



Revisiting the Yoruba Lore: Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*

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Abstract : Amos Tutuola's writing effectively revisits a West African past that has been mythicized in Yoruba folk-tales and has been resurrected and thereby installed as part of the significant cultural history of Nigeria. In this respect, the oral tradition becomes the signifier of a past that has been censored by the rupturing cultural effects of colonial modernity. Moreover, they are firmly rooted in the storytelling tradition formed in an un-modernist milieu. Tutuola's depiction of the mysterious folk world shows his indebtedness and interest in the revival of African local beliefs and traditions.

Key Words: Lore, Oral discourse, Revisit

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian Literature was a literature that moved in several directions simultaneously, assimilating creative energy from sources as disparate as oral narratives, Christian Classics and Western popular romances. Indeed, the most dominant provenance of Nigerian literature is the oral narrative, poetic and performance traditions. The deepest roots of Nigerian and West African literatures lie in the indigenous folklore-folktales, storytelling art of the griot and the bards, the performance traditions of the masquerades and the indigenous poetry of the diviners- the Ifa oracular and other oral poetic constructs all of which, through sheer resilience, helped the colonies to survive the cultural ravages and violence visited on them by imperialism and colonialism. The contemporary Nigerian writers- especially the most accomplished of them - have gone back to the precolonial literary structures and formats for thematic and aesthetic inspirations, without losing sight of the impact of the inherited western literary canons bequeathed by education and western conscious ideological and cultural indoctrination.

TUTUOLA AND THE NIGERIAN TRADITION

Amos Tutuola, a self-taught Nigerian writer, was born in 1920 in Abeokuta, near Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital. He had only scant knowledge of the world of letters and he wrote in English language rather than his mother tongue, Yoruba. His aim was to reach a wider audience to which this local material may have more general interest. The peculiarity of his English is that it is not polished or sophisticated. Instead, Tutuola used the English language, spoken by the ordinary people of Nigeria. As a fascinating writer, Tutuola's works are remembered not only for its vibrant style and but also for its indebtedness to African folklore and tradition. Tutuola's books include, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), *My Life in the Bush of Ghost* (1954), *Simbi and the Satyrs of the Dark Jungle* (1955), *The Brave African Huntress* (1958), *The Witch Herbalist of the Remote Town* (1981).

Tutuola was a recognized scholar in the world of folklore. He was absolutely indebted to the oral folkloric strategies and traditions of his own culture. One of the defining debates in critical and theoretical writings on African literature has centered on the relationship between the Continent's indigenous oral traditions and its literary practices. Karin Barber, an influential theorist who

has been critical of the tendency for idealized, essentialist approaches to oral cultures in much African literary criticism, where they are often regarded principally as “unproblematic signifiers of authenticity and authority” (Whittaker 3-4).

Tutuola's works have too often shows a close affinity with Yoruba oral discourses. Essentially a self-taught writer, Tutuola's non-realist mode of storytelling often found its inspiration in the themes and motifs of the Yoruba's oral traditions rather than in any substantive non-African literary tradition. Yoruba culture had developed a number of extraordinarily sophisticated oral forms, including their Odu Ifa divination poems, Oriki praise- chants, and the related form of Ijala hunter's poems in praise of the deity Ogun which Soyinka has described as “the supreme lyrical form of Yoruba poetic art” (Soyinka 28). Tutuola's narratives are centered on an interconnected series of autonomous episodes and fragments. He derived many of the stories from the Yoruba's expansive corpus of myths, folktales and religious lore, as well as from their extensive use of riddles, proverbs and humorous stories. The esoteric realm occupied by the various inhabitants in Tutuola's works provides a distinct experience for readers.

