

AN
AFRICAN
ABROAD

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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by

Olábí sí Àjàlá

With a preface to the second edition by Kólá Túbòsún,
introduction by Tom Mboya, and a new foreword by Joane Àjàlá.



MASOBE

Published in 2023 by Masobe
An imprint of Masobe Books and Logistics Limited
34 Gbajumo Close, off Adeniran Ogunsanya,
Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria
Tel: +234 806 316 6939, +234 701 838 3286
Email: info@masobebooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
National Library of Nigeria

ISBN: 978-978-59437-6-4

Cover Design Oriahi Ofuzim Anderson
Layout by AI's Fingers

www.masobebooks.com

*To the many friends I have made during my
journey, and particularly to the following
people who have helped me in various ways:*

My mother

Mrs. Jean Pratten, Lismore, Australia

Fatima Joedokoesoemo, Djakarta, Indonesia

Mildred Bush, Hunter City College, New York City

Patricia Weeks, Highgate, London

Dorothy I. Powell, Sydney, Australia

Dr. David Engelking, Lanark, Illinois, U.S.A.

Dean Johnson, Rock Island, Illinois, U.S.A.

Morocz Istvan, Zürich, Switzerland

Noorul Kabir, Chittagong, East Pakistan

U Law Yone, Rangoon, Burma

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Contents

A Preface to the Second Edition	ix
Introduction	xv
Foreword	xvii
Prologue	xxi
PART ONE: INDIA	
1 Sojourn in India	3
2 An Informal Chat With Nehru	18
PART TWO: RUSSIA	
3 Visits to the Soviet Union	27
4 Afro-Asian Students in Russia	75
5 Drama in meeting Khrushchev	88
PART THREE: IRAN	
6 Modern Ancient Iran (Persia)	99
7 An Audience with the Shah of Iran	107
PART FOUR: MIDDLE EAST	
8 The Arab World	115
9 Visit to an Arab Brothel	122

10	Nasser and Arab Nationalism	126
11	Assassination Attempt in Jordan	133
12	Arrival in Jerusalem	140
PART FIVE: ISRAEL		
13	Suicidal Entry into Israel's Jerusalem	151
14	Interview with Israel's Golda Meir	159
15	The Land of Israel	168
16	What is a Jew?	173
17	Conversation with an Arab in Israel	179
18	Visits to Arab Villages in Israel	185
19	Exit: Israel into Lebanon by Road	191
PART SIX: EGYPT		
20	The Egyptians	199
21	The Birth and Origin of Islam	208
22	Changing Egypt	212
23	Incident in Cairo	219
24	Conversation with Nasser	224
PART SEVEN: AUSTRALIA		
25	Profile of Australia	233
26	The Aborigines: Australia's Disappearing Race	253
27	The Australian	267
	Acknowledgments	281
	About the Author	283

A Preface to the Second Edition

“When our undergraduate kids in Canada and the United States look forward to backpacking across Europe or South America or Asia in the summer, I take considerable delight in telling them about their Nigerian ancestor who did that in the 1950s-1960s.”

— Pius Adésanmi (1972 – 2019)

A non-Yorùbá speaker in Nigeria today will be forgiven for thinking that the meaning of the word “Àjàlá” is ‘travel’ or ‘traveller’. It is a common mistake, attributable to the consequence of the life and fame of the country’s most notable traveller and journalist, Mashood Olábí sí Àjàlá, whose reputation has ensured that his name will continue to be so-associated for all time.

He was not the first Nigerian student to make a name for himself abroad as a writer or journalist. It is not even clear, *at the time* he wrote this book—based on his travels that began in London in 1957—that he was as famous in Nigeria as he had become across the world. Before him, there was Ojike Mbonu whose two volumes of travel writing, *My Africa* (1946) and *I Have Two Countries* (1947), kept his Nigerian countrymen and American hosts apprised of his thinking on a number of relevant subjects of race, culture, politics, education, colonialism, and plenty others. After him, there would be others, like J.P Clark with *America Their America* (1964).

But by the time he died of a stroke in Lagos in February of 1999, Àjàlá had become a household name around Nigeria, even though his death didn’t make the front pages of the nation’s newspapers. He continues to enjoy such a reputation today, in part

due to the album *Board Members*, released in 1972 by Nigeria's most foremost Juju musician Chief Ebenezer Obey, through which Àjàlá's name was codified for all time across cultures.

These lines, as sung on the album, continue to resonate in all its melody:

He has travelled all over the world

Àjàlá travelled all over the world.

Àjàlá travelled

Àjàlá travelled

Àjàlá travelled all over the world.

