

Handwritten in Lagos: Selfhood and Textuality in Colonial Petitions

Tunde Decker 

Abstract: This paper asks a methodological question: In what way can petitions written in the colonial period introduce us to the persona of the writers – that is, as against mainstream interpretation given to them as mere archival sources? Doesn't the very nature of the petitions introduce us to the selfhood of those "caught up" in the often-mentioned "sophisticated" concepts of nationalism, politics, power, imperialism, urbanity, and colonialism? What, and how, do petitions tell us about the "interior version" of colonial society as seen in the individual? In an attempt at a deeper understanding of colonial Lagos, this paper examines an alternative feature of petitions as entry into the selfhood of colonial subjects rather than mainstream interpretations of the documents as qualitative exposition to "grand" historical phenomena. Selfhood as examined here is presented as it was constructed by petitions written in Lagos between 1940 and 1960 with a particular focus on three. Their deficiencies in "standards of grammar" notwithstanding, the words are also examined to allow for a demonstration of their qualities as texts: their meanings in singular and collaborative contexts, the gaps they exposed, the information they concealed, the disconnections in chronology they indicated, the "ethics" of grammar they "relegated" for more "substantial expose" of the self, the information they privileged the reader to hear, the identity they formed in the personas they constructed and the voice they generated. This paper suggests that these strands analyzed together affirm the textuality

History in Africa, Volume 48 (2021), pp. 355–382

Tunde Decker is Associate Professor of History in the Department of History and International Studies, Osun State University, Nigeria and 2019–2020 Urban Studies Foundation International Fellow at the African Studies Centre, University of Oxford. He was Africa-Oxford Initiative Fellow at the University of Oxford in 2019 and Leventis Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 2016. He is author of *Matrix of Inherited Identity: A Historical Exploration of the Underdog Phenomenon in Nigeria—s Relationship Strategies, 1960–2011* (Ibadan: University Press PLC, 2016) and *A History of Aviation in Nigeria, 1925–2005* (Lagos: Dele-Davis Publishers, 2008).

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association.

doi:[10.1017/hia.2021.4](https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2021.4)

of petitions written by everyday people in colonial Lagos and that these point to the potentiality of such documents to further contribute to the substantial comprehension of the inner qualities of self-identity in Lagos and Nigeria's colonial history.

Résumé: Cet article pose une question méthodologique: de quelle manière les pétitions rédigées à l'époque coloniale peuvent-elles nous présenter la personnalité de leurs auteur.e.s, c'est-à-dire par opposition à l'interprétation traditionnelle qui leur est donnée comme de simples sources d'archives? La nature même des pétitions ne nous introduit-elle pas à l'individualité de ceux qui sont « pris » par les concepts « sophistiqués » souvent cités que sont le nationalisme, la politique, le pouvoir, l'impérialisme, l'urbanité et le colonialisme? Que nous apprennent et comment les pétitions nous parlent-elles de la « version intérieure » de la société coloniale vue depuis un individu? Dans une tentative d'approfondir la compréhension de la ville de Lagos pendant la période coloniale, cet article examine une caractéristique alternative des pétitions comme autant d'entrées dans l'individualité des sujets coloniaux plutôt que des interprétations traditionnelles des documents comme exposition qualitative à de « grands » phénomènes historiques. L'identité telle qu'examinée ici est présentée telle qu'elle a été construite par des pétitions écrites à Lagos entre 1940 et 1960 avec un accent particulier sur trois d'entre elles. Malgré leurs déficiences en « grammaire », les mots qu'elles contiennent sont également examinés pour permettre une démonstration de leurs qualités de textes: leurs significations dans des contextes singuliers et collaboratifs, les lacunes qu'elles révèlent, les informations qu'elles dissimulent, les déconnexions chronologiques qu'elles indiquent, l'« éthique » de la grammaire qu'elles ont « reléguée » pour une « exposition plus substantielle » du soi, les informations qu'elles ont privilégiées pour que le lecteur comprenne, l'identité qu'elles se sont formées dans les personnages qu'elles ont construits et la voix qu'elles ont générée. Cet article suggère que toutes ces dimensions analysées ensemble affirment la textualité des pétitions écrites par des gens ordinaires dans la Lagos coloniale et que celles-ci soulignent le potentiel de tels documents à contribuer davantage à la compréhension substantielle des qualités internes de l'individualité à Lagos et l'histoire coloniale du Nigéria.

Key words: selfhood, colonial, urbanity, textuality, phenomenology, poverty.

Introduction¹

Written petitions in colonial Lagos were some of the historical evidences of self-consciousness and agency among individuals, groups, and institutions. These documents have informed a wide range of readings on childhood,

¹ Research for this paper was funded by the Urban Studies Foundation during a postdoctoral fellowship at the African Studies Centre, University of Oxford. This is gratefully acknowledged. The author also thanks Professor Wale Adebani and Professor David Pratten of the African Studies Centre, University of Oxford for their valuable comments.

prostitution, military service, social protests, and slum clearance.² In the second half of the nineteenth century, petition-writing was a major preoccupation of the elite and the contents and contexts of such writing multiplied with the increasing number of those who took to writing. The character of petitions in that period was to appraise generally the performances of colonial state authorities in the effort to ensure that they conformed to the visions of empire as promoted by Victorian principles of governance. The *Lagos Weekly Record* and the *Lagos Times* published a great number of articles that directly presented the shortcomings and the performances of the colonial state and its agencies as well as expressed the realities of the political economy of the time. At different times these tabloids x-rayed specific urban realities like electricity, crime, transportation, religion, and poverty. At other times they examined issues that directly concerned the elite and the state in such areas as law, traditional authority, patriotism, empire, nationalism, pan-Africanism, race and race relations, human rights, leadership, and constitution-making. While presenting philosophical positions and arguments as additional propositions to traditional perspectives in the latter they directly confronted the lapses of the system in the former.

The language of petitions in these newspapers was clear and unambiguous even when the motive was to preserve the status quo of empire. This was done by institutions, groups and highly-placed individuals, indicating the growing mass awareness of the role of the colonial state in politics and socio-economy. It is not clear at which point petitioning trickled down to everyday people as part of their activities. However, Kristin Mann suggests that by the late nineteenth century, slaves had begun to take advantage of the opportunity of legal proceedings to challenge their masters.³ From the end of World War I, petition writing was done among everyday people on a regular basis particularly among former soldiers who fought for empire and had to demand benefits for their services on returning home. After World War II, the flurry of petitions to the residents and colonial administrators increased. In addition to former soldiers who petitioned were home associations,

² In particular, some historians have drawn attention to the qualities of personhood and selfhood in colonial Nigeria. These include: Olufunke Adeboye, "Reading the Diary of Akinpelu Obisesan in Colonial Africa," *African Studies Review* 51–2 (2008), 75–97; 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," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 8–2 (2015), 273–294; Saheed Aderinto, "Framing the Colonial Child: Childhood Memory and Self-Representation in Autobiographical Writings," in Saheed Aderinto (ed.), *Children and Childhood in Colonial Nigerian Histories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 169–199.

³ Consider Kristin Mann's chapter on Strategies of Struggle and Mechanisms of Control: Quotidian Conflict and Court Cases in Kristin Mann, *Slavery and The Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760–1900* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 277–312.

women associations, artisans, anonymous urban residents, unemployed men and women, young adults, and teenagers.

