

‘My desire is to be the possessor of all the best books in this world of struggle’: respectability and literary materialism in colonial Ibadan

Ruth Watson

My father brought back from England an extraordinary collection of books ... But he got carried away with being a successful young lawyer and didn't get round to reading them. They gathered dust, and every now and then he'd say to me, 'Ben, dust the books – but don't read them!' That made the books fantastically attractive. I don't know if he did it on purpose. I wouldn't put it past him. I would sit on the floor cross-legged dusting a Dickens or a Shakespeare, then I'd read for hours until I'd hear his voice, 'Ben, what are you doing?' and I'd start dusting again. Books still have this tension for me – the do and the don't, the possibility of danger, of secret knowledge. It makes them very potent.¹

The Nigerian novelist Ben Okri gives us a vivid picture of books on display in his childhood home. We glimpse the potency of literary knowledge, and also a world of aspirant respectability that had deeper, colonial, origins. Silver Okri was originally a railway clerk, who in 1959 won a scholarship to study law in London. This was shortly after the birth of his son Ben in the northern Nigerian town of Minna, which lay at the junction of two important railway routes.² Like many others before him, it appears that Silver Okri saw clerical work as a stepping stone to a more prestigious profession.

This article explores why owning a book collection was significant to men such as Silver Okri, and investigates how their literary aspirations reveal colonial African understandings of respectability. It argues for the importance of 'literary materialism', a particular form of acquisitiveness that placed value not only on the idea that books were 'very potent' but also on the materiality of literary things. That is, literary objects – books, journals, magazines, notebooks, diaries and encyclopaedia volumes – were valued for their material qualities and for their capacity to display cultural capital. This act of display refers to what Bourdieu has termed the 'objectified state' of cultural capital, which takes the form of cultural goods that can be appropriated both materially in economic terms and symbolically as a trace of embodied knowledge. Objectified in this way, cultural capital can be possessed, but it gains meaning through its owner engaging in a process of self-improvement. More broadly, Bourdieu contends that cultural capital can be converted into economic capital under certain conditions, and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications (Bourdieu 2002). Thus Silver Okri's book collection objectified his professional education and literacy in

Ruth Watson is a lecturer in African history at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Clare College. Email: riw21@cam.ac.uk

¹J. Rix, 'Ben Okri: my family values', *Guardian*, 26 June 2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/life-and-style/2010/jun/26/ben-okri-family-values>>, accessed 11 August 2016.

²M. Jaggi, 'A life in writing: free spirit', *Guardian*, 11 August 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/aug/11/fiction.benokri>>, accessed 11 August 2016.

English, qualifications that might otherwise have appeared intangible to his clients. His books could not be dusty. He ensured that they were cared for as material objects while simultaneously his son discovered the private pleasure of reading to oneself and learning ‘secret knowledge’.

But rather than Silver Okri, our focus here is Akinpelu Obisesan, a voluminous diarist whose life spanned the entire colonial period in the Yoruba city of Ibadan, Nigeria. Building on an earlier study of Obisesan and his diary (Watson 2006), where I explored his commitment to English-language literacy as constitutive of his status as a Christian gentleman, this article emphasizes how Obisesan’s early years of diary writing related to his professional identity as a clerk. The significance of Obisesan’s work as a clerk points to how, like the African intermediaries studied by Lawrance, Osborn and Roberts, he ‘lived in social worlds that straddled African and European universes’ (Lawrance *et al.* 2006: 23). Not satisfied with simple notebooks, Obisesan purchased commercially produced Letts diaries imported from Britain, which embodied geographical and cultural horizons far beyond the parochial world of colonial Ibadan. Obisesan also aspired to own actual books, and the second part of the article develops this theme by reconstructing the fraught circumstances that surrounded his purchase of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* between 1928 and 1931. He viewed possessing an encyclopaedia collection as giving him ‘knowledge’ that, in Bourdieu’s terms, granted him cultural capital. Feelings of perplexity, yearning and dissatisfaction pervade Obisesan’s diary and correspondence, enabling us to see aspirations for literacy and betterment from the point of view of the aspirant, expressed in his distinctive voice.

A clerk and his diary in colonial Yorubaland

Akinpelu Obisesan worked as a railway clerk when the railhead first reached Ben Okri’s birthplace of Minna in 1910. A generation older than Silver Okri, he was born in Ibadan in about 1889 to Chief Aperin and a slave woman.³ After mission schooling and a spell as a clerk in the Ibadan Resident’s Office, in 1906 Obisesan was seconded to the Railway Construction Department. He passed the railway entrance examination at the end of 1908, and was posted to the newly opened station of Ilorin as a ‘traffic clerk’. Four years later, Obisesan became station master at Ikirun, a Yoruba town to the south of Ilorin. However, on completing a correspondence course in 1913, he received the disappointing news that the railway administration would not support his further education in England, and he resigned.⁴ Obisesan turned to the private sector and became a produce clerk for the British trading firm Paterson Zochonis (PZ), which opened an Ikirun store in 1913.⁵ He was employed to purchase palm kernels, drawing upon credit advanced by a managing agent from PZ. This more senior agent periodically

³Obisesan recorded in his diary on 16 September 1920 that he ‘presumed I was born in the month of August in 1889’; Akinpelu Obisesan Papers, Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan (hereafter OP), Box 55: 1920 Diary, 16 September.

⁴The Hon’ble Akinpelu Obisesan’, *Yoruba News*, 4 May 1942, p. 2.

⁵*Ibid.*

checked the stocktaking and ensured that Obisesan's inventory of the store was correct. However, Obisesan's stay at PZ was short-lived, and in 1914 he moved on to become a produce clerk at a German trading firm called Witt & Busch.⁶

Soon after his career move, Obisesan bought a diary. It was almost certainly manufactured by Letts, a company that in 1812 had developed the commercial diary to assist London merchants and traders with recording movements of stock and controlling their finances. A century later, Letts diaries had reached colonial Yorubaland. Properly used, the document could help a produce clerk keep the inventory of his store in good order by enabling him to track his stock of palm kernels and cocoa in and out of his shop, and to monitor their fluctuating prices. Obisesan chose a 'Letts's Quikref South African Union Rough Diary', which was foolscap size and offered 'a week in an opening'.⁷ This meant that the week was neatly partitioned into six rectangular blocks on two facing pages, with one block for each of the five weekdays and the sixth block shared for Saturday and Sunday.

