

“He Being Dead Yet Speaketh”: The Legacy of Amos Tutuola

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Abstract

This paper takes a fresh look at the legacy of Amos Tutuola, the first Nigerian author to write any full length novel in English, by throwing new light into why he wrote the way he did, and how his work is still relevant to us today. Tutuola has been an enigma, especially to fellow Nigerian authors since he first published his now popular *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads' Town*. This pioneering work catapulted him to world acclaim almost overnight when it was given mostly positive critical reviews overseas. However, this did not sit well with everyone, not least, his fellow countrymen who faulted his unconventional use of the English language. This paper argues that it is this same retooling of the conventions of English grammar and usage that sets Tutuola apart from other well known Nigerian authors.

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INTRODUCTION

Although a pioneer, prolific writer and master storyteller, Amos Tutuola was little known, little appreciated, and often vilified during his lifetime, mostly by the educated elite of his home country. Generally, the accusations leveled against him by his Nigerian critics had little to do with his creativity, or inventiveness (although some did question both of these, as well as his authenticity), rather, they had to do with the way he wrote. Most of his ardent critics could not see the forest for the trees, as far as his important contributions to African, and more specifically, Nigerian literature and culture are concerned, due to an overbearing and excessive devotion to the English language – the language used by Tutuola,

and in which most Nigerian and other African elite have been schooled. In all, Tutuola wrote nine novels and three collections of short stories and folktales during his lifetime, yet most of the criticisms of his works have been centered on the language in which he chose to write, rather than on the message and merit of his works.

From hindsight one can probably excuse Tutuola's critics for their lack of toleration of his language, since the colonial masters worked very hard to make sure that their subjects spoke "proper" English. To achieve this "noble" goal, they even went as far as banning the speaking of local languages in the colonial school system and anyone caught speaking "vernacular" was duly punished. Thus, to have someone write the way Tutuola did in the heydays of colonialism must have come as a big shock to his educated Nigerian audience. Although they may have been very familiar with the day to day usage of the vernacular, or pidgin form of the Queen's English, they probably were very uncomfortable with the written form of it. To them, it cast them in a very negative light viz-a-viz the rest of the English speaking world.

Ajani¹ (2001) explored, in part, this thorny issue of Tutuola's language – why he wrote the way he did, and the linguistic principles that underlie his experimentation with the English language (EL). Using three of Tutuola's works – *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), and *The Brave African Huntress* (1958) – as corpus for this linguistic analysis, Ajani's dissertation tried to show how the Yoruba language (YL), among others, has exerted a profound influence on EL as used in present day Nigeria.

Critics have often blamed Tutuola's scanty formal education for his "peculiar" way of using the "Queen's English." Although this is true to a large extent, this kind of retooling of EL is not limited to Tutuola. More famous writers, such as Chinua Achebe of the world-acclaimed *Things Fall Apart* (1957) and Wole Soyinka, the 1986 Nobel laureate in literature, both fellow countrymen of Tutuola's have also been known to use EL in very unconventional ways, albeit in more subtle ways than Tutuola. For instance, Soyinka loves to experiment with EL in very sophisticated ways, to an extent that most people accuse him of being unnecessarily difficult and his works largely inaccessible to a great majority of readers (cf. Ajani 2005). However, Soyinka has once said that in his use of EL, he has tried to stretch it,

¹ I owe Dr. M. J. Hardman, Professor of Linguistics and Anthropology at the University of Florida a debt of gratitude for stirring up my interest in the works, and especially the language of Tutuola.

impact it, fragment and reassemble it, in order to transform it into a tool that could adequately carry his messages to a wider world. Achebe's now famous quote is relevant here

So my answer to the question, Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I would say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience... It will be a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surrounding (1965:29-30).

Almost a decade before Tutuola's novel came on the scene, another writer from far away India had already shared similar convictions in another well-known and often quoted statement: "We cannot write like the English, We should not" (Rao 1943:viii). Rao's statement (above) should put to rest the argument often made that Tutuola's unconventional English was a disgrace to fellow Nigerians.

Ajani's research concludes that Tutuola has not been accorded a deserving place among African writers. He felt that Tutuola had not been given a fair hearing, simply because of the tool he had used to bring his message about. It really doesn't matter how anyone chooses to look at Tutuola's works, one cannot easily dismiss a man who has produced over a dozen works; no, it is impossible to ignore such a person without doing a great disservice to his legacy. He definitely deserves to be taken seriously, no matter what he has to say, and which way he goes about doing so. Below is what Tutuola himself had to say about why he decided to write, in spite of what many purists have termed his "handicap" with the English language

I don't want the past to die. I don't want our culture to vanish. It's not good. We are losing [our customs and traditions] now, but I'm still trying to bring them into memory. So far as I don't want our culture to fade away. I don't mind about English grammar – I should feel free to write my story. I have not given my manuscript to any one who knows grammar to edit (*West Africa* 11-17 August 1997:1299).

