

Amos Tutuola's Television-handed Ghostess

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AMOS TUTUOLA, the Nigerian coppersmith who blundered his way through the English language to become one of Africa's best-known authors, is still regarded by most critics of African writing as a literary freak.¹ His lack of schooling, his eccentric handling of grammar and syntax, his preoccupation with fantasy and fable, and his bizarre, almost surrealistic imagination are 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. Tutuola, it is argued, is not a typical African writer; he must be viewed as the exception rather than the rule — the black sheep, so to speak, in the African literary family. Moreover, he has shown no capacity for creative development, no desire to join the mainstream. His unkindest critics, denying that he has written six books, insist that he has merely written one book six times, using the same mythic quest pattern (Departure–Initiation–Return) in each. He has been branded a literary cul-de-sac, a fantastic primitive, a myopic visionary, a lucky accident — everything, in fact, but what he really is: the most African of African writers.

No one, of course, would attempt to dispute the fact that he has been greatly influenced by African oral tradition.² Indeed,

¹ One of the first critics to call Tutuola a freak was V. S. Pritchett, who reviewed Tutuola's second book, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, in the *New Statesman and Nation*, 6 March 1954, p. 291. Gerald Moore expanded on the idea in his influential essay, 'Amos Tutuola', published originally in *Black Orpheus*, 1 (1957), pp. 27–35, and reprinted in Moore's *Seven African Writers* (1962), pp. 39–57. For further discussion of Tutuola's critical reception, see the present writer's 'Amos Tutuola and His Critics', *Abbia*, 22 (1969), pp. 109–18.

² See E. N. Obiechina, 'Amos Tutuola and the Oral Tradition', *Présence Africaine*, no. 65 (1968), pp. 58–78; Harold R. Collins, *Amos Tutuola* (New York, 1969), pp. 53–68; and the present writer's 'Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Oral Tradition', *Critique*, 11 (1968–9), pp. 42–50.

this is often held up as further proof of his freakishness as a writer. 'Who but Tutuola,' critics hoot, 'would appropriate a European language, borrow a European literary form, steal much of his imagery from European technology and yet remain uncompromisingly aboriginal in his method of storytelling?' To some this kind of eclecticism is evidence of unsophisticated syncretism, a naive blending of two separate and culturally distinct modes of narrative. Tutuola is considered odd because in marrying Europe to Africa, he allows Africa to stand as the senior partner. He does not surrender unconditionally to European culture. Unlike his better educated compatriots who write realistic novels in the manner of Hardy or Hemingway and poetry echoing Eliot, Pound and Hopkins — voices which any well-bred Westerner can recognize — Tutuola seems immune to specific foreign literary influences. A few critics (notably Gerald Moore in his *Seven African Writers*, p. 42), desperate for familiar touchstones, have attempted to compare him to great fabulists such as Dante, Blake and Bunyan, but the lines of comparison always have to be drawn oblique rather than parallel. For Tutuola, though obviously Westernized, is not a Western writer; he is *sui generis*, a rare aberration separated from the rest of literary mankind by his stubborn Africanness, his unremitting orality. Or so, at least, it seems to most of his critics, who cannot find a convenient pigeonhole in which to place him.

The truth of the matter is that Tutuola's *Africanité* owes as much to African literary sources as to African folklore. He has borrowed extensively not only from Yoruba folk-tales but also from the Yoruba 'novels' of the late Chief Daniel O. Fagunwa,¹ the most prolific vernacular writer in Western Nigeria. Furthermore, even when Tutuola appears to be stepping outside his own culture to make use of foreign materials, he may in fact be operating entirely within a Yoruba aesthetic framework. His images and props may be European but his exploitation of them will be characteristically African, as Robert P. Armstrong has shown in a discussion of Tutuola's Yorubanness, in 'The Narrative and Intensive Continuity: *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*', *Research in*

¹ See the present writer's 'Amos Tutuola and D. O. Fagunwa', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, no. 9 (1970), pp. 57-65, and 'Amos Tutuola: Debts and Assets', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, no. 38 (1970), pp. 306-34.

