

AFRICAN LITERATURE AND INDIGENOUS RELIGION: A STUDY OF WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN* AND D.O. FAGUNWA'S *ADIITU OLODUMARE*

Femi Abodunrin

School of Languages and Communication Studies

University of Limpopo

olufemi.abodunrin@ul.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Religious bigotry pervades our world today. As the 21st century oscillates between what Ramin Jahanbegloo (2015) has described as the politicisation of religion and its accompanying ideologisation, this study examines the vast array of literary creativity and indigenous religion/knowledge from an ecocritical viewpoint. By indigenous, it is meant those systems of knowledge and production of knowledge that are sometimes perceived as antithetical to the Western empirical systems. Encapsulated in myths and mythical wisdom, these indigenous values have at the centre of their philosophical presuppositions a symbiotic strategy that seeks to integrate man with nature. The study examines Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and D.O. Fagunwa's *Adiitu Olodumare* [*The Mysteries of God*, Olu Obafemi (trans)], in particular, and the indigenous religious/knowledge system that they reiterate, in general, as distinct from the Western monotheistic system in ontological and metaphysical terms. Also, largely because the metaphysical presupposition of Yoruba religion is essentially performance poetry in motion, a carnivalesque perspective is employed to account for the folkloric and other elements of carnival often described as 'the feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal'.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge/religion; carnivalesque; ecocriticism; metaphysical presupposition; folklore

UNISA 
university
of south africa

Imbizo

Volume 7 | Number 2 | 2016 | pp. 4–20

<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/Imbizo/index>

Print ISSN 2078-9785

© 2016 University of South Africa

INTRODUCTION

If religion was taken away I'd be happy.
(Wole Soyinka, quoted in *The Guardian* of 14 October 2012, 40)

In character and temperament, the typical African of this race-type is a happy, thriftless, excitable person:

1. lacking in self-control
 2. lacking in discipline, and
 3. lacking in foresight.
 4. full of personal vanity,
 5. *with little sense of veracity, fond of music*
 6. his thoughts are concentrated on the events and feelings of the moment and
 7. he suffers little from the apprehension for the future, or grief for the past.
 8. He lacks the power of organisation, and he is conspicuously
 9. deficient in management and control alike of men or business.
 10. He loves the display of power, but fails to realize its responsibility....
- (Sir Frederick Lugard, Governor-General of Nigeria, who amalgamated the North and South into modern Nigeria in 1914)

Weaving together a number of Yoruba folk tales, I re-read the whole story from an ecological perspective. And I discover {...} that most knowledge about the environment that we moderns are just 'discovering,' had been written long ago, encapsulated in nuggets of mythical wisdom.
(Femi Osofisan, *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*)

In his author's note to the would-be director of his paradigmatic play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Wole Soyinka frowns heavily at the 'clash of cultures' tag often attached to what he called 'the bane of themes of this genre'. He describes this tag as 'a prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent misapplication, presupposes a potential equality *in every given situation* of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the soil of the latter' (Soyinka 2009, 3). Given what postcolonial theory, in particular, and African literature, in general, have made of the so-called binary opposition between the 'I' and the 'Other' and the whole context of the 'empire of signs writing back to the centre', one may be forgiven to think of Soyinka's play as just another enactment of this subversive postcolonial act. But Soyinka obviously feels that the play is definitely more than this and instead invites the would-be producer to 'direct his vision instead to the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence' (3). By 'threnodic', Soyinka obviously sees the play along the lines of the biblical book of Lamentations and the theme of mourning over Jerusalem's holocaust that consumed the weeping prophet Jeremiah wholly. According to Soyinka (2009, 3), the colonial factor in *Death*

...is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba

mind – the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. *Death and the King's Horseman* can be fully realised only through an evocation of music¹ from the abyss of transition.

First published in Yoruba in 1961 as *Adiitu Olodumare*, Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa's *The Mysteries of God*, on the other hand, has held countless generations of Yoruba school children spellbound for many decades. The present translator, Olu Obafemi – himself an erudite scholar, leading playwright and critic of African literature – describes the source of his translation attempt as 'one that has held my fascination since 1962, when we first read it in Primary Six at the Methodist School, Kabba'. Indeed, Fagunwa's compulsive oeuvre was part and parcel of the education of the Yoruba child of the mid-twentieth century and beyond, from 1938 when his *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irumale*, 'widely considered the first novel written in the Yorùbá language and one of the first to be written in any African language'² first arrived on the Yoruba literary scene. Thus, according to Obafemi (2012, v), before *Adiitu Olodumare*,

we had read in primary four, *Igbo Olodumare* (generously translated by Gabriel Ajadi as *Forest of God*) and *Ireke Onibudo*, recently translated in his theatrical adaptation as 'The Fabulous Adventures of the Sugarcane Man' by Femi Osofisan. Wole Soyinka had earlier translated *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* as *The Forest of a Thousand Demons*.

