A Class of Their Own: Newspaper Obituaries and the Colonial Public Sphere in Lagos, 1880–1920

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Abstract: From the 1880s, obituaries of Africans and European colonial officials became a frequent genre in Lagos newspapers. This article examines obituary notices in seven Lagos newspapers to understand how print publications and the next of kin who commissioned obituaries used commemorative practices to frame colonial relations and reflect on imperial expansion. Revisiting Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere, I argue that colonial newspapers introduced gossipy anecdotes and sensationalism in obituary notices to define the colonial "public sphere" as one that is characterized by insinuations of social and economic class, Christian rhetoric, racial divides and anti-colonial sentiments as well as civic responsibilities around public health concerns.

Résumé: À partir des années 1880, les nécrologies d'Africains et de fonctionnaires coloniaux européens sont devenues un genre fréquent dans les journaux de Lagos. Cet article examine les notices nécrologiques dans sept journaux de Lagos afin de comprendre comment les publications imprimées et les proches qui commandaient les notices nécrologiques ont utilisé des pratiques commémoratives pour formuler les relations coloniales et réfléchir à l'expansion impériale. Revisitant la notion de sphère publique de Jürgen Habermas, je soutiens que les journaux coloniaux ont introduit des anecdotes et un certain sensationnalisme dans les notices nécrologiques pour définir la « sphère publique » coloniale comme une sphère caractérisée par des insinuations faites à l'aide d'une rhétorique chrétienne sur des classes sociales et économiques, sur des clivages raciaux, sur des luttes anticoloniales ainsi que sur des responsabilités civiques en matière de santé publique.

Keywords: Obituary, memorialization, commemoration, colonial, death

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History in Africa, Volume 50 (2023), pp. 99–125

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doi:10.1017/hia.2023.14

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2023.14 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Introduction

Between the 1880s and 1950s, colonial newspapers in Africa became a space where Africans could perform selfhood, build political alignments, and hold constituted authorities accountable. Colonial newspapers were not purely products of unequal power relations between the colonialists and Africans but a space where power was negotiated and where different groups debated colonial policies.[1] Some of these literary practices shaped the culture of obituary publications in colonial Lagos newspapers.[2]

Stephanie Newell notes that newspapers are a significant source to investigate the nature of political agency and sociocultural relations in Africa.[3] Researching obituaries in colonial newspapers advances investigation of social histories of death in Africa. While many studies examined how death could be used to understand the changing urban, class, gender, religious, national and ethnic identities in Africa, others focused on the multiple ways in which the dead body is produced through the print culture.[4] While Newell suggests that

[1] On the negotiation of power in colonial African print, see Derek. R. Peterson and Emma Hunter, "Print Culture in Colonial Africa," in Peterson, Derek R., Hunter, Emma and Newell, Stephanie (eds.), *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 2016); Emma Hunter and Leslie James, "Introduction: Colonial Public Spheres and the Worlds of Print," *Itinerario* 44–2 (2020), 227–42; Fabian Krautwald, "The Bearers of News: Print and Power in German East Africa. *Journal of African History* 62 –1 (2021), 5–28; Stephanie Newell, *The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013); Stephanie Newell, *Histories of Dirt: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos* (Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2019).

[2] Peterson and Hunter, "Print Culture in Colonial Africa"; Hunter and James, "Introduction: Colonial Public Spheres and the Worlds of Print"; Fabian Krautwald, "The Bearers of News: Print and Power in German East Africa. *Journal of African History* 62–1 (2021), 5–28.

[3] Newell, *The Power to Name.*

[4] Some of these studies include Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan, "Death and Dying in the History of Africa Since 1800," *The Journal of African History* 49–3 (2008), 341–359. Both Charles Okigbo and K. Nwalo analyzed death and funeral advertisements in the Nigerian press and suggested how the obituaries pronounced the conspicuous presence of the individual by filling a vacuum created by lack. See K. Nwalo, "A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Obituary and In Memoriam Advertisements in Nigerian Newspapers" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Lagos, Nigeria); Charles Okigbo, "Death and Funeral Ads in the Nigerian Press," *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (1987), 629–633; Adebanwi has also shown that printed biographies were used to articulate the meanings of nationalism and heroism in his work on the biographical commemoration of Nigerian nationalists such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo. See Wale Adebanwi, "Burying 'Zik of Africa': The Politics of Death and Cultural Crisis," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63–1 (2021), 41–71; Wale

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new forms of subjectivity were produced in colonial newspapers through anonymous writing, I argue that obituary publications allowed Africans to reassert their presence in the colonial public sphere. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, African and colonial elites in Lagos used obituaries to convey their adherence to Christianity, warn of the purported dangers of the African climate to frail European bodies, and confer social value on the deceased's life. Obituaries took a variety of forms, ranging from brief announcements to elegiac poems and extensive biographical portraits that enhanced the prestige of both the departed and their living next of kin. Through these diverse print genres, Lagos' educated political and social elite asserted its prestige and status against lower-class Africans as well as European colonizers.

Colonial newspapers often depended on the patronage and approval of the imperial authorities or the missionary groups. Those who dared to challenge the censorship regime faced the risk of being shut down or silenced. Only the loyalist voices could survive and thrive in such a hostile environment.[5] I studied the archives of some of these newspapers, including *Lagos Weekly Record* (LWR) (1891–1930), the *Lagos Standard* (LS) (1894–1920), *Lagos Observer* (LO) (1882–1884), *Lagos Times and Gold Coast Colony Advertiser* (LT) (1880–1883), *The Mirror* (1887–1888), *The Times of Nigeria* (ToN) (1914–1924), and *Nigerian Chronicle* (NC) (1908–1915).[6]

The above mentioned newspapers were under the proprietorship and editorship of educated African elites and appeared biweekly or weekly in Lagos from 1880 to 1920. The *Lagos Weekly Record* was a pioneering and influential newspaper that championed the causes of anti-colonialism and African nationalism in Nigeria. It was founded and edited by John Payne Jackson, an Americo-Liberian journalist who migrated from Liberia to Lagos

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Adebanwi, "The Cult of Awo: The Political Life of a Dead Leader," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 46–3 (2008a), 335–360; Wale Adebanwi, "Death, National Memory and the Social Construction of Heroism," *Journal of African History* 49–3 (2008b), 419–444; and Wale Adebanwi, "Colonial Modernity and Tradition: Herbert Macaulay, the Newspaper Press, and the (Re)Production of Engaged Publics in Colonial Lagos," in Peterson, Derek R., Hunter, Emma and Newell, Stephanie (eds), *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 125–148; See also A. Odasuo Alali, "Management of Death and Grief in Obituary and In Memoriam Pages of Nigerian Newspapers" *Psychological Reports* 73 (1993), 835–842; Funmi Togonu-Bickersteth, "Obituaries: conception of death in the Nigerian newspapers," *IFE Social Science Review* (Journal of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ile-Ife, Nigeria) (1986), 83–93; and Adélékè Adéèkó, "From Orality to Visuality: Panegyric and Photography in Contemporary Lagos, Nigeria," *Critical Inquiry* 38–2 (2012), 330–361.

[5] Hunter and James, "Introduction: Colonial Public Spheres and the Worlds of Print."

