpreting his own roles in relation to societal expectations? What public image did he attempt to create, and what were his major considerations in doing so? And particularly, what was the significance of diary-keeping to him, and to other educated males, in the first half of the twentieth century?

### Perspectives on the Diary

Diary-keeping as an activity is not peculiar to Western societies. But while many diaries of Western writers have been well studied, those from Africa are just beginning to receive scholarly attention (Adeboye 2006; Gunner 2006; Miescher 2006; Watson 2006).<sup>8</sup> A common thread that runs through all these diaries is the human instinct or desire for a private site in which to interrogate, develop, and assess one's multiple selves. The diary is more than a personal record of one's life, however. Along with other personal documents such as journals, memoirs, and autobiographies, it has been described as part of the new "technologies of the self" which became popular at different times in different societies, marking the "emergence of possessive individualistic subjectivities" (Garton 2002:44). The entries of the diary, reflecting brief moments in the author's life, thus attribute prime significance to those segments of life (Weintraub 1975:827; Peel 2000:15).

Perhaps a more fundamental aspect of the diary is its ambiguity, since it constitutes both a private and public or social site. According to Stephen Garton (2002:41), the diary is not just an individual product, but is also grounded in more "general mentalities or forms of collective imagination." Thus for the Australian John William Springthorpe (whose diary, written between 1897 to 1930, was studied by Garton), the diary was not only a means for "constructing a private self away from the chaos of social intercourse," but also a means of "creating and engaging with society... [and recreating] those social dialogues that helped form the boundaries of his self..." In this sense, the diary was not a "respite from the public world, but an utterly social site" (Garton 2002:45).<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in a study of Samuel Pepys's diary, Mark S. Dawson (2000:422) describes the diary as a narrative of "social accounting," thus underscoring the way in which the public world impinges on the private reverie of the diarist. The diary of Samuel Pepys is characterized not only by personal introspection and "confessions," but also by a deep concern with absolving and justifying himself, as if an "other" stood behind his shoulder, holding him accountable for his behavior.

However, this private/public overlap does not detract from the role of the diary as a text in which a private self is invented. Generally speaking, the diary, whether from Africa, Europe, Australia, or elsewhere, lacks a te-

leological structure or narrative closure; unlike other “technologies of the self,” it captures life as an on-going process and records it in installments (Garton 2002; Peel 2000). In this sense the genre underscores the relationship between the self and the collective in the individual’s very process of self-invention. As a means of constructing a private self, the diary serves as a daily monitor of one’s success in maintaining self-integrity (Nussbaum 1989). It is a form of self-government and a gauge of self-development, a partner in an individual’s internal dialogue (see Garton 2002; Adeboye 2006): not a “privileged site for historical truth” but rather a “journal of existence” and an “instrument of life” (Garton 2002:44; Nussbaum 1989; Peel 2000:16). Diaries are also written by individuals who position themselves as the center and source of meaning but also imagine themselves as one “example in comparison with others” (Watson 2006:62). The end-product of this exercise is an “imagined truth” or “reality” created for the benefit of the private self, as opposed to the “social performances” required of the public self (Nussbaum 1989).

While the foregoing discussion reflects some general perspectives on the nature and role of the diary, it does not address the question of why different individuals in specific cultures choose the diary over other forms of “technologies of the self” for their self-invention. The answer to this might be found in the sociocultural context within which particular diaries are produced. Writing in seventeenth-century Puritan England, Samuel Pepys kept a diary in an age in which the activity, characterized by deep introspection and soul-searching, flourished among both men and women. While his diary included confessions of philandering and wife-beating, the diary persona created by the writer conformed nonetheless to public standards for a gentleman. The diary of the Australian John Springthorpe, by contrast, was largely a private account of his grief over his wife’s death in childbirth. Created as an alternative to the late-Victorian “code of masculine culture,” which required him to demonstrate outward self-control, especially in his career as a medical doctor, it was a private mourning space that served as a respite from the public pressures. Springthorpe’s diary was atypical of his time in two respects. First, he kept a diary at a time when such an activity was believed to be the preserve of middle-class women. Second, in investing his energies in the creation of a private document, he deviated from the conventions of a culture that encouraged successful men to make their achievements a matter of public record.