Translated as *The Mysteries of God*, it is at the tail end of the epic tale that the literal translation of the hero's name, 'Adiitu Olodumare', came through in Obafemi's translation as 'the knot that God himself had tied and which only he can unknot' (2012, 214). But before this paradigmatic point, we are taken, like Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, through a wide and diverse range of threnodic events that consist of 'an interesting blend of traditional and modern elements' (Lindfors 1979, 12). Yet, it is at the level of this 'blend of traditional and modern elements' that we can locate the essential Fagunwa and the seemingly conflictless range of dialogue and disturbing questions that he has subjected the intrusion of the 'modern' into his traditional society and its beliefs. Like Soyinka, Fagunwa appears to be interrogating the Western monotheistic outlook, albeit without Soyinka's more probing critical and theoretical arguments. But, from *The Forest of God* to *The Fabulous Adventure of the Sugarcane Man* to *The Forest of a Thousand Demons* and *The Mysteries of God*, Fagunwa has provided his own equivalent of the Yoruba cosmogony, and one which this study has read from an ecocritical and carnivalesque perspective.

Some of the answers to the burning questions that may arise from the foregoing can be found in the theoretical approaches that this study adopts to unravel the concerns of African indigenous religious viewpoints, in general, and the Yoruba cosmogony that Soyinka and Fagunwa reiterate, in particular. Thus, the study's major argument is that from Soyinka's disdain for organised religion (as quoted in the epigraph above) to Lord Frederick Lugard's summation of the Nigerian and

African personality as well as Osofisan's 'discovery' of the intricate links between the Yoruba folktales that he re-read from an ecological perspective and through which he discovered 'that most knowledge about the environment that we moderns are just "discovering" had been written long ago, encapsulated in nuggets of mythical wisdom' (Osofisan 2003), there are various cultural, political and historical links which only a carnivalesque and ecocritical theoretical viewpoint can unmask.

THE CARNIVALESQUE AND THE ECOCRITICAL

When we talk of high discourses – literature, philosophy, statecraft, the languages of the Church and the University – and contrast them to the low discourses of a peasantry, the urban poor, sub-cultures, marginal, the lumpen-proletariat, colonized peoples, we already have two 'highs' and two 'lows'. History seen from above and history seen from below are irreducibly different and they consequently impose radically different perspectives on the question of hierarchy.

(Peter Stallybrass and Alon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*)

Indeed, there is a good cause to worry that environmentalism and ecologism are new forms of dominating discourses issuing from Western or First World centers.

(William Slaymaker, 'Ecoing the Other(s): The Call for Global Green and Black African Responses')

Like the ecocritical theoretical approach to literature, the carnivalesque has had a history of marginalisation and the newly discovered appetite for ecocriticism or environmentalism among Western critics and interlocutors is part and parcel of that age-old marginalisation. However, the editors of the acclaimed *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (2007, 683), have laid down the gauntlet for an ecocritical approach to African literature in our era by stating: 'Of pertinence also is the fact that ecocriticism helps us refocus some of the burning ideological questions that have plagued African literary criticism from its inception.'

Thus, the ecocritical, or a concern for the environment from an African viewpoint, must of necessity foreground 'the interface between theory and praxis (both local and global) in a way that makes it as relevant to understanding today's African condition as the earlier forms of criticism found in this anthology' (Olaniyan and Quayson 2007, 681). This study agrees with Olaniyan and Quayson's (2007, 683-697) summation that the primary place to begin is the sceptical viewpoint of William Slaymaker's 'Ecoing the Other(s): The Call for Global Green and Black African Responses', and its understanding of the black African writer's understanding of what he has described as 'The (siren?) call of the Green Wave resounding through much of the literary world' and one which, according to Slaymaker (2007, 683), 'has been answered weakly by black African writers and critics'. To begin with,

Slaymaker's search for statistics on Black African writers and critics' adoption of the ecological viewpoint through bibliographic publications such as Bernth Lindfors' *Black African Literature in English* is futile because, as the epigraph from Osofisan above reveals, not every writer or critic label their work or proclaim their theoretical focus as ecological. To put it in another way, should we assume that Osofisan is the first African writer to be concerned with the environment once his ecological declaration has been captured in Lindfors' bibliographic publication? As Osofisan declared, while weaving together a number of Yoruba folk tales that he re-read from an ecological perspective, he was the one that discovered and not the other way round, 'that most knowledge about the environment that we moderns are just "discovering", had been written long ago, encapsulated in nuggets of *mythical wisdom*' (Osofisan, 2003, my emphasis). As Roland Barthes (1976, 128) reminds us in his *Mythologies*:

Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts. Myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion. Placed before the dilemma which I mentioned a moment ago, myth finds a third way out. Threatened with disappearance if it yields to either of the two types of focusing, it gets out of this tight spot thanks to a compromise – it is this dilemma. Entrusted with 'glossing over' an intentional concept, myth encounters nothing but betrayal in language, for language can only obliterate the concept if it hides it, or unmask it if it formulates it. The elaboration of a second-order semiological system will enable myth to escape this dilemma: driven to having either to unveil or to liquidate the concept, it will naturalise it.

Thus, in Barthes' theory, myths can be deciphered from three basic positions of reading. Every myth embodies a duplicity of signifiers, 'which is at once meaning and form. I can produce three different types of reading by focusing on the one, or the other, or both at the same time' (Barthes 1976, 128).

