

# Form, Theme, and Style in the Narratives of D. O. Fagunwa

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Some readers of African literature may be unfamiliar with the writer Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa, but in southwestern Nigeria he is very well known. Indeed, his five long narratives, two travel books, collected short stories and folktales, as well as a series of graded readers he prepared for use in primary schools<sup>1</sup> have been so extraordinarily popular there that nearly all of them have gone through numerous editions (one narrative published in 1949 had been reissued sixteen times by 1963), and by 1965 it was estimated that the total printing of his six major works ran into the hundreds of thousands.<sup>2</sup> This might make him the author with the largest reading audience in Africa, but his fame has not spread to the rest of the world, and all his works but one remain virtually unknown outside the boundaries of his own ethnic group.

The explanation for this is quite simple: Fagunwa chose to write in Yoruba, his mother tongue, rather than in an international language such as English. So far, only one of his narratives, *Ògbójú Ode ninú Igbo Irúnmalè* (literally, *The Brave Hunter in the Forest of the Four Hundred Spirits*) has been published in English translation<sup>3</sup> and thereby made available to a wider reading public. A scholarly book and a number of essays have been written on his works,<sup>4</sup> but until more of his writings are disseminated abroad through translation, his impact as a writer is likely to be felt only in Yorubaland where his reputation is secure.

About fourteen million native speakers of Yoruba live in southwestern Nigeria and in the neighboring country of Benin. Since Fagunwa's books are required reading in all Nigerian primary schools in which Yoruba is the language of instruction, every child who goes to school in southwestern Nigeria is exposed to his writings. Fagunwa himself had taught for twenty years in primary and secondary schools in various parts of Yorubaland, and he wrote his books expressly for use with students. Yet his writings are enjoyed by old and young alike, and they have fostered an entire tradition of writing in Yoruba. Ayo Bamgbose, who has authored the only full-length study of Fagunwa to date, reports that Fagunwa "has had a profound influence on the development of the novel in Yoruba. Until comparatively recently, almost all the Yoruba novels followed Fagunwa's pattern . . . . The novels in the Fagunwa tradition range from outright imitations . . . to serious and imaginative adaptations."<sup>5</sup> He has even had an influence on Yoruba authors who write in

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<sup>1</sup>These books are listed in the bibliography of Ayo Bamgbose, *The Novels of D. O. Fagunwa* (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corp., 1974), pp. 131-32. Because Fagunwa's long prose works are adventure stories set in fantasy worlds, I prefer to term them "narratives" rather than "novels."

<sup>2</sup>See Ulli Beier, "Fagunwa: A Yoruba Novelist," *Black Orpheus*, 17 (1965), 51.

<sup>3</sup>It was published under a less literal title, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga*, trans. Wole Soyinka (London: Nelson, 1968).

<sup>4</sup>Most of the essays are listed in Bamgbose's bibliography, p. 132. More recent studies are cited here in subsequent footnotes.

<sup>5</sup>Bamgbose, p. 5.

English, such as Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one wonders if any writer educated in Yoruba could completely escape being affected by him. Like Shakespeare or the King James version of the Bible, he appears to have made an indelible imprint on the literary language of his people.

His narratives are an interesting blend of traditional and modern elements. Essentially they are adventure stories in which a hero or group of heroes sets out on a mission that is eventually accomplished with great daring, cleverness, luck, plus a little bit of help from God. The adventures usually take place in a forest or "bush" infested with spirits and remarkable creatures who threaten any travelers bold enough to trespass on their territory. Occasionally the heroes pass through clearings in the bush or islands of urban civilization in which strange customs and ceremonies prevail. Sometimes they stumble into spiritual realms never before visited by living beings, but in the end they invariably are returned to the point at which they began. Their journey has been a test of their abilities and faith, and they re-enter ordinary human life strengthened by their experience of the abnormal and supernatural.