African Literature, 1, 1970. To demonstrate just how parochial this universal writer is, I propose to turn to his second book, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), and examine his hero's famous encounter with the 'Television-handed Ghostess'.

Before meeting this unearthly creature, the narrator-hero has had numerous harrowing adventures. Separated at the age of seven from his mother and brother during a slave raid, he had accidentally stumbled into the Bush of Ghosts while seeking refuge in a hole in the ground and had spent the next twenty-four years trying to find his way out. Wandering from town to town in this African spirit world, he had been captured by the malodorous king of the Smelling Ghosts, had escaped by magically transforming himself into a cow (only to be chased by a lion and captured by ghostly cowboys), had later learned ghost language and married the sister of a young Burglar Ghost, had also married a 'Super Lady' who bore him a monstrous half-human, half-ghostly son, and had endured various ordeals such as being encased in a pitcher, wrapped up chrysalis-fashion in spider webs, buried alive in a coffin, arrested by mosquito-worshipping ghosts and sentenced without trial to sixteen years at hard labour in an oven which he himself must stoke. Amidst these tribulations he had occasionally had a few pleasant experiences, such as meeting his dead cousin who was working as a Christian missionary in the 10th Town of Ghosts, a well-regulated urban centre replete with schools, hospitals, police stations, law courts, prisons, even a Methodist church; the hero remains in this pleasant setting for several years, first taking a six-month course so he can qualify as a 'full dead man'. But eventually he resumes his journey and comes face to face with one of the most hideous of all ghosts:

She was not more than three feet high. Immediately she entered [the hut] she went direct to the fire, she spread the mat closely to the fire and then sat down on it without saluting or talking to me. So at this stage I noticed carefully that she was almost covered with sores, even there was no single hair on her head, except sores with uncountable maggots which were dashing here and there on her body. Both her arms were not more than one and half foot, it had uncountable short fingers. She was crying bitterly and repeatedly as if somebody was stabbing her with knives . . . When I could not bear her cry I asked her — 'by the way what are you crying for?' She replied — 'I am

crying because of you.' Then I asked again — 'because of me?' She said — 'yes' and I said — 'What for?' Then she started to relate her story thus —

'I was born over two hundred years ago with sores on my head and all over my body. Since the day that I was born I have no other work more than to find out the doctor who could heal it for me and several of them had tried all their best but failed. Instead of healing or curing it would be spreading wider and then giving me more pains. I have been to many sorcerers to know whether the sore would be healed, but every one of them was telling me that there is an earthly person who had been lost in this 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. So that I am very lucky and very glad that I meet you here today and I shall also be exceedingly glad if you will be licking the sore with your tongue every day until the ten years that it will be healed as the sorcerers had told me.' (pp. 161-2)

She goes on to claim that she is crying because of the many hardships he has had to endure in the Bush of Ghosts, and then, to induce him to endure one more, she hints that she knows how he can get home. Our hero, unmoved, replies:

'I want you to go back to your sorcerers and tell them I refuse to lick the sore.' After I told her like this she said again — 'It is not a matter of going back to the sorcerers, but if you can do it look at my palm or hand.' But when she told me to look at her palm and opened it nearly to touch my face, it was exactly as a television, I saw my town, mother, brother and all my playmates, then she was asking me frequently — 'do you agree to be licking the sore with your tongue, tell me, now, yes or no?' (p. 163)

The hero is in a true quandary:

I thought over how the sore was dirty and smelling badly, especially those maggots which were dashing here and there all over the sore, so it was hard for me to say 'yes'. But as I was seeing my town with all my people, it was also hard for me to say 'no'. (p. 164)

Luckily, while the hero is watching a second showing of this supernatural Candid Camera, he sees his earthly mother prepare a native remedy to heal a sore on a baby's foot. The hero tries the same prescription on the ghostess and within a week she is cured. The television-handed ghostess then lives up to her part of the bargain:

... she opened her palm as usual, she told me to look at it, but to my surprise, I simply found myself under the fruit tree which is near my home town . . . It was under this fruit tree my brother left me on the road when he was running away from the enemies' guns which were driving me farther and farther until I entered into the Bush of Ghosts, and it was the fruit of this tree I ate first immediately I entered the Bush of Ghosts. This is how I got out of the Bush of Ghosts, which I entered when I was seven years old. (p. 166)