What Tutuola was saying in essence is this: I will not be bogged down by trying to write English like an American or a British. I am going to domesticate the English language to serve my own ends. I am going to let it bear the burden of my experience. I am a man with a message and a mission and I shall

not be distracted by elitist critics. I will use the English language as an instrument to convey my mission to the next generation. I am trying to preserve the culture and customs of my people before it dies away.

With the death of Tutuola in 1997, however, there seemed to have emerged a more favorable criticism of the man and his works, as evidenced in the numerous posthumous tributes in most Nigerian dailies and news magazines shortly after he passed away. It had taken, unfortunately, the death of the literary luminary for people – especially those he called his own – to finally begin to appreciate his worth.

Tutuola was an enigma, both in life and in death. The way he lived and died were a puzzle to those who admired him, as well as to those who could not care less about him. During his lifetime many a critic from his home country felt he was a disgrace and an embarrassment, not only to Nigeria and Africa, but to the entire black race. A few others, however, felt he was a writer to be reckoned with. Achebe refers to Tutuola as “the most moralizing” of all Nigerian writers (1987:68) and Cyprian Ekwensi called him, albeit posthumously “... [A] man who excelled in his writing, a man who brought honour to Nigeria” (*West Africa*, 4-10 August 1997:1266).

Tutuola: The Man

Amos Tutuola was born in 1920 in Abeokuta, a city of about 64 miles from Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial capital, and passed on to the “Deads’ Town” (to borrow his own terminology), on Saturday, June 7, 1997, having lived a long, fruitful, and often controversial life. He was 77 when he died quietly at his home in Odo-Ona, in the suburbs of Ibadan, another major Yoruba city, next only to Lagos in demographic importance. In spite of his international popularity, he died unsung at home in obscurity and almost destitute. Oyekan Owomoyela had this to say in his full-length book on Amos Tutuola

He died as he had lived, amid uncertainties, contradictions, and controversy. The causes and circumstances of his death reflect a major contradiction in his life and career. Diabetes and hypertension, the conditions to which he succumbed, need not prove fatal to a patient able to afford proper medical care; unfortunately Tutuola was not, for despite his literary success and international fame, at the time of his death, he was destitute. In the view of many who mourned him ... he got far less from life and much less from his society than he deserved. ... His virtual local anonymity in his last days, despite his international fame, is also something of a contradiction (Owomoyela, 1999:146).

Abeokuta, Tutuola’s birth place and hometown, is one of the major cities of the Yoruba, located on the rain-forest region of south-western Nigeria, a geographical location that would later inform, shape and

influence his writings. The spiritual atmosphere of Abeokuta and its environs during Tutuola's growing years was that of a syncretism birthed by the presence of a strong Yoruba traditional belief and value systems and a heavy Christian missionary activity, mostly by the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S).

Tutuola came from an honorable and respectable background. According to Michael Thelwell in his informative introduction to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola's grandfather, the Odafin Odegbami, was a well respected administrative ruler among his people, being one of the sub-chiefs and spiritual leaders of Abeokuta. He had six wives and more than twenty children. As a spiritual leader of his people, he was a practitioner of one of the African traditional religions – Ogun. In fact, his name, "Odegbami" itself means the deity, Ogun accepts, or saves me. Ogun is the Yoruba patron deity of hunters, smiths and warriors; the god of iron, fire, technological knowhow and political authority.

Amos Tutuola's father, Charles Tutuola Odegbami, had three wives and several children. Although his parents were firm believers in Yoruba traditions and values, they had converted to Christianity as a result of strong missionary activity in the Abeokuta area during most of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Thus, Tutuola was born into an extended family in which Yoruba traditional religion was practiced side by side with European-introduced Christianity, a background that would forever influence his outlook, life and works. Although Tutuola's grandparents practiced indigenous Yoruba religion, his parents were firm believers in the Christian religion.

Tutuola has been quoted as saying that "I met my father and mother as Christians" (Tutuola 1984:182). Thelwell believes that it is this conflicting religious background that must have influenced Tutuola's decision to change his name from Olatubosun (his given name, with obvious reference to the Yoruba deity, Osun) to Amos (most probably his baptismal name), a name reminiscent of the biblical fiery prophet of righteousness. Changing his last name from Odegbami (his family name, bearing loyalty to the deity, Ogun) to Tutuola, his father's given name (meaning "fresh wealth") is reminiscent and indicative of the missionary practice of asking new adherents of the faith to expunge from their names any references to African deities. This is how Olatubosun Odegbami became Amos Tutuola, the name by which Tutuola became known and recognized around the world. In this name lies the history of Tutuola's transformation as well as an important key to understanding his works, works that mix Yoruba beliefs and cosmology with Christian beliefs and Western technology and transfer underlying Yoruba linguistic structures into English to produce writings that appeal to both Yoruba and English speakers alike.

