

SOCIETY OF YOUNG NIGERIAN WRITERS

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



FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY FOUNDATIONS OF FAGUNWA'S WRITINGS

Going back to read any of D. O. Fagunwa's books is like visiting ancestral home one had departed for long. The familiar paths lead through locations and buildings filled with memories. Familiar smells and tastes titillate the senses. Greetings laced with praise poetry recounting ancestral exploits caress the soul. Cool water from earthen pots fetched early in the morning from trees-shaded spring sooth the thirst of the wayfarer. One naturally drift towards well remembered locations of kola nuts and smoked bush meat hanging in webbed cages over the fireplace.

D. O. Fagunwa was the archetypal Yoruba story teller. He invited the reader to sit by the fireplace. The tingling smell of the burning wood can nearly be perceived. The cool night breeze in the moonlight is felt. The storyteller's arresting inflections takes the reader to lands of wondrous exploits and experiences. The different encounters of the characters in the tales are identified with or rejected as they are vividly painted like bold oil colour on canvas.

Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole

was first published in 1950. Between then and 1979, it underwent 22 reprints. Those were the glorious days of Yoruba literature when no student in primary,

modern or secondary school or teachers' training college in the South West part of Nigeria avoided reading Fagunwa. At the appointed time, pupils and students took turns reading portions. Of course some were more skilled readers. Whenever a poor reader was doing disservice to the reading, the teacher would allot his reading time to one of the outstanding readers in the class.

After the drought season of Yoruba *dun ka* (reading Yoruba is enjoyable), Nelson Publishers Limited reissued *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* in 2005. The cover of the paperback wears beautiful new look. It displays one of the original illustrations of the early editions. Over the years, the illustrations had remained the same. The only difference now is that while the cover is in colour rather than original black and white, the inside illustrations are in black and white instead of the original colour.

The original typesetting is preserved. Not even the fonts or pagination is tampered with. To the casual observer, this is a smaller version. Not so. The only reason why it looks smaller than earlier versions is that the bond paper used to print it is lighter than original newsprint. All of the original 102 pages are presented complete with the Editor's Foreword, author's foreword and table of contents.

The comment of the Englishman editor L. Murby penned in Edinburgh in November, 1950 is insightful.

"Without wishing to make extravagant claims," he wrote, "I think future generations of Nigerians may well place Mr. Fagunwa's indigenous 'epics' or 'allegories' at the very head of creative writing in Yoruba. It is probable that scholars will compare them - in respect of their subject matter and language, their place in the body of Yoruba literature and their influence on subsequent writing - with the great epics that stand at the threshold of European literature... I have been able to see that in their treatment of character and story, in their use of myth and legend and allegory, and in their proverbial and epigrammatic language they bear definite resemblances to the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf* and the early medieval romances on the one hand, and on the other hand to the great cornerstone of the English novel, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*."

These are bold assertions. Anybody familiar with the history of English literature would quickly notice that D. O. Fagunwa's works are here being compared to the best that tradition gave the world.

Akara Ogun, which Wole Soyinka translates Compound of Spells in his English translation of the book entitled *The Forest of a Thousand Deamons*, walks in one bright morning to visit the writer. Before his visit is announced, the authorial

voice proclaims here is searching time. The drum of wisdom is about to be rolled out for the dancing pleasure of the knowledgeable. The writer is the drummer and the reader the dancer.

Akara Ogun, now an old man walks in and is offered a seat when the writer observed he wanted one. He then asks the writer to produce his writing materials as he has a story to tell that he does not want to carry with him into the grave. Humanity stands to gain a lot from story, hence his visit.

Mysterious men walking in out of nowhere is a common trace in Fagunwa's works. The same Akara Ogun it is who mysteriously walks in to tell his father's life history in *Igbo Olodumare*. However, stories of his exploits on hunting expeditions to the dreaded fairy hunting grounds of Igbo Irunmole is what *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* is all about.

Akara Ogun embarks two personal hunting expeditions to Igbo Irunmole. His encounters with all sorts of men, animals and spirits border on mythical. The last journey we are invited to embark upon with him is the trip to Oke Langbodo. This is an expedition put together by the king for famed hunters to go in search of wisdom that would establish their kingdom and cause it to prosper.

Fagunwa's stories are not just fairy tales. They allegorical presentations of different situations a human being has to face during the journey of life. Seeking fame and success, everyman has to get up and go in pursuit of his desires. These are the expeditions of the hunters in his story.

What does it take to get up and go? It takes faith. Real faith. One has to believe in God and believe in himself. In the same manner one needs faithful men and women to believe in.

As Akara Ogun embarks on his sojourns, he is armed with all three. At the most difficult points, there is always help by the time he calls on God and rely on the help of people such as his dead mother who mysteriously emerges from the land of the dead to rescue him. In his duel with Agbako, Trouble, it takes the help of ghomids who constituted part of the audience to strengthen him. By the time he gets to the town named Emo, Mystery, a lady named Iwapele, Meekness, comes to his aid.

Pride, ignorance and depravity are topics Fagunwa's writings explore. Different encounters teach one moral or the other. The stories are about philosophical principles for winning in life. Every mountain can be conquered. Every desire can be fulfilled. But there is always a price to pay. There is always a lesson to learn.

Many perish on the trip to Oke Langbodo. The reason given by Fagunwa via Akara Ogun is a simple one. You cannot survive – let alone succeed – beyond your level of wisdom. As the brave hunters seat at the feet of Iragbeje who resides in the seven-room ile olojule meje, the reader is seating alongside drinking of the ancient wisdom of the ageless man. Seven is the number reserved for God who created man on the sixth day. The man Iragbeje is like God Himself seating to teach them exploring different topics on the seven days they spend at his place. God teaches us new things daily. Like men and servants of King Solomon of ancient Israel, we must be prepared to seat at His feet and learn from Him daily.

Of course the expedition itself is like that of Queen of Sheba who sought out Solomon to learn of his wisdom. Buy wisdom and sell it not, Solomon counsels in the Bible, if needs be, sell everything you have to acquire its. It is more precious than anything.

Fagunwa's characters and locations are named to reflect their different natures. Descriptive names is a Yoruba tradition that is as ancient as the biblical tales of naming people. Names not only describe the bearer they are prophetic utterances.

Where does Fagunwa's works stand today in the annals of Yoruba literature? No doubt there is none to compare with him. He is father of the tradition and has greatly influenced succeeding generations although none has tried to strictly adopt his style. Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka translated *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* into English as *The Forest of a Thousand Deamons*. Dapo Adeniyi did the same with *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* which he entitled *Expedition Into the Mount of Thought*.

It is however desirable that modern versions be made available as the old Yoruba in which the works were written is not easily accessible for the modern reader. Shakespeare and Chaucer might have been preserved in their original states but Yoruba language has undergone deliberate rebirth. Even Akinwunmi Isola's *O Le Ku* had had to be reviewed in view of this.

The academic system too ought to revisit Fagunwa. It is unimaginable for any student to do literature in English without reading Shakespeare. How come our children are obtaining results in Yoruba without reading Fagunwa?

This calls for a rethinking.