The comparisons linking Tutuola to Dante, Blake and Bunyan may now appear to have some validity, but it can be demonstrated that Tutuola is actually much closer to his fellow tribesman, Chief Fagunwa, than to any other writer. Fagunwa, who wrote in Yoruba, published at least nine books between 1948 and 1951,¹ the years immediately preceding the publication of Tutuola's first two works, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), and there can be no doubt that Tutuola learned a lot from Fagunwa's writings. Tutuola himself has more or less admitted to this,² but even without such an admission the debt would be obvious to anyone reading their books. Here, for example, is Fagunwa's description of a repulsive creature one of his heroes meets on an expedition to Mount Langbodo, which lies on the other side of the Forest of a Thousand Daemons, near the dome of Heaven. (This incident occurs in his first book, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (1938), recently translated by Wole Soyinka as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga* (1968). All quotations are from this translation.)

One morning, as we made our way along, I caught sight of a man who went by the name of Egbin. In fact we began to smell him even before we set eyes on him. My good friends, since the day I was born into this world I have never encountered such a disgusting object as this man. All his toes were poked with the jigger and they were so numerous that they had cut through several of his toes and infested his legs from the soles to the knees and many of them even came out of their own accord as he walked. The sores on his legs were numerous and he covered them with broad leaves, for the smallest of them was at least the size of my palm, many of them were left uncovered because these leaves could not fully cope with their size and they oozed fluids and pus as he moved. Egbin never cleaned his anus when he excreted

¹ 'D. O. Fagunwa — A Yoruba Novelist', *Odu*, no. 9, 1963, p. 26.

² See Anon., 'Conversation with Amos Tutuola', *Africa Report*, 9 (July 1964), 11.

and crusts of excrement from some three years back could be found at the entrance to his anus; when he rested, worms and piles emerged from his anus and sauntered all over his body, and he would pull them off with his hands; when he wanted to excrete he never stopped in one spot, he voided as he walked and the faeces stuck to his thighs and stuck to his legs. Every kind of boil and tumour lined the body of this man and each one was bigger than my foot, they burst open on his body and he would gather the suppuration in his hand and lick it up. Egbin never bathed, it was taboo. The oozing from his eyes was like the vomit of a man who has eaten corn porridge, he stank worse than rotten meat and maggots filled his flesh. His hair was as the skin of a toad, grime from eternities was plastered on it, black he was as soap from palm oil. Earthworms, snakes, scorpions and every manner of crawly creatures came out from his mouth when he spoke and he would chew on them whenever he was hungry. The mucus never dried in Egbin's nostrils, this he used as water for cooking his food and he drank it also as water. (p. 94)

Although this delicious portrait is not a mirror image of Tutuola's television-handed ghostess, the two characters have enough in common to reflect a lineal relationship. They are kissing cousins, if nothing else. But probably they are much more closely akin, Fagunwa's Egbin having presumably sired Tutuola's ghostess. Both creatures are virtually hairless and pocked with oozing sores which require extensive licking.¹ Each supports an army of active parasites; the ghostess has 'uncountable maggots . . . dashing here and there on her body' while Egbin has not only maggots but anal worms and piles sauntering all over his. Egbin smells much worse than the ghostess but this is probably due to the fact that Tutuola had practically exhausted his olfactory imagery on the king of the Smelling Ghosts, who, like Egbin, had an insect-infested body 'full of excreta, urine and also wet with the rotten blood of all the animals that he was killing for his food'. (p. 29)

More important than these matching visual and nasal details, however, is the similarity in the rhetorical structure of such

