

Once a Nomad, Always a Nomad

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Romeo Oriogun is the author of *A Sacrament of Bodies* and *Nomad*, and a few other poetry chapbooks. *Nomad* has now been shortlisted for the 2022 Nigeria Prize for Literature (poetry category). In this conversation with OlongoAfrica, conducted over zoom by Kólá Túbòsún and Olajide Salawu, he talks about his motivations and influences. The conversation has been abridged for brevity.

OlongoAfrica: Hello, so here we are. Is it Oríògún or Oríogun?

Romeo Oriogun: I think it's the second one. I know it means head of war. That's what I've been told that it means head of war.

OlongoAfrica: Congrats on your shortlist for the Nigeria Prize. A well-deserved nomination.

Romeo Oriogun: Thank you for that.

OlongoAfrica: So, *Nomad*...the best place to start from is why the title—because it covers a range of movements and places. How did you settle on that title? How did you settle on the poems that make the book?

Romeo Oriogun: I went through like three different titles before I settled on that. I've forgotten the names of all the titles right now. I think there was one titled: *Always a Nomad*. Yeah, I don't know. It wasn't a different title but I felt like once I just found that name "Nomad," it felt right for what I was trying to do. I think for me there's this weird way in which once I left Nigeria, I realized how displaced I was within Nigeria. I think it didn't just have to do with queerness but also language and belonging and a lot of things which I—in my very nonchalant nature—always took for granted. I was in Lome when our bus broke down and I was in front of a beach and there was this black American couple who—I guess the weight of reckoning with one's origin and one's place of origin of movement in the world was too much for them—looked at me and he just started weeping and said, "Why did you sell us?"

OlongoAfrica: Oh wow.

Romeo Oriogun: In my head I was like, "dude, I'm actually running from home," what do you mean? But there was just that tension, that moment of tension of like two different kinds of displacement I started thinking about from there. I think I wrote my first poem once I left. It was not really even written about that particular... because I still find it very hard to interpret what that means to me. But I started writing the book from there and I was just thinking about what it means also to me—as someone who, given the fact that heritage in Nigeria is very patriarchal, should be Yorùbá in all sense of the world, but I don't think I've ever felt that way. I think there's also—I grew up in Benin, my mom is Benin, I understand the language, the mythology and everything. My granddad was like the head of my mom's village so there was also that way in which every December when we go home—during the Igue festival or some other festivals in the village—my granddad's house was the place in which the masquerades depart from, which people come—and then rituals and everything. There was something very weird that always happened in that period—we as children normally follow them on Igue dances where it's like treat or treating. So I think even from that point in my life there was already that disconnect. And going to school in Ijẹ̀bú-Òde and hearing people call me "ọmọ àlẹ̀" and everything ...

OlongoAfrica: Why?

Romeo Oriogun: Because I couldn't speak Yorùbá. I had no idea of what "come" meant in the language. My lecturers would just see me and start speaking Yorùbá. And I think that's where I started dropping the name Ségun and started bearing my middle name Romeo—because they'd be like, "What's your name?" And I'd say, "Ségun," and they'd just start speaking Yorùbá ...

OlongoAfrica: Of course.

Romeo Oriogun: ... and I'm like, "Dude, I have no fucking what you are talking about." And it was just that. But I think leaving Nigeria—there was a way I didn't really care about those things—but leaving Nigeria sharpened those differences for me. Living in Ghana for a while at a point where I think it stood out when I was in Accra and there was this very weird gathering of very young people from different parts of Africa; people who were running from Uganda, some Malawians also there. I think there was someone from Eritrea and there were some black Americans who came for the whole peace corps or something, I don't know. There were Ghanaians also of course—queer Ghanaians who were also in the arts. And there was a way in which we started talking about identity and then I was just like, "Man, I never had a home!" [laughs] And I think that was the first time I realized that. I'm just like "Wow, yeah!" So when I started writing I started looking at history and

wanted to query a lot of things. And then it just dawned on me that actually history is also very placeless in the way it moves.

OlongoAfrica: When did you leave Benin? When did you leave for the first time to lẹ̀bù-Òde? How old were you?

