

Late D.O Fagunwa – Life and Works by Dr. Bayo Adebowale

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Lecture delivered by Dr. Bayo Adebowale, (Director/Founder, African Heritage Research Library and Cultural Centre, (AHRLC) Adeyipo Village, Ibadan) on the occasion of Fagunwa Night, organized by Society of Young Nigerian Writers on Saturday 25th February, 2011 at U.I. Amphi-Theatre, Ibadan.

A. Greetings:

The Chairman of today's Occasion,

Dignitaries here present,

Representatives of the Fagunwa Foundation

The National President and Members of the Society of Young Nigerian Writers,

Invited Guests and Students,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Gentlemen and Ladies of the press.

B. Appreciation:

Let me hereby appreciate the Organizers of this FAGUNWA NIGHT (the Society of Young Nigerian Writers), for their foresight, and thank them, profusely, for the honour of requesting me to address this gathering, on the topic: D.O. Fagunwa: His Life and Works.

This is a rather big topic which I know has been analyzed and dissected in several forums, by eminent scholars and literary giants...So now, I begin to wonder what other new things a little person like me can say on this big topic which had not been said several times before...Then, of course, I very well know that to do real justice to a discussion of the life and works of a writer like D.O. Fagunwa, is far beyond the scope of a one hour public lecture.

This is not my only worry...

I must confess, Mr. Chairman, that I was caught in the dilemma of whether to present this lecture in English or Yoruba, since we are hereby tackling essentially a Yoruba Literary Icon whose medium of expression is purely the Yoruba Language...But upon deliberation, I have settled for the former option, realizing that Fagunwa's works need to be expanded beyond the frontiers of his immediate ethnic group, to a wider audience which include those not directly concerned with

Yoruba Literature, but who are deeply interested in traditional African Literature; and also to those whose special field is Comparative Literature, who may want to probe into how traditional African Literature has influenced the totality of African writing in English.

C. General Comments:

And so, Mr. Chairman, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, here we go! First with a few general comments, on the topic of the lecture:

FAGUNWA: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

D.O. Fagunwa's creative art, from inception, has been received with warmth and enthusiasm. His early-time audience consumed the themes and contents of his works eagerly and with gusto...

Whoever among them can ever forget Fagunwa's powerful character portrait of his major characters like Esu Kekereode, Anjonnu Iberu, Olowoaye, Ojola Ibinu, Kako, Akaraoogun, Imodoye, Olohun Iyo, Aramanda Okunrin, Egbin, Ibembe Olokunrun, Ifepade, Arogidigba, Baba Onirugbon Yeuke, Ajediran, Iragbeje, Ajantala, Ogongo Baba Eye, Edidare people and Omugodimeji their Royal Father, Ireke Onibudo, itanforiti, Ologbo Ijakadi, Iyunade and Ahondiwura!

Fagunwa's early-time critics, in the same token, evaluated the style and technique of his novels with utmost regard and respect. All of Fagunwa's novels got incisive analysis and critical acclaim from eminent scholars, of the caliber of Ayo Bamgbose, Abiola Irele, Uli Beier, Bernth Lindfors, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Akinwumi Isola, R.W. Noble, Olaseinde Lawson, Olakunle George, Adeeko Adeleke, A. Olubummo, Olabiyi Yai, Tunde Ogunpolu, Adeboye Babalola, Afolabi Olabimtan, Oladele Taiwo, and a host of others.

Fagunwa's works had been adapted for the stage, and translated into English, notably by Wole Soyinka (*Forest of a Thousand Daemons: Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*); Gabriel Ajadi (*The Forest of God: Igbo Olodumare*); Dapo Adeniyi (*Expedition to the Mount of Thought* (*irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* and *The Mystery Plan of the Almighty* (*Adiitu Olodumare*) by the University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies... This is apart from a series of theses and dissertations which Fagunwa's works had elicited among researchers in Tertiary Institutions all over Nigeria and beyond.