MY LIFE IN THE BUSH OF GHOSTS

My Life in the Bush of Ghosts is a novel that evidently makes use of myths. The past memories depicted in the novel reveal the traces of the slave trade era and brings those repressed memories to the forefront of conscious recollection. The novel seems to resonate with critical and popular audiences because it provides a supernatural realm of a timeless African experience and culture. The story takes place in the era of the slave trade. Tutuola's narrator sharply points to the prevalent slave raiding that was a frightening experience, even to the most remote villages in the early nineteenth century during the Yoruba civil wars, and which fed thousands of its victims into the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The opening of novel itself shares the protagonist's anxiety and fear of slave trade. The narrator's horrified description of being sold to foreigners reveals explicitly the nature of the trade. Though it is Africans who would have been his captors, his fear is informed by a mythology of captivity existing in his community. In the story, the protagonist anticipates what will be in store for him, if he is captured as a slave. Clearly, here this young protagonist has an imagination for the kinds of torture possible for those who are captured, such that slavery in a foreign land is the child's first thought when he is threatened with the possibility of capture. It exposes not only of the terror inflicted on West African communities by slave raiders but also the effects it had not only on the lives but also on the imaginations of those who lived in West Africa at the time. Thus, the Africans were mutilated physically and psychologically. Tutuola's novel, then, not only records the dangers of the slave trade but its lasting effect on the psyche of those within the reach of its powers.

Tutuola, through the re-telling of history, provides a new realm of experience, quite unknown to the modern Africans. In the opening chapter, the narrator encounters some of the most harrowing conditions the slave trade introduced to the people of West Africa. Their villages pillaged by people who often looked much like themselves, the people of West Africa were haunted by the specter of enslavement in their daily lives. Disarmed with the knowledge of this constant threat, even children were forced to face capture as Tutuola's narrator does, with the resolve that God or their own fear will save them. The aftermath of slave trade was that it left numberless men, women, and children stripped of their closest relations and most intimate connections and left them prey to death, disease, and extraordinary suffering. For those who were left on the continent, like the protagonist of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, what remained in place of those connections was displacement, both physical and psychic. When the young narrator of the novel enters the bush, then, it is Tutuola's figuration of that displacement into a landscape most forbidding.

Tutuola wove the oral tradition into this novel in a way that allows seeing the transatlantic slave trade's intrusion into the West African imagination of landscapes, memories and bodies. The layered temporalities of the novel remind that this is not simply the story of a boy running from slave raiders during the era of the transatlantic trade. Those moments of seeming anachronism, the palimpsestic time, so characteristic of the oral narrative and storytelling, the return to contemporary indigenous forms of bondage at the end of the framing narrative, remind that this terror, the trauma of the trade, is not short-lived, nor did it end with the abolition of trade. “In turn, the grief and the loss that the protagonist experiences can be read as a trans- generational trauma, a tension that resides in the bush, even for those not subjected to the terror of literal slave raiders” (73).

The ambivalent attitude displayed by Tutuola's protagonists towards crossing the boundaries between the realms of the real and the supernatural. Far from showing any anxiety at the thought of returning to the Bush of Ghosts, the narrator hints to his

mother and brother that he would like to return there to witness the centenary celebrations of the 'Secret Society of Ghosts'. Although he is forbidden by his family from returning, he ends the narrative with these words:

Of course they said this their own accord, because I dreamed a dream that I am present when this "Secret Society of Ghosts" is performing and I believe so, because my dream always comes true in future, however it may be. So you will hear about this news in due course (174).

In the narrative, the central character reaches a point where he has become so accustomed to the ways of ghosts and supernatural beings that he ponders whether to give up on their desire to return home and instead become denizens of the 'Bush of Ghosts' themselves.

Anthropomorphism and shape-changing are a regular feature of Yoruba folktales and mythology. Following this tradition, Tutuola's stories are filled with magical transformations and episodes involving metamorphism. While in one disconcerting episode in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* the young narrator is captured by a town of ghosts who transform him into different kinds of creatures. Tutuola depicts such a transformation:

In the presence of these guests, my boss was changing me to some kinds of creatures. First of all he changed me to a monkey, and then I began to climb fruit and pluck fruits down for them. After that he changed me to a lion, then to a horse, to a camel, to a cow or bull with horns on its head and at last to my former form (36).

