



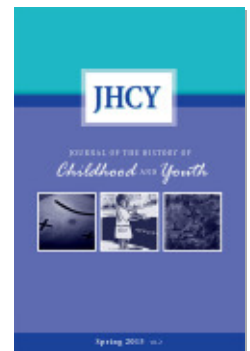
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“O! Sir I do not know either to kill myself or to stay”: Childhood Emotion, Poverty, and Literary Culture in Nigeria, 1900-1960

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The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth, Volume 8, Number
2, Spring 2015, pp. 273-294 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/hcy.2015.0024](https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2015.0024)



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SAHEED ADERINTO

**“O! SIR I DO NOT KNOW EITHER
TO KILL MYSELF OR TO STAY”:
CHILDHOOD EMOTION, POVERTY, AND
LITERARY CULTURE IN NIGERIA, 1900–1960**

INTRODUCTION

Between 1942 and 1950, several Nigerian boys predominantly between the ages of ten and sixteen wrote letters to the commissioner of the colony; the head of the British administration in Lagos, colonial Nigeria’s capital; and to Donald Faulkner, the pioneering boss of the Colony Welfare Office (CWO), an institution that addressed child and juvenile delinquency, giving themselves up for adoption and/or seeking help in paying for their education.¹ Some wrote for assistance in securing jobs or admission into highly competitive and prestigious schools. The boys apparently wanted to replace their biological families with colonial paternity. They were aware of the cultural and symbolic expectations of a father (which include but are not limited to the provision of food, shelter, and education), and wanted the colonial government and its officers (whom they conceived entirely as male) to assume those roles.

For a historian of Africa, the letters requesting adoption and assistance written by Nigerian boys open numerous avenues to rethinking a host of historiographical and theoretical assumptions about the place of children within Nigeria’s colonial culture during the first half of the twentieth century. It is a truism that the largest mass of information about African children was produced by adults who often held subjective notions about the children’s subser-vient identity within the hegemonic colonial culture. However, the boys’ letters are unique in that they were produced by the children themselves. Indeed, if sources on African children’s history are rare, those produced by children themselves are rarer. Meanwhile, the scarcity of data about childhood written by children themselves is not unique to Nigeria or to Africa—historians of other

regions, especially Europe and the Americas, have highlighted the challenges of researching childhood history using materials composed by adults.²

The argument and observations that underpin this paper are twofold. First, I observe that the boys' letters are not just a source of materials for researching children's experience within the larger colonial society, but a significant aspect of hidden African literary culture. Africanist scholars have devoted energy to exploring the hidden histories embedded in often obscure letters, diaries, correspondences, and pamphlets composed by adults; however, we know very little about children's contributions to this aspect of African colonial literary culture.³ Africans in the British colonies acquired the skill to write letters and keep diaries in both English and indigenous languages through membership in literary clubs and debating societies that sprang up in various parts of the continent in response to a personal and collective drive to embrace colonial modernity and "civilization." Letter composition was also one of the cornerstones of elementary and secondary education; it furnished the imperial government with educated Africans who could serve in various capacities as office and court clerks, bookkeepers, and interpreters, and in other low- and middle-grade employments. Aside from revealing people's intimate expression of emotions and self-conception, such letters and diaries are generally useful data for mapping out everyday encounters with colonialism.

Second, I argue that existing scholarship has neglected the study of colonial children's emotions. While we know much about African children's economic activities, their role as an "invisible" but important class of the colonial workforce, delinquency, and their representation in the print media, we know very little about their personal expression of fears and anxiety.⁴ In addition, although scholars, notably Beverly Grier, have noted that African children "were not passive victims" of colonialists' policies, they have not *critically* demonstrated how young people counteracted the notion of subordination, especially in text.⁵ Indeed, Nigerian boys who wrote to the colonial government were conscious about their positionality and expressed strong feelings about themselves as individuals and about their places within families, communities, and even the colonial system. They knew what they wanted. But they understood their highly restricted access to the infrastructure of authority and decided to convey their feeling as effectively as they could in order to seek the attention of administrators, who they believed were generally too busy to ordinarily entertain their concerns.

For instance, whatever motivated Nathaniel Okafor, a sixteen-year-old homeless boy, to assert, "May the Almighty God assist the British government to continue to rule us?" went beyond the common expression of loyalty to the British Empire, beyond personal inferiority and self-expression of isolation,

and beyond a desperate attempt to secure the attention of the busy colonial bureaucracy.⁶ Rather, it reflected how some children expressed their emotion in response to the problems of abandonment, a product of the institutionalization of poverty under colonial rule. In addition, it showed that colonialism meant different things to different people. While socioeconomically marginalized individuals like Okafor would pray for it not to end in exchange for personal comfort, most adults wanted the Union Jack to be lowered so that Africans could reclaim their dignity, among other aims of decolonization. Likewise, Samson Amiaka, who declared, "O! Sir I do not know either to kill myself or to stay," understood the meaning and impact of abandonment and searched for what he believed to be the best words to express his pains. He knew the meaning and implication of living and dying, and was prepared to make decisions in accordance with what his present situation and future held.⁷

This paper seeks to achieve three overlapping goals. First, it uses sources produced by children to research children's history; second, it recognizes and treats these sources as a significant aspect of Africa's hidden literary production; and third, it unveils how children conceive fear and its causes, and how they conveyed their experience of it. In the next section, the first of five thematic parts, I give a short history of urbanization and childhood poverty in Lagos to contextualize the sections that follow. Indeed, the boys' letters seeking help can be best understood within the broader context of the negative consequences of urbanization, which included but were not limited to urban crime, delinquency, social inequality and exclusion, and the colonialists' poor disposition toward education. Subsequent sections discuss the main causes of fear among Lagos children and how they expressed it, a close engagement of their letters as a literary exercise, and the response of the colonial authority to their demands.

