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## PERIPATETICS IN AFRICA: A GLANCE

by P.T.W. Baxter

### A Northern Sudanese proverb

"Tinkers, nomads, lepers and mice,  
May God keep their homes from us."  
(Ahmed el Shahi:102)

### Sleary's Horse-riding

"There were two or three handsome young women among them, with two or three husbands, and their two or three mothers, and their eight or nine little children...All the mothers could (and did) dance upon the slack wire and the tight-rope, and perform rapid acts on bare-backed steeds; none of them were at all particular in respect of showing their legs...They all assumed to be mighty rakish and knowing, they were not very tidy in their private dresses, they were not at all orderly in their domestic arrangements, and the combined literature of the whole company would have produced but a poor letter on any subject. Yet there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an untiring readiness to help and pity one another, deserving often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction, as the every-day virtues of any class of people in the world."

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, 1854

### Pre-Industrial England

"Most beastlike of all were those on the margin of human society: the mad, who seemed to have been taken over by the wild beast within; and the vagrants, who followed no calling, but lived what the Puritan William Perkins called 'the life of a beast'...Once perceived as beasts, people were liable to be treated accordingly. The ethic of human domination removed animals from the sphere of human concern. But it also legitimized the ill-treatment of those humans who were in a supposedly animal condition."

(Thomas:44)

The epigraphic snippets are representative of contradictory and very widespread responses to peripatetics, itinerants and wanderers of all sorts who seem, from the viewpoint of the settled, to have 'no settled abode': they indicate the fears and fantasies that the settled and docile have about the wild and untamed. They tell us nothing at all about the peripatetics but, in so far as peripatetics must adapt their public behaviour to the social and cultural surroundings in which they have to move, then they have some relevance.

The Sudanese proverb lumps tinkers with other undesirable but unavoidable categories of God's creation; that is to be endured but kept at a distance, tolerated as long as they remain in their appropriate place, which is on the margins of proper society. It is a peasant view, and quite unlike that typified by Puritan Perkins which, by classifying vagrants as less than human, is a precursor of those moralities which justified plantation slavery, apartheid and genocide.

Dickens' account of Sleary's Horse-Riding, which was a small itinerant circus, has quite different premises. It stems from the urban intellectual's quest for a folk source of socially uninhibited vitality. Dickens takes an almost Lawrentian view but, however blatantly the Horse-Riding is used as a pro-life symbol, Dickens does capture some vital aspects of peripatetic life. The horse-riding folk are seen as frivolous and wasteful by the dreary utilitarian calculus of Mr. Gradgrind and "malignantly scorred" by the brash capitalist, Mr. Bounderby. But, as Dickens' great moral fable makes clear, the circus "brings the machine hands of Coketown...what they are starved of. It brings to them, not merely amusement, but art" (Leavis:231-2). This last, the provision of participatory artistic experience, I suggest, is a major reason that peripatetic artists endure. It is also, I suggest further, perhaps one reason that genuine peripatetic arts are not a feature of traditional African cultures. Most African artistic expression is rooted in religion which is rooted in locality and social groupings; it is entertaining but not simply entertainment.

But peripatetics have other things than creativity in common. Berland argues, I think convincingly, that "peripatetic artisans and entertainers rely exclusively on human social resources" (1983a:19); that is that to earn their food they need customers. They cannot produce their own food so that market places, or more rarely courts, are the obvious places for them to frequent. So, however independent the "vagrant gipsy life"<sup>1</sup> may appear to be, peripatetics are in practice restricted to the social and economic niches the encompassing society permits them to occupy. These niches must lie "inside the mainstream of the perdurable rural and urban communities, rather than at the perimeter" (Berland 1983b:2).

Nowadays if peripatetics cannot satisfy their customers, they can only sink into the morass of the urban poor. They have neither land nor livestock on which they can fall back. This is one reason, I suggest, why it is that African artisans and entertainers have been, and continue to be, reluctant to sever their connections with the land and to become entirely dependent on their specialised skills. Africa teems with itinerants but there are no real equivalents to the European or Asian closed, endogamous groups of peripatetic specialists, such as the Qalandar described by Berland, and who I select as an "ideal type" because of their suitability, the quality of the data about them and because that data is familiar to everyone here. Qalandar are endogamous, depend entirely on their professions, have no permanent home place and belong wherever they happen to be.