Romeo Oriogun: I was I think fourteen or thirteen. I finished secondary school when I was eleven or so. And so I left early. Yeah, it was about thirteen or fourteen when I went to poly. I think it was the first time when I was like “Ah yeah.”

OlongoAfrica: Poly? Polytechnic? You were thirteen when you went to poly?

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah, I was thirteen when I finished secondary school, then fourteen I think when I got admission.

OlongoAfrica: What? How did that happen? That was too young. That was so young.

Romeo Oriogun: I didn't—like I did only three years of primary school.

OlongoAfrica: Wow!

Romeo Oriogun: My dad—so we were still in Port-Harcourt with my dad before he died and then the school we were attending too was always like once you take first, you skip a class ...

OlongoAfrica: Uhun, yeah.

Romeo Oriogun: ... and then when we moved to Benin—because all my life I always attended private schools so when we moved to Benin to be with my mom for my dad's death, that's when I attended public school for the first time. And I was in Primary 3, I was supposed to go to Primary 4 and they gave me the exam for Primary 4 and I ...

OlongoAfrica: And you passed. *[laughs]*

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah. The headmaster...the headmistress then was like “Oh, let's give him the entrance exam for Primary 5 and see if he would pass.” And so I passed and I just went to Primary 5 and then did Primary 6, and then when I was in JSS 1, I did GCE in SSS 1 and I passed but my mom then was like, “Oh you cannot go anywhere.” But yeah, she died early. She died early and I think I had to leave because I think as at then—I think as at then my mom's family was trying to play on my young age to gather sympathy from people to help me go to school

OlongoAfrica: Yeah. That just has been tough, to be in polytechnic at that young age...

Olajide: Very tough. It's not an age when one should...yeah.

OlongoAfrica: ... on your psyche. Dealing with old people.

Romeo Oriogun: It wasn't. I didn't feel that way. I think it's now when I'm looking at like the people I went to poly with and they have like four kids ...

OlongoAfrica: Yeah.

Romeo Oriogun ... and they're like having like white beards already—I'm now discovering the age gap. But I think when I went to—I already liked doing big things in poly. I was already drinking and smoking when I went to the polytechnic.

OlongoAfrica: Right.

Romeo Oriogun: I didn't feel—I didn't feel out of place at all. I don't know, yeah. It never felt out of place for me. It's weird like even when I was talking to them like, "Hey, what's up?," they would just look at me and laugh. I had no idea that they were laughing at me because of my age. I thought it was something else. But yeah, I never felt—it's been like very funny because I never felt—I think it's also because of the fact that when my dad died, we still lived in little Ijesha for one year because it was like a tussle between my dad's family and my mom about who's going to take us. So I think there's ways in which those events forced me to grow up.

OlongoAfrica: I was going to say that. When your dad is not there, you're forced to kind of become a man quicker than most

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah.

Romeo Oriogun: And then the streets of Benin also forced you.

OlongoAfrica: So you left Nigeria for the first time in what year?

Romeo Oriogun: In 2017.

OlongoAfrica: Okay. That was when you won the Brunel Prize

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah.

OlongoAfrica: Going through the poems I see that you're invested in a lot of colonial history and that angle you are coming from actually sparked some kind of interest in me—what could have motivated you to go on that path? What are you trying to do by going to colonial history? And then the question that looks like it is, do you recognize that poetry can also do a decolonization project?

Romeo Oriogun: So I think that without—maybe it has always been at the back of my mind. When I started writing these poems—I mean the initial, the first draft—I had no idea what I was doing, whether it was about decolonization or history or whatever. I think it has always been that the way stories have been told to me was just that way. My grandma used to tell us stories a lot and she would always start her stories with "Oh—she calls white people "pọtọkí", so she'd be like—when the pọtọkí people came..."

OlongoAfrica: Portuguese.