Fantasy and exaggeration, hallmarks of the folktale, reverberates throughout his art. Tutuola's details are perhaps the most fantastic and exaggerated that will be found anywhere in the world of the folktale. In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* the hero, now turned into a cow, springs to a distance of ninety yards and the Flash-eyed Mother's body has millions of heads which when talking together sound like the striking of iron or church bells. In the novel, Tutuola fantastically introduces the heads of the Flash-eyed Mother: [. . .]If they are talking, their voices would be sounding as if somebody strikes an iron on the church bell which sound would last more than ten minutes before stopping. If all of them are talking together at a time it would be as a big market's noises, they were arguing, flogging and reporting themselves to their mother (98).

Many of Tutuola's stories derive its origin from the oral tradition and there is no doubt that these works have been concocted by his own fertile imagination. He delved deeply into the wonders of traditional lore, and exhibits his mastery in inventing his own mythology and so coloring it that it looks even more fantastic than folklore. One thing of the sheer fantasy of the Spirit of Prey who kills an animal each time it closes its eyes, of the strange inhabitants of the "Unreturnable Heavens Town" who climb a ladder before leaning it against the tree and wash their domestic animals leaving themselves dirty. In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* there is the monstrous figure of the Flash-eyed Mother—so obviously the product of Tutuola's fantastic imagination—that alone fills the whole town like a vast hill:

She had a large mouth which could swallow an elephant uncut. The two fearful large eyes which were on the front of her head were always flashing or bringing out fire whenever she was opening them . . . The hair on her head was just as bush, all could weigh more than a ton if cut and put on a scale, each was thicker than a quarter of an inch and almost covered her head, except her face (98-99).

His fantastic creatures appear at times like the bugbears conjured up by a child's imagination which is haunted or delighted by stories of the monstrous and the fantastic.

In the novel, Tutuola pays much attention to the African native belief of sorcery. In the chapter on 'Television Handed Ghosts', the ghostess describes, her story to him. She says that she was born over hundreds of years with sores all over her body. She approached many doctors but everything failed. The she says: "I have been many sorcerers to know whether the sore would be healed" (162). This story is tied with a knowledge shared by the sorcerers on how to heal these sores. They consoled her telling her that: [. . .] there is an earthly person who had been lost in the Bush of Ghosts , so that If I can be wandering about I might see you one day, and the sorcerers said that if you will be licking the sore every day with your tongue for ten years it would be healed (162).

Tutuola's works resonate with the richness of folkloric narrative tradition. In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* he incorporates precolonial beliefs and superstitions which are still very much alive among Africans. To complement these beliefs Tutuola, adds a younger tradition of Christianity with the older native beliefs. The blending of Christian beliefs can be seen in the wedding ceremony in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* where we meet the narrator and his future wife – ghostess from the bush of ghosts, as well as the preacher Devil and Judas, who closes the service. The intertwining of two religious traditions creates a hybrid amalgam of beliefs that are all both alive in lives of most Africans. Christianity did not cancel out the older beliefs and superstitions. In the foreword to *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* Geoffrey Parrinder stresses the importance of the setting – the Bush of Ghosts – and the fear it arouses even today in millions of Africans (9). The belief in the presence of ghosts in the bush is still very much alive. Although the fusion of folkloric and modern, African and Western elements may seem artificial to the Western eye, it is important to realize that it is not a factitious invention of a writer. Dathorne rightly notes, that "Tutuola's disharmonious symbols unite the paradoxes of his world" (101).

Tutuola belongs to the first generation literate of Yoruba tradition, a man who was born and brought up in an oral culture and managed to transplant some of his story telling power onto the written page of papers. Since all Yoruba legends are verbally told, it can be understood that he relies on oral strategies of communication to recapture the freshness and original narrative strategy of his Yoruba tales. Oral narrative technique appears in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, in a more particular way. In a passage where the Wanderer goes so far as to give a phone number to the reader and ask the latter to call if he is interested in marrying one of his dead cousin's daughters. He says: "So do you like to marry one of them? If it is so, please choose any and only one of these numbers – 733, 744, 755, 766, 788 respectively, so that his or her picture may be sent to or to come to you personally" (152-153).