I shall go on to examine briefly some examples of African itinerants, or supposed itinerants, who at first glance might seem to be comparable to peripatetics as typified by the Qalandar. Luckily I am not an itinerant story teller who must keep you in suspense in order to earn my supper so, from the start, I can reveal that I can find no groups of peripatetics in sub-Saharan Africa which can be profitably compared with the Qalandar. Before I make my brief survey, I want to dismiss from our consideration one category which has a rapidly swelling membership, that is the wandering poor.

African cities are fearsome places for the destitute and may well even be worse than were the bursting insanitary eighteenth century cities of Europe. Rudé estimates that in European cities then between a sixth and a quarter of the urban population were: "the destitute, the beggars, the homeless, the vagrants... the casually employed, who floated in and out of jobs... doss houses and prisons - those whom Defoe placed below the poor in his social categories and called 'the miserable'" (1972:90). I make this reference to the debris of urbanization in Europe in order to clear away from our view some relatively new categories of wanderers and itinerants; such as the clerks, teachers, mechanics, artisans, migrant labourers and the like, who are products of the semi-incorporation of African states into the world economic system. Jacobson, for example, actually titles his sympathetic study of new Ugandan townsmen, *Itinerant Townsmen*, by which he means the middle range élite of clerks and artisans. He distinguishes that new élite who "move from town to town" from the poor labourers who "circulate between town and tribal home" (1973:127-8). Jacobson's distinction is a useful one, but not directly so for our present purposes, the new élite may be itinerant in that they move from town to town, but they are neither peripatetic nor endogamous and only seldom are they dependent economically on the community amongst whom they are temporarily resident. Rather they are a random set of individuals with certain common interests and social attributes who only cooperate in situations in which they share common class interests: quite unlike peripatetics they have "relationships which end quickly" (136).

Joan Vincent, an acute observer of social differentiation, notes how the "economic infrastructure of East Africa, and especially its marketing system, calls for itinerancy of wandering artisans (surely akin to the 'labouring men' of Hobsbawm's pre-industrial England)". She sees these "wandering men" as the "brokers as it were, of the proletarian national culture" (1975:130-1). There is also an increasing number of itinerant urban women (e.g. Schuster:68-72; and Aderanti Adepoju:64). I have divagated into brief comment on what, in effect, is a newly forming economic and social class, to make clear that there should be no confusion between this new class and the specialised occupants of old established niches in Indo-European society.

Now I shall survey quickly African itinerants. For convenience I shall consider them under the following heads and in the following order:

- (i) long distance pilgrims;
- (ii) wandering teachers, marabouts and religious practitioners, mostly Moslem but also some northern Ethiopian Christians;
- (iii) artisans, such as smiths, weavers and barber-doctors;
- (iv) musicians and entertainers;
- (v) hunters and gatherers who often also double as buffoons and/or praise singers.

These are only groupings of convenience, obviously they are not sociologically nor even descriptively distinct. Rather than pile instance on instance, I have selected examples which seem representative of each grouping.

### Long Distance Pilgrims

Many West Africans set out in small groups to work their way to Mecca at any task to which they can lay their hands. They anticipate spending many years on the journey; many indeed die on the way and the pilgrimage continued by their children is stretched over the generations. Some indeed pause for so long that they even appear to be settled. Some Fellata<sup>2</sup> have taken plots at Gezira in the Sudan and paused long enough for their children to be born and complete school and university. So visibly, as Baw Yamba puts it: "no physical movement towards some ultimately holy spot, the essential aspect of all pilgrimage, ever took place" (1984:12). Less successful Fellata often appear to be like vagrants or peripatetic workers. But, for the Fellata themselves, the identity of pilgrim remains essential, because of the notion it carried of purposeful movement. The identity of pilgrim is also some protection, from harassment, which that of itinerant worker is not. "Transients" who live in "enclaves" on the edges of many Sudanese towns live in risk of being moved on. In intention, at least, a pilgrim is on a journey of religious obligation to and from definite places, and is not a peripatetic nor a vagabond.

