

TUTÙOLÁ 'RESURFACES' IN ITALY: An Exegesis of Alessandra di Maio's recent book on Amos Tutùolá

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Nigeria, Amos Tutùolá's country has behaved true to type in its indifference to the man's work - and family - after the writer's death in June 1997. When he was alive, the state hardly acknowledged his existence as a writer, let alone appreciate his contributions to African literary canon and the glory he earned for Nigeria. The silence, nay indifference, that has been the hallmark of the state's and Nigerian academic institutions' response to the man acclaimed as a pioneer African novelist, is therefore not surprising; sad as it is. But for the private efforts of Bíódún Ayòdélé, Ségún Olúsolá, late Esi Kinnin Olusanyin and Bruce Onobrakpeya who in 1999 variously organized some celebrations in his honor, Amos Tutùolá since his death, has rested in peace even in the hearts of those who should keep his spirit aglow on this side of the existential plane. This makes the efforts of the people outside Nigerian shores to keep the man's memory alive even more remarkable. One such effort was by Oye(kàn Owómóyelá as reflected in the book he published in 1999. Titled *Amos Tutùolá Revisited*, Owómóyelá's 174-page book is edited by that renowned African literary scholar, Berth Lindfors.

Alessandra di Maio, through Bulzoni Editore, an Italian publishing company came out with a publication which, from 2001, has been used by scholars, students and researchers to gain further insight into Tutùolá's world. In the words of Claudio Gorlier, the release of the book was intended as University of Turin's tribute to the Yorùbá literary ancestor - Amos Tutùolá. Aptly titled *Tutùolá at the University: The Italian Voice of a Yorùbá Ancestor*, the book contains the transcript of the eight lectures given by Amos Tutùolá when he visited Italy in 1990, the text of an interview he had with the book's author (di Maio) and an Afterword by Claudio Gorlier, a professor of English at the University of Turin. The book is divided into four inter-connecting parts: a detailed Introduction by the author, the Tutùolá lectures, the interview by Gorlier and the Bibliography. The bibliography is given some space here, because of its comprehensiveness and the attention it calls to the prodigy, Tutùolá. Within it are 'Works by Amos Tutùolá',

'Italian Translations'; 'Selected Works on Amos Tutùolá' as well as 'Obituaries' and 'Commemorations'. Two other inclusions worth mentioning are the short Afterword by Gorlier and the Notes that accompany each of the eight lectures. Besides the lectures and their notes, each of the other four sections can stand nearly on their own with their message still as auspicious. By being made to accompany the main text of the book which is the transcript of Tutùolá's eight lectures, the four accompaniments make Alessandra di Maio's book intrinsically bigger and certainly richer than its small size purports.

Although many Nigerian readers might already be familiar with most of di Maio's disclosures in the Introduction; the perspective it gives on Tutùolá's worldview, Italians' perception of this worldview, as well as the emphasis on the need to (sharing Tutùolá's idea) appreciate each other's similarities and respect each other's differences are an elucidation on a subject that elicits controversy right from the inception of his literary career in the early 1950s. The Introduction is not limited to the foregoing. It also serves as an overview of the eight lectures that are to span the next 123 pages of the 188 page book. The eight lectures that form the fulcrum of the book are basically readings and commentaries by Tutùolá from two of his books, not lectures in the real sense of the term. The author presupposes this when he writes that from his opening remarks during his very first lecture, "everybody was already aware that Tutùolá's lectures were not going to be exactly what one would expect from a Visiting Professor of English - which was, in an approximate translation, the academic title of Tutùolá's appointment at the University of Palermo" (pp16 & 17).

In the first seven lectures, Tutùolá read excerpts from 'The Palm-wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-wine Tapster in the Deads Town' modifying some words, phrases or paragraph(s) in the process. In the typical audience-participation style, Tutùolá encourages his listeners to be part of his delivery - in the manner of the storyteller that he is. This is achieved by way of encouraging questions during the reading and certainly by the entertainment of questions and observations at the end of each lecture. The same style characterised the eighth lecture at which he read excerpts from his last published novel, *Pauper, Brawler and Slanderer*. Pages 157 - 166 contain an edited transcription of the interview Prof Claudio Gorlier had with Tutùolá after his eighth lecture in Italy.

Based in part on this interview and his interaction with Tutùolá generally, Gorlier is to assert in his 'Afterword By Way of an Envoy' that: "Tutùolá the

Nigerian farmer, was for all his candour and even naivette, a craftsman always consciously present to himself, &his way of talking, of looking at things and at individuals, carried a sense of discovery, becoming an uninterrupted, amazing work in progress, the irrepressible first stage of a discourse" (p167).

