

## OVERCOMING THE CONSTRAINTS OF NARRATIVE TRADITIONS

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**Abstract:** Amos Tutuola's work stands in the difficult position of a newly emerging cultural tradition struggling between different narrative traditions – Western scribal and Yoruba oral. Moreover, these two significant modes must find out the solution reflecting the great political and social changes of the twentieth century bringing together the “traditional” and “modern” features. The debate will be based on the juxtaposition of the two seemingly opposing elements – the traditional narrativeness of African folk-tales with their characteristics typical of oral transmission, and the incorporation of modern elements into those tradition-oriented stories in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *Palm-Wine Drinkard and his Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads' Town*. The analysis shows that Tutuola's texts reflect the current developments in postcolonial studies and in the increasingly interconnected globalized world. The traditional elements no longer represent the past, or even backwardness, but they cooperate on the creation of a new authentic expression capable of capturing the hybrid essence of contemporary culture.

**Key words:** Tutuola, narrativity, orality, scribal culture, tradition

Narrative traditions are living organisms which reflect their background, evolve depending on surrounding conditions and circumstances, ossify or even vanish under the influence of different traditions that take their place. My intention in this article is to discuss the narrative techniques of a Nigerian author Amos Tutuola, whose work shows significant and bold mixing of oral Yoruba narrative tradition with elements of the twentieth-century African reality and features of modern scribal form which is often associated with Western culture (in case of Nigeria with British). The novels to be used as an example and source of reference are *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and his Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads' Town* (later only *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*).

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was published in 1952, but it was written by Tutuola already in 1946. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* followed in 1954. Writing and emergence of these two texts coincide with the period shortly preceding the declaration of Nigerian independence in 1960 after which Nigeria became part of the “New Commonwealth”. Political as well as cultural influence of the British Empire was being challenged at that time. African artists had to deal with two traditions which are even today mostly seen as radically different. Direct

political struggles which were taking place all over the world in the twentieth century were reflected in a more subtle inner cultural search for authentic expression through newly-created literary works which began to emerge in the countries with colonial history.

Like many writers from formerly or still colonized territories, Tutuola chose to turn to the roots of his culture. Nevertheless, Tutuola never aspired to nationalist literature which employed typical African topics and vernacular languages, because they ascribed authenticity to traditional African features which were seen as pure of western colonial influence. The modern was wrongly understood as European and therefore colonial, rather than as a new part of an evolving African society. Bill Ashcroft<sup>1</sup> introduced a more up-to-date, yet I believe still incomplete, link between the traditional and the modern in his concept of postcolonial world. For Ashcroft, the traditional is perceived as the precolonial and modern as postcolonial. Understood in this way, Ashcroft gets rid of the idea of modernity as belonging to the western tradition only and promotes the authenticity of modernity within African context. The only insufficiency of this perception is in the separation of the tradition and modernity into historically following but distinct epochs. My idea of the cultural globalization of the modern world and hybridity of many, not only postcolonial, communities is based on the concept which joins the two (and more) traditions geographically as well as temporarily. The modern thus shows the historical influence of Western tradition, but it does not alienate it from African environment whose inseparable part it had become. Moreover, the various African traditions that have their roots in the ancient times and that draw on the oral tradition merged with the new influences and are therefore present and still valid within the new cultural tradition that is being formed.

Tutuola's work shows the potential of complementation of the older traditional African narrativity and a more modern scribal form including the influence of Western literature. Tutuola did not have real predecessors, except D. O. Fagunwa, who was a Yoruba chronicler writing in the vernacular. Ethnically belonging to Yoruba tribe, Tutuola draws heavily on this tradition in his writing<sup>2</sup>, but unlike Fagunwa, he employs a distinctive variety of English as his medium of expression. The scribal tradition is a very young phenomenon in the African

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Ashcroft et al. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge. 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Inspiration from Yoruba folktales is discussed by Seth Tomko in his article "Heroic Journey in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*: Amos Tutuola's Trek Through Mythic West Africa".