Over the years, *An African Abroad* has provided a template for many travel writers and journalists, like myself, as both a kind of guiding light for what is possible, and a documented record of a time when African writers didn't seek permission to exist in the world as equally valid witnesses to history. With the piercing directness of VS Naipaul, the perceptive humour of Mark Twain (whose 1869 travelogue *The Innocents Abroad* may have provided the title which Àjàlá modified for his own book), and the daring curiosity of George Orwell, the work emerged with a journalistic diligence that spared almost nothing in its gaze, from politics to prostitution, from race relations to religion to romance.

Travelling abroad for pleasure as Africans today is something of an expensive middle class habit, constrained by visa restrictions, racist immigration policies, the threat of terrorism, the cost and standard of living on the continent, political instability, mutual distrust, among others—which is an irony when viewed against the prevailing idea that we live now in a *more* connected world than they did in the 60s. So reading about Àjàlá moving and working across these geographical boundaries with such ease, confidence and style, conjures the image of a colourful wondrous past now totally out of reach, adding to the interest the book has garnered

over the years. Who was he? What motivated him? What legacy has his adventures provided for today's African traveller?

But the book went out of print shortly after publication in 1963 and was never republished. Soon after, Jarrolds, which first published it in London, went out of business and devolved into many different entities. Àjàlá himself returned to Nigeria to start a new life with an Australian teacher, Joane Pratten, with whom he subsequently had three children, and in whose care the handwritten manuscripts of his travel journeys first transformed into the memorable prose that is this book. After they separated around 1972, she returned to Australia with the children, and Àjàlá became a Lagos socialite and music promoter. There is no record of any other global travel adventures or travel books by him, effectively ending his ambition to make this a travel trilogy.

Today, Mashood Olábísi Àjàlá is an important name in African travel writing, journalism, and even diplomacy, but not as much as it would have been had a fuller writing career developed from his eventful life. It is part of the tragedy, and the cult following of this book, that this was the only one the author left behind. Not even manuscripts from his other travel adventures have survived.

In time its contents became matters of conjecture, and the tales about Àjàlá took on lives of their own, with embellishments and outright inventions by those who only knew him by faint reputation. He was, after all, also a noted casanova, with children by many women from different countries—and the stories from his dalliances, marriages, and failed relationships were diligently memorialised in the social pages of the newspapers of the time. He was also reputed to have travelled around the United States on a bicycle, met Ronald Reagan, and acted in at least one Hollywood film called *White Witch Doctor* (1953).

This reprinting is a result of a virtual meeting, that I had with Joane Àjàlá on one Sunday morning in 2021 at the end of a long search. She was in Australia, now in her eighties, with a sharp

memory of the man she met and married, the challenges of their relationship, and the wild and wonderful period of Nigerian history in the mid sixties and the early seventies. It is to her credit, and that of their children David Oláfémi Àjàlá, Lisa Abímbólá Àjàlá, and Sidney Oláyínká Àjàlá that this book is made available for the second time.

Joane has graciously provided a short preface of her own. But much of the book—including the first introduction by the late Tom Mboya of Kenya—has remained the same as it was in the first edition, except for tone marking, and a few minor Oxford comma additions, and minor grammar edits. Old spellings like ‘Teheran’ and ‘Djakarta’, for instance, have been retained, while some writing styles like ‘girl friend’, ‘co-operative’, or ‘over-whelmed’ have been modernized to *girlfriend*, *cooperative*, and *overwhelmed*. In one instance, the assassinated Premier of Jordan was referred to as “Hazan Majali”, which we’ve now changed to *Hazza’ Majali*, which is the proper spelling of his name. In all, with consent from his estate, we have retained much of the vision and overall style of the original manuscript.

As readers will find, this is not a record of Àjàlá’s life in full. It’s just a sliver of it: a travel memoir of only one type of experience. It does not include his life in Hollywood, and his personal adventures and encounters with the American immigration, educational, and legal systems—of which there were a few. It makes no mention of any of his many children and earlier marriages, deportations, and successes. For that, a full posthumous biography will be deserving, overdue now after almost two and a half decades of his passing..

I am grateful to Şèyè Abímbólá in Sydney, who was helpful in digging out some details at the beginning of my search, Saheed Adérintó and Ayòdélé Ìbíyemí who helped with the Nigerian archives, and Grace Gigi for diligently transferring the work from print back into electronic form. Special thanks go to Abby Ògúnsànyà, a fellow book sleuth and Àjàlá aficionado, without

whom I may not have found Joane at all, and to Rebecca Jones who was an early sounding board. I also thank Fúnmi Oyatógun, Leo Oglecevac, and Joane Àjàlá for editing eyes and other helpful feedback. Finally, the editorial team at OlongoAfrica and The Brick House cooperative, from Maria Boustillos to Olájidé Sàlávù, have made this publishing process smooth and rewarding.

