

# STORIES AS MODE OF REVELATION OF AFRICAN INITIATORY SECRETS

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In many African societies the methods employed in building narratives and transmitting values through storytelling are often considered in the light of the physical and cognitive development of the individual. This is very evident in the different stages of ritualistic initiations that take place on an individual's journey to adulthood and self-realization. Against this background, this paper interrogates the narratological desacralisation of initiatory secrets in the works of D. O. Fagunwa. It posits that when critically examined, narratology through storytelling represents a mode of revelation of the secrecy of initiation. Thus, this paper argues that Fagunwa's metaphorical representation of the individual's existentiality in *The Forest of Thousand Daemons* is an invitation to self rediscovery.*

**Key Words:** *Initiation, Narratology, Self Rediscovery, Stories.*

## **1. Introduction**

It was Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist, philosopher and pioneer of learning theory who at the twilight of the modern period developed the Science of Cognitive development. Piaget in *The Theory of Stages in Cognitive Development*<sup>1</sup> established a connection between the physical and the cognitive development of the child. By presenting a dynamic model of learning through four stages of a physical development namely, infancy, preschool, childhood and adolescence, Piaget posited that if these features are not taken into consideration, there could be a degree of disequilibrium in the child's holistic development and that may undermine the entire process of his functional development.

In praise or blame, Piaget gave an insight into a dual development corresponding to individual's physical and cognitive stages. Interestingly though, given that African societies, and of course Yoruba societies are traditionally oral societies, in the process of education and child rearing, different methods of discourse narratives are employed to inculcate and transmit culture and knowledge. It is against this background that I set to examine the modes of narratives in Yoruba culture using D. O. Fagunwa's *'The Forest of Thousand Daemons'*<sup>2</sup> as paradigm.

## **2. The Initiatory Narrative**

Narratives are often adapted to life, time and space, reflecting the image of a people's culture and civilization. Life events are narrated through interpretive tradition and symbols that add value to individual's life. Consequently, it is not surprising that from the symbolic representations and metaphoric language of narrations come the fascinating aspect of stories whose first task is entertainment. Stories are not vague imagination or simple playtime. They are bearers of knowledge, guarantor of order, and transmitting agent of order and knowledge. In their appearance, stories are ludicrous, educative, pedagogic and didactic; also they are affective, therapeutic, moralizers, initiatory, cathartic. They are vessels of the metamorphosis of being from adolescence into adulthood and maturity.

Whatever its modes of divulgation may be, narratives impress their magic and power of influence on all beings, children inclusive from all origins. It is in this light that this work examines Fagunwa's *"The Forest of Thousand Daemons"*. In the view of Abiodun Adeniji,<sup>3</sup> the work is a prose narrative. In my own understanding I see it more as an initiatory narrative. By initiatory narrative, I mean the mimesis, the copy and re-presentation of the initiatory adventure. Initiation in traditional societies, (not Africa alone), is an institution of a process of learning through secret trainings, apprenticeship and discourse, for initiations generally have many rites.

To these, only a section of the society at a designated time has access to them. As such the section is made up of neophytes. In the process of learning the neophytes understudy rites of formal introduction and acceptance into the society. Mircea Eliade<sup>4</sup> defines initiation as a basic change in existential condition of human life. In African traditional societies, life is thought through the categories of space and time. For this reason, John Mbiti sees initiation

as a different time in the life of the neophyte spent in a different space. It represents as a new beginning, a new dawn. Mbiti in this same line of thought adds:

Initiation rites have a great educational purpose. The occasion often marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge which is otherwise not accessible to those who have not been initiated. It is a period of awakening to many things, a period of dawn to the young<sup>5</sup>

Given the above, and considering the initiatory narrative which is my focus, could I then infer that narratives, and by implication, initiatory narratives such as Fagunwa's, once made for public consumption have become simple entertainment adventure in which all seriousness has been removed and in which the initiatory imprint is self effacing? If the initiatory rites have become a public place phenomenon, could that mean that they have lost all sense of educational responsibility? Invariably could I then, conclude in the way of Niamkey Koffi that stories have become a mode of divulgation and desacralisation of the initiatory secrets?<sup>6</sup>

In some cultures and societies, the answer may be in the affirmative. Meanwhile, in most African societies, initiatory narratives repeat, re-echo at the profane and secular levels, the secrecy of the initiation rites. Narratives substitute themselves, repeat and extend initiation through imagination. It is in this spirit that the hero in Fagunwa's work, Akara Ogun approaches a fortunate man (the author) to write down what would be a blessing and benefit for future generations. Therefore far from being ludicrous and evasive, narratives such as Fagunwa's as we shall see by its content are modes of revelation and divulgation of initiatory secrets.

