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The Forger's Tale: The Search for Odeziaku (New African Histories)

Stephanie Newell

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Between 1905 and 1939 a conspicuously tall white man with a shock of red hair, dressed in a silk shirt and white linen trousers, could be seen on the streets of Onitsha, in Eastern Nigeria. How was itpossible for an unconventional, boy-loving Englishman to gain a social status among the local populace enjoyed by few other Europeans in colonial West Africa?In The Forger’s Tale: The Search for Odeziaku Stephanie Newell charts the story of the English novelist and poet John Moray Stuart-Young (1881-1939) as he traveled from the slums of Manchester to West Africa in order to escape the homophobic prejudices of late-Victorian society. Leaving behind acriminal record for forgery and embezzlement and his notoriety as a “spirit rapper,” Stuart-Young found a new identity as a wealthy palm oil trader and acelebrated author, known to Nigerians as “Odeziaku.”In this fascinating biographical account, Newell draws on queer theory, African gender debates, and “new imperial history” to open up a wider studyof imperialism, (homo)sexuality, and nonelite culture between the 1880s and the late 1930s. The Forger’s Tale pays close attention to different forms of West African cultural production in the colonial period and to public debates about sexuality and ethics, as well as to movements in mainstreamEnglish literature.

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