The first category of readers are those Barthes describes as focusing on 'an empty signifier'. With these readers, the myth has no ambiguity and the reader is most likely going to find himself/herself before a simple system where the signification becomes literal again. We can summarise this type of focusing as that of the 'producer of myths'. The reader at this level starts with a concept and takes upon himself/herself the task of seeking a form for the myth. The Black African experience at this level of reading is replete with examples and ties in with the history of the marginalisation of low discourses of Stallybrass and White's reference in the epigraph above and the whole notion of carnivals and the carnivalesque. Also, because the primary focus of this study is on the numerous ways African literature interfaces with African indigenous religion and knowledge, I would like to use a religious analogy vis-à-vis the whole notion of myth to illustrate the point further.

In translating the Bible from English to Yoruba, the translator, Samuel Ajay Crowder, West Africa's first black bishop, found himself at various stages at the threshold of mythology – a task made more difficult by the fact that he had to translate myths from one culture to another. Bishop Crowder's task was not a simple one, as he had to find a Yoruba equivalent for every myth from the Christian mythological

framework. Thus, in translating into Yoruba the biblical myth of Satan or Lucifer, Bishop Crowder settled on Esu-Elegbara, the enigmatic Yoruba god of fate. John Pemberton (1976, 26) has attempted to set the record straight by reconstructing this age-old distortion:

As the festival songs suggest that Eshu is one who deceives and harms, so too the *oriki* (praise name) and myths portray Eshu as the confuser of men, the troublemaker, the one who acts capriciously. So prevalent are these associations that Christian missionaries used 'Eshu' as a translation of the New Testament terms 'devil' and 'Satan'. Now, even Eshu worshippers who speak a little English, as well as Yoruba Christians and Muslims, will refer to Eshu as the 'devil'. It is an indefensible corruption of the tradition. Nevertheless, Eshu is a troublemaker. His own praise names attest to it.

In performing a Christian duty, Bishop Crowder and numerous Yoruba Christians after him have consequently produced their own myth – have acted, to use Barthes' words, like 'the journalist who starts with a concept and seeks a form for it'. However, the threat of complete annihilation which Crowder poses to the original myth of Esu is preserved in Barthes' theory by what he describes as a 'false dilemma' through which myth 'gets out of this tight spot thanks to a compromise – it is this dilemma'.

The second category of readers of myths focuses on a 'full signifier'. The reader is able to recognise the meaning and the form of the myth and goes beyond this recognition to unmask the distortion which the form imposes on the meaning, and vice-versa. The reader at this level is able, in Barthesian terms, to 'undo the signification', but rather than see the signification as the embodiment of the association of the meaning and the form, the reader receives the signification as an imposture: 'This type of focusing is that of the mythologist: he deciphers the myth, he understands a distortion' (Barthes 1976, 129).

Thus, within the implications of the notion that 'ideology is *inscribed in signifying practices* – in discourses, myths, presentations and representations of the way "things" "are" – and to this extent...inscribed in the language' (Belsey 1980, 42, my emphasis), we can situate past and existing practices in mythological discourses relating to black experience. Fraught with attempts to deify the rapidly changing history of wars, governments and so on, at the expense of those, to appropriate another term by Foucault, 'apparently unmoving histories' such as 'the history of the balance achieved by the human species between hunger and abundance' (Foucault 1977, 3), the black experience in myths has been limited to the following recognisable pattern:

Oba was the legitimate wife of Shango in charge of domestic affairs. She accompanied him on all his military expeditions in order to take care of his diet, which consisted of *Amala* (corn meal with quimbombo and raw meat). One day Shango went to a war that lasted a very long time. It was the war that he had with Ogun. Oba, as usual, followed her husband with the provisions... (William Bascom 1977, 5)

Convinced that the ideopractical connotations latent in this and other myths are of little significance, ethnologists, literary historians and folklorists – acting along the line of the second category of reader of myths in our theoretical paradigm and working through a maze of statistical data, Type and Motif indexes – have increasingly concerned themselves with the question of the ‘origin of their tales’ and, by so doing, were merely able to ‘undo the signification’ of the myths before them. Thus, it is not uncommon to come across assertions such as ‘this African/Afro-American tale has raged, if that is the *mot juste*, for nearly a quarter of a century’ (Crowley 1977, xi).

However, the pseudo-capitalist ideology inscribed in the myth of Sango, sketched above, should be clear to anyone familiar with signifying practices. Sango, the grand signifier in this myth, is the embodiment of meaning and form that gives the signified, Oba, all that she connotes (‘legitimate’ wife of Sango and custodian of domestic paraphernalia), a presence which ‘unlike the form ... is in no way abstract: it is filled with a *situation*’ (Barthes 1976, 119, my emphasis). Let me trace the history of this situation. It is a history of appropriation of power, successfully carried out by Sango in a historical moment of feudal ascendancy in a patriarchal society and ‘to the extent that it was successful, it contained the power of truth itself, charged with all its risks and benefits’ (Foucault 1977, 125).