Romeo Oriogun: ... yeah. Like "When the pọtọkí people came, this is what happened." And I think unknowingly it's been—it's like recently when I started asking myself why I tell stories that way but I think unknowingly, I kind of like absorbed that, in which in order to trace a story you have to trace the origin of that story—where it comes from. And then on the other hand, I attended Stephanie Botts poetry class at Harvard. When I had a meeting with her she gave me Adam Zagajewski's *Without End*—collected poems. And I started reading it. And I think there was something about it that I kind of recognized. It kind of sparked my interest in Eastern-European poetics, which is because somehow the histories are very similar to us—get invaded by the Soviet Union, get roped into the whole thing, change of language, change of names of cities and even cultures, the culture of the people. And so a lot of times you have poets going to the past in order to drag things out. I think when I started writing, I'm like, "Oh okay, this is a cool way to wrestle with history and see what it's about." Yeah, I think for me I'm really interested in what history can show us. Not just in terms of language or pains or whatever, but I feel like we are weirdly in a moment where we all are back to certain kinds of puritanical—what's it called?—purity age or something where weirdly enough we're

repeating, always repeating history.

OlongoAfrica: I find it interesting really. The role Benin plays in Nigerian history—precolonial and postcolonial—being one of the first points of contact for the Portuguese who came way before the British came. And then the British invasion and the 1897 sacking. And then even the civil war when the government side came and the Biafrans had invaded and the western people came and pushed Biafrans away and then punished the people in there for their roles and their perceived roles. Just the way it has continued to play a very very ancient and present role at the same time.

Romeo Oriogun: I think a lot of people don't even know that Benin was a republic for just one day.

OlongoAfrica: B́anjօ declared a Republic of Benin.

Romeo Oriogun: So I'm like working on these poems on people leaving Benin because I feel like there's another conversation that's happening that a lot of people are not talking about, which is what's happening in Europe. I think the other day there was this video where someone just strangled a handicapped Nigerian to death in an Italian city.

The struggle there has a very weird language of its own and so *[laughs]* it's very weird. Most times you talk to people—a lot of my friends who are in Portuguese cities or Italian cities—you talk to them and they tell you how similar a lot of the language is and a lot of the things they go into, and a lot of the things that have seeped into Benin religious practices ...

OlongoAfrica: How do those things then carry along with you who have lived in this place and then moved towards—because when I read the book I see it's not just Europe and America, I mean you talk about like York and other places. You've also been in Bamako and a number of African countries and you mentioned earlier the encounter with the African-American. How does this background of yours colour the way you see these places that you encounter while you were writing this book?

Romeo Oriogun: Oh no. I think I'm like...I think there's that every day—because a lot of the places I write about are either history or the present of the everyday common person. I think in Bamako for example, one of the very weird things about there is there's a lot of Nigerians stranded there who people promise to take to either La Perdusa or something and then they get there and they run away and those guys have to survive. I stayed with some of them for three days before I left and I feel like there's a way in which I kind of think of myself as a chameleon—I'm weirdly comfortable in those spaces. I also don't think violence is something I share. And I also think that—contrary to what most people think about those kinds of spaces—once you're comfortable there and you don't feel out of place, no one sees you. Because no one sees them. A lot of people just see us as part of the architecture of the city. They see it as okay yeah people who struggle must always be here so you're not seen. You're part of that faceless group. And I think a lot of times, it's like fucked up because there's really no place I've been to that I've not met a Benin person.

OlongoAfrica: I wanted to ask a question about where you started writing poetry. I was watching an interview you did with Anthony Ngozichukwu, you said you had been writing for like three and a half years or so. So I dated it back to like 2013/2014.

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah.

OlongoAfrica: So what motivated you then? What was happening in your life at the moment that made you start thinking of poetry as an outlet?

Romeo Oriogun: I think that the thing with me and poetry is that...so I went to Edokpolor Grammar School. It's one of the boys' schools in Benin. So when I finished primary school, I was supposed to

go to Edo College which is where people from my primary school go. My mom had no money then to register me for secondary school so what I'd do because Edokolor their school had the same shorts, the colour of shorts as my primary school and then with a white shirt. So someone gave me an oversized white shirt and I'd wear it on my old primary school shorts and then go to school. I think I was already exhibiting being bipolar but I had no idea what it was at that time. Then my secondary school teacher, Mrs Uweni, when she walks in and she talks about writing, I was always very elevated. It was one of the very few things I really loved. I'd talk about poetry and fiction and she kind of gave me this collection of poems and she was like, "You should write poetry or read poetry more."

