

# Understanding "The Palm-Wine Drinkard"

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SINCE ITS PUBLICATION in 1953, Amos Tutuola's first novel has received considerable critical attention. However, relatively little of this attention has been focused on interpreting the text in its details. When not debating the value of the work, critics have tended to devote themselves to largely non-interpretive source studies or linguistic analyses.<sup>1</sup> Most remaining critics<sup>2</sup> are formalist in orientation and stress the mythological or folkloric universality of motifs found in Tutuola's book — a point noted by Irele (188).

Much of this criticism is quite valuable. But it leaves virtually all the semantic and narrative details of the novel unexamined. It provides us a (largely uninterpreted) literary source for the fight with Death, but does not explain the significance of fighting Death with the ropes of yams; it tells us that annual sacrifice is a common folklore motif, but does not indicate why Tutuola links this to the color red, and so on. The common assumption of this work seems to be that the meanings of Tutuola's tales are self-evident; the sources of these tales, their language, or their relation to broader mythic patterns needs to be explained, but not their latent significance. Indeed, even at that, the vast majority of Yoruba cultural references in the work not been identified, let alone analyzed. Moreover, all this is closely related to the view that the book is unstructured, "little more than a cleverly woven string of loosely connected episodes," in Bernth Lindfors words (*Folklore* 59).

But, in fact, the stories which constitute *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* are not mere semantically obvious fancies with little symbolic or social depth. Nor are they a random collection of disparate if fascinating elements. As I hope to show in the following pages, each episode repeats and elaborates the central

themes of the novel, which are equally the central themes of Yoruba culture. Specifically, both the novel and the culture largely center around fertility, the continuation of human life through the growing of food and the birth of children. As Ojo explains, "The Yoruba have always been preoccupied with the problems of fertility of human beings as well as crops. Every worship, no matter what the deity, is incomplete without solicitations for children or for their long life; otherwise, it is for land fertility or better crop yields" (185).<sup>3</sup> Tutuola has taken these themes and, through a series of variations, fashioned them into a complex and highly interpretable work.

More exactly, we may understand the relevant aspects of Yoruba culture as structured by two parallel sets of beliefs. The first set centers around fertility as the mechanism of life. Life is sustained through the fertility of the soil — or, more generally, through nourishment recurrently provided by nature. And life is reproduced through the birth of children — or, rather, through the birth of children who will themselves continue the cycle of reproduction. Note that each aspect of fertility (that which sustains and that which reproduces) is cyclical. Note also that in each case the cycle may be broken. Nature may fail to provide food. A couple may have no children, or their children may die and thus fail to continue the cycle of reproduction. In other words, the mechanism of life may fail.

This possibility of failure leads us to the second set of beliefs. These are not mechanical, but ethical. If the mechanism of life fails, we need to explain why it does so. Every society accepts that there is a purely material aspect to such a failure, a physical cause. But, colonialist clichés about the scientific attitude of Europe notwithstanding, every society also has a set of ethical principles which at least certain members of the society see as underlying the life-sustaining mechanisms. A failure in those mechanisms may then be explained by an ethical failure on the part of the society or of some group within society. (Compare the way in which some people explain the AIDS epidemic as divine retribution for sexual promiscuity.)

In Yoruba society, a crucial principle defining ethical prescriptions is reciprocity. The mechanisms of life fail when

there is a failure of ethical reciprocity. This typically occurs when a society or some members of a society have become greedy, not so much about necessities as about excess. Life, for the Yoruba (or, really, for anyone else), is not merely a matter of having or lacking. We may conceive of normal circumstances as varying between the poles of adequacy and scarcity. In times of adequacy, needs are fulfilled with little surplus. In times of scarcity, mechanisms of life fail in part but without precipitating a crisis, for needs are still fulfilled by the slim surpluses of other times. But outside of adequacy and scarcity there are other circumstances. On the far side of adequacy, we find abundance. This is the ideal life. And on the far side of scarcity, we find devastation. This is life at its worst. Where abundance is characterized by massive harvests, devastation is marked by drought and famine. Where abundance yields many offspring, devastation leaves one with no children, or, what is much the same thing, with children who are *abiku* or *tohosu*, children who are abnormal and will not continue the cycle of regeneration. Indeed, the *tohosu* child, with his/her excessive consumption and disregard of his/her parents (Ellis 120-22), provides a prototypical example of a disruption of the principle of reciprocity.

More generally, in Yoruba myth and folklore, devastation is most often understood to result from excessive appropriation of abundance, from greed regarding something which is in excess of need. To produce homeostasis, and thus to return the mechanisms of life to their normal cyclical path, such excessive appropriation requires a sacrifice — specifically, propitiatory sacrifice, “*ebo etutu*,” aimed at a deity angered by this excess (Awolalu 152-56). In the most extreme circumstances, the society must sacrifice one of its own members. In order to restore the balance, in order to restore reciprocity, it must sacrifice what is nearest and most important: human life, precisely what is to be preserved by the mechanisms of life once reciprocity has been restored.

In the following pages, I shall examine the stories of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in this context, arguing that each tale manifests these concerns, working through problems of ethical

reciprocity and material fertility. Tutuola occasionally departs from strict Yoruba ideas. But for the great bulk of the novel, he fashions his story by integrating and developing motifs and imagery, real practices and imaginary plots, from Yoruba myth and folklore and ritual, forming them into a coherent and deeply resonant narrative. Far from a mere stitching together of tall tales from a Yoruba storyteller's repertoire, it is a developed work of art pervaded by Yoruba symbolism, structured by Yoruba ethics and cosmology, asserting and playing variations on the fundamental Yoruba principles of fertility and reciprocity.