These diaries, which Obisesan called 'diary books', were made for Nigerian customers and 'C.M.S. BOOKSHOP, Broad Street, LAGOS' was emblazoned across the cover. At this time, missionary bookshops dominated the book and stationery trade in British West Africa (Newell 2002: 10–11). The diary opened with a two-page yearly calendar recording all Christian holy days along with some Islamic and Jewish holidays, as well as the birthdays of the British royal family. The dates of South African Union, Canadian Dominion, Australian Federation, American Independence and Empire Day were also noted. This was followed by the 'General Information &c.' section, which provided a list of the British 'African Governors' and information on the phases of the moon, and times for sun and moon rises and sets in major South African cities. Dates for the seasons and public holidays, as well as details of postal charges, customs tariffs and cable rates in South Africa, were also recorded. The projected times for high tide in Table Bay throughout the year were presented, along with conversion tables for weights and measures and the estimated sterling equivalent for various 'foreign moneys'. A register of suggested Bible lessons for the year followed this section, and then came the 'Concise Directory', which advertised everything from 'Absorbent Cotton Wool' to 'Writing-Ink Powders'. After two pages for 'Memoranda of Things Lent, &c.' and 'Memoranda of Reference, &c.', the 'week in opening' began on page 1, with a header recording '1st Month, January 1914, 31 Days'.⁸

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷The Obisesan Papers collection has deteriorated with time and some of the diaries are in very poor condition, including the 1914 diary, which has been eaten away by insects. The cover, title page and several other pages are missing, making it impossible to verify the brand of this specific diary book. However, its style is very similar to the diaries Obisesan used from 1920 onwards, which were all manufactured by Letts. Nearly all of them were called 'Letts's Quikref South African Union Rough Diary', although they differed in size and format. It thus seems safe to assume that Obisesan purchased this brand in 1914.

⁸OP, Box 55: 1924 Diary. This description of the opening pages of the 1914 diary is based on that for 1924, which is the earliest complete copy of the diary in sound condition. The 1914 diary is in the worst condition of the entire collection, but the 1920 diary retains a few pages of the 'General Information, &c.' section, showing that it was part of the standard format of the diary before 1924.

Letts diaries were thus pre-printed with all kinds of international information, as well as a defined temporal format. In this sense, just like books, they were external and authoritative. Their content was most relevant for South African consumers, but they were also a product of and for the 'British world'. More capacious than the territorial entity implied by the British Empire, the 'British world' can be viewed 'as a field of cultural, political and symbolic attachments' (Dubow 2009: 3). A Letts diary provided a degree of access to these attachments, not only by suggesting that its owner was literate in English, but also by the way in which it packaged information. At the same time, however, its purpose was to allow an individual to inscribe their own words into the defined spaces, juxtaposing print and handwriting. Through this juxtaposition, Letts diaries combined the worldly and the local, and had the potential to be both sources of 'objective knowledge' as well as repositories of subjective personal narratives. Obisesan embraced the capacity of the diary to be a repository, and consciously used it as a tool of self-improvement, but he did not comment specifically on its prefatory information. He never remarked on the South African qualities of his diaries, nor did he annotate the pre-printed sections, thus it is difficult to know if he used this material. Nevertheless, it seems significant that he chose these commercial diaries over a blank notebook.

Letts' commercial diaries were invented to record business transactions, but the type of diary writing with which Obisesan was probably most familiar took a more narrative form and was likely learned from Yoruba agents of the Church Missionary Society (Watson 2006: 57). All the same, the timing of his decision to purchase a diary, which coincided with his resignation as a railway clerk and a career move to the private sector, suggests that he bought one to supplement his professional identity as a clerk.⁹ He used the 'Memoranda of Things Lent' pages to record his cash flow and the 'Memoranda of Reference' section to record births and deaths among his family and acquaintances, but there was initially no distinct pattern to how the form of the Letts diary shaped the recounting of his life. On occasion, he would remark that the 'bank holiday' pre-recorded in his diary was observed and all businesses and government offices were closed.¹⁰ But over time, as Obisesan's diary writing developed, the most important function of the Letts diary was to offer a structured temporal format into which he could insert a chronological account of his life.

Obisesan began using his diary to write about his activities in May 1914. 'Arrived from Ibadan after spending time in settling quarrels amongst the families,' he noted when he returned to Ikirun on 9 May.¹¹ During the next few weeks he kept a clerical record of deliveries to his shop and the price of produce. He also recorded interpretations of his dreams, using it for something other than an aide-memoire for his store inventory. During the last week of June he prepared for stocktaking, which took place when a new managing

⁹A detailed reading of the 1914 diary (which is extremely confusing due to entries being inserted randomly over a six-year period) reveals that Obisesan's earliest period of diary keeping was from May to August 1914 when he was working for Witt & Busch in Ikirun. In an earlier publication, I suggested that Obisesan began his diary writing when he returned to Ibadan following the outbreak of the First World War (Watson 2006: 56).

¹⁰OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 6 August.

¹¹OP, Box N: 1914 Diary, 9 May.

agent, Mr Roggenkamp, arrived. Obisesan does not write about hostilities in the build-up to the First World War, but he was surprised when Roggenkamp visited the shop on 3 August and took £25.¹² Britain declared war on Germany the next day and a messenger was sent to collect more cash, but Obisesan had none to give.¹³

Roggenkamp no doubt sought to pocket what he could before the British authorities seized the assets of Witt & Busch, which was ultimately expelled from Nigeria along with several other German companies later in 1914 (Osuntokun 1979: 25). The upheaval must have been a shock to Obisesan, who stopped keeping his regular diary, until a brief entry on 27 August: 'Store closed by the District Officer Mr. Grier. Safe & store keys demanded by him.'¹⁴ Obisesan returned to Ibadan the next day. 'Arrived from Ikirun,' he declared wearily, 'after handing over to Government.'¹⁵ He writes that he met his former managing agent in the company of a colonial officer a few days later, and Roggenkamp was promised that he would be able to collect bags of palm kernels and outstanding debts from customers. Obisesan was provided with 200 cases of gin, one case of schnapps and some bottles of rum to sell, but since he owed Roggenkamp 18 shillings and sixpence, he could not claim the small profit he expected to make.¹⁶ Thus while the managing agent retrieved some goods, his loyal produce clerk was left empty-handed and unemployed. It was not the last time that Obisesan was to lose his job.

After he resettled in Ibadan, Obisesan's brothers appointed him to manage the family's extensive landholdings. He continued to write sporadically in his 1914 diary until 1919, constructing a rough family tree and reporting on births, deaths and the occasional significant incident.¹⁷ This function of the 1914 diary as a repository for information relating to the Aperin household is its most notable feature. Unlike in later years, Obisesan did not record his entries in chronological order, but wrote them randomly throughout the diary pages. He took care to handwrite a date for each entry, underneath the date printed in the diary. Regular diary keeping began again in February 1920, when Obisesan was trying to sell cocoa from the Aperin family farms. He kept account of how much produce he sold and for what price, in much the same way that he had recorded details of his transactions for Witt & Busch during 1914. He also wrote about the family landholdings, as well as domestic matters.

From 1920 onwards, Obisesan became much more diligent in his diary keeping and he continued to purchase a Letts diary every year until 1960 (except in 1931). He wrote a diary entry nearly every single day, always in English, apart from when

¹²OP, Box N: 1914 Diary, 3 August.

¹³OP, Box N: 1914 Diary, 4 August.

¹⁴OP, Box N: 1914 Diary, 27 August.

¹⁵OP, Box N: 1914 Diary, 28 August.

¹⁶OP, Box N: 1914 Diary, 31 August. This diary entry is torn and thus words are missing.

