

Revisiting Oral Travel Narratives and the Egyptian Circumnavigation of Africa: A Decolonial Approach

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Abstract: This paper delves into the historical nuances of travel narratives, shedding light on the marginalisation of oral traditions within the broader travel writing tradition. Despite the temporal precedence of African travel narratives, they are often relegated to a belated and marginalised status within the travel writing genre, inextricably bound to colonial influences. The primary objective of this paper is to contribute to the decolonisation of the travel writing genre by scrutinising and validating the veracity of an oral travel account documenting one of the most disputed circumnavigations of Africa by ancient Egyptians. Through a thorough examination of historical evidence and sources, this research seeks to establish the factual basis of the Egyptian circumnavigation, thereby reshaping the narrative and affording oral traditions their rightful place in the annals of travel literature.

Keywords: Travel Writing, Decolonisation, Africa, Egyptians, oral traditions

Introduction

The attitude of members of an oral society toward speech is similar to the reverence members of a literate society attach to the written word.
– Jan Vansina

Jan Vansina, a leading historian and anthropologist, in his seminal works on orality and oral traditions, has observed that African civilisations widely relied on oral traditions to record and transmit all the significant knowledge concerning political, legal, social and religious. Nevertheless the scholars, such as Ruth Finnegan, has also observed that since oral traditions ‘do not neatly fit into the familiar categories of literate cultures’, therefore, the oral traditions are less appreciated as compared to written cultures (Finnegan 1). This underpins the attitudes of the societies with written literary traditions to undervalue the aptitude of oral cultures in amassing, structuring, disseminating, and perpetuating knowledge. The skepticism arises from the constrained understanding of the written literary traditions about the intricacies of knowledge production and communication (Nunn 3–6). This propels and furthers the image of oral cultures as void of any literary traditions at all. That is why, even though Achille Mbembe has observed that ‘the cultural history of the [African] continent can hardly be understood outside the paradigm of itinerancy, mobility and displacement’ (Mbembe 27), still the tradition of indigenous African travel writing is considered belated and marginalised.

Building on both the travel writing scholarship and historical value of oral traditions, this paper studies the most controversial first circumnavigation of Africa commissioned by the Pharaoh Necho II or Nekau II of the twenty-sixth Egyptian dynasty reigning from 610 to 595 BC (Shaw 480–82). The only source of information about this circumnavigation is *The Histories* by Herodotus, who has penned down the story after listening from the indigenous poeple. However, this written document is also questioned by the historians, anthropologists, and cultural studies scholars because of the ‘unreliable’ oral source of information for Herodotus’s knowledge about the circumnavigation.

Travel writing scholarship has thoroughly recognised the ability of travel writers to distort the truth- ‘amplifying their observations, claiming credit for what they never witnessed or inventing fabulous narratives from their imagination’ (Carey 3). Nonetheless, in the case of travel narratives produced during the period of antiquity, William Hutton, has cautioned the readers against seeking a firm distinction between ‘fictional’ and ‘non-fictional’ accounts. According to Hutton, even the most ‘reality-based narratives’ are loaded with literary allusion, authorial role play and imagination (Hutton 101). Therefore, I am not propositioning the actuality of the story of this circumnavigation, rather I am recommending the vitality of the oral tradition in rewriting the history of African travel writing from decolonial perspective. I propose, that this tale should also be tested similarly as other travel narratives are considered to be ‘fictional’ or ‘non-fictional’ based on their supporting evidence, such as geographical, historical, cultural, political and capabilities of the travellers.

Overlooking Oral Travel Narratives, Colonising Travel Writing

The ancient Egyptians are known to have gone up the Nile until the point of confluence in search of the source of the river Nile, hence undertaking possibly the first exploration to the interior of Africa, and beyond (Cary and Warmington 158). The exploration activities undertaken by non-European entities in the African interior and along its coasts were initially preserved within the oral traditions of African societies. Subsequently, these accounts were relayed to ancient scholars, notably Herodotus, who transcribed them into written documentation. Nonetheless, due to the absence or lack of written travel accounts by African explorers themselves, the stories of these explorations were discredited by the European explorers and Western scholarship. Due to their roots being embedded in oral literary tradition, the historians, geographers and other literary scholars labelled these ancient explorations as ‘alleged’ or ‘pretended’, thereby eliminating any chance of verifying these historical records and subsequently diminishing traditional explorations into the realm of ‘myth’ (Webb). Consequently, the authority of Egyptians as pioneers of African exploration was annulled thereby ‘erasing centuries of pre-colonial history, contact, and travel across Africa’ (Thompson). This created the African exploration as a blank space to be filled by the Victorian explorers through the myth of discovery.