CHILDHOOD POVERTY AND DELINQUENCY IN COLONIAL URBAN LAGOS

From a backwater fishing community and slave exporting port on the eve of British imperial annexation in 1861, Lagos would become by 1960, the year of Nigeria's independence, a "First Class Township." Colonialism paved the way for an influx of immigrants—from within and outside Africa—which increased and diversified the city's indigenous Yoruba population. Lagos did not have an uninterrupted population increase, owing in large part to its unsanitary environment that increased the incidence of malaria and influenza. However, it managed to expand considerably from a town of 25,083 in the decade of its annexation to around 250,000 by the mid-1950s. In 1921, 61 percent of the population was under the age of thirty. In 1960, more than 40 percent were children under the age of

fifteen.⁸ Lagos was therefore a youthful city for much of the first half of the twentieth century. Major population pull factors included modern urban facilities like electricity, educational institutions, and employment opportunities.

Like most colonial urban centers, Lagos offered the antithesis of modern-day comforts of a high standard of living. From about the 1920s, severe unemployment would become a visible consequence of its excess population. Unemployment permeated virtually all sectors of the economy, but those who performed manual labor or held low-skilled jobs were most at risk of losing them. While people with elementary and secondary school diplomas (the largest demographic of the Nigerian literate class) had trouble finding the clerical jobs that traditionally absorbed their labor, their counterparts who worked in public works encountered a similar fate as the government abandoned capital projects in the wake of global catastrophes such as the world wars and the Great Depression. It is difficult to ascertain the exact rate of unemployment or the precise number of the unemployed given the conflicting data presented by the government, the nationalists, and pressure groups such as the Association of the Unemployed Men and Women of Nigeria, but the number of people in the city out of work during the 1930s and 1940s was at least twenty thousand.⁹ The high cost of living exacerbated the problem of unemployment. Both food and rent were expensive.¹⁰ Between 1939 and 1942 the cost of living in Lagos jumped by as much as 50 to 75 percent. Much of this increase was attributable to the food price control and rationing policies of the government and the scarcity of essential items during World War II.¹¹

Children bore the brunt of the impact of unemployment and uncontrolled immigration partly because their livelihood was tied to the employment status of their parents or guardians. Some children brought from the provinces by their relatives and "town people" became homeless when their benefactors encountered financial troubles. What is more, children were also a significant, but officially unrecognized, class of colonial migrant workers left unemployed due to the instability of the colonial economy. Just like adults, children as young as ten left their homes in the provinces in search of jobs in Lagos. Child migration, an aspect of African colonial history that is understudied, increased because of the exploitative nature of colonial capitalism. In fact, African and European employers alike preferred children to adults for a number of reasons: they were easier to control, they could work longer hours, they could do several tasks that adults could not do, and they were cheaper to employ than adults. Indeed, the economic importance of children to the colonial economy is best appreciated by reviewing the response to the "child labor" laws of the 1940s. When the British banned children under the age of fourteen from hawking

(street vending that relies on the seller's calling out) in 1946, the Nigerian News Vendors Union petitioned the government, explaining the indispensability of children vendors, who constituted 90 percent of the newspaper distribution workforce.¹² Instead of arguing on behalf of itself, the union highlighted the economic and social benefits that newspaper vending purportedly held for the children, most of whom started work as early as 5:00 a.m. It claimed that the "unfortunate lads" who belong to the "school going age" depended on income from newspaper distribution "to feed, clothe, and educate themselves."¹³

In addition to the problem of child unemployment and poverty, the cost of education, which Lagosians considered as a significant tool for upward mobility, increased. During the 1940s most Lagos elementary and secondary schools were run by missionaries, who charged a tuition of between £1 and £2 for each of the three terms in an academic year. In theory, missionary education was open to every child who sought it, but in reality it was restricted—faith-based discrimination existed in varying shapes both in Lagos and in other parts of Nigeria. In response to this prejudice, the Lagos Muslim community in the 1940s engaged in massive fundraising to gather money to support an education system that blended Western and Islamic curricula.¹⁴ To make the situation worse, the colonial government did not have a free public education policy and did not begin to take the education of colonial subjects seriously until around the third decade of the twentieth century. There is a close connection between education, childhood poverty, and delinquency. Boys who completed either primary or secondary education stood a good chance of getting a clerical job—especially in the provinces—and escaping poverty. Moreover, enrollment in school kept children busy, thus reducing the instances of moral degeneration.

Homelessness and abandonment were just two of the most visible implications of unemployment and poverty on children and juveniles. Added to this was child and juvenile crime. The sight of street children making a home under Carter Bridge and in abandoned structures and market stalls was not uncommon in the 1920s and 1930s. Lagos street children were truly scavengers, gleaning scraps to eat from the public dumps and begging commuters for money. The newspaper press considered the expanding band of homeless children as a blemish on Lagos's exalted image as a bastion of West African modernity, and their involvement in theft, street fights, and "petty" crime turned them into a public enemy and reduced the civic sympathy they might otherwise have received.¹⁵ African and European administrators did not entirely agree on the motivations for juvenile crime.¹⁶ But they all concurred that children like Salawu Kadiri steal "because of hunger."¹⁷ Kadiri belonged to the class of migrant children that had been driven into the "Lagos underworld," to use the

term of a *West African Pilot* editorial, because of parents' cruelty. The boy ran away from his native town of Ijebu Ode in southwestern Nigeria because he "did not receive good treatment" from his parents.¹⁸ Many homeless and delinquent children like Kadiri lived independent lives as criminals, while others belonged to the flourishing gangs of delinquents known in the urban dictionary of the day as "boma" and "jaguda" boys.¹⁹

These developments led the government to begin to address the problem of juvenile delinquency in order to ameliorate public disorder and to police children who they believed would otherwise grow up to become hardened adult criminals and a threat to the colonial state. In 1941, Faulkner, a former officer of the Home Prison Service in the United Kingdom, was appointed as the first colony welfare officer.²⁰ Faulkner's mandate included liaising with the courts, police, and the Lagos community to establish a juvenile welfare system that included reformatory or correctional facilities for delinquents (for boys and girls separately) and a juvenile court system. Before the mid-1940s, both adult and young offenders were confined in the same quarters and allowed to socialize. Faulkner believed that this practice increased the crime rate as young offenders tended to learn criminal behavior from adult inmates while incarcerated. Faulkner drafted the Children and Young Persons Ordinance, or CYPO, which was approved in 1943 but did not come into full operation until 1946. An adaptation of Britain's Children and Young Persons Act of 1933, it created an elaborate legal machinery for protecting and administering justice to Nigerian minors.²¹ In 1942, he announced to the public that needy children could write to him explaining their problems and needs. This was the genesis of the letters of assistance of Nigerian boys, which are a main focus of this article. Why Faulkner did not also ask girls to write to seek help is unclear. We do know that the CWO believed that delinquent boys posed a higher threat to law and order, and by extension to the sustenance of imperialism, than girls. This gendered approach to child welfare mirrored the imported colonial practices of committing more resources to men, while limiting women's access to the benefits of "civilization" such as education and job opportunity. Be that as it may, the office was not set up as a one-stop shop for needy children. Neither was it meant to operate a homeless children's shelter. Its main preoccupation was the treatment of delinquent children and juveniles.

