

## JOHN DAVID YEADON PEEL, 1941–2015

<i>Erin ti wó, kò le dide</i>	The elephant fell, unable to stand on its feet
<i>Erin ti wó, kò le dide</i>	The elephant fell, unable to stand on its feet
<i>Àjànàkú sùm bí òkè</i>	The humongous mammal is down
<i>Erin ti wó kò le dide.</i>	The elephant fell, unable to stand on its feet.

On 2 November 2015, sociologist John David Yeadon Peel's illustrious career came to an end, marking the end of an era. Now, the discipline of sociology will miss the service of a pioneer who single-handedly gave a new dimension to the studies of Yoruba culture and religion. For those of us who have been influenced and inspired for years by his profound insight, John's demise has created a vacuum of unparalleled scale. However, John left with us an oeuvre that stands as a vast repository of knowledge waiting to be rediscovered in the future. His mastery of many disciplines is impressive, from the very core of sociology and anthropology to that of history and literature. His knowledge of group behaviour and social institutions is profound. His patience and ability to collect empirical data are phenomenal. His writings are never geared towards policy or advocacy – he does not belong to that tradition – but rather to a large set of coordinated knowledge on the fragmentation of society into its sociological fragments of social change, and the disturbing but crucial issues of social disorder and order. I think about how he first proceeded with the study of a new order organized by the Aladura movement of the colonial and postcolonial era before moving backward in time to the disorder of the nineteenth century, and how the social processes of the chaotic period enable us to understand one sub-ethnic community, the Ijesa.

As we commemorate J. D. Y. Peel's magnificent presence in the academy we must go back to the early 1960s, when he was still a young PhD scholar at the London School of Economics. It was during this time that he entered West Africa and began serious engagements with the Yoruba ways of being and belonging. His gaze was on the independent churches among the Yoruba community in south-west Nigeria. In 1966, based on his extensive fieldwork, he completed his dissertation entitled 'A sociological study of two independent churches among the Yoruba'. Thereafter, he grew very rapidly in the academic world with a prolific publishing record. As part of his academic engagements, Peel taught at numerous prestigious institutions across the globe, including at Nottingham University and the LSE (1966–73), the University of Ife, Nigeria (1973–75), Liverpool University (1975–89), the University of Chicago (1982–83), and SOAS, University of London (since 1989). At SOAS in London, he also served as the Dean of Undergraduate Studies from 1990 to 1994 and as a member of the governing body (from 1996). Peel was a former President of the African Studies Association in the UK (1996–98), and the Chair of the Social Anthropology and Human Geography Section of the British Academy (1997–2000).

During his illustrious teaching and research career, Peel emerged as an extremely influential scholar in the field of sociology of religion. His early published work

explored the ideas of syncretism and religious change in Yorubaland. In 1968, he published his PhD dissertation in the form of a book, *Aladura: a religious movement among the Yoruba*. *Aladura* is a classic work of historical sociology on West Africa in which Peel used a wide range of vernacular historical sources, especially the private papers and the endless small publications of local intellectual guilds as well as the oral traditions of the Yoruba religious order. *Aladura* also included fascinating aspects of social history concerning the interrelations of the first generation of Christians and young elites in Yorubaland with the ideological contours of the Anglican Church. Peel carefully crafted a brilliant analysis of the discourse on religious transformation among Ijebu and Egba families. In many ways, *Aladura* also ushered in an epistemological shift in the way sociologists had understood Yoruba religious traditions until then. No wonder that Tom McCaskie once suggested that he lifted 'the Yoruba past to a dimension of comparative seriousness that no one else has managed'. Indeed, there can be little doubt about the veracity of that statement.

Interestingly, as a young adult, Peel was a student of classics. His early training had a profound impact on his intellectual life. His attention to the close reading of texts allowed him the room to explore new horizons of scholarship. Peel's second monograph, *Herbert Spencer: the evolution of a sociologist*, published in 1971, was a prime example of his sensitivity as a reader and his creativity as a thinker and writer. In this remarkable piece of scholarship, Peel offered an alternative reading of Herbert Spencer's whole sociological corpus: a reading grounded in biographical and cultural context, informed by a profound knowledge of later social theory, and moulded by historical and critical sensibility of rare refinement. In this interesting turn in the assessment of Spencer's work, Peel argued that Spencer's evolutionary sociology was the projection onto all human history of the experience of English industrialization as perceived from the provincial radical viewpoint, and that much of its specific substance can be related to the rhetoric of provincial radical anti-politics. *Herbert Spencer* is Peel's gift to those scholars interested in the history of the social sciences as well as to sociologists concerned about the future of their inquiry.

With the publication of *Herbert Spencer*, Peel emerged as an important scholar of the global North. But his deeper attachment to the Yoruba ways of being kept bringing him back to Nigeria time and again. In 1983, he published his monograph *Ijeshas and Nigerians: the incorporation of a Yoruba kingdom, 1890s–1970s*, which offers an excellent account of the precolonial social and political structures of the Yoruba kingdom as well as the history of Ilesa in connection with the formation of modern Nigeria. In many ways, this text shows the intensity of Peel's engagement with both Yoruba past and present. His use of both historical archives and anthropological accounts offers a unique way to see the historical continuities and ruptures as the Ijeshas were integrated into the larger Nigerian social and political sphere. In fact, *Ijeshas and Nigerians* is a good example for future scholars interested in historical sociology.

He launched his career with a study on the Yoruba. He closes it with a book that he was unable to see in print, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa Religion: three traditions in comparison and interaction*, published by the University of California Press. I was privileged to write a blurb for this fine book, as well as to read a late essay, 'Religion and the future of Nigeria: lessons from the Yoruba case', which appeared in the maiden edition of *Yoruba Studies Review*.

Peel's intellectual legacy is assured. He will forever remain a core member of the pantheon of sociologists who provide new theories and refine older ones to understand identity and agency, to explain complicated social processes, to link micro events to the macro systems, and to fully analyse the relevance of daily practices as they explain larger issues of social mobility and social stratification.

Sleep well, great mind, in the company of *òrìsà*. Let me keep singing for you to calm you down into a great rest:

<i>Ará igbàun dà oò?</i>	Where are those who lived before us?
<i>Ará igbàun dà?</i>	Where are those who lived before us?
<i>Ìbá ẹ̀ pé à ìi ku ni o,</i>	If people do not die,
<i>Ará igbàun dà?</i>	Where are those who lived before us?

TOYIN FALOLA  
University of Texas at Austin  
[toyinfalola@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:toyinfalola@austin.utexas.edu)