Tabish Khair, in his introduction to *Other Routes: 1500 years of African and Asian Travel Writing*, explains in detail the ‘myth of discovery’ and its impact on the colonial forces as well as the colonised. Khair demonstrates, through the example of Angkor Wat, a regularly visited Buddhist temple, the way western explorers constructed a myth of a blank space to be mapped and named by the European discoverers (Khair). The pre-colonial question of who mapped the world first was phenomenally influential in making the face of the world and deciding the superior race. The multiple European expeditions sent and their written documentation of the geographical and ethnographical knowledge of the world enabled the Europeans to, predominantly, be acknowledged as the discoverers and the knowledge precursors of the geography.

The interplay of power, knowledge, and authenticity has its roots in the historical context of the Grand Tour. This tradition, originating in the sixteenth century, obligated young men of privilege and means to embark on a comprehensive journey across Europe. The purpose was to gain a profound understanding of history, architecture, and geography, and to document these experiences in writing (Fussell 129). Consequently, this practice conferred authenticity and a sense of superiority upon these travellers compared to the other travellers and travelleses. This concept of authenticity, along with intellectual ascendancy, took root in European society, especially among those who undertook the Grand Tour. As a result, when these travellers ventured beyond the borders of Europe, journeying to distant places like Africa, they were perceived as individuals of high social standing, possessing intellectual acumen and moral rectitude, often sponsored by wealthy patrons. Consequently, the documents they generated, including letters, writings, and personal accounts, were accorded a status of authenticity and originality. The momentum of this trend was further

propelled by the Victorians, who, through their narratives emphasising exceptionalism, consolidated the authority of Euro-imperial powers. They achieved this by establishing and validating the myth of discovery, reinforcing their position of supremacy in the global context (Hibbert 13).

The advent of the printing press further facilitated the travel writing genre to construct and circulate the myth of discovery, which emblematised the stereotypical labels: European travellers' society as an enterprising and inquisitive society, while the other as its antithesis (Mancall 5; Gruesser). A recurring image of black people as 'lazy, ignorant and uncontrollable,' contrasted with the 'compassionate, kind, and enterprising' white explorers in European, specifically British, travel writing (Brantlinger 166). The volumes of travel narratives produced in the colonial era ascertained that these civilised, courageous, brave, committed, cultured and knowledgeable white British travellers (Jeal) were travelling everywhere despite the threats and hitches. Not only were these hegemonic discourses further used to 'justify colonialism as the control of wild and savage people by the civilising forces of European culture', but also to belittle the significant role played by the African companions in these European expeditions (Holloway and Hubbard 135; Garrett; Fabian). Since the African auxiliary was not keeping any written records of their travel stories, therefore, to reduce them to the footnotes in the white man's travel writing became rather convenient. This all concluded in a stereotypical image of a white man passing the difficult terrains to explore and discover the unknown land. This described Western society as enlightened, inquisitive and enthusiastic about solving the mysteries of the world; and the non-western culture as dark, ignorant and passive. This myth, and its written versions, has not only helped imperial projects but has also deprived African people of any claim to knowledge and power. The commemorating sites, such as Victoria Falls and Mount Stanley, in Africa on the names of the European discoveries speak a lot about colocalization of experience, the lost African history and its heroes. The myth of discovery, largely based on ignoring the indigenous oral traditions, enabled to play into the trope of exceptionalism in order to create and exploit the idea of 'blank spaces', to further construct the image of 'dark continent' waiting for a light from outside. This enabled European explorers to colonise the physical as well as the literary landscape of African continent.

