

Railtown Writers



My first encounter with Kafanchan was rather accidental. On an early journey through Nigeria, at the beginning of the 1960s, the train I was on remained long at one station (as it did at many others), and the station sign said “Kafanchan.” There were lots of people on the platform: travelers with all kinds of packages, people who were meeting them or taking leave, peddlers of all kinds. And then on the field next to the station there was also a lot of commotion, which did not seem to have anything to do with our particular train. People were on their way somewhere, on foot. The place seemed quite large, and yet I could not see an automobile anywhere. In the middle of the savanna, the town seemed to be linked to the rest of the world by rail only. At a distance, in the beginning dusk, a cliff rose above the greyish-green landscape. The train finally started moving again in that direction. The name of the town stuck in my mind, however, as it made my thoughts wander toward a quite different part of the world—Kafanchan . . .Teheran, Isfahan . . .

The next time I ran into Kafanchan was soon afterward, in a novel by Onuora Nzekwu, of that first generation of Nigerian fiction writers. *Blade among the Boys*, from 1962, is the story of a young man, from his Kafanchan childhood on a crooked path through life, taking him through various Nigerian settings. But the continuous theme, as in much African prose of the period, is the tension between the obligations of local tradition and the individual ambitions of modern life. Patrick Ikenga wants to become a priest in the Roman Catholic Church—his parents have had him schooled by its mission. Yet when he becomes fatherless, the elders of the family’s distant home village demand that he takes up an office connected to the old pre-Christian religion, and a girl in the village has been identified as his future wife since almost as soon as she was born.

Again, Patrick Ikenga of the novel does not remain in Kafanchan for very long. He is an Igbo, so his roots are elsewhere. Moreover, as the Ikengas are a railway family, he finds himself at various times in different temporary homes along the rail. But before we get that far in the story, Onuora Nzekwu briefly portrays Kafanchan as it was in its earlier decades. He was born there himself, and one senses that he was a railway child. Local life revolves around the activities and the rhythm of the railway.¹ Such power holders as the British colonial officers are hardly visible, except when Empire Day is celebrated. But there is a multitude of ethnic groups. Their various Christian congregations are in competition, while there is more distance between them and the Muslim Hausa, and for that matter the indigenous peoples of the area. These have not yet been so fully reached by the missions, and they come into town only very occasionally. Nzekwu allows Patrick Ikenga to notice that they hardly wear any clothing, and that the women often have only twigs of leaves between their legs.

Later on, when I was planning to do urban ethnography somewhere in Nigeria, I remembered the Kafanchan railway station and Nzekwu's book. On my reconnaissance trip to find a suitable field site, I thought I would have a look at Kafanchan first. Quickly enough, I decided that it suited me well, and I liked it.

By then, of course, Onuora Nzekwu was long gone—although he was nationally quite visible. To begin with, briefly, he was a peripatetic schoolteacher, but then he turned to writing. *Wand of Noble Wood* (1961) had actually been his first novel; after *Blade among the Boys* came *HighbLife for Lizards* (1965). The first and the third are largely set in Igboland and offer a great deal of dramatized knowledge of Igbo culture, not least relations of gender, family, and kinship. But his best-known book remained *Eze Goes to School* (1966), a slim volume for primary school use, an early reading experience for masses of Nigerian school children.² Apart from that, he had started working early for *Nigeria* magazine, a high-quality quarterly government publication devoted to documenting Nigerian cultures. Soon enough he was its editor. The Biafra period, during which he had returned to the Igbo homeland, turned out to be a rather parenthetical interlude. He came back to Lagos, and for much of his remaining active years he was the general manager of the News Agency of Nigeria. His death, in Onitsha in April 2017, at age eighty-nine, drew nationwide attention. President Buhari, tweeting a condolence message, referred especially to the national importance of *Eze Goes to School*. Just a little later, one could find one copy of that book advertised at the Amazon.com website, at the price of US\$706.

Another novel, accidentally encountered: as I am at Copenhagen Airport, waiting for the departure of my plane, I browse in a book stall. High on a shelf I come across *Burma Boy* (2007), by Biyi Bandele, about the young men who were recruited from West Africa's villages and small towns, many of them mere teenagers, to fight for the British Empire against the Japanese enemy on a different continent in World War II.

Their view of the world was hazy, their understandings of weaponry, terrain, and command were faulty and grew only through costly experience, and some of them would never come home again. But they were held together through all the hardships of the jungle war by their innocent faith in King George, their Nigerian background, and their Hausa and Pidgin dialects, which they used to share memories of life at home and to interpret what was new and alien. This was the Royal West African Frontier Force, once set up by the colonial master Governor Lugard.

Bandele's father had been a Burma veteran himself, and the novel had originally been inspired by the stories Bandele had heard at home as a boy. But then he had proceeded to read historical accounts and the biographies of British officers, and do research in the archives, and he had written his book with those materials as a background as well.

