

CHAPTER 2

Bahia-Lagos-Ouidah

Mariana's Story



While most of the writings to be encountered in these essays are by Nigerian authors, I include a couple of non-Nigerian writers from an early period, who wrote about even earlier times in Nigeria. One of them was Antonio Olinto, a Brazilian writer of some distinction. In 1997, he became a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters; he died in 2009, aged 90. His novel *A Casa da Agua* was published in Portuguese in Brazil in 1969, and appeared in translation as *The Water House* with a British publisher a year later.

The Water House chronicles the life of an Afro-Brazilian family over seventy years, 1898–1968. It begins in the central Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, with an elderly woman, Catarina, recently freed from slavery, making a big decision. (Brazil was the last major country in the Americas to abolish slavery, in 1888.) Catarina would return to Africa, together with several of her descendants. She had grown up in Abeokuta, a large inland West African town (and, as we saw in chapter 1, later Amos Tutuola's home town), but an uncle based in the bustling port city Lagos had invited her to visit—and then promptly turned her into merchandise in the Transatlantic slave trade.

So she spent most of her life in Brazil, and had children and grandchildren. Now she would use such savings as she had to take a number of them to Bahia, the major port (more lately known as Salvador de Bahia, or just Salvador). From there they would get on a modest sailing vessel for that belated return journey across the South Atlantic. It was a difficult journey. The passengers suffered, and a number of them died. But finally they reached Lagos. As they were suspected of bringing epidemic diseases, they had to undress, and came ashore wrapped only in sheets issued to them by the British

customs officers. Lagos and its closest surroundings were by then a British possession.

But soon they were met by other Afro-Brazilians who were already there, and so the story becomes one of the family group's absorption into this community of immigrants and the society surrounding it. Old Catarina has a chance to return to Abeokuta for one last visit, and then dies after just a year in Lagos. From there on, *The Water House* becomes Mariana's story—Mariana, Catarina's granddaughter, is thirteen as she disembarks that ship from Brazil, with her grandmother, mother, and siblings. It is also a story of a West African coastal society, where borders seem rather blurred.

The family does variously well. One sister marries a local man from Ibadan. But this man drifts away to become a preacher, perhaps goes slightly mad, preaches to beggars in the Lagos streets, ages quickly, and dies. (Street preachers keep appearing in Nigerian fiction as exemplars of liminality—see, for example, chapter 9.) One brother goes to England, and returns with an English wife. The young woman bears a son, tries her best to adapt to Lagos life, but becomes sickly and returns to England, where she dies. The widower brother later goes to Bahia to start trading, importing kola nuts and palm oil from West Africa to Brazil. He marries again there, and returns home with another wife. His half-English son from the previous marriage grows up in part in England with his maternal grandfather, but the latter decides that wartime England is too dangerous, and comes with the boy to live in Lagos.

Mariana herself soon demonstrates entrepreneurial talent. She marries Sebastian, another Afro-Brazilian (with some concern that Lagos husbands often take several wives), and becomes a mother. But while her husband goes off for work on Fernando Poo, the Spanish island colony further to the east in the Gulf of Guinea, she notes the freshwater shortage in Lagos, has a well drilled next to her house, and starts selling water; this becomes the original Water House. And so a small business empire takes off, soon branching out into other trades.

Sebastian returns, but is no longer much good at anything and gets killed as he tries to settle a street brawl. Yet, before that, he and Mariana have made a journey westward along the coast, finding more Afro-Brazilians just about everywhere, even as the land is divided between different European empires. The Germans are there more briefly than the others, in Togo, but lose their overseas territories in World War I. So they are gone. The Portuguese maintain a more durable, but minimal presence: the fortress enclave São João Baptista de Ajudá,

there since the days of the slave trade, on the shoreline of what was otherwise the French colony Dahomey. But the handful of Portuguese still running the place are on good terms with their varied neighbors, and Portuguese wines are treasured, along with *cachaça*, the distilled sugarcane liquor coming over with ships from Brazil. Most of the other Europeans on the West African coast, of course, are Englishmen and Frenchmen.

A personal parenthesis here: in the early 1960s, as I traveled by road along the West African coast, I passed São João Baptista de Ajudá. By then, a couple of years had passed since the newly independent republic of Dahomey had ordered the Portuguese to leave. The two remaining Portuguese gentlemen had marched out, after burning what was left of the fortress. By the time I came by, there were only ruins and a rusting car wreck.