The transition of the oral traditions of ancient explorations from history to mythology, and employment of myth of discovery through written history was neither spontaneous nor explicit Western collusion. It can be suggested that the scarcity of ancient to medieval written records played a pivotal role in the rhetorical strategy of travel writing, effectively stripping Africa and its inhabitants of historical context. This, in turn, enabled European authors within the genre to disregard and erase journeys that fell beyond the confines of Eurocentric narratives (Cary and Warmington 8, 15). Also, the Western scholars and explorers, due to peripheral understanding of oral traditions and due to imperial aspirations, negated this authority of ancient explorers. Their explicit rejection of the oral narratives, by either questioning them on a very narrow gauge and testing them according to their own set of belief or by rejecting them on the basis of lack of evidence, erased all the memories and evidence of non-European travels to Africa for European audience. Though the recent developments in the fields of African textualities, literary traditions and history of literature has started focussing on the oral traditions as well. Nonetheless, as Finnegan has rightly observed that even those scholars who still tend to believe in the indigenous oral traditions are influenced by the assumptions about the nature of literary activity among non-literate peoples, which uphold the colonial hegemonic stereotypes in postcolonial world:

All in all, there is still the popular myth of Africa as a continent either devoid of literature until contact with civilized nations led to written works in European languages, or possessing only crude and uninteresting forms not worthy of systematic study by the serious literary or sociological student. (Finnegan 26)

The absence or dismissal of oral travel narratives has also contributed in perpetuating and disseminating a similar image of Africa as a continent either lacking any literary tradition around travel

forms until European explorers arrived, or possessing only peripheral understanding of travel traditions (Jones 1–3). West claimed that the continent continued to be a secret to the world until 1788 when the first European expedition ‘discovered’ the continent. Travel writing, therefore, as suggested by Steve Clark, came to be perceived as ‘one-way traffic, because the Europeans mapped the world rather than the world mapping them’ (Clark 3). To decolonise the history of African travel writing, I propose, that the oral tradition will need to be evaluated and taken into sincere consideration.

Though the postcolonial travel writing scholars, such as Rebecca Jones and Aedin Ni Loingsigh, has started arguing in favour of considering alternative ways of reading and understanding African travel history, still oral tradition is not being fully explored for its historicity and reliability by the travel writing scholars. In recent developments, Vansina has suggested that history can indeed be extracted from the African oral traditions after careful evaluation of ‘methods of transmission, limitation of material, sources of distortion, literary forms and relationship to other historical evidence (Vansina et al. 155; van Fossen).

Circumnavigation of Africa

The circumnavigation of Africa, as described by Herodotus, was commissioned by Necho II of the Egyptian dynasty. This particular circumnavigation remains a subject of considerable controversy, primarily because the primary source of its information, *The Histories* by Herodotus, relies only on indigenous oral narratives. According to Herodotus’ account of this monumental feat, the Phoenician mariners embarked from the Erythraian Sea, navigating through the southern ocean. They would anchor at a suitable location each autumn, cultivate a parcel of land, wait for the harvest, and then continue their voyage after reaping the crops. After two years, in the third year of their expedition, they successfully circumnavigated the Pillars of Heracles and returned to Egypt (Macaulay 112).

The narrative of this expedition exclusively resides within the domain of indigenous knowledge contained in myths, folklores, and oral performances. Herodotus, in his capacity as a meticulous historian, conscientiously records the intricacies of this oral history. Throughout his historical works he expresses his reservations about accepting all accounts provided by the local peoples. He approaches this narrative as well with a measure of both belief and skepticism. Relying on his knowledge and assessment of the event’s authenticity, he presents supportive evidence for the notion that the Indian Ocean and Atlantic waters were connected (Cary and Warmington 88). Conversely, he also expresses his skepticism by stating, ‘These men made a statement which I do not myself believe, though others may, to the effect that as they sailed on a westerly course round the southern end of Libya, they had the sun on their right – to the northward of them’ (Macaulay 307). Though, Herodotus’ skepticism has since been addressed and resolved by geographers, who have corroborated the accuracy of the accounts provided by his sources. Nonetheless, his deliberate and strategic stance as an external observer of historical records, combined with an awareness of indigenous oral traditions for recording, conveying, and preserving their history, renders, as rightly observed by Cheikh Anta Diop, his accounts suitable for the reconstruction of African history (Diop).