Though Tutuola has often cultivated the persona of a naïf, sometimes he steps out of that persona. Once, when describing his literary aims, he dropped his *faux* naïf mask and explained, "I noticed that our young men, our young sons and daughters did not pay much attention to our traditional things or culture or customs. They adopted, they concentrated their minds only on European things. They left our customs, so if I do this they may change their mind . . . . to remember our custom, not to leave it to die . . . . That was my intention" (qtd. in Thelwell xiv). Tutuola did not want young Yoruba men and women simply to learn fantastic entertainments, a random sequence of adventure stories whose cultural value derives entirely from the fact that, in the past, they kept things lively in Yoruba gatherings — a sort of verbal equivalent to palm wine. Rather, he wanted them to learn "custom" and "culture," those things that held the center of Yoruba tradition. Thus he laboured to produce *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, a novel with the depth and significance necessary to such a project. Indeed, it is doubly appropriate that, in doing this, he drew on the central Yoruba themes of devastation, reciprocity, and reproduction. For, in writing his stories, Tutuola in effect labours like the narrator with the food-producing egg, given by the ancestors — only Tutuola is working to reproduce a heritage, rather than a generation of people; he is working to prevent cultural, rather than biological death or devastation. Moreover, he is doing this in opposition to a great violation of reciprocity that he finds in Africans who reject African culture for mimeticism — and, of course, in Europeans who have hardly considered African traditions at all.

## I. The Myth of Land and Heaven

Perhaps the most obvious instance of the pattern outlined above (excess leading to greed, then to violated reciprocity, devastation, and so forth) is to be found in the story of Land and Heaven recounted at the end of the novel under the title "The Causes Of The Famine" (118ff.). As several critics have noted, this is a retelling of a common Yoruba myth. Land and Heaven go hunting together, but capture only a mouse. Both become "greedy" for this unneeded game and they refuse to divide it in two. Heaven returns to heaven; the mouse remains on earth. Due to this failure of reciprocity, Heaven withholds rain from the earth. This causes drought and famine which can be stopped only by a sacrifice. In this case, the sacrifice does not involve literal killing of a human being, but it does involve symbolic killing. Specifically, a slave is chosen to act as "carrier" for the sacrifice. In order to function properly, he must, so to speak, be put "on the side" of death, excluded from human social life, separated as if he were dead, even though he is alive. This is why "nobody would allow him to enter his or her house at all" (125; cf. Taiwo 96).

The precise object of dispute is important as well. Tutuola draws this story from a common myth in which the rodent in question is an "emon" (Idowu 50), which is to say, "*praomys Tullbergi*" (Abraham under "emon"), which can be equally referred to as a mouse or a rat (Grzimek 375 and 351; Idowu prefers "rat"). This is relevant for, as Ojo notes (222), the rat is an important symbol of reproductive fertility among the Yoruba. Thus, while the dispute focuses literally on sustenance from hunting, there is a suggestion of the motif of reproduction as well. Indeed, Heaven's withholding of water may be understood as a symbolic destruction of reproductive fertility as well as sustenance. For, as Margaret Drewal points out, in Yoruba cosmology water is "the source of all life," not only in agriculture, but in the womb as well (74). This enters the tale more literally also. During the famine, reproduction is not only stopped, but reversed; parents not only fail to bear children, but "many parents were killing their children for food" (118). The divine failure of reciprocity — a failure not only of an

individual or of a society, but of the earth itself — has completely devastated fertility, both sustenative and reproductive.

## II. The Frame Narrative (Second Story)

The preceding myth is integrated into a larger frame narrative which is open to the same sort of analysis. The frame narrative has two parts which may be treated separately. The first narrative concerns the acquisition of the magic egg; we will turn to that in a moment. The second concerns the use and destruction of that egg. It is this second story which is integrated with the myth of the famine. Specifically, the narrator returns to his home with the magic egg given to him when he left the Deads' Town. Thus it is clearly associated with life, with the avoidance of/departure from death. Moreover, it is both a food and a symbol of reproduction (i.e. we eat it, and it contains an embryo). Given what we have just noted about water, it should come as no surprise that the egg functions to provide sustenance once it is placed in (life-giving) water. People from all villages come to be fed by the egg. As the egg can not only satisfy their needs, but produce a surplus, they become greedy. They refuse to go home, and do not let the narrator rest even for a moment; he must constantly supply them with food and drink. Ultimately, their raucous behaviour breaks the egg. When the egg no longer works, they depart, and begin to suffer again from the famine. Moreover, they spurn the man who had fed them so untiringly. Subsequently, he repairs the egg, but now it will produce no food, only whips. He calls back the greedy villagers and commands the egg to punish them. They are beaten by "millions of whips" (123) so that "many of them died" (124). Then the egg disappears.

For the most part, this tale fits quite clearly into the pattern we have elaborated: abundance of fertility leading to greed leading to devastation. But subsequent to the devastation come the whips. To understand this resolution, we must look at the parallel scene in the myth of Heaven and Earth. There, the slave is taking the sacrifice to heaven when he is "beaten" by rain. Like the villagers at the narrator's home, he runs about trying to "escape from the rain," but "nobody would allow him to enter his or her house" because he was now, symbolically,

dead or “of the dead.” (Typically, this abuse and exclusion precedes the “carrying” of the sacrifice, as illustrated in Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*. But the function is clearly the same.) The beating of the villagers and the resulting deaths have the structural position, and thus function, of a sacrifice. They restore normalcy. This becomes clearer when we recall the practices of the *Egungun*, members of the community who take on the identities of important ancestors for ceremonial purposes — specifically, when we keep in mind their use of whips (Johnson 29), the importance of beating in the *Egungun* ceremonies (Simpson 49, 51), the juridical and punitive function of the *Egungun* (Ellis 107), and the association of the *Egungun* with re-birth and with agricultural fertility (Johnson 30-31). In some degree, the beating of the greedy villagers recalls the *Egungun* ceremonies and parallels what happens to villagers when they displease the ancestors prior to or during these ceremonies.