In colonial Africa, diary-writing was common among members of the intelligentsia, particularly those who had been exposed to missionary education (Miescher 2006; Watson 2006). These were people whose social worlds were characterized by a culture of literacy and who appreciated the empowering potential of literacy in a colonial context (Barber 2006). They imbibed the diary-keeping culture of the missionaries, who themselves kept journals of their activities, which they periodically sent to their mission headquarters in Europe.<sup>10</sup> They therefore used the diary to docu-

ment, comment on, and challenge whatever constraints they encountered individually and collectively. A particularly remarkable case is the diary of Boakye Yiadom, a Presbyterian catechist/teacher in Ghana, whose diary completely blurs the line between the private world and the public sphere. Yiadom's diary, like those of other local pastors in his region (and unlike those of Pietist missionaries who mentored them), is devoid of any introspection and intimate details of his life. But what is particularly noteworthy is the fact that it was composed specifically as a text to be read to an audience. Periodically Yiadom would gather members of his family to listen to his readings of excerpts. His intention was didactic: that others might learn from his life.<sup>11</sup> The diary even had special features such as visual marks (red asterisks, "STOP" in uppercase, multiple exclamation marks), all of which "serve[d] as signposts, [or] stage directions [with which] to adopt the material for public performance" (Miescher 2006). But beyond this public role was a personal desire on Yiadom's part to immortalize himself through his writing, thus preserving his memory in the absence of any physical monument in his honor. The diary, in this sense, became a vehicle for acquiring the social prestige that had eluded him.

This article, focusing on the diary of Akinpelu Obisesan, attempts to move beyond two previous studies of the work. In a previous article (Ad-ebeye 2006) I compared three diaries produced in colonial Yorubaland, including Obisesan's, focusing on the ways in which they represented the cultural and intellectual subtleties of their times and how these in turn molded the diarists. Watson (2006) investigated the ways in which the entries in Obisesan's diary created the social world inhabited by the author, particularly in his emphasis on literacy and what it meant to him and his contemporaries. Both studies reveal how the diary as literary text is used by its author to engage with society, on one hand, and monitor his self-development, on the other. In this study I look more closely at the question of identity in diary-keeping, and the ways in which, as a document, the diary exists at the intersection of sociology and psychology.

### The Diary as a Symbolic Cultural Creation

In his book *Two-Dimensional Man* (1976), Abner Cohen defines symbols as "objects, acts, concepts or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions and impel men to action. They usually occur in stylized patterns of activities like ceremonial, ritual gift exchange, prescribed forms of joking, taking an oath, eating and drinking together." To the individual, however, "symbols are often fundamental mechanisms for the development of selfhood and for tackling the perennial problems of human existence" (preface, n.p.). A private diary, in the same way, reflects both generally intelligible, socially prescribed ideas, and personal formulations of the diarist, borne out of the exigencies of the moment and perhaps making sense only to him.

Sociologists have challenged the notion that selfhood is biologically determined and acquired at birth. Rather, they maintain that it is achieved through social interaction with other people and is constantly being transformed.<sup>12</sup> Human identity is therefore not just introspectively derived from the “self” in question, but is also molded by societal influences. This perspective has at least two implications. First, that self-awareness is predicated on periodic personal appraisals, the parameters for which are externally produced. In other words, self-assessment is usually carried out in the light of expectations generated by the larger community. Second, that there is a subjective element in the construction of selfhood which should not be discounted, even if it is considered precarious and dependent on social interaction (see Cohen 1976:55). Thus the diary, as suggested, represents the close interaction of the private and the public spheres and also lends itself to both sociological and psychological interpretation.

It is particularly in the development of selfhood that symbols, according to Cohen, have become essential as expressive and at the same time instrumental “mechanisms” (1976: preface, n.p.) In this regard the diary, as a symbolic documentation of selfhood, has certain dramaturgical elements, all of which reflect the author’s creativity. First, there is the “ritual” element. The idea of daily entries and the aura of secrecy surrounding the diary gives it the mystique of eluding the comprehension of the “uninitiated.” Second, the diary contains strategies of impression management, created by the diarist and reviewed from time to time as he encounters different situations. Third, diarists may create a private “shorthand” as a security measure protecting very intimate details; at other times they may devise visual aids to indicate very important information (Dawson 2000; Miescher 2006). A reading of the diary as a dramaturgical composition thus produces valuable clues to understanding the various processes of interpersonal negotiation, intrapersonal analysis, and creative inspiration in which the diarist was involved.

This issue of intrapersonal analysis raises the question of the therapeutic dimensions of the diary as an instrument of life. The release of pent-up emotions, facilitated by the documentation of pains, hurts, and disappointments in the diary, may be seen as a therapeutic activity or, in a psychoanalytic sense, as a form of self-induced catharsis achieved through a release of internal tension. The value and stabilizing effect of this procedure, even if self-administered unconsciously by the diarist, cannot be overemphasized.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Diary of Akinpelu Obisesan: Sociological Dimensions**

The diary of Akinpelu Obisesan provides us with a framework for analyzing his social growth from 1914 to 1960, a period of time during which he assiduously documented his thoughts and activities, producing over forty volumes in the process. These give us invaluable insights into his life and

society from his early adult years into his old age. It is also important to note that Obisesan's life coincided with colonial rule in Ibadan. He was six years old when the Ibadan Agreement was signed with the British in 1893, and he died three years after the independence of Nigeria. His life was thus conditioned not just by the traditional values into which he was socialized, but also by the transformations created by the colonial context.