Though Egyptian literary tradition in proto-historical era of African history can be traced through the surviving evidence on papyri, tombs, and stelae, and also the way wisdom genre, transmitted in form of *shoyet* (Instructions from a wise man to his son), has evolved as a complex literary tradition from oral tradition says in itself the extent to which oral tradition has served as the archive of the indigenous African knowledge (Scheub 17). However, as Finnegan, while discussing about the historical narratives and legends as forms of African oral traditions, has pointed towards the problematic assumption ‘that any knowledge of the past must always find expression in a literary form’ (Finnegan 369). This leads to the trap of looking at the knowledge through a limited lens of perceived authenticity. Even though the recent developments in this area has led scholars, such as Rennell, Wheeler and Muller, to reconstruct and authenticate the entire story (Cary and Warmington 93). Still, the scholars, such as Allan B Lloyd and E.J. Webb have rejected the first circumnavigation

of Africa by calling it a myth. They have raised numerous questions on the practicality of the voyage, absence of written evidence, unauthentic sources, impossible distances, and discontinuity in narratives. Out of all these, the absence of any written records left behind by the mariners amplifies the prevailing skepticism surrounding this narrative. Therefore, to reconstruct the history of African travel writing without adapting colonial framework, the scholarship needs to look beyond literary traditions for references. For instance, the evidence of imported exotics and other materials from interior Africa and lands overseas is a significant point to highlight that the Ancient Egyptians were in thorough contact with others. They are known to be importing 'turquoise from Sinai; silver from Anatolia via the Levant; copper from Nubia[,] Sinai and [the] eastern desert; gold from [the] eastern desert and Nubia; fine wood [such] as cedar and products [such] as incense and myrrh from [W]estern Asia and tropical Africa' (Shaw 320). However, the most crucial evidence of their travels to as far as North-eastern Afghanistan is lapis lazuli, a grave bluestone, known to Egyptians as Khesbed (Shaw 313). This stone was used for jewellery, amulets, and figurines from the Nagada II Period that dates 3000 BC. This stone seems to have been located at Badakhshan in northeastern Afghanistan (4000km from Egypt) (Shaw 320). This evidence proves that the Egyptians of 3000 B.C. were already aware of land routes and were travelling to these faraway lands.

Furthermore, as posited by M. Cary, the historiography of ancient explorations should adopt a distinct approach compared to that of ancient and modern discoveries. It is impractical to impose uniform patterns across various temporal epochs and ethnicities. Each historical era is shaped by a unique prevailing ideology, and the motivations for migration or exploration are specific to each racial or ethnic group. The European explorers were exploring and writing their story in the form of letters and reports for a specific purpose, however, these Phoenician sailors have not left anything in written primarily due to the exact opposite reason.

Upon ascending to the throne, Necho II faced a dire military situation on Egypt's northeastern border. The preceding twenty-fifth dynasty had concluded with Egypt severely affected by the Assyrian invasions spanning 671-631 B.C. The advent of the twenty-sixth dynasty brought specific challenges, including a fragmented Egypt, economic fragility, and the threat posed by Asiatic and Nubian rulers seeking to regain control over the land (Alan B Lloyd; A. Lloyd). Psamtek I, cognizant of these challenges, sought to bolster both the military and economic aspects of his reign by 'developing trade links with Greek and Phoenicia' (Bard and Fattovich 270). Hence, it was imperative to foster strong military and economic ties with neighbouring entities. In an effort to facilitate trade and potentially open a maritime route to attack southern Babylonia, Nekau II initiated the construction of a canal that stretched from the delta's Pelusiac branch through the Wadi Tumilat to the Gulf of Suez (Bard and Fattovich 270). This endeavour marked a revival of economic activity in the Red Sea region. However, Necho abandoned the project after a tragic loss of 120,000 Egyptian lives, as legend says, following an oracle's prophecy that only a foreigner would reap the benefits of the canal. Subsequently, the canal's construction was completed by Darius (Redmount 128). The circumnavigation of Africa may be linked to Necho's broader defence initiatives (A.B Lloyd 376). It is plausible to assume that Phoenician involvement in this circumnavigation was a logical choice given their renowned seafaring expertise and shared adversarial relationship with Babylon. Necho II's solicitation of Phoenician assistance and their agreement to undertake the project aligns with this rationale. As it was the inaugural circumnavigation of Africa, it is conceivable that neither the Phoenicians nor the Egyptians possessed accurate knowledge of the African coastal geography. This might have led them to entertain the optimistic notion of finding a route around Africa to launch an attack on Babylonia. It is possible that this circumnavigation was not commissioned with the intent of documenting the journey but rather driven by alternative, more pragmatic motivations. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that once they had completed their exploratory mission, they might have either departed without leaving any inscriptions or stayed in Carthage. Alternatively, they could have been unable to convey their achievements to Necho from where the tale lived in the form of a legend