Yet perhaps the departure of these two men marked the beginning of the end of the Portuguese empire? Later in the same year, Indian troops would invade Goa, the enclave in South Asia, and then, in the following decades, the Portuguese would lose everything: Angola, Mocambique, Guinea-Bissau, East Timor, and finally Macao, returning to China.

But back to Mariana, and her business acumen. Her journey with Sebastian takes her to Ouidah, at the western end of the Dahomean coastal strip, next to that Portuguese fortress.¹ It is in that town she comes to establish her new headquarters, with the building of a new Water House. Next to Ouidah on the coast there is Zorei, a fictitious country invented by the author Olinto, but as such also a French territory for the time being. Ouidah itself offers a diverse scene. As she develops her business and her social ties, Mariana comes to know Seu Haddad, a Lebanese from Beirut, and the Frenchman Monsieur Casteller, a teacher, living alone. Later on, widowed, she occasionally shares a bed with him. Later on, too, some forty years after she left Brazil, Mariana reflects on her language experience:

She never managed to think in any other language but Portuguese, but she enjoyed talking in English and in French, in Yoruba and Ewe, even in German which she hadn't spoken now for such a long time. Seu Haddad's French, for example, had a charm all of its own, it was different from Monsieur Casteller's French, like the different Yoruba in Ijebu-Ode and Abeokuta, in Ifé and Pobé sometimes there were sounds in one that didn't exist in another. (Olinto 1970: 279)

In Lagos, in her youth, the encounter with English had come early. For one thing, in the Roman Catholic congregation, while Afro-

Brazilians made up a large part of the membership, the services were in English. And that was because the priests, one after another, were O'Malleys and O'Tooles. (Indeed, Catholic church and missionary work in much of the British Empire seemed to be in the hands and voices of the Irish—priests and nuns. Given the ambiguous relationship between them and the British, one may perhaps speculate about what was their more secular message. Was there a little of an Irish empire as well? The last remaining European missionary in Kafanchan, when I was there in the 1970s, was indeed another Father O'Malley.²)

Before her husband is lost, he and Mariana have several children, and with time they will move around in the world. Family gossip gets to be exchanged in large part by mail. One son goes to London to study law. When he returns, he is accompanied by a British friend, who also finds a job in Lagos. But Mariana finds out that the young Briton has come along because he has become infatuated with his Nigerian fellow student, and they are in a homosexual relationship. Mariana, wanting more grandchildren, makes it clear to her son's expatriate lover that she cannot accept that. Consequently the Englishman commits suicide by jumping out of a fourth-floor office window, and her son marries a nice Afro-Brazilian girl.

A daughter has also gone to England, to study medicine. Writing home, she can report, for one thing, about having seen snow for the first time. After completing her studies very successfully, she, too, comes back to Nigeria, where she eventually finds herself in charge of a hospital in Ibadan. And marries, rather late by local standards.

Mariana, for her part, is mostly in Ouidah, carrying on with business. Monsieur Casteller, the Frenchman, is recruited to give one of Mariana's younger sons language lessons, and then this son, named Sebastian after his father, goes off to Paris to study.

While all this happens in Mariana's family, there has first been a period of bad news from Europe, about the rise in Germany of a man named Hitler, and another world war. That, again, was why her brother's English father-in-law decided to take his grandson to Africa. But the war ends, and meanwhile, not least among African expatriates in both England and France, there is more and more talk about the possibility of Africa becoming independent in a not-so-distant future. In Paris there is the *Présence Africaine* movement. The prospect of independence attracts some people in the African territories as well, and when Sebastian returns to Africa—somehow, to that imagined land Zorei—he soon shifts from a teaching career to nationalist politics. Things happen quickly. The French have the idea of including politicians elected in their overseas territories in their national assembly in Paris. In real life, both

President Leopold Senghor of Senegal and President Felix Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast were there earlier in their careers. In Olinto's fiction, Mariana's son Sebastian is elected to go there, thus returning to Paris. But that arrangement would not endure. Soon he is back in Zorei, and elected the young independent country's first president. His wife—an Ewe girl from further west, whom he had met in Paris, where she was studying nursing—had died in childbirth, and so this president is a widower. For the Independence celebrations, Mariana has to slip over the border from Ouidah to serve as stand-in First Lady.