### Wandering Teachers and Other Religions

There have been many studies of marabouts and itinerant Moslem clerics (Monteil, 1969, is a useful summary), but the point I wish to make can, I think, be made adequately enough from Saul's recent paper "Quranic Schools in Upper Volta" (1984). Muslim teachers and their students are often itinerant for many years. Students who aspire to become teachers must usually travel extensively from teacher to teacher. Students are expected to "live in deprivation...to supplement their diet by begging, which they often do in groups of five to ten" (74). Before settling down to start up their own schools "most spend one or two years as itinerants for the purpose of accumulating some money by writing charms and providing other ritual services" (81). Some cover the length and breadth of West Africa, but if they do make the transition from student to master they settle down to run a school and usually combine teaching with farming, at which some have been conspicuously successful commercially. Itinerancy then is an essential part of training but not a continuing part of the vocation. Only those who fail to make the grade remain wanderers all their lives; the successful obtain land and a settled home.<sup>3</sup>

Andrezejewski records the sad plaint of a solitary Somali poet whose independent wandering had left him without affines or reliable agnates:

"...When a man reaches the age of twenty he wrestles with the world,  
If I was once a 'loafer' now I am a decrepit old man,  
A man whose hair is streaked with grey like the strands of a rope and broken to burdens,  
By twelve years I have exceeded sixty; and this is certain.  
My backbone and my body have slackened and my arms have lost their swagger,  
Last night I had no sleep for pain and moaning,  
Indeed my eyes peer blinking, and my sight is feeble,  
I shake like something trembling in the wind.

Even as a she-camel which has been milked dry in the rainless season will not yield much milk,  
So is he who treats distant relatives as though they were his clansmen.  
Whenever I handed over a portion of my bridewealth it was consumed at once,  
And if tonight you want to milk me I will be dry..."

(1964:116-8)

The poet's fault which reduced him to social isolation was not that he had followed, successfully, his itinerant speciality, but that he had neglected his social obligations, and not maintained his roots in camel herding society. There is no independent niche for poets among Somali;<sup>4</sup> in Somalia, as anywhere else, a man must keep his social connections in good repair.

#### Artisans

I shall be interested to learn how the artisan group I shall take as my example compare with Ethiopian 'tinkers' and Tukulor weavers. (See the contributions to this session by Shack and Dilley. Also cf. Burley 1978:148; Karsten 1972:94-7; Pankhurst 1961:287-8).

Nancy Neaher (1979) has convincingly reconstructed the social life of the community of Awka who, at the turn of the century, dominated metal working in a vast section of what is now south-eastern Nigeria. Awka had an ancient reputation as men who "travelled widely" as "itinerant smiths". Many commuted such great distances to work that they "required weeks or even months of travel to sites over a hundred or more miles away" from their home town of Awka (355). But, having set up their forges, they cultivated local political and business connections and frequently took a local wife or wives. They even took local titles of rank. But after a spell away, the "transients" always returned home; indeed, most followed a regular routine, "for a year's duration one half the male smithing population was away at respective work sites while the other half remained at home in Awka, with a reversal of the pattern the following year" (356). While at home they relaxed and helped their home wives with the yam gardens. Neaher stresses that "this specialist subculture was anchored to its home community as effectively as its sedentary counterparts" (356) - and that although outsiders saw Awka as travellers, an Awka was "ever identified with his place of birth" (357). So that - "A comparison of the Awka smithing profession with a sedentary paradigm reveals striking correspondences in general structure, cultural setting, and ultimate objectives" (357).