in oral tradition. The precise date of the expedition remains unknown, and it is conceivable that Necho may have passed away by the time of their return. His successors, preoccupied with safeguarding their borders against external threats, may not have taken a keen interest in the expedition's outcomes. Nevertheless, their experiences were preserved in Egyptian oral tradition, eventually reaching Herodotus.

Also following Vansina's methodology of historiography through oral traditions, this circumnavigation also finds its evidence in written European documents, not in the form of folklore or oral performance. In 1827, George Thompson, a successful merchant, travelling across Africa from Cape Colony to promote his company, wrote his travelogue: *Travels and Adventures in South Africa*. In a footnote, he records a discovery of the timber of a vessel embedded in the sea some years ago, which he was unable to identify, he writes:

...A nautical gentleman, who examined it with more care than I had an opportunity of bestowing, thinks that the wood (which has apparently been buried for ages in the sand) greatly resembles cedar, and conceives it possible that this may be the remains of some ancient Phoenician vessel, wrecked here when our present Cape Flats were under water, forming, perhaps, a shallow strait between Wynberg and the Koeber... Whatever may be in this, Captain Owen seems to have obtained strong evidence of the commerce of the Phoenicians having extended from the Red Sea, much farther down the eastern coasts of Africa than is generally imagine... (Thompson 319)

This travelogue, published in 1827, and as per Thompson's account, the discovery had been made a few years prior to its publication. This signifies that the British were already cognizant of the potential voyages of the Phoenicians to Cape Flats, potentially for commercial purposes. Surprisingly, scholars have seemingly omitted or overlooked this historical context when engaging in debates concerning circumnavigation. While the significance of this discovery may not conclusively justify ancient endeavours, it is an aspect worthy of acknowledgment, particularly when considering its temporal precedence over the Victorian era, an epoch marked by a profusion of enlightenment-driven discoveries. Moreover, it is pertinent to note that this discovery experienced a revival in 1852. Charles Bell, the Surveyor-General, officially requested a sum of twenty pounds through a letter addressed to C.H. Darling, the Lieutenant Governor, and the request received due approval. Some of the excerpts from that letter, as quoted by H.F. Sampson are as follows:

...However extraordinary it may seem, I am compelled to believe that this wood is part of a large vessel upward of some seventy feet in length, wrecked when the sea washed up to some of the ancient beaches on the Lion's Head and now raised some hundreds of feet in height above the present high-water mark and left at a distance of at least 14 miles from the shore... It would be idle to indulge at present in any archaeological speculations. I would merely allude to the accounts which have reached our times of the early circumnavigation of Africa while the pyramids were yet new. The Block cannot be taken as evidence of recent construction, for Blocks are pictured and carved by the ancient Egyptians and Assyrians, and if, solely from position, I advert to the possibility of this being a relic perhaps of the age of Pharaoh Necho, and to the care with which of late years the Archaeologists of Europe have collected and classed all that relates to the prehistoric annals of their country, particularly in Norway and Scotland. I do so, only that the chance of some interesting discovery may not be lost. (Sampson 37–38)

The outcome of this archaeological survey and the disposition of the twenty-pound fund remains undisclosed, as inferred from Sampson's article. However, the primary point of significance lies in the ongoing exploratory activities centred around shipwrecks. It is plausible that Charles Bell may have inadvertently associated these shipwrecks with the era of Necho II. Nevertheless, if a comprehensive report on the investigation were available, it would likely dispel any uncertainties by providing a more accurate understanding of the wreckage.