A. Olubummo, a Yoruba scholar, has summarized Fagunwa's first four narratives in more graphic terms. He says they all follow the same general pattern:

One fine day, a brave hunter finds his way into a thick jungle in search of big game. He encounters the most fearful monsters, fights with a giant snake with a human head and wrestles with a ghost with one eye in front and one eye at the back of his head. Armed with his gun, the charms of his forefathers and an unshakable belief in an omnipotent God, he comes out successfully in all these encounters. On returning home, he is appointed by the chief of his town to lead a group of men to a far-off land in search of wisdom. They miss their way into the outskirts of hell and wander through curious places like the city of dirt where nobody has ever thought of the idea of having a bath and the city where all the inhabitants eat, drink, laugh or weep simultaneously. After more trouble and hair-breadth escapes, they reach their goal and return home richer and wiser.<sup>7</sup>

As can be seen from this synopsis, Fagunwa employs motifs from traditional Yoruba folktales but weaves them together into a longer narrative structure that approaches epic proportions. One immediately recognizes parallels to other quest or travel stories such as *The Odyssey*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and certain episodes in the *Arabian Nights*. Bamgbose claims that Aesop's Fables, classical Greek mythology, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and scenes from Shakespeare, Milton and Chaucer also served as sources of inspiration for Fagunwa.<sup>8</sup> But clearly the two most important influences on Fagunwa's work were indigenous folktales and John Bunyan's Christian classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

The evidence of borrowings from Yoruba oral tradition is too abundant to require elaborate demonstration. Fagunwa was evidently building upon the repertory of narratives with which most Yorubas would have been familiar.

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<sup>6</sup>See, e.g., Bamgbose, p. 6; Abiola Irele, "Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka," *Odu*, n.s. 11 (1975), 75-100; and my "Amos Tutuola and D. O. Fagunwa," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 9 (1970), 57-65.

<sup>7</sup>A. Olubummo, "D. O. Fagunwa: A Yoruba Novelist," *Odu*, 9 (1963), 26-30.

In his first books, for example, he not only made use of a traditional narrative frame—the hunter's tale of adventures in the bush—but included such well-known motifs as the "enfant terrible," the "juju-compass" which helps travelers to find their way, the hall of singing birds which turns out to be a trap, the fierce gatekeeper who must be overcome in combat, and the deer-woman who marries a hunter.<sup>9</sup> All these motifs can be documented as existing in Yoruba oral tradition. Indeed, any collection of Yoruba folktales will yield numerous analogues to the episodes in the adventures Fagunwa recounted. He evidently was not hesitant to exploit local lore.

His reliance on *The Pilgrim's Progress* is equally apparent. Not only does he make use of allegorical characters (e.g., Helpmeet, Peril, Loss, Starvation) in the manner of Bunyan but he also frequently pauses to inject Christianity into his narrative by preaching small sermons on the religious significance of some of the events that transpire. The Christian God even enters into the narrative occasionally as an active agent of change, an omnipotent force that rescues the righteous and punishes the wicked. A sinner in Fagunwa's works is apt to die uttering a confession and a declaration of woeful remorse: "Ah, is this how miserably I end! If only I had used the grace which God gave me in a fitting manner, this would not have happened to me."<sup>10</sup> In such scenes Bunyan is all too visible in the background.

Fagunwa's narratives are thus syncretic works which fuse indigenous folklore with missionary Christianity to produce an interesting hybrid parable that both entertains and instructs. The didacticism that informs both African oral tales and Christian allegories suits Fagunwa's purpose perfectly, for he views storytelling as an opportunity to teach moral lessons to the young. One must remember that he was a schoolmaster nearly all his adult life and a devout Christian as well. It is not surprising, then, that he should merge the two narrative traditions he knew best, in an effort to reinforce the moral principles he spent a lifetime trying to convey to his students.<sup>11</sup>

In 1960 Fagunwa contributed a brief article to a Nigerian teachers' magazine on the subject of "Writing a Novel."<sup>12</sup> In this article he states:

A novel which involves the mysterious is perhaps the most difficult to write. In such a case, the writer goes really into the world of imagination and therefore it is necessary for him to have had an inborn gift of imagination. In literary history, only few brains had produced this type of writing and the products have lived long . . . It is not correct to say that all Nigerian novels have something of phantasy in them but the majority do. I usually term these Spenserian because they so much resemble the works of an English writer, whose works were published in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth A.D., called Edmund Spenser . . . Our duty is to present to our readers what we know will interest them. We should not merely copy others but should give

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<sup>9</sup>Bamgbose, pp. 8-30.

<sup>10</sup>*The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, pp. 106-15; "The Forest of the Lord," trans. E. C. Rowlands, in *A Selection of African Prose: II. Written Prose* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 71, 74-75; Beier, pp. 52, 54.

<sup>11</sup>*The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, p. 130.