context. Some written literature in Yoruba has existed since the middle of the nineteenth century when the Bible, prayer books and hymns were translated by the European missionaries in the region. However, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century (1929/30) that first attempts of imaginative writing occurred (Dathorne, 1974: 4). At the time of Tutuola's first attempts to write imaginative literature, Africa had only a very short tradition of literacy. Moore stresses the difference of both the folk-tale and the heroic epic in its form from the novel which is clearly a European literary form by its origin and therefore without any real antecedent in Africa (1967: 246). This is why experimentation with structure as well as language was almost inevitable for Tutuola who had to overcome the constraints of a new medium of expression which required features different from those used in folk tales that were transmitted orally. In his seminal work *Orality and Literacy* Walter J. Ong aptly describes the contrasts between written and oral modes of thought and expression. It is exactly the environment of cultures with short literary tradition which allows the reader from a primarily scribal society to encounter those specific ways of understanding of the world already lost to him<sup>3</sup>.

Tutuola's work managed to preserve the features of story-telling typical of oral narrativity such as the episodic structure, frequent use of memorable elements or the more direct communication between the narrator and the reader. It is unique in its smooth blending of traditional Yoruba forms specific for heroic epic and folk stories with new scribal medium in which he skillfully employs Yoruba sentence structure applied to English vocabulary. O. R. Dathorne sees in Tutuola one of the first African writers capable of seeing "the possibilities of the imaginative translation of mythology into English" (1974: 94). To accommodate to the written language, Tutuola had to reduce significantly the repetitiveness of oral narration leading to a loss of evolutionary principle characteristic of folk tales. On the other hand he preserved the overarching myth of a quest through the Bush of Ghosts and great variety of mythological characters such as the Invisible Pawn, Faithful Mother in the White Tree, Half-Bodied Baby<sup>4</sup> or Burglar Ghosts. Jason Weaver (2009) notes that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is an intensely visual story showing the "splashy colour, the incredible and the memorable" as well

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<sup>3</sup> J.P. Sartre commented on the inaccessibility of folkloric tradition to Western authors in *L'art nègre* in *Black Orpheus*.

<sup>4</sup> A half-bodied baby/spirit is drawing on the Yoruba figure of the *abiku* (Whittaker, 2001: 3).

as “the fantastic and the grotesque details, that are the organizing DNA and mnemonic elements necessary for folk-tales”.

The closeness of Tutuola’s form to that of the folklore narrators is partly the result of his formal education (or rather the lack of it). Unlike many postcolonial writers of the second half of the twentieth century who were studying at Western universities and were subsequently writing from the exile, Tutuola had only limited formal (Western-oriented colonial) education provided by the Salvation Army. Taban Lo Liyong(1975)is sure of the benefit of this. He sees the genius of Tutuola’s art in its richness of imagination, daydreaming and superstition which would be suppressed by more thorough Western-based education which aims at rational practical mind. Tutuola’s closeness to beliefs of common African people in the modern world makes the hybridity of his work not only possible but highly credible. The fusion of the imaginary mystic worlds as well as those material ones is absolutely natural in both works. In an interview with Jeff VanderMeer, Tutuola’s son YinkaTutuola talks about Tutuola’s love for village life and the stories that circulated there. He remembers how Tutuola recorded the stories and listened to them just for pleasure himself being able to develop a story about anything. He did not use directly many of the stories he had recorded. He was a natural teller, his life being “intertwined with stories – collecting, forming, writing or telling them” (YinkaTutuola in VanderMeer, 2012). Tutuola’s choice of English as a medium reflects his whim of a teller who wants to tell his tale to as many people as possible. On the other hand, he also believed, as his son remarks, that folk stories should be told in “words that would ultimately express the original local meaning or thought, even at the expense of good grammar”, that is why he preferred direct translation of the Yoruba words and thoughts word-for-word instead of using the English equivalents (YinkaTutuola in VanderMeer, 2012).

It is not only the formal structure of Tutuola’s work that resonates with the richness of folkloric narrative tradition. Both *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* are full of pre-colonial beliefs and superstitions which are still very much alive among Africans. To these beliefs Tutuola adds a younger, but equally strong, tradition of Christianity which complements the older native beliefs. During the wedding ceremony described in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* 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 (Tutuola, 1978: 61). The two religious traditions intertwine here creating 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 (1978: 11) stresses the importance of the setting – the Bush of Ghosts – and the fear it arouses even today in millions of Africans. 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 (1974: 101) rightly notes, that “Tutuola’s disharmonious symbols [in fact] unite the paradoxes of his world”.