[6] These newspapers were accessed in the digitized newspaper collections of Readex's World Newspaper Archives.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2023.14 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and became a prominent voice of the African elite. The *Lagos Standard* was established by George Alfred Williams in 1894, while the *Lagos Observer* was launched by Blackall Benjamin in 1882 with the help of Dr. Nathaniel T. King and Robert Campbell. The *Lagos Times and Gold Coast Colony Advertiser* – also known as *Lagos Times* – was founded by Richard Blaize and edited by Andrew Thomas and Mojola Agbebi. It was one of the pioneer newspapers in Nigerian journalism, being the third newspaper in the country, following *Anglo African Newspapers* and *Iwe Iroyin. The Mirror* was a weekly paper that belonged to and was edited by P. Marke, while James Bright Davies (1848–1920) owned and edited *The Times of Nigeria* (ToN), a weekly publication that only maintained its frequency for six months. The *Nigerian Chronicle* was the first newspaper to use the word "Nigeria" in its name.[7] The publication was initiated by two siblings, Christopher and Emmanuel Johnson, who were educated in Britain and occupied prominent positions in Lagos society. The newspaper was issued weekly at their Kumola House office on Shitta Street, which also housed a high-class school. The NC had a distribution of 400–600 copies, each priced at 3 pence. The readership of these newspapers cut across the African elites and expatriates, but it is important to note that obituary advertisements were mainly from African elites, while the death of European expatriates seemed to be reported by their editors as news items due to their close relationships with them. Many of the newspapers benefited from the patronage of the colonial government and did not openly oppose the anti-African policies of the colonial administration. Whereas some newspapers such as *Lagos Weekly Record*, the *Lagos Standard*, the *Times of Nigeria* at times exhibited a relatively oppositional stance toward the government, all Lagos presses aligned with the British and endorsed the Allies during World War I. With the exception of the *Nigerian Chronicle,* which maintained its style and even intensified its cultural orientation and predilection for philosophical topics, the Lagos press assumed a significant role as a disseminator of British propaganda.[8]

Of course, announcing an obituary has a cultural history in precolonial West Africa. In the Igbo area, for example, it was usually accompanied by a loud cry in the deceased's household, a cry that was intended to draw public attention to a tragedy. Depending on the status of the deceased, it was sometimes announced through the town criers. In announcing the death of Ezeudu in Umuofia, for example, Chinua Achebe narrates how the sound of a drum and a cannon announced the death of Ezeudu, an important man in the village. [9] In a similar vein, it was reported that one night, the town crier rang the *ogene*, or gong, and requested all the clansmen to "gather in the market in the morning. At the gathering, Ogbuefi Ezeugo, a noted orator,

[7] Nozomi Sawada, "Selecting Those 'Worthy' of Remembering: Memorialization in Early Lagos Newspapers," *Journal of West African History* 2–2 (2016), 48.

[8] Sawada, *The Educated Elite,* 291.

[9] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 26.

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announces that someone from the village of Mbaino murdered the wife of an Umuofia tribesman while she was in their market."[10] The drum brought the news of Ezeudu's death while the town crier announced the murder of the wife of an Umuofia tribesman. Thus, using the drum and the town crier to announce death exemplifies the synergistic relationship between the public and obituary announcements in precolonial Africa. Here, the public was embodied in the town crier's and the drum's capacity for extensive information coverage across the communities. As a public address system through which death was announced, the town crier and the drum constituted one template for the connection between the public sphere and obituaries in precolonial Africa.[11]

Local practices verbalized obituaries through many means, such as the town crier, oral praise poetry, dirges, eulogies, and other oral genres.[12] McCaskie thus argues that the emergence of advertisements of death in newspapers and other printed formats and their incorporation into the local funeral rite is a ritualistic and aspirational modernity that builds upon a legacy of customary oral practice.[13]

Although colonial newspapers claimed to serve the public, they often became exclusive spaces for educated elites.[14] Similarly, I look at the ways in which elite African newspaper editors, authors, and readers transformed obituary announcements from a public oral announcement in the village public sphere to the public sphere of print publications in colonial Lagos. Some authors have studied the printed publications that accompanied death and funerals in Africa to show how these publications transcribe oral mourning tributes, praises, and poetry into a new materialized chapter in the

[10] Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 20.

[11] Wilima T. Kalusa and Megan Vaughan, *Death, Belief and Politics in Central African History* (Lusaka: The Lembani Trust 2013). Newell has suggested the existence of other public spheres in colonial Africa such as "town and village associations, singing bands, church prayer groups, funeral cooperatives, masquerades, military groups, and a multiplicity of other social organizations that created spaces separate from the family and the state." She argues that many of the above-named public spheres predated colonialism and newspapers in Africa and they were independent of chieftaincy structures. Stephanie Newell, *The Power to Name*. See Dwayne Woods, "Civil Society in Europe and Africa: Limiting State Power through a Public Sphere," *African Studies Review* 35–2 (1992), 93; Kenneth Little, *West African Urbanization: A Study of Voluntary Associations in Social Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

[12] Stephanie Newell, "From Corpse to Corpus: The Printing of Death in Colonial West Africa," in Peterson, Derek R., Hunter, Emma and Newell, Stephanie (eds.). *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 390.

[13] Thomas C. McCaskie, "Writing, Reading, and Printing Death: Obituaries and Commemoration in Asante," in Barber, Karin (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 349.

[14] Newell, *Histories of Dirt*.

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deceased's life.[15] In Lagos, obituary publication in colonial newspapers was one way through which Africans imbued death with social prestige and significance associated with the colonial modernity of the print.

In their study of newspaper obituaries in Nigeria, Rouven Kunstmann and Cassandra Mark-Thiesen have shown how the social identities and cultural conventions of the deceased and their families were maintained and affirmed in the public sphere.[16] Death notices and obituaries disseminated social identities to a wide audience. Newell has shown how many Africans utilized the new political possibilities offered by anonymous newspaper writings in colonial Africa to assert their subjectivities, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although anonymity gave African authors certain freedoms to articulate their views, it also deprived them of the opportunity to imprint their names and announce their presence in the colonial public sphere. Obituary publications could be a means through which Africans wrote themselves back into colonial text, announced their presence in the colonial public sphere, and thereby reclaimed their subjectivity. Colonial Lagos newspapers allowed readers to participate in "debates about moral, cultural, economic, aesthetic, historical, and political issues" and helped engender a West African reading culture almost unprecedented in any other colonial setting.[17] Although Lagos newspapers did not challenge colonial control, the insistence on naming the deceased and enumerating their accomplishments was an indirect riposte to colonial racism, which posited that Africans led meaningless lives that did not contribute to the development of their societies; every obituary was thus not only a monument to the deceased and their family but a beacon that signified the ingenuity, adaptability, and drive of Lagosians.

The Public Sphere

Jurgen Habermas has argued that a bourgeois space emerged in the eighteenth century to "mediate between society and state, in which the public

[15] James Gibbs, "'Give Sorrow Words': An Examination of Ghanaian Funeral Brochures and Their Place in Contemporary Local Publishing," paper presented at the "Postcolonial Lives of the Book" conference, University of London, Institute of English Studies, 3–5 November 2005, 5; see also Olive Akpebu Adjah, "Ghanaian Funeral Brochures: An Unexplored Rich Source of Biographical In-formation," *African Research and Documentation* 103 (2007), 33–44.