Chima Korieh has examined the potentiality of these documents to offer a remarkably different view of colonial society, particularly one that should help us to understand the agency of colonial subjects through self-expression.⁴ Hence, treating petitions as an integral part of colonial phenomena would help to unveil aspects that speak to their victimization as a result of policies of government. Although humility was a general attitude in the petitions, Korieh's underlining argument is that agency was the hallmark of the motive behind the writings, especially for the reason that many of them had the general ability to "call the colonial officers to order" through the intensity of expressions therein and the consequent follow ups and, in other cases, the professionalism of their commissioned writers.⁵ In foregrounding petition-writing, Chima Korieh and Bright C. Alozie trace the capacity of letters to confront colonial officers, to demand justice, call for equality, contest, negotiate, refute, and pave way towards addressing grievances. Petitions were thus meant to be efficacious otherwise they wouldn't attract the expected response in affecting policy. In this way, the petitions were "assessed" by colonial officials to qualify for some form of response. Such petitions were "strong enough" because of the following features: being written by members of individual or collective elite, or, if by peasants, by the craftsmanship of the hired petition writer and the post-petition-writing activity. Such petitions, as Korieh suggests, provide us with the opportunity to reengage colonial society in a way that is bound to show that peoples were not just "subjects" as mainstream narratives often underscore; but that colonial government actually operated on the basis of the "agitations" led by petition-writing. Hence, contents of petitions were the "rules and regulations" that foregrounded colonial rule, particularly so because many of such petitions did not just stop at being written. They were activated by interests, precedents, and antecedents.⁶ In Lagos, for instance, the petitions of women associations vigorously contributed to the establishment of welfare institutions, to the enactment of ordinances and the pursuance of interests of vulnerable individuals in state infrastructure.⁷ In south eastern Nigeria, petition writing agitated against pricing policy and in other cases empowered women.⁸

⁴ Chima Korieh, "'May it please your Honour': Letters of Petition as Historical Evidence in an African Colonial Context," *History in Africa* 37 (2010), 87–88.

⁵ Korieh, "May it please your Honour," 101.

⁶ See for example Abdul-Fatah'Kola Makinde and Philip Ostien, "Legal Pluralism in Colonial Lagos: The 1894 Petition of the Lagos Muslims to their British Colonial Masters," *Die Welt des Islams* 52–1 (2010), 51–68.

⁷ Korieh, "May it please your Honour," 93.

⁸ See Bright C. Alozie, "'Female Voices on Ink': The Sexual Politics of Petitions in Colonial Igboland, 1892–1960," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 10 (2019), 343–366.

Petitions were read, understood, and acted upon because the contexts were fertile for their activation in various forms. They were always evolving and being transformed in contents: sex, politics, cost of living, poverty, war effort, tax, and land.⁹ They were often indicators of the ill health of colonial society and to ignore them was to curry hurried protests. That they were written at all meant unattended issues had brooded ill will amongst the populace. The longer it was ignored, the greater the possibility of outbreaks. This often led to strikes, riots, and direct agitations.¹⁰

However, there were also pointers to the fact that petitions' objectives sometimes did not include agency in the sense of directly "confronting" colonialism but as just expressing selfhood in a phenomenological way. Hence the petitions sometimes did not seek to "make a point" but to just express a reality even though this is difficult to separate. The point is that in seeking to bring petitions to the forefront of historical discourse, such ambition must come to terms with the phenomenological make-up of the documents – as documents that intimate us with the "interiority of society." Here, the emotional make-up of the writers should be our focus rather than to redirect their feelings towards "an antagonist" mode of survival. In other words, they should lead us into the self-world of the petitioner as experienced and felt by the writer. Here the feelings are germane. The temptation to redirect such feelings towards colonial government policies and responses is almost insurmountable; but the more this is reduced, or, if possible, removed, the more phenomenological and sincerer would our purpose be in acknowledging the virility of these documents in interpreting a past that has neglected them for so long.

Foucault, Descartes, Merleau-Ponty, Freud, Husserl, Joyce, and Faulkner have pondered over the complexity of the human aspect that these documents show, i.e. "selfhood."¹¹ Although often veiling deep-seated emotional interiors, the petitions sometimes offer simplified versions of that reality, leading us to the wide variety of options available to the petitioner to relate with himself without encumbering us with the details of psychoanalytic or

⁹ For some incidences where petitions played significant roles see Jimoh Muftau Oluwasegun, "The British Mosquito Eradication Campaign in Colonial Lagos, 1902–1950," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 51–2 (2017), 217–236; Liora Bigon, "Between Local and Colonial Perceptions: The History of Slum Clearance in Lagos (Nigeria), 1924–1960," *African and Asian Studies* 7 (2008), 49–76; Stephanie Newell, "Life Writing in the Colonial Archives: The Case of Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904–1996) of Nigeria," *Life Writing* 13–3 (2016), 307–321.

¹⁰ See Chimah Korie, "The Invisible Farmer? Women, Gender and Colonial Agricultural Policy in the Igbo Region of Nigeria, c. 1913–1954," *African Economic History* 29 (2001), 117–162.

¹¹ Howard R. Pollio, Tracy Henley and Craig B. Thompson, *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3–27.

structural frameworks, but in just being itself – an expression of life as lived in the first person. Hence, in a certain capacity, the documents are self-contained, expressing reality for what it is and not for what it should be. Thus, the meaning we read into them must conform to a great extent to what they *do say* apart from the grand narrative history often tells to the detriment of the “unimportant.”

Methodology: Issues, Challenges, and Prospects

This study examines three petitions as a case study to showcase the extent to which the selfhood of the writers is revealed as documented in their letters to the colonial administrators and the extent to which they speak to the collective identity of everyday people’s aspirations, preoccupations, hopes, disillusion, and ambitions, even if unrealized. (Letters are attached as appendix). This method is instructive in the sense that it exposes the trends that bound them together as a collective exposition of self-reflection on poverty and urban experience. These were phenomena that revealed the thoughts and mindsets of people who experienced a shifting and historically transitional society like colonial Lagos. The faster the society was in transformation, the more and creatively responsive everyday people had to be in looking inwards and exposing and engaging their selves in ways that aspired toward a voice in the colonial period. This voice was magnified in the preoccupations of popular bodies of artisans, railway workers, teachers’ unions, and market associations. However, this has been underrepresented in the form it took as a silent force of understanding of the ways in which colonialism was internalized by a collective that has not been fully represented by historians in their documentation of the period in Lagos.

This selfhood is here presented as it was constructed generally by petitions written in Lagos between 1940 and 1960. These were writings that aimed to conform with the standards of written communication in that period. Their deficiencies in “standards” of grammar notwithstanding the tissues and threads of their textuality are engaged to allow for a closer examination of the words themselves: their meanings in singular and collaborative contexts; the gaps they espoused; the information they hid; the disconnections of chronology they espoused; the “ethics” of grammar they “relegated” for a more “substantial expose” of poverty, urbanity, and the self; the information they privileged the reader to hear; the identity they formed in the personas they constructed; and the voice they generated. This study suggests that these strands analyzed together affirm the textuality of petitions written by everyday people in colonial Lagos and that these point to the potentiality of such documents to further contribute to the substantial comprehension of the inner qualities of self identity in Lagos and Nigeria’s colonial history.

Challenges Posed by Petition Writing

As observed by Korieh, a considerable number of petitions were indirectly written.¹² Although this article did not use any, in this article's argument, an indirectly written petition was a way in which a typical personal experience of an individual was "decoded" in words by another individual who coined "grammatically and norm-appropriate" expressions in order to unveil the experiences so narrated by the "client." In this way, the real experience of such "client" (the petitioner) was "reduced" by the very fact of the "transfer" of personal experience to a "neutral," "objective," and "unbiased" person – someone who in effect is immediately incompetent to account for such experience. This is so because the very subjective and biased experience as lived by the person is what constitutes for the purpose of this article the truthfulness of the data.¹³ In "transferring" the experience to the copy-writer, the petitioner hoped to illuminate the mind of the recipient (in this case, the colonial official) of his communication because of the need to get a predetermined response (e.g. an invitation for a job interview, permission to visit, or a recommendation). Secondly, the petitions of the colonial period were "static information" that terminated at a specific period of time and do not provide the opportunity for an elongated time into the present which may have been useful in understanding the continuity and flexibility of the first person experience through time. In other words, the researcher is confined to the juncture of human experience as represented in the letters. Thirdly, as loosely organized as the words were, they often referred only to themselves. This means that the experience and self reflection that follows must be found within the confines of inadequate, sometimes vague, and sometimes inaccessible descriptions that tempt the researcher into viewing the statements as outright fabrications, but which in the notion of "crafted story" as argued by Crowther, Ironside, Spence, and Smythe actually presents "an acceptable and trustworthy methodological device" that points to "alternate possibilities to conventional ways of work with qualitative data."¹⁴

Thus, the non-dialogic nature (in the sense of non-availability of personal encounter) of the interface between the researcher and the petitioner presents a challenge that promotes vast options for the petitioner to hide "the truth of the matter" in certain cases. Hence, the "finality" of the words in

¹² Korieh, "May it please your Honour," 87–88.