But her son's presidency will not last long. Rather soon, in a military mutiny, he is killed in his palace. (This event in the book seems modeled after the killing of President Sylvanus Olympio in Togo in early 1963—Olympio was also of Afro-Brazilian background, and the first African head of state to become the victim of a coup.) Afterwards, the soldiers claim that it was not him they were after, but some of his ministers.

And around there ends Mariana's story. With all its family intricacies and multi-sited events, perhaps *The Water House* could have been turned into a long-running TV series. Again, the book is by a Brazilian author, and was undoubtedly aimed primarily at a Brazilian audience interested in a Brazilian diaspora. Most Afro-Brazilian families in West Africa hardly had so much recurrent contact with Brazil as did Mariana's (I have not referred to all of them here), and hardly as much other world travel either. London, Paris . . . ; what counts in Europe are the imperial capitals, although evidently no longer Lisbon. Another of Mariana's young Afro-Brazilian prodigies, also in Paris, frequents the cafés: he goes to the Café Flore and meets Sartre, and at a Montparnasse café he runs into Jorge Amado, who is surprised to find this African speaking Portuguese, and of a rather Brazilian variety. (Amado, of course, is the celebrated writer from Salvador—Olinto's readers would appreciate that.)

Yet Olinto shows a fair amount of local knowledge, not least about the Afro-Brazilians' on-and-off involvement with Yoruba religion, which of course has its immediate counterparts in their Brazilian homelands as well. Lagosians who still find the street signs for Bamgbose Street, running through what used to be the Brazilian Quarter, will perhaps be amused as they find that Olinto consistently has it as "Bangboshe Street." Most importantly, however, we sense that the coastal stretch from Togo, and actually beyond Lagos, to the Niger Delta, with its variety of large and small ports, was once a more organic unity—before Nigeria became Nigeria, and even into the twentieth century, despite those boundaries that came to be drawn by colonial powers.

On visits to Lagos in the 1960s, I could see material evidence of the early Afro-Brazilian presence. There was still Brazilian architecture: two-story buildings, fading beauties with ornamental doorways and window frames and wrought-iron balconies.³ Mostly this would be lost in later years, replaced by new high-rises, never preserved as a World Heritage Site the way similar quarters were in numerous other cities. (Instead, Nigeria would later get its first such site in Osogbo—see chapter 6.) In the old cemetery in Ikoyi, I could also find such names as Pereira and da Souza inscribed on the gravestones.

Before I got around to reading Olinto's novel, I had also read the African American anthropologist Lorand Matory's (2005) historical ethnography of the Afro-Brazilian connections across the South Atlantic. The Black British sociologist Paul Gilroy (1993) had advanced the notion of a "Black Atlantic," but, in his version, it was largely a Black North Atlantic. Matory emphasized that there was a Black South Atlantic as well.

The city of Salvador has drawn a great many anthropologists over the years, from Europe as well as North America, but Matory is unusual in his attention to both the Brazilian and the Nigerian ends of the back-and-forth cultural traffic.⁴ It began, certainly, with the slave trade, when members of various African groups were shipped westward as merchandise, but in which one or two groups could leave a more enduring mark on what became Afro-Brazilian culture—not least in the syncretic religious forms resulting from the meeting with Catholicism. On a visit to Salvador in the late 1990s, I could buy a set of cards showing which Yoruba gods correspond to which Catholic saints, according to the local cultural translation.

But then, after slavery ended, the exchanges continued, as Olinto's story about Mariana and her family shows. The migrants from Brazil indeed settled along a stretch of the coast, but, on parts of it, conditions were a bit turbulent. One exception was the place where the British, the dominant maritime power, had established their main port: Lagos. Consequently this became the most attractive destination.

Some of the Afro-Brazilians came to go to school and learn English, on its early way toward becoming a world language, and then returned home. Others came back to Brazil with a renewed toolkit of ritual paraphernalia. But many remained in Lagos and in other cities nearby. A number of them were skilled in construction work and in crafts. Decorative tiles and porcelain were bought from Brazil, while kola nuts moved across the sea in the other direction. (Again, Mariana's brother was involved in this.)