### **3. The Hunter's Saga**

Fagunwa's narrative *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* is an initiatory narrative central to Yoruba oral literature and philosophy. It capitalizes on images, metaphors and hermeneutics. Scenarii such as fight against monsters, impossible tasks, descent into abyss, ascending to heavens, symbolic death, rebirth etc. are tests experienced by the hero through his itinerary. By implication, the initiatory narrative, through the magic of the verb transforms the esoteric world into an exoteric one. Hence, symbols and proverbs for instance express the serious

content and reality of rites. It is not a misplacement that the author starts with the following words:

The story which follows is a veritable *agidigbo*. It is I  
who will drum it and you the wise heads who will  
interpret.<sup>7</sup>

*The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* is a philosophical adventure of a hunter searching for knowledge and wisdom. The hero, Akara-Ogun travels into a town and introduces himself to an unknown man (the author) so that his story and the knowledge he has acquired in his lifetime does not die with him. In the narrative, much reliance has been put on proverb 5 reason possibly could be that Yoruba proverbs are indispensable vehicles of clarification and consensus on a thought. Surprisingly, the context in which Fagunwa uses these proverbs is Christian in interpretation as he relays side by side in the hunter's saga the importance of Christian principles and the magic and mystical nature of traditional Yoruba religion and culture.

Fagunwa combines storytelling and morality. Using the main character, Akara-Ogun, he uncovers truths of spirituality, life and wisdom in *Irunmale*, the forest of a thousand daemons. On each visit and encounter with the extraordinary beings of the forest, Akara Ogun learns new ideals and principles about himself, life, and his relationship with God.

#### 4. A Journey to Maturity

Akara Ogun had two trips into the forest. In the first, his encounter with a ghommid, a being neither human nor animal, nor strictly a demi-god taught him that “A man mends his fate with his own hands”<sup>8</sup>. This proverb reveals the Yoruba belief in the life of a pers 6 intrinsically linked to his destiny. Like *Ori'inu'*, inner essence, or the metaphysical part man which precedes human life, shares in the divine essence and lives after the termination of human life, it bestowed on man also the part of choosing his destiny<sup>9</sup>. Before they part ways, the ghommid gives Akara Ogun alligator pods. Any time he faces danger, he will grow wings and fly to his original state.

Akara Ogun's second attempt is a meeting with a second ghommid who reiterates the first's message. He says, “I never reach for that which my hand cannot encompass, nor do I embark upon that which is beyond my power; I do not act in the manner of the thoughtless, nor do I complete an action which I then regret.”<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on this principle of life speaks

volume of its importance to Fagunwa. Hence, Fagunwa uses Helpmeet as a vehicle to fully introduce Christian spirituality into his narrative. Helpmeet offers her assistance to Akara Ogun while he is in the forest. She tells him, "I love the Lord and he loves me also. Thrice in one day I go through the world to visit the friends of God and to assist them in all their endeavours."<sup>11</sup> Before she leaves, she tells Akara Ogun, "The truthful shall not fail to profit good, the deceitful shall gain nothing but deceit"<sup>12</sup>.

A keen appraisal of Fagunwa's narrative brings to the fore a continuing manifestation of the correlation and coexistence between traditional Yoruba thought and culture with Christian spirituality. To me, that is one of Fagunwa's paradoxes and possible syncretism which is also representative of the average contemporary Yoruba person. Meanwhile, the Yoruba maintain, in their proverbs, that: "otito koro" meaning truth is bitter. This is credibly rendered as Akara Ogun says, "Words of truth are as thorns, and the honest man is the foe of the world."<sup>13</sup> However, truthfulness is an admirable quality in the Yoruba person, and children are socialized to be truthful in a way acceptable to the community. Because truth is bitter, as the Yoruba believe, they disapprove of speaking the truth in certain contexts.<sup>14</sup>

One of the last places Akara Ogun goes on his first visit into the forest is the City of Filth where Iwapele (Gentleness) tells him how the city gets into its state. The lesson that Akara learns from this visit is that "all acts of mankind are observed by God, and there is nothing hidden from Him"<sup>15</sup>.

