

SOCIETY OF YOUNG NIGERIAN WRITERS

**ARTICLES, ESSAYS AND E-BOOKS ON DANIEL
OLORUNFEMI FAGUNWA**



Day When D.O. Fagunwa Arose From The Dead

Literally, he arose from the dead; the late D.O. Fagunwa did. It was a splendid occasion and I'm glad I did not miss it.

The 4th D.O. Fagunwa Memorial Lecture, under the aegis of D.O. Fagunwa Foundation, held at the Afe Babalola Memorial Hall, University of Lagos, on Tuesday, December 7 with a lecture titled, "Leyin Itan Aroso D.O. Fagunwa Maraarun, Ewo lo ku?" (What Else Is Left After The Five Novels Of D.O. Fagunwa?)

I wonder how many of our primary or secondary school children today (in any of the Yoruba-speaking states) know who D.O. Fagunwa is, but it certainly is unthinkable that anyone lived in the 40s right up to the 70s in these parts who didn't. Fagunwa was larger than life. He was our own William Shakespeare even though he wrote in the novels genre rather than plays.

But Fagunwa wrote in the Yoruba language, something truly novel at that time in the 1930s when he came up with his first novel, *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmale*. Indeed, other than the Bible that had been translated it is doubtful if there was any literary work in the Yoruba language before D.O. Fagunwa.

D.O, as students of my time in the 60s simply referred to anyone yarning a fabulous story, was as mythical as his novels. No one could actually say if he was a *real* person for his books could have, like we were made to believe of the bible, have been written by sprits, angels, or what have you and dropped from heaven. And if D.O was a *real* person he must be in commune with the spirit world – his mind was fertile with imaginations, surreal and frightening imageries, and his command of the language daringly creative, intensely philosophical and beautifully romantic all at once.

So when, as secondary school students then, we heard in December 1963 that D.O. Fagunwa had died, the shock and sorrow reverberated throughout the region – how could a spirit die? And stories around the manner of his death lived up to the quality of his works: "O, he died in Bida, he was alone and was seen by some locals simply walking away into the great River Niger and never returned"; "No," another would counter, "he was seen walking on the River Niger like

Jesus when suddenly Ojola-ibinu (a mythical snake-like creature from one of his novels) arose from the depths and dragged him down”; “True,” another would add, “except that someone saw him uplifted into the heavens and he disappeared”!

Born in 1903 in Oke-Igbo, Ondo State, Daniel Oluwafemi Fagunwa actually lived, and he died, truly, by drowning in the River Niger, Bida (Niger State) on 7th December 1963 survived by five children, great children all, including my beautiful sisters, Yejide and Diwura and brothers Dipo and Dele. The children, with the support of others on the D.O. Fagunwa Foundation, including Chief Olu Falomo, the inimitable Yoruba philosopher and orator, Adebayo Faleti, and Prof. Wande Abimbola, my friend Oloye Lekan Alabi, etc, have ensured that his memories and works remain alive. And on the Advisory Board are Prof. Wole Soyinka, Basorun Dele Momodu, and Chief G.A. Alawode.

Through the lecture, delivered appropriately and ably in Yoruba by Dr. Duro Adeleke, we now know that the five books – ‘Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmale’, ‘Irunkerindo ninu Igbo Elegbeje’, ‘Adiitu Olodumare’, ‘Ireke Onibudo’, and ‘Igbo Olodumare’ – were not the only works of the late Fagunwa. He wrote or co-wrote a body of other works that Dr. Adeleke researched into and provided a glossary of.

The thrust of the lecture and the mood of speaker after speaker was the essence of the Yoruba language. Importantly, it was emphasised that for Yoruba, one of the world’s culturally richest languages, not to become extinct in the perhaps now distant future, it is imperative that the language becomes the first language in our homes and schools – the language of teaching even right up to the university level, and the language of business. Yes it could so become extinct. Denmark, with only a population of about 5 million people as against 40 million of the Yoruba dispersed world-wide, speak Danish and the language is used throughout their schooling and institutional training, with books in other languages translated to Danish for the benefit of their citizens.

It must be repeated that no nation, so far, is known to have developed technologically and culturally on a language foreign and not indigenous to her.

The day at the Afe Babalola Memorial Hall was more than one of mere pontifical lecturing, it was a glorious occasion of Yoruba cultural evocation. The beauty of the language and the richness of the culture were on display. I am a man always quick to tears and tears again welled in my eyes and my head swelled as the cultural group that came to perform poured eulogy, through the poetry of ewi and spiritual ijala (incantations), evoking the ancestry of Fagunwa, his offspring, and the Guest Speaker in turns.

And when the beautiful and cerebral Bisi Fayemi, who came on her own behalf as a relation of the Fagunwas and to represent her husband, the new governor Kayode Fayemi of Ekiti State, rose to speak she could not help breaking into a dance at the intoxicating ewi and ijala rendered for her of which Yejide rose from where she sat to join in the dance steps. Mrs Fayemi did not disappoint. She spoke in flawless Yoruba and made promises, on behalf of her husband, for the Yoruba cause.

If anyone said they saw D.O. Fagunwa arise from the dead rejoicing at the occasion, I would believe.