Who, however, were the people who were sent over as slaves to Brazil, like Mariana's grandmother Catarina, and who were the locals receiving the Afro-Brazilians when they came ashore again? We may be accustomed to think of Afro-Brazilian culture in Salvador as showing strong Yoruba traces, and to identify the people of Lagos and its large hinterland as Yoruba. Lorand Matory points out that things were really more complicated. Certainly there were a number of kingdoms, some large (such as Ife and Oyo), some small, showing cultural affinities as well as some variations. Yet there was, in an earlier phase, no real sense of shared identity. The Hausa people, pushing their way southward in the nineteenth century, referred to the people they would encounter there loosely as something like "yarriba," and it seems that label would come to stick.

In Lagos, too, there would not be only the Afro-Brazilians, the locals, and the British masters, but also the Saro, or Krio—the Sierra Leoneans who had likewise been freed from slavery and the slave trade, and came with some modern skills similar to those brought by the Afro-Brazilians.⁵ Many of them also had local historical roots. To a degree, the Afro-Brazilians and the Sierra Leoneans could be in competition (with the latter advantaged by their superior English language knowledge), but together they were buffers and middlemen between the locals and the British. And then the locals were changing. They went to mission schools and learned to read and write. You may remember that Olinto's Mariana reflected on the dialect differences between people from Ijebu-Ode and Abeokuta and Ife? That was between spoken forms of what could be taken to be Yoruba. Now, however, Bible translations, other religious texts, and other officially sponsored writings introduced a Standard Yoruba. Here, as in many places in the world, a shared language, in writing and print, could be an important foundation for a shared identity.⁶

Moreover, there were more British arriving, taking over jobs that had previously been held by Afro-Brazilians and Krio. Colonialist racism grew—and the response was a beginning African nationalism, with Sierra Leoneans, Afro-Brazilians, and local educated Yoruba forming a united front. Among the Afro-Brazilians, there was an inclination to assimilate—for example, shifting to Yoruba family names.

So, Lorand Matory concludes, the Yoruba collective identity is not some primordial, timeless thing, but one that has developed through political and cultural processes of amalgamation not so very long ago. By now, certainly, most Yoruba would not be aware of so much of this history. Yet one may sense that to a certain degree, the Yoruba identity is a product of early Afropolitanism, in its South Atlantic version.

Notes

1. Early, slave-trading Ouidah shows up in many writings. Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoön* (2018), published after lying around as an unpublished manuscript for almost eight decades, is based on an extended interview series with an old slave of Yoruba origin, brought from Ouidah on what may have been the last (and by then illegitimate) slave shipment on the vessel *Clotilda*, arriving on the coast of Alabama in 1859. See on this also chapter 19, note 4. Hurston, African American anthropologist-writer, would become prominent with later writings, published in the 1930s and 1940s. Another writer on Ouidah is the novelist and travel writer Bruce Chatwin, whose *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980) portrays a ruffian from the Brazilian wilderness turning into a slave trader on the West African coast, next to the old fortress. Moreover, Colson Whitehead's 2017 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Underground Railroad* starts off at Ouidah, as the grandmother of the story's key figure is sold off into transatlantic slavery.
2. The presence of the Irish by way of the Catholic church may also have played a role in making the Republic of Ireland the destination of a considerable number of Nigerian migrants in the late twentieth century. For an ethnographic study of African, not least Nigerian, migrants to Ireland, see Maguire and Murphy 2012.
3. For one account of Brazilian-style architecture in Lagos and neighboring lands, see Vlach 1984.
4. Among the prominent anthropologists doing research in Salvador at one point or other in the twentieth century were Melville Herskovits, Ruth Landes, Roger Bastide, and Pierre Verger. We come back to Verger in chapter 11, and can see in chapter 19 that the linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner was also there. Note here, too, at the African end, the monograph by Kwame Essien (2016) on Afro-Brazilians in Accra, Ghana, and one chapter on those in Accra by Ato Quayson (2014: 37–63).
5. For a history of Sierra Leoneans in nineteenth-century Lagos, see Kopytoff 1965.
6. Matory notes that Benedict Anderson's classic *Imagined Communities* (1983)—referred to in the introduction—has been a major source for the understanding of a shared print language as a major basis of nationalism.

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