¹ The licking of repulsive, oozing sores is a common motif in African folk-tales, especially tales of the 'Frau Holle' type (AT 480), according to Alice Werner, 'African Mythology', *The Mythology of All Races*, vol. 7, ed. J. A. MacCulloch (New York, 1964), p. 204. For an example of a Chaga tale with this motif, see Ojo Arewa's unpublished doctoral dissertation, 'A Classification of the Folk-tales of the Northern East African Cattle Area by Types' (Berkeley, 1966), p. 183. In his *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Bloomington, 1955-8), Stith Thompson lists under 041.2 — 'Reward for cleansing loathsome person' — an example from Leo Frobenius, *Atlantis: Volkedichtung und Volksmärchen Afrikas*, vol. x (Jena, 1921-8), p. 242.

descriptions. Both Fagunwa and Tutuola pile up details, repeating the same idea over and over again through variations in imagery. They are not content with economical descriptions of how badly Egbin smells or how painfully the ghostess oozes; they must enlarge upon the notion, embroider it, play with it, elaborating it in so many different ways that we cannot avoid carrying away a vivid impression of the enormity of the abnormality. I have argued (in a forthcoming article, 'Characteristics of Yoruba and Ibo Prose Styles in English', shortly to be published in *Black Orpheus*) that in expressing themselves in this kind of ebullient style, both authors may be exploiting a traditional mode of Yoruba humour, a mode that relies upon inventive comic exaggeration and verbal extravagance. Such rhetoric is not found only in literary works. Tutuola and Fagunwa may owe a great deal of their stylistic brilliance to Yoruba oral tradition.

Certainly both writers are more in debt to the African fire-side raconteur than to the European man of letters. This is evident in content and narrative structure as well as style. The motifs and organization we find in Tutuola's television-handed ghostess episode appear to derive almost exclusively from indigenous sources. The ghost world is an African ghost world, for as Gerald Moore has pointed out, in *Seven African Writers* (1962):

the ghosts . . . are not the individual spirits of those who once lived on earth; they are the permanent inhabitants of the Otherworld, who have never lived as mortals, but who have intimate knowledge of that life and are in constant intercourse with it. At the same time, it appears that earthly witches and wizards hold their meetings among these ghosts and that it is from there that 'spirit-children' are sent to dwell among men and act as agents for the ghost world.

Moore goes on to say that 'None of this is worked out with theological exactitude', and indeed, we do encounter a few stray mortal ghosts such as the dead cousin in the 10th Town of Ghosts, but the distinctively African character of this spirit world is indisputable. Furthermore, Alice Werner, in her study, 'African Mythology', pp. 118, 184, has commented that among many tribes the ghost world is usually reached 'through caves or holes in the earth', and that stories of human beings who have penetrated into this subterranean realm and returned 'are not

uncommon'. Thus the Departure-Initiation-Return cycle has not been borrowed from European mythology. Indeed, William Bascom's research shows that folk-tales which conclude, as Tutuola's episode does, with the hero being transported back to the precise point where he began his adventures are quite well-known among the Yoruba.¹ All the evidence therefore seems to indicate that Tutuola was working well within the boundaries of traditional autochthonous verbal lore.

But what about the ghostess's hand? How do we explain the television set in her palm? Can this be said to be of African origin? Yes, I think it can, though we may have to look for its roots in African sorcery rather than in African oral art. If we search through published collections of African folk-tales for television motifs, we are likely to be disappointed unless we are willing to settle for analogues or hypothetical surrogates. Harold Collins has found, he tells us, in his *Amos Tutuola*, (p. 63), an Ashanti tale 'in which a young man has a magic mirror in his hand that allows him to see his home village when he is travelling'; this magic mirror is not unlike Tutuola's ghostly TV, but without further documentation — especially in Yoruba tales — one would be reluctant to accept the connection between the Ashanti mirror and Tutuola's tube as anything more than accidental. However, when we switch channels and look at divination practices in West Africa, the picture becomes a lot clearer. Here is a first-hand account of an Ibo diviner at work:

When I was nine and not yet at school, I had the good fortune one morning as I passed by of being invited in by a diviner who lived only a few hundred yards away from my home. He beckoned me in to a dimly lit room. At one corner of it, a little away from a middle aged woman who sat anxiously on a low stool, was a normal size earthen pot, weirdly decorated with cowries, white sand, Kola nuts, and other odds and ends. The diviner ordered me to kneel before the pot and look into it which I did. He then covered my head with a piece of white