¹⁷OP, Box N: 1914 Diary, 12 March–12 April. The 'family tree' is stretched over a whole month of daily entries, with a name written on the left-hand side of the entry and 'Children' written on the right side. However, Obisesan never filled in the children's names. Since it appears he began his diary writing in May 1914, it seems he decided writing out this information was a good way to fill unused pages. For some entries (for example, Adedoyin, 3 April) he wrote a short report of the person's death.

he used Yoruba proverbs or sayings. By the late 1920s he regularly recorded his expenses with his daily entries, but he kept a 'private exercise book' to monitor his work as a produce clerk. When this exercise book was seized by his managing agent in 1928, he became 'overwhelmed with anxiety', since the document essentially revealed how Obisesan was defrauding his employer.¹⁸ However, Obisesan managed to talk his way out of trouble, and when the exercise book was returned to him two days later he declared that 'its release gives me the greatest joy, happiness, contentment of soul & pleasure; to the loving providence I am very grateful. I am taken out of mire which threatened to sink me.'¹⁹ Thus by his second decade of diary keeping, Obisesan was using his Letts diary as predominantly a confessional document, and less as a clerical record. He adopted its pre-printed chronological format as a structure to record events in his life day by day, frequently invoking fate or providence as an explanation for why or how things turned out as they did. At times when he was away from Ibadan he supplemented the daily entry date heading with a short title, such as 'At Akanran', which suggests that he carried his diary around with him.

Reading, writing and respectability

Obisesan's purchase of a Letts diary in 1914 indicates how far his interest in English-language literacy arose in the professional context of being a clerk in colonial Africa, similar to Kenneth Mdala's experience in Nyasaland (Vaughan 2005). It seems that, for Obisesan, acquiring a commercial diary was partly a strategy to manage the uncertainty of a career move from the world of the colonial railways to the world of colonial trade. It enabled him to appear qualified for his new job, even though he began using his diary for more personal purposes than simply a business record. We also see in Obisesan's first diary purchase early signs of his acquisitiveness as a literary materialist. A cheaper plain notebook would not do because a Letts diary better projected Obisesan's self-image as an educated and literate professional and gave him an air of cultural refinement. Like many books, Letts diaries contained obscure information; they were commercially manufactured and imported; and they were on sale in a bookshop. But unlike, say, a history book, a diary was full of blank pages and was intended for writing rather than for reading. Only when Obisesan began filling entries every day did his diary books (as he called them) become something to read as well as to write. Occasionally, he did re-read his diaries, annotating entries that he found interesting.

By writing and reading his diary in this interactive way, Obisesan created and inhabited a social world that linked self-realization to his family, to his professional life, and to English-language literacy. His commitment to literacy was to some extent an end in itself, but his interest went well beyond the utilitarian objective of improving his reading and writing skills in English. As I have argued elsewhere, Obisesan's dedication to English literacy, most tangibly expressed in his diary writing, helped to make his respectability, a colonial condition that was

¹⁸OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 27 June.

¹⁹OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 30 June.

socially constituted (Watson 2006: 55). Conversely, Adeboye argues that literacy for Obisesan was broadly functional, a means towards the attainment of 'elite masculinity'. Borrowing the term from Lisa Lindsay's study of Nigerian railway workers (Lindsay 2003), Adeboye contends that 'elite masculinity ... was a function of three factors in Ibadan: Western education, wealth and at the highest level, the acquisition of a chieftaincy title' (Adeboye 2008: 86–7). A chieftaincy title in turn recognized the realization of *ola* or 'honour' – specifically the quality of being acknowledged as superior and thus attracting admirers and supporters.

By contrast, respectability was a lifestyle that cost money, and that colonial Africans socially constructed and practically experienced in their day-to-day existence. In the social world of Obisesan's diary, cultural boundaries between literate, Western-educated gentlemen and traditional chiefs generally appear fluid rather than rigid. Far from depicting cultural polarity, Obisesan's daily entries reveal his personhood as a complex process of cultural engagement. This was partly because his sense of himself as a respectable Yoruba gentleman arose out of the rich histories of cultural encounter that established Yoruba Christianity, and the close association between mission education and English-language literacy (Peel 2000). Relatedly, Iliffe argues that, although colonial African respectability 'was not merely imposed on Africans by missionary imperialists', it developed out of the engagement between African societies and Christian missions in the context of nineteenth-century European imperialism. 'The cultural package of respectability,' he continues, 'included moral as well as material elements' (Iliffe 2005: 246, 253). Apart from Christianity, these elements were education, temperance, clean and ironed clothes, and, by the early twentieth century, a properly swept (and square) cement house with a corrugated iron roof.

In British colonial Africa, education, and the respectability associated with it, was tangibly linked to the acquisition of English-language literacy. Although this was a skill that had an economic use, it was less important than its embodiment of fundamental values, or, in Bourdieu's terms, its embodiment of cultural capital. Thus, for Obisesan and his circle of friends, speaking, reading and writing in English bestowed superiority and made them recognizably respectable, and enabled these men to set themselves apart in colonial society. They believed that their literacy and associated Englishness made them better than those who did not have their education, an idea that was, of course, closely tied up with the British colonial project. Nevertheless, despite having materials such as a Letts diary, Obisesan's early business career was not greatly advanced by his English-language literacy, even though he could correspond directly with the managing agents of leading British commercial firms (Williams 1993: 114).

Instead, throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Obisesan was nearly always out of money, not least because he spent so much to maintain a respectable lifestyle. Living within one's means was another important element of respectability, even if many African gentlemen did not achieve this in practice (Iliffe 2005: 253). Obisesan failed miserably on this score, a fact of which he was especially conscious. Failing to convert his literacy into economic capital, as Bourdieu observed was possible in theoretical terms (Bourdieu 2002: 281), Obisesan instead used his limited financial resources to consume literary cultural goods. This activity was part of a mostly internal quest for self-improvement that he documented in his diary, but one which Obisesan also projected outwards as he craved recognition of his respectability from his peers (Watson 2016). The cost of being a gentleman

was high, a fact that was particularly evident in the literary materialism that fuelled Obisesan's purchase of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Obisesan, literary materialism and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

Early in 1927, Obisesan received a letter from the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company. It offered him a special deal on the *Historians' History of the World*, a twenty-five-volume series of world history that had been published by Encyclopaedia Britannica since 1904. A volume in this first edition was reviewed by one W. M. Müller as 'a rather extensive sketch of Egyptian history, popularly written, not without literary merits'. He commended the effort to make academic knowledge on Egypt more widely available, but found the numerous errors in the 'well-intending book' objectionable. He attributed this to the dangers of 'popularizing' scholarship (Müller 1906: 292–4).