But, in deciphering this myth, the reader has only been able to recognise a distortion and acting as the mythologist, transforms Oba into an *alibi* for Sango’s pseudo-capitalist yearnings. The critical question can certainly be posed: ‘If s/he (the reader) reads it using his/her power of reflection, like the mythologist, does it matter which alibi is presented?’ (Barthes 1976, 129). It is hardly surprising therefore, that William Bascom provides several ‘alibis’ for Sango’s feudal hegemony. Thus:

The narrative continues with an episode in which Obba is confused with Oya, and ends with the following: When Obba dances, she dances holding her hands to her ears. When Yemaya (Yemoja, Shango’s mother) was talking with Obba, she told her what a glutton Chango was, and the quantities of corn meal and okra stew that had to be cooked for him. They were married but Chango abandoned her. He left and spent many days away from home. Chango didn’t want anything but drumming (bata) and feasting. In one of his absences, Elegua (Elegba Esu) told Obba to give a feast; he looked for Chango and took him to the drumming that Obba prepared. (Bascom 1977, 4-5)

Again, if the reader does not see Sango’s burgeoning feudal hegemony in the overtly domesticated Oba, it is of little importance presenting her in the first instance, ‘and if he sees it, the myth is nothing more than a political proposition, honestly expressed. In one word, either the intention of the myth is too obscure to be efficacious, or it is too clear to be believed. In either case, where is the ambiguity?’ (Barthes 1976, 129).

This important question leads to the third category of readers of myths in our theoretical framework. The reader at this level usually focuses on the mythical signifier as an irreducible whole, embodied with meaning and form and receives an ‘ambiguous signification’. The reader responds to all the minute components that

make up the myth, to its very dynamics and *becomes a reader of myths*. At this level of reading, for example, Oba is no longer an instance or symbol and she is definitely far from being an alibi for Sango's exploitative yearnings: she is the very *presence* of this exploitation. Thus, while the first two types of focusing can be said to be 'static' or 'analytical', respectively:

They destroy the myth, either by making its intention obvious, or by unmasking it: the formal is cynical, the latter demystifying. The third type of focusing is dynamic, it consumes the myth according to the very ends built into its structure: the reader lives *the myth as a story at once true and unreal*. If one wishes to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it responds to the interest of a definite society, in short to pass from semiology to ideology, it is obviously at the level of the third type of focusing that one must place oneself: it is the reader of myths himself who must reveal their essential function. How does he receive this particular myth today? (Barthes 1976, 128-9)

The primary aim of this study is two-fold: it consumes the Yoruba myths of Femi Osofisan's reference above, among others, according to the ends built into their structure, and connects the mythical schema to a general history. Reading the myths this way is a critical plunge into transgression and all that it connotes. Transgression is the word that addresses centuries of distortion and partly successful attempts to 'control' the myths from liberating the harassed 'worshippers/adherents' of this view of the world. This control mechanism can be traced historically to that point in history when the African/Black experience literally became interfused with Western discourses in literature, philosophy, statecraft, religion, education and a host of other aspects of entity that have shaped and modelled the African/Black outlook along a certain unambiguous ideological framework pursued by the West.

THE FEAST OF TIME: *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN AND THE MYSTERIES OF GOD*

Ulli Beier: I wanted to talk to you about Yoruba religion, because you seem to be the only writer who has seriously tried to come to terms with it. Even many Yoruba scholars who do research into language, literature, and history of the Yoruba shy away from the subject – as if they were embarrassed about it ... Now in your case, given the type of upbringing you had, I have asked myself how you became interested in Yoruba religion ...

Wole Soyinka: Curiosity mostly, and the annual visits to Isara – which was a very different situation from Abeokuta! There is no question at all that there was something, an intimacy that was more attractive, more intriguing about something from which you were obviously being shielded. If you hear all the time 'Oh, you mustn't play with those kids because their father is an Egungun man ...' you become curious: and then you discover that there is nothing really 'evil' about it ... and that is not the way they preach about it. ('Orisha Liberates the Mind: Wole Soyinka in Conversation with Ulli Beier on Yoruba Religion')³

Sometimes religion simply comforts the worshippers.
(Kauffmann, S. 'Profane Rites')

On the plane of simple analysis, God, in Western thought, is a being with an infinite capacity for controlling the activities of all mortals. Being immortal, God occupies a position that is literally unrivalled and often incomprehensible to the earthly beings whose daily life and activities He controls from a vantage position that cannot be attained by even the most powerful among them. This simple definition marks the beginning of a socially and, perhaps more importantly, religiously stratified society. In what can be regarded as one of the most poetic passages in the Bible, the book of the Prophet Isaiah captures this hierarchical structure, first as it exists in the kingdom above, before spreading to the equally stratified territory inhabited by the earthly subjects of the transcendental signifier:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings, with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did flew. And one cried unto another, and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts,' the whole earth is full of his glory. (The Holy Bible 1990, 777).

Even for a man as holy as the Prophet Isaiah, the privilege bestowed on him in beholding the heavenly splendour of the 'Most-High' is extraordinary; it epitomises, more than anything else, his own ordinariness vis-à-vis the more deprived humanity for and on whose behalf he liaises with the heavenly kingdom. Thus, the apocalyptic vision must be pronounced: 'Woe is me! I cried. For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the king, the LORD of hosts' (Ibid., 778).