OlongoAfrica: Do you remember who wrote the book or what book it was?

Romeo Oriogun: I can't remember but I know that there was J.P Clark's *Streamside Exchange* in that book.

OlongoAfrica: Probably *Poems from West Africa* or one of those.

Romeo Oriogun: It might be that one. If it was Wole Soyinka, I'd remember. I know that at that time, we were already enamored by Wole Soyinka, what he had been able to do and everything. So I kind of read the book and just dumped it somewhere. And then my mom died in 2009. Oh, no, 2003. I don't know, I don't know. But yeah, she died when I was in SSS 3 or so and it was just a very difficult time for me. Yeah, and one day I was just searching for something and I picked that book and I just read the *Streamside Exchange*. Looking back now I really don't have any idea why I was really taken in by that poem because it was just a very simple poem. But I think maybe there was that use of the word "mother".

OlongoAfrica: And it was a very poignant poem.

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah.

OlongoAfrica: Like "*Time and tide come and go and so shall your mother.*"

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah, yeah. I just sat down and just started weeping. And I think there was just something that was woken in me at that moment so I started reading a lot of poetry. I have no idea. I mean, I've tried writing prose but I was never taken in by prose at all. There's just something about poems that just called out to me. And I kind of like—I had no idea where I found *Thirsting For Sunlight*, but I was reading it and it talked about Ibadan as this place where poetry was just there and everything. And I was like, "Oh, I could write," so I worked my transfer to Ibadan and I met someone—'cause I was a Mormon at that point—and I met someone who was just like... Actually one of the first contemporary poets I read was Dami Ajayi's *Daybreak and Other Poems*. Someone sent me the PDF and I read it and I was like, "Oh, interesting that people could write this way." And then she was also writing poems. We were in church writing spoken words when she introduced me to this Facebook group. I was just practising and I think that's where the whole thing started from. Funny enough, I never thought poetry was something—I knew I wanted to write seriously but I never thought it was something I would do seriously. The goal has been, like every guy from Benin, the goal has been ...

OlongoAfrica: Get out of this place

Romeo Oriogun: ... get out of this country.

OlongoAfrica: One of the things I noticed more regularly in your work is the metaphor of the ocean, water, seas, or streams. I think you mentioned that as well. I wonder where the obsession came

from. Is it from Benin or...?

Romeo Oriogun: I think for me it's just that when I was young I had a lot of female friends that we'd be playing with and they'd be like, "I'm in the ocean right now swimming." Right? And there's one, Omoye, she raises her leg and there's a pool of water there and I was fascinated by that. People were scared but for some reason, I was not scared of it. I would always like that. And then there was the Ikpoba River where a lot of people go—so we don't call it ogbanje in Benin, it's called Erugbakwan—so people go there to unearth stones or something to sever the link. I'd always go there and watch it happen and strangely enough, I never felt something bad. There was something so free watching those people dance to drums. Someone is playing drums and throwing native chalk in the air. There's a lot of fainting going on and this woman is just extremely free. I kind of envied that, I'm like, "Damn! Where can I get this moment where I'm extremely free for a while." Then I think when I was in primary 6, my mom stopped going to church and started doing the whole thing. I also really have insomnia then already so I would just sit down and watch my mom all night. I think she was scared. *[laughs]* So they took to this where they were like "Oh his father is calling him from the spirit world so we have to do ògùn for him.

[laughter]

OlongoAfrica: And you know for most African Americans, the water is very symbolic because of the role it played in getting them to the new country, to the new world.

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah, yeah.

OlongoAfrica: So you will find that many African-American writers will always find a way to refer back to the sea.