The idea of 'myth' is distinct in Western culture and in African literary culture. There are literary forms such as *hwenoho* (time-old-story) and *heho* (light-hearted tales related to supernatural, human and animals) tradition. However, they are rather overlapping forms of folktale/myth/legend (Finnegan

365). Therefore there is no clear distinctive definition for 'myth' per say. Whereas Western written literary tradition clearly classifies travel writing genre and myth, there is almost no overlap. Also the Mediterranean culture has not produced travel writing as conventionally defined and understood by the Western scholarship. Therefore, the story of this circumnavigation has conveniently slipped into the Western definition of 'myth', which has resulted in overlooking of these specific findings. The varied description of myth, and attitude towards the oral cultures, enables some scholars to question the authenticity of the circumnavigation based on their presumptions and expectations of the race. For instance, Lloyd doubts the circumnavigation based on Egyptian characteristics: he says 'Here we have Egyptian king presented to us, like some philosopher-king, forming the notion of circumnavigating Africa... This would surely have been a psychological impossibility for any Pharaoh... It is doubtful that an Egyptian King would, or could, have acted as Necho is depicted as doing' (Alan B Lloyd 150).

Vansina has proposed methods to test the oral traditions for churning out the closest description of the past of the culture. He has widely focussed on comparative analysis of testimonies with other auxiliary sources of history. Lloyds' doubt, though highly racialised, can be tested through the discovery of the two massive sealed pits, carved into the limestone bedrock of the Giza plateau, in 1954, underneath a pile of debris just south of the Great Pyramid of Giza. These pits seemed to form a part of the funerary complex of the pyramid of King Cheops, the second ruler of the Fourth Dynasty of the Egyptian Old Kingdom. One of the pits preserved the timbers of a 43.m (143.97') funerary vessel (Jenkins 3). This boat seems to have been buried some four and a half millennia earlier, apparently at the same time that King Cheops was buried in his tomb in the heart of the adjacent pyramid (Jenkins 4). In yet another excavation at Wadi Gawasis, the archaeologists have discovered the remains of the oldest seafaring ship. This established that the 'ancient Egyptians were capable of navigating as far as the southern Red Sea region' using ships built with refined technology (Bard and Fattovich). This site of Wadi Gawasis was also established as the Pharaonic harbour used for sea-faring expeditions during the twelfth dynasty based on textual evidence (Veldmeijer et al.). Another 'mythical tale' of Scota, the daughter of an Egyptian Pharaoh who married Geytholos, the founder of Scots, after being exiled from Egypt, assist in establishing that the Egyptians might be well trained and technically sound to navigate the waters of North Atlantic sea after passing through the pillars of Hercules, a distance greater than they were travelling overland (Matthews 289).

The Egyptian literary tradition became not only Africa's first but world's first such tradition to manifest a close relationship between orality and written literature. Herodotus, though unknowingly, has acted as a scribe for the local orators of the tale of circumnavigation. The scribes in proto-historical era of Egypt were seen as a disseminator of oral knowledge with an authority to 'rephrase, rearrange and transpose, omit sentences, add information, elaborate on advice, and generally shape the imagery' (Scheub 16). Therefore, the degree of imagination that may have gone into the narration or writing of the tale cannot be ruled out. Still, the degree of authenticity in the story needs to be tested on certain other historical parameters. This enables the travel writing scholarship to revisit and redefine the history of travel writing from decolonial perspective.

Conclusion

Recently, the travel writing scholarship has started seeking alternative non- Eurocentric ways of reading and approaching the travel texts by non-European societies. However, the oral tradition is yet to receive appropriate attention by the scholarship. This paper, by studying the role of oral tradition in skepticism and reliability of the tale of the first circumnavigation of Africa carried out by the Phoenician sailors, has contributed to this area of knowledge. The study has demonstrated, relying on the archaeological and other historical sources, that the Egyptians were seafaring people travelling to faraway lands as early as 3000 B.C., had technically sound ships to materialise their projects, and also had a reason to circumnavigate Africa. The paper has used this information as a

substantial clue, either affirming or questioning the veracity of the first circumnavigation of Africa in a more informed manner. Therefore, the circumnavigation shall not be discarded as 'alleged' or 'myth'. The paper has not explicitly proposed the authenticity of the event itself, rather it has tried to establish the significance of oral traditions in writing the literary histories of the societies without formal written culture as understood by the Euro-centric knowledge structures. The paper demonstrates that the oral traditions can be utilised to decolonise the history of travel writing genre.

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