<sup>12</sup>Fagunwa's reliance on traditional Yoruba religion as well as Christianity is discussed by Afolabi Olabimtan, "Religion as a Theme in Fagunwa's Novels," *Odu*, 11 (1975), 101-14.

<sup>13</sup>*Teachers' Monthly*, 6, 9 (1960), 12.

first consideration to the need of our society . . . There is nothing wrong in making our own kind of writing our special contribution to the literary history of the world.

It is interesting to note that Fagunwa regarded novels involving the mysterious as "perhaps the most difficult to write," inasmuch as this was the fictional mode in which he always chose to operate. His allusion to Spenser is also quite intriguing, especially since no one, to my knowledge, has ever traced or even cited the possible influence of Spenser on Fagunwa, though their approaches to "phantasy" in literature are clearly akin. Fagunwa obviously learned a great deal from his reading of both Bunyan and Spenser, but he had enough creative independence to develop his own distinctive brand of what he termed "Phantasia novels." One could say that he had the good sense to follow his own sound advice—that "we should not merely copy others but should give first consideration to the need of our society."<sup>13</sup>

The most remarkable feature of Fagunwa's fiction resides not in his choice of a common form or theme, however, but in his highly individualistic style of writing. He was a complete master of the Yoruba language, and according to Yoruba-speaking critics, no one else comes close to achieving his dexterous verbal effects. Bamgbose tells us that "Fagunwa's main claim to greatness as a Yoruba novelist is his language . . . He twists it in his own way to express his feelings and those of his characters. Indeed, it may be truly said that in creativeness and inventiveness, he has no equal as a writer in the language. He has an ear for its music and rhythm, and many of the passages in his novels have a poetic quality about them."<sup>14</sup> Ulli Beier confirms this by noting that "The true Yoruba flavour of Fagunwa's work, lies not in the material he used, but in the language, in the manner and tone of his story telling . . . he uses the language creatively and inventively, constantly adding to the traditional stock of imagery and enriching the language."<sup>15</sup> Abiola Irele also finds "the most striking merit of Fagunwa's art" to be "his way with language": "What is significant about his personal use of language is his resourceful exploitation of the communal medium and his ultimate fidelity to its nature, his individual illustration of its peculiar blend of exuberance and gravity."<sup>16</sup> Olubummo even goes so far as to claim that Fagunwa is able to carry readers along with him on marathon journeys of the imagination that are improbable, incredible, and absolutely absurd because "he is able to get away with almost anything by the sheer [sic] dazzling brilliance of his words."<sup>17</sup>

It is impossible to give evidence here of the full range of Fagunwa's masterful exploitation of the Yoruba language. Certain adroit verbal effects such as assonance, alliteration, parallelism, tonal punning, and ingenuity in deployment of ideophones, proverbs and other figures of speech simply do not translate well. However, one can provide a few examples of the kind of prose for which Fagunwa was justly famous. Here in his description of a character named Death: "His eyes are as big as a food bowl, round like moons and red like fire; and they are rolling about like ripe fruit dangling in the wind. The teeth in his mouth look like lion's fangs, and they are bright red, for it is not yam he likes, nor bananas nor okro, nor bitter leaf—he likes nothing but human flesh."<sup>18</sup> Fagunwa enjoyed hyperbole, and his books are full of vivid, fanciful comparisons. He also delighted in ebullient rhetorical effects, which he achieved through repetition, profusion of detail, and a zany extravagance of invention, as can be seen in this harangue delivered by a monster on encountering an earthling wandering in his part of the forest:

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid. <sup>14</sup>Bamgbose, p. 108. <sup>15</sup>Beier, p. 52. <sup>16</sup>Irele, p. 80. <sup>17</sup>Olubummo, p. 29. <sup>18</sup>Beier, p. 53.