### *Multiple Masculinities*

A central issue in Obisesan's diary is his perception of his own identity. There we see his struggles to define himself as he engaged with societal images and expectations on the one hand, and with the exigencies and innovations of the colonial context on the other. His multiple relationships within his household and lineage, his place within his network of friends, and his position within the community necessarily translated themselves into multiple identities. In particular, Obisesan's life as presented in his autobiographical diary entries is a site of contestation of gender issues in which Obisesan negotiated among different notions of masculinity and situated himself, both in terms of self-understanding and self-presentation, in the context of gendered practices.

L. A. Lindsay's (2003) study of money and masculinity in colonial Yorubaland identifies three distinctive masculine forms: adult masculinity, senior masculinity, and elite masculinity (the "big man").<sup>14</sup> The main requirement for the attainment of adult masculinity was marriage, which transformed a man from a dependent "junior" whose services and labor contributed to the resources of his seniors into a head of household responsible for the care and support of a wife and children. Senior masculinity entailed the expansion of the household through the admission of more wives and other dependants. The man now wielded greater influence in lineage and community affairs, educated his children, built his own house, and established his own business or farm(s). Sometimes, because of the time required to accomplish all these, a man would have advanced in age, becoming not just a social senior, but also a biological elder.

Elite masculinity, or the status of the "big man" in the colonial period, was a function of three factors in Ibadan: Western education, wealth, and at the highest level, the acquisition of a chieftancy title. The first two of these elements—education and wealth (from the cocoa trade)—were products of the colonial situation. But as the educated elite (*Olaju*) and men of wealth (*Olowo*) played greater and greater roles in local politics and public life, they pressed for inclusion within the traditional chieftancy structure, which had existed from the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, for the attainment of elite status, as for the attainment of adult or senior masculinity, wealth became more important than any other factor, even age.

While this study agrees with, and adopts, Lindsay's categorization, it should be added that the traditional context within which these catego-

ries emerged was drastically modified by the circumstances of colonial rule. First, military prowess, which was valued in the nineteenth century, ceased to be an avenue for the achievement of elite status in the twentieth century. Second, these categories of masculinity were not necessarily hierarchical. Third, while adult masculinity continued to be represented by marriage and status as head of a household (no matter how small), senior masculinity was sometimes conflated with elite masculinity when seniority was reckoned not strictly in terms of chronological age, but in terms of control over social “juniors” through the instrumentality of wealth or Western education. The idea of elderhood or seniority was thus stripped of its literal connotation and transformed into an idiom or metaphor imbued with notions of social influence exercised from positions of superior status and resource control.

### *The Social Travails of Obisesan*

The diary begins in 1914 but the entries up to the end of that decade are sparse and sporadic. It is only in the early 1920s that they become more detailed and consistent. By this time Obisesan had married his first wife, and we find a rich array of information on the travails involved in his attempting to move beyond adult masculinity status to senior and elite status. This experience is referred to here as “travail” because the gap between Obisesan’s perception of himself and social reality was so wide that his attempts to narrow it brought him personal despair and disappointment. Part of the difficulty was that he did not address these issues in terms of steps that had to be taken one after the other; as early as 1922 he was conceiving of himself not just as a social senior, but also as part of the elite. Thus between the early 1920s and the mid-1930s we find him struggling to ascribe to himself a senior/elite status that was clearly beyond his reach. It was only later, from the late 1930s, that he began to cross the threshold into elitism. By the 1940s and 1950s he gradually began to attain the status he wished for, and by the early 1960s, just before he died, he had become quite accomplished.

The interpretation of his life offered here suggests that during Obisesan’s years of “travail,” his failure to maintain a kind of balance between the consumption and production of what may be called “social goods”—that is, material objects as well as other intangibles like respect, privileges, and intellectual ideas—caused tensions and frustrations in his life that are evident in the diary entries. As a member of the first generation intelligentsia in Ibadan, Obisesan, unlike some of his contemporaries (the Akinyele brothers, for instance), read much more than he wrote.<sup>16</sup> In his diary entries for 1922 and later we find evidence that Obisesan read the *Negro World* (the official journal of the Universal Negro Improvement Association led by Marcus Garvey), Herbert Macaulay’s *Miscellaneous Writings and Speeches*, local newspapers such as the *African Messenger* edited by Ernest Ikoli, and the *Daily Times*. To broaden his intellectual capacity he participated in discussions

and debates with other members of the local intelligentsia—among them Chief Sowemimo, I. B. Akinyele, Mr. Babarinsa, and Mr. Ibaru (whom he called “a thinker of the twentieth century” [Jan 13, 1922])—on issues ranging from “Garveyism” to British policy in Africa and world politics.<sup>17</sup> From all these sources Obisesan gained not just information and general knowledge of the world outside Ibadan, but also a deeper appreciation of the English language. For instance, after reading Macaulay’s book, he called it “perhaps the most instructive and informative book I ever read... It gives me more knowledge of the English language” (April 8, 1922).