More than two decades later, the letter Obisesan received made no attempt to promote the scholarly content of the latest edition of the *Historians' History*, nor did it give an indication of what the books were about. Instead, it focused entirely on the physical qualities of 'a small number of shopworn sets' and explained: 'All of them are in excellent condition. The text pages are perfect. The bindings show hardly any sign of wear.' The Company promised a significant price reduction, and declared that the 'offer will be made only to those whom we know to be interested in this work'.²⁰ The marketing ploy worked: seemingly tempted by the promise of these grandly bound tomes, Obisesan placed an order. His diary records that he took delivery of his *Historians' History* set on 21 May 1927; a fortnight later, he spent most of the day reading the 'American history book out of the Volumes'.²¹

Obisesan does not mention making specific use of the *Historians' History* again, although on 21 September he noted that he spent much of the day in bed, reading 'papers and historical books'. This prompted him to reflect 'that I am very deficient in the knowledge and understanding of the English language is a fact I am being forced to realise every day'. Obisesan was 'very sorry and sad that I have passed the river of perfection in this subject which is so dear to me; Cannot my God work wonder for me by compelling my brain to learn, read & be able to digest?'²² Here we see that Obisesan's pursuit of English-language literacy was often a private preoccupation and part of a personal project of self-improvement, not necessarily developed in a social setting. On other occasions, Obisesan sought public recognition of his literary abilities, for example when he aspired to become editor of an Ibadan newspaper in 1921 (Watson 2014).

Obisesan's correspondence with the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company began in January 1927, when he paid a deposit of 20 shillings to order the thirteenth edition.²³ A subsequent account statement records that his order was received

²⁰OP, Box O: File 3: Letter dated 11 February 1927 from Chairman the *New Historians' History of the World* to Akinpelu Obisesan.

²¹OP, Box 47: 1927 Diary, Memoranda of Reference, &c; 3 June.

²²OP, Box 47: 1927 Diary, 21 September.

²³OP, Box 47: 1927 Diary, 10 January.

on 2 February, about a week before the Company sent its letter promoting the *Historians' History* deal.²⁴ He agreed to pay for both sets of volumes in instalments, a method of payment pioneered by the Company in 1896 and used profitably ever since.²⁵ Falling behind with his remittances almost immediately, Obisesan carefully preserved correspondence about his debts with the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company. In doing so, he inadvertently generated an archive of the social and economic costs of literary materialism, as well as its perceived cultural benefits.

By March 1928, after more than a year of irregular subscriptions, Obisesan had paid just £13.15s.0d of the £47.5s.6d he owed for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the *Historians' History*. The Company suggested a new schedule, proposing that he make 'three substantial instalments'.²⁶ But, unfortunately, there was no way Obisesan could afford these payments. 'Money like stream continues to pass away from our pocket,' he remarked on 17 March.²⁷ His monthly stocktake at the beginning of April 1928 showed his outstanding balance was £400, indicating his failure to recoup sufficiently the credit advanced to him by his white managing agent, Mr Roe.²⁸ This predicament was characteristic of the produce trade, a consequence of clients not paying their bills at the end of the month, or, as Obisesan put it euphemistically: 'Customers are not hitting the nails right on the head.'²⁹ He reflected: 'No doubt Mr Roe will murmur when next he visits Ibadan; one thing is certain I cannot be regarded as one of the irresponsible & foolish clerks, though I must not be egotistic.'³⁰ Such self-reassurance was characteristic of Obisesan's diary narrative.

In the context of these difficulties, corresponding with the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company might have given Obisesan an ego boost. In its letter of 1 March 1928, the Company expressed confidence that he could meet the three payments required, and promised that his encyclopaedia would be dispatched as soon as the first instalment was received. Recognizing that he already had the *Historians' History* in his possession, the Company again emphasized the physical features of the collection, stating: '[W]e know that you would like to have the use of these two splendid sets of books side by side.'³¹ But the Company's positive response to a specific proposal from Obisesan is likely to be what pleased him most of all.³² 'We appreciate your suggestion to send your photograph,' they noted, 'and if you care to do this it will be placed with our collection of

²⁴OP, Box O: File 1: Statement dated 5 March 1928 from The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd. to Akinpelu Obisesan. This statement dates Obisesan's order to 2 February 1927.

²⁵*The Story of Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago, 1991), p. 8. I was provided with a copy of this history by Christine Hodgson, the PR officer at the London offices of Encyclopaedia Britannica. *The Story* does not have a named author.

²⁶OP, Box O: File 1: Statement dated 5 March 1928 from The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd. to Akinpelu Obisesan.

²⁷OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 17 March.

²⁸OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 2 April.

²⁹OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 30 March.

³⁰OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 4 April.

³¹OP, Box O: File 1: Letter dated 1 March 1928 from The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd. to Akinpelu Obisesan.

³²OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 9 January. This letter from Obisesan does not survive, but his diary entry for 9 January 1928 records that he sent £6 to the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company. In its

photographs of Britannica owners all over the world.³³ It seems that the Company was keen to promote ownership of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as synonymous with membership of a global literary community. It was no small achievement for an Ibadan gentleman to claim such connections, and to extend his status aspirations beyond his local social circle.

This group included men such as D. A. Obasa, editor of Ibadan's bilingual newspaper, the *Yoruba News*, the schoolteacher J. L. Ogunsola and the Akinyele brothers, Isaac and Alexander, members of one of Ibadan's oldest Christian families. We do not know if these men also ordered the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but Obisesan's diary records their social gatherings on a regular basis. Some meetings had a political objective and involved the *Egbe Agba O'Tan*, a cultural nationalist organization that sometimes also sought to lobby Ibadan's chiefs and British officials for an advisory role in colonial administration. Another group was the 'Union of Teachers', which Obisesan was involved in despite not being a qualified schoolteacher. In May 1928 he attended a debate hosted by the union, on the motion 'Teaching brings more benefit to the community than the clerkship'. His friend J. L. Ogunsola spoke for the teachers' camp while another acquaintance, Mr Ajibola, spoke for the clerks. Two other speakers made contributions and (perhaps unsurprisingly) teaching was declared the winner.³⁴ Nevertheless, most of Obisesan's diary narrative during this period is concerned with documenting happenings in his family life and his struggle to manage financially. His diary books have a coherence imposed upon them by the daily entry structure laid out in the Letts diary, and in this way he generated an encyclopaedia of his life, ordered chronologically rather than by subject.

At the end of May 1928, Obisesan sent two photographs of himself – 'which we find interesting', the Company later reported. 'We will, as you suggest, retain the photograph in African dress,' they proclaimed. The other photograph was returned. The Company acknowledged Obisesan's desire to study English 'for the purpose of writing and speaking' and provided him with details of two correspondence schools.³⁵ A few days later, International Correspondence Schools Ltd wrote to him directly and suggested subjects in English grammar and English composition as appropriate for anyone who wished 'to become a master of the English tongue'.³⁶

Notwithstanding such recognition of his ambition to improve his English-language literacy, Obisesan could not avoid being preoccupied by his lack of money. On 12 July he confessed to his diary: 'At present time I have financial embarrassment ... what remains of me presently to do is to get property & get money to live upon in great quantity after my present active life – I admit that I am nothing, absolutely nothing at present.'³⁷ Ironically, just the previous day

reply of 1 March, the Company acknowledged receipt of a letter dated 9 January enclosing a remittance of £6.

³³OP, Box O: File 1: Letter dated 1 March 1928 from The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd. to Akinpelu Obisesan.

³⁴OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 4 May.

³⁵OP, Box O, File 1: Letter dated 25 June 1928 from The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd. to Akinpelu Obisesan.

³⁶OP, Box O, File 1: Letter dated 28 June 1928 from International Correspondence Schools Ltd. to Akinpelu Obisesan.