Who are you? What are you? What do you amount to? What do you rank as? What are you looking for? What do you want? What are you looking at? What do you see? What are you considering? What affects you? Where are you coming from? Where are you going? Where do you live? Where do you roam? Answer me! Human being, answer me in a word! One thing is certain—you have got into trouble today, you have climbed a tree beyond its topmost leaves, you have fallen from a height into a well, you have eaten an unexpected poison, you have found a farmplot full of weeds and planted ground-nuts in it . . . You saw me and I saw you, you were approaching and I was approaching, and yet you did not take to your heels . . . Have you never heard of me? Has no one told you about me? The skulls of greater men than you are in my cooking pot and their backbones are in the corner of my room, while my seat is made from the breast-bones of those who are thoughtless.<sup>19</sup>

When reading such amusing rhetoric in translation, one might wonder to what extent the verbal pyrotechnics have been accurately rendered or possibly even improved upon by the translator. How much credit, in other words, should we give to Fagunwa in such passages and how much to the mediator who stands between us and him? This minor linguistic question need not bother us when the translation is done by the author himself, so let us look at a few samples of Fagunwa's prose which he himself attempted to translate into English. Here is a description of a rainy day taken from the opening paragraph of his last long narrative, *Adúńí Olódumare (The Mysterious Plan of the Almighty)*<sup>20</sup>

My friends who are still young, especially those of you who are still attending schools, my friends, adults, our people males and females, you inhabitants of the earth black and white, whatever colour you may have, the incident occurred on a wet day, the rain was very heavy and to us who were inside a car on that day, the rain was simply drumming over our heads giving the sounds of one of the small instruments in a dundun orchestra of the Yorubas. Sometimes a gun-like booming of sounds greeted from the right, sometimes it was from the left, sometimes it was in our front, sometimes at our back, sure heralds of rain, the sky was as dark as the Yoruba cloth dye, the front was silvery in appearance; it was as if the Almighty God was dropping silver powder from the sky, the car wiper wiped to exhaustion, what about the torrents, you could row boats on them, and holes all over the road were jerking the car in every direction, the wheels were bespattered with dirt; pedestrians were in a sorry state, with their clothes all gummed to their bodies by the downpour. The waters in the streams, brooks and rivers, transparently clean before were now coloured red, fishes dived down into the deep; beasts were moving sluggishly about all jungles, birds took shelter inside their nests, the torrents dislodged many snakes from their holes, the pythons and boa-constrictors were moving on the waters, there was not a creature which could be regarded as happy except the earth-worm which wriggled about in the soil.

<sup>19</sup>Whiteley, pp. 74-75.

<sup>20</sup>This quotation and the one that follows are taken from the recently discovered typescript of Fagunwa's translation of *Adúńí Olódumare* (Ms. English 326709) in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. All irregularities in spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

A few paragraphs later, there is a full description of a hitchhiker the narrator comes across:

. . . as I have said, he was handsome, I got attached to him immediately. He was light coloured, tall and slim. While he was slim, it cannot be said that he was undersized. All members of his body were symmetric, there was no oversized head, and his back was not bent like that of a tortoise, neither was the neck too short to cast the resemblance of a cat's; legs, arms and every member of his body was moderate. His skin was very smooth, nothing like that of a crocodile; it was very like that of a lady. In fact, but for his hair not being plated, but for his not wearing a loin-cloth, not painting his eyebrows, not painting his nails both of hand and foot, not carrying a handbag and but for his not stepping slowly and gingerly, he would have passed for a woman. I have seen a lot of teeth since I came into this world but none could match his in whiteness, I have seen no end of tongues but none could compare with the pinkish nature of his, it was as pink as though no food ever passed over it, the clearness of his eyeballs has no comparison, at least, I have never seen its type. One whose style of talking was a standard to his listeners, whose gait was a standard apart, one whose clothes sent admirers ashopping, that man with both nostrils clean, symmetric arms, legs, fingers and toes. He was a paragon of beauty. None of the like have I ever met and I have my doubts whether my mother ever met the type or my father ever set his eyes on anybody of that kind before they bade this world an eternal good bye. Tall and with befitting legs, he was not unusually tall upon legs thin as a rake.

These passages convey some of the flavor of Fagunwa's delightful prose style and help us to understand why he is such a popular author among the Yoruba. One imagines that this kind of rhetoric, skilfully employed, quickly becomes infectious and tempts other writers to strive for similar effects.

Fagunwa thus should be acknowledged as one of Africa's most influential writers, even though his influence at the moment does not extend much beyond his own people. But there are as many Yorubas today as there are Australians and three or four times as many as there are Norwegians. One hopes that further translation of his works into other world languages will make Fagunwa more widely known. Only then will he receive the recognition he richly deserves for "making our own kind of writing our special contribution to the literary history of the world."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>*Teachers' Monthly*, 6, 9 (1960), 12.