As one of several children in a large family, Tutuola had a rough time growing up, especially with regard to his academic upbringing. As a struggling cocoa farmer, his father could not afford the luxury of sending him to school, at least not without some help from the extended family. His father's meager income from cocoa farming was not sufficient to take care of his large family and send all the children to school. Although cocoa was a major cash crop, most of the profit that came from it went, unfortunately, to the colonial authority and the few middle men that it had created and very little to the hardworking farmers who owned the land and did most of the work. Thus, his father struggled financially and was able, with some help, only to put Tutuola into school for a few years. His uncle, Mr. Dalley, arranged for him to live with his friend, Mr. F. O. Monu, a civil servant, to earn his tuition working for the latter as a household servant. The young Tutuola quickly jumped at this opportunity and left his father to live with Monu, while working his way through school at the Salvation Army School, Abeokuta. He was, then, about 12-14 years old when he began his formal education, but quickly proved himself to be a brilliant and promising student. This is what Tutuola had to say himself about his academic abilities and potentials

I started my first education at the Salvation Army School, Abeokuta, in the year 1934, and Mr. Monu was paying my school fees regularly, which were 1/6 a quarter, and also buying the school materials, etc., for me. But as I had the quicker brain than the other boys in our class (Class 1 infant), I was given the special promotion from Class 1 to Std. 1 at the end of the year... [M]y weekly report card columns were always marked 1st position on every week-end, which means I was the first boy out of 50 boys in the class throughout the year. At the end of that year I was in the 1st position out of 150 boys and this was the final examination of the year (Tutuola, 1953:126-127).

Tutuola later on moved to Lagos with his employer and there enrolled at the Lagos High School where he continued with his education. However, due to the verbal and physical abuse he suffered from his master's wife, he had to return to his native Abeokuta without completing his education. Upon his return home, he continued with his education at the Anglican Central School, Ipose Ake, also in Abeokuta. Here he remained until 1939, when his final hopes of completing his formal education were dashed as a result of his father's untimely death. He had had in all only six years of formal education.

After an unsuccessful attempt at farming, during a drought, he returned to Lagos the following year, but this time, to live with one of his half-brothers. Back in Lagos he successfully learnt blacksmithing which landed him a job as a coppersmith with the West African Air Corps of the British Royal Air Force in 1942. In 1945, following the end of the Second World War, he was discharged from the Royal Air Force

and made an attempt to establish his own blacksmithing practice but failed because he did not have enough capital to properly establish the business.

A year later, he wound up as a messenger with the Department of Labor in Lagos. It was during his tenure here that the idea of writing his first book, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads' Town* (henceforth PWD) came to him. It is said that he wrote the entire book within the space of two days (*Africana* 1999:1905). It was his creative way of easing his boredom while working as a messenger, a job he would later on refer to as “this unsatisfactory job.” Although he wrote this first full-length narrative ever to be written by a West-African in the English language in 1946, this pioneering work would not be published until in 1952 – six years after it had been written. He married Victoria Alake in 1947, the year after completing his audacious book. The couple was blessed with three children during their fruitful marriage, which lasted half a century. Tutuola also had three other wives with whom he had eight more children, bringing the total number of his children by all four wives to eleven (*West Africa* 1997:1267).

In 1957 Tutuola secured a job as a storekeeper with the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Lagos and was subsequently transferred to Ibadan where he continued with his writing career. At Ibadan, he teamed up with Professor Collis of the University of Ibadan to adapt his first book, PWD, for the stage while he worked on his fourth, *The Brave African Huntress* (henceforth BAH), published in 1958 by the same publishers, Faber and Faber, which had published his first three books and later would also publish most of his subsequent books.

Tutuola: His Works

Before Tutuola went to join his ancestors in June 1997, he had twelve books to his credit: nine novels, two collections of stories and a book of Yoruba folktales, all produced within the span of about forty years, from 1952-1990, and published almost exclusively by Faber and Faber of London. Although two of these works – *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) – share recognition as his most famous, he is best known for his first and now classic novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, now translated into almost twenty languages around the world, including in French, German, Italian, Swedish, Romanian, Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, Czech, and several other European and African languages (Eko 1974:19; Thelwell 1984:187). His other works include *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle* (1955), *The Brave African Huntress* (1958), *Feather Woman of the Jungle* (1962), *Ajaiyi and His*

Inherited Poverty (1967), *The Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town* (1981), *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of Ghosts* (1982), *Yoruba Folktales* (1986), *Pauper, Brawler, and Slanderer* (1987) and *The Village Witch Doctor and Other Stories* (1990).