After the beating, the egg disappears and we are back to the status quo. Though, due to the insertion of this tale in the myth of Heaven and Earth, the status quo at that moment is itself devastation and another resolution is needed.

Unsurprisingly, this sequence fits Yoruba beliefs and practices surrounding drought quite well. In a time of drought, the Yoruba would first call upon a rain-maker, who, in a scenario directly parallel to that of the narrator and the egg, “boiled the rain-inducing ingredients in a big pot set on a fire in a public place” (215; among the neighboring Igbo, a white stone, reminiscent of an egg, was submerged in water<sup>4</sup>). If this failed, the *Egungun* maskers would be called out (215) — presumably with their whips and beatings. Finally, if this too failed, a human sacrifice would be undertaken (216). Tutuola’s frame narratives clearly present a version of these practices.

It is worth noting that, in another story, the narrator steals a cola and is chased by a man with a whip. Here, again, greed for surplus is to be punished by whipping. Moreover, in this case, the whipping is also associated with death, which links the man directly with the ancestors, thus re-enforcing the connection between the *Egungun* and the whips/beating of the frame narrative. Specifically the man walks backwards and thus

represents the inverted existence of the dead, as Tutuola portrays it in the Deads' Town.

### III. The Frame Narrative (First Story)

The first story of the frame narrative is in many ways directly parallel to the second story, and the events of the two constitute a sort of reciprocity or balancing for the narrator. It begins with the narrator doing no work, but drinking palm wine the entire day. He is surrounded by friends who share his greed for palm wine and who keep his tapster constantly busy. One Sunday, he sends his tapster out to tap more wine. (The specification of the day as the Christian day of rest underscores the excess of the narrator's demands). The tapster falls from the tree and dies. This deprives the narrator of his palm wine. And, like the villagers in the second frame story, the community which has been consuming his wine disperses. This sorry state of affairs inspires him to set out on a quest to the Deads' Town, from which he returns with the magic egg.

This story is a sort of comic version of the structure we have been discussing. The narrator's sustenance has not been genuinely devastated, though he takes his loss of palm wine as seriously as others might take a drought. More importantly, the narrator himself operates as a sort of carrier or sacrifice. Just as the slave rises up to Heaven in order to restore the rain (i.e., water), the narrator goes to the town of the dead in order to restore his palm wine (itself a sort of excess or superlative of water: "I could not drink ordinary water at all except palm-wine" [7]). The result of both sacrificial journeys is the restoration of sustenance, though the narrator (unlike the slave) is not excluded from society for achieving this. Indeed, rather than being excluded from society, he assumes the burdens of sustenance. Of course, scapegoats always take on the burdens of society, but they do so symbolically. In this case, the narrator becomes responsible for producing the food for the community. At the beginning he "had no other work more than to drink palm-wine" (7). And at the end he "did no other work than to command the egg to produce food and drinks" for the community (122). In effect, he takes the position of his tapster, working ceaselessly to produce excess to satisfy the greed of others.

#### IV. The Other Deads' Town (Alternative Frame Story)

Though, for the most part, I wish to consider episodes from the novel in their order of appearance, I should like to single out one further story for discussion out of sequence. The story of the journey to the Deads' Town in effect repeats an earlier story from the novel, but renders it comic, so that it can ultimately lead to the comic resolution of the novel as a whole. In this way, the earlier story might loosely be considered part of the frame narrative, a further frame story. This is the story of the "Unreturnable-Heaven's Town," clearly another town of the dead — though a more serious one. The Deads' Town is, in effect, a benevolent version of death; the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town, its malevolent counterpart. More exactly, the Yoruba distinguish two places of death. The Deads' Town is, more or less, the *orun afefe* or "heaven of breezes." This good heaven is often believed to be on this earth and to have a social and material structure directly parallel to our own. Moreover, it is the heaven or afterworld from which the dead are reborn into our world (Bascom 68). In contrast, the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town is the *orun apadi* or "heaven of potsherds," a brutal place where cruel people are sent and everyone is "beaten and made to walk in the midday sun" (Bascom 68). Tutuola derives his name for the place from the fact that, unlike the heaven of breezes, no one can be reborn from the heaven of potsherds (see Bascom 68). It is truly unreturnable.

Within the novel, both places are marked by an inversion of the practices of life. In the Deads' Town, everyone walks backwards (96). In the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town, people "were doing everything incorrectly" (58). More importantly, the two towns invert one another. The backwardness of the Deads' Town is benign, while the incorrectness of the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town is malign. The narrator has to sneak into the Deads' Town, whereas he is forced to enter the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town. In the Deads' Town, everyone has a fear of blood; therefore the deads drive the Narrator and his wife from the town when he is accidentally cut. In the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town, in contrast, the inhabitants cut visitors to pieces (59). In the Deads' Town, the narrator and his wife are forbidden to stay, but are well-treated. In the

Unreturnable-Heaven's Town, they are beaten (58). Most interestingly, in the Deads' Town, the narrator falls into a pit — here, as elsewhere in the book, reminiscent of a grave — but he gets out of the pit and leaves the town. When he leaves the town, his tapster provides shelter, food, and drink — in other words, all the necessities for sustaining life. In contrast, the inhabitants of the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town bury him and his wife up to the jaw (reminiscent of interment, but also planting), place food nearby (so that they can see it, but not eat it), and flog them. However, they are able to escape when rain falls, softening the earth. They burn the town, eat a sheep, and leave.