This really is how things should be for a writer of Fagunwa's stature – a prominent figure and trail blazer in Nigeria's indigenous literature of Yoruba extraction... in the field of Yoruba literature, in particular, and traditional African literature in general, Fagunwa, no doubt, occupies a position of pre-eminence. It has rightly been observed that the appearance of Fagunwa's novels marks 'an important stage in the development of Yoruba written literature. 'After having his five novels reprinted over twenty-five times, since first publication, Fagunwa's name, in deed, has become a household word among his teeming audience (old and young), but especially among those of them in schools and colleges, in South West Nigeria and some parts of Benin Republic, where his books used to be prescribed texts and required reading.

Fagunwa's Biography:

Fagunwa's biography is important, here for consideration only as long as it helps us to secure a clearer picture of his art, and also as long as it assists us to appreciate the overall technique of his creative ebullience. It has been discovered that the stories and episode recorded in all his novels. This is to say that Fagunwa's fiction provides one good peep into the facts of his life and times. His is an interesting meeting-point between experience and imagination; a union of pure fact and outright fiction.

1. The rural setting of Fagunwa's birth place (Oke-Igbo), no doubt, has helped to immerse him deeply into the traditional milieu and cultural heritage of his people. This has thrown some light on why igbo (forest) itself keeps on recurring in his novels. It has been discovered that the word 'igbo' appears over four hundred times, in different places, in the works of Fagunwa. Three of his five works, as a matter of fact, embody the word 'igbo' as title: Igbo Irunmale; Igbo Olodumare and Igbo Elegbeje.
2. In Yoruba traditional belief, the deep forest is held in great reverence and awe, because the place is replete with all sorts of malevolent practices and diabolical manipulation. Fagunwa is well aware, through the medium of traditional folktales, as a village boy, that 'igbo' is the abode of trolls, spirits and fairies; the home of witches and wizards; of gnomes and all classes of daemons known as 'ebora', all of whom Fagunwa has identified in his novels, and whom his major characters used to confront in duels and battles during their series of adventures. There is the antill ebora (ebora okiti ogan); walnut ebora (ebora ara awusa); the Iroko tree ebora (ebora inu iroko); the mountaintop ebora (ebora ori oke) and the thick jungle ebora (ebora aginju).
3. Fagunwa, as a village man, is definitely not a stranger to the purported power and potency of witches and wizards. It is along the roadside and in the clumps of the banana trees in the forest where witches and wizards used to converge, in the dead of the night, to sing songs of bereavement in muffled tones and esoteric language. Witchcraft, Ayo Bamgbose has rightly noted, is a basic ingredient in the story of Akara Ogun's father. He marries a witch, Ajediran, who, like all activities in Yoruba belief, is able to turn herself into a bird and fly in the night. Later when this man takes more wives, this witch shows her wickedness by killing three of her co-wives and eight of their children.
4. Fagunwa emphasizes the elements of weirdness in his novels, based on his knowledge of the folktale tradition, and the tradition of adventure stories handed down from generation to generation by his people. He, consequently goes ahead to paint the picture of the world of spirits and magic, incantations, charms and communication with the dead which his people ardently believe in... physically, his 'aroni' is a one-legged fairy; his 'egbere' is a short creature, always shedding tears and carrying a ragged mat about under her armpit. His Inaki-Iberu in Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje transforms into various things : an elephant, water, sun and stone.
5. In Yoruba folktales, which Fagunwa is undoubtedly familiar with, powerful mythology heroes, hunters and warriors arm themselves with medicines, magical charms and incantations. Charms are sewed into leather and worn round the waist, arms and neck; rings are worn round fingers, charms are put inside little gourds. Some charms are taken orally or through incisions in the body. All these medicine and charms are properly focused on in all Fagunwa's novels – from Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale to Adiitu Olodumare.
6. D.O Fagunwa's Judeo-Christian background is a common knowledge to scholars of his creative works. His father (Joshua Akintunde) and mother (Rachael Osunyomi) are both converts to

Christian religion. He himself gave up his middle name (Orowale) and assumed a new one (Olorunfemi); then proceeded to St. Luke's Kindergarten School, Oke Igbo, and the famous St. Andrew's College, Oyo (1926-1929) after which he later became the headmaster of the Nursery section of the practicing school, for ten whole-years. Fagunwa's Christian background is solid, sustained all along, through his vacation interaction with Catechist Oladineji at Modakeke (1931)...