### **5. Struggle as the Ground of Life**

In the forest, Akara Ogun fought many evil omens. He says "I stubbed my left foot; this was my maternal foot and whenever I stumbled by this foot over any matter, that affair would not prosper. This frightened me somewhat, and while I stood pondering on this unlucky foot an owl flew past and its wings hit me in the face; a most evil omen was this."<sup>16</sup> In his adventure, Akara Ogun meets The Beast with sixteen eyes. In numerology, if 4 is the number of the male gender; this beast represents in strength and power four times the power of a man. After struggling with the beast for some time, Akara Ogun begins to come to term with his mistakes. He realizes that he indulged in magical arts but had failed to reckon with God. So, he begins to pray, "Ruler of skies, Owner of this day... Help me now... Forbid it that I become meat for this creature..."<sup>17</sup> In this part of the story, Fagunwa puts up magic and

mystique against Christianity with the latter being the winner. Once Akara Ogun prayed to God, he was freed. Perhaps Fagunwa presents a challenge with magic and Christianity to show that the spiritual power of deliverance provided by the Christian faith is stronger and more comprehensible than magic. Since Fagunwa is an African and more so a Christian, this may have been his way to illustrate the tension between African traditional magical spirituality and Christianity's dominance over magic. Above all, struggle remains the common dominator of either side.

## **6. Life Education at Langbodo**

Akara Ogun's journey to Mount Langbodo was successful, with seven days of tutorial on wisdom arranged to cover a specific topic per day. The topic of the first day was children<sup>18</sup> education. "Watch how your child speaks, rid him of lies, and let not unseemly language pass his lips. In Yoruba tradition, the method of child-rearing and education requires that a child be taught the benefits of being truthful in his dealings with others. Fagunwa says "a child has but little sense, it does not exceed this much"<sup>19</sup>. In the same vein, the King of Langbodo also address children saying, "Give honor to your parents; they gave you birth. Even if you are educated, even when you become a doctor twelve times over, lawyers sixteen times over, when you become thirteen types of Bishop and wear twenty clerical stoles at once, never condemn your father."<sup>20</sup> On the second day, he offers words of wisdom in proverbial form to parents saying, "It is love which the world respects, not power, and disgrace is the goal of excess, and the immoderate is the father of the disgraced."<sup>21</sup> No idea of the following days teaching was revealed until the seventh day Akara Ogun returns home, for good fulfilled.

Although it is noteworthy to acknowledge Fagunwa's creativity and ingenuity, however a critical mind will be disappointed at the drift and decline from the critical and creative mind to the moralist and religious adventurer. Fagunwa's decision probably was that of a resigning mind probably tired of thinking after depicting an existential position of an individual revealing the secrets of existence and whose Christian faith was incessantly and intermittently questioning the rationale of the imaginative adventure.

## **7. Proverbs, symbols and meanings**

Proverbs are colourful expressions with a linguistic beauty; they are tools of meaning. According to Agbaje<sup>22</sup>, proverbs are stable in meaning as they represent a collective wisdom. As collective consciousness, proverbs are in the first instance a mode of speech. As speech, they transmit meaning. Corroborating this view, Fayemi<sup>23</sup> quoting Wolfgang notes that: “a proverb is a short generically known sentence that expresses common, traditional, didactic views in a metaphorical and greed form, which is easily remembered and repeated.” Interestingly, Yoruba like many African communities see proverbs as a repository of traditional and ancestral wisdom transmitted from generations to generations through speech. Generally it is believe that they have universal applicability. However proverbs are not static as such. Just like language, they are dynamic as some are often slightly modified according to circumstances.

It is also worthy of note the philosophical nature of proverbs underlined by Whiting as he asserts that proverbs are short sayings of philosophical nature, of great antiquity, the product of the masses rather than of the classes, constantly applicable and appealing because they bear a semblance of the universal truth.<sup>24</sup> This view permeates Fagunwa’s choice of proverbs which is not unconnected with his desire to bring to the public place a traditional pedagogical instrument of education that ignites the imagination and illuminates the mind. It is then understandable the combination Fagunwa made of proverbs with symbols.

An assessment of Fagunwa’s narratives shows that the forest and the mount symbolize the dwelling of knowledge and wisdom, while the ghommids are the agent of access to knowledge. Why is it that the first and second ghommids prevented Akara-Ogun from hunting in the forest as they convey the same message to him? Akara-Ogun cannot hunt because he was not initiated. From the four pods of alligator pepper to the lessons at the king’s palace for seven days, the entire process represents the initiation circle of rites by the neophyte and hero of the narrative, Akara-Ogun.