A primary way to start delineating an opposing African viewpoint is to understand that such an 'exclusivist' heavenly presence does not exist in an African context, and the psychological exploration in character development is readily substituted for a mode of character development in relation to 'event' or 'situation'. Also, the 'externalization' and mode of representation of 'uniformly illuminated phenomena', which Auerbach observes in chapter one of *Mimesis* (1974), contrasting the Homeric poems with the Biblical story of Abraham and his son, Isaac, and the decree of a dictatorial God, whose absence looms larger than the story itself, has little place in an African context. The difference is that, to the African, even though the gods are the 'final measure of eternity', they are so, only in so far as 'humans are the equivalent of earthly transience', and as Soyinka (1976, 143-4) further observes:

To think, because of this that the Yoruba mind reaches intuitively towards absorption in godlike essence is to misunderstand the principle of religious rites, and misread, as many have done the significance of religious possession. Past, present and future being so permanently conceived and woven into the Yoruba world view, the element which is the god's prerogative

does not have the same quality of remoteness or exclusiveness which it has in Christian or Buddhist culture.

Elesin Oba and Adiiitu Olodumare, Soyinka's and Fagunwa's heroes in *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Mysteries of God*, respectively, incarnate this 'principle of religious rites'. *The Mysteries*, for example, opens with the omniscient narrator's 'Encounter with Adiiitu-Olodumare' (1-6) and only a broad canvass of man and all that pertains to his immediate environment can contain the existential tale:

My friends of all ages and sexes: young school children and my older friends, our male-folks and our women, the black people of the world and the white people too, people of other races and colours. This event took place on a day such as this. Ah! A mighty day it was. Ah! The rain was very heavy. We were driving in a saloon car when a heavy downpour began (1).

Just as 'Death' and 'the King's Horseman' can be described as the major characters in *Death and the King's Horseman*, the major characters in *The Mysteries of God* soon become Adiiitu-Olodumare or 'the knot that God himself had tied and which only he can unknot' and the omniscient narrator. And if, according to Obafemi, the most intriguing aspect of the novel could be described as 'its dream sequences – one in which 'before you get to the end of your marvel and fright at the adventures and idyllic stories, you find that you have been in a world of dreams: *Ase Ala ni*' (Oh! It was only a dream) – then Fagunwa's point is rather straightforward: life is a dream or a sequence of dreams in which all mortals – men and women, animate and inanimate objects – must participate on equal terms. However, being mere mortals, mother-nature and father-culture are not equal in this primordial encounter, as culture is seen to be utterly powerless when subjected to the forceful strength and power of nature.⁴ To prove this simple point, perhaps the latest of father-culture's inventions, the saloon car is soon shown to be incapable of coping with the torrential downpour with which the epic tale opens:

The downpour became quite heavy and hence, visibility became very poor for the driver to continue. In the end, he removed the key from the ignition of the car, stepped on the brakes and the car came to an abrupt stop. We began to look at one another. As we wound up the glasses of the car in absolute silence, a man suddenly began to knock at the sides of the car. He knocked once and knocked a second time. At the third knocking, we opened the door and looked outside. The man came to us the very moment we signalled to him to come. As soon as he arrived, he looked at me intently and started to laugh. 'Son of Beyioku, open the door of your car for me to enter. I have been sent to you. In fact, I am on my way to your house' (2).

Again, nature and culture have combined to carve the specimen, Aditu-Olodumare or 'the knot...' turned out to be. After all, Fagunwa's role in the epic tale is that of the itinerant performer, the griot or *ibongi* – who functions as a recorder of societal norms and values. However, Fagunwa/the omniscient narrator and Aditu-Olodumare are united and bound by the same vision and that vision is intricately woven into the stream-of-consciousness mode of narration with which the fantastic tale is told:

I opened the door immediately because, as I said, the man was extremely handsome. I became drawn to him as soon as I saw him. He was tall and light-complexioned. He was not unduly fat but had the built of an average man. His head was not too big and his back was not as rough as the back of the tortoise and his neck was long in moderation and it was not as long as that of the ostrich. Yet, it was as short as that of the cat. All the parts of his body, including the arms and feet, fit well into each other (1976, 2-3).

Bound by the Yoruba belief that, ‘The past is the ancestors, the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn’ (Soyinka 1976, 5), Aditu-Olodumare and narrator have apparently had the same dream, and the narrator – simply called the man at this stage – asks the incredulous Aditu: ‘Now, do you remember your dream of the night of the sixteenth day spanning the morning of the seventeenth day of the seventh month of the year nineteen hundred and fifty eight after the death of our Lord?’ (1976, 4-5). Besides the preponderance of the figure seven in this bizarre dream, the year 1958 is indeed significant in the context of Nigerian historical experience. The country was on the brink of political independence and the inroad made by the colonial encounter, in cultural and spiritual terms, cannot be better felt than the syncretic overtones in which Yoruba and Christian beliefs are presented. According to the Aditu-Olodumare:

On that night, I had a sudden dream in which my father, who had died, who had crossed many rivers, who had bade the world farewell, suddenly appeared to me from a very mighty house. His body has transformed completely into that of a very young child indeed. He saw me and called me as he used to call me when he was on earth and commanded me to follow him. We entered another big house. As soon as we got inside the house, I began to see many of our household people who had passed on. I saw my elder sister who died long before my father died. I saw my younger brother and sister who died when my father was still alive. I saw my maternal uncle who was a hunter. I saw my senior brother who was both a politician and an eminent person within Christendom. I beheld them all (1976, 5).