[16] Rouven Kunstmann and Cassandra Mark-Thiesen, "The Memory Process in the Commemorations of the Dead in West African Newspapers," in Mark-Thiesen, Cassandra, Mihatsch, Moritz A. and Sikes, Michelle M. (eds.), *The Politics of Historical Memory and Commemoration in Africa Essays in Honour of Jan-Georg Deutsch* (Berlin/ Boston: er de Gruyter GmbH).

[17] Newell, *The Power to Name.*

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organized itself as the bearer of public opinion."[18] This "public sphere," according to Habermas, is a nonhierarchical setting convened within the spaces of coffee shops, salons, social clubs, and printed materials such as novels, periodicals, and pamphlets. Within these spaces, compromise and unanimous decisions were reached by means of unfettered, logical, and critical deliberation among bourgeois citizens freed from the feudal hierarchies of early modern Europe.[19] However, this vibrant public sphere waned after the nineteenth century because of the intrusive meddlesomeness of the state and private corporations.[20] Habermas's public space differed from colonial space in fundamental ways: while one is constituted by equal, rational individuals, European colonialists defined colonial space as an environment of purportedly irrational and sub-human colonial subjects. Bart Cammaerts separates "Habermas's exemplary citizens" from colonial subjects and argues that while Habermas's citizens were "stripped of status" and "the strength of their rational arguments more important than their position in society or personal wealth," African subjects of the colonial era were widely regarded by their rulers as incapable of reason or civility, requiring intervention and tutelage from men of modernity and enlightenment.[21] Cammaerts's dichotomy allows one to see how the colonial newspaper's definition of the public could not conceive of the idea of a colonial citizen across racial boundaries.[22]

Habermas used the public sphere to explore the emergence of the bourgeoisie and nation-states in the eighteenth century, a model that deviates significantly from the public discourses in precolonial and colonial societies.[23] While Newell suggested that "newsprint introduced an anonymizing function" whereby "members of educated elites, school-leavers, clerks, men, women, and youth could participate in the formation of public opinion," thereby "masking the markers of social identity,"[24] I contend that the newspaper obituary transcended anonymity through self-naming and the cultivation of celebrity to exclude certain classes of Africans from, while

[18] Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)," *New German Critique* 1–3 (1974), 49.

[19] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

[20] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 142.

[21] See Bart Cammaerts, *Internet-Mediated Participation beyond the Nation State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 25–27, cited in Newell, *The Power to Name.*

[22] On how the French Empire is an exception to this rule, see Frederick Cooper's *Citizenship between Empire and Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[23] Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Notes towards a Conception of the Colonial Public," in Bhargava, Rajeev and Reifeld, Helmut (eds.), *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), 132.

[24] Newell, *The Power to Name,* 15

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enlisting others into, the hierarchical colonial public sphere. In other words, obituary publications were one of the means through which Africans staked a claim to prestige and status in the public sphere engendered by both African and European-owned newspapers.

Lagosians' assertion of their upper-class status through newspaper obituaries reflected both the persistence of local traditions in the public honoring of the dead as well as the wider global rise of privileged middle classes, even under colonial conditions. For example, Emma Hunter shows how the new African elite who emerged during the height of colonialism in East Africa used print media as a platform to express and spread their political visions. Hunter contends that the advent of modernity, the development of nationalism, and the global dissemination of Pan-Africanism and anti-colonial movements gave impetus to the formation of these ideas. Hunter argues that the print media produced the public sphere not just as a site of communication but also as a site of struggle and contestation over the meaning and practice of democracy, citizenship, and freedom in colonial East Africa. [25]

Further, Emma Hunter and Leslie James have offered a useful model to understand these processes as a space produced through a combination of multiple diverse forces.[26] They argue that the colonial public sphere is constituted through the infrastructure for communication, through the addressivity of cosmopolitan and local public spaces; the performativity inherent in the colonial text, and the periodicity of the printed material.[27] Thus, the public sphere can become a powerful arena of social change, where diverse groups can challenge the validity of existing norms or serve the rationalization of political domination and the agency of instrumental governmentality.[28] Mrinalini Sinha has provided a counternarrative to

[25] See Emma Hunter, "Modernity, Print Media, and the Middle Class in Colonial East Africa," in Dejung, Christof, Motadel, David and Osterhammel, Jürgen (eds.), *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). For a detailed account of the African middle classes and the bourgeoisie in a global and other colonial context, see Christof Dejung, David Motadel, and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[26] Hunter and James, "Introduction: Colonial Public Spheres and the Worlds of Print."

[27] Hunter and James, "Introduction: Colonial Public Spheres and the Worlds of Print."

[28] James Coleman, *Nigeria. Background to Nationalism*, 4th ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965); Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space. Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermans," in Calhoun, Craig (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 73–98; X; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere. A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25–26 (1990), 56–80; Katharina Oke, "The

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Habermas by defining the colonial public sphere as one that produced visible differences of race and whiteness deployed to engender social inclusion, social ineligibility, or subalternity. Drawing on Sinha's work, I argue that the newspaper obituary served as a central space where the social statuses of colonial elites were further reinforced and advertised and where different educated African elites sought visibility for their families.[29]

Christian Rhetoric in Obituary Reports

One dimension, among others, in which Lagosians asserted their presence in the colonial sphere was through Christian obituaries in the newspapers. The Lagos Christian community dealt with the exigency of death through their belief that death was simply a pathway to heaven rather than an everlasting parting from loved ones. The notion of salvation made accepting death as a peaceful end easier. Publicly advertised obituaries, such as newspaper obituaries, helped reinforce the notion of religious camaraderie necessary for the eternal salvation of the departed. In this manner, many obituaries were deemed to elicit greater interest from the Christian community than the adherents of African religions and thus were preoccupied with Christian sentiments. Reporting the obituary of Chief Okenla, the *Lagos Observer* (LO) of 14 September 1882, wrote, "The Christians of Abeokuta and ourselves have sustained an irreparable loss in the death of their hero, Chief Okenla."[30] Here, the Christians of Abeokuta were mentioned as the first bearer of the irreparable loss of Chief Okenla. In this way, the newspaper suggests that Christians were first positioned to suffer the crushing pains of loss and were privileged in the hierarchy of public emotions in obituary reports in Lagos.

Likewise, reporting the obituary of Miss Elfrida Esther Thomas, the *Lagos Observer* of 13 September 1883, carefully analyzed how Thomas discharged her duties: "it is well known that in the performance of her duties as a Sunday School Teacher, before her departure for Europe and after her return, she acted always with energy, self-denial, and devotion." The introduction of "Sunday school," "self-denial," and "devotion" may underline the preponderance of Christian rhetoric and its attendant sympathy in most obituaries of these periods.

Even while narrating the roles played by the deceased in traditional institutions, languages that subtly implied Christian virtues were introduced. Efforts to evangelize and convert the locals were part of the colonializing

Colonial Public Sphere in Nigeria, 1920–1943," *Stichproben. Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien* 25–13 (2013), 29–56.

[29] See Mrinalini Sinha, "Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India," *Journal of British Studies* 40–4 (2001), 489–521.

[30] LO, 14 Sept. 1882.