³⁷OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 12 July.

he had paid £11 to the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company, finally meeting the first of the three instalments originally requested in March.³⁸ But he made no mention of this expenditure when lamenting his financial predicament, and instead identified another important goal of aspirant men like himself, which was 'to get property'. Respectable Africans, contends Iliffe, invested 'almost as heavily in cement and corrugated iron as in education' (Iliffe 2005: 252). Obisesan's £11 payment prompted a letter from the Company, which informed him that although he still owed £22.10s.6d, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and bookcase were to be despatched 'without delay so that you have the use of it at once'. The Company emphasized the practical and symbolic uses of its product, asserting that: 'There is no doubt whatever that this great work will assist very materially in your study of the English language in which we understand you are particularly interested.'³⁹ Obisesan recorded in his diary on 31 August that he had received advice 'that my Encyclopaedia Britannica has been shipped to me', indicating once again how he used the diary to keep track of when important events occurred.⁴⁰

"'The sweetness of pudding is in the taste'" so says an English proverb,' Obisesan responded to the Company; 'the arrival of the great Book will stimulate me to send a heavy instalment.'⁴¹ The same day, he wrote in his diary that he had sent 25 shillings for his monthly payment, and listed a number of documents that he had sent to the Company.⁴² These included photographs and a short history of the Bokini Society, a short history of Ibadan Grammar School (established in 1913 by the clergyman Alexander Akinyele) and an account of Resident Captain Elgee's time in Ibadan (1902–13), a period of colonial administration revered by the city's Christian elite due to their increased political influence. Founded in 1922, the Bokini Society was a group of Christian gentlemen, most of whom were members of St Peter's Anglican Church in Aremo, the mission station where Obisesan had completed his early education. Adeboye describes it as primarily a social club with religious overtones, where members hosted meetings in their homes on a rotating basis, the highlight of which was a feast provided by the host. These occasions offered a forum for Christian gentlemen to meet and exchange ideas and discuss general issues that affected them (Adeboye 2003: 295–7).

Obisesan's letter indicates that at least some of the Bokini Society's discussions concerned the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but for the purpose of getting material printed, rather than for ordering encyclopaedia volumes. He did not mention the histories of Ibadan Grammar School or Resident Elgee's administration, but, adopting an instructional tone, he informed the Company that he was 'sending to you a job'. He explained: 'The society of which I am one of the founders and members is desirous to print 500 copies of Wall Calendar with three photographs inserted, and with the history in short of the persons or person in

³⁸OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 11 July.

³⁹OP, Box O: File 1: Letter dated 2 August 1928 from The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd. to Akinpelu Obisesan.

⁴⁰OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 31 August.

⁴¹OP, Box O: File 1: Letter dated 11 September 1928 from Akinpelu Obisesan to The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd.

⁴²OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 11 September.

the picture – written in Yoruba and English language.’ He advised that the Society needed an assurance that the ‘almanacs’ would arrive in Ibadan by the end of November 1928 at the latest, and be cheap enough to enable the Society to sell copies for three pence each. ‘In the present transaction the society looks up to you for help,’ Obisesan appealed, ‘and I hope you will do your utmost to win our affection by assisting us in the best way you can.’ He ended his letter by asking that the Company let him know as early as possible what the charges would be, so that the amount could be remitted.⁴³

The Company appears to have ignored Obisesan’s request on behalf of the Bokini Society, since there is no response to it and the printing job is not mentioned again in his diary or correspondence. Nevertheless, the letter is revealing for its attempt to foster a relationship between the Society and the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company. Obisesan identified himself as a member of a literary community that needed material printed; he thought the Company had access to professionals who could help. We do not know if it was his idea to contact the Company on behalf of the Society, but we can assume so, since by September 1928 he had been communicating with them for well over a year. Most interestingly, the letter suggests that Obisesan viewed his correspondence with the Company as part of an exchange that went beyond just a financial transaction, and potentially connected him, and his fellow Bokini Society members, to a wider international circuit of printing and literacy. However, it seems that the Company simply wanted him to pay his debt.

It was another month before Obisesan finally received his encyclopaedia. Around the same time, he purchased a typewriter.⁴⁴ Only four days before, he confessed: ‘Metaphorically financial fatal sickness has come to visit me ... it is only the higher power that can save me.’⁴⁵ His boss Mr Knox had recently advanced more credit, but Obisesan lamented that ‘presently the angel of failure has entered my business house’.⁴⁶ All the same, he apparently had no regrets about buying a typewriter and was soon able to put the machine to use. On 18 October he typed up a letter to the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company and then edited it by hand. He informed them that ‘sixteen books of Encyclopaedia was received in good condition ... but up till now the book case which you very kindly presented with the Britannica is not yet to hand’. He advised that he would take the matter up with the shipping company. ‘While congratulating myself for the safe arrival of these great and wonderful books,’ he wrote, ‘I must first thank you sincerely for the great interest you have and continued taking in me.’ He reassured the Company, and no doubt himself, that they would never have any cause to complain about him settling his account, ‘as my desire is to be the possessor of all the best books procurable in this world of struggle’.⁴⁷

⁴³OP, Box O: File 1: Letter dated 11 September 1928 from Akinpelu Obisesan to The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd.

⁴⁴OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 6 October.

⁴⁵OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 2 October. Presumably Obisesan meant ‘metaphorically fatal financial sickness’ rather than ‘metaphorically financial fatal sickness’.

⁴⁶OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 9 October.

⁴⁷OP, Box O: File 1: Letter dated 18 October 1928 from Akinpelu Obisesan to Messrs The Encyclopaedia Britannica Ltd.

Now here was a literary materialist. As with Silver Okri, who liked his books to be respectably dust-free in their bookcases, or Boakye Yiadom, the Ghanaian teacher-catechist who kept his precious documents in a glass-fronted cabinet, or indeed the bookcases favoured by British working-class autodidacts in the early twentieth century, the materiality of the texts was vitally important (Barber 2006: 2). In his letter to the Company, Obisesan emphasized the functionality of the encyclopaedia; he wanted ‘to get them to use’, he declared. His assertion that the books had a use value reminds us of the potency of literary knowledge. On the day the volumes arrived, however, what impressed Obisesan most of all was their form as material objects. ‘Encyclopaedia Britannica – 16 books, 32 volumes arrived today,’ he wrote in his diary, ‘Glory be to God. The 16 books weigh about one cwt.’⁴⁸ To enjoy the full effect, Obisesan wanted his encyclopaedia to be presented appropriately in its customized bookcase, hence he raised his concern that this was missing.

Ten days after receiving his encyclopaedia volumes, Obisesan wrote to inform the Company that his oak bookcase had arrived. He thanked them for the careful packing and ‘for the knowledge and informations [*sic*] of the greatest worth you have brought to the door of ignorant and uninformed poor creature like myself.’ Concluding, he wrote:

I feel I must put it down as a record that the privilege given to me to be one of the possessors of the ‘Encyclopaedia Britannica’ is one of the greatest goods that the fate can do for me, and for this I am very grateful. Wishing you more success in your task to place ‘knowledge’ in the homes of ignorant people.⁴⁹

For Obisesan, owning the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* meant that he owned a home that was rich in ‘knowledge’ – something so important that he wrote to the Company to ‘put it down as a record’. He was of course accustomed to putting down a daily record of his life in his diary, for which he was the main audience. In this case he addressed his correspondents at the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company as his audience, having previously thanked them for taking an interest in him.