**"A SON CRYING FOR AN OBLIGATION FROM HIS FATHER":
THE NEEDS OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD**

Not surprisingly, the boys' expression of wants varied widely. However, three of the most fundamental needs of Nigerian children were education, shelter,

and jobs. These three demands were usually fused to create a coherent and intelligible justification for seeking adoption.²² The boys did not just decide to replace their natal parents with Faulkner or the government. Rather, having explored other means, they thought the government was their last and guaranteed option. A typical letter reveals the actions the boys had taken to avoid dropping out of school or becoming delinquent. Some of these steps include begging their families and kinsmen for help and saving up to finance their own education. It is not unusual to read about the efforts of family members (especially mothers) who worked hard but whose meager resources could not pay the students' tuition. The letters seeking help in securing employment describe the frustration of job denial because of the applicant's age or failure to meet required standards or because of the unavailability of positions. Rafiu Ajao Alabi was denied a job even after he presented the statutory age declaration card, a government document that ascertained the age of prospective applicants and their eligibility to work.²³ Nathaniel Okafor, who was "sleeping in the gutter," was denied a job by the labor department because he could not produce evidence of payment of tax and residency.²⁴ Friday Adah, unlike some



Figure 1: A cartoon titled "Wanted: More Government Run Schools" by Akinola Lasekan. The cartoon depicts a Nigerian child saying, "It Is Your Duty, Father, To Take Me Safely Across" to the colonial government infamous for giving grants to missionary schools instead of directly investing in the education of the colonial subject. Source: *West African Pilot*, April 27, 1949.

of his contemporaries like Isan, who were selective in their job demands—Adah wanted a letter of recommendation to the Senior Commandant of the Royal Air Force to learn to be a driver—was “prepared to do any kind of job though a menial one” to earn a living to continue his education. Conscious of his emerging masculinity, he claimed: “I could do all a man could to earn his wages.”²⁵

The boys were not merely exaggerating their willingness to do “any kind of job” to sponsor their education or escape poverty. During the 1940s, as in the preceding decades, Nigerian schoolchildren and youth were found in jobs considered by the mainstream society as degrading and dangerous.²⁶ While some youngsters like Mustairu R. Seriki hawked kerosene after school to help his “seriously sick” mother, others served as touts or illegal guides who helped male foreigners find prostitutes.²⁷ It was not uncommon to see schoolchildren between the ages of ten and fifteen working as bus conductors on the perilous roads or carrying heavy items in the port at Apapa, the gateway to the colonial state’s international trade and wealth. On June 2, 1943, the *West African Pilot* published an interview it conducted with fifteen-year-old Bolaji, who worked as a night soil (human excrement) collector to pay for his education.²⁸ The press regrettably described his work as “the lowest of all jobs” and people of his class as forgotten elements that “live in a different world” and claimed that the average Lagosian “does not know anything” about their “sordid life.” The newspaper’s description of Bolaji’s daily schedule revealed a strong desire on his part to acquire an education and make the necessary sacrifices to get it. Bolaji started work at around 10:30 p.m., collecting excrement from fifteen houses. At 3:30 a.m., he went to bed and woke up at 6:00 a.m. for school. Bolaji’s degrading job led to his being ostracized at school—hence his only friends were his coworkers. According to the newspaper, Bolaji wanted to move up the socioeconomic ladder: “He has no desire to remain in his present position.”²⁹

Bolaji’s story definitely touched the hearts of some members of the Lagos elite. On June 4, two days after the *Pilot* introduced him to the world, Henrietta Millicent Douglas, a pan-Africanist, social worker, and journalist from the West Indies who made Lagos her home, offered Bolaji a permanent job as house help. His employment package, which was publicized in the newspaper, was attractive for boys of his age, status, and need. He would be paid 17s. per month, plus free meals and accommodation in Douglas’s home in Yaba, a new district on the Lagos mainland.³⁰

The boys sought help to attend school, not because they thought it was a rite of childhood socialization, but because they understood the importance of education in colonial society. For example, Festus Osetunmobi Lumowo stated clearly that “the world required a very deep education nowadays.”³¹ Oyewole

Somefun expressed a similar sentiment: "I realized how important education is and therefore am very anxious about education."³² But the boys' educational needs varied widely. While some, like Gabriel Babajide Cole, who called himself "a son crying for an obligation from his father" (his father had died when he was just two years old), just wanted to complete his elementary education. Others, like Abasi Adisa and Tolulope Adekunle, aspired to attend secondary and even postsecondary schools.³³ The case of A. Oyetunde Oguntola reveals the youth's capacity to do the right thing, even if it meant going against the grain. It also shows an element of father-child conflict arising from divergent perspectives on life goals. His father, having helped him to acquire his elementary education, declined to send him to secondary school—even after he had passed the entrance examination to Igbobi College.³⁴ "What could I do?" he wrote in frustration. In another portion of his letter Oyetunde gives an insight into the source of disagreement with his father, citing his height, age, and why acquiring more education, not a job, was best for him: "After all I want to know more. I am not old, I am a fourteen year old, I am four feet eight inches. I cannot work because I have not the power."³⁵