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missions and were often seen to interject most colonial correspondences not just in obituary reports but in other endeavors of life. The *Lagos Observer* wrote: "John Owolotan, or Okenla as he is called, was made a Chief Warrior of all the Abeokuta Christians in 1960."[31] The use of "Chief warrior" seemed to mimic the prevailing description of individuals notable for leading wars quite prevalent in Yoruba land during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was fashionable to describe specific individuals as "great or chief warriors" to capture their outstanding roles in these Yoruba wars.[32] The import of war slogans into obituaries was to foreground the impactful Christian life of the deceased and emphasize why it is more significant than any other narrative. Reporting the death of Chief Okenla, the *Lagos Observer* wrote, "From all accounts he died of heart disease, not as is being circulated by the superstitious and ignorant, that his death is traceable to the diabolical machinations which they suppose resulted from his bold defiance of the heathen Chief Ogudipe, in his late attempt to persecute the Christians."[33] From this report, it was evident that the LO was opposed to the purported "heathenism" of local religious beliefs. The tensions seen in such clashes between Christianity and traditional beliefs were even disseminated through obituaries. It is possible to conclude that newspaper obituaries were vehicles of evangelism deployed by the elite converts to oppose local thoughts they often perceived as rooted in "idolatrous" practices, "paganistic" backwardness, and superstition.

Reporting Obituaries as Social, Civic, and Public Health Interventions

While obituary reportage in colonial newspapers of Lagos was a space to express sorrow and dispel beliefs deemed harmful to the Christian faith, it was also an ideological publication that problematized social and civic challenges confronted by the colony.[34] During the colonial period in Lagos,

[31] LO, 14 Sept. 1882.

[32] Some of these wars were reported in the same Lagos newspapers. For example, *The Lagos Times and Gold Coast Colony Advertiser* (LT) of 1881 reports: "From Abeokuta it is reported that the kidnapping and guerrilla warfare between the Egbas and Ibadans still continued. The king of Dahomey had sent messengers to the Egba Government, but these from political reasons had been ordered to remain at a suburban village (Ibara) where they would be communicated with. See *The Lagos Times and Gold Coast Colony Advertiser* (LT) 1881, p. 3; LO, 14 Sept. 1882.

[33] LO, 14 Sept. 1882.

[34] Lagos newspapers owned by Africans such as *Lagos Weekly Record* and *Lagos Standard*, while being politically confrontational, occasionally showed sympathy for government-oriented concerns such that the views and values of broader urban populations may not still be fully captured. As such the press did not entirely critique the European public health paradigms for urban "improvement." Even while they solicited the European's intervention in disease control, they shared "British sanitary

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obituaries were unusually obsessed with the causes of death. By mentioning and extensively dwelling on the causes of death, the intention was not to separate death from its causal significance but to establish the consequences of such causes. The *Lagos Weekly Record* of 16 March 1895, wrote, "Death of Mr. George Nicholas Hoare."[35] The first sentence of the obituary opened with the cause of his death: "With deepest regret, we have to chronicle the sad death by drowning of Mr. George Nicholas Hoare, eldest son of Mrs. G. N. Hoare of Lake Street, which occurred last Saturday afternoon."[36] The newspaper went ahead to provide a detailed account of how the boat mishap occurred:

> Mr. Hoare was proceeding in a canoe with a younger brother and cousin, a servant and a canoeman to his mother who was residing at Apapa for the benefit of her health, and to whom he was taking some provisions, when the canoe was drifted by a strong current against one of the many groups of fishing stakes planted in the lagoon and was upset. The servant sank almost immediately and was drowned the younger brother, cousin and canoe man contrived to cling to the upset canoe until they were rescued. Mr. Hoare managed to get hold of the fishing stakes, but his weight caused these to give way, and he was plunged into the swift current and after a short struggle he sank and was drowned.[37]

This detailed account of his death suggests that reporting obituary in the nineteenth-century Lagos newspapers was necessarily gossipy to prove that certain deaths were inevitable or avoidable. Narrating how Hoare managed to clutch onto the fishing stakes but was failed by his own weight subtly reveals the immediate cause of his death. In effect, a connection to the remote and immediate causes of death must be established. By mentioning his weight as a significant hindrance to his last struggle for life, the newspaper indirectly informs the reader of Hoare's immense physical size. By occasionally digressing to peripheral topics, obituary reports in colonial newspapers served multiple purposes: to report deaths and provide informative news on the precarious nature of lives in the colonies. One of the most salient aspects of such precarious existences was tropical diseases such as malaria.

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and public health" sentiments that scapegoated and blamed the Africans "for the ubiquitous dirt of Lagos." This position may problematize the newspaper public sphere as one that is not public oriented. Fred Omu argues that African owned newspapers often expressed rather pro-British Government tendencies and rarely possessed the attributes of an engaged criticism. See Fred Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria, 1880–1937*, Ibadan History Series (London: Longman, 1978), 30; Newell, *Histories of Dirt*, 47–49.

[35] LWR, 14 Sept. 1882.

[36] LWR, 16 March 1895, 2

[37] LWR, 16 March 1895, 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2023.14 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The efforts by the colonial government to control malaria in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Lagos resulted in expedient sociological and political decisions that impacted lives in the colony.[38] Relying on its medical knowledge, the colonial state in Lagos attempted to colonize the body and appropriate obituary spaces of the newspaper to essentialize the African environment as a thriving port of dangerous diseases. Reporting the obituary of Captain Cyril Hammond Elgee, *Lagos Weekly Record* of 13 and 17 October 1917, wrote,

> For soon after the appearance at West Africa he was kind enough to offer to write for the paper some sketches of his Coast life. Several months ago he wrote stating that increasing ill-health had led him to postpone preparation of the manuscript. An inquest into the circumstances of the death was held on Wednesday at Westminster. Captain E. A. Elgee, of Bolton Street, Piccadilly, deposed that for several years his brother had been in bad health. He had suffered from tropical diseases, malaria being the original cause.[39]

By mentioning "tropical disease," it was assumed that it was among the major causes of death. This narrative was brought into several obituary reports and used to characterize the Lagos colony as intrinsically and endemically prone to disease and potentially unsafe for the colonial authorities. In fact, colonial officers saw most West African colonies as the epicenter of one of the most dangerous malaria-carrying organisms.[40]

During this period, the safety of colonial officers and other Europeans was held paramount and often considered the primary reason for most anti-malaria campaigns while Africans were victims of institutionalized racial policies.[41] Each failed attempt to safeguard the health of colonial officers was sensationalized in the newspapers as an implication of the African climate. For example, a detailed description of Captain Cyril Hammond Elgee's obituary in *Lagos Weekly Record* of 13 and 17 October 1917, insinuated

[38] Jimoh Muftau Oluwasegun, "The British Mosquito Eradication Campaign in Colonial Lagos, 1902– 1950," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 51–2 (2017), 217–236.

[39] LWR, 13 and 17 October 1917.

[40] Some of the texts that dwelled extensively on this include Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Newell, *Histories of Dirt*; and Oluwasegun, "The British Mosquito Eradication Campaign," 221.