Awka smiths maintained craft standards and internal discipline which only varied "in matters of degree" from those common to West African craft guilds (Lloyd 1953). They also often assumed certain priestly duties in conjunction with their profession, and many became distinguished and respected members of the wider community. The smithing guilds themselves "grew rich, enjoying an exalted reputation at home and abroad" (361). Awka itinerancy, then, was an adaptation to the requirements of the work, rather than a significant sociological or cultural marker. Awka smiths are closer in style to the Free Professions of the Nupe (Nadel 1942, Ch. XVI) and the many and widespread "economically specialised Muslim nuclei" who live settled, or semi-settled, among non-Muslim populations (Lewis 1966:26), than they are to the peripatetics of the Indian sub-continent.

The "caste-like" groups of craft specialists such as the woodworkers, weavers, potters, smiths and tanners found in many peoples of Ethiopia, though endogamous and polluting, are not peripatetic (Todd 1977).

### Musicians and Entertainers

Entertainers are the nearest equivalents to Sleary's Horse-riding. Drummers and dancers in Nupe (Nadel 1942:301-3) were organized in two ways which ran side by side. Each large village had a traditional craft organization of part-time drummers organized on guild lines and headed by a King of Drummers. The art was handed down from father to son, supplemented by a form of local apprenticeship. In Bida, the capital, drumming was a full-time occupation; drummers formed "companies" and were joined in performances by "professional women dancers and singers". They used traditional modes but were also innovative and both "the profession and the style were allowed to develop freely", so that for many performers it was "a vocation rather than a profession". Each company built up an impressive repertory, style and technique, and was known by the name of its leader. There were several such companies, and the better known ones, even in the 1930s, toured "the country, sometimes even going abroad to the other large towns of Nigeria". This was an innovation and Nadel reported - "represents the only instance in the economic organization of the country (i.e. Nupe) of a free association purely on a business basis, and without the support of the framework of kinship and hereditary tradition" (303). But though they travelled, the companies remained firmly rooted in Bida.

Similar adaptations of traditional forms to new social conditions occurred elsewhere. The development of *domei* among the Mende of Sierre Leone is a well documented example. *Domeisia* are a sort of narrative folk tale, "closely related to such mixed forms of the lively arts as the music hall review or burlesque" (Cosentino 1982:8-11), and which, when performed by a master are "the most intensely personal of all Mende artistic expression". Although most Mende perform these tales, only a very few become proficient masters. Such virtuosi are able to travel across the length and breadth of Mendeland performing before audiences "consisting of entire towns gathered in chiefdom halls". Some, like Salia Koroma, made recordings and during the diamond boom of the fifties and sixties were like "movie stars". Of recent years, their popularity has waned and even Salia had to supplement his income by working as a mason and a carpenter (Kamara 1985:30). Another popular musician, Mos'ay Dubua, a satirist, is eulogised by Cosentino as - "a true bohemian, a member of the international freemasonry of would be artists". A number of women also became very skilled performers, though they do not seem to have travelled professionally, as did the men. Cosentino describes these artists, of both sexes, as "the intellectuals of Mende society".

We are fortunate to have two recent biographical essays about Salia, which indicate how he moved on from being an itinerant, perhaps peripatetic, praise singer who performed under the patronage of chiefs, into a performer who played before a paying audience. The two essays are by final year sociology students, Frederick Bobor James and Issa B. Kamara, at Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone. They both agree on the main facts of Salia's life and supplement each other. I expatiate a little here because the sources I use are not widely accessible.

Salia was born about 1903. His father, Boboi Kandor, was an itinerant accordianist and singer reputed for his singing at chief's courts. In those days, a successful itinerant musician would spend several months in one chiefdom and then

move on to another; chiefs and warriors appreciated them most as praise singers, though clearly they also sang other types of song.

After Salia's naming ceremony had been performed, his father "left on his singing tour and was not seen for many years" (Kamara:15). Salia was reared in the compound of his mother's father, but Boboi Kandar did not forget his son and sent the lad an accordion. Salia developed such proficiency on the instrument that his mother's brother became envious and had the boy sent off to join his father. Boboi Kandar taught Salia the art and had him protected with medicines against witches. His father also refused to let Salia go to school, "for fear he neglected to study his music and should sing around white men rather than warriors and chiefs" (Kamara:18). Salia soon became proficient enough to set off as an independent minstrel. In those days, "many chiefs had musicians in their courts serving as entertainers" (Kamara:22). Salia became a proficient all-round minstrel and later moved to the capital, Freetown. At the start of the Second World War, Salia did a brief stint in the Police Band in Freetown but his father disapproved and called him to Bo, the provincial capital of Mendeland.