In a sense, this trip to the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town provides, by way of the burial and beating, the sacrifice required of the narrator, the sacrifice which compensates for his greed. We have already seen the link between beating and human sacrifice in the myth of Land and Heaven and the second story of the frame narrative. More importantly, as Parrinder points out, in one method of human sacrifice among the Yoruba, the victim was “buried . . . with the head just showing” (72), precisely as represented in this episode. The ordeal of this journey, then, in effect restores the balance and allows the narrator's subsequent journey to the Deads' Town to be comic rather than tragic. In this way, Tutuola alters the heaven of potsherd, making it returnable — contrary both to the cosmology and to his name for the place — in order to make it fit the dynamics of the story, much as he makes the final sacrifice of the slave a symbolic death only, not a literal one. Moreover, within the story, this change is allowed by rain filling the earth — where they are, so to speak, “planted” — in a manner clearly connected with agriculture. Note that this too is linked with the return of the slave to earth in the frame narrative (second story), for the slave is in part driven back down to earth, and thus back to human life, by the “heavy rain” (125). Once again, it is the (cyclical) produce of the earth that frees one (temporarily) from the grave or death.

## V. The First Story of Death

After setting out on his journey to the Deads' Town, the narrator meets an old man and asks for directions. The old man says

that he will give directions only if the narrator performs a task. The narrator retrieves a bell for the old man. But the old man is not satisfied, so he asks the narrator to go and capture Death. Before going on, it is important to note that the parallel between these stories implies a parallel between death and bells. It links death with a type of sound. Specifically, this sound is not natural, but artificial; yet, at the same time, it is not articulate — it is not speech.

Whatever the link, however, capturing Death is, unsurprisingly, a much more complicated task than getting a bell. The old man gives the narrator “a wide and strong net which was the same color as the ground of that town” (11) — in effect, the net is the soil and thus it is the soil with which he will combat and capture death. The narrator encounters Death and Death immediately tries to subdue him with “the strings of the drum” — another artificial instrument of sound. But the narrator fights back and simultaneously subdues Death with “the ropes of the yams in his garden . . . the yams . . . and the yam stakes” (12). Thus, in a rather obvious way, Death is subdued by crops, by farming. From here, the narrator and Death struggle in various ways until the narrator causes Death to fall into a pit (here, I think, more related to planting or to digging yams than to interment, but of course including the image of the death of Death). He then captures Death with the earth-colored net, in what is in effect an allegorization of the life-sustaining function of agriculture.

## VI. The Abducted Daughter

The next story, one of the longer, more complicated, and more fascinating episodes, implicitly turns from agricultural to human fertility. Briefly, there was a young woman who refused to marry (18)—thus, implicitly, refused to fulfill her role in reproducing life. She sees a “complete gentleman” in the market and follows him into the forest. As the man travels in the forest he begins to remove parts of his body and return them to their owners, from whom he had them on loan. Ultimately, he is reduced to a skull. Allegorically, then, the woman has refused marriage and, implicitly, children, and thus has (unwittingly)

followed death. Indeed, this is almost explicit: "When the lady saw that she remained with only Skull, she began to say that her father had been telling her to marry a man, but she did not listen to or believe him" (21). And the Skull, implicitly identifying himself with death, tells her that "if she would die she would die" (21). He then begins "humming with a terrible voice," again linking death with inarticulate, artificial sound. The lady now tries to run away, but the Skull forces her to enter his house which "was a hole which was under the ground" — again, a grave. Now she is underground with many skulls — just as the narrator had found himself with many human skeletons in the house of Death. In order to prevent her escape, the skulls tie a cowrie around her neck; this cowrie prevents her from speaking, but itself makes "a terrible noise" when she tries to escape.

Here, the connection between death and inarticulate artificial sound is becoming clearer. Death means being unable to speak. And it is marked by two different sorts of artificial sound: music and noise. Music seems to be connected with death by way of funerary practices. As Drewal points out, on the main funeral day, the "first public ceremony is a spectacle of playing and dancing . . . Relatives of the deceased hire music groups and accompany them around the town dancing and singing praises of the family" (41-42). Dennett stresses the importance of drumming during a wake (29-30). More generally, Bascom points out that drumming, singing, and dancing are virtually continuous for days after a death. (The bell may allude to the ringing of bells in a Christian church. Though they are fairly rare, Christian elements do enter into Tutuola's book at some points.)

Noise is perhaps more akin to the keening, especially that for an inappropriate or premature death, a death which disrupts the cycle of fertility — as when the deceased is childless. As Clarke reported, "As soon as death occurs, the friends of the deceased begin their woes and lamentations which they keep up at night for several days successive" (250); while any death occasions some grief, a premature death gives rise to mourning with little or no celebration through music, dance, etc. (251; see also Idowu 187). Indeed, there are many sorts of

inappropriately dead for whom the Yoruba do not perform funerary rituals at all (e.g. suicides or *abiku* children); instead, they throw the corpse in the bush (Talbot 470, Bascom 65) — recall that the Skull's home is deep in the bush.

Fortunately, however, this simultaneously noisy and mute burial in the bush is not the end for this unmarrying young woman. The narrator follows the complete gentleman to his home and rescues her — helped by the sacrifice of a goat (23). But she still cannot speak; she is, in effect, still dead, though she has been retrieved from the bush. The narrator prepares a medicine for her from an “opposite” plant and a “compound” plant. In conjunction, the images of opposition and compounding imply balance and, therefore, a restoration of reciprocity. More importantly, when the opposite and compound plants allow the woman to speak once again, she immediately marries the narrator. Her “death,” having been precipitated by a refusal of marriage, is necessarily overcome with marriage.