And then I found that the author of *Burma Boy* was from Kafanchan. He was born there in 1967, at a time when the town was in upheaval, with the large Igbo population fleeing after Northern pogroms, and at the beginning of the Biafra War. Even if he could hardly remember that, he would probably have learned about some of the consequences in his early years. And he could have been among the boys I encountered on the town streets by the time I arrived; if I did not notice him, it was still likely he would see me, the conspicuous stranger (and perhaps he shouted "*oyinbo!*"—"whiteman!" in Yoruba—as he spotted me). But for Bandele as for Nzekwu, Kafanchan was hardly a place to remain for an ambitious youth. The varieties of missionary Christianity dominating schools in the area were not particularly intellectually inclined. So he went south to study in Ife at Obafemi Awolowo University, renamed after the pioneer Yoruba politician.³ And from there he soon enough proceeded to London for a career as writer and dramatist. We come back to him briefly at the end of the next chapter.

Having learned about Bandele's childhood origins, I made my way back to his first book, *The Man Who Came In from the Back of Beyond* (published under the name of Biyi Bandele-Thomas), from 1991. Here was a quite precocious author: he wrote this novel in his early twenties. On the cover of the paperback edition I have, there

is a quote from a review in the *Observer*: “A story of Africa: exotic, sprawling, overcrowded and bizarre.” The book was published in Britain by Heinemann, as were so many early African writers. (One could note that the series editor at the time was Adewale Maja-Pearce, another member-of-sorts of a Yoruba diaspora. We come back to him in chapter 18.)

I may confess that I was rather bewildered reading this book. It moves back and forth quickly between people and places and in other ways. Kafanchan serves as the setting occasionally, although there is never really a strong sense of the locale. But we learn this much: “The world is a small place and even smaller was Kafanchan, where the left hand was always aware of what the right hand was doing. A word here, a whisper there and anybody who had ears for the grapevine was immediately brought up to date on the latest news in town.” There is also still that infighting between local Christian denominations.

The young man at the center of the story reads Buddhist scriptures and Charles Dickens, Lobsang Rampa, Jack Kerouac, Wole Soyinka, Ernest Hemingway, Booker T. Washington, James Hadley Chase, and Frantz Fanon. He listens to Bob Marley and to Fela Sowande. He gets to know the local marijuana tycoon but also nurtures plans for radical revolutionary violence. On visits to Kano, Kaduna, and Jos, he recruits altogether some fifty youths among the *almajiri*, boys begging in the streets, followers of itinerant Islamic teachers. (A few paragraphs are inserted into the story here on the very real Maitatsine rebellion in Kano in 1980, briefly discussed in chapter 13.) These intended foot soldiers of a rebellion are put up in an isolated house at the outskirts of Kafanchan for training, but when the local police get wind of their presence, the place is raided. The boys, caught in the act of training spear throwing, are arrested. But their leader is not there, having gone to Lagos to get walkie-talkies for them.

And so it goes. One gets a sense of the author as a young man, taking in all the experiences and all the news of his time, fashions and rumors, from near and far away. Returning to Bandele’s later book: perhaps we can think of those “Burma Boys” as yet another set of been-tos, of Afropolitans. They were not of the kind who would go abroad to seek education, to further their careers. But they would also come back and play their part in the way Nigerians thought of the world outside.⁴

Notes

1. Those were good times for the Nigerian railway system; when we get to chapter 18 we find that two 1980s travelers did not have such pleasant memories from being on the rail, and some time after that the Nigerian railways closed down altogether.
2. *Eze Goes to School* was coauthored with Michael Crowder, a British historian long active in Nigeria, who was also for a period editor of *Nigeria* magazine.
3. Obafemi Awolowo was the leading Yoruba politician for an extended late colonial and postcolonial period, leader of the Action Group party, premier of the Western Region, and national opposition leader. Obafemi Awolowo University had started out as the University of Ife, but was renamed after him in 1987. See also chapter 10, note 2.

Another important person in mid-twentieth century Nigerian cultural life, the artist Uche Okeke, also had part of his childhood in Kafanchan; later he was connected for a period to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. For one thing, Okeke drew the illustrations for Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

4. Okey Ndibe's (2016: 66–69) father was also in the Burma campaign, and remembered it. In a brief autobiographical postscript to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, too, Amos Tutuola noted that when as a young man he tried to get a foothold on the job market, he found it crowded by returning overseas soldiers. And, as we saw in chapter 1, Artur Lundkvist, the Swedish author and traveler, encountered them in the Lagos streets.

References

- Bande, Biyi. 2007. *Burma Boy*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Bande-Thomas, Biyi. 1992. *The Man Who Came In from the Back of Beyond*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Ndibe, Okey. 2016. *Never Look an American in the Eye*. New York: Soho.
- Nzekwu, Onuora. 1961. *Wand of Noble Wood*. London: Hutchinson.
- . 1962. *Blade among the Boys*. London: Hutchinson.
- . 1965. *Highlife for Lizards*. London: Hutchinson.
- Nzekwu, Onuora, and Michael Crowder. 1966. *Eze Goes to School*. Lagos: African University Press.