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah, yeah. And I think somehow there's a way in which my coming to America but passing through Harvard for my first year defined my sensibilities of what poetry is for me, the language itself and the kind of urgency. Because when I was at the Hutchins, on one hand, there was Stephanie Botts who's an authority in poetry and there were the conversations I'd go to her class and listen to when she talks about whether it's Japanese internment in America and the poems that come from that kind of tension—between well, you're Japanese-American but you have a history in which you were imprisoned. And on the other hand, there was Zizzy Parker, Mary Heats who is a professor of poetry now in the University of Chicago, Professor Mathew Morrison who is a zoologist. He does black sound which is tracing how the history of American music was founded in this kind of very racist tropes of black face and the rest and he theorizes on that. Kilithia Brooks was another person who I became very close with because she does something kind of like almost spiritual feminism but though—I think she has a New Orleans background. She's from New Orleans, from the south, and her relationship looks at the garden itself as a very spiritual space. And there's also Skip Gates also.

OlongoAfrica: Yeah.

Romeo Oriogun: Just being around that space for one year and hearing people talk of a lot of things whether it's even spirituality in America or about Santeria in Cuba, there's also a way in which those languages and kind of curiosity around that kind of entered my own language too ...

OlongoAfrica: Yeah. Okay. My last question is going back to that interview with Mark Nosichukwu in 2017 where he asked you what you hope to be doing in five years and you said you hoped to have settled in a place that you love, doing what you love, and teaching somewhere. This is five years so we seem to have met that goal somehow.

Romeo Oriogun: Yeah.

OlongoAfrica: So how do you look at the next ten years? Look back at the last five years and look to the next ten years, where do you think we would be? Or you would be?

Romeo Oriogun: Looking at the past five years, there's still the constant struggle of what home is. I don't think I've answered that truly. I think there's a way in which being restless becomes a kind of safety net for me. I'm thinking of travelling, going back to Mali again. I don't know whether parts of...because the last time I went, there were a lot of those cities in the desert that were under terrorist occupation. I don't know how far it has gone but I'm really interested in the language that exists in those spaces and how people see the world in those spaces. Because there's a certain kind of peace that I experienced when I was there among the people that I really want to go back and write about and experience for myself again. [laughs] So there's a way in which that idea of just being a Nomad in the world becomes a kind of home for me and I hope within the next ten years to really explore it. When it comes to life and writing and everything, I think I'm really comfortable where I am. [laughs] I don't know if anything will change. Yeah, but I think there's a way in which I'm settled now to start thinking of family, and start thinking about...because I never saw myself having one in the past.

OlongoAfrica: Yeah.

Romeo Oriogun: [laughs] But there's a way in which I'm thinking about that now. Yeah, I don't know. I think I'm also very naive. I think I'm fortunate to be teaching poetry now. But I think looking back at that interview, there was this very optimistic naivety that happened like "oh, I want to be doing this in five years time and bla bla bla." And I think I've been very fortunate. I think that at every turn of my life when it comes to writing, I've been extremely fortunate to meet people or get into spaces that have kind of pushed me forward. Because I remember applying for Iowa, I was very sad 'cause I think a lot of people then, even in Nigerian, who were like, "Oh, you got into these spaces because you're queer." And I'm like, "I'm not going to apply with any poem that referenced queerness and see what happens yeah." And I got into the program. But I think that there's a way in which by getting into Iowa and meeting my professor, there's that fortune that I feel I've felt all my life when it comes to writing. And being in the right place at the right time. And getting people to always push me. I think for now I'm just relaxing in that space and saying wherever life leads me. After my first book, after *Sacrament of Bodies*, there's this fever of curiosity that has really entered my body that comes with interpreting black spaces. And I think I'm not ready to fully...I still write about America but I don't think I'm ready fully yet to ask myself what the space means to me.

OlongoAfrica: Hmm.

Romeo Oriogun: So there's a way in which I'm really curious about how black people live outside of here and other kinds of religious spaces in Cuba and Brazil and all those spaces, and all the things. I think for me, my goal in the next ten years is to look at the languages of all those places and see if I can write it. But outside of that, in my personal life, I don't know. [laughs] I really don't know.

OlongoAfrica: Thank you for your time.