In terms of his own productive literacy, however, Obisesan was painfully aware of his weaknesses. In his diary entry for September 21, 1927, he actually prays for divine help in overcoming his written and oral English-language deficiency. As far back as 1922 he had always been impressed by colleagues who demonstrated competence in the language. While attending a feast in the house of Busari Giwa, for example, he was quite impressed that A. Akinloye “read his own address in English” (Jan. 1, 1922). Similarly, in 1929, during a joint committee meeting of the Egbe Agba-O-Tan and the Agricultural Society, he admired the ease with which the Hon. E. H. Oke (an Egbe member and member of the Nigerian Legislative Council, 1924–30) dictated instructions to his secretary in English, an ability described by Obisesan as Oke’s “brilliancy of intellect” (Oct. 17, 1929). Throughout his life he continued to admire anyone who spoke fluent English, mentioning Dr. Anthony Saka Agbaje, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and even his political opponent, Adegoke Adelabu.

It appears that Obisesan did more than pray in order to overcome this perceived deficiency. He gave drafts of his writings to the schoolteacher J. L. Ogunsola for editing (April 1, 1932). He gradually built up his confidence, although his own literary productions were mostly petitions, letters, and public speeches. Few of his newspaper articles were ever published, and when they were he was elated (Sept. 13, 1932).<sup>18</sup> But even a diary entry from 1948, in which he writes that he did not understand the technicalities in the wordings of Legislative Council bills, suggests his continuing struggle with the language (July 28, 1948). Nevertheless, a reading of the diary from the 1920s to the 1960s reveals a distinct improvement in Obisesan’s writing skills. While some allowances need to be made for transliterations from Yoruba to English and for some mixing of the two languages, a distinct maturation of his literary abilities is evident.<sup>19</sup>

The real problem seemed to be Obisesan’s impatience as he sought an elite status within a traditional society, with Western education as his only ticket. After he had been recognized as part of the elite in his later years, he seemed less disturbed by his lack of mastery of the language. Watson (2006:55) has suggested that Obisesan’s commitment to literacy was an end in itself, or at most a means for attaining respectability as a Christian gentleman. But a close reading of the diary seems to suggest instead that literacy for Obisesan was more a means to an end, with the ultimate goal the attain-

ment of elite masculinity and social recognition as a “big man.”

Another source of tension in Obisesan’s private life, especially in these earlier years, was the inadequacy of his lean income for the life style to which he aspired. Apart from his intellectually minded friends, Obisesan fraternized with two of the wealthiest men in Ibadan—namely, Salami Agbaje and Adebisi Giwa—and the disparity between his consumption of social goods and production of an income with which to sustain it created much internal turmoil for him in mid-life (Jan. 1, Feb. 2, 4, 13, March 22, 23, 24, 1922). This was largely a self-inflicted agony; although Yoruba people consider money as *koseemani* (indispensable) and as a vehicle for self-realization, they counsel moderation and believe that a man should not overreach himself in financial terms (Barber 1995; Falola & Adebayo 1999). Nevertheless, Obisesan wrote in the diary that

The courtesy shown specially to the persons of Salami Agbaje and Adebisi Giwa... forced me to ask myself whether I am a nonentity in things monetary or not. I regard my past and present life as being indolent and lazy... Nobody in this town will revere anyone of no means; he would be counted as a no-man. The great presents made to us forced me to recognize that Messrs Agbaje and Adebisi are being held in a very high esteem—after all, what is our intelligence, our school going and reading of books without getting money to back this three things.... (Feb. 3, 1922)

In fact, Obisesan overreached himself in a very reckless manner. First, he expanded his household and number of dependents, acquiring at least eight wives and employing several personal servants, even at a time when there was no improvement in his financial status. Wives, of course, were traditionally considered assets and status symbols, although by 1929 he was complaining about all the “responsibilit[ies]” that weighed on his “shoulders” (Oct. 16, 1929). He also purchased high-status items that he could barely afford: two cars in 1927 and 1928 and also a house. About the car he wrote, “My mind is still in state of cogitation about Mr. Barnes’ car which I have in writing promised to buy without first examining in details the proposed revenue to come to me. Here and there I am being faced with financial troubles, the origin of which is partly my fault, and mostly the fault of the circumstances under which I live” (March 22, 1927).