Yet, some boys were selective in their choice of a school to enroll in—they wanted to attend schools where they could learn certain subjects.³⁶ Akinola Olowu, who lost his father in 1942, specified the reason he wanted to change his present school (Eko Boys' High School, established in 1913) to either Methodist Boys' High School (1879); King's School (1909); or C.M.S. Grammar School (1859), the first secondary school in Nigeria. He claimed that Eko Boys' High School was not offering biology and science and "other secondary subjects."³⁷ His three-page letter revealed the personality of a boy conscious of his own educational needs and progress, and concerned about the feelings of his mother: "I don't want to waste my time in that school [Eko Boys'], because my mother depends on me that I will do well and yet I am not in good school."³⁸

Similarly, Tom Malade, who was attending Christ High School, preferred some of the best schools in southwestern Nigeria—King's School, Ibadan Government College, Igbobi College, Baptist Academy, and Methodist Boys' High School—because attendance at any of them guaranteed a job after school.³⁹ In terms of his personal appreciation of his level of education, the fifteen-year-old believed he had acquired "a quarter of education," "not up to half education yet." Although Malade did not write of his postsecondary school plans, his statements suggest that he considered secondary school education as half education, and postsecondary as full, complete education.⁴⁰ Similarly, it is difficult to tell why Nosiru Lawal felt that "half education nowadays is very dangerous."⁴¹ He could be referring to inadequate job opportunities for holders

of elementary school diplomas or the public impression that people who are not well trained in their chosen fields or did not complete their education to a certain level constitute a danger to themselves and the larger society. Tunji Bello's statement gives a clearer insight into what seems to have been a shared perception of the negative impact of "half" education on an individual; he draws on indigenous thought in saying: "Excuse me sir, The Yoruba People use to say one proverb, Half knowledge is usually make a boy to suffer in his life."⁴²

A strong element of the boys' letters is the sense of projected reciprocity.⁴³ They firmly express their willingness to reward the kind gesture of Faulkner (their "father") by serving as domestics, which they variously called "houseboys," "stewards," and "servants." The reciprocity or "houseboy factor" in the boys' appeal for help is well entrenched in the culture of guardianship and traditional Nigerian customs of parenting and adult-minor relationships. Adoption, training, and parenting were never free. Both the parents who gave their children out to Lagosians and the children knew that they must help their guardians in exchange for food, clothing, shelter, and formal and informal education. During the 1930s and 1940s, welfare officers reported that virtually every Lagosian adults from the provinces (educated or uneducated) brought distant and immediate relatives, mostly underage boys. Even the lowest-ranked staff of the colonial government, such as office messengers, had houseboys. Aside from helping communities back home to raise a new generation of "enlightened" or "educated" citizens, house-help culture was a symbol of prestige and, to some extent, of hegemonic relations between senior men and the emerging junior men.

"I AM TIRED OF THESE LAGOS TROUBLES": THE FEARS OF THE NIGERIAN BOYS

Regardless of the diverse needs of the boys and how they articulated them, fear was a constant factor in their existence. The boys' rendition of anxiety negates the colonialists' assumption that they were passive or inert. Homelessness, joblessness, school abandonment, and orphaning, among other problems confronting the boys, produced a considerable degree of anxiety that they wanted either to avoid or to terminate.⁴⁴ How did the children process the fear of abandonment and its corresponding implications? A close reading of their letters to the CWO suggests that their perception of anxiety straddles the cultural and religious or moral implications of delinquency. In addition, the boys seemed to place greater emphasis on the fear of the external world than on fears emanating from their inner thoughts. Yet both types of fear coexisted—the external typically led to the internal. An expression of interiority such as "I am tired

33, Bishop Street.
Lagos.
22.6.43.

Sir.

The purpose of writing you this letter is that, I beg most respectfully to tell you that, I would like you Sir, to be responsible for my schooling.

Please Sir, kindly have mercy upon I this small boy to be responsible for my schooling.

I am only a boy of eleven years (11 years) of age. I started schooling in 1932 and I am now in class I middle at Eko Boys High School Lagos.

I am having no mother, father and my families are not in the town. Only I am leaving with my brother in Lagos. My brother find it difficult for him to be sending me to school anymore, and I am still interesting to have more knowledge in education. I am a Yoruba boy.

Should this my letter be favourably considered I will do every things entrusted to me, to you satisfaction.

I am Sir, with great respect,
Your Lord Ship, most
Obedient boy,
Momudu A. Ojuolape.

lo(B). 161

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Ojuolape
9/7.

122 7/7/43

Figure 2: A sample of a boy's letter of assistance, composed by eleven-year-old Momudu A. Ojuolape and dated June 22, 1943. "Application for Assistance," Comcol 1, 2766, NAI.

of these Lagos troubles" (by Lawal) was a product of fear of abandonment, an external situation.⁴⁵ It is important to emphasize that what constituted fear to the boys and how they processed it cannot be dissociated from the broader socioeconomic transformation within the colonial society. As Lagos changed from a small fishing community in precolonial times to an overpopulated colonial urban center, so did the conditions and experiences that put fear into the hearts of children. Indeed, what constituted fear to a Nigerian child varied by location. It was shaped, among other factors, by the society's (adults')

expectations. Much that the suffering children of Lagos feared (urban violence and criminality) was unique to Lagos and a few other growing Nigerian cities.

Both homelessness and its consequences frightened the boys. As previously mentioned, most of them were brought to Lagos from the provinces by their “country” men and women who pledged to train them, but many were then abandoned. Not all of them came with families and relatives. For instance, Samuel Oyibodudu trekked, to use his words, “all the way” from Sapele—a distance of about 220 miles.⁴⁶ While some sponsors just stopped providing help because of their own financial troubles, others had to leave because they were transferred to other locations within Nigeria or outside the country.⁴⁷ A case in point was that of Amiaka, who was brought to Lagos by his uncle after completing his elementary school education at Umuahia in the southeast.⁴⁸ During his second year at Lagos Baptist Academy, his uncle, a messenger with the colonial government, was transferred out of Lagos but left Amiaka behind. Amiaka and other abandoned children and juveniles expressed their efforts to ensure that their sponsors maintained their obligations. “I wrote him about six letters,” he explained, “and I asked several of my master’s friends to write him and beg him for me. He replied and explained that he is in very bad condition and trouble that I should find my own way.”⁴⁹