The Christian doctrine which Fagunwa has imbibed manifests itself powerfully in his creative output in various clear ways: The biblical allusions in his novels are in myriads. Fagunwa's major characters engage in fervent prayers, during difficult times, in recognition of their firm belief in the omnipotence of the Almighty God, whose attributes are diverse and whose appellations are intimidating. He is Olodumare, Olojo-Oni, Oba Airi, Onibuore, Olubukun, Olowo-gbogboro and Awimayehun. (Ref. Ogboju Ode, Ireke Onibudo, and Adiiu Olodumare).

D.O. Fagunwa's life-time intimacy with the Holy Bible fully reveals itself in his works, with lavish allusions to the scriptures. And from Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale, all through to Adiiu Olodumare, we come across an avalanche of direct and indirect references to episodes in the Bible; for instance, the stories, the stories of King Solomon, Adam and Eve, Tower of Babel, Samson and Delilah, the ten lepers, King Nebuchadnezzar, Joseph and Potiphar's wife etc... It does seem that the charge of 'too much didacticism', excessive sermonizing and moralizing' from critics will continue to trail the writings of D.O. Fagunwa for a long long time i) because of his professional calling as a teacher, and (ii) because of the permanency of his formidable Christian background, all of which he has brought to bear on the development of the themes and techniques of his writing.

1. In his life time, Fagunwa was evidently a voracious reader of classical English and Greek literature books. There are abundant evidences of his familiarity with the Arabian Night Stories, John Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and William Shakespeare's plays, especially the play, As You Like It, where Orlando composes poems in praise of his lover, Rosalind in the forest of Arden – something which reechoes in the love tangle between Ireke and Ipade in Fagunwa requires a story, he feels no inhibition in drawing on his reading of abridged edition of classical books with which to embellish and enrich episodes in the various sections of his novels.

8. Works of D.O. Fagunwa

i) Complete Works

Fagunwa's complete works transcend the major five novels he published (i.e Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale (1938); Igbo Olodumare (1949); Ireke Onibudo (1949) Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje (1949); and Adiiu Eledumare (1961). Fagunwa also authored/co-authored Ajala and Ajadi: Asayan Itan (1959); Irin Ajo Apa Kini, Apa Keji (1949); Itan Oloyin (ed.) 1954); Ojo Asotan (with G.L Laosebikan) (1964); Taiwo ati Kehinde (with L.J. Lawis) 1949.

ii. Setting and Themes of Fagunwa's Novels:

Fagunwa's novels are majorly set in purely rural environment with forests and hills, graced by the abundance of nature. All Fagunwa's novels are adventure stories in which a hero or a group of heroes (usually hunters) set out on a mission that is eventually accomplished with great daring, cleverness, luck, and the help of charms and incantations, plus a little bit of help from God... Bernth Lindfors (1982) elaborate further on the theme of Fagunwa's novels by submitting that the adventures usually take place in a forest or bush infested with spirits and daemons who threaten those bold enough to trespass on their territories. Eventually, most of them safely return home (from their perilous journeys to Ilu Oku, Ilu Ero Ehinm Ilu Alupayida, Langbodo etc) Strengthened by their experience and encounter with the abnormal and the supernatural... Virtually the same theme of perseverance, courage, valour, determination, treachery, retribution, love and women run through all of Fagunwa's novels. These thematic similarities make one to conclude that, in Fagunwa, if you have read just one of his novels, then you have indirectly read all of his novels!

iii. Characterization:

The vulnerability of Fagunwa's art has been identified in the ways his characters are portrayed in virtually all his novels. Most characters, especially the minor ones are paper-thin; vaguely depicted; unrealistically portrayed; passive and dull. Ayo Bamgbose, in particular, has been unsparing in his observation of Fagunwa's method of characterization. While some of Fagunwa's characters remain un-named, most of them are deliberately brought in for the single incidents in which they are involved, and as soon as such incidents are over, they disappear into thin air, never to be seen again! They disappear as suddenly as they appear! (e.f Gongosu-takiti and Inaki-Gorite in *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje*)... But to extend this same argument to fagunwa's major characters might appear to be carrying critical appraisal too far. It is on record that fagunwa's major characters are vibrant, active, rounded and convincingly presented.