Social acknowledgement was an important element of colonial African respectability, but it was also closely bound to the material objects of literacy. In this regard, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had special status. It was a great deal more expensive than a book or a newspaper, it weighed more than 50 kilograms, and it came in the form of sixteen books and thirty-two volumes. Displaying the handsome, ornate books in a customized case was a highly visible mark of Obisesan’s educated status, which would likely have impressed visitors to his house. Further, as he indicated, by possessing the encyclopaedia he felt that he had acquired the knowledge contained in it. In 1920s Ibadan, book and encyclopaedia collections were relatively scarce and most socially significant knowledge was transmitted orally. Thus, to be a ‘possessor’ of the *Encyclopaedia*

⁴⁸OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 13 October. One centum weight was 112 pounds or more than 50 kilograms.

⁴⁹OP, Box O, File 1: Letter dated 29 October 1928 from Akinpelu Obisesan to The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd.

Britannica was a powerful assertion of education and erudition, displayed by the physical edifice of the tomes themselves and the learning they symbolized.

In Bourdieu's formulation, by purchasing the encyclopaedia Obisesan had converted his limited economic resources into cultural capital in its objectified state, a form of capital distinctive for being 'transmissible in its materiality' as actual material objects or cultural goods (such as writings, paintings, monuments or instruments). Nevertheless, Bourdieu observes that only legal ownership is transmissible, not necessarily the capacity to access cultural capital (Bourdieu 2002: 285). Obisesan, however, viewed being the owner of an encyclopaedia as a privilege given to him by fate, and he genuinely seemed to believe that simply owning the volumes enabled him to embody, as he put it, 'knowledge and informations of the greatest worth'. He promised the Company to do his utmost 'to get the rising youths of my race to have interest in your work', suggesting that he envisaged inviting his friends to read the encyclopaedia with him.⁵⁰ Yet strangely, although he wrote of his pleasure at the encyclopaedia's arrival on 13 October 1928, Obisesan's subsequent diary entries are silent about its use. The Bokini Society held a meeting on 21 October, but we hear nothing of Obisesan showing the volumes to his fellow members, nor did he describe bringing them out during other social visits from his gentlemen friends.⁵¹ There were days when Obisesan 'read books', but he never described reading the encyclopaedia specifically.⁵²

Perhaps Obisesan did share his encyclopaedia volumes socially, but he chose not to describe these occasions in his diary. Alternatively, maybe the critical point is that Obisesan did not actually own the encyclopaedia. He owed money for it. In his daily life, his lack of economic capital was more consequential than his possession of a literary object, even one as impressive as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Consumed by struggling to make ends meet, he had no time to host literary soirées or apparently even to use the encyclopaedia, either by himself or with his friends. Perhaps it gathered dust, just like Silver Okri's collection of unread books. In fact, once his oak bookcase was in place, the encyclopaedia entered Obisesan's diary only as a debt, dutifully recorded each time he sent a remittance to the Company. In September 1928, a few weeks before his volumes arrived, he wrote: 'I am no more a gentleman. Outside appearance shows me to be everything & all things but I am nothing; at present bankruptcy with its concomitant [*sic*] evils is catering assiduously to like me as its subject. Where I am going I do not know.'⁵³ This confession that there was a disjuncture between Obisesan's outward appearance and the reality of his finances mirrors the edifice of his encyclopaedia and the reality that he could not afford it. It is something of an irony that his pursuit of one element of respectability – English-language literacy – contributed to failure on another front – financial propriety.

By the end of 1929 Obisesan had made two further payments of £5, but his account remained in arrears.⁵⁴ Obisesan pleaded for more time, declaring:

⁵⁰OP, Box O, File 1: Letter dated 29 October 1928 from Akinpelu Obisesan to The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd.

⁵¹OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 20 October; 21 October.

⁵²OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 18 October. Also Box 47: 1929 Diary, 24 May.

⁵³OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 22 September.

⁵⁴OP, Box B: File 17: Letter dated 11 November 1929 from W. H. Franks Manager Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd. to Akinpelu Obisesan.

'The year 1929 has come to fill my house with diverse misfortunes and disappointments ... it appears, that the wheel of tide has turned against me: In the name of true brotherhood of man I beseech you to hold on.'⁵⁵ Eight months later, the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company was threatening to instruct its solicitors in Nigeria to initiate proceedings against him to recover the outstanding debt of £6.11s.8d.⁵⁶ 'The whole world is suffering, the great famine is money,' Obisesan wrote.⁵⁷ At the same time, the District Manager of the United Africa Company (UAC), Mr Cuddeford, wrote to inform Obisesan that the debit balance of his account was £1,034.16s.11d, a truly astronomical sum of money.⁵⁸ The problem was that the value of the credit that had been advanced to Obisesan vastly exceeded the value of the stock he had sold. This situation was not entirely his fault: in the aftermath of the 1929 Wall Street Crash, the Nigerian export trade suffered heavily (Williams 1993: 124). Nevertheless, he was at least partly responsible for his difficulties, as he confessed the next day in his diary: 'The whole sea of life in every one of us today with the exception of certain few has turned to a freezy one: Nothing doing! In my case, special punishment has come from heaven to atone for my sins of improvidence, recklessness & prodigality of the past.'⁵⁹

Given what he owed his boss, one might have thought that Obisesan's much smaller debt to the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company would be the least of his concerns. But this was not the case. He composed a letter, acutely aware that he was facing financial ruin, but insisting that he had made 'every possible arrangement' to pay the amount owed. 'The time is very hard,' he explained, 'and it has been so for a very long time.' He confessed that 'you are justified to regard me as a scoundrel and a liar' and lamented that his domestic responsibilities had 'increased ten-fold'. It is unclear what specific domestic responsibilities Obisesan refers to, but his household was certainly a large one. 'I beseech you to regard the statement made herein as genuine, true and honest one,' he concluded, in what was his last communication with the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company.⁶⁰ A few weeks later, as it looked increasingly likely that he would lose his job, Obisesan removed most of his books and personal articles from his shop, which he had kept there for some time.⁶¹ He did not indicate whether these items included his encyclopaedia, although his previous correspondence with the Company had implied that he kept the collection at home.

Obisesan was sacked by the UAC in October 1930 and received a court summons in December to pay his outstanding account balance of £844.14s.0d.⁶² Although he had cleared some of his debt since August, the amount was still ruinous. The court hearing was later confirmed for 7 January

⁵⁵OP, Box B: File 17: Letter dated 8 December 1929 from Akinpelu Obisesan to The Manager Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd.

⁵⁶OP, Box D: File 6: Letter dated 14 August 1930 from W. H. Franks Manager Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd. to Akinpelu Obisesan.

⁵⁷OP, Box 47: 1930 Diary, 11 August.