The negative consequences of homelessness included lack of food, shelter, and access to education. But the fear that most often troubled the boys was their perception of the moral or religious peril of criminality that characterized living on the streets. Richard Omofileyemi, a native of Lamiro (in southwestern Nigeria) who arrived in Lagos in early 1944, wanted help because he did not “want to follow a bad company.” Orphaned in 1942, he was shaped by religious teaching in his antipathy to delinquency: “I do not want to be a thief boy, according to the eighth commandment which says thou shall not steal.”⁵⁰ After telling of the death of his father and the estate he felt was not meeting the financial demands of his family, Olufemi Epega, a sixteen-year-old student of C.M.S. Grammar School, expressed his strong antipathy for delinquency: “I am left to choose between becoming a pickpocket and seeking help because the former I cannot do.”⁵¹ Robert Hayes worked hard to trace his former benefactor because he did not want to be a “victim of the underworld.”⁵²

While street life often went hand in hand with criminal or moral degeneration, not all street boys would steal. Bolaji Agbabiaka, who lived on the street “like [a] hooligan” and whose aged mother succeeded in paying for his elementary education at Tinubu Methodist School, did not ask Faulkner to adopt him or help him pay for his secondary school education. Rather, claiming to be “a good boy,” he pled for a job opportunity as a messenger or apprentice because

he “does not want to steal.”⁵³ Yet, provincial boys knew that it would be difficult for them to survive in the city if they could not make ends meet in their villages. In other words, while the lure of the city encouraged boys to leave their home villages, some were convinced that they would not do well in Lagos without assistance. Tonto John of Sapele, who started elementary school in 1938, did not rely on his poor parents to offset his school fees. Rather, he worked to pay his way through school. But he slipped far behind his schoolmates because by 1945 he could no longer pay his school fees. Rather than coming to Lagos like many other boys of his generation, he wanted to remain in Sapele to finish his education because, as he said, “when a boy have nothing to do in the village, he will become a rogue in the town, and I don’t want to become so.”⁵⁴ Other expressions of fear—such as “I do not want myself to be sentenced for any criminal offence,” “I do not want to be practicing thievery,” and “I do not want to become a dishonest fellow”—affirmed that the boys clearly understood their vulnerability within the subculture of urban violence ruled by children and youth considered by many as outcast and irredeemable.⁵⁵

The boys’ fear went beyond the immediate implications of homelessness for themselves alone. They were also conscious about their futures as adults and their responsibilities to their families, to the Nigerian state, and even to the British Empire. They occasionally fused elements of loyalty to the empire with an articulated desire to grow up to become responsible men who would make Nigeria and their family proud. While Felix Adebayo sought help so that he “may become a good man in future,” others like Adiele Nwosu, the son of a World War I veteran, wanted to escape poverty in order to “pay back some of my mother’s kindness to me before she could die for she is old.”⁵⁶ He was even aware of his position in his family and the cultural responsibilities it entailed: “As I am the first son of my parents, my father has died. As you know I will carry up the responsibility of my father family, for I am now the father.”⁵⁷ Nosiru Lawal’s sentiment is similar to Nwosu’s. He envisioned becoming a man one day and did not want his “manhood” to be “involved in distress.”⁵⁸ Aside from being able to learn biology and science, Olowu wanted to change schools “in order to do my best to my mother in future.”⁵⁹ Epega, unlike Nwosu and Olowu who seemed to love their mothers, did not want to “shame the name” of his father and the prestige of his school.⁶⁰

ENGAGING THE TEXTS: ORAL AND TEXTUAL EXPRESSION OF WANTS

As previously pointed out, the letters of assistance of the boys of Lagos can be treated as literary productions of colonial-era Nigeria. In attempting to convey

their emotions and needs to the colonial welfare administration, the boys provide insights into children's literary culture in an interesting manner. Their letter writing was an exercise in self-edification, representation of personhood, and expression of isolation. Unlike other forms of written correspondence, such as petitions sent to colonial masters composed by professional letter-writers on behalf of illiterate petitioners, a textual reading of the letters reveals clearly that the boys wrote the letters themselves. An overwhelming number of them were too poor to hire a professional letter-writer. One need not look too far, however, to determine where the boys received the skill to write their letters. Letter writing was a significant aspect of primary school education, and there was a flourishing culture of social literary clubs and debating associations in most schools and cities. Indeed, the "3Rs" (reading, writing, and arithmetic) were the cornerstone of primary and secondary school education in colonial Nigeria.⁶¹ Virtually all of the boys' letters were handwritten.⁶²

The boys begin their letters with conventional salutations and expressions of humility and regret for approaching the colonial master with personal problems.⁶³ The boys must have learned the language of humility both from Christian missionary education and from traditional Nigerian child rearing that

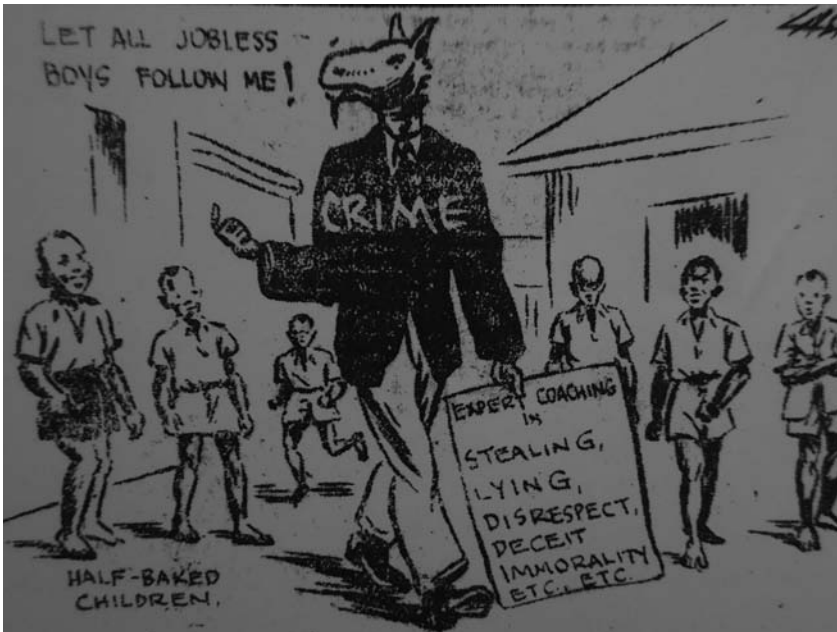


Figure 3: A cartoon titled "Automatic Promotion Breeds Automatic Delinquency" by Akinola Lasekan. *West African Pilot*, June 21, 1956.

taught them to hold teachers and other people in authority in high esteem both in person and in text. Although all colonial subjects, regardless of age, social class, or gender, tended to express strong feelings of humility toward the colonialists, the vocabulary of respect and powerlessness contained in the children's letters was often higher than that found in conventional petition letters written by adults. This is in part attributable to the fact that, being in desperate need of help, the children knew that the colonial authority was their final recourse.