¹ I am grateful to Professor Bascom for allowing me to examine his unpublished notes on Yoruba folk-tales. He has found three examples of this kind of folk-tale: Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits, 'Tales in Pidgin English from Nigeria', *Journal of American Folklore*, 44 (1931), pp. 457-9; Barbara K. and Warren S. Walker, eds, *Nigerian Folk Tales* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1961), pp. 19-21; and Alfred Reuss, 'Märchen der Wazeguha', *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen Afrikanische Studien*, 34 (1931), p. 119. The latter reference, a Zigula rather than Yoruba tale, is summarized in Arewa's dissertation, pp. 207-9.

cloth and informed me that if I concentrated my attention on the centre of the limpid liquid therein, a small window would automatically open through which I would see the nether-world. To the questions posed by the worried woman, appropriate replies were expected to be communicated by the denizens of the underworld through me as the medium. I obeyed the diviner's instructions, half in curiosity and half in fear. But as hard as I concentrated I saw nothing and I heard nothing.

The supernatural television did not work and, in honesty to my conscience, I confessed to the old man that there was no reply for me to relay on any of the questions put to the oracle. Disappointed at my naivety, the diviner reassured the woman of the potency of his oracle, and he claimed that it was the witchcraft in me which rendered it inactive that morning.¹

This recourse to 'supernatural television' to communicate with 'denizens of the underworld' can also be found in Yoruba culture. E. Bolaji Idowu, a Yoruba theologian, points out in his *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, (1962) that 'the Yoruba believe that the deceased can be seen in dreams or trances, and that they can impart information or explanation, or give instructions, on any matters about which the family is in a serious predicament. They can also send messages through other persons or through certain cults to their folk' (p. 191). Moreover, as Geoffrey Parrinder, in his book, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo and Kindred Peoples* (1961) comments, throughout West Africa 'it is believed that the soul of a dead person may be consulted anywhere from the hour of death, regardless of the place of death' (p. 150), and spiritualistic séances are frequently arranged to facilitate this communication.

Séances and visions of other worlds are not, of course, uniquely African, but in the mid-twentieth century the average African may be exposed to them much more frequently than the average European or American. Certainly Tutuola must have been familiar with the magical practices and divination lore of his own tribe. And since we have reliable evidence that he created the television-handed ghostess without ever having seen a television set in operation,² it is no doubt safe to assume that his fabrication

¹ A. Y. Eke, review of Geoffrey Parrinder's *Witchcraft in Ibadan*, 3 (June 1958), p. 33.

² See Geoffrey Parrinder, 'Foreword' to *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, p. 12.

of the ghostess's transcendental hand was inspired more by the Yoruba folk belief in the ability of professional diviners to magically tune in on a distant spirit world than it was by Western electronic technology. Tutuola was still operating entirely within a traditional African metaphysical system. He did not change *Weltanschauungs* in the middle of his stream of narrative.

The moral should be obvious. It is not 'A spook in hand is worth two in the African bush', or 'NBC is the mother of invention'. Rather, it is nearer to the Yoruba proverb 'A ki ifi eje dudu sinu ki a tu ito funfun jade', which means 'One does not have black blood inside and spit out white saliva'.¹ Amos Tutuola is a black writer who does not spew forth white culture. He may be a literary freak but he must be recognized as a thoroughly African one.

¹ This proverb is listed in Isaac O. Delano, *Owe l'Esin Oro: Yoruba Proverbs — Their Meaning and Usage* (Ibadan, 1966), p. 1. When Yoruba use this proverb, it has a somewhat different meaning: 'It is better to speak one's mind rather than dissemble one's feelings. It is not good to pretend to love someone we hate.' I have taken the same kind of liberty with it as Tutuola sometimes takes when utilizing English proverbs.

The Tree

This was the tree I'd known.
It had many trapped roots.
Some furnished meals with talk.
Others dragged silence in.

You were the leaves and flowers.
Also the trunk; its curved
Thickness embalmed your frowns.
Its roots gripped the hard earth.

Mine was the branches' role:
A modest one, of course.
Every time your heart beat,
We stared at it and laughed.

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