

ARTICLES

Editors' Introduction: Taslim Olawale Elias in the Periphery Series

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This special issue of the *Leiden Journal of International Law* on the Nigerian international lawyer Taslim Olawale Elias (1914–91) marks the second of the journal's Periphery Series. The collection of essays featured here serves essentially two functions. On the one hand, it pays tribute to an exceptional jurist whose work marked international legal scholarship during the years of decolonization. On the other, it invites critical engagement with the theme of international law's 'periphery'. The centre–periphery formulation, as explained elsewhere,¹ owes its provenance mostly to recent debates in political economy. It is a spatial metaphor which postulates a structural relationship between a presumed 'centre', typically portrayed as advanced or metropolitan, and a less developed and provincial 'periphery'. In such debates the centre–periphery opposition is assumed as stable, decisive, and representative of the empirical reality of a 'world out there'. The Periphery Series was launched in 2007, with a special issue on the Chilean jurist Alejandro Álvarez, to foster engagement with the discursive function of centre–periphery oppositions in public international law in its various iterations, and to confront questions of resource allocation, dependency, geography, and power.

The life work of Taslim Olawale Elias offers an intriguing narrative space for centre–periphery dynamics to be read, engaged, and disrupted. Not only because of the sheer versatility of Elias's role as teacher, scholar, politician, diplomat, and judge in a variety of settings, such as Nigeria, Britain, and the 'international plane'. Not even on account of his intellectual project, which, like the work of other African scholars of the time, addressed the theme of centre–periphery by challenging international law's Eurocentricity. It is rather because, in seeking to reclaim international law's emancipatory potential for the newly independent states, the scholarship of Elias foregrounds the analytical limitations, hidden antinomies, and conventional biases of the centre–periphery formulation.

The essays in the present volume revisit the work of Elias in order to celebrate its richness but also to bring out the complexity of centre–periphery dynamics in

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1. See F. Johns, T. Skouteris, and W. Werner (eds.), 'Editors' Introduction: Alejandro Álvarez and the Launch of the Periphery Series', (2006) 19 LJIL 875.

legal argument. The biographical note by Olufolake and Olusoji Elias portrays at the outset a man whose 'predilection for tea was as natural as his love for Isale-Eko', both 'an unaffected Anglophile and a subtle but thoroughgoing Lagos Islander'. It is in this context that Mark Toufayan speaks of Elias's 'juridical Negritude' – a legal consciousness within which 'projects of national cultural integration or fragmentation on a local basis, cultural convergence or drift at the continental level, and a developmental ideology compatible with or resisted by African culture became nested and found expression in their unstable relationship to law and Western culture'. Carl Landauer speaks of the 'oscillating identities' of west African intellectuals in order to locate the views of Elias on the relationship between Nigerian and British customary international law. The essays by James Gathii and Chin Lim examine Elias's confrontation with the most important challenge of African international lawyers of his time, namely how to establish a doctrinal basis to express their frustration with international law while demonstrating that international legal rules and institutions could help the newly independent countries of Africa to tackle the challenges they faced.

In closing this brief introductory note, the editors wish to express their gratitude to the Elias family for their invaluable support and assistance in obtaining biographical information and previously unpublished photographic material; to the board of editors of the *Leiden Journal* for embracing the project of the Periphery Series; and, last but not least, to the authors, for sharing with us essays of great skill and enthusiasm.