Some years later, after the death of his father, Salia moved to Kenema (also in Mendeland) where he built a house. This coincided with the diamond boom in Sierra Leone during which a number of singing groups emerged (cf. Ghana concert parties below) but Salia continued as a solo performer. He made money from recordings and one Lebanese agent even presented him with a Landrover. Salia himself seems to have behaved rather like a pop-star at this time and made himself unwelcome in many places, "as the people feared to house him because their wives sometimes showed open love...A lot of women, married and unmarried, gave themselves up to Salia either for love or marriage. He avoided them all as best he could. But for this he would not be living now". When the diamond boom collapsed and with it high fees (as chiefly patronage had done earlier), Salia settled down and worked partly as a musician when opportunity offered and partly as a mason and carpenter, both of which skills can be practised itinerantly.<sup>5</sup>

There are reports of similar minstrel-cum-modern style performers elsewhere. Awedoba (1985:190), for example, reports a "classic case" from Navrongo in northern Ghana of the composer Sadongo who had "an extraordinary talent for wisdom and poetry", and travelled widely in Kasena-Nankani and in the southern Upper Volta Kasena chiefdom where he was rewarded by chiefs and the wealthy with livestock for his performances. Nowadays, such itinerant musicians perform in "the beer canteen and are rewarded with beer".

Kwabena Bame has just published (1985) a short book on the efflorescence, over the last sixty years, of "itinerant theatre troupes" in Gold Coast/Ghana. The musical plays of the concert parties adapt traditional stories to contemporary social interests and contemporary highlife tunes, and have come to "provide one of the commonest forms of entertainment in Ghana today". Bame traces the origin of the movements to Teacher Yalley of Sekondi, then the major seaport in the country, who performed in the "white make-up of a minstrel". Teacher Yalley gave his first concert, appropriately enough, on Empire Day, 1918. In 1974, there were over thirty touring concert parties which combined guitar bands and male and female dramatic performers; but each was a touring company with a home base and not truly peripatetic. Indeed, in Nkrumah's time, some even became incorporated into the state-run Workers Brigade, and endeavoured to establish a professional union which sought to "accord musicians an honourable place in the society" (28). (See also Collins 1976).



Musicians, like craftsmen and religious, all establish a permanent home base and do not in any way form a distinct "part-society".

Recent examples of new type itinerant performers are the guitarist minstrels of the Horn, such as the Oromo singer from Harar, Ali Mohamed Bira and Abdullahi Jirma, "the Elvis Presley of Boran music" (John 1982): but each of these operates as individuals in the style of troubadors and minstrels, not as members of a socially recognized group.

The wanderers I have glanced at so far have all, in varying degrees, been itinerant but none have been permanently peripatetic; simply the effective performance of their specialised tasks has required them to be itinerant for variable periods.

#### Hunters and Gatherers

I shall only glance at the Mbuti of the Ituri Forest of Zaire (Turnbull 1983), but I think that most hunting and collecting peoples (though not the Hadza) share similar traits. The Twa of Rwanda do so (Gravel 1968; Maquet 1961), so do the Manjo, Boni, Waata and Wanderobo of the Horn (Stiles 1981; Waller 1985; Todd 1977; Gamst 1978); and so do the !Kung of the Kalahari (Marshall 1976).