¹³ It provides us an entry into what Spence would call 'the horizon of understanding' of the self in question. See Deborah Gall Spence, "Supervising for Robust Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Reflexive Engagement Within Horizons of Understanding," *Qualitative Health Research* 27–6 (2017), 836–842.

¹⁴ Susan Crowther, Pam Ironside, Deb Spence and Liz Smythe, "Crafting Stories in Hermeneutic Phenomenology Research: A Methodological Device," *Qualitative Health Research* 27–6 (2017), 826–835.

terms of their unchangeability or lack of flexibility or review or retraction stares at the researcher so much as to present an either/or option of understanding the non-codes that are available in the “coded” expressions that point to selfhood and everyday life in colonial Lagos and which sometimes offer no more than few words which have been used and reused in other letters and whose repetitiveness tempt the researcher into overlooking the innate messages of self-identity, survival, poverty, and efficacy. The repetitive nature of the words at first glance offers a boring, near-trash-bin nature of documentation. At face level, they make no meaning and make no pretense about it. In depth, however, they point to meaning-making of “everydayness” by a set of urban livers. Although each letter offers a “one-chance” encounter with the individual – with a strong framework of finality, together the letters offer “repetitive encounters” that offer layers of understanding as each one illuminates the other though structure, content, style, fabrication, repetition, vagueness, incompleteness, and sometimes outright propensity for falsehood. The petitions are thus treated as phenomenological accounts in this sense that they leave us with opportunities to reflect on the everydayness of the subject of discourse while interjecting with facts from the larger society and comparison with other colonial spaces to arrive at a more comprehensive version of self-identity among the petitioners.

In the letters, the ‘I’ of the subject (the petitioner) indicates the self world of the individual and it unveils the challenges as it understands it. In essence, this serves a very useful sifting mechanism by which colonial Lagos society was “reduced in content” largely “to fit into” the context of the individual and also as a tool by which this article arrives at a conclusion that the data allows it to reach. We are thus able to see the individual not in the framework of the conventional biography, but – for the sake of convenience and explanation here – through some sort of “selfography” i.e. an analysis of the “documentation of the self” as revealed and recounted by the petitioner. Thus, this reveals society as the “hidden” individual sees it – in the sense that phenomena of social existence are internalized and interpreted in the worldview of the self of the individual in question.¹⁵ It reflects primarily on itself and is often silent and inward focused even if its inner reaches eventually find voice.¹⁶ It exists under the cover of the individual through whom society is sifted before reaching it. It has the propensity to reach out (through the individual) in two significant ways: to withdraw or to advocate (positively or negatively).¹⁷ In the first instance, Amy Chandler argues that it leads to self

¹⁵ See Amy Chandler, “Boys don’t cry? Critical Phenomenology, Self-harm and Suicide” *The Sociological Review* 67–6 (2019), 1350–1366.

¹⁶ See Chandler, “Boys don’t cry?” 1350–1366.

¹⁷ The middle ground between these two is aptly captured as one in which the individual withdraws and in withdrawing denounces the body to make a stance. See Olufunke Adeboye, “Iku ya J’Esin: Politically Motivated Suicide, Social Honour and

harm.¹⁸ In the second instance, it searches for (and in some instances) obtains platforms to enlarge its scope.¹⁹ It is necessary at this point to consider this self further.

A Note on Selfhood

In the context of this article, I have described this self as: general existence represented by the *I* and the *Me* and as embodied in the individual.²⁰ Here, we find two phenomena at play in one physical body which is often regarded as the front runner and the aspect that is physically presented and interacted with by other selves and other bodies in physical space.²¹ This “physical nature” of the abstract self (the *I* and the *Me*) is often presented as the totality of the self in general everyday language as: myself, yourself, themselves, itself. But this “presentable” self is not only a mere segment of the totality, it is also a more deceitful aspect of it for some reasons. First, by its nature it is generic, not in the sense that you have a particular individual multiplied many times, but in the sense that such individual shares certain features in his physical realm the same way as other individuals also do. This is verifiable in such words that present such collectives like Negroid, Caucasians, Indian, and others of such that point to race or other forms of categorizations like footballers, soldiers, and journalists. These are typical segments of a physical self that is shared by others. Thus, we see this “general existence” branch out into sub categories that are further divisible e.g. amateurs, professionals, and such like. As this “general existence” narrows down to its singular physical embodiment in the individual, it proceeds to the hidden and complex binary version: the *I* and the *Me* of the individual – as the subject (*I*) in the first instance, and object (*Me*) in the second. This is where we confront the

Chieftaincy Politics in Early Colonial Ibadan,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 41 (2007), 189–225.

¹⁸ See Chandler, “Boys don’t cry?” 1350–1366.

¹⁹ Consider Daniel E. Agbiboa, “Informal Urban Governance and Predatory Politics in Africa: The Role of Motor-Park Touts in Lagos,” *African Affairs* 1177–466 (2018), 62–82.

²⁰ This is what some scholars refer to as “The Nature of Human Experience” or “Intentionality.” These concepts emphasise the permanent connection or interaction between the individual and his outside world. See Pollio, Henley and Thompson, *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life*, 3–27. This phenomenon of the self permanently interacting with the body is also examined in Kathy Charmaz, “The Body, Identity and Self: Adapting to Impairment,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 36–4, (1995), 657–680; Wayne Bowman, “A Somatic, “Here and Now” Semantic: Music, Body and Self,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 144 (2000), 45–60.

²¹ Consider the typical nature of this kind of interaction in the study of people with multiple sclerosis in Hanneke van der Meide, Truus Teunissen, Pascal Collard, Merel Visse and Leo H. Visser, “The Mindful Body: A Phenomenology of the Body with Multiple Sclerosis,” *Qualitative Health Research* 28–4 (2018), 2239–2249.

shape-shifting character of these invisible phenomena – both of which for convenience, I have categorized as one, *the self* – in order to remain committed to my data. Thus, this description is what guides my interrogations and explanations.

“Selfography” as Different from Biography and Prosopography

From this method, I have considered a form of “selfography” as different from biography and prosopography. This further emphasizes its separateness from the differentiation that exists between the two (i.e. biography and prosopography). While biography is the individual as lived within society, and prosopography is that which is lived in the attainments of the individual, “selfography” is concerned with perception which is at the very core of the relationship between individual and society. Although this perspectival nature is according to Pollio, Henry, and Thompson intensely subjective and personal, it – as noted earlier – does not strive to entertain objectivity in order to weaken its own status; for it is within the very notion of bias and subjectivity that its truthfulness lies.²² Although it recognizes the entries of other perceptions, its very substance is derived from the standpoint of stubborn steadfastness that is unyielding to the dictates of even the individual in question and the society that strives to unfold his persona.²³ “Selfography” is therefore a method that psychologists have tried to avoid given what some writers have referred to as psychology’s slowness to come to terms with the first person perspective of phenomena.²⁴ Thus, the first person is the crux of the matter. The method that has been advanced for its interrogation is the phenomenological method which is multidimensional in ways that put selfhood at the core of social science research.²⁵ It has its own idiosyncrasies. For the purpose of emphasis, it has its own “selfish assumptions,” generic implications, and its own comparative mode of recognizing the influence of other

²² According to Will Storr, this “truth” is as configured and measured by the self in question. Historically, in his assessment, this self has the capacity to self-destruct having raised bias and subjectivity to a level it no longer has the capacity to control. Consider “The Dying Self” in Will Storr, *Selfie: How the West became Self-obsessed* (London: Picador, 2018), 3–20.