His first two novels, and by far his most popular – *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (henceforth PWD) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (henceforth LBG) – were also adapted for the stage in Nigeria in 1958. PWD was first produced as a Yoruba opera in 1968 by the popular Yoruba dramatist Kola Ogunmola. In 1995, a stage adaptation of LBG was presented in the United Kingdom as Nigeria's entry play for the Africa95 international festival held in London that year. Several other performances of these two books have been made by various local operas since their first stage presentations, a testimony to their popularity among the masses of the people at the home front.

Tutuola's popularity among non-elite Yoruba speakers and the common people could be attributed to the fact that his works spoke to their hearts – they could identify with the folklores of their common backgrounds. Because his works and the way he used his language (i.e. English) conveyed the worldview of Yoruba speakers, it was easy for the common people to identify with and appreciate his works. Although he drew from a common pool of knowledge, he went one step farther by making that knowledge his own first before sharing it with an international audience. He did this by adding his own creative slant to the age old stories in such a way as to make it both easily accessible to his people and the world at large. Although some have questioned his original intended audience, it can be safely argued that by writing in English he was also aware that his works would be read by his fellow Nigerians and foreigners alike. Some have even argued that the accolades his works were accorded abroad was rather accidental than expected, but is this not true of many a famous works in history? How many of today's famous writers knew, after producing their work that it will eventually bring them fame and renown? How many inventors knew at the onset of their scientific endeavors that they would invent something that would literally revolutionize our world?

Despite the hostile attitude towards Tutuola and his works and his apparent lack of popularity among a large segment of the Nigerian educated elite, an excellent proof of the general popularity of his works and their influences on the Yoruba elite was Wole Soyinka's staging of PWD in Yorubaland, which was followed by several other stagings of both EL and YL versions by various theater groups across West Africa, especially in Nigeria and Ghana in the early sixties. In fact, according to Eko (1974:20), the first YL stage adaptation and performance of PWD by Kola Ogunmola (with parallel EL translation) in April

1963 “was an immense success with the public, especially African intellectuals, and received an excellent review from Wole Soyinka.”

It should also be observed that Tutuola’s fiction has received high praise from his fellow novelists. Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe are known to openly admire Tutuola and his works. Achebe is known to have referred to Tutuola as “the most moralistic of African writers” (probably a reference to the fact that most Yoruba and African stories and folktales always have a moral slant to them) while Soyinka has popularized his works among the masses through theatrical performances. Both authors are the two most famous writers to come out of Nigeria, and probably Africa as a whole.

Tutuola has been unequivocally recognized as the first person to write any full-length narrative in EL in Nigeria, as well as the first West African writer of EL expression to win considerable international attention. Ebele Eko has this to say about Tutuola’s pioneering efforts

Amos Tutuola was undeniably the first West African writer of English expression to win considerable international recognition. The publication of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in 1952 marked the beginning of modern Nigerian literature and apparently took the literary world by surprise. An important review by Dylan Thomas launched the book on its way to fame and the author on his way to becoming one of the most controversial writers of modern African literature (Eko 1974:19).

Bernth Lindfors, who has written a full-length *Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola* (1975) and has studied Tutuola and his works over several decades, has the following observation to make with regards to the publication of Tutuola’s pioneering work, “Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was the first substantial literary work written in English by a Nigerian author, and its publication in 1952 created a stir” (1973:51).

In a posthumous eulogy recognizing Tutuola’s achievements, the editor of *West Africa* magazine referred to Tutuola’s first novel in the following terms

Today, this book is recognized as a significant milestone – indeed, the first milestone – on the long road that Nigerian authors writing in English have travelled since that time. It was the national equivalent of *The Canterbury Tales* in British literature, Tutuola being Anglophone Africa’s aboriginal Chaucer (1997:1268).

Tutuola, then, has been given credit for opening up the new field of modern African literature in EL for Achebe, Soyinka and the other Nigerian writers who followed. It should be acknowledged, however, that although Tutuola pioneered creative writing in English, he himself was following in the footsteps of another compatriot and kinsman, Daniel O. Fagunwa, who was actually the first person to codify YL

folktales in creative written form, the only difference being that he chose to write in YL rather than in EL. Just as Tutuola was influenced by his predecessor, Fagunwa, so also has Tutuola influenced Wole Soyinka. These three are inseparably linked to each other and are recognized as the three most outstanding YL writers, all three drawing from the same sources – their common background in a rich and vibrant tradition of storytelling and YL folklore.