The Forest World of the Mbuti is quite distinct socially, ecologically and productively from that of the sedentary agricultural villages of the dominating society; Mbuti occupy an ecological niche which they have socialised. But, unlike the Qalandar and indeed any of the peoples already mentioned, the Mbuti have, or had until recently, "an abundance of all the necessities of life" just for the taking. Mbuti could withdraw to the forest and live independently of the encompassing society; they certainly, until recently at least, did not rely "exclusively on human social resources" (Berland 1983a:19). But in other respects they satisfy several of the criteria suggested both by Dickens and Berland:

- (i) they easily adjust kinship terms and behaviour to social convenience and adapt "kinship status according to age and marital condition" (35);
- (ii) they are skilled entertainers and "great mimes";
- (iii) their dress and deportment was often "rakish" and to outsiders even seemed "totally decultured, almost degenerate" (64);
- (iv) "quality of life was more important than the quantitative elements of individual wealth" (20);
- (v) their "remarkable gentleness" is attested to again and again in Turnbull's study;
- (vi) they practice a joyful skill in the "pretence of subservience" (64) to their arrogant patrons whom they later mock;
- (vii) they are endogamous.

Mbuti also were completely peripatetic and moved every month or so "following wherever the forest beckoned" (14). But these traits apart, Mbuti are little like Qalandar; neither would fit easily in the culture of the other.

Although they could live independently of the neighbours who traditionally encompassed them, Mbuti have not been able to resist the encroachments of the state. The Zairian government, "determined to make this unproductive part of the nation contribute to the national economy" (Turnbull 1983:118), has forced the Mbuti to sedentarise and may well have destroyed their gentleness and their creativity. Their forest resources are also being removed.<sup>6</sup>

We could, I suppose, carry on to construct tables or graphs or lists of criteria such as those which have proved fruitful in dealing with other problems of comparison. Leach's cluster of criteria for distinguishing marriage (1961:107) is one that springs to mind, as does Goody's use of directional criteria to place the Lowilli on a scale running from Lo to Daga (1956:19-26). But there seems little point in placing the groups we have glanced at on a scale of itinerancy or peripateticism in relation to the Kandyar. They just are not helpful comparisons: peripateticism is not anything like a universal nor is it culture specific. We could speculate as to why, unless I have missed them, Africa does not have groups of peripatetics. Some questions leap to the mind. Were population densities too low? Are certain rigidities of caste and/or class prerequisites for the formation of groups of peripatetic specialists? Was the velocity of trade and exchange in East Africa too low to permit their emergence? Did the traders of the Sahara and Sahel move goods so efficiently that specialists were redundant? And so on - but that is another, and I suspect, unrewarding route to follow. The prerequisite conditions for the emergence of specialist peripatetics, if they are discoverable at all, must surely be sought through the analysis of the conditions in which they are found not in those in which they are absent.

#### Notes

1. This romantic term was coined, or at least put into common literary currency, by John Masefield in Sea Fever, and refers to sailors, perhaps the most universal category of itinerants. Masefield, who became Poet Laureate, ran away to sea as a youth.

A quaint example of the romantic aura that the circus still exerts is that of one English Tory MP who is a valuable upholder of the conventional clutch of values which include law and order, hanging, the family, etc., but is proud of the fact that as a boy he ran away to join a circus!

2. Fellata is a name given to West African migrants into the Sudan by Sudanese. It is not an identity which they give to themselves.
3. Cf. the accounts by Teshager Wube (1959) and Alaka Imbakom Kalewold (1970) of wandering students of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.
4. Of course, a certain amount of travelling is useful to anyone who needs to make diagnoses of social relationships, whether marabout, priest, poet or witch

doctor. Evans-Pritchard pointed out long ago that a Zande witch doctor travelled "more and further than most members of his locality". But witch doctors were not peripatetics.

5. Ebenezer Calendar (Faux 1985), commonly known as "Danger Fire", was a Creole performer who also achieved some fame as an itinerant performer. His song "Faya, Faya" which he played with his band "Meringue Music" was taken up as a calypso by Edmundo Ross, a well known British performer of the forties and fifties.
6. Cf. Stiles (1981:859) who concluded his survey of the hunters of the north east African coast, Boni, Dahalo and Waata: "Since the principal economic basis for the existence of hunting peoples has disappeared, the people themselves as distinct cultural entities can be expected to disappear as well".

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