²³ The self thus become its own moral agent. In Storr’s words, “a specific form of spirituality that placed the source of divine perfection within the self.” See Storr, *Selfie*, 132.

²⁴ Pollio, Henry and Thompson, *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life*, 27.

²⁵ See Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden (eds.), *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self: Developmental and Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Psychology Press, 2013); Consider also Valeria Wenderoth, “Merging Realism and the Exotic: Lucien Lambert’s Le Spahi and the Colonial Self,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 29–1 (2010), 34–63.

social science methodologies on its status as a research mechanism for the understanding of reality and the implications for social accountability.

In writing the self as portrayed in the petitions and in addition to engaging the letters as text to unveil selfhood, this article uses the phenomenological method in such a way as to coresearch the first person experience of the petitioners – used here to refer to those who directly wrote the letters. Specifically, petitions written by G. A. Aina, James Ogedengbe, and Salawu Opatotun were examined. Here, the petitions speak the perception of the petitioners. A deliberate and continuous focus on the contents of the letters is what I have done. The phenomenological method used here directly “sifts” the colonial environment through self meanings couched by the petitioners in words that seek to respect to some degree the norms of communications; which though fall short of “sophistication,” reveal selfhood beyond the technicality of grammar and conventional comprehension. Thus, the petitions are used as final documents in my attempt to exhume a historical version of the *self* in colonial Lagos.

The Domains of Interiority

In a larger consideration of the petitions, many described themselves as “poor,” “sacrificial,” “oppressed,” and “unfortunate,” often exposing the “Me” segment as well as the “I.” In arriving at this, certain expressions in the letters were quantified to be able to unveil the percentage of attention the petitioner dedicated to either sides of the self. Separation was made between letters with words and expressions that revealed the individual as *object* (i.e. as one who was affected by factors and events) from those that revealed the individual as *subject* (i.e. as one **who conceived of or followed up on** a course of action in spite of the factors or events). This is found in the usage of the words “I” and “Me.” In this way I am able to also separate “I” or “Me” with attached words such as “my poor condition” (which is a view of the self as an object) from others like “my house” or “my wife” (which indicates the self as a subject). For petitions written by teenagers, such expressions as “my mother,” “my father,” “my brother,” “my uncle,” “my family,” and “my hometown” are treated as expressions that reveal the petitioner as *objects* for the fact that the expressions pointed to factors that they had no control over (i.e. they did not choose their mother or their father or the fact that their fathers or mothers died, and such like.) For adults, the expressions “my wife,” “my husband,” “my children,” and “my family” portray a different self from those of teenagers because these factors expressed those petitioners’ willpower over the emergence of such conditions. Thus, these expressions are quantified in terms of the number of times they appeared (not repeated) or used in each letter. A typical example of a petitioner who used the *subject* version of the self was 33 year-old Samuel Oredipe who wrote to the Commissioner of Enquiry at the colony office in Lagos on 22 December 1949 confidently expressing his *subject* self in such words and expressions as: “I (have the honour of writing),”

“I (am inviting),” “I (put in an application),” “I (returned),” “My (educational qualifications),” “My (scholastic attainments),” “Am I (entitled to),” “I (am not mistaken),” “My (writing you),” “I (shall be),” “I (have the honour to be).”²⁶

Statements such as “I am a poor and unfortunate boy,” – which in turn pointed to a sense of low self esteem and an added emphasis before other statements like “who had been looking out for job for the past five years” – was used frequently in other petitions to present efforts at self help. This usage of interiority to emphasize (and in other contexts) deemphasize the generic (i.e. to indicate similarity of such experience by others and to narrow down such experience to the self) was alternated as occasions demanded such as when Salawu Opatotun in his own petition (see [Figure 1](#) in the Appendix) elaborated on a request for recommendation from the Lagos Fire Brigade and the Assistant superintendent of police when he attempted to seek for employment. In this case, since it was common practice for employers to request for such, he endeavored to make the commissioner for the colony see reason and empathize with him as he endeavored to take part in the general practice (of requesting for reference) for his own private gain.

Demonstrating the expanded version of the “I,” Aina, in his own letter, postulated the inner and the outer visible qualities of himself thirteen times in a two-page petition ([Figures 2A](#) and [2B](#) in the appendix)!²⁷ This “I” expressed itself through every day experiences that wavered between effort at modesty (“I humbly submit”), material presence (“I am a poor and unfortunate boy”), the immediate past (“I was the one who came to you”), ill-luck (“I have lost my mother in my infant days”), stretched capacity (“I could educate myself up to government class two only”), utilized capacity (“I have registered”), underutilized capacity (“I have not been called to any job” – in other words if he had been called he would have responded even if “inappropriately”), subjected or traumatized capacity (“I have been suffering”), confident affirmation (“I know that your assistance”), inherent faith (“I [with a comma], through the name of God, and of Jesus Christ His Son, beg you”), self-decision (“I have been fasting”), self-incapacitation (“I am weak, feeble and dizzy”), and finally, possession of the customary courtesy (“I have the honour to be”).²⁸ We see the fascinating varieties of the persona represented not only in the “I” but also in the qualifiers that followed immediately e.g. I have, I am, I know, etc. and corroborated by those that followed. Particularly interesting is the different meanings Aina “attached” to the same expression “I have”; used five times, yet conveyed five different meanings to elicit his dilemma. We find a persona that stands at the

²⁶ National Archives, Ibadan (NAI) Com.Col. 1 /2807/S4, letter from Samuel Oredipe to the Commissioner of Enquiry, Colony Office Lagos, 22 Dec. 1949.

²⁷ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766, Letter from G.A. Aina to W. A. Fowler Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 30 May 1949.

²⁸ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766, Letter from G.A. Aina to W. A. Fowler Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 30 May 1949.

intersection between the immediate and the remote past, on the one hand, and the present, on the other. Both pulled him towards opposing psychological strains (from the past and towards the present) and both presented potential possibilities and benefits in the sense that they serve as reference points to attract benevolence. These two also showed the capacity for permeating distress.²⁹ The challenges of the present: aged father, unemployment, limited qualification, and weakness of the body, pulled the burdens of the past: death of mother and death of guardian (apart from the biological father) to bear upon personal distress. The connecting cord for Aina was hope, not in the future, but in the present, specifically in the words: “submit this my petition,” “asking for your favour,” “know,” “my success,” “fasting,” “awaiting,” “favorable,” and “have registered.” These were used to affirm to himself the possibilities of the present. Aina ended his letter with a title attached to his name: “Poor G. A. Aina,” a reference that sarcastically pointed to “an expert” versed in the poverty of variables: of death, loss, lack, hunger and ill-health.³⁰

Hence, when James Ogedengbe (see [Figure 3](#) in the Appendix) wrote “I have the honor most respectfully to draft you these few lines, which I hope you will reply me with your deepest and sympathetic consideration,” he expected a response that would be commensurate with the exposure the colonial agent has gone through in “experiencing his (the petitioner’s) world.”³¹ However, everyday bureaucracy of the colonial officer was a complex mix of administration of policies, monitoring of repatriations, investigations of claims in varieties of correspondences, and other time-investing activities that invite wonder as to why some of the petitions did not end up in the dust bins of the colonial office! However, the petitioner was aware that sincerity of purpose should be the hallmark of the presentations of his request for benefaction. When he says “On my honor,” he seemed to suggest that his conditions “merited” some attention and possibly intervention.³² While intimating the officer with his world of conditionalities, he risked outright disregard (if at all his letter gets to that point; for being disregarded meant that to an extent the letter had been perused at the least.) He also knew that the moment he was “seizing” was ephemeral and meant to be optimized. In configuring his reality, more gaps were exposed than were presented in such words as “as soon as I am jobless and unable to feed myself,

²⁹ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766, Letter from G.A. Aina to W. A. Fowler Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 30 May 1949.