Obisesan also gave expensive gifts to visitors, not just as a way of demonstrating his hospitality and reciprocating gifts he had received, but also as a socially coded gesture demonstrating affluence and largesse. Even in the nineteenth century and in pre-Ibadan Yorubaland, such public displays and public acknowledgment had been indispensable components of “big man” status (Barber 1991a).<sup>20</sup> Initially, though, Obisesan could hardly afford these gestures, which also frequently fell short of his own standards. Thus when Adebisi Giwa and another guest named J. A. Gbadamosi visit him in January 1922, he writes, “I was ashamed to receive strangers of emi-

nence like these in my poor house” (Jan. 17, 1922). He gave them one “leg of stag” and “some kolanuts,” which by his own assessment fell short of what was honorable. His later attempts to impress his circle of friends plunged him into debt. For a New Year’s feast in 1928 he bought liquor worth £25 on credit. This issue of indebtedness is a central theme in his diary entries during his years of travail. Obisesan habitually borrowed money from friends and from professional moneylenders, principally Folarin Solaja, an Ijebu man. Borrowing money from professional moneylenders was generally avoided because of the high interest rates involved, and people usually borrowed money for family emergencies and other economic purposes, not, like Obisesan, to finance a flamboyant life style (Falola & Adebayo 2000:152–53).<sup>21</sup>

Obisesan devised a means of taking fresh loans to pay off old ones, and when he could not raise enough money from a single source, he borrowed small amounts from several people. Whenever he failed to meet up with the payment of overdue loans, he mobilized family support to plead for extensions from his creditors.<sup>22</sup> He also borrowed money to cover up monthly deficits in his accounts at the shop he operated for the Miller Brothers between 1923 and 1930. By mid-1927 he had incurred a monthly deficit of about £300 in his shop (July 7, 1927). According to him, these deficits were caused by the failure of his customers to pay for goods that they had purchased on credit (Aug. 3, 1928). While this explanation may account for some part of the deficits, a critical appraisal of his expenses during the same period suggests that he may have utilized some of the business funds for his own purposes, especially given the fact that his diary reveals no other source of income. Eventually, in September 1930, his total deficit was discovered to be £680, and the shop was closed down (Sept. 4, 1930). He obtained more loans to repay part of this deficit, but by 1933, when he had not fully repaid the money, the UAC (the mother company of the Miller Brothers) instituted legal action against him (Jan. 10, 1933). Six months later he secured another loan from one Mr. Omode with which he was able to clear the UAC debt (July 1, 1933).

It is important to note that the general economic climate in the 1920s was not particularly conducive for most entrepreneurial ventures. The severe economic depression left the commercial careers of many individuals in ruins, particularly Christian traders, who, according to Garvin Williams (1993:112), were worse hit than their Muslim counterparts because Christians “engaged in trade, as in farming and other activities in order to finance the lifestyle which they believed appropriate to a Christian gentleman.” For the prominent Muslim traders, by contrast, “trading was a way of life.” Interestingly, those whose businesses withstood the depression in Ibadan—including Obisesan’s friends Salami Agbaje and Adebisi Giwa—were all Muslims, and it was largely to them that others turned for loans and other help in salvaging their businesses. However, the reasons that Muslim traders were able to survive the depression appear to be more fundamen-

tal than what William suggests. First, Muslim traders' investments were diversified and not concentrated on the produce trade. As general traders, they could sell a variety of items, whereas the produce merchants were affected by global fluctuations in the trade. Second, Christian traders did not have an early start in business due to the years they had spent in pursuit of Western education and later in wage employment before venturing into trading. Of course, Obisesan's lack of financial prudence only exacerbated this general disadvantage. *It is somewhat ironic that in a bid to attain the socially elevated status of a "big man," he consciously plunged himself into indebtedness, which eventually brought him shame and dishonor. It was this financial embarrassment that drove him in 1930 to the farm where he started life afresh as a cash-crop farmer.*<sup>23</sup>

### *The Later Years*

Having sorted out his financial affairs by the late 1930s, Obisesan began to reap the rich yields of his cocoa farming. He could not be said to have become affluent, but he finally had surplus money of his own with which to finance his personal project of social advancement. Meanwhile, he remained active in many social organizations in Ibadan. These activities, which kept him abreast of social developments in the city, helped pave the way for the satisfactions of his later years, when he was elevated to public office. The holding of public office, either within the traditional chieftaincy hierarchy or within the colonial establishment (which also rewarded literacy and competence in English), was a final avenue to elite masculinity. While this could bring public notice to an individual, it was also in itself a sign of high status. Thus he was appointed councilor in the Ibadan Native Authority (1939), member of the Nigerian Legislative Council (1943), leader of the Cooperative Union (from 1936), and native court judge (1954). His crowning accomplishment, finally, was the traditional chieftaincy title conferred in 1960.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of his consumption/production of "social goods," in the realm of public office Obisesan was able to maintain a balance, showing that he had now matured and earned the status of senior masculinity. He consumed the privileges of office, various perquisites, and of course respect and social recognition, which he had desired for so long. In turn, he produced value in the various offices he occupied by performing effectively. His commitment and dedication to the cooperative movement was unrivaled in his time, and he was now able not only to service his clientele, but also to show great generosity toward them. All these activities and behaviors had the effect of inspiring even more respect, suggesting a dialectical relationship between the consumption and production of these social goods. In terms of his own well-being, the rewards were enormous. Having accomplished his goal of elite masculinity in his later years, his diary entries reveal a more relaxed man, at peace with himself and his society. "God the Almighty, I