[41] When Governor MacGregor arrived in 1898, his immediate concern was to stem the tide of mortality among the European population. The statistics were scary: 71.12 per thousand. By 1900, it was 87.64 per thousand. With this figure in mind, the governor was determined to eradicate mosquitos from Lagos. The total death toll among the entire population of 33,000 was 2,200 per year. This serious medical problem motivated him to fight to end the scourge of malaria in Lagos. See Oluwasegun, "The British Mosquito Eradication Campaign," 221.

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that the "damp" Amazon aided the deterioration of his health: "He suffered greatly as a result of sleeping in the damp on the Amazon, and it was there that he first took drugs."[42] The introduction of the Amazon serves to paint a "jungle" picture of the colonial outpost of Africa where Elgee "first took drugs." The report's mention of "malaria," "Amazon," and "drugs" exemplify the triple existential threat of the colonial mission in Africa. To further heighten this vulnerability to the tropical climate and the consequent precarity of colonial sojourn in the colonies, the newspaper noted that "he had lived in tropical climate for 20 years" and that

> the housekeeper at the flat in Regent Street said that on many occasions she had found Captain Elgee was asleep on the floor. He told her never to awaken him. When she left on Thursday Captain Elgee was asleep on the floor, dressed and she did not disturb him. When she arrived the following day, he was in the same position, dead.[43]

The above instantly suggests that sleeping "on the floor in the damp of the Amazon" was the immediate cause of his death. The emphasis on the number of times Captain Elgee slept on the floor in the damp Amazon makes one ponder how the curious innuendo convincingly implies that sleeping in the damp Amazon induces illness and eventual death.

Obituary reports were full of gossipy anecdotes deployed to, among other things, present the African environment as an incubator for malaria. It also presented the African climate as a space where public health posed a greater critical challenge, leading to dangerous diseases such as dysentery. For example, reporting the death of Henry W. George, brother-in-law to the Hon. J. Thomas C. M. G. at Onitsha on the 16th Inst, the *Lagos Standard* of 17 January 1908 notes, "We understand that the deceased succumbed to an attack of dysentery."[44] On the same page, another death was reported without any cause: "It is with regret that we record the death of Mrs. Isabella Meredith, wife of Mr. Peter O Meredith, which occurred last Thursday. We extend our sympathy to the bereaved."[45] It is possible to suggest that in some of the newspapers, the cause of death assumed a political stance such that deaths by natural causes were not sensationalized, while deaths caused by tropical diseases were highlighted and overstated. These deaths (and the connected obituaries) became political because they allowed the authors to criticize public health conditions in the colony; deaths of frail white bodies thus served as a warning and condemnation of government inactivity.[46]

[42] LWR, 13 and 17 October 1917.
[43] LWR, 13 and 17 October 1917.
[44] LS, 17 January 1908.
[45] LS, 17 January 1908.
[46] Janice Hume believes that mentioning the causes of death in obituary notices of nineteenth century American newspapers constitutes a form of media framing that

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LO complained about how the colonial officers, under the guise of the African climate's adverse effect on their health, extended their leave in England without any official authorization. As LO argued, "In some instances, an officer had previously been in the commercial service, without inconvenience, for three or four years, yet as soon as he becomes an official; he discovers that his health requires that he should have frequent changes in England." LO maintains that for Europeans to become acclimated and "suffer least from the effects of the climate" that they must remain in the country "for a considerable time." LO was convinced that "withstanding the peculiarities of the African climate" posed a greater challenge for European colonial officers than it did for Africans if spending "a considerable time" in Africa was a criterion to acclimatize to the African climatic conditions. LO further scapegoated the Abeokuta climate in other death reports. For example, in its 27 October 27 and 3 November 1888 editions, the late surgeon-Major of Lagos, Samuel Rowe, was reported to have died "owing to his severe sufferings and the inadvisability of proceeding in that state to a more trying climate,"[47] while Miss Elfrida Esther Thomas, daughter of Rev. J. B. Thomas, Wesleyan Minister at Abeokuta, was reported to have died of a cold. The report notes that "while she was on a visit to Abeokuta, she contracted cold, and this increasing on her return, she went to, according to the advice of her medical attendants, Gbologun where she died."[48] Here again, the Abeokuta climate was labeled either as a "more trying climate" where it was foolhardy for Samuel Rowe to venture into under his health conditions or one where Elfrida Esther "contracted cold" that lead to her death.

Similar obituary reports were recorded in other colonial newspapers. For example, reporting the death of Rt. Rev. Joseph Sidney Hill D. D. Bishop of Western Equatorial Africa, "on Thursday at 4:35 o'clock after three days of severe illness" and his wife, Mrs. Lucy Hill, wife of Bishop Hill, "this morning at 12:30 o'clock,"[49] LWR notes that "in each case, death was due to a malignant type of malaria fever" and that "both were apparently in good health on Monday but during the night their health failed them, and on the following morning were protracted with fever; which grew more and more intense and to which they finally succumbed."[50] The mention of "after three days of severe illness" is a ubiquitous slogan that associated three days with the

played a "much more prominent role in the obituary of 1838 than it did in 1818." This observation bears strong resonance with my findings regarding the vivid portrayal of deaths in colonial Lagos. See Janice Hume, "Private Lives, Public Virtues: Historic Newspaper Obituaries in a Changing American Culture," (unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1997), 58.

47 LO, 27 October and 3 November 1888.

48 LO, 13 Sept. 1883.

49 LWR, 6 January 1894.

50 LWR, 6 January 1894.

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duration of malaria symptoms. For example, LWR reported that "Prince Adejumo of Oyo succumbed to fever after an illness of three days."[51]

One would assume that the manner the newspapers reported the death of the Bishop and his wife or Adejumo was intended to paint a scary picture of a malaria fever that was "malignant." There was also an attempt to prove that malaria was an instant killer such that one can be "in good health" in the morning and contract malaria in the evening and succumb to death after "three" days. The deployment of terrifying words such as "malignant" and "protracted" seemed part of the discreet agenda of stereotyping the tropical environment as an endemic abode where recovery from malaria fever could not be guaranteed.

In the nineteenth century, the use of sensationalism seemed a popular journalistic strategy of obituary reportage – not just in the colonial newspapers but also in that of the Western colonialists. A tone of scandalous objectification has been noted in the nineteenth-century obituary reportage of American newspapers, which has been described by Janice Hume as "the use of sensationalism to tell stories of the deaths of citizens" whereby "editors believed information published in obituaries benefited the public and served as lessons or warnings."[52] Hume examined how obituaries of 1818 in America tried to help readers come to terms with the specter of death through the framing of death imagery, noting essentially how death imagery in obituaries of 1818 was primarily religious in nature.[53] This is similar to the religious imagery I noted earlier in colonial newspapers of Lagos. From the above, it becomes evident that lay writers used the medium of newspaper print to memorialize loved ones and insert them into the public sphere convened by these newspapers. Obituaries were either presented in the form of short announcements, poems, or lengthy biographical writing where names of surviving relatives were mentioned to give social worth to the deceased's life.[54]

While obituaries could raise alarm about dangers to the bodies of white colonizers, they could also become an avenue to criticize European racial policies against Africans. Reporting the death of Rowland Cole, the *Times of Nigeria* (ToN) devoted almost a full page to chronicle his life's journey and how he rose to the highest rank as Postmaster General in the Gold Coast Colony. However, ToN reported that in 1898 Cole "fell a victim to the pernicious and unscrupulous policy of ousting every black man from their

[51] LWR, 28 November 1896, 7.