³⁰ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766, Letter from G.A. Aina to W. A. Fowler Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 30 May 1949.

³¹ NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766, Letter from James A. Ogedengbe to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 17 Nov. 1949.

³² NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766, Letter from James A. Ogedengbe to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 17 Nov. 1949.

is better for me to go home” (when the home as conveyed in the meaning of the letter was his house in the city and not the home as referring to his hometown).³³ This reflected a disconnect between reality and utterance. Accounting for his reality was “short of finesse.” The chronology was disorganized and the gaps served as metaphors for his disillusionment. He said “On my honor” because he knew it as sincerity of purpose. What honor does poverty confer if not the ever-reducing and diminishing self that is exposed to another by the person without recourse to self worth, self esteem or consideration of privacy? The cost of such “self worth” is the opportunity (even if it never came) that he was willing to lose in the attempt to be dignified! In the overwhelming pressure he brought to bear on the time and attention of the colonial officer, he sought permission to reveal his “nothingness,” his “loss,” and his “empty-being,” in such statements as “I beg to confess that my present condition is above expression. My left palm-hand is cut off through fire accident which I have undertook in 1939. I have no father, no mother and am born alone. There is no one to help me. I am now as a sheep without shepherd.”³⁴

Foregrounding the Other

In this section, I am able to arrive at conclusions with the quantification of two words and expressions – “you” and “your”; singularly appearing or leading other words as used in such expressions as “your honor,” “your majesty,” and “your lordship.” Instructively, some expressions used to qualify the Other also began with the word “my” as used in such expressions as “my Lord,” “my savior,” and “my father.” This was common among younger petitioners. In these usages, attention to the self is reduced, and in some cases, drastically.³⁵

It is very rare to dismiss self identity even before it begins to express itself, particularly so when benefaction is sought. For an individual, reducing the self to insignificance presupposes prior encounter with established social structure that recognizes status as well as evidences “on display” of its counterparts that are “wealthy,” of “greater intellect,” “much more,” “worthy,” “dignifying,” and “honorable.” These qualities were conjured by the “opposites” itemized in the petition of Phillip Ogunyemi in November 1949 as “too poor,” and “small”; in other words, of little consequence to be worthy of attention (ironically calling to question the very purpose of the petition itself). This was followed by a revelation of premonition and pre-verification that led to a re-direction of emphasis to the colonial agent. With a

³³ NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766, Letter from James A. Ogedengbe to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 17 Nov. 1949.

³⁴ NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766, Letter from James A. Ogedengbe to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 17 Nov. 1949.

³⁵ Some of the letters indicate this.

shift to the receiving persona as center of focus, these twenty expressions (some of which were repeated in a single letter): “Your honor,” “About you,” “You are,” “You are ready,” “Your help,” “your absence,” “Your information,” “My Lord,” “You are,” “My lord,” “My savior,” “Through whom,” “His shade,” “Your kindness,” “Your goodness,” “A good man,” “Your name,” “Except... you,” “Your...boy” and “Your helping” set before us a competition for attention between two objects of perception (in our case, the foreground which is the fact of unemployment and poverty as experienced by the writer and second the background – the persona of the colonial agent which is presented in larger than life form in the words above).³⁶ In Pollio’s conception, as the reader (the colonial officer) goes through the content, he is confronted with the need to contemplate the foreground and the background. As the content is absorbed, the background (meant to be a secondary focus of attention) takes over as the primary focus. This leaves the reader to contemplate the content in two ways: the background either becomes a distraction from what was supposed to be the focus, or in “taking over what was meant to be the real issue: request for employment,” it becomes a strategy meant to further solidify the issue at hand.

Thus, at different moments, the addressee occupied a larger percentage of attention than the writer and ironically the requests at hand! In the letter, the writer made the request only once. Even at that, it was stated only in passing in the sense that the personhood of the writer – its history, memory and trauma – were amplified in the context of the expected reader, in this case the administrator of the colony. The request, which was meant to be the substance of the letter was the tiniest bit of the structure. Twenty times in the letter, the addressee’s amplified status (as against the request) situated the request so insignificantly that the status of the addressee becomes the most substantial feature of the petitioner’s reality. In effect, the world of the administrator’s persona is expected to “nullify” what (i.e. the request) now becomes “a rude intrusion” into the power and the agency (as amplified in the letters) of the administrator. At that, the issue at hand – unemployment and poverty – becomes an obstruction to be removed after the lure of agency (i.e. the petitioner’s attempt at attracting the official’s attention) is “expectedly accomplished.” This “expected accomplishment” is born out of the fact of the written letter itself whose final character rested on the animation of the addressee in whatever way the response of the addressee is generated; as well as the “satisfaction” of the petitioner that his complaint had been directed at the right channel of power. The sociality of status in colonial Lagos was such that certain individuals typically represented the locations of power and agency at which sentiments and the expression of psychological trauma of the populace “could” be directed.

³⁶ NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766 Ogunyemi, Philip. Philip Ogunyemi to Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 2 Nov. 1949.

These “locations” were scattered in the personalities and benevolence of the rich and the colonial agents (with whom everyday people had a significant level of intimacy and attachment, albeit from a distance). This is what was often amplified and “inserted” into the personal world of the petitioner. In effect, the colonial agent was “conscripted” as “co-experiencer” of poverty, orphanhood, and unemployment, or whatever other livelihood challenges the writer was facing. While “inside these labyrinths of problems,” the colonial agent was meant to “traverse the world of the petitioner with his honor, dignity, agency, and power intact.” While there, he was expected to “see the challenges and empathize.” While there, his power and agency were not animated as to the immediate implementation of an intervention; rather, he was expected to “wait eagerly” (in the petitioner’s hope and expectation) to come out of it and once at the threshold of his power – outside of the petitioner’s world – was meant to summon resources to confront and override the impact of the experiences of the object of his empathy – the petitioner. This was the role “conjured” for the colonial agent by the petitioner – a role expected to be taken with “relish and abandon” – given the “psychological invitation” to “power” and intervention from the petitioner. Thus, the petitioners manipulated the colonial officer’s “habitation” of roles in two realms: in their own personal worlds (which the colonial agent had been “privileged” to “co-habit” for the “brief period” of written contact) and that of the agent itself in the sense that even if the unexpected response or intervention was not forthcoming, the agent had been informed or made aware.³⁷

Elevating the Other: Preserving Self Attention

In the foregoing section, I consider the sections of the petitions that conceived of the status of the Colonial official. This section concerns itself with the role and responsibility “assigned” to the officer and the government he represented. Here, we confront conditions whereby the colonial officer was not “praised” as a cursory read of the letters might first suggests. Rather, his capacity was “expanded” beyond normalcy. A typical official in the 1940s reading through these letters would be tuned towards his almost “endless and unchallenged ability” to influence the course of positive intervention in the daily struggles of the petitioners. Already, “he was aware” of his bureaucratic role in the management of state administrative structure. He “was reminded” in the language of the petitions that he was “much more than he conceived himself or herself” to be. The psychological nuances that the petitions brought to bear on the person bearing the mark of officialdom mounted pressure on the capacity of the wielders of the powers of bureaucracy, even if

³⁷ NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766 Ogunyemi, Philip. Philip Ogunyemi to Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 2 Nov. 1949.