needs confess, has for the past 30 years shown me grace," he writes in 1942. "Who in the years gone by could have thought that I would one day play a signal part in the affairs of Ibadan? From the bottom of my heart, I thank Him" (Jan. 15, 1942).

### **The Diary of Akinpelu Obisesan: Psychological Dimensions**

During the years of travail, Obisesan's self-image was characterized by some degree of ambivalence and psychological vacillation. On the one hand, he experienced a considerable amount of self-doubt, self-condemnation, and guilt in regard to his financial and social status. "I am reaping where I did not sow," he wrote, "all the money I have been using to pay accounts here and there and for farm work is not mine. I am only borrowing it from firms. The condition has created itself in this way and it will similarly in not a long while destroy itself" (Dec. 13, 1928). On the other hand, he pacified himself by blaming others for his financial woes and clinging to a pseudo-image of his own importance, derived from the slightest flattery he received from others. He always reminded himself that his financial troubles were only "partly my fault"; they were "mostly the fault of the circumstances under which I live."

Indeed, the colonial context in which he lived was a particularly hostile one, while global developments such as the depression rendered local traders such as Obisesan economically and socially vulnerable. But his own behavior undeniably contributed to his troubles, and while he did have the capacity, at times, to blame himself for the "needs and my aspirations and ambitions" that overwhelmed his modest income, he mostly identified other people and even more intangible spiritual forces as the cause of his woes. The idea of the enemy was, and still is, very central to Yoruba traditional thought (Oyetade 2004). Obisesan in 1927 speaks wishfully of being "preserved untouched by the enemy of my all until the end of the year. I shall not only be thankful and grateful to Him, but I shall devoutly pray for a strong will to give about 50 or less to the cause of good in this world." In reminding himself that his "preservation" or deliverance from the "enemy" could only come from God, Obisesan was also implicitly absolving himself of responsibility in the crisis. The solution to his misfortunes was to be found not in any scheme of moral or internal reform on the part of the victim, but in the appeal to superior spiritual forces and divine intervention.

At the same time, Obisesan magnified in his own mind the little courtesies he received from others. After visiting Adebisi Giwa in 1922 on the occasion of the funeral ceremony of the latter's father, he writes, "I was received with great courtesy and enthusiasm. I realize more today the greatness of my position in this town and God Almighty is to be thanked for making me great and famous. I dislike being egotistic but facts must be made known" (March 24, 1922). Written at a time when he was heavily in debt

and not occupying any visible position of authority (except perhaps as an officer of the Ilupeju Society), this self-valuation can be understood mostly as a psychological palliative, or what psychologists have termed “fantasized self-representation” (Tunis & Fridhandler 1992:39).

By the late 1930s Obisesan can be said to have entered a new phase of his life, which lasted roughly to the late 1940s. As his financial problems were rectified and he gained public recognition as a leader of the Cooperative Movement, he exhibited increasing self-confidence in his diary and his self-esteem also soared. In 1939, when he was appointed to the Ibadan Native Authority as councillor, the Bokini Society (a social organization to which he belonged) organized a formal reception in his honor. On reading the report of the ceremony published in the *Daily Times*, Obisesan comments, with a false modesty that only barely disguises his enormous pride, “Report of the function in my honor that took place a fortnight ago appeared in the Nigerian *Daily Times* of today. By this, readers of Nigerian *Daily Times* everywhere will know my poor achievements in life. May God bless Bokini Society. Long live Ibadan” (July 21, 1939). Following his appointment to the Legislative Council of Nigeria in 1943 as member representing Oyo Division, Obisesan wrote, “the *Daily Service* in its issue of the 27th [of April] gave my life career history admirably” (July 29, 1943).<sup>25</sup>

By the third stage of Obisesan’s life, from roughly the 1950s until his death, he was deeply confident in his own importance and filled with a great deal of pride. His circle of associates included senior colonial officials, paramount rulers in Yorubaland, and nationalists from different parts of the country. He was at the peak of his career in the Cooperative Movement and had several opportunities to visit the United Kingdom on cooperative matters.<sup>26</sup> His renown, as he reminds himself in the diary, had spread beyond his locale and even beyond Africa. In 1953, while attending a ceremony at Buckingham Palace, he writes that “dressed in *petuje dandogo*, *etu* trousers, *gbariye aso-oke* and given a Rolls-Royce car to ride, I appeared as a big chief and entered the palace” (May 28, 1953).<sup>27</sup> And in January 1954, while recounting his achievements of the previous year, he notes among other things that he had achieved increased “fame in the English Channel” (Jan. 1, 1954).