[52] Hume, "Private Lives, Public Virtues," 47.

[53] Hume, "Private Lives, Public Virtues," 47.

[54] The nature of each obituary was determined by the whims and caprices of the editors and publishers. Sawada notes that from the 1880s onward, biographical obituary publications of African heroes flourished while obituaries of ordinary citizens became highly commercialized. See Sawada, *The Educated Elite.*

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positions as heads of departments as well as of high trust and responsibility."[55] ToN named Joseph Chamberlain as the European colonial minister who introduced the "unconscionable policy" that is "immoral in principle."[56] ToN chose to reproach Chamberlain for "this policy which he initiated in the West African administrations for the suppression of the black race and for stifling their aspirations and national growth."[57] The death of Cole, therefore, became an opportunity to condemn the racist policy of Chamberlain, which saw to the unjust retirement of the late Cole from the service "against his will and in spite of his protestations that he was still strong, able and willing to continue his work."[58] ToN further remarked that Thomas Deacon, the European who succeeded Cole, was unable to cope with the enormity of work Cole handled effortlessly, noting that Chamberlain could not spend many months in charge "when he had to requisition for the services of two assistants from England."[59] The newspaper suggested that the colonial office had to pay triple times the salary of Cole to service the same function Cole handled singlehanded while he was in charge. This type of obituary was a common practice in many colonial newspapers. Perhaps, deploying an obituary to critique racial stereotyping and condemn anti-African policies was a rare opportunity for certain writers who were denied a voice in the public sphere of newspaper columns. Obituaries thus became a type of column for public affairs commentary and critical engagement.

From the above, it is clear that obituary reportage constituted a political discourse in the colonial newspapers of Lagos because it encapsulated not just information about the deceased but also, more importantly, information about the African climate, which bordered on the stereotypical imagination of the colonies as an unsafe space for Europeans.

Obituaries and Nuances of Class and Status

The vibrant intellectual atmosphere ignited in the Lagos colony by these newspapers came with a new definition of the public sphere. This was a commodified form of the public sphere, dependent on payment, that constructed a certain class status in the editorial pages of most of the newspapers. For example, a select public for obituary was included under the strict terminology of "Advertisement." On page 3 of the *Lagos Times* of 23 February 1920, there was a rubric titled "Advertisement" where the price of subscription for various advertisements was published. It reads, "Twelve lines and under, 5s,. Every additional line 6d, In Memoriam 4s, Birth 5s, Thanks for

[55] ToN, 15 November 1915, 5.
[56] ToN, 15 November 1915, 5.
[57] ToN, 15 November 1915, 5.
[58] ToN, 15 November 1915, 5.
[59] ToN, 15 November 1915, 5.

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Sympathy 4s, One single column 25s, one-half column 15s, One-quarter column 10s, One-eight column 5s."[60] On another edition of *The Times* in 1915, a different subscription rate was provided for advertisements: "Advertisers scale – Five lines and under 2s. 6d., and 6d per line afterward for one insertion. Births, Marriages. Deaths, Thanks for Sympathy, for one insertion, 2s. 6d. rates for Contract Advertisement which can be arranged for."[61] 6d was a day's salary of a carpenter, a low-income government employee, or a blacksmith.[62] The newspaper itself sold for 3 pence. It was assumed, therefore, that publishing five lines of an obituary cost 2 shillings in 1915, while twelve lines cost five shillings in 1920.[63]

What this means is that anyone publishing more than five lines in 1915 would have paid an additional fee of 6 pence. The newspapers thus created a prestigious and class-exclusive public space for the dead. One way newspapers constructed this space was through longer poems to remember the dead. There were longer poems that were also published in the "In Memoriam" columns to remember the dead. While these poems were sometimes too long, and their subscription considered unaffordable due to their exorbitant subscription fees, they were thought to be published at the discretion of the editors who had a personal acquaintanceship with the deceased. The reading public was furnished with citations of poetry about death and loss from verses and lines from hymns such as "Brief Life Is Here Our Portion," "The Saints of God, Their Wanderings Done," and "For the Soul[s] Thou Holdest Dearest, Let Prayers Arise."[64]

A close study of the newspapers suggests that the length of the obituaries strictly adhered to the newspaper's subscription rates. Thus, it was thought that only the wealthy could afford such prices to either publish or be published in the "In Memoriam" section. Because of this overly constraining financial factor, the less affluent restricted their obituaries to only a few lines. Even though many obituaries were defined by textual brevity because of financial constraints, within these few lines, the essential elements of the dead's social class were highlighted. For example, the *Times of Nigeria* reported these obituaries: "Dissu Martins: Prosperous merchant of Martins Street, died at his farm, Yaba Road, Wednesday, 11th Instant. Member of the Ansaru-un-Deen, famous Muslim Society of Lagos. Aged, about 60 years."[65] ToN would employ similar prestigious wording in narrating the obituary of

[60] ToN, 23 February 1920, 3.

[61] ToN, 2–6 March 1915, 2

[62] Sawada, *The Educated Elite*, 81.

[63] This corresponds with Sawada's observation that "between 1890 and 1920, in order to insert one memorial advertisement (memorial poem or death notice), family or friends of the deceased paid between 4 and 15 shillings. See Sawada, *The Educated Elite*, 169; Newell, "From Corpse to Corpus," 401.

[64] Sawada, *The Educated Elite*, 169; Newell, "From Corpse to Corpus," 402.

[65] ToN, 23 February 1920, 3

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the late Rowland Cole, the Sierra Leonean who was the former postmaster General of the Gold Coast. ToN described Cole as "a successful man of business" whose wife assisted in "conducting a very prosperous trade while he was in the public service."[66]

An analysis of these lines indicates that while the obituary announcement of the late Martins is just five lines, it captured his most prestigious attribute and framed his social capital with such phrases as "prosperous merchant," and "famous Muslim Society of Lagos." These words of admiration immediately identified Martins's social worth. On the same page of the newspaper, the obituary of James Alfred Agbaje, which is just seven lines, identified him as "a prominent citizen of Lagos" and father of "Dr. Savage and Mr. Spencer Savage" who "retired after a long and flourishing business career."[67] While the space is constraining to allow for an expanded narrative of Agbaje's social worth, the insertion of his educated son, Dr. Savage, ascribes that flair of class and social importance to his persona. He would immediately be associated with a class of what is known as "Baba Dokita" in the Yoruba language, meaning "Doctor's Father." In the African context, the social worth of parents is often measured by the success of their children, while children are often considered wealth in certain local parlance. Yoruba popular thoughts have reinforced "the superiority of children over wealth," such that "success or wealth, without children among the Yoruba, is either incomplete or devalued."[68] Among the Igbo, local idioms such as *nze bu na nwa,* means the "child exudes chiefly authority," while *Nwakaego* translates as "the child is worth more than money."

The importance of wealth and power in colonial Lagos is evidenced by the omission of the poor and powerless who are not connected with the newspaper publishers and editors from the public sphere convened by obituary pages in most newspapers of the eras under study. Where the obituary publication of an individual exceeded certain prescribed subscription lines, it was assumed that the individual was wealthy or may have a certain familial relationship with the editor or publisher. However, some obituaries were obviously published out of the discretion of the publisher or editors, perhaps because of the position the individual occupied among the elite circles. This editorial preference for some obituary publications, according to Sawada, is sometimes informed by the African custom of paying homage to deceased heroes and "great men." Editors deployed poetry and sensationalism to define their subjective meanings of heroism in the obituary while moderate-income Lagosians seized the opportunity offered by the cheaper,

[66] ToN, 15 November 1915, 5.