The typical letter is an exercise in autobiography. The boys give their age, place of birth, and education history, revealing how their families' socioeconomic conditions and their orphaning was responsible for the problems they now faced. Some letters shed light on family feuds and their impact on the child's upbringing.⁶⁴ Others read like a travelogue detailing movement from one part of Nigeria or Lagos to another. In addition, certain rhetorical and idiomatic expressions were employed to make specific points. For instance, Olayinka Akinyele used the phrase "dear father" for Faulkner four times in his letter. The boys knew they must impress their prospective benefactor with such expressions or with phrases taken from literature to which they had been exposed in order to showcase their mastery of the English language, dedication to education, and trainability. In attempting to express a willingness to reciprocate whatever help Faulkner might offer, Samuel Adeyemi asked him to remember the story of the "lion and the mouse." Apparently, Adeyemi is the metaphoric mouse that needed to be saved by the powerful lion (Faulkner), who might himself need help in the future. Similarly, Jack Phillips, in beseeching Faulkner to be involved in his success, used the idiom "to hitch a wagon to a star."⁶⁵

The boys wanted to translate oral expression of feelings into written texts as effectively as they could. Indeed, their letters read more like a speaking voice meant to express private consciousness. Although the boys intended the letters (a written verbal text) to serve as a medium for conveying their emotions, they knew they were not likely to be as effective as a personal meeting with Faulkner or the commissioner of the colony. Such phrases as "Oh help me I beseech you help a fatherless boy," "Oh! Oh! My Lord my two knees are on the ground begging for help," "Oh help a helpless boy, help!" and "Ha Ha I am sorry for myself" were all meant to make their feelings as realistic as possible.⁶⁶ Moreover, in attempting to transmit their feelings in a non-native language, the boys came up with several nonstandard English phrases and statements such as, "I have try my power" and "I don't want to spoil any of my father's things in the public," which effectively reveal the multilinguistic realities of Nigerian society, as well as innovative deployment of language. At least one of

the boys, Benjamin Odunukan, broke the linguistic boundary and engaged in what linguists term “code-mixing.” He greeted Faulkner with “Kabo” (meaning “welcome” in Yoruba) twice in his letter. He was aware that Faulkner had just returned from the United Kingdom after a leave.⁶⁷ One would need an extensive knowledge of elementary and secondary education vocabulary of the period to assess thoroughly the level of innovation and originality in the boys’ letters. What is certain is that the originality of some of their expressions reflects a creative drive to carefully select the most persuasive and heartfelt words possible.

There is also a religious dimension to many of the letters. Christian education featured prominently in school curricula because, as previously mentioned, missionaries pioneered Western education and ran most schools. Schoolchildren were trained to offer prayers for the colonial government and their teachers every morning—drawing on passages from the Bible, hymnbooks, vernacular texts, and school readers. Moreover, traditional methods of child rearing emphasized prayer as a persuasive tool. Layiwola Folawiyo (age fourteen) of Ereko Methodist School ended his letter with the following statement: “I wish happiness, peace and prosperity! (amen). Success shall always be yours and long life! Great success in your occupation.”⁶⁸ Dickson Jryitoma believed Faulkner to be a Christian and asked him to help him because of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ The religious element of the letters coalesced with the portrayal of Faulkner as a “god” or an extraordinary being. For one thing, colonial hegemony survived partly because the colonialists were meant to appear extraordinary and invincible. Being caught up in a desperate situation, the boys were bound to use adjectives and expressions meant to compliment the Colony Welfare Office almost as if he were all-powerful. John Sanyaolu almost placed Faulkner and God on the same pedestal when he stated, “I write to you as if I write to our father in Heaven.” In another portion of his letter, Folawiyo painted an exalted picture of Faulkner’s status, saying that he could do “more than any man is expected to do for another. . . . No one can possibly save me unless the man of great kindness.” Clement Akinlolu Odunbaku called Faulkner “the holy man of God,” and used the Bible phrase traditionally reserved for supplications to God, “Ask and it shall be given you,” while his counterpart John Ogunnaike asserted that he had only God and Faulkner as his helpers. Somefun showered Faulkner with five strong attributes—“kindness, cheerfulness, generosity [*sic*], prudence, simplicity”—as he established his needs.⁷⁰

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEMS OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD

How did Faulkner treat the boys’ letters of assistance? Did he give fatherly advice, or adopt them, or provide for their needs? The thick stacks of official

documentation generated by Faulkner and his staff do not reveal any systematic or well-designed regulations on how to address the requests. The only observable, clear-cut procedure can be discerned in his response to the very few letters from boys based in the provinces: he simply directed them to their district officers. Provincial boys were not expected to write him in the first place because he was mainly concerned with the problems of Lagos youth. Faulkner simply marked most of the letters with short notations like "no reply" or "no response." He rarely responded with a formal letter of rejection, and when he did, he did not state why he could not help. A typical rejection letter read, "I have the honour to refer to your letter of the [date] and regret to inform you that I am unable to help you."⁷¹ To some job-seekers, he simply suggested that they join the army if they were sixteen and medically fit.⁷² On a few occasions, he did arrange an interview with some boys. Yet, it is hard to determine why he chose to see some and ignore others. The minutes of such meetings and the actions taken were not documented, except in some rare instances.