iv. Language of Fagunwa's Novels:

Critics are speaking with one voice on Fagunwa's superlative use of language, his masterful exploitation of the Yoruba language. It is the submission of most of the critics that the true greatness of Daniel Fagunwa as a writer majorly lies in the stupendous way he handles the Yoruba language in all his five novels. The gift of language is a distinctive quality which sets Fagunwa apart from his successors. His use of language is seen to be inimitable – a master of Yoruba language, no one else comes close to achieving his dexterous verbal effects. In creativeness and inventiveness. He has no equal. Fagunwa has an ear for music and rhythms of Yoruba Language. Many of the passages in his novels have a poetic quality about them. These are elements to which the average Yoruba readers respond, with delight. It is Ulli Beier's opinion that Fagunwa is as knowledgeable in proverbial expression as an old oracle priest'. Abiola Irele buttresses this opinion when he says that repetition, balance and tonal forms, world building and sustained phrasing in whole passages, build up admirably in Fagunwa's works'. And according to Olubummo, Fagunwa is able to get away with almost anything by the sheer dazzling brilliance of his words.' Fagunwa enjoys hyperbole, and declamatory utterances. His books are full of vivid, fanciful comparisons. He also delights in ebullient rhetorical effects, which he achieves through what Lindfors calls 'repetition, profusion of detail, and a zany extravagance of invention.'

The genius of fagunwa's verbal gymnastics shows in several areas of all his novels, especially in Igbo Olodumare where Esukekere-Ode tackles Olowoaye in a battle of words:

[Quote Esukekere-Ode on pp...; and Olowoaye's response on pp

The poetic nature of Fagunwa's language reveals itself in several areas of his five novels. And here again, we can quote p4 of igbo Olodumare where Fagunwa says:

Mo ti bu okele koja ibiti enu mi gba

Mo fi omi tutu ro elubo

Mofi akara je iresi

Mo gbe gari fun Oyinbo wa mu.

Final Submission:

From the fore-going, Mr. Chairman, guest of honour, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, it is quite evident that, in Fagunwa, we are dealing with a writers of great promise, of rare talent, with plenty of creative propensity. Fagunwa, as an indigenous writer, probably occupies the same respectable position as other great world-renowned indigenous writers like Chinese Geo Xingjian, Polish Wislawa Szymborska, Japanese Kezamburo Oe, Czechoslovakian Jaro Siefert, and Yugoslavian Ivo Andric, all of who have, at one time or the other, won the Nobel Prize for Literature, writing in their mother tongues.

A number of things, however, need to be done, and be put in place, to enhance Fagunwa's creative art, and uplift his artistic endeavours, if it will reach international standard:

- i. More translations of his works need to be embarked upon in order to expose his major works to international audience.
- ii. Fagunwa Academy must be inaugurated/reactivated to promote a through in-depth study and research activities of his works.
- iii. Critics, especially African critics, should be more alive to their responsibilities by embarking on a more critical appraisal of Fagunwa's works, for the education of literary buffs all over the world.
 1. Recommendation of his novels, which is presently waning in Nigeria Schools and colleges, should be revived, and spirited efforts made to get the books into the syllabus of WAEC and NECO.

v. Fagunwa's works should be seriously considered for adaptation as movies and full-length films.

vi. A befitting monument to commemorate the life and times of the writer must be built by Government, in strategic locations in the country, probably in his home town of Oke Igbo.

vii. His publishers must continue to re-issue all his books regularly and make them available, at all times, to the reading public.

viii. Oke-Igbo, the place of birth of D.O. Fagunwa, should be upgraded to become an important tourist centre for visitors at home and abroad.

ix. The state Government should name a School or College in honour of D.O. Fagunwa, to immortalize him.

x. The Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) should begin to pay more attention to our talented indigenous writers and embark on heavy publicity for their works.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Guest of Honour, Invited Guests, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I must, once more, register my appreciation to Fagunwa Foundation and to the Society of Young Nigerian Writers for this unique opportunity given me (an old writer) to address this gathering today. I must express my thanks to members of this audience for their listening ears and patience all through this short speech on the Life and Works of D.O. Fagunwa.

Thank you all and God bless.

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