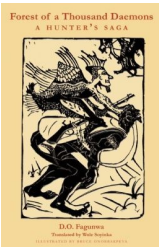


Forest of a Thousand Daemons by D.O. Fagunwa

Review by Geoff Wisner — Published on December 2, 2013

Tags: [African literature](#), [postmodern fiction](#)



REVIEWED:

Forest of a Thousand Daemons by D.O. Fagunwa (trans. Wole Soyinka) City Lights. \$14.95, 153pp.

Published in Issue 34

From 1930 to 1939, a young man named Daniel Fagunwa worked as a teacher at the St. Andrew's school in the town of Oyo in western Nigeria. When the education ministry of the British colony announced a literary contest, he entered a short novel called *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmale*, literally "The Brave Hunter in the Forest of Four Hundred Spirits."

The first novel to be written in the Yoruba language, the book was published by The Church Missionary Society Press in 1938, when Fagunwa was around thirty-five. One of its early readers was a schoolboy who encountered it in class before his six years of formal education came to end in 1939. His name was Amos Tutuola.

Forest of a Thousand Daemons begins with a simple frame story. One beautiful morning, the narrator says, he is seated in his favorite chair, "settled into it with voluptuous contentment, enjoying my very existence," when an old man comes up to greet him, sighs, and instructs him to take down a story.

The old man explains that he was once a mighty hunter known as Akara-ogun or Compound-of-Spells. Over the pages that follow, he describes his adventures in the forest, including a battle with a warrior named Agbako, whose sixteen eyes are "arranged around the base of his head," and a meeting with a beautiful woman named Helpmeet who explains the nature of the many other creatures he will encounter.

The name Helpmeet suggests *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the impression is reinforced a page later when he arrives at a city called Filth, "a place of suffering and contempt, a city of greed and contumely, a city of envy and of thievery . . ." Elsewhere we seem to be in the world of *Paradise Lost*, since Christian and Yoruba myths coexist in the tale: a creature with two heads and two horns tells the hunter, "I was one of the original angels who were much beloved of God, but I rejected the laws of God and His ways and engineered chaos in heaven. God saw that I was intractable, and that my genius was an evil one. He handed me to Satan to inflict agonies on me for seven years, and even so did it come about that I lived in Hell for seven clear years."

Akara-ogun himself is far from being a saint. As he explains at the outset, his father was like him a hunter and “also a great one for medicines and spells.” And as for his mother, “she was a deep seasoned witch from the cauldrons of hell.” Akara-ogun’s actions are often reckless or even cruel, and many of his troubles are self-inflicted: when a small ghommid scares away the game with his wailing and lamentations, the hunter insults and threatens him. A little later he fires at a pair of gleaming eyes without knowing what he is shooting at. (It turns out to be a civet.)

Some measure of the importance of *Forest of a Thousand Daemons* can be seen in the great influence it exerted on Tutuola, certainly one of the most important African authors to emerge in the 20th century. According to the Africa scholar Bernth Lindfors, Fagunwa published at least nine books between 1948 and 1951, “the years Tutuola started writing.” These included two more novels, *Igbo Olodumare* (“The Forest of God”) and *Ireke Onibudo* (“The Sugarcane of the Guardian”), as well as two volumes of travel writing about Fagunwa’s experiences in England.

The young Amos Tutuola, writes Lindfors, “must have been aware of Fagunwa’s extraordinary outburst of literary activity in these post-war years. Indeed, it is conceivable that he got both the idea of writing stories and the idea of submitting them for publication from seeing Fagunwa’s work in print.”

Tutuola wrote his first novel, *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of the Ghosts*, over the course of a few days. Though Tutuola wrote in English, not Yoruba, Lindfors makes his debt to Fagunwa plain:

Indeed, the very title of Tutuola’s story “The Wild Hunter in the Bush of the Ghosts” is extremely close to Fagunwa’s “The Brave Hunter in the Forest of Four Hundred Spirits” (a literal translation of *Ogboju ode . . .*), suggesting a strong kindred relationship between the texts possibly bordering on plagiarism. . . . [I]n the course of fighting with a fierce ghost in the First Town of Ghosts, Tutuola’s Wild Hunter breaks his cutlass on his adversary’s body and the ghost calmly repairs it and returns it to him so they can resume their battle; Fagunwa’s Akara-Ogun is offered the same strange courtesy in his duel with Agbako, a monster he meets in his first sojourn to Irunmale. Next, the Wild Hunter is victimized by a ghost who mounts and rides him as a horse; so is Akara-Ogun. Both books tell of encounters with one-legged ghosts, four-headed ghosts, ghosts who want to learn how to cook, ghosts with major social and psychological problems.

If *The Wild Hunter* had been the first Tutuola novel to be published, this debt would have been immediately obvious. But Tutuola put the manuscript aside, and it did not appear until 1982.