Tutuola built his literary career primarily by the creative retelling and expansion of YL folktales (see the Reference page of this paper for a full list of his works), stories that not only he, but all other YL children like him have heard again and again by adults under the bright moon-lit African sky. They are stories that have been told and retold, from one generation to another over the millennia. All of his eleven books draw from these common sources. Throughout his life, Tutuola's goal was to preserve Yoruba culture by codifying his people's folklore; his choice of language was English, but his was a modified English, an English that could convey adequately the culture he was trying to preserve without doing much damage to its originality and intensity, an English made to serve his people, an English created in the image and likeness of his people and their language.

The existence of different varieties of EL is now a well established fact. Much has been written about Indian, South African, West African, Nigerian, Cameroonian, Australian and other varieties of English around the world. In fact, American English itself is a variety or dialect of English, with its own idiosyncrasies that set it apart from the British or any other variety of EL.

What both Achebe and Rao said in earlier quotes above is exactly what Tutuola has done, and this he has done well. Proof of his success is to be found in the effusive praise and adulation showered upon him in numerous posthumous tributes in the Nigerian press after his passing away. One writer referred to him as "Nigeria's Nobel Literature Laureate who never won" (*West Africa* 1997: 1266). Another described him as "an honored ancestor, an inspirational father figure to a whole generation of younger writers" (ibid.). Another tribute writer in the same article quoted above put it so well in one single but powerful sentence: "Tutuola may have died, but what he left to the world lives on" (p. 1267). In other words, Tutuola has left a lasting legacy to generations yet unborn.

When the London firm, Faber and Faber, published his first novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, on May 2, 1952, it became an instant success, mostly due to a positive review by Dylan Thomas in *The London Observer* of July 6, 1952. Other rave reviews of the book followed, especially after the American edition appeared the following year, issued by Grove Press. The seriousness with which the American audience

took his work could be seen in the many reviews that it enjoyed in leading newspapers and magazines across the nation. According to Ebele Eko, within three years of its publication, PWD was translated into four other European languages: French, German, Italian and Serbo-Croatian (1974:19).

While Tutuola enjoyed mostly favorable reviews in Europe and America, the story was quite different at home; he was booed and jeered at by the Nigerian educated elite, who felt that he had disgraced them because of the “unconventional” way in which he wrote his English. They were afraid Europeans would label them incompetent to acquire the “glorious” English language. They felt that he was an anomaly and a disgrace because he had not followed strictly the rules of the “Queen’s English” (Ajani 2005, 2007). In short, they got stuck on his language and forgot to look at his message. Although many well-known writers and critics, such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Harold Collins, Bernth Lindfors, to mention just a few, have come to appreciate and to positively appraise Tutuola’s works and worth, there are still a few, mostly Nigerian critics, who feel Tutuola is not deserving of all the attention he is being accorded (Owomoyela 1999).

Some have argued that Tutuola’s English was the result of his educational handicap – the fact that he only had a few years of formal education. My answer to such criticism is that true as this may be, he was able to overcome such “handicap” eventually, by producing more works than most of his highly educated contemporaries. By not sitting down idly to bemoan his apparent scanty education and instead deciding to forge ahead with putting down his creative ideas on paper for the whole world to read, I believe he should rather be praised than penalized. There are many people with great ideas but who were eventually buried with those ideas without sharing them with posterity because they were probably afraid of what others might say; thankfully, however, Tutuola cannot be counted among that company.

In spite of all of this, however, Tutuola is still being discovered by people in other realms where his name had been hitherto practically unknown. He is now receiving honorable mention in science fiction circles (Hardman 1999, personal communication). This is because the dividing line between science fiction and fantasy (SF&F) is sometimes very blurred and thin, and Tutuola’s works are rich in the fantastic. It is therefore no surprise that SF&F is now claiming him as one of their own. This, definitely, will further expand the support base for Tutuola’s works and increase his recognition around the world.

Furthermore, Tutuola’s works and name also figure prominently on the world-wide web. The public reviews of his works on Amazon.com, for instance, have been consistently very positive, as most

reviewers have given his works five star ratings – the highest in that rating system. One internet reviewer and admirer had this to say about Tutuola and his use of the English language

Amos Tutuola is one of the handful of master stylists in the English of the 20th century... Tutuola is, in fact, a stylist and not, as it once seemed possible, a naïve product of an unusual and scanty education in English in Nigeria. The compelling factor in his style is his rhythm, presumably related to his mother tongue of Yoruba. It has something of the cyclical nature of extended drumming. (Harry Eager, Amazon.com, Inc.: 1998).