In 1954, he also describes his country home at Amurire as a “paradise where a mighty man lives today with his many wives and children” (Aug. 11, 1953). Members of his household were now seen not as liabilities, responsibilities weighing on “his shoulders,” but rather as assets and indices for gauging his own social “might” and significance. Interestingly, however, these people still were thought of not as individuals in their own right, but as contributors to and reflections of his own glory. In comments like this one registers the degree to which the self-pride of his later years looked more and more like a fairly unattractive narcissism and sexism. His vision of women as restricted to the domestic domain where their services could be exploited to further the desires and ambitions of their men who operated

in the public domain was to a large degree idiosyncratic and unrepresentative of reality.<sup>28</sup> In both precolonial and colonial Africa there was, in fact, a considerable overlap between the domestic and public domains, and some women were active in the public domain just as some men also operated in the domestic sphere (Sudarkasa 2005:26).

Meanwhile, having occupied several formal positions within the colonial administrative structure, Obisesan still had his eyes on a chieftaincy title, the ultimate marker of high status (see van Nieuwaal & van Dijk 1999). His dream was finally fulfilled in 1960, although the title he received, that of *Bada Olubadan*, was a very junior one. He also again plunged himself briefly into a “pond of debt” in preparation for the title taking, and berated himself in the diary as “Akinpely, the stupid!” But while he never reached the pinnacle of the chieftaincy hierarchy by becoming the *Olubadan*, Obisesan by his later years clearly had achieved the status and self-esteem that had eluded him earlier. His chiefly identity brought him other honors as well, such as an appointment to the Western Region House of Chiefs (Sept. 28, 1960). There is no doubt that by the time he died, three years after acquiring his title, he no longer considered himself a failure.

## Conclusion

If one reads through the entries in Obisesan’s diary sequentially, from day to day, one makes the interesting discovery that his frequently dour moods, while not abating in the course of a single entry, would often be followed the next day by a palpable release of tension. These uninhibited diary entries, in which Obisesan emptied his soul, clearly brought him cathartic relief. What Obisesan did was to administer self-therapy, unconsciously using his diary as the therapeutic instrument and psychological stabilizer.

The two functions of the diary that we have been examining here—as an aid to self-representation and as a psychological stabilizer—are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are deeply interrelated. On the one hand, although scholars often approach a diary as a literary text or a source of historical data, a diary, despite some examples to the contrary, is first and foremost a personal and private document, not meant, at least in terms of its genre, for public exposure. (That diary writers often, either consciously or unconsciously, write with an eventual audience in mind is of course another matter). On the other hand, the diary is, as Garton has said, an “utterly social site” (2002:45). These two functions are not contradictory. In a way, the sociological aspect constitutes the backdrop for the psychological, which in turn depends on the former for survival. There is, in other words, a dialectical relationship between these two elements in a diary. The sociological aspect provides the material for self-analysis and introspection, while the resulting psychological disposition influences, in turn, the subject’s responses to further social stimuli. The selfhood of the diarist somehow exists at the intersection of these two forces. The interpretation of the diary here is as

a symbolic cultural creation, an autobiographical narrative that both documents and creates the self of the writer and exists at the intersection of the private and the public.

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## Notes

1. The diary is housed in the Manuscripts Section, Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Obisesan Papers. All references to the diary are cited as dates within the text.
2. For more on female institutions in colonial Yorubaland, see Denzer (1992:116–39).
3. These were the early elite organizations that were active within the first half of colonial rule in Ibadan. It is by no means an exhaustive list. Other groups

and elite clubs later came on board. Similar developments in Lagos have been reported by Philip Zachernuk (2000:53).