The extraordinary tale that ensues is, according to the Yoruba belief, in a tripartite world in which the ancestor, the living and the unborn are united in one continuous existence of divided responsibilities. The father or ancestor addresses his living son:

Look at the man standing on your right hand. Look at him very closely. Take note of him very well because he will come to see you one day and reveal to you what those of us on this side want you to do. He too is of the flesh my son. Commend me to your younger siblings (6, original italics).

Thus, the next two hundred or so pages of the book are devoted to a graphic narration of the life and times of Aditu-Olodumare as he announces: ‘I am Aditu-Olodumare from the town of Ilakose. My father is Obiri-Aiye and my mother’s name is Iponjudiran’ (1976, 6). If Aditu is the ‘knot ...’ then each of these names also connote one mythical frame or another and the true meaning of the names unravel in chapter two entitled *Obiri-Aiye and Iponjudiran* (1976, 7-20). A literal translation of

the name 'Iponjudiran' will yield 'endemic misery that afflicts all generations', while 'Obiri-Aiye' can be translated as 'the changing world'. In the two names reposes the Yoruba belief that change is indeed the most permanent feature of the world, and the chapter opens with a graphic depiction of the chronic poverty into which Aditu was born and one in which his parents had lived and died. Ecologically speaking, man is nothing without nature and the town's name, Ilakose is the key to the political and economic milieu in which Aditu's parents live:

They lived in a town called Ilakose. You may marvel at such a name for a town, as it reminds one of a small animal that resembles the snail, which bears the same name. Ilakose carries a carapace on its back like that of the snail. It crawls about like a snail but Ilakose may live up to a thousand years on earth, yet it can never be as big as the snail. If one makes a stew with a snail, no matter how gingerly one dishes the stew, it cannot last for more than two days at most. There is no single animal in Ilakose town that is bigger than Ilakose. Nobody ever saw a grass-cutter in Ilakose. No one ever came across *Ekiri*, the footprints of *Akata* and those of the antelope were never found in Ilakose, neither were those of the bush-pig. Goats had abandoned Ilakose. The same thing with sheep. Dogs rejected the town. Ducks also. It was as if God himself had decreed that the people of Ilakose must live in total suffering (1976, 8).

But Obiri-Aiye's was a riches-to-rags saga, because there was indeed 'a time in his life when things were much better with him, especially in the year he married his wife, Iponjudiran' (1976, 8). Again, in this admixture of destiny and pragmatic daily existence reposes another Yoruba belief, that man is solely responsible for his own life or what Dayslva (2014, 85) has described as 'The Yoruba *Omoluwabi* Concept of the Persona':

The emphasis here is the significance of learning from one's past mistakes. *Omoluwabi* as a philosophy acknowledges that there is no perfect humankind, not even the *Orishas*, only *Eledumare*-God is the perfect One. However, *Omoluwabi* as a philosophy encourages the need to strive for perfection.

This is precisely what Obiri-Aiye fails to do, even though his name (not to talk of his wife's or his father's equally loaded name), Ibanuje-Fehinti – literally 'where sadness reposes' – appears to have consigned them to a life of misery and unremitting poverty. Aditu-Olodumare, on the other hand, approached life differently. He wrestled with the beasts of the forest, subdued the falsity prevalent in society and overcame them all.

In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the same philosophical juxtaposition of the *Omoluwabi* concept of the persona is clearly discernible vis-à-vis the difficult task of eliciting what Alby James, in his 1995 interview with Soyinka, describes as 'the play's 'threnodic' or lament quality/purpose' (James 2009, xlix). Free to negotiate his fate, the persona, Elesin-Oba obviously understands what his self-sacrificial debt means to his society and he demonstrates this understanding

in his poetic articulation of the ‘Not-I bird’, as the following conversation between him and the Praise-Singer testifies:

Praise-Singer: The cockerel must not be seen without his feathers.
 Elesin: Nor will the Not-I bird be much longer without his nest.
 Praise-Singer: (stopped in his lyric stride) The Not-I bird, Elesin?
 Elesin: I said, the Not-I bird.
 Praise-Singer: All respect to our elders but, is there really such a bird?
 Elesin: What! Could it be that he failed to knock on your door? (9)

The ironically named bird, ‘Not-I’, indeed symbolises what every mortal, confronted with the sure but unambiguous awareness of ultimate death, would chant over and over – a chant propelled by fear. According to Elesin:

There was fear in the forest too.
 Not-I was lately heard even in the lair
 Of beasts. The hyena cackled loud. Not-I,
 The Civet twitched his fiery tail and glared:
 Not-I. Not-I became the answering-name
 Of the restless bird, that little one
 Whom Death found nesting in the leaves
 When whisper of his coming ran
 Before him on the wind. Not-I
 Has long abandoned home. This same dawn
 I heard him twitter in the god’s abode.
 Ah, companion of this living world
 What a thing this is, *that even those*
We call immortal should fear to die (my emphasis, 12)

The ultimate irony, of course, is Elesin’s, as he soon becomes the one who fails to answer the call of death. However, it is in the link between ‘those we call immortal’, who are afraid to die, that the Yoruba worldview reposes. As it has been argued earlier in this article, because past, present and future are intricately woven into the Yoruba worldview, the quality of immortality to those it has been granted, and ‘the element which is the gods’ prerogative does not have the same quality of remoteness or exclusiveness which it has in Christian or Buddhist culture’ (Soyinka, 1976). Consequently, what Olu Obafemi has described further as the undeniable ‘thread between religion, theatre and socio-spiritual regeneration’ (Obafemi 2014, 15) is what is at stake here. Unlike Aditu-Olodumare or the ‘knot ...’, Elesin obviously fails but, as Soyinka himself has argued in his interview with Alby James, it is the human element that matters in the reconstruction of history. Also, the resultant deployment of mythic imagination and ritual, which Obafemi describes as running through the texts of many dramatists, is designed ‘to interrogate the social landscape – advocacy, enlightenment, conscientisation, and so on,’ just as ‘the gods and goddesses are created for continuity in material and super-sensible terms’ (Obafemi 2014, 15).