History is fascinating, but only usually because it is in the rear view. Or at least we think it is. Things we once viewed in a certain way can change when coloured with new experiences. But that in-the-moment recording of the immediate present offers a great first draft of what will yet unfold as a consensus of history.

My fascination with Àjàlá, I realise, stems from this value he brings to the documentation of crucial moments in the places he visited, the people he met, and the events he got himself into. There are parts of the fifties and sixties that is beyond my reach unless through deliberate research, removed from contemporary conversations either because they no longer seem relevant or because the people concerned are all gone and forgotten. But whose import remains relevant when seen against the light of new developments. The situation in Russia, for example—which takes a huge chunk of this book—offers an answer to African students interested in understanding its Soviet past, its relationship with early African countries, its paranoid security state, and how it sees itself in the world as reflected in its interactions with outsiders. How much has changed since then until now is for the reader to decide. It is of sombre significance, however, that when Àjàlá mentioned passing through Kiev, he was speaking about a city in the old USSR. As at this writing, Kiev is the capital of a sovereign and independent democratic country currently at war with Vladimir Putin's Russia over a disagreement about cultural and political alliances. If the past has nothing to offer us in the present, it does at least give perspective and context, shaped by the sure passage of time.

Even Israel, then involved at the time of the original book in

many wars of survival, has now not only solidified its presence in the Middle East now as an indispensable force, but is now also the cause of pain and misery for many of its indigenous Arab populations in occupied territories. Hints of this were already present when Àjàlá came there and insisted on meeting with residents, away from his chaperoning hosts.

So what we have here aside from a delightful narrative of one man's trip "around the world" is much more in context and memory, laughter and adventure. History is once again made alive, though it beams through a rear view mirror. What it reflects remains a valuable contribution to what we now try to understand about ourselves and the world we currently occupy. Other Nigerians have made similar terrestrial journeys through long international borders. Newton Jibun comes to mind, an engineer environmentalist who twice traveled by car between Lagos to London to call attention to desertification. As at this writing, another Nigerian, Rotarian Kúnlé Adéyanjú, is on a trip from London to Lagos on a motorbike, to plenty global acclaim. The spirit of Àjàlá lives on.

By making this work available again for the first time since the sixties, we reintroduce Mashood Olábí sí Àjàlá to a new generation of literature lovers, and return him to his place in the Nigerian literary canon as both a pioneer and a force; to showcase for the historian of African and world history the evolution of politics, diplomacy, geographical boundaries, and journalism; and to celebrate the wit and boundless optimism of the man bold enough to go where many of us today now merely aspire, limited mostly by the globalisation of paranoia.

Kólá Tubòsún

Writer and linguist.

Lagos, Nigeria

February, 2022.

Introduction

For several hundred years Africa suffered under the yoke of imperialism. Naturally enough it was in the political and social spheres that colonial domination was most clearly expressed. Nevertheless the inhibiting effect of colonial control upon the cultural development of the people should not be ignored. Much that was of aesthetic value in our traditional societies was deliberately suppressed. The conditions of political and social oppression were hardly an encouraging climate for artistic expression, experiment and development.

Now, during colonialism's twilight in Africa, a new spirit is stirring throughout the continent. The leaders have made it clear to the people that political independence is not an end in itself. Rather does it give the men and women of Africa a chance to develop their talents to the full.

It means that we can work hard and with dignity to bring economic prosperity. It means that we can face up to the challenge of removing our great enemies, poverty, ignorance and disease. It means that we can set about creating new societies—African societies—and a new culture—African culture.

During the period of foreign domination such artistic expression as existed among Africans was understandably preoccupied with the immediate problems presented by that domination.

Thus it was that the more common forms of artistic activity

were in the creation of patriotic songs, designs, paintings, in political and biographical writings.

As we achieve our freedom, the beginnings of a new flowering of culture in Africa are becoming apparent. Our philosophers, writers, artists, musicians, architects, dancers and sculptors are drawing both from our own rich past and from the skills, technicians and techniques of Europe and Asia.

Great advances have been made in the literary fields. In East Africa Kiswahili poetry flourishes. A number of important philosophical works have been produced, mainly in the French-speaking territories. Exciting new novelists have appeared in the last decade or so all over the continent.

It would be difficult to place the present work in a strict category. From its title and its form, it is a travel book. But it is much more than that. Mr. Àjàlá brilliantly describes a number of important events and interviews, but it is more than mere journalism. He discusses a number of political issues, ranging from the White Australian policy to the Arab-Israeli dispute—but it is more than a polemical dissertation. As he travels back and forth across the continents on the two wheels of his motor-scooter, the author skillfully describes to us the psychologies and the sociology of the fascinating individuals and groups he meets.

I am happy and proud to be able to write these few lines of introduction to this newest addition to the growing library of lines of African writings.

Tom J. Mboya

Minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Kenya.

26th July 1963

Nairobi, Kenya