

Olakunle George

Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa (1903-63)

The Nigerian writer D. O. Fagunwa is one of the most well-known figures of the pioneering generation of African writers. This generation did much of their work in the first half of the twentieth century, during the formative stages of cultural nationalism. Fagunwa used an indigenous African language to develop a narrative style that fits into a tradition of the picaresque novel but also contains inflections that are specific to a colonial African context. He wrote in Yoruba, one of the major languages spoken in Nigeria. His first novel, entitled Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbó Irúnmalè (The forest of four hundred deities) was originally written for a competition organized in 1936 by the education ministry in Nigeria. The novel was published by The Church Missionary Society in 1938 and became an instant success. The success of the novel inspired Fagunwa, with the encouragement of the Nigerian educational system, to write more novels using a similar innovative style.

Fagunwa was born in Òkè-Igbó in Western Nigeria. His parents were converted Christians and he himself worked at various levels of the Christian missionary educational system in colonial Nigeria. In addition to Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbó Irúnmalè, he published four other novels: Igbó Olódùmarè (The Forest of God), Ìrinkèrindò Nínú Igbó Elégbèje (Wanderings in the Forest of a Thousand and Four Hundred), Ìrèké Oníbùdó (The sweet one with a secure homeground), and Àdìitú Olódùmarè (God's Conundrum). He also contributed, and wrote the introduction, to a collection of short stories entitled Àsànyàn Ìtàn (Selected Stories). With G. L. Lasebikan, he co-authored a

short story published as a pamphlet for schoolchildren, Òjó Asótán Iwe Kinni (Ojo the storyteller, Book 1). He spent 1948-50 in England on a British Council scholarship, and his experiences form the subject of a travel memoir in two parts: Irinajo Apa Kinni (1949) and Irinajo Apa Keji (1951) (Journey, Part One and Journey, Part Two).

Although he wrote in a variety of modes, Fagunwa's reputation rests primarily on his work as a writer of fiction. His importance for African letters, and his legacy for other writers of Nigerian origin, is to be located in his achievement as novelist. The novels that constitute his major work were influenced by classics of the European picaresque tradition like Pilgrim's Progress and Robinson Crusoe. Likewise, the landscape his texts evoke, and the way in which many of his characters are drawn, reveal the influence of texts like Paradise Lost or Aesop's Fables. The plot usually involves a protagonist who finds himself in an alien forest populated by supernatural forces. He undergoes many trials but triumphs over them through bravery and moral steadfastness. Along the way, the narrative voice interjects didactic themes, often in the form of direct address to the reader, and specifically to schoolchildren.

Fagunwa's novels deploy two inter-related rhetorical modes. First, there is a moralistic and didactic rhetoric about human beings confronting adversity, of perseverance being repaid by spiritual and material prosperity. This rhetorical mode owes much to Fagunwa's investment in Christian doctrine, but it also derives from the fact that, as a schoolteacher, he sought to use his writings for the moral instruction of youths. At a second level, Fagunwa's rhetoric reveals a cultural-nationalist undertone. At this level, collective prosperity is presented as an ideal worth striving for, but it is understood in more mundane terms. Here, the impulse is not simply to propagate moral

lessons based on Christian doctrine, but also to contribute, through fictional narrative, to the material advancement of black people. Fagunwa's cultural nationalism is elaborated on behalf of black peoples everywhere, but he focalizes that black collectivity in the figure of the discerning reader or the well-mannered schoolchild. Consequently, the heroes of his five novels represent the Nigerian and black African subject. They are fallible because they are human. But the strength of character they show in the course of their wanderings indicates Fagunwa's sense of what history demands of black peoples in the mid-twentieth century.

An important testimony to Fagunwa's place in the literary history of Nigeria in particular, and the intellectual history of black Africa in general, is that three of his major works have been translated into English. This indicates that his work continues to be relevant to Africa's postcolonial situation. Fagunwa himself translated his last novel Àdiitù Olódùmarè (God's Conundrum) into English. The unpublished manuscript, which Fagunwa translates as "The Mysterious Plan of the Almighty," is located at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. His writings have also offered a fertile ground for the development of the academic study of Yoruba in secondary and tertiary education. His novels have been reprinted numerous times and, in the nineteen eighties, were republished in revised editions that updated the texts' diacritical tone-marks. The impulse behind the revised editions was to make his texts more easily readable to the average reader of Yoruba. In this way, his texts retain their currency in contemporary, postcolonial Nigeria. Fagunwa's significance can also be seen in the influence he exerted on writers who use the English language, like the late Amos \*Tutuola and Wole \*Soyinka. The influence of Fagunwa can also be seen in the

magical realism of Ben Okri's The Famished Road. Okri's evocation of a universe of forest-dwelling demons and metaphysical entities shows a profound, if indirect, debt to Fagunwa's trail-blazing work.

The most important achievement of Fagunwa is the skill with which he deploys the Yoruba language to fashion a narrative idiom that was uniquely his, but that also gave expression to a crucial transitional period in Yoruba culture. As has often been remarked, the most influential African writers have been committed to developing a narrative form that is adequate to the historical and cultural complexities of postcolonial black Africa. The success of these writers in fashioning creative ways of elucidating Africa's experience in the modern world serves to make the continent the subject, rather than object, of literary representation and philosophical knowledge. This achievement is an ongoing one, and it is in this sense that Fagunwa's pioneering work stands as an inspiring model of intellectual and cultural work. Located at a historical juncture when traditional African cultures were (and still are) undergoing transformations as they confront Western literacy and secular-scientific values, Fagunwa's fiction rises to the occasion. He thereby makes a crucial part of Africa's cultural history available to us in compelling language.

#### Further Reading

Bamgbose, Ayo. (1974) The Novels of D. O. Fagunwa, Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope.  
Irele, Abiola. (1981) "Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, and Wole Soyinka," in The African Experience in Literature and Ideology, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP., 1990.

Smith, Pamela J. (1991) "D.O. Fagunwa: The Art of Fabulation and Writing Orality,"

The Literary Griot 3, 2: 1-16.

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