Thus, if humans are fallible so are the gods, and one of the primary conclusions of Soyinka's interview with James is that 'the Yoruba gods are truthful':

Truthful in the sense that I consider religion and the construct of deities simply as an extension of human qualities taken, if you like, to the nth degree. I mistrust gods who become so separated from humanity that enormous crimes can be committed in their names. I prefer gods who can be brought down to earth and judged, if you like. And the Yoruba Theogony very much embraces that world view. All the gods have their errors, their moment of error. The ills of the world are blamed on the deities but not in the absolute way of their knowing what they were doing at the time. They were either drunk when they did it, when they committed certain errors which were responsible for the creation of the cripples, etc. of the world or they were enfeebled in some other way. But more important is what I call *the elasticity of the digestive system of the deities*. (Soyinka 2009, xlix, my emphasis).

Today, Soyinka's own Nigerian society is under the iron grip of the dreadful Boko Haram insurgents, where, according to David Blair (2015, 21), 'the blood stained Islamists of Boko Haram are mounting a scorched earth campaign'. As our world continues to sink under the perilous onslaught of one religious fanaticism or another, 'the elasticity of the digestive system' of these deities are certainly worth considering, if we are going to realise what Jahanbegloo has described as the philosopher and social historian, Isaiah Berlin's description of what he thought we could hope for in 'a common moral horizon', which is what he called a 'minimally decent society' (Jahanbegloo 2015, 21).

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the evolution of Yoruba culture over the past century or so has been the way in which it has been able to afford a stable institutional and spiritual groundwork for the transformation of collective life and feeling for the individual within this culture, at the critical moment when Western civilisation introduced an element of tension into African societies.

(Abiola Irele, 'Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka')

The past is the ancestors', the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn. The deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn.

(Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*)

Wole Soyinka and the erudite critic of African literature, Abiola Irele, reiterate two important aspects of the African historical experience that this article has been trying to unravel. First, is the relatively 'stable institutional and spiritual groundwork' which, according to Irele, Yoruba culture has fostered 'for the transformation of collective life and feeling for the individual within his culture'. The second aspect concerns the human element, which is often subsumed in what Soyinka has described as a mode of historical reconstruction 'which tries to suggest almost a kind of mathematical

unrolling of a social equation leading to a utopia within society' (Soyinka 2009: xlviii). As the battle cry of the 21st century becomes not just religious fanaticism, but a new fanaticism that, according to Jahanbegloo, 'have all taken the form of a new barbarism', the politicisation and ideologisation of belief systems, leading to what Soyinka has described as the construction of deities 'so separated from humanity that enormous crimes can be committed in their names', must be revisited again. As Jahanbegloo (2015, 21) observes further, 'when people believe that they have the absolute truth, they end up denying other people's existence'.

Consequently, it is not just the explosion of the new barbarism born in the throes of the Arab Spring, to paraphrase Jahanbegloo, that is complicit in this, but what Obafemi has also described as the numerous ways 'Pentecostals have aptly seized the art of dissembling by the jugular and raised theatrics to the highest level of spiritual commodification' (Obafemi 2014, 15). Ostensibly, a belief system that is reflexive and dialogical could be described as one that recognises the kind of human frailty that we have seen in Elesin-Oba and Aditu-Olodumare. Again, Wole Soyinka makes the point well in the following account of Yoruba religion:

There's something else which I never tire of saying. Yoruba religion world view is so self-confident that their adherents never proselytise. Never. And yet, in spite of this, the religion has survived across the waters. It exists in Haiti, Brazil, Cuba, Columbia, in several parts of Latin America, without any fuss. The Yoruba have never fought any war, neither *Jihad* or crusade, on behalf of their religion. Now this is a lesson which these very arrogant and mutually self-destructive religions – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, plus others Hinduism – these belligerent, mutually murderous so-called world religions – had better learn from Yoruba religion. You will not find an adherent of a Yoruba deity going out to murder another being simply because that individual does not accept the terms of his or her religion. I think in the present mutually self-destructive condition of the world, Yoruba religion is one religion in which other religious followers might learn a lesson in humility. (Soyinka 2009, 1)

Finally, because the antidote to fanaticism will always remain a dialogic imagination, the Iranian philosopher, Ramin Jahanbegloo, observes that opposing fanaticism of any kind can only mean one thing: 'To be anti-barbarian in our time is to say 'no' unconditionally to fanaticism – not as tyrants or 'avenging angels' who are intolerant in our own turn, but by engaging in meaningful dialogue with anti-fanatic believers' (Jahanbegloo 2015, 21).