Probably the most ‘striking’ juxtaposition of traditional and modern elements in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is the incorporation of twentieth century inventions into the supernatural world of the Bush of Ghosts. In the same way he fused native African and Christian beliefs, Tutuola marries the Yoruba mythical characters and setting to twentieth century reality with the materialization of its objects and customs. Especially *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* flamboyantly plays with the melange of such images. One of the examples can be found in the episode taking place in the 7<sup>th</sup> Town of Ghosts where the character called Smelling-ghost participates in the conference – “because ghosts like to be in conference at all times” (Tutuola, 1978: 40). Later on, the same character visits the “Exhibition of Smells” (Tutuola 1978: 33-34). In the 10<sup>th</sup> Town of Ghosts, where the narrator lives for few years with his dead cousin, we encounter “a well regulated urban centre replete with schools, hospitals, police stations, law courts, prisons, [and] even a Methodist church (Lindfors, 1971: 70). Mythical creatures thus mimic in their parallel other-worldly habitat activities of contemporary people in ‘the real’ world. The truly modern features described above are however surrounded by a lot of examples of feasting, dancing and drum beating, such as that of the traditional “good luck ceremony” (Tutuola, 1978: 37). Moreover, different kinds of Juju<sup>5</sup> are used so frequently it seems absolutely natural and almost ordinary.

With the same ease Tutuola uses the modern imagery even in the very names and descriptions of the mythical characters – such as the Television-handed Ghostess. It is a hideous creature with sores all over her body. The television is part of her name (names of Tutuola’s

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<sup>5</sup> Juju is understood as a kind of magic, usually an object with magical powers such as an amulet, characteristic of West African religions. (see OALD)

characters as well as places they inhabit are almost exclusively named by their description<sup>6</sup>), but it is only when she tells narrator to look at her palm that he sees that “it was exactly as a television” in which he could see his worldly town, friends and family (Tutuola, 1978: 163). Bernth Lindfors analyzes this episode and the character of the Television-handed Ghostess and comes to a persuasive conclusion that it is almost exclusively derived from indigenous sources. Even the television on the palm of the ghostess can be said to derive from African culture – namely divination practices of West African sorcery which believes in the ability of some people to communicate with the ancestors with help of various rituals. Lindfors (1971: 75-76) gives example of an account of Ibo divination practice in which a kind of “supernatural television” appears on the surface of water allowing the living to see “the nether-world”. Television is therefore rather a useful likening to give clearer description of the character, rather than any extravagant artistic tool with hidden symbolic meaning. Tutuola uses similar contemporary images quite often, especially when characterizing or giving descriptions. Among many examples I will name his likening of narrators throbbing heart to the sound of “a telegraphist sending messages by telegraph” (Tutuola, 1978: 27), the sound of his cry which was listened to by ghosts as if it was a radio (Tutuola, 1978: 50), or the voice of a “half-bodied baby” who talks in a “lower voice like a telephone” (Tutuola, 1963: 35). Although the modern (often technical) imagery may, at first, sound inappropriate within the supernatural world of Yoruba mythology, it is used with such ease and commonplace, that it does not disturb the cohesion of the text.

Although from the perspective of the beginning of the twenty-first century and the growing prominence of postcolonial studies of the past few decades Tutuola’s syncretic use of language, form and topics seems highly innovative and worthy of critical attention and praise its reception at the time of its creation and even later was often cool or even hostile. Early Nigerian critics and readership attacked Tutuola for his use of non-standard version of English claiming that his “works were smeared with grammatical infringements ranging from wrong use of tenses to strange un-English words and structures”. They also doubted his writing ability, because his stories reminded them of the earlier stories collected by D.O. Fagunwa in the vernacular (Smith, 2008). V.S Pritchett who reviewed Tutuola’s second book *My Life in the*

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<sup>6</sup> As Jason Weaver remarks “things are most often described by the elements that mark them out, make them what they are” (Weaver, 2009).