the aim of such pressure was not achieved. In normal social structure in the colonial period, a civil servant, even if senior, was not technically as “revered” in status as that of say a court judge or a lawyer or a wealthy merchant. Although, such expressions in the petitions as “Your Lordship” by elderly petitioners, or “My Lord,” “my master,” or “My father,” as often used by younger petitioners might have been glossed over by their readers, the consistency of their appearance in the petitions must have demonstrated capacity to overwhelm the officer or generate some “psychological torture” as to “the need” (by the officers) to heed to the nature of their professional calling, which was to manage the evenness of governmental response to the challenges of civil life. Although evidences suggest that such salutations as “Your worship” were common denominators in the acknowledgement of status in the legal sphere in Lagos of those days, its “acquisition” and use as everyday reference to the person of the civil servant by the everyday petitioner was a fascinating way in which the petitioner “elevated” the civil service in the management of routine livelihood.³⁸

Self-Justification

Some of the petitions contain remarkable evidences of self-justification (i.e. attention to the subject version – the I) as opposed to others which contain the *object version* of the self (the Me). Interestingly, the *subject version* of the self is prevalent among older petitioners than the younger ones. For instance, when Peter John wrote to the chief secretary to the Nigerian government on 18 October 1948, he used the subject version fifteen times in such words as: “I (have the honour),” “I (took myself),” “I was (at Burma),” “I (disregarded),” “I (returned),” “my (wife),” “my (house),” “I (built),” “I (borrowed),” “I (am still an applicant),” “my (boy),” “I (reported),” “I (applied),” “I (would),” “my (request).”³⁹ Three of these words and expressions were repeated. However, Peter used the object version in this petition only five times in the words: “I was (discharged),” “I had (no job),” “my (poor condition),” “(Assist Me),” “(lend me.” One of the expressions: “I had (no job)” was used twice. One of Peter’s sons was 26 years old in 1944 and died 10 August while Peter was serving in Burma. We can make two safe conclusions given this detail. Peter probably gave birth to his son around 1918 if we assume that he was twenty years old and that – give or take – Peter was born in 1898. Thus, Peter’s petition contains indications of a strong self will as opposed to others that contained repeated instances of the *object versions* as we would consider. So forceful would Peter have been that he stated in his

³⁸ NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766, letter from G.A. Aina to W. A. Fowler Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 30 May 1949.

³⁹ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2807/S4, letter from Peter John to the Chief Secretary to the Nigerian Government, Lagos, 18 Oct. 1948.

letter that when [he heard] his son's death in 1944, he "disregarded it."⁴⁰ In contrast to Peter's petition was Salawu's letter which in the beginning gives an impression of laxity, a strategy which was perhaps meant to play down a supposedly important issue.⁴¹ It was an expression with the capacity to immediately anger a very busy colonial official. It demonstrated the writers' conception of the office he was addressing as one able to pause formal office engagements for informal distractions. Evidently, the writer was not aware of the danger in introducing his request lightly with usage of the word "just."⁴² The introductory expression was just as light as it was confusing. The statement which reads "this is just as an obligation from you" generates some questioning as to who ought to be obliged in a matter that was yet to be introduced!⁴³ There are two ways to this: The writer either wrote in that manner to put the official at alert as to what comes next or he "wanted to" emphasize the enormity of a condition that was also vague in his own perception and so prepare the mind of the official. Thus, this countered the "less serious" introductory words that began the petition. As it was in this particular letter, the official that was expected to read the letter did not have a pre-knowledge of the communication and no other record showed that the official had made promises in earlier contact.⁴⁴ The opening expression was a summation, in a way, of the overall responsibility of the officer as government official to respond to such requests. Beyond that, it suggests a much larger responsibility of the agent as representative of the Queen and the evident inability on the part of the Crown to "take responsibility" for "appreciating" his service as a former soldier by providing opportunities for employment.

Thus, a strong message was passed across as to the symbiotic relationships between the state and the individual – between state and rights and the rewards that "should" be attached to patriotism and service rendered on behalf of the state. Salawu Opatotun served the force for two years and 59 days. This suggests that he must have been engaged in some vocation or job before his recruitment and the inability of the period in service to completely disentangle him from previous social networks or engagements prior to his service.⁴⁵ Salawu's "silence" on this aspect of previous

⁴⁰ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2807/S4, Letter from Peter John to the Chief Secretary to the Nigerian Government, Lagos, 18 Oct. 1948.

⁴¹ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

⁴² NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

⁴³ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

⁴⁴ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

⁴⁵ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

engagements seemed an attempt to “overwhelm” the agent of “his responsibility.” Hence his reminder at the beginning of the letter “This is just as an obligation from you.” This “strategy” in a way suggests an attempt to raise the psyche of the writer as against that of the agent thus: “you caused this so it is your responsibility to rectify it.” However, we get a different impression in his usage of the word “Master” to refer to the addressee as he made his very crucial request in all of the correspondence – for the master to grant a recommendation for him to gain employment as factory hand at the West African Soap Company in Apapa.⁴⁶ Also, we encounter a different message from expressions such as “I have tried so many departments in Lagos in which I have not yet successful.” This was a pre-petition attempt at dealing with the issue of unemployment, despite his “concealment” of his preservice vocation or employment. Before writing his petition, Salawu’s efforts led him to information on a job opening in Apapa an industrial district located at the far end of Lagos. It is not clear if Salawu actually went to the identified company – West African Soap Company – before writing the petition to confirm the vacancy or if he acquired the information from a third party and thus requested a recommendation before attempting to reach the company. Salawu possessed a school leaving certificate, an army service record and a labor card, three qualifications that were significant in 1949 Lagos for possible employment. As noted earlier, Salawu did not give indication as to his preoccupation before serving in the force but ended his petition with a note that subtly indicated a pre-service predicament.⁴⁷

On Interiority and Persona

Instructively, these petitions present us with varieties of the first person experience of colonial society. More than that they reflect the emotions, thoughts and feelings of the petitioners. Hence, they give us a clue to the nature of their consciousness and their personas hidden in the “I” and the “Me”; in other words, in what the letters are saying about the writers rather than what the letters are saying about colonial Lagos society. Although, the petitions are not revealing enough of the consciousnesses of their writers as neuroscientific experiments would do, we are able to see some reflections behind the “veil” i.e. behind the words that seemingly “make little or no sense.”

Salawu, for instance, was partly frustrated and this was reflected in his inability to properly organize an introduction to his request: “This is just as an obligation from you...”⁴⁸ But this “inability” is an interpretation that comes

⁴⁶ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

⁴⁷ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

⁴⁸ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

from my own “supposedly organized” cognition, which is of no consequence to Salawu because the production of the petition as an “intellectual” exercise stems from a typical first person experience which my own cognition as a researcher cannot relate with adequately given the space, the time, and the audience that the text related with and in particular the authority of first person experience it substantially carries. Thus, we encounter in Salawu an expectant individual, hopeful that his attempts at remaining socially responsible would yield results: “I have tried so many departments in Lagos in which I have not yet successful.”⁴⁹ Salawu knew how to use social network to solicit information and convert it to personal use: “I beg to tell Master that I heard an information that there is a vacant under West African soap company Apapa.”⁵⁰ Thus, it is not so much about the information but in redirecting it to a source (the colonial officer) that was capable of utilizing it to greater effect – an act that Salawu expected would be rechannelled by the official for him to act upon. Thus, Salawu expected a meeting point between his social network and that of the colonial officer based on his acquisition of the information on vacancy and the capacity of the colonial official to act upon it for Salawu’s desired end. Salawu had an understanding of the colonial official as a social capital through which his ambition could be realized. Salawu knew what to do once the official decided to do what Salawu expected him to do. He understood the variants of the agencies (his and that of the colonial official) at stake in this matter and the scope as well as the limitations of both. He was ready to do what the official would not do, physically go to the soap company to solicit on his own behalf. With the expected recommendation letter, Salawu was prepared to increase his chances and aim at success in getting the job. Salawu already had the feeling that anyone that was truly informed in Lagos at the time knew what was required to attain social responsibility, more so the colonial official, so, he stated: “For your information, I am here with my school certificate in original and army service record and then labor card.”⁵¹ Apparently, Salawu was an adequately informed member of Lagos society. He knew the meaning of social net worth, social network, and social capital and that these three went together.