4. Its publications included a revised edition in 1916 of I. B. Akinyele's 1911 *Iwe Itan Ibadan* (A History of Ibadan) and M. C. Adeyemi's 1914 *Iwe Itan Oyo-Ile ati Oyo Isisiyi abi Ago-d'Oyo* (A History of Old and New Oyo), both local histories; and *Iwe ti Awon Akewi* (Yoruba Philosophy, vols. 1 & 2) written by D. A. Obasa.
5. Except for a couple of references to missionary journals, Zachernuk's (2000) authoritative study of the intellectual development of the Southern Nigerian intelligentsia relies heavily on their public writing and excludes their private diaries.
6. See also Ranger (1993) on the invention of tradition.
7. These villages included Araromi, Inuodi, Amurire, Aba Ogo, Eriolopa, Lagunju, Obideyi, Awishe, Abiola, Baleosho, and Osunlana.
8. In the Nigerian coastal region among the Efiks, the diary or personal journal began to figure from the eighteenth century. Antera Duke's diary from 1767 in Old Calabar was taken to Scotland; portions of it were published in Forde (1956). There were also the personal journals of King Eyamba V of Duke Town in which he recorded "events of the state in good English" (Ayandele 1966:3).
9. This resonates with John Tosh's (1994:179–202) contention that public and private spheres are not to be seen and treated as mutually exclusive domains, but rather as "permeable and independent" entities, both of which are integral to the social order.
10. See also Watson (2006) for a discussion of the origin of the private diary in Ibadan.
11. This practice is said to have been inspired by the local Akan oral practice of storytelling (Miescher 2006:45).
12. See the analysis of Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the "Looking-glass Self" in Vander Zaden (1996). See also Turner et al. (2006) for a definition of the "personal self," and Gecas and Schwalbe (1983) for a rebuttal of the "Looking-glass Self" metaphor.
13. The word *unconsciously* is used here because while it is doubtful that Obisesan ever read Freud, his writing was clearly a spontaneous response to a pressing need. It is also important to note that other diarists of his time did not necessarily release their emotions in the diaries in the same way that Obisesan did. For a comparative study of such diaries, see Adeboye (2006).
14. Fadipe (1970) also describes in great detail these different adult statuses, though not necessarily by employing gender analysis.
15. For studies on the transformation of traditional chieftaincies in different parts of modern Africa see Goheen (1988, 1992) on Cameroon, Vaughan (2003) on Botswana, Abbink (2003) on Ethiopia, and Odotei (2003) on Ghana.
16. A. B. Akinyele was the first principal of Ibadan Grammar School established in 1914, while I. B. Akinyele, his junior brother, was the general editor of the Publications Committee of the Egbe Agba-O-Tan.
17. William (1993) has also discussed the intellectual pursuits of Obisesan and his contemporaries in the early 1920s in Ibadan.
18. This desire to be read has been explained as an assertion to the public of his literacy skills and as the confirmation of "his status as a Christian gentleman in colonial Ibadan" (Watson 2006:55). Such a desire, in a sense, also exemplifies

- “a fervent regard for the capacity of literacy to enhance personal and social existence” (Barber 2006:1–24).
19. Commenting on Adelabu’s proficiency in the English language, E. W. J. Nicholson (Sole Commissioner of Inquiry into the Ibadan District Council) wrote: “Mr. Adelabu is highly intelligent, and his writings show him to have a wonderful command of English marred only by the excessive use of lush adjectives” (1955:99). Obisesan could not stand comparison with somebody like Adegoke Adelabu (a much younger man), whose verbal gymnastics in the English language impressed even the British colonial officers.
  20. For a discussion of the difference between casual gifts and largesse, see Adeboye (2003:290–95). On “big man” status, see also Bayart (1993:69).
  21. Solaja charged a 5 percent interest on loans he gave Obisesan (Aug. 29, 30, 1928). The professional moneylender was locally called *s’ogun d’ogoji* (he who converts twenty to forty) because of his 100 percent interest rate (Falola & Adebayo 2000:159).
  22. For example, in January 1928, in order to raise a loan of £320, he borrowed from several people including Mr. Davies (£50), Salami Amao (£60), and Lawani Akande (£100) (Jan. 2, 4, 1928). In March 1929 he could not promptly pay up all he owed Folarin Solaja, the professional moneylender: “Requested my mother to see Mr. Folarin Solaja for me tomorrow with a view to entreat him to allow me to return his loan twice instead of once” (March 7, 1929).
  23. For studies on cocoa farming and its social implications in Southwestern Nigeria see Galletti et al. (1956) and Berry (1975, 1985).
  24. See Van Nieuwaal and Van Dijk (1999) for the latest debates on the attraction of traditional chieftaincy titles for modern men.
  25. For the newspaper reports see *Daily Times*, July 21, 1939; *Daily Service*, April 27, 1943.
  26. For his visits to the U.K., see diary entries for October 21, 1950; September 14, 1952; April 28, 1953; and October 15, 1954.
  27. *Petuje dandogo, etu*, and *gbariye aso-oke* were very expensive local attires worn by chiefs and “big men” in Yorubaland. For more on Yoruba dress, see Akinwunmi (2006: 49–73).
  28. For analytical purposes, a more appropriate representation, according to Niara Sudarkasa (2005 [1996]:26), would be to “recognize two domains, one occupied by men and another by women—both of which were internally ordered in a hierarchical fashion and both of which provided personnel for domestic and extradomestic (or public) activities.”