⁵⁸OP, Box D: File 6: Letter dated 14 August 1930 from Mr. Cuddeford, District Manager United Africa Company, Ibadan, West Africa to Akinpelu Obisesan.

⁵⁹OP, Box 47: 1930 Diary, 15 August.

⁶⁰OP, Box D: File 6: Letter dated 18 August 1930 from Akinpelu Obisesan to The Manager Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd.

⁶¹OP, Box 47: 1930 Diary, 3 September.

⁶²OP, Box 47: 1930 Diary, 1 December.

1931.⁶³ Significantly, 1931 is the only year between 1920 and 1960 when Obisesan did not keep a diary, a direct outcome of his bankruptcy. In February, the UAC District Manager copied a letter he had written to the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company to Obisesan, stating that Obisesan was no longer an employee ‘and we regret, therefore, that [we] are not in a position to assist you to recover the balance outstanding against him’.⁶⁴ Later in the year, Obisesan received a letter from the barrister E. M. E. Agbebi that demanded payment of the encyclopaedia bill, as well as costs incurred, and threatened legal proceedings to ‘enforce payment’.⁶⁵

Only part of Obisesan’s reply to Agbebi survives, but he framed his plea for leniency around a claim that he abhorred and dreaded being in debt, making use of a familiar trope in discourses of respectability. He recounted how his children had been turned out of school as a result of him not being able to pay their fees, and he lamented ‘were it not for the sympathy shown by the managers of these institutions I would by now be wailing and gnashing for imparting misfortune’. Appealing to Agbebi, he requested permission to settle the bill in instalments.⁶⁶ Obisesan’s reference to education is interesting, because, as Iliffe observes, ‘belief in education and the profitability of investment in it’ was the element of African respectability most widespread across the continent. By contrast, he argues, although temperance and thrift were central to respectability in South Africa, thrift in particular had less appeal ‘to West African traditions of largess’ (Iliffe 2005: 253). As we have seen, frugality was not a feature of Obisesan’s respectable lifestyle, especially with regard to his literary materialism. He also needed to be able to spend on others in order to claim his status in Ibadan politics and society. Unable to meet his economic commitments without accumulating debt and ‘cooking the books’, Obisesan was nonetheless acutely conscious of the shame this brought upon him. Consequently, a fear of impending financial disgrace pervaded his diary.

There is no record of Agbebi’s reply to Obisesan, but in August 1931 Obisesan wrote again to Agbebi and thanked him for allowing him to settle his debt in monthly instalments of 25 shillings. Editing the draft, he wrote: ‘You have indeed honoured my ego & not my poor self – in a way very commendable.’⁶⁷ Here he distinguished between his aspirant ego as a respectable literary gentleman and self-pity for his precarious financial state. Whether he paid the bill is uncertain, but we do know that he offered to donate his encyclopaedia to the Ibadan Reading and Social Club, founded in March 1931.⁶⁸ This organization was similar to the Ghanaian literary clubs of the same era, studied by Newell, which strove to promote a broad education and open up new intellectual horizons

⁶³OP, Box D: File 5: Provincial Court Form dated 19 June 1931. This form was a summons for Obisesan to appear ‘to be examined respecting your ability to satisfy the Judgement recovered against you’ in the UAC’s case against him. It dated the judgment as 7 January 1931.

⁶⁴OP, Box D: File 5: Letter dated 13 February 1931 from District Manager, United Africa Company Ltd. to Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd.

⁶⁵OP, Box D: File 5: Letter dated 6 May 1931 from E. M. E. Agbebi to Akinpelu Obisesan.

⁶⁶OP, Box D: File 5: Undated letter from Akinpelu Obisesan to E. M. E. Agbebi.

⁶⁷OP, Box D: File 5: Letter dated 1 August 1931 from Akinpelu Obisesan to E. M. E. Agbebi. Crossing out in the original.

⁶⁸OP, Box D: File 5: Letter dated 14 August 1931 from J. L. Ogunsola to Akinpelu Obisesan.

for ambitious young men (Newell 2006: 212). Ibadan's reading club, however, was distinctive for its close links to local government, which provided it with both a venue and funding (Watson 2003: 123).

'The Britannica is much in favour with the people, and aspiring men come to read it always in the Reading House,' wrote J. L. Ogunsola, Obisesan's school-teacher friend who, having previously invited him to teacher union gatherings, had since joined the managing committee of the Ibadan Reading and Social Club. He told Obisesan that he had spoken to Canon Akinyele, Ibadan's most senior clergyman, who had suggested that it would 'not be wise at this bad time to give away so costly a set'. Akinyele proposed that the Native Administration could be petitioned by the Club to help with paying the cost. Ogunsola thus advised Obisesan that he could transfer his encyclopaedia to the Club, but he should not offer it as a gift. In this way, Ogunsola gave primary emphasis to the encyclopaedia's economic value, although he also acknowledged its worth to 'aspiring men'. Interestingly, he justified this view with reference to the encyclopaedia's material qualities. 'This is not the time to give away such a thing of the cost of the Britannica,' he cautioned. 'People are now using it, and the wear and tear will be having its effect on the books.'⁶⁹ A month later, he wrote to say that he had given an invoice to the librarian, but noted that he was no longer the secretary of the Reading and Social Club, 'and as such my power is limited'.⁷⁰ In the end, we do not know what became of Obisesan's hard-won set of encyclopaedia volumes, or if he ever settled his debt.

Conclusion

'He understood cultured simply to mean respectable, and somehow bound up with the incomplete set of Encyclopaedia Britannica he had bought on the Parade' (Wicomb 2008: 67). So writes the novelist Zoë Wicomb about one of her fictional characters in twentieth-century Cape Town. For Obisesan and other gentlemen in colonial Ibadan, as indeed for Silver Okri in 1960s Lagos, the cultural capital of respectability was similarly bound up in the materiality of books, be they diaries, encyclopaedia volumes or English literature. These cultural goods objectified the more abstract aspects of education, literacy and Englishness, and showed their owners to be erudite and deserving of respect. Literary objects were also expensive, reminding us that across the continent keeping hold of respectability meant spending money. In 1920s South Africa, for example, many black employees in low-paid professional jobs experienced great impoverishment 'because they were frantically trying to maintain "civilized" living standards' (Bradford 1987: 70).

But what is meant by 'materiality'? The anthropologist Daniel Miller suggests two interpretations: one mundane, which refers simply to actual artefacts, and the other more philosophical, which references the agency exerted by objects (Miller 2005: 3). Obisesan's diary books and encyclopaedia fit the definition of being artefacts: we see this in the way in which he valued their physical attributes, such as the

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰OP, Box D: File 5: Letter dated 10 September 1931 from J. L. Ogunsola to Akinpelu Obisesan.

weight of his encyclopaedia volumes or the book-like qualities of his diaries. At the same time, Obisesan's way of relating to his literary things, like Silver Okri's 'very potent' books, imbued them with a kind of agency. Bourdieu has written of the capacity of objects to condition human actors, and to become a means by which people are socialized as social beings (Miller 2005: 6). Obisesan's diary first conditioned his professional identity as a clerk, and later became a means to reinforce his precarious sense of personhood and bemoan his financial situation. 'I am nothing,' Obisesan frequently lamented, acknowledging his lack of money while simultaneously denying responsibility for his spending and attributing his predicament to fate. Possessing the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, he believed, socialized an 'ignorant and uninformed poor creature like myself'.⁷¹ In the end, however, it was merely another debt to pay. Nevertheless, the possible afterlife of his encyclopaedia in the Ibadan Reading and Social Club enabled it to socialize a larger group of gentlemen, who – importantly – recognized the financial sacrifice that Obisesan had made to buy it.