If Salawu understood social net worth, social network, and social capital, G.A. Aina had greater regard for the last two. In Aina’s estimation, these are personified in the colonial official to an enviable and efficacious extent: “Your worship, I humbly submit this my petition before your worship asking for your favour and assistance.”⁵² The words: “Your worship,” “I humbly,”

⁴⁹ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

⁵⁰ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

⁵¹ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766/ Vol. II, Letter from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 9 Mar. 1949.

⁵² NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766, Letter from G.A. Aina to W. A. Fowler Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 30 May 1949.

“before your worship,” and “asking for your favor and assistance” point to Aina’s relegation of his sense of self in regard to that of his addressee.⁵³ These words are layers of submission imbued with high sense of emotion. It is easy to conceive of Aina prostrating before the colonial official if he had met him in person. Aina demonstrated humility and relegated self-worth (“I am a poor and unfortunate boy”) that resonated with that of Salawu and James.⁵⁴ Whether this expression of low self esteem was an honest representation of their mindset or merely due to their status as objects deserving benefaction is another matter which the scope of the petitions did not cover. However, a quantitative analysis of Aina’s letter reveals the usage of the word “I” twelve times in the object sense: “I (am a poor...),” “I (have lost my mother),” “I (have not been...),” “I (have been suffering),” “I (am weak),” “I (humbly submit),” “I (was the one...),” “I (could educate...)” “I (know that your...),” “I (beg you...),” “I (have been fasting)” and “(help) me” and three times in the subject sense: “(This) my (petition),” “I (have registered),” and “I (have the honour)” reflecting a lower self esteem than Salawu and James.⁵⁵

At the beginning of his letter, James believed he possessed qualities that could attract significant attention emotionally from the colonial officer he wrote to. Interestingly, he sounded like a man with a high self esteem by trying to establish a basis for deserving attention, only for him to constantly reiterate his sorry state in the words: “I beg to confess,” “there is none to help me,” “I am now as a sheep without a shepherd,” “Now I humbly beg,” “to assist me,” “to get money to transport myself,” “unable to feed myself.”⁵⁶ This was in addition to exposing some cognitive challenge in organizing his thoughts in the statements: “My left palm hand is cut off through fire accident which I have undertook in 1939,” and “As soon as I am jobless and unable to feed myself, is better for me to go home....”⁵⁷ Apparently, James realized his helplessness despite the tendency to acknowledge his privilege of being honorable to address a colonial official and of being “a freeborn of Ora.”⁵⁸ Quantitatively, James has a fairly low self esteem given that he used the words “me,” “am,” and “I” in the object sense 13 times: “I (beg to confess),” “My (present condition),” “I (have no father),” “Am (born alone),” “(to help) me,”

⁵³ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766, Letter from G.A. Aina to W. A. Fowler Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 30 May 1949.

⁵⁴ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766, Letter from G.A. Aina to W. A. Fowler Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 30 May 1949.

⁵⁵ NAI Com.Col. 1 /2766, Letter from G.A. Aina to W. A. Fowler Acting Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 30 May 1949.

⁵⁶ NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766, Letter from James A. Ogedengbe to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 17 Nov. 1949.

⁵⁷ NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766, Letter from James A. Ogedengbe to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 17 Nov. 1949.

⁵⁸ NAI Com.Col. 1 / 2766, Letter from James A. Ogedengbe to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 17 Nov. 1949.

“I am (now as sheep),” “I (humbly beg),” “(to assist) me,” “(to transport) myself,” “my (hometown),” “I am (jobless),” “(unable to feed) myself,” “(for) me (to go home).” Meanwhile, he used the same words nine times in the subject sense: “I (have the honour),” “I (hope you will),” “(will reply) me,” “My (honour),” “I (have attended),” “I (am a freeborn),” “[I] (will be pleased),” “I (have the honour),” “I (try one way or the other).” He used the words “My” and “I” twice in ways that are of no consequence quantitatively: “My (left palm hand)” and “I (have undertaken).”

Thus, the petitions introduce us to the persona of the writers through the quantitative and repetitive usage of self words: the “I,” “Me,” and “My” in the subject and the object cases. Used in the subject case, the words present the writer as having some agency as against the object case that presents the writers as victims or beggars. The more the subject case was used, the more we have the feeling that the writer exercised some agency before approaching the official. In some cases, the petitioner presented himself as having no agency at all, preferring to leverage on the agency he ascribed to the official. In his estimation, this was what mattered in his case; hence the usage of words like “your worship,” “my savior,” “your lordship,” and “my father.”

Conclusion

Particularly, the scope of these petitions is introductory as each letter is indeed insufficient entry into the inner recesses of the self world of the individual. However, unveiling the textuality of these writings has shown that they can actually give us a glimpse into the selfhood of their producers. This is instructive in the sense that they have served another purpose and that is they can provide us an opportunity to interact with the feelings and thoughts of people who lived in colonial Lagos and documented it, albeit unintentionally. As it is, many individuals who lived in Lagos during the period covered by this study are no longer alive and it is difficult to get testaments as to how they felt about themselves during such time. Mainstream stories focus on politics and economy and in recent studies, childhood, social welfare, and sex. Colonial Lagos has always been the story of phenomena that are greater than the self. Although the self is sometimes inserted but only to serve the purpose of elucidating the larger phenomenon rather than explaining selfhood as it was among individuals. The implication of this is that not much is known about how individuals reflect on themselves, their self-esteem and self-worth. Petitions like those we have considered have been substantially used by social historians writing on Lagos. References have been made to the contents of such but the details of the contents as they reflect the writer’s selfhood have been left out. The boundaries of scholarly investigation on colonial Lagos have essentially excluded such objective. This is what this essay has done. Although biographies and autobiographies have been significant, a reflection on petitions and their usage to construct some sort of “selfies” of the writers remains scant. Thus, we are denied access to the interiority of society

during the twenty-first century, when going public on private and celebrity platforms holds sway. This interiority, now at the center of global human relations, is different from what we have when these texts were written in the restricted and private format we have just considered. In all, the texts of the petitions as we have observed are an entry point into what promises to be a rewarding intellectual venture if engaged fully by historians. This paper has engaged one of these potentials.

Thus, it has examined the significant option that the petitions present to us to consider the petitioner as s/he relates with him or herself with the structural, psychoanalytical, and neuroscientific details left out. It is what these petitions say vis a vis the fears, the anxiety, the subtle deception, and the thoughts of the individuals that constitute the “interior version of society” as used in this article. The capacity of these petitions to reveal the phenomenological make up of their writers is what this paper has also emphasized as their alternative features. It marries the content of the petitions (the words and expressions) with the thought processes that produced them noting only in passing the external version of society that influenced them.

From what we have examined, petitions written in colonial Lagos give far more information than social historians have utilized in constructing colonial Nigerian history. This potential is what this article has investigated by paying attention to the significant capacity of the documents to aid phenomenological research on the self identity of colonial subjects. Regrettably, this remains a scant exploration in existing literature. In her book *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, Karin Barber notes that documents written by individuals in the colonial period should not only be scanned for historical analysis but that there is need to pay attention to the voice of the documents i.e. allowing the letters to “speak” as texts towards a more informed understanding of the colonial past.⁵⁹ This article has attempted to present a way in which such documents could be used as text and as entrance into a fascinating interiority of colonial society. Despite the fact that some of the archival documents examined here have been used in other studies on colonial Lagos, the insights provided here totally deviate from the conventional analyses that have dominated the literature, and point to the strong potential of petitions to redefine and reinvigorate colonial Lagos history.