REFERENCES

- Abimbola, W. 1977. *Ifa divination poetry*. New York: Nok Publishers.
- Abodunrin, F., O. Obafemi, and W. Ogundele, eds. 2001. *Character is beauty: redefining Yoruba culture and identity – Iwalewa-Haus 1981 to 1996*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Akinyemi, T., and T. Falola, eds. 2009. *Emerging perspectives on Femi Osofisan*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

- Armstrong, N., and N. Tennenhouse, eds. 1989. *The violence of representation: literature and the history of violence*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Auerbach, E. 1974. *Mimesis: the representation of reality in Western literature*. Trans. W.R. Trask. Princeton & New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. 1968. *Rabelais and his world*. Trans. I. Helen. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. 1986. *The dialogic imagination: four essays*. Trans. and eds Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson Austin: The University of Texas Press.
- Barthes, R. 1976. *Mythologies*. Norwich: Granada Publications.
- Bascom, W. 1977. Yoruba myth in Cuba and Brazil. In *African folklore in the new world*, ed. D. Crowley. Austin & London: University of Texas.
- Beier, U. ed. 2002. *Yoruba poetry*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Series 62.
- Beier, U. 2001. *The hunter thinks the monkey is not wise: a selection of essays*, ed. Ogundele Wole. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Series 59.
- Belsey, C. 1980. *Critical practice*. London & New York: Methuen Oress
- Blair, D. 2015. Boko Haram isn't just abducting schoolgirls: it is enslaving them. *Sunday Times*, 21, www.timeslive.co.za (accessed June 28, 2016).
- Crowley, D. ed. 1977. *African folklore in the new world*. Austin & London: University of Texas Press.
- Dayslva, A. 2014. Globalizing the Yoruba *Omoluwabi* concept of the persona: a philosophical perspective of the African heritage. In *Hirenta: Journal of the Humanities* 79-95.
- Eagleton, T. 2000. *The idea of culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Fagunwa, D.O., *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://global.britannica.com/biography/D-O-Fagunwa> (accessed June 28, 2016).
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Language-counter-memory practice*. Trans. and ed. D.F. Bouchard. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Holy Bible: The New King James Version*. 1990. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Irele, A. 2002. Tradition and the Yoruba writer: D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka. In *African literature: an anthology of criticism and theory*, eds T. Olaniyan and A. Quayson, 75-82. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Jahanbegloo, R. 2015. We must not tolerate the new barbarism of the fundamentalists. In *Sunday Times*, p.21, www.timeslive.co.za Retrieved 20 June 2015
- James, A. 2009. An interview with Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, London: Methuen, xlv-li.
- Kauffmann, S. 2000. Profane Rites. *The New Republic*, 17 (9), 24-25.
- Lugard, F. Lugard's Assessment of Africans, <https://chiefnwaco.wordpress.com/2012/07/15/lord-lugards-assessment-of-africans/> (accessed March 28, 2015).
- Na'Allah, A. ed. 2003. *The people's poet: emerging perspectives on Niyi Osundare*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Obafemi, O. 2012. *The mysteries of God* (A translation of D.O. Fagunwa's *Aditu Olodumare*). Ibadan: Nelson Publishers Limited.

- Obafemi, O. 2014. Religion, Theatre and Redemption. *Hirenta: Journal of the Humanities*, 15-39.
- Olaniyan, T. & Quayson, A. eds. 2007. *African literature: an anthology of criticism and theory*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Osofisan, F. 2003. *Many colors make the thunder-king: major plays vol.1*. Ibadan: Opon Ifa Readers.
- Osundare, N. 1998. *Moonsongs*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Osundare, N. 2000. *The word is an egg*. Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- Pemberton, J. 1976. Esu-Elegba: the Yoruba trickster God. *African Arts* 9(1): 20-27.
- Slaymaker, W. 2007. Ecoing the other(s): the call for global green and Black African responses. In *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, eds T. Olaniyan and A. Quayson, 683-697. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Soyinka, W. 1976. *Myth, literature and the African world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Soyinka, W. 2009. *Death and the king's horseman*. London: Methuen.
- Stallybrass, P., and A. White. 1986. *The politics and poetics of transgression*. London: Methuen Press.
- Stallybrass, P. 1989. Drunk with the cup of liberty: Robin Hood, the carnivalesque and the rhetoric of violence in Early Modern England. *Semiotica* 54(1-2).

ENDNOTES

1. Lord Frederick Lugard and Wole Soyinka, among other differences, obviously see music in diametrically opposing terms: for the former, the African's fondness of music is an integral aspect of his lack of veracity, while the latter sees it as a medium through which we may enter the 'numinous passage' which links all!
2. 'D.O. Fagunwa', *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved 28 June 2016.
3. For detail see, Femi Abodunrin, Olu Obafemi & Wole Ogundele (eds), *Character Is Beauty: Redefining Yoruba Culture and Identity – Iwalewa-Haus 1981 to 1996*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001:151-162
4. In *The Idea of Culture*, Terry Eagleton (2000:1) makes the point quite emphatically and reminds us that 'Culture is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite – nature – is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all'. The complex interface between the two terms constitutes what this study has read, in existential terms, as the inevitable interface between mother-nature and father-culture.