Another internet reviewer called Tutuola “The voice of the Yoruba people...when he died he was one of the most appreciated authors of the African continent” (Martin Eriksson, Amazon.com, Inc.: 1997).

Tutuola: His Accomplishments

While Amos Tutuola was still alive, he was showered with many honors, but mostly outside Nigeria. In 1979 he was appointed a writer-in-residence at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), one of the most prestigious universities in Nigeria, located in the heartland of Yorubaland in Ile-Ife. It was during this tenure at Ife that this author had a personal encounter with Tutuola, who had been invited as a guest-speaker in the Introduction to Literature in English class. Tutuola’s use of language – the English language – was quite fascinating, for underneath his English were structures that were recognizably Yoruba. His stories were drawn from a commonly shared pool of Yoruba folklore, but with a personal touch and flavor that was distinctly his. This “strange” but harmonious and musical English is what Cyprian Ekwensi, another veteran Nigerian novelist, was referring to when he wrote “Tutuola wrote music with his works. Although his medium was prose, his writing appeared more musical, more lyrical and more poetic than many of those who actually set out to write poetry.” (*West Africa* 1997:1266).

In 1983 Tutuola was awarded three honors: USIA International Visitor Program, Fellow of the Iowa Writing Workshop, and an Honorary Citizenship of New Orleans. The following year he received the Grimzane and Cavour Prize in Italy. In 1989 he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Modern Language Association and in 1992 he was designated Noble Patron of the Arts by the pan-African Writers Association, in recognition of his contribution to the African literary world. Three years later, in 1996, he received a Special Fellowship award from the Oyo State chapter of the National League of Veteran Journalists. Delivering a eulogy following his death in 1997, Cyprian Ekwensi recommended, among other things, that an “Amos Tutuola Prize for Literature” be established by the Federal Government of

Nigeria as a well-deserving honor for the hardy literary pioneer. Although to the best knowledge of this author such an award has not yet been established to date, the very fact that a writer of such a high reputation from among his own would make such a recommendation publicly is a great testimony to the fruit of Tutuola's many years of literary labor.

Throughout his life and long career, Tutuola saw himself as a folklorist whose life ambition was to preserve Yoruba culture. He had always been fascinated by the folklore of his people and spent the rest of his life trying to preserve this legacy for generations to come. He had spent a lot of time with wise elders among his people, learning from them as they told their stories of days gone by. This way, he himself acquired the knack for storytelling. Here, in his own words, is how he became the good storyteller that he was

[In school] we used to tell folktales to our schoolmates and teachers. Each time we got our holiday, I used to go to my people in the village. There was no radio or television, but our source of amusement was to tell folktales after dinner. I used to listen to old people and the folktales they told. Each time I returned to school, I told the story to other schoolmates and I became a very good storyteller. They used to give me presents for telling incredible folktales. (*West Africa* 1997:1268).

A Yoruba proverb readily captures the experience Tutuola describes above: "Those who know how to wash their hands properly could eat with the elders" (i.e. if you humble yourself before the elders and conduct yourself appropriately, you will eventually learn of their wise ways). Apparently Tutuola knew how to conduct himself well and was granted the honor of dining at the same table as the sages among his people.

Tutuola: His Use of English

What became Tutuola's bane at the home front also became his blessing abroad – his use of English. The main reason he was vilified and disdained by his detractors back home was their response to the unconventional way he wrote. They felt his oral storytelling style would make native speakers of English in Europe and America look down on them as people who could not correctly acquire and use the English language. They felt that his works would serve to confirm the erroneously held belief in some Western circles that Africans are too backward and are incapable of learning the noble ways of the West. That Tutuola was attracting a great deal of positive interest presented his critics with a serious dilemma. So great was the ripple that the publication of his pioneering work created in Nigeria that

while he was still receiving highly positive reviews in the West, his fellow countrymen were writing criticisms intended to discredit the very authenticity and originality of his work. While these concerns are quite legitimate in a number of ways, a better solution would have been to spend some time studying and analyzing his language to find out why he wrote the way he did, rather than simply dismiss it as the half-baked, uneducated babble of a childish mind. Some of his critics even went on to predict that the euphoria surrounding his works in the West would soon wane and that Tutuola would end up in the trash heap of history. Time, however, would prove them wrong, very wrong indeed, as more and more people continue to discover his genius long after his death.