## **8. Fagunwas’s Existentialism**

Despite the religious and ethical penchants in his narrative, there is a strong feeling that Fagunwa exhibits some existentialist traits. Invariably, temporality as a measure of time in Akara Ogun’s sojourn in the forest discloses his authentic self through the affirmation of his

own essential finitude. It is obvious that Fagunwa had a clear understanding of the importance of the three moments of time which are past, present and future by emphasizing on the relevance of the narrative to the writer and to posterity. However the discovery of the self through authenticity has a dual purpose, Heidegger posits<sup>25</sup>. On the one hand, he notes that the task of being is to give meaning and to illuminate human existence, for this illumination leads to self discovery or authenticity. Authenticity comes when man answers the call of conscience and realizes through (angst) or anguish, the finitude of his daily life in anticipation of death. Rather than having a self deceptive approach to life, Heidegger invites us to confront the reality of life. Sartre corroborates this view when he says that “death by being revealed to us as it really is, frees us wholly from it so called constraint”<sup>26</sup>

In other words my finitude, the knowledge of my limitations instead of limiting me becomes the unique source of my motivation. Heidegger like Sartre and possibly by extension, Fagunwa invites one to get in touch with oneself and to examine oneself just as the words of the forefront of the temple of Delphi in Ancient Greece: “Man, know thyself”. Invariably, Fagunwa could not find an escape route into infinity and freedom other than seeking the Supreme Being’s intervention in man’s finitude. In other climes, the Supreme Being would be interpreted as human transcendence.

## **9. Conclusion**

The aim of Fagunwa’s philosophical venture into initiatory narrative is the future generations. As the storyteller would not like the story to die with him, so Fagunwa would not like the story to pass away, just like that. The same anxiety is that of the translator Wole Soyinka who is mindful of not limiting the story to the Yoruba speakers only. Meanwhile, the main thrust of the narrative is education through initiation. In this vein, Peters in his work, *Philosophical Analysis and Education* under the sub topic “Education as Initiation” remarks:

to be educated is not to have arrived at a destination; it is to travel with a different view. What is required is not feverish preparation for something that lies ahead, but to work with precision, passion, and taste at worth-while things to lie to hand <sup>27</sup>

Given the above, initiation harbours the elements of education and vice versa. Initiation implies learning through a process. The role initiation plays in the life of an individual such as Akara Ogun is exemplified by the different hurdles he overcame. Therefore, it would not be a misnomer to say that the journey to greatness starts when the individual through conscious deliberation decides to face the stark realities of life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jean Piaget, 'The Theory of Stages in Cognitive Development', *CTB/McGraw-Hill Invitational Conference on Ordinal Scales of Cognitive Development – Monetary*, (USA: California Press, Feb, 1969), 11.

<sup>2</sup> D.O Fagunwa, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga*, trans. Wole Soyinka (Surrey: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1982), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Adeniyi, Abiodun. *Traditional Wisdom as Literary Artefact: The Example of D.O. Fagunwa's Prose Narrative*. Paper presented at the International Symposium "Expression of Traditional Wisdom", Brussels: 28 September, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: New York Press, 1958), p.

<sup>5</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, London: 1969), p.122.

<sup>6</sup> Koffi, Niamkey. 'Une lecture de Kaydara de Amadou Hampaté Ba', *Séminaire International sur la Méthodologie de recherche sur le conte africain*. 3-6 Avril 1989, Abidjan, 35.

<sup>7</sup> D.O Fagunwa, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, 7; Agidigbo in the translators' words is a Yoruba leisurely musical instrument played mostly at social occasion. The instrument includes a resonance box with metal strips for plucking.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 69-98.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 104-105.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>22</sup> J. B Agbaje, "The Place of Yoruba Proverbs in the understanding of Yoruba Philosophy and Education", *International Journal of African and African American Studies*, 1.5 (2005): 48-54.

<sup>23</sup> Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, "Deconstructing Proverbs in African Discourse: The Yoruba Example", *Journal of Afro-European Studies*, 3.1 (2009): 35.

<sup>24</sup> B.J Whiting, "The Nature of the Proverb", *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philosophy and Literature*, 14 (1932), 18-27.

<sup>25</sup> J. I. Unah, *Heidegger's Existentialism* (Lagos: Panaf Publishers, 1996), 105.

<sup>26</sup> J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1958), 439.

<sup>27</sup> R. S. Peters, "Education as Initiation", *Philosophy of Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 20.

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