Instead, Tutuola made his literary debut in 1952 with *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, memorably praised by Dylan Thomas as a “brief, thronged, *grisley* and bewitching story.” This tragicomic tale of a man’s quest for the soul of his dead palm-wine tapster was like nothing before seen in the English language. It seemed to mark the transition between oral history and folktales and the world of modern literature. If a Western reader knew two African novels, they were most likely *Things Fall Apart* and its crazy, comic brother *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Whether or not Fagunwa thought Tutuola had stolen his thunder, he continued to write in Yoruba, publishing a novel in 1954 (*Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* or “Wanderings in the Forest of Elegbeje”) and another in 1961 (*Adiitu Olodumare* or “The Secret of the Almighty”), as well as a number of short stories. If Fagunwa was less famous than Tutuola in the world at large, he was honored in his own country, winning the Margaret Wrong literary prize and being inducted into the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

Nonetheless, it was not until 1968, five years after his death, that Fagunwa's first novel was translated into English—by no less a Yoruba writer than future Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka. Already known as a poet, playwright, and novelist, the 34-year-old Soyinka translated the work in prison, where he was held as a result of his efforts to avert the Biafran civil war. A U.S. edition of the book did not appear until 1983, and has long been out of print. This new *City Lights* edition is nearly identical to the Random House edition, from Soyinka's two-page Translator's Note and skimpy glossary to the evocative woodcuts or linocuts by Nigerian artist Bruce Onabrakpeya. A new introduction by Soyinka would have been welcome, revisiting the novel almost half a century after he first took it on. A foreword by one of the many younger Nigerian authors would also have been nice. But despite these quibbles, the important thing is that the book is now available to a new generation.

Readers can only be grateful that Soyinka used his prison time to bring this important Yoruba novel into English. One measure of the book's ongoing relevance comes in the following passage, which seems to have inspired the writers of the TV series *Lost*. Akara-ogun is speaking about his father:

It happened one day that my father prepared himself and set off to hunt. After he had hunted a long while, he felt somewhat tired and sat on a tree stump to rest. He was not long seated when, happening to look up, he saw the ground in front of him begin to split and smoke pour upwards from the rent. In a moment the smoke had filled the entire area where my father sat so thickly that he could not see a thing; all about him had turned impenetrably black. Even as he began to seek a way of escape he observed that the smoke had begun to fuse together in one spot and, before he could so much as blink, it fused completely and a stocky being emerged sword in hand and came towards my father.

In *Lost*, too, a smoke monster boils out of a vent in the ground. It is the alter ego of the malevolent Man in Black, and among its victims is Mr. Eko, a Yoruba man from Nigeria (played by the Yoruba actor Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje). When it takes the form of a dead man in one scene, the first thing it does is to bend over and pick up a machete.

Despite the book's ongoing importance and Soyinka's excellent translation, a new translation would be most welcome. It's possible that the smooth professionalism of Soyinka's English may have caused Fagunwa's novel to suffer in the inevitable comparison with *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Tutuola, it's been pointed out, used English words as "counters," in effect writing a Yoruba novel in literal English. Undoubtedly, some of the weird power of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* comes from this wrenching of one language into another.

Soyinka's brief introduction reveals the lengths he would go to in order to make the unfamiliar work of Fagunwa seem familiar.

The pattern of choices begins quite early, right from the title in fact. Is *Irunmale* to be rendered literally "four hundred deities" rather than in the sound and sense of "a thousand" or "a thousand and one"?

Yes! I mentally respond. If the Yoruba consider four hundred rather than a thousand as the equivalent of "a lot," then I would like to know. Soyinka continues:

Again, in one of the extracts which I translated for the magazine *Black Orpheus*, this phrase "*mo nmi ho bi agiliti*" which became "my breath came in rapid bloats like the hawing of a toad" aroused some protest from a critic. Indeed *agiliti* is far from being the toad, it is more a member of the lizard species. But then neither toad nor lizard is the object of action or interest to the hero Akara-ogun or

his creator Fagunwa at this point of narration.

I stand with the critic on this point. According to a commenter on the Nigerian website nairaland.com, the agiliti is “a resilient type of lizard of the Iguana family, whose tough skin is often used in making longevity charms.” Surely the hero’s choice to compare himself with this particular creature has some significance.

On the other hand, Soyinka sometimes makes the book odder than it needs to be. In order to avoid the “common or misleading associations” of words such as demons, devils, or gods, he turns to “inventive naming ceremonies” for some of Fagunwa’s creatures. The spirits of the title are rendered as “daemons,” and “ghommid” is introduced as the umbrella term for a host of forest-dwelling entities, including the bog-troll, dewild, gnom, and kobold. Soyinka apparently invented the words ghommid, dewild, and gnom, none of which can be found in the twenty volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary, but trolls, kobolds (a kind of German sprite), and gnomes (with our without the e) have misleading associations of their own.

Of course, the responsibility of bringing Fagunwa into English does not rest with Soyinka alone. In 1994 Dapo Adeniyi, editor of the Nigerian exile magazine *Glendora Review*, published a “free translation” of *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* under the title *Expedition to the Mount of Thought*. Perhaps someday the rest of Fagunwa’s books will find their translator, and we will have a truer picture of his achievement.

Geoff Wisner is the editor of *African Lives: An Anthology of Memoirs and Autobiographies* and the author of *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa*. He writes for the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Warscapes*, and *Words Without Borders* and blogs at geoffwisner.com.

Published in Issue 34