References

- Adeboye, Olufunke, “Iku ya J’Esin: Politically Motivated Suicide, Social Honour and Chieftaincy Politics in Early Colonial Ibadan,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 41 (2007), 189–225.
- , “Reading the Diary of Akinpelu Obisesan in Colonial Africa,” *African Studies Review* 51–2 (2008), 75–97.

⁵⁹ Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

- Aderinto, Saheed, "O! Sir I do not know either to kill myself or to stay": Childhood Emotion, Poverty, and Literary Culture in Nigeria, 1900–1960," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 8–2 (2015), 273–294.
- , "Framing the Colonial Child: Childhood Memory and Self-Representation in Autobiographical Writings" in Saheed Aderinto (ed), *Children and Childhood in Colonial Nigerian Histories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- Alozie, Bright, C., "'Female Voices on Ink': The Sexual Politics of Petitions in Colonial Igboland, 1892–1960," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 10 (2019), 343–366.
- Agbiboa, Daniel, E., "Informal Urban Governance and Predatory Politics in Africa: The Role of Motor-Park Touts in Lagos," *African Affairs* 1177–466 (2018), 62–82.
- Barber, Karin, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- Bowman, Wayne, "A Somatic 'Here and Now' Semantic: Music, Body and Self," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 144 (2000), 45–60.
- Bigon, Liora, "Between Local and Colonial Perceptions: The History of Slum Clearance in Lagos (Nigeria), 1924–1960," *African and Asian Studies* 7 (2008), 49–76.
- Charmaz, Kathy, "The Body, Identity and Self: Adapting to Impairment," *The Sociological Quarterly* 36–4 (1995), 657–680.
- Chandler, Amy, "Boys don't cry? Critical Phenomenology, Self-harm and Suicide," *The Sociological Review* 67–6 (2019), 1350–1366.
- Crowther, Susan, Pam Ironside, Deb Spence, and Liz Smythe, "Crafting Stories in Hermeneutic Phenomenology Research: A Methodological Device," *Qualitative Health Research* 27–6 (2017), 826–835.
- Fivush, Robin and Catherine A. Haden (eds.), *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self Developmental and Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Psychology, 2013).
- Korieh, Chima, "The Invisible Farmer? Women, Gender and Colonial Agricultural Policy in the Igbo Region of Nigeria, c. 1913–1954," *African Economic History* 29 (2001), 117–162.
- , "May it please your Honour," Letters of Petition as Historical Evidence in an African Colonial Context," *History in Africa* 37 (2010), 87–88.
- Makinde, Abdul-Fatah Kola, and Philip Ostien, "Legal Pluralism in Colonial Lagos: The 1894 Petition of the Lagos Muslims to their British Colonial Masters," *Die Welt des Islams* 52–1 (2010), 51–68.
- Mann, Kristin, *Slavery and The Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760–1900* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010).
- Newell, Stephanie, "Life Writing in the Colonial Archives: The Case of Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904–1996) of Nigeria," *Life Writing* 13–3 (2016), 307–321.
- Oluwasegun, Muftau, Jimoh, "The British Mosquito Eradication Campaign in Colonial Lagos, 1902–1950," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 51–2 (2017), 217–236.
- Pollio, Howard R., Tracy Henley, and Craig B. Thompson, *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- Spence, Deborah Gall, "Supervising for Robust Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Reflexive Engagement Within Horizons of Understanding," *Qualitative Health Research* 27–6 (2017), 836–842.
- van der Meide, Hanneke, Truus Teunissen, Pascal Collard, Merel Visse and Leo H. Visser, "The Mindful Body: A Phenomenology of the Body With Multiple Sclerosis," *Qualitative Health Research* 28–4 (2018), 2239–2249.
- Wenderoth, Valeria, "Merging Realism and the Exotic: Lucien Lambert's Le Spahi and the Colonial Self," *Journal of Musicological Research* 29–1 (2010), 34–63.

Appendix

Figure 1. Petition from Salawu Opatotun to the Commissioner for the Colony, Lagos, 1949.

The Commissioner,
 of the Colony
 Marine Road,
 Lagos.

122, Victoria Street,
 Lagos - Nigeria
 Comcol 2
 2766
 vol II.

9th March, 1949

Dear Sir, this is just as an obligation
 from you, because since my discharged in
 the force I have not got anywhere to
 be employed. I am an ex-service man
 grade two for the period of two years and
 fifty-nine days. I have tried so many Deba
 rtments in Lagos in which I have not
 yet successful; I beg to tell Master that I
 heard an information that there is a
 vacant under West African Soap Company
 Apapa. I will be very much thankful from
 the Master if I may be recommended and
 the said Department as a Labourer.
 For your information I am here with
 my school certificate in original and army
 service records, and then Labour card.
 I would have got an app
 ointment being there is no help.
 Awaiting for your favourable reply so
 Yours Obediently,
 Salawu Opatotun

not 17/3/49 T. O

Figure 2A. Petition from G. A. Aina to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 1949.

From: G. A. Aina, 907
27, Binuyo Street,
Lagos.
30/5/49

Hon. W. A. Fowler,
Acting Commissioner of the Colony,
Commissioner of the Colony's Office,
Lagos. ✓

Your worship,

I humbly submit this my petition before your worship asking for your favour and assistance.

I am a poor and unfortunate boy who had been looking out for job for the past five years and no success. I am the one who came to you at Ikeja in 1944, whom you promised to recommend to R. A. F. Oshodi.

I have lost my mother in my infant days and my father is an aged old man. Through difficulties and hardship, I could educate myself up to Government Class Two only, which is my present qualification.

I have registered my name at the

Figure 2B. Petition from G. A. Aina to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 1949.

308
labour office since January 3rd 1944, and
unfortunately, I have not been called to any
job since that time.
The worse is the death of my Guardian,
about 2 years ago, and after his death, I have
been suffering heavily. I know that your
assistance will weigh a great measure for
my success.
I, through the name of God, and of Jesus
Christ His Son, beg you to help me,
I have been fasting for the past
two weeks ago, and now I am weak,
feeble and dizzy.
For God's sake, kindly help me.
Awaiting for your favourable reply.
19. 259.
3/6
1/45: I have the honour to be,
Srs,
Your obedient Servant
Poor G. A. Aina
P.A. 4/6
2766

Figure 3. Petition from James A. Ogedengbe to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos, 1949.

The Commissioner
Of Colony-
Scolony's Office,
Lagos.

12, Furton Street, 816
Lagos.
17/11/49

Sir/ I have the honour most respectfully to
to draft you this few lines, which I hope you will reply
me with your deepest and sympathetic consideration.

On my honour, I beg to confess that my present
Condition is above expression. My left palm - hand is
cut off through fire accident which I have under took
in 1941 1939. I have no father, no mother and am born alone.
There is none to help me. I am now as a sheep with-
out a shepherd. I try one way and other to get
work as soon as I have attended school up to stand-
ard five in St John's Central School Sabongidola
Ora, but no success due to no labour - card and
also no assistance.

Now I humbly beg the Commissioner, to assist me
as to get money to transport my self to my home land.
As soon as I am jobless and unable to feed my self, is
better for me to go home than to be wandering in the
town of Lagos township.

I am a free born of Ora, very far from Lagos and
will be pleased if this note is considered and approved
I have the honour to be,

19.268. Sir.
your's Obedient Servant,
James A. Ogedengbe.

COMMISSIONER OF THE COLONY		
DATE	TO WHOM	TIME
18/11	R. C. M. 200	9.268
A. S. L.		
JON. CO.		
A. S.		
S. R. B.		
SEARCHER		
17/11	S. R. B. N.	12.766

PA