A closer look at Tutuola's language reveals some fascinating and intriguing structures that the casual observer cannot simply discern from afar off. An unbiased observer will, however, not go too far before beginning to discover that there is a regularity and systematicity underlying the entire linguistic processes undergirding his language. Any person for whom Yoruba is a first language, however, can easily identify the underlying structures upon which Tutuola has superimposed his English.

Amos Tutuola has a way with language that defies the conventions of English grammar as set forth by the British, the introducers of this language on the Nigerian scene. He constantly weaves the grammar of his native Yoruba into that of the English of his writings and this is most obvious in the area of tense and aspect. Geoffrey Parrinder gives us an insight into this "non-conventional" use of EL in his introduction to Tutuola's second book: *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* when he comments

Tutuola's writing is original and highly imaginative. His direct style, made more vivid by his use of English as it is spoken in West Africa, is not polished or sophisticated and gives his stories unusual energy. It is a beginning of a new type of Afro-English literature... (Tutuola 1954:12).

A few decades later, a fellow Yoruba and a highly respected professor of English at one of Nigeria's foremost tertiary institution, Adebisi Afolayan, would identify Tutuola's English as "'Yoruba English', a language possessing Yoruba deep grammar that nevertheless has many of the surface features of conventional English grammar" (Parckh & Jagne 1988:473). Harold Collins who wrote the first monograph on Tutuola spoke of Tutuola's "imaginative use of the English language" and describes him as "A conscious craftsman whose unconventional English syntax, spelling and punctuation represent an artful technique that assists readers in comprehending Tutuola's imaginary worlds where all conventional rules of order are suspended" (Collins 1969).

What Afolayan and others are saying in essence is quite simple to understand by any Yoruba, or, for that matter, any Nigerian or West African speaker of EL. The term “West African English” is already known and is well attested in the literature on New Englishes, and so is the term “Nigerian English” (Bamgbose 1982; Ajani 2007). Under the umbrella of the latter, three main sub-varieties have been identified: Yoruba English (YE), Hausa English (HE) and Igbo English (IE), sub-varieties representing the three majority groups of Nigeria that constitute about 70% of the population. Thus, although there is a super ordinate variety known as Nigerian English (NE), there are enough idiosyncrasies in usage that make the Hausa person use NE quite differently from say an Igbo or a Yoruba speaker of NE (Odumuh 1987). The reason for this is not farfetched: the mother tongue (L1) of each of the speakers of the three sub-varieties mentioned above affects the way they use English. These differences come, in part, from the differences that exist among the various L1s. For instance, the way Tutuola and Soyinka use English is quite different from the way Achebe uses it. It is well attested that Achebe draws a lot from his Igbo background when he writes and this is most obvious in his world classic *Things Fall Apart* in which he uses a lot of his native Igbo proverbs, sayings, and lexical items. The same could be said of Soyinka and his use of Yoruba vocabulary, sayings, and especially cultural and religious items from Yoruba traditional religion (Ajani 2005). We find many of these in his popular *Collected Plays* (Soyinka 1973). Of course, we do know, too, that the quality and amount of formal education acquired by the various speakers of the same sub-variety will also affect the amount of transfer from the L1 into the target language. Evidence for this can be seen in the NE versions of Tutuola and Soyinka. Whereas it is much easier to identify YL substratum in Tutuola’s English, they are much more subtle in Soyinka’s works. The reason for this is that although both authors speak the same dialect of YL, they stand at different points along the continuum of YL and NE. Whereas Soyinka had a college education and has lived and worked in both England and the United States, Tutuola’s entire formal education lasted only six years and took place solely in Nigeria and Yorubaland specifically. This explains why, although both authors draw heavily from their common background, Tutuola’s NE is much closer to YL, while Soyinka’s is rather closer to EL.

Very commonly observed in Tutuola's English are transfers of syntactic structures from his native Yoruba into EL (Ajani 2001). His trademark structures are the transfer of the YL incompleted aspect *n*² and the habitual aspect *maa n*³.

Instances of the transfer of the YL incompleted into Tutuola's English are evident in the following sentences culled from *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952:41)

I was told that he was now at "Deads' town" and they told me that he *was living* with deads at the "deads' town", they told me that the town was very far away and only deads *were living* there.

In standard educated English, the above quote will translate into something like this

I was told that he was now at Deads' Town. They told me that he *lived* with the dead in Deads' Town. They also told me that the town was very far away and only the dead *lived* there.

We observe that Tutuola uses the past continuous "was living" and "were living" to render the simple past "lived" and "lived" respectively. The reason for this is quite obvious: in YL, the incompleted "n" will be perfect in both instances. We would say "*Won so fun mi pe o n gbe pelu awon oku...*" and "*...ati pe awon oku nikan ni o n gbe ibe*" So what we see here is a simple case of aspect transfer from YL to EL – YL aspect is thus used to translate EL tense.