[67] ToN, 23 February 1920, 3

[68] Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale, Mofeyisara Oluwatoyin Omobowale, and Olugbenga Samuel Falase, "The Context of Children in Yoruba Popular Culture," *Global Studies of Childhood* 9–1 (2019), 18–28.

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short-verse-subscriptions in the "In Memoriam" section to inscribe their late wives, parents, spouses, and Western-educated Africans into the public sphere. Authors drew on poetry printed in hymn books, religious pamphlets, or other academic texts to memorialize loved ones and family members who were not public figures.[69]

On Saturday, 24 December 1887, *The Mirror* reported the death of Mr. Martins, the keeper of the Jubilee Restaurant under the "News Item" section. The report mentioned Mr. Martins as only the keeper of the Jubilee Restaurant without mentioning anything about his family; nor did it mention his father, mother, or siblings or any other information that would identify and accord him that social recognition. The report only stated that "he had been assisting in serving out refreshments to those who attended the conversations at Phoenix Hall up to within few minutes of his death."[70] The obituary did not provide any significant family information that would elevate his social standing. This obituary was published under the "News Item" section of the newspaper rather than the "Advertisement" section, where most obituaries were subscribed with money. This suggests that it might have been published at the discretion of the editor and could not have emanated from Mr. Martin's relatives – a logical reason why no name of any of his family members was included. The "News Item" section contains short news deemed less weighty as to be given sustained attention by the newspaper editors. There are other short news contained in this section. The brevity of Mr. Martins' obituary announcement may not constitute the condescending tenor of the obituary as reported by the editor but the omission of his social accomplishment. The style of reportage, therefore, seemed consistent with his social class (he was a bartender in Phoenix Restaurant). Its terseness could not capture salient aspects that were given attention in the shorter obituaries subscribed for in the "Advertisement" sections, such as his children, parents, or a brief sensational remark on the cause of his death and his life's accomplishments. Perhaps, he was not married and had no child, but the omission of his parents' names may be interpreted as a sign of social anonymity in the African context, while the absence of his obituary in the "Advertisement" section indicated that it was not subscribed. The meaning of subscription here suggests that families used money to negotiate for presence in the public sphere.

At the same time, some Africans invoked prestigious pedigrees to posthumously make up for marginalization in the colonial sphere. In the obituary of Africans, there seems to be a tendency to mention the highly placed children, parents, or relatives of the deceased to pronounce their social worth. For example, the *Nigerian Times* (NT) of 5 April 1910, reported the death of Charles Randall Cole on 28 March and identified him as a native of

[69] Sawada, *The Educated Elite*, 164–169.
[70] *The Mirror*, 24 December 1887.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2023.14 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Yorubaland along with his wife Berky, as well as his parents, who were also noted as "natives of Yorubaland." NT mentioned Cole's siblings and noted that his parents were enslaved in Sierra Leonne but later returned to Lagos in the 1860s. The newspaper reported that all six members of the family have died, leaving only an elder daughter of Charles Randall Cole "who survives them all and who is mourning the irreparable loss of members of her kindred."[71] The obituary took a historic leap into Cole's life's journey, how he was ill for four months and eventually "succumbed to his illness."[72] The need to capture the family genealogy was in line with the tendency of Africans to launder the family's history in eulogies. Naming all deceased relatives allows Africans to reexamine and reconnect with ancestral genealogy and advertise the family's long-forgotten glories and credentials. Michael Jindra and Marleen de Witte see the listing of surviving family members as an indication of social success, for the names reveal a network of dependents and influence.[73] Sometimes, it serves to recall the gift of longevity.

While the manner and narrative of the obituary reportage of the less affluent Lagosians may convey an idea of unfortunate brevity, certain elements were introduced to poignantly foreground their social class. The *Lagos Weekly Record* (LWR) of 18–25 June 1921 reports, "Not lost but gone before. The Home call came to Miss Caroline Adenike Fashanu at 1.30 PM on Tuesday the 21st instant, daughter of Mr. J. A. FASHANU, of 30 Martins Street, Lagos."[74] J. A. Fashanu was an important member of the Lagos colony who was also an active member of the Lagos Branch of the National Congress of British West Africa and a committee member of the West African National Conference.[75] By mentioning the late Adenike father's name, it is assumed that the family placed emphasis on the humanizing attribute of Adenike's obituary and strongly articulated it through her father's name. One assumes that a mention of late Adenike's other family members would have been possible if space were sufficient. For example, in the *Lagos Standard* of 20 February 1895, the publication of the death of "Madam Martha Meroke on Wednesday the 13th instant," mentioned that she was the grandmother of Mrs. Mojola Agbebi of Bamboo House, Race Course, and great-grandmother of Rev. E. M. Lijadu, Agent of the C. M. S., at Ode, Ondo.[76] Meroke's longevity marked a salient component in the public memory of her death, as seen from

[71] NT, 5 April 1910, 1.

[72] NT, 5 April 1910, 1.

[73] Michael Jindra and Marleen de Witte, "Of Corpses, Clay, and Photographs, Body Imagery and Changing Technologies of Remembrance in Asante Funeral Culture," in Jindra, Michael and Noret, Joël (eds.), *Funerals in Africa: Explorations of a Social Phenomenon* (Berghahn Books, 2011), 184.

[74] LWR, 18–25 June 1921.

[75] Gabriel Olakunle Olusanya, "The Lagos Branch of the National Congress of British West Africa," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 4–2 (1968), 321–333; 325.

[76] LS, 20 February 1895.

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the conscious attempt to canonize her centenarian status. To underscore Meroke's longevity, the newspaper deemed it necessary to notify the public that her daughter, Grace, passed on before her (Meroke) at 70. The mention of Meroke's daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter seemed a deliberate editorial choice to emphasize the nature of social status that progeny can bestow upon the deceased. In this instance, the three generational progeny foregrounds not just Meroke's age and social worth but suggests how her children value progeniture.