### VII. The First *Tohosu*

Having dealt with the problems of marriage, childlessness, and inappropriate death, Tutuola turns in the next episode to the problem of inappropriate reproduction with the introduction of a *tohosu* child. Ellis explains that, in Yoruba folk belief, the bush is inhabited by a great number of spirits who have not achieved the status of ancestors, and thus do not live peacefully in the land of the ancestors. They wander aimlessly and suffer from “hunger, thirst, and cold since nobody offers sacrifice to them” (112). When one of these wandering ghosts manages to enter a woman's womb and be born, he/she is obligated to share with all the companion spirits whatever food he/she acquires.

One possible result of this is that the child does not retain adequate sustenance for him/herself and thus “begins to pine away and become emaciated” (112). The child's mother does everything to keep the child alive, but to no avail. In this case, the child is “*abiku*,” a child “born to die” (Parrinder 98) or “possessing death” (Ellis 111). Like the *ogbanje* child of Igbo culture, it is a spirit who haunts its mother by being born, dying at

a young age, then re-entering the mother's womb to be born again, only to die again, and so on.

The *tohosu* is also a spirit child, but with precisely the opposite characteristics. According to Ellis, this child "is possessed by an evil spirit, just as an *Abiku* possesses a child, though with different results" (122). *Tohosu* children are prodigious and dangerous: "The *tohosu* are able to speak at birth, and . . . to pit their strength against giants, sorcerers and kings" (31). Far from pining away, they consume massive quantities of food (Ellis 120) — roughly in the amount that would be required to maintain an *abiku* spirit and all his/her parasites. Moreover, while the parents of an *abiku* child would seek ways of keeping the child alive, *tohosu* children were often "exposed at the water's edge shortly after birth" (31). Often a *tohosu* child is "recognized" by physical abnormalities. As Herskovits and Herskovits explain: "Among the things that distinguish a *tohosu* from a normal child are hermaphroditism and gross physical anomalies. Abnormal traits include macrocephaly," etc. (30).<sup>5</sup>

The child of the narrator and his wife has the major characteristics of the *tohosu*. Though not initially deformed, he is born abnormally. More importantly, he is prodigious: he speaks immediately (31), is familiar with all the people at home "as if he had known them" (32), and has superhuman strength (33). Finally, he has an enormous, indeed insatiable appetite (32), making him a particular threat to the survival of the parents. In addition, his name underscores the *tohosu's* abilities at self-transformation, stressed by Ellis (120-22): "'Zurrjir' which means a son who would change himself into another thing very soon" (32; recall that Ellis identifies the Yoruba *tohosu* as a "changeling"). Zurrjir's association with death is further suggested by his association with noise; the narrator compares his voice to the sound made when "somebody strikes an anvil with a steel hammer" (31-32).

While, as we have noted, the *tohosu* child was often exposed at the water's edge, the narrator tries to kill this child by burning him. He believes he has succeeded and leaves to find his tapster. But his wife wants to return for a "gold trinket" (35). Her greed for this unnecessary item makes them return home, only to find

the *tohosu* again, now returned as a “half-bodied baby” (35), a common version of the abnormal or aborted child (cf. the “half-child” in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*). This child is linked with death in several ways. First of all, when they refuse to obey him, he stops their breathing (35). This clearly mimics death, but it also alludes to the narrator’s first encounter with Death, when Death prevented him from breathing (12). Secondly, the child begins whistling (i.e. he produces inarticulate, artificial sound). Finally, when carrying the child, the narrator and his wife are chased away from homes and villages, precisely as if they were sacrificial carriers.

Ultimately, they are able to escape from this *tohosu* only through “Drum, Song and Dance.” Specifically, drum, song, and dance perform for five days, then lead the *tohosu* into their “premises” of “mud” (38). This is a fairly clear instance of music being identified as part of a funerary ritual, the five days evidently alluding to the duration of a funeral ceremony, prior to burial.<sup>6</sup>

The next several episodes — from the white worms to the spirit of prey — repeat, with variations, the themes we have been considering. For example, the worms manifest precisely the properties of the unresting spirits born as *tohosu* and *abiku* children. As these seem to offer relatively few new complications, I will leave them aside. The next episode after these is that of the stolen cola, to which we have already referred. Following this is the tale of Unreturnable-Heaven’s Town.

### VIII. The Faithful-Mother

After escaping from the Unreturnable-Heaven’s Town, the narrator and his wife are taken into a white tree by Faithful-Mother. In entering the tree, they “sell” their deaths and “loan” their fear (67), indicating already that this is a utopia of immortality and perfect security, the opposite of the hellish *orun apadi* that they have just left. Perhaps even more importantly, it is also the opposite of the homeless existence of the wandering spirits, born as *tohosu* or *abiku*. Indeed, Faithful-Mother’s white tree is a place of endless giving, and thereby precisely reverses the principle of endless taking. Unsurprisingly, this principle of

limitless nurturance is personified in a "faithful mother," just as the *tohosu* principle is personified in a greedy child. In keeping with this, Faithful-Mother's white tree is a place of abundance, with inexhaustible supplies of food and drink. There is also much music and dancing, but this is the music of orchestras, stages, and tap dancing (68), thus different from — indeed, opposed to — the implicitly funerary drum, song, dance, and bell, and the various hummings of the figures of death. It is the music and dance of abundance and pleasurable entertainment, not the music and dance of devastation and necessary ritual. On the other hand, the loss of this utopia is marked by singing and is immediately followed by an encounter with dance (72), indicating a return to the world of mortality, and its ceremonial music.

### IX. Another Deads' Town: The Red-People in the Red-Town

After leaving the Faithful-Mother, the narrator and his wife meet a red woman, whom they later discover to be Dance (of Drum, Song, and Dance). She takes them to a town of red people, which is implicitly another town of the dead. As the King explains, the inhabitants of the town are people from "the olden days . . . when we were walking backwards and not forwards" (75), a mark of the dead, as we have noted. Moreover, their redness links them with death, for the Yoruba bury their dead in "red laterite soil" (see Beier 122), a point which turns up in Yoruba poetry and elsewhere (cf. the verse from a poem on *abiku* children: "the red soil in the grave belongs to Heaven" [Beier 49]).