Faulkner did intervene in the case of thirteen-year-old Shiyi Taiwo, who had lived with his father after his parents divorced when Taiwo was five. Taiwo's positive feeling tilted strongly toward his mother, who paid his school fees.⁷³ He described his father as someone "who takes no regard of his responsibility" because he had not kept his promise to feed and clothe him. Faulkner's intervention, however, revealed a different dimension to the root of the conflict. In defense of his alleged "irresponsibility," Taiwo's father, Ishola Taiwo, claimed he wanted his son to attend C.M.S. School, not a Catholic school (St. Saviour's High School), which he currently attended. Faulkner's intervention yielded some results favorable to Shiyi Taiwo.⁷⁴ He was able to get Ishola to pay three pounds nine shillings, as school fees for three terms, and provide his son school supplies and a uniform.⁷⁵ The boy was to remain in St. Saviour's High School or take the entrance examination to St. Gregory High School, if he wanted.⁷⁶

Herbert William also received a detailed response and help from Faulkner. Herbert had accused his school principal (Reverend J. B. Adair of Baptist Academy School) of not allowing him to proceed to the high school section of the institution after completing his elementary school education despite being ranked ninth in a class of twenty-seven students, because he was not a member of the Baptist Church. In desperation to fulfill this alleged religious requirement for admission, William claimed he went to receive baptism and started attending the Baptist Church. But it would appear that the school authorities doubted his commitment or justification for conversion to the Baptist faith. In his letter to Reverend Adair, Faulkner recognized the school authorities' discretion to admit students based on whatever criteria they deemed important, but

he pleaded that the boy be given a space. To boost William's image, Faulkner added that the boy was a member of the Boys' Welfare Club, an after-school program, which he (Faulkner) had established. He assured the school authorities that the boy would be able to afford his tuition if admitted. In his response, Reverend Adair denied William's faith-discrimination accusation but claimed that all the students had been informed that admission into the high school section of the academy was not guaranteed.⁷⁷ One common thread in the cases in which Faulkner intervened is that the boys did not seek adoption, jobs, or financial help. Faulkner seemed to be more interested in the cases of boys who lived with their parents and were not needy.

One explanation for the government's reluctance to help boys with their personal problems comes from the core principles of colonialism, the main mandate of the Colonial Welfare Office, and the difficulty of ascertaining the validity of the boys' claims. First, right from its inception the office took a sort of institutional or general approach to the problems of juvenile delinquency. Its main focus included helping to institutionalize the juvenile justice program by ridding Lagos of delinquent children and juveniles whose activities were capable of undermining the colonial project. It was not designed to address the manifold needs of thousands of students. The office did not maintain a permanent home for destitute, orphaned, or abandoned boys; when it came to finding somewhere to stay while they attended school, they were on their own. Nor did the colonial government have a free education policy. Many of the problems of child welfare and youth criminality that Faulkner and his government wanted to address could have been solved by providing education and accommodation for homeless and delinquent children free of charge. But, as previously mentioned, the colonial state did not have a truly welfarist bent.

Second, it was difficult to establish the veracity of the claims of the needy children, the majority of whom were from the provinces. Some probably lied about their age, educational attainment, and status vis-à-vis parents. This is particularly correct in the case of Abdul Hameed Fashola, who claimed to be fifteen and "one of the cleverest boys" in his class.⁷⁸ After interviewing him, Faulkner jotted down a one-sentence note stating, "This fellow is older than he says—more like 19–20 years of age."⁷⁹ Indeed, some of the boys could have been "imagined" orphans—children who claimed to be orphans while in Lagos, but who occasionally sneaked to the provinces to visit their parents.⁸⁰ In all, it would appear that the letters served more to fill Faulkner's research needs—for close to ten years, he was able to gather information freely about the daily lives of the boys—than as a means to secure meaningful help for the boys. Much of

what Faulkner knew about juvenile delinquency came directly from his on-the-spot assessment of vagrancy and the boys' letters.

CONCLUSION

Lagos children encountered many challenges in an unstable and rapidly modernizing colonial society. Abandoned and orphaned children virtually littered the streets of Lagos, not only because of unemployment, overpopulation, and the breakdown of family and kinship ties, but also because the colonial state was not welfarist, as such. It was designed to take from rather than give to the colonized. Regardless of their varied family background, ethnicity, age, and life history, many children actually sought to replace their biological paternity with the colonial one. They understood the cultural and symbolic conception of fatherhood (which included but was not limited to the provision of food, shelter, and education) and wanted the colonial government and its officers, which they conceived entirely as male, to assume the role of their fathers.

NOTES

I thank the editor and anonymous reviewers of the JHCY for their useful comments which helped to improve the quality of this article.

1. Unless otherwise stated, all the letters by the boys were addressed to the colony welfare officer (CWO) and the commissioner of the colony and are from the file labelled "Comcol 1, 2766, National Archives Ibadan [NAI hereafter]: Application for Assistance."
2. See, among others, Peter N. Sterns, "Challenges in the History of Childhood," *Journal of History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 35–42.
3. See, among others, Karin Barber, ed., *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and the Making of the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Chima Korieh, "'May It Please Your Honor': Letters of Petition as Historical Evidence in an African Colonial Text," *History in Africa: A Journal of Method* 37 (2010): 83–106.
4. Beverly Carolease Grier, *Invisible Hands: Child Labor and the State in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006); Abosede George, "Within Salvation: Girl Hawkers and the Colonial State in Development Era Lagos," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (2011): 837–59; Laurent Fourchard, "Lagos and the Invention of Juvenile Delinquency in Nigeria," *Journal of African History* 46 (2006): 115–37; Simon Heap, "'Their Days are Spent in Gambling and Loafing, Pimping for Prostitutes, and Picking Pockets': Male Juvenile Delinquents on Lagos Island, 1920s–60s," *Journal of Family History* 35 (2010): 48–70; Saheed Aderinto, "Researching Colonial Childhoods: Images and Representations of Children in Nigerian Newspaper Press, 1925–1950," *History in Africa: A Journal of Method* 39 (2012): 241–66; Saheed Aderinto, ed., *Children and Childhood in Colonial Nigerian Histories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
5. Grier, *Invisible Hands*, 3.
6. "Nathaniel Okafor," January 1, 1949.