Even while reporting obituaries in a very short, single-line sentence, the social worth of human life was squeezed in. For example, on page 3 of the *Nigerian Chronicles* (NC) of 2 December 1910, even though the obituary of Hon. J. Mensah Sarbah B. L. C. M. G., was reported in just a single line, the social worth of his life was captured by mentioning that he was "an unofficial member of the Gold Coast Legislature." To underline the importance of class and to prove that the sole mention of the "Gold Coast Legislature" was not satisfactorily socially elevating for Sarbah's social class, on 9 December 1910, the NC singled out J. Mensah Sarbah's death, among the three reported in the previous edition, for a detailed, lengthy elucidation. Titled, "The Late Hon J. Mensah Sarbah," the article notes,

> The news of the death of the Hon'ble J. Mensah Sarbah C. M. G. Senior unofficial member of the Legislative Council of the Gold Coast Colony which reached us as we go to press last week created a very deep feeling. It was only a few months ago that we were congratulating the Sister Colony on the recognition bestowed upon her by the conferring of a Companionship of the Order of St. Michael and ST. George upon her illustrious son Mensah Sarbah. In congratulating the Colony then, we felt that we are doing honour to our own selves as men of the stamp of Mr. Sarbah are not the property of one Colony but the common property of West Africans. By these achievements the outside world has been able to see to what intellectual and moral heights the West African can rise. His writings have enriched English literature as far as a native can contribute to it. His 'Fanti Customary Laws' is now the acknowledged authority in Legal circle on Gold Coast customs and laws. Mr. Sarbah had lived a strenuous life and lived for his country. His sudden removal is to us a national calamity which we all mourn.[77]

The above indicated that NC had initially treated Sarbah's obituary scantily, alongside others, "last week" because the news arrived belatedly as they were "about to go to press." However, in the subsequent edition, it was extracted from the seemingly less newsworthy obituaries and given sustained attention. Of course, not all obituaries were published in colonial newspapers. It is assumed that those obituaries that made it to the newspapers were deemed important and recognized. In another example, NC of 2 December

[77] NC, 2 Dec. 1910.

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1910, articulated the social worth of Mrs. Sarah Abraham's obituary through a mention of her son, Mr. I. E. Abraham of Broad Street.[78] This suggests that the son may have placed the obituary advert. The above two obituaries seem to underscore either their subjects' class, wealth, status, or affiliation with an important institution in the Lagos colony.

Accompanying the Dead to the Obituary Public Sphere

I have attempted to identify instances where the elite public sphere was constituted by individuals who possessed the financial means to "advertise" their deceased in colonial newspapers. In her study of Yoruba print culture in the early twentieth century, Karin Barber has demonstrated how Yoruba newspapers in the 1920s Lagos convened a progressive citizenry, equal in status on the printed page.[79] In contrast, I argue that Lagosians displayed wealth and social status through references to progeny and social connections.

Similarly, Jindra and de Witte have employed the concept of "wealth-in-people" to illustrate how the numerous names of people displayed on funeral posters could be used as a mark of achievement.[80] Dependents are powerful criteria to measure social responsibility and clout in Africa. The dependents of the big man, and other recipients of his benefaction, more often than not constituted the followers of the big man, and listing them in newspaper obituary seems a subtle strategy for announcing one's social accomplishments. Therefore, the newspaper obituary unveils a fruitful interplay between the social conspicuousness of the wealthy and the surrounding gaze of eulogizing adherents.[81] The bereaved see the public sphere of the newspaper as a space that can bestow prestige upon the deceased and their families while the narrative style and length of the obituary serve as a means through which this prestige could be exhibited and articulated.

Thus, colonial newspaper obituaries highlight the versatility of African societies in adapting to the colonial modernity of the print while safeguarding and continuing their most cherished cultural institutions. Despite the adoption of a seemingly new medium (the newspaper), African/Yoruba practices of wealth in people remained largely unchanged. The concept of wealth in people may provide ample room for further critical interrogation of the concept of the crowd and wealth in Yoruba cosmology. Jane Guyer deploys the concept of "wealth-in-people" to encapsulate the nature of

[78] NC, 2 Dec. 1910.

[79] Barber, Karin (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 29.

[80] Jindra and de Witte, "Of Corpses, Clay, and Photographs."

[81] Okechukwu Nwafor, Aso Ebi: *Dress, Fashion, Visual Culture and Urban Cosmopolitanism in West Africa* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 85.

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studies of wealth in precolonial African societies. Some studies on wealth in precolonial Africa have touched on "the techniques by which pre-colonial war-lords built up, motivated and remunerated their followings" especially given the fact that the concept of followership is broad enough to apply to, for example, "wives, children, clients, political followers, religious acolytes, titled associates, occupational apprentices and so on."[82] Whether living or dead, the Yoruba concept of the big man is measured by the number and rank of the individuals who associate with the big man and particularly who accompany him wherever he goes.[83] The names of surviving relatives who accompany the deceased in the obituary publication reflect the cultural and social completeness sought in the public sphere of the newspaper obituary. In this way, obituaries in the media would surpass the mere act of chronicling facts. Rather, they might disseminate a particular ideology to their mass audiences. In Yoruba cosmology, the prestige of the elite is measured by the size of the dependent crowd.[84] Patrick Cole noted that "emphasis was placed not only on how much an individual had but also on how much of it he was ready to redistribute as largesse among his followers and others around him."[85] Thus, when certain individuals die, they are immediately perceived in the light of a dignifying, transcendental, and heroic persona. Like an ancestor who is spiritually ubiquitous, such deceased individuals must also make a ubiquitous presence through many spectacular public avenues. Newspaper obituaries thus may become one of those avenues seen in this context as an extension of the Yoruba cultural belief in the physical and spiritual transcendence, expansion, and heroization of the dead.[86]

The above narratives are quite expository of new understandings of visibility, especially through the rituals of newspaper obituaries. These obituaries were strategically conditioned to participate in the political discourses of the public sphere. In Yorubaland, part of the political discourses of the public sphere revolves around procreation, wealth, and the heroic attributes of the advertised persona. Heroic tendencies are underscored by their association with the capacity of the families to prove that their deceased was a hero. Newspaper obituaries became a means of achieving this.

[82] Jane Guyer, "Wealth in People, Wealth in Things," *Journal of African History* 36 (1995), 83–90; 89.

[83] William Bascom, "Social Status, Wealth and Individual Differences among the Yoruba," *American Anthropologist* 53–2 (1951), 490–505.

[84] Patrick Cole, *Modern and Traditional Elites in the Politics of Lagos* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

[85] Cole, *Modern and Traditional Elites*.

[86] On the relationship between the living and the dead in African cosmologies, see John Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann. 1990), 5–26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2023.14 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Conclusion

While the public anonymity of print allowed correspondents and columnists to achieve equality, as argued by Newell, obituaries enabled them to define class hierarchies and race. Key to the emergence of a new class of elite society through the high rate of subscription, the newspaper obituary advertisements thus excluded the poor from this public sphere. A class hierarchy was introduced, one that seemed to deviate from the Habermasian public sphere. The newspaper obituaries defied the model of the Habermassian bourgeoisie public and charted a different notion of the public characterized by rhetoric of race, class, Christian sentiments, public health concerns, progeny, and wealth. The newspaper became a signboard for the public advertisement of family credentials by the editors and the surviving relatives.

The politics of visibility and conspicuousness constitute salient features of obituary announcements. Newspaper obituaries during the colonial period took death into the public sphere. Causes of death would do more than just chronicle; they also offered glimpses into colonial attitudes about the African environment and colonial policies as well as revealed sentiments towards the colonial mission of enlightenment and Christianization. Thus, obituaries examined in this study were analyzed in terms of their relationship to the public sphere. In conclusion, it would be apt to suggest that the colonial style of obituary announcement recognized the kinship network in the African context and, as such included the surviving children and relatives of the deceased in the announcement. Perhaps the European lifestyle of individualism determined the pattern of an obituary notice of Europeans where mention was not made of their deceased relatives. In bringing the obituary into the newspaper public sphere, death was returned to its precolonial African context as collective grief and participatory mourning.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Joe Siry and Katherine Kuenzli for their insightful feedback on the initial version of this article, which helped to shape its direction.

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