The king explains how they turned red. Nature was topsy-turvy. He caught a red bird in the river and a red fish on the land. These unnatural animals are abnormalities of sustenance directly comparable to the *tohosu* as an abnormality of reproduction. Indeed, like the *tohosu*, they speak as if they were adult humans. The king tries to burn them, just as the narrator tried to burn the *tohosu*, but (again like the *tohosu*) they burn into halves. Moreover, just as the *tohosu* prevented the narrator from breathing, the smoke from the fire suffocates the king and his

subjects. In addition, it made them turn red. Finally, “the whole of us died” (77).

In keeping with the recurrent imagery of the novel, these two creatures of death — that is, death-causing abnormalities of sustenance — live in a hole in the ground. And, continuing the motif of inversion, instead of providing food for people (as one might expect of a bird and a fish), they eat one human being each year; they demand a sacrifice. As the king puts it, “we are sacrificing one of us to them yearly to save the rest of us” (77). Here reciprocity is again out of balance. Nature, like the *tohosu*, is taking life rather than sustaining it. The narrator agrees to fight the creatures, and he eventually kills them. However, what is most interesting is his preparation for killing them. He has his head shaved and painted red and white; then he dances around the town. In other words, he imitates a brief version of the Yoruba initiation ceremony, where the initiates heads are shaved and painted white or white and red (Drewal 66, Drewal and Pemberton 32). This ceremony is, as Drewal emphasizes, a ceremony of rebirth, and thus of overcoming death (an appropriate way of marking the initiate’s entry into manhood, the social delimitation of his human reproductive capacity). In preparing as he does, the narrator contextualizes the battle as an initiatory combat with death.<sup>7</sup>

When he returns, however, he finds that, fearing him, the red people have “changed into a great fire which burnt their houses and all their properties” (an inversion of the narrator’s burning of Unreturnable-Heaven’s Town, the *tohosu* child, and the white worms). After some intermediate events, they reappear and are “no longer red, because I had killed the two red creatures” (83). These people’s earlier death, linked with the red soil of burial, has been undone by the narrator’s defeat of the monstrous creatures.

At this point, Drum, Song, and Dance appear. As they play, all the dead rise up from their graves. But Drum beats itself into heaven, Song sings itself into a river, and Dance dances itself into a mountain, so that they can never be seen again in person. Then all the dead people, who had just risen to life, die once more, and can never be resurrected — “since that day they

could not rise up again" (85). This is clearly an explanation of the preceding events and of the relation between death and ritual. The red people were dead and have been brought back to life through ritual. Thus ritual could at one time mediate between life and death, not only bringing about death for the life-devouring *tohosu*, but also, and correlatively, bringing about life for those who were dead. This is no longer possible. The red people were the last to be genuinely resurrected. The resurrection of the remaining dead people functioned only to make them more fully and more finally dead. From now on, life is a matter of sustenance and reproduction, not resurrection. Indeed, reciprocity requires this. For, after all, the mechanism of life is also the mechanism of death. Death requires life, but life also requires death. One makes way for the other. As if in confirmation of this, following this final return of death, the narrator acquires abundant sustenance; he plants seeds and "grains grew up and yielded fruits the same day" (85).

But there is still something unresolved. These people had fled the narrator after he saved them, and they had stolen his wife, clearly failing in reciprocity. Thus the story continues. The narrator has an invisible helper named "Give and Take" who is "head of all the Bush-creatures" (86) and who helps the narrator with communal work. Most importantly, he steals food. He also shaves the villagers' heads and paints them white. He is a sort of trickster figure that functions to address problems of reciprocity (hence his name). More exactly, he is based on the Yoruba trickster and messenger deity Esu. Esu serves as intermediary between humans and the gods, and has the particular function of transmitting sacrifices (Awolalu 29). In addition, as Awolalu points out, "He is . . . the divine enforcer, punishing those who do not offer prescribed sacrifices and making sure that those who do are amply rewarded" (29). In his trickster function "Esu can and does instigate men to offend the gods — thereby providing sacrifices" (29). Due to Give and Take's Esu-like provocations, the villagers forget their obligations and threaten the narrator as a non-native. In response, Give and Take kills them, in effect taking back the life restored to them by the narrator. It is easy to see the element of sacrifice in this destruction as well, especially given the connection with Esu.

## X. A Tale of Justice and Sacrifice

The next episode draws more directly on Yoruba practices of retributive ritual and human sacrifice. Continuing on his journey, the narrator meets a man who asks him to carry a bag. The narrator agrees, and unknowingly begins to carry the corpse of a murdered prince. They enter the prince's town and the man accuses the narrator of murdering the prince, thus undermining the reproduction of the society — both literally, due to the social disintegration caused by loss of succession, and metaphorically, due to the common identification of the monarch with the society as a whole. The king parades the narrator about the town in apparent honor. The man sees this and confesses to the murder, hoping for a reward. He too is paraded through the town in apparent honor. But, afterwards, he is killed.