There is no doubt that Obisesan could not afford the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. He was constantly unable to meet his instalment payments, and all the time used his diary to lay bare his dire financial state. He carefully recorded his remittances to the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company, and he once noted the cost of a typewriter that he purchased. Yet, when he had no money afterwards, he made no connection to his expenditure on literary things. Why did he behave in this apparently irrational way, causing himself a great deal of anxiety? The answer may lie in how utterly consumed he was by the task of maintaining 'civilized' living standards, just like his counterparts in South Africa. His literary materialism meant that he impoverished himself for the privilege of owning 'knowledge', so great was his desire to be a learned gentleman and constitute his respectability through self-improvement. Even though it appears that he did not use the encyclopaedia, either by himself or in the company of his gentlemen friends, he could still display the cultural capital it represented. His long correspondence with the Company enabled him to imagine himself as a member of a global community of literary consumers; indeed, he even sent his photograph to be placed alongside fellow 'Britannica owners'. But ultimately, without economic capital, he was, as he put it, 'no more a gentleman'.⁷²

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this article was presented to the History Department Seminar at the University of the Western Cape in February 2012, and I am grateful to Patricia Hayes for her helpful remarks on that occasion. Karin Barber and Wayne Dooling gave very useful comments on various drafts. Two anonymous reviewers for *Africa* made constructive criticisms. The research was supported by a Research Leave Award from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number 113102), which is gratefully acknowledged.

⁷¹OP, Box O, File 1: Letter dated 29 October 1928 from Akinpelu Obisesan to The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co. Ltd.

⁷²OP, Box 47: 1928 Diary, 22 September.

References

- Adeboye, O. (2003) 'Elite lifestyle and consumption in colonial Ibadan' in A. Oyeboade (ed.), *The Foundations of Nigeria: essays in honor of Toyin Falola*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press.
- Adeboye, O. (2008) 'Reading the diary of Akinpelu Obisesan in colonial Africa', *African Studies Review* 51 (2): 75–97.
- Barber, K. (2006) 'Introduction: hidden innovators in Africa' in K. Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: everyday literacy and making the self*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2002) 'The forms of capital' in N. W. Biggart (ed.), *Readings in Economic Sociology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Bradford, H. (1987) *A Taste of Freedom: the ICU in rural South Africa, 1924–1930*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Dubow, S. (2009) 'How British was the British world? The case of South Africa', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37 (1): 1–27.
- Iliffe, J. (2005) *Honour in African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawrance, B. N., E. L. Osborn and R. L. Roberts (eds) (2006) *Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African employees in the making of colonial Africa*. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Lindsay, L. A. (2003) 'Money, marriage and masculinity on the colonial Nigerian railway' in L. A. Lindsay and S. F. Miescher (eds), *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Miller, D. (ed.) (2005) *Materiality*. Durham NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Müller, W. M. (1906) 'The historians' history of the world', *Biblical World* 27 (4): 292–304.
- Newell, S. (2002) *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: 'how to play the game of life'*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Newell, S. (2006) 'Entering the territory of elites: literary activity in colonial Ghana' in K. Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: everyday literacy and making the self*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.
- Osuntokun, A. (1979) *Nigeria in the First World War*. London: Longman.
- Peel, J. D. Y. (2000) *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.
- Vaughan, M. (2005) 'Mr Mdala writes to the Governor: negotiating colonial rule in Nyasaland', *History Workshop Journal* 60 (1): 171–88.
- Watson, R. (2003) '*Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan*': chieftaincy and civic culture in a Yoruba city. Oxford: James Currey.
- Watson, R. (2006) "'What is our intelligence, our school going and our reading of books without getting money?'" Akinpelu Obisesan and his diary' in K. Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: everyday literacy and making the self*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.
- Watson, R. (2014) 'Literacy as a style of life: Garveyism and gentlemen in colonial Ibadan', *African Studies* 73 (1): 1–21.
- Watson, R. (2016) "'No one knows what he is until he is told": audience and personhood in a colonial African diary', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 44 (5): 1–18.

- Wicomb, Z. (2008) *The One That Got Away*. Roggebaai: Umuzi.
- Williams, G. (1993) 'Garveyism, Akinpelu Obisesan and his contemporaries: Ibadan, 1920–22' in T. Ranger and O. Vaughan (eds), *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-century Africa: essays in honour of A. H. M. Kirk-Greene*. London: Macmillan.

Abstract

This article argues for the importance of 'literary materialism' in colonial African understandings of respectability. It draws attention to a particular form of acquisitiveness that placed value on the materiality of literary things. That is, literary objects – books, journals, magazines, notebooks, diaries and encyclopaedia volumes – were valued for their material and physical qualities as well as for their use in imparting 'knowledge'. They had the capacity, in Bourdieu's terms, to display cultural capital. My focus is Akinpelu Obisesan, a voluminous diarist whose life spanned the entire colonial period in the Yoruba city of Ibadan. The article first re-examines Obisesan's early years of diary writing, particularly how the activity related to his professional identity as a clerk, and then goes on to reconstruct the fraught circumstances that surrounded his purchase of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* between 1928 and 1931. Obisesan struggled to pay his debt for the encyclopaedia, and all the time used his diary to confess his dire financial state. Ultimately, his claim to the cultural capital that the encyclopaedia embodied was undermined by his lack of economic resources.

Résumé

Cet article défend l'importance du « matérialisme littéraire » dans les interprétations africaines coloniales de la respectabilité. Il attire l'attention sur une forme particulière d'acquisivité qui attachait du prix à la matérialité des choses littéraires. C'est-à-dire que l'on appréciait des objets littéraires (livres, revues, magazines, carnets, journaux intimes et volumes encyclopédiques) pour leurs qualités matérielles et physiques, mais aussi pour leur utilité à transmettre le « savoir ». Ils avaient la capacité, comme dirait Bourdieu, de faire montre d'un capital culturel. L'auteur s'intéresse particulièrement à Akinpelu Obisesan, un diariste prolifique qui a traversé toute la période coloniale dans la ville yoruba d'Ibadan. L'article commence par réexaminer les premières années du parcours de diariste d'Obisesan, notamment le lien entre son activité de diariste et son identité professionnelle d'employé de bureau, avant de reconstruire les circonstances délicates qui ont entouré son achat de l'*Encyclopaedia Britannica* entre 1928 et 1931. Obisesan a eu du mal à rembourser les dettes contractées pour cet achat, et s'est servi de son journal à l'époque pour avouer ses difficultés financières. Au bout du compte, son manque de ressources économiques a sapé sa revendication au capital culturel qu'incarnait l'encyclopédie.