*Bush of Ghosts* in the *New Statesman and Nation* in 1954 was one of the first to call Tutuola a freak (Lindfors, 1971: 68). Lindfors (1971: 68) adds that it was

[Tutuola's] lack of schooling, his eccentric handling of grammar and syntax, his preoccupation with fantasy and fable, and his bizarre, almost surrealistic imagination [that were] usually singled out as reasons for excluding him from serious consideration when discussing the development of the African novel or, more broadly, the evolution of English language literature among peoples who do not have English as their native tongue.

Another harsh critic of Tutuola's work was Adeagbo Akinjobin who significantly did not oppose Tutuola's use of English (contrary to the supporters of national literatures in vernacular stressing the precolonial cultural roots of the societies), but his depiction of the unbelievable things which were typical of African folklore. Akinjobin was persuaded that such 'old fashioned' aspects of African culture depicted in modern literature in this way were harmful to the perception of Africa by the Westerners. He wrote in 1954 to the magazine *West Africa* that:

Most Englishmen, and perhaps Frenchmen, are pleased to believe all sorts of fantastic tales about Africa, a continent of which they are profoundly ignorant. The "extraordinary books" of Mr. Tutuola (which must undoubtedly contain some of the unbelievable things in our folklores) will just suit the temper of his European readers as they seem to confirm their concepts of Africa. No wonder then that they are being read not only in English, but in French as well. And once this harm (I call it harm) is done, it can hardly be undone again. Mr. Tutuola will get his money and his world-wide fame all right, but the sufferers will be the unfortunate ones who have cause to come to England or Europe. I am not being unduly anxious. (Akinjobin qtd. in VanderMeer)

Such criticism is one of the two extreme examples of the mid-century native perception influenced by the vivid political transformations taking place in Africa (The other one is the idea of 'purely' African art – nationalistic literature in vernacular). Tutuola's writing threatened in their eyes the picture of modern educated Africa capable of standing against the colonizing West as its equal. Honestly speaking, Akinjobin's fear might have been

exaggerated, but nevertheless it was not totally unjustified as some of the early European criticism really praised Tutuola for his vivid imagination and unconventional language use<sup>7</sup>.

I believe that both reactions were in fact led by misunderstanding of Tutuola's choice of the language. By changing even very commonly used words (such as substituting "drunkard" for "drinkard") it seems unlikely that his use of "modified English" would be the result of his poor knowledge of the language. A decision to use a variety of English is probably caused by the desire to appeal to a larger audience in and outside of Africa (admitted in the interview with his son), however by his "blending of Yoruba sentence structure and English vocabulary he produced strikingly powerful and original effects which make his work deeply interesting and original. This ability to synthesize all elements of the African experience" (whether it is the older pagan culture with its myths and stories or a newer phase influenced by European interference) "into a cohesive form is where Tutuola's claim to genius really lies" (Smith, 2008). Both Smith and Dathorne point out the importance of intentionality of Tutuola's linguistic and structural choices fusing the folklore with modern life. This practice makes his work highly relevant. "In this way he is unique [, Dathorne says,] not only in Africa, where the sophisticated African writer is incapable of this tenuous and yet controlled connection, but in Europe as well, where this kind of writing is impossible." (Dathorne, 1974: 95)

Contemporary multicultural world is beginning to take pride again in what was once considered traditional or even old-fashioned. Unlike in nationalist literature, however, these aspects of culture are recognized as valuable when incorporated into new "modern" culture as its important parts thus cooperating on creation of a new contemporary African novel. Tutuola's novels incorporate "modern" elements into the predominantly traditional context of Yoruba folktales with a unique lightness which is supported by his use of non-standard English vocabulary grafted onto Yoruba sentence structure, and novelistic form still preserving many oral features of folktale narration. Also the modern imagery which has its place in the mythical space and time of the bush reminds us of the inevitable presence of all these aspects in the time-space of Africa of the modern age. Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* are reflections of the modern development of African culture with its traditional roots, but also other influences that came to form its current shape. From the

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<sup>7</sup> BernthLindfors talks about such perception of Tutuola's work by English and American critics in *Folklore in Nigerian Literature*. New York: Africana, 1973.

position of the twenty-first century readers we should take advantage of the possibility of our historically more distant observation which gives us more space to analyze Tutuola's texts, his position as the African author of the middle of the twentieth century, as well as the positive and negative criticism of that time, without being directly or indirectly politically involved in the then reshaping of the world cultural (and political) space.

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