This tale fits into the general structure in two ways. First of all, it involves concerns of reciprocity in a fairly straightforward way and these relate to reproduction in a fairly straightforward way. More importantly, it implicitly presents the story of a human sacrifice operating to rectify an imbalance in reciprocity and a disruption in the cycle of reproduction, for in this episode the narrator and the murderer are treated as carriers or scapegoats. Though carriers are often reviled and excluded from society (as in the frame narrative or Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*), their treatment was in some cases precisely the opposite. As Talbot explains, "a person about to act as a scape-goat . . . was usually treated with the greatest respect and indulgence by all and given the best of everything. When the time came for his death . . . [he] was paraded through the streets, when many people took the opportunity of laying their hands on him" (858). The fact that the true malefactor is given the same ceremonial reverence as the narrator indicates that the initial parading of the narrator was not merely a ploy to trap the true killer. Rather, it was part of a ritual sacrifice. This is made even clearer when the man is taken to the sacrificial place — "their bush reserved for such occasion" (95). Most strikingly, after the killing, "they presented his dead body to their gods in that reserve-bush" (95). This execution is not merely a secular punishment, but a ritual compensation, both for the murder of the prince, and for

whatever prior crime the king or his people might have committed, thus allowing the prince's premature death.

Appropriately, this tale of sacrifice and retribution immediately precedes the episode of the Deads' Town.

### XI. Encountering the Dead

After leaving the Deads' Town, the narrator first encounters "over a thousand deads" who are "making bad noise" (101) and "not talking plain words except murmuring" (102) — in keeping with the motif of death and inarticulate, artificial sound. After this, and along the same lines, he meets "400 dead babies . . . singing the song of mourning" (102) — ambiguously *tohosu* and *abiku* children, their death a tacit violation of the principles of reproduction. Fleeing the babies, he meets a huge man — in effect, another Death figure — who captures him and puts him inside a bag. There are other creatures in the bag who make clear the connection with death. Most importantly for our purposes, "their bodies were as cold as ice" and when they spoke, their voices make a sound like "a church bell" (104). The huge creature takes his captives to his grave-like home, a hole in a hill. After a fight with these creatures, the narrator is knocked unconscious. His wife—who had been following along at a distance—uses plants to revive him, and thus to escape this form of Death. She thereby reciprocates his earlier act of saving her from the skull. Indeed, the entire episode repeats that earlier episode, balancing its one-sidedness and thus providing balance in their marriage. This reciprocal (balanced) life-giving is particularly important here because marriage typically defines the most basic social unit for both reproduction and sustenance.

### XII. The Hungry Creature and the Mountain Dance

Just as a *tohosu* episode followed the initial marriage of the narrator and his wife, a *tohosu* episode follows this re-equilibration of that marriage. Moreover, just as this re-equilibration inverts the initial sequence of events leading to the marriage (the husband is taken to a hole by death and rescued by the wife), so too does this episode involve significant inversions of the initial

*tohosu* episode. Specifically, the narrator and his wife encounter an insatiably hungry creature, reminiscent of their own *tohosu* child. The creature wishes to eat the egg which they have been given in the Deads' Town and which represents fertility in both sustenance and reproduction. In order to avoid this, the narrator transforms his wife into a small wooden doll (108). This is reminiscent of the wooden dolls which Yoruba women often have made of dead children — specifically a dead twin, one of those abnormal children who are revered by the Yoruba and who, due to their unusually high mortality rate, are implicitly associated with both the *abiku* and the *tohosu* (see Ojo 178 and Parrinder 99). The purpose of the doll is to help protect the life of the remaining twin, by appeal to the good offices of the dead twin. In short, it operates to secure the continuation of the cycle of human fertility — a function further suggested by the fact that these dolls are often “shaped like phalli” (Parrinder 99). Indeed, they are even linked with “agricultural . . . fertility” through their common presence in temples dedicated to Oko, “the Farm God or Goddess” (Parrinder 40).

But, again, in this case, the doll is the wife, not the child. This places the wife in the position of the abnormal/dead child, rather than placing the hungry-creature in that position, as one might have expected. Continuing this inversion, the hungry-creature swallows the narrator and his wife, and they must cut themselves out of his belly in a perverse and violent twin-birth which kills the creature.

This startling inversion of commonsense expectation appears to derive from the Yoruba idea that one's own life is, in effect, preserved directly through one's offspring, and that a *tohosu* or an *abiku* child, or any child who dies without his/her own children, prevents this. Specifically, it is a common view among the Yoruba that the spirits of one's parents or grandparents return in one's children (see, for example, Awolalu 60). Thus the failure to have children is not only a failure to reproduce society, but also a failure to reproduce one's forebears and thus, ultimately, oneself. In this way, the greatest threat of the *tohosu* or *abiku* child is to one's own life. The threat of the *tohosu* or *abiku* to the parents is that they themselves may not be reborn. In this

context, it makes perfect sense that the "parents" should themselves be "born" in overcoming the *tohosu* or *abiku*.

There is a suggestion of these connections in one of the two remaining episodes also. Here the narrator and his wife have encountered some mountain creatures who — in another linking of dance with death — force the wife to dance until she is exhausted and perhaps may die. The narrator then changes his wife into a wooden doll and escapes. Here, again, the talisman which wards off a child's death — the wooden doll — is the talisman which wards off the mother's death (here represented by the exhausting dance), presumably because it is just this sort of talisman that secures reproduction through offspring.

### XIII. Two Cases of Justice

The only remaining episode is that in which the narrator becomes a judge and is faced with two cases. Both concern reciprocity. The narrator can resolve neither, and asks the reader to use his or her judgement, and to let him know of any solution. As they are so similar thematically, I will consider only the first story. It concerns a borrower, a debt collector, and a passer-by. The borrower decides to kill himself rather than pay his debt. The collector decides to kill himself in order to collect the money in the land of the dead. The passerby decides to kill himself in order to witness the result. Most obviously, the entire problem of debt is a problem of reciprocity. But in addition to this concern with reciprocity, this episode also manifests the recurring theme of greed leading to death. Moreover, it does so in a comic way which partially parallels and parodies the narrator's search for his tapster in the land of the dead.