Another instance of transfer of the incompleted aspect into EL can be found in this quote from *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954:37)

² The Yoruba incompleted aspect "n" does not have a specific time referent. Its basic referent is the ongoingness, or incompleteness of an activity, event, or situation. For example, *Mo n lo s'ile-iwe* could refer to both present and past actions, depending on the context. Consider the following phrases for instance: *Mo n lo s'ile-iwe bayii*=I am going to school right now (present referent) and *Nigba ti mo n lo s'ile-iwe lanaa*=When I was going to school yesterday (past referent). "N" therefore is an aspect maker, and not a tense marker (as some grammar books have tended to claim) because a tense maker can only have one time referent: past, present or future – never two at the same time. See Ajani 2001 for a more detailed analysis of aspect in Yoruba.

³ The habitual aspect *maa n* is a compound aspect marker combining the anticipative *maa* and the incompleted *n* to describe an event, activity or situation that occurs on a regular basis, or did occur on a regular basis before the moment of speech. Consider the following sentences for instance: *Mo maa n lo s'ile-iwe lojoojumo*=I (do) go to school daily and *Mo maa n lo s'ile-iwe lojoojumo nigba ti mo wa l'ewe*=I used to go to school daily when I was young. Thus, *maa n* refers to a habitual action rather than to any specific time frame. The time of the activity or event is determined by the context of speech or other markers, such as adverbs of time.

After a while he came out with two of his attendants who *were following* him to wherever he wanted to go. Then the attendants loosened me from the stump, so he mounted me and the two attendants *were following* him with whips in their hands and flogging me along in the bush.

In the above quote, the past continuous “who were following” in both instances will be rendered with the past simple “who followed him” in standard educated English (SEE). In YL however, the incompletive will suffice in both cases. In YL these phrases would be rendered “*ti o n tele e.*”

In the following quotes from *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) we observe the transfer of the YL habitual aspect.

I thought within myself that old people *were saying that* the people who died in this world, did not go to heaven directly, but they were living in one place somewhere in this world (p. 9)

My father got eight children and I was the eldest among them, all of the rest were hard workers, but I myself was an expert palm-wine drinkard. I *was drinking* palm-wine from morning till night and from night will morning (p. 7)

In these two quotes, Tutuola’s past continuous “were saying” and “was drinking” would be rendered with a “used to” expression in SEE. For example, in the first quote we would say in SEE “I thought within me that old people *used to say that...*” and in the second quote, we would say “I *used to drink* palm wine from morning till night...” In YL though, both expressions would be translated using the habitual aspect marker “*maa n.*” The first quote would be translated in YL in part as “*Mo ro ninu mi pe awon agbalagba maa n so pe...*” and in the second quote “I was drinking palm-wine” will be translated as “*Mo maa n mu emu lati owuro d’ale...*” So what we see Tutuola doing here is transferring the YL habitual aspect marker into EL. In YL, the rendition is perfect, but in SEE a “used to” expression would be the grammatical way to render these expressions.

The examples above are just a few of the numerous of such expressions we encounter again and again in Tutuola’s writings. Although he transfers other YL aspect markers into EL, such as the anticipative “*maa*”, the relational “*ti*”, and the relevant-inceptive “*ti n*” the two most attested by far, however, are the incompletive “*n*” and the habitual “*maa n.*” The reason for this choice is not farfetched; these aspects have a narrative function, a function that is very conducive to storytelling, and Tutuola is a story teller

extraordinaire. Thus it makes a great deal of sense that he would capitalize on these as he transitions from YL to EL.

Conclusion

Perhaps, the most important legacy of Amos Tutuola is his contribution to linguistic creativity in the English language, more specifically Nigerian English. This is not in any way to minimize the sheer volume of his works – having produced more than a dozen volumes in his prolific career. It is definitely not a child’s play to make such a contribution to any area of knowledge. However, his creative genius can be found in one place – his creative manipulation of the “Queen’s English” and his masterful ability to make the English language bear the burden of his experience. Of course, Tutuola is a master story teller in his own right, and he himself admitted to this in some of his pronouncements while still alive, but other respected writers, both overseas and especially among his very own kinsmen have also testified to this, most prominent among them Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Cyprian Ekwensi. The fact that more than a decade after his death, he still continues to draw followership, both in academia and more recently in cyberspace, and among both young and old is a testimony to his enduring legacy, even as more and more people from all callings of life continue to discover and rediscover him, and to appreciate his life and works. Thus, although long departed to the “Deads Town” Tutuola continues to speak to the living today, as his unmistakable voice continues to reverberate around the world – both real and virtual.

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