The ambivalent nature of Tutuola's protagonists is seen when they cross the boundaries between the realms of real and the supernatural. At the end of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* the returning protagonist is questioned by his family about his recollections of meeting his dead cousin in the 10th Town of Ghosts, and he has this to say: "They asked me whether I feared him as he had died in our town here in my presence before I left the town, so I replied that if anybody enters into the Bush of Ghosts he or she would not fear for anything within a week he or she entered into it" (174).

Further confirmation of Tutuola's indebtedness to Yoruba oral tradition can be found in the structure of his narratives. A close examination of the novel reveals that they consist of a series of short stories strung together. This can be seen in the closing formulas Tutuola uses to round off his episodes. Some examples can be found here: "This is what hatred did" (174), "This is how I escaped from the "hopeless-ghosts" who was carrying me about" (53): "This is how I get out of the Bush of Ghosts which I entered when I was seven years old" (166).

Tutuola has taken over the traditional mythology and fitted it into his own pattern. The over-riding theme in the novel is what happens to a mortal who strays into the world of ghosts. Into this popular motif, Tutuola placed popular beliefs, such as that in the Burglar ghosts, who are children that die in infancy and are reborn again and again, and are really troublesome ghosts come to plague and rob the unhappy parents. Tutuola describes the scene: "So you earthly person, if you reach your earthly town and if you hear that a woman is delivering babies who die always and continuously, then believe, we are those babies and all the earthly people are calling such a baby born and die" (55).

Tutuola uses proverbs and riddles in order to communicate his dedication to Yoruba folktales and to share it with his audience. They have their importance in the novels since they confirm once again Tutuola as a writer concerned with his culture and tradition. In fact as the Igbo saying goes “proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe 5). Moreover, to Yoruba people, proverbs use is a testimony to a man’s initiation, his knowledge and wisdom. In the Nameless –town episode, the wanderer recollects an incident when he is offered a costly, decorated bed by the super lady and he feels highly uncomfortable to sleep there. This idea is expressed through the proverb: “Clean places are driving a dirty person away as if it will hurt him” (MLBG 120). Tutuola uses the proverb to draw a line of demarcation between clean places and dirty people. This proverb portrays the wanderer as an ‘unfit’ person in the decent place the super lady has given to him to sleep. It shows also a sense of inferiority about the Wanderer as he is scared of sleeping at a clean place because of the fear that his extreme dirt is contradictory to a neat environment.

Tutuola’s use of riddles can be found in the ‘loss or gain’ valley episode (139). It is the story of a river, which cannot be crossed with clothes on the travelers. Any traveler is compelled to put out his cloth at one bank of the river before crossing it. After crossing, if the latter finds better clothes than his at the other bank, he gains. Otherwise he loses. This explains then the name of the river. The riddle to be resolved here is: how one can cross the valley without any loss except gain.

Tutuola creates a world of traditional lore where human beings mingle freely with beings from the spirit world. This unrestricted realm created by Tutuola, provides a new perception for his audience. It is a world in which animals, vegetation, and spirits are frequently given human attributes while human beings are endowed with miraculous supernatural powers. It is a world of fantasy where the human being is often at the mercy of the incomprehensible forces of the universe. It can be said that the creation of the Tutuolan world is an attempt to come to terms with those hidden forces lurking in nature, which have always haunted the African imagination.

Tutuola uses oral forms to recapture their original narrative style. He has then restored African orature’s dignity to the world in succeeding to recapture those narrative techniques without attempting to mimic European models. His deviations as far good writing is concerned are obvious but they are fore grounded. They are done on purpose and constitute an unmistakable mark of the writer’s artistry.

Conclusion

Tutuola’s writing effectively revisits a West African past that has been mythicised in Yoruba folk-tales and has been resurrected and thereby installed as part of the significant cultural history of Nigeria. In this respect, the oral tradition becomes the signifier of a past that has been censored by the rupturing cultural effects of colonial modernity. Tutuola is most important as an innovator. He was one of the first writers to contribute something entirely new to West African literature. So he deserves to be called the father of experimentation in Nigerian fiction in English. Moreover, they are firmly rooted in the storytelling tradition formed in an un-modernist milieu. Tutuola’s depiction of the mysterious folk world shows his indebtedness and interest to the revival of African local beliefs and traditions.

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