7. "Samson Amiaka," May 21, 1943.
8. Akin L. Mabogunje, *Urbanization in Nigeria* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1968), 261–70.
9. "The Organization of the Unemployed Men and Women of Nigeria to the Chief Secretary to the Government," June 7, 1946, CSO 26/38322/S.193, NAI.
10. Ayodeji Olukoju, "The Cost of Living in Lagos, 1914–45," in *Africa's Urban Past*, eds. Richard Rathbone and David Anderson (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 126–43.
11. *Report of the Cost of Living Committee Lagos, Nigeria* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1942), 48.
12. "The Nigerian News Vendors Union to the Commissioner of the Colony," July 12, 1946, Comcol 1, 2784, NAI.
13. "Nigerian News Vendors Union," July 12, 1946.
14. See "Young Ansar-Ud-Deen Society in Aid of £20,000 Education Fund," *Nigerian Daily Times*, December 16, 1942.
15. See, from the *West African Pilot*: "European Special Constables Arrest a Boma Boy and He is Sentenced to Imprisonment for a Month," August 10, 1940.
16. Dr. K. A. Abayomi, "The Nigerian Boy of Today," *West African Pilot*, November 30, 1942; "Leg. Co. Adjourns Sin Die: Bill against 'Boma Boys' Passed: Dr. Carr Advocates Adjustment of Educational Policy," *Nigerian Daily Times*, January 16, 1941.
17. "Young Boy Steals Because of Hunger," *West African Pilot*, June 16, 1941.
18. "Young Boy Steals," *West African Pilot*; "Cruelty to Children," *West African Pilot*, November 20, 1942.
19. Fourchard, "Invention of Juvenile Delinquency"; Heap, "Their Days Are Spent in Gambling."
20. "Director of Prison to the Honourable Chief Secretary to the Government," July 21, 1941, Comcol 1, 2471, NAI.
21. "Social Welfare, General Questions, Establishment of Social Welfare Department," 1942–45, Comcol 1, 2600, vol. 2, NAI.
22. "Joseph Ogunnwale," June 10, 1943.
23. "R. A. Alabi," n.d., Comcol 1, 2766, NAI.
24. "Nathaniel Okafor," January 1, 1949.
25. "Isan," December 9, 1944; "Friday Adah," May 5, 1944.
26. "History Sheet for Jack Morris," March 7, 1941.
27. "Mutairu R. Seriki," February 17, 1945.
28. "15-Year-Old Boy Carries Night Soil to Earn His Daily Bread," *West African Pilot*, June 2, 1943.
29. "15-Year-Old Boy," *West African Pilot*.

30. "Miss Douglas Offers to Employ 15-Year-Old Night Soil Carrier," *West Africa Pilot*, June 4, 1943.
31. "Festus Osetunmobi Lumowo," December 27, 1944.
32. "Oyewole Somefun," July 19, 1945.
33. "Gabriel Babajide," May 5, 1943; "Abasi Adisa," December 27, 1944; "Tolulope Adekunle," June 1, 1945; "Issiah Oye Akintunde to the Commissioner of Labour," July 9, 1945.
34. "A. Oyetunde Ogunlola," February 28, 1943.
35. Ibid.
36. "Wilson Olusola Shonde," October 21, 1943; "Tom Malade," December 10, 1942.
37. "Akinola Olowu," December 16, 1944.
38. Ibid.
39. "Tom Malade," December 10, 1942.
40. Ibid.
41. "Nosiru Lawal," June 2, 1943.
42. "Tunji Bello," December 2, 1943.
43. "Yisra Audu," February 21, 1943.
44. Alison Izzett, Faulkner's deputy, noted that most delinquent Yoruba boys ran from home partly because of the fear of being poisoned or bewitched by their family members, especially their mother's jealous co-wives. Alison Izzett, "The Fears and Anxieties of Delinquent Yoruba Children," *Odu* 1 (1955), 26–34.
45. "Samson Amiaka," May 21, 1944; "Nosiru Lawal," June 2, 1943.
46. "Samuel Oyibodudu," January 29, 1945.
47. "Samson Amiaka," May 21, 1944.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. "Richard Omofileyemi," December 6, 1944.
51. "Olufemi Epega," April 24, 1945.
52. "P. K. C. Garland," February 17, 1947.
53. "Bolaji Agbabiaka," October 7, 1946; "Nosiru Lawal," June 2, 1943.
54. "John Tonto," April 18, 1945.
55. "Adiele Nwosu," August 29, 1944.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. "Nosiru Lawal," June 2, 1943.

59. "Akinola Olowu," December 16, 1944.
60. "Olufemi Epega," April 24, 1945.
61. A. Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (Ibadan: NPS Educational, 1974).
62. "Issiah Oye Akintunde," July 9, 1945; "Olufemi Lawrence to E. A. Carr," December 5, 1947; "Taoridi Oseni Falano," September 26, 1946; "Samson Amiaka to C. Niven," April 26, 1945.
63. "Kasimu Isola," December 3, 1944.
64. "Erastus Okpaku," May 9, 1945.
65. "Jack Phillip," December 23, 1944.
66. "Olufemi Epega and Nathaniel Okafor," April 21, 1945.
67. "Benjamin Odunukan," October 16, 1944.
68. "Layiwola Folawiyo," August 7, 1943.
69. "Dickson Jryitoma," April 4, 1945.
70. "John Sanyaolu," May 19, 1943; "Layiwola Folawiyo," August 7, 1943; "Clement Akinlolu Odunbaku," February 2, 1944; "Oyewole Somefun," July 19, 1945; "John Ogunnaike," September 3, 1946.
71. "CWO to John Ogunnaike," September 6, 1946.
72. Ibid.
73. "Shiyi Taiwo," July 17, 1946.
74. "Faulkner's Handwritten Memo," July 22, 1946.
75. "List of Requirements by Shiyi Taiwo," July 19, 1946.
76. "Faulkner's Handwritten Memo," July 23, 1946.
77. "Herbert William," April 26, 1946; "Faulkner to the Principal of Baptist Academy," May 13, 1946; "Principal of Baptist Academy to Faulkner," May 22, 1946.
78. "Abdul Hameed Fashola," March 5, 1943.
79. "CWO to Abdul Hameed Fashola," March 10, 1943.
80. For the story of "imagined" orphans in London, see Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).