This last point is worth further comment. Tutuola's serious use of Yoruba custom and culture does not require him to adopt some sort of humorless puritanical attitude toward human frailty. Tutuola expresses the moral views of Yoruba tradition, and the significant material consequences that follow from greed, according to that tradition. However, he does so in a way that emphasizes the comic absurdity inherent in human desire, a way that allows us to laugh at the ridiculous spectacle of a man who is willing to travel through Hell on account of a

little palm wine. This attitude is not at all out of keeping with some strands of Yoruba culture — it would be particularly appreciated by Esu. It is also, I think, not out of keeping with our own experience of human life, which is both serious and silly, laughable, yet filled with horror. I have not emphasized the comic aspect of the novel as it appears to have been recognized, at some level, by virtually all critics. What they have missed is the seriousness of purpose underlying the humour — and thus the significance of the humour itself.

On the back cover of the Grove edition of *Palm-Wine Drinkard* (copyright 1984), there is a quote from *The New York Times Book Review*: “Only a dullard who has buried his childhood under several mountains of best-selling prose could fail to respond to Tutuola’s naive poetry.” I am afraid that even the most sophisticated discussions of Tutuola’s novel have frequently tended to assume its naïveté; they have tended to assume that it is all surface — a dazzling surface perhaps, but surface nonetheless. What I hope to have shown through the preceding interpretations is that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is not all surface. It develops and varies a small number of closely related themes which are central to Yoruba culture, and which in some form are important to cultures everywhere.

Moreover, the different episodes, while not ordered by strict necessity of plot, are not merely strung together at random. After the frame, which broadly introduces the main themes, Tutuola turns to an agricultural struggle with death, then to a tale of marriage, then to a *tohosu* tale about abnormal reproduction (followed by a variation on the *tohosu* theme), then to the first town of death — a fairly clear conceptual development from problems of sustenance to problems of reproduction to a direct treatment of death and the afterworld. While the subsequent development is looser, there is a general pattern there as well. The major episodes of the middle of the novel focus on various forms of the life-draining *tohosu* figure in relation to variant representations of the afterlife. This leads to the recapitulation of the marriage episode, which itself leads to another *tohosu* story, roughly inverting the order of the opening episodes. Before returning to the frame, and resolving its narrative

and thematic tensions, Tutuola presents a didactic episode that in effect suggests the main themes of the book by asking the reader to consider reciprocity in relation to death and reproduction.<sup>8</sup>

Needless to say, these interpretations are only a beginning. Tutuola's text is as subtle and as open to multiple interpretations as any other. My hope, however, is that these preliminaries will suffice to demonstrate that Tutuola's work is not naïve poetry and that they will provide at least the first steps of a genuinely interpretive understanding of this important mythic novel.

## NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Lindfors, Roscoe, and Beilis on the former, Collins 96-116 and Zabus on the latter.
- 2 For example, Moore, Edwards, or Coates.
- 3 See also Hallgren 13, 91, and throughout.
- 4 See Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, where a "mysterious white smooth stone . . . when immersed in water, caused rain to fall even in the dry season" (8).
- 5 "*Tohosu*" is in fact a Fon term, not a Yoruba term. The two groups are closely related — sharing, for example, not only the concept, but the term "*abiku*" (Parrinder 98). More importantly, belief in and concern with *tohosu* children is part of "an important cult made by the Fon and some Yoruba to abnormal children" (Parrinder 100). Among the Yoruba, the two types of child are often not clearly distinguished and the term "*abiku*" is frequently used for abnormal, prodigious children, and not merely for normal, sickly ones. Sometimes the two are, in effect, combined. For example, in Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the burgler ghosts (53-55) are prodigious children who pretend to pine away (and thus to be *abiku*) in order to extort sacrifices from the parents. On the other hand, Ellis finds the two distinguished among the Yoruba. He refers to the prodigious child as a "changeling," on the model of Northern European folk beliefs. For the sake of clarity, I shall distinguish the two, but use the Fon term, "*tohosu*," for the abnormal, prodigious child.
- 6 Yoruba pre-interment festivities vary considerably in duration — Dennett reports seven days (30) and Bascom "as many as eight" (67), though Parrinder limits them to three (110) and Awolalu only says "two or more days" (55); five falls neatly between these extreme estimates.
- 7 Note that, in the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town, the narrator and his wife had been scalped in a deathly perversion of this shaving. That shaving, like dance, occurs in both contexts is only to be expected, for shaving the head is part of the preparation of a male corpse as well as part of the initiation ceremony (see Awolalu 55, Dennett 30, Parrinder 110).
- 8 When I refer to the episode of the judge as "didactic," I mean only that Tutuola is explicitly calling on the reader to draw inferences about reciprocity, and the consequences of an ethics of reciprocity — to reflect on what has been, in effect, the main theme of the entire work. My use of this word may be one reason

that some readers have misunderstood my claims about Tutuola's project as necessarily a matter of fully self-conscious planning, I am not claiming Tutuola plotted out the precise meanings of his episodes as I have explicated them. Few novelists do anything of the sort, and in that sense it is unlikely that Tutuola is any different. Rather, drawing on the vast, unself-conscious body of knowledge, belief, memory, feeling, that they have internalized from their literary and extra-literary culture, most authors write and revise, re-think, write again, and so on — until they feel that the episode is "right," produces the appropriate effect. (For further discussion of this general point, see chapter 5 of Hogan.) In fact, I tend to think that Tutuola has an unusually good idea of what he is doing. But, even if he is not self-conscious about the significance of his artistic choices, that does not matter. Whether he could explain it or not, he has chosen yams and yam stakes for fighting death and he has done so largely for the reasons discussed above; he has drawn on Yoruba initiation rituals and the preparation of the dead to represent the narrator's condition and action at key moments, etc. That is all that is necessary for my argument.

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