In his Introduction, Alessandra di Maio observes that Tutùolá "put himself at the very center of the experience that it intended to communicate& . In accordance with his people's cyclic cosmology, Tutùolá at the University, was at one and the same time the boy fascinated by the elders' stories, the writer who recreated the folktales of his people, the hero of his artistic imagination and the teacher" (p25). This reinforces Tutùolá's already established image as a storyteller. For, as anyone who has listened to ('engaged with' is the proper phrase) an effective (African) storyteller can recall, the emotions experienced by a hero in a storyteller's tale can almost be discerned in the in the person and gestures of the storyteller.

Furthermore, traditional storytellers are not just entertainers, they are also teachers, which is why didacticism is not an uncommon element in their narrations. This is not totally peculiar to Africa. Early philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Diogene and Epicurus conveyed the inspirations gained from their introspections to their pupils using a method that was not too dissimilar. Modern communicators too have perfected this method of imparting knowledge as found in certain workshop procedures, feedback mechanisms etc.

The book under review is a testimony to the universality of the shared characteristics of mankind. Up till the last century, Africa was considered a dark jungle where bizzares reign supreme. Racist archeologists and anthropologists use equally racist travelers' accounts to derogate and denigrate the African. At the appearance of Tutùolá's book in 1952, some mischievous anthropologists again tried to refer to it as a pointer to the ludicrousness in Africa. Quite a number of Africans actually felt that Tutùolá's early books got an instant acclaim in Europe and America because of some ludicrous pictures they paint. Tutùolá authoritatively addressed these issues while answering a question after one of the lectures in Turin, Italy. He stated that his reference to a creature with eyes on his knees is meant to indicate that "then people were still in darkness or were not wise. It does not mean that his eyes really grow on his knees. No! It's just like a proverb" (p119).

For Emmanuel Obiechina, scholar of African Literature, "the potential

tensions and stresses in traditional society & are sometimes played up in folktales with the purpose of heightening the emotional effect of the narrative & exaggeration and sensationalism are the keynotes & This sensationalism elicits feelings of horror, wonderment and fascination from the audience" (Obiechina, 1965). If he is to be effective as a storyteller therefore, Tutùolá could not but adopt this folkloric tradition. Actually, he hardly had any choice since folktales would be his subject matter, for, as Obiechina emphasizes, exaggeration and horror creation are the hallmarks of folktales the same way the latter is one of the characteristics of thriller and science fiction!

On page 104 of the book under review, an attempt is made, quoting Gerald Moore, to explain the equivalent of 'Child-Wiser-Than-Father' in Yorùbá. This phrase was wrongly interpreted. The correct expression (in Yorùbá) is 'Omo (tó) Gbón Ju Baba (è) lo' and not 'Mog bon juba'. On many of the pages of the book, Tutùolá is correctly painted as an opponent of disobedience or non-conformism. His position is in line with that of a typical moral-teaching storyteller. The irony here, however, is that Tutùolá the man was, while alive, a non-conformist - at least in his literary voyage (as would be found in the forthcoming biography by the present writer). For one thing, being a writer in itself is a choice to be different, *ab initio*. To have chosen to conduct his writing in English - a language in which he is barely literate - makes his daring more emblematic.

Equally remarkable of Tutùolá's non-conformity is his penchant, like the old philosophers that were alluded to earlier, to experiment even while remaining humble. An aspect of this can be gleaned from the way he treats popular folktales. His major works are based on identifiable folktales in West Africa. But these tales wear different toga, assume different aura and characteristics that are sometimes enhanced or sometimes different from what they are in their original form.

It can be stated that Tutùolá's admonition on 'obedience' is limited to moral issues, as it is practically impossible in the African world of his works not to go beyond 'the limit'. For one, there is no serious line of demarcation between the world of animal and human, or even between that of the living and the dead. The Africans of Tutùolá's world believed and engaged, and many still believe and engage in an intermingling of what Plato refers to as the world of ideas and the world of the physical, or what religionists would call the spiritual and physical worlds.

Finally, it is the ability, or at least a manifested attempt, to leap beyond the frontier either imaginatively or physically that makes an individual unique. This is certainly what distinguishes a creative genius who may be writer, scientist, philosopher, or discoverer from the rest of us. Herein lies the significance of the Amos Tutùolá phenomenon. This is what Alessandro's work reminds us. The author's simple, free-flowing, arresting style make the work quite engaging, just as its author comes across as a writer of great potential.

Bibliography

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Title: *TUTÙOLÁ AT THE UNIVERSITY: The Italian Voice of a Yorùbá Ancestor*

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