

Great White Horse as we travelled in southern England. It has now been re-chalked and refurbished, an awesome site for John's scattered ashes.

II

'CULTURAL OFFICER' AT HOME AND ABROAD: *OLOYE ADEBAYO OGUNRINU OGUNDIJO,* 1939–2005

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Editor's note: This combined memoir by Paulo Farias and Oladejo Okediji continues the journal's theme of local intellectuals in Africa. Bayo straddled academic and popular fields. He was the author of several books, a research consultant and mediator, a practising diviner and university employee, a traditional innovator and local cosmopolitan. We are fortunate to be able to publish here the reflections of Mr Oladejo Okediji, the celebrated Yoruba novelist and playwright, on Bayo's life and death; the memoir as a whole is based on the long and close friendship of all three people.

ON THE CAREER OF A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL TEACHER TURNED *ORISA* PRIEST

P. F. de Moraes Farias

His friends addressed him as *Oloye* (Titleholder) and as Bayo. He was deeply rooted in the world-views, folk classifications of living beings, healing practices and social mores of modern urban forms of Yoruba culture. These are of course widespread cultural forms, which constantly cut across the hypothetical divide between what counts as 'popular culture' and what is classified as 'elite culture' or 'academic culture' in contemporary Yorubaland. They, and the social-networking practices and hierarchical conventions accompanying them, largely shaped Bayo's assumptions and attitudes throughout his life. At the same time, as his career demonstrates, he was a man of initiative and insight, quick to detect new paths and eager to take them.

For many years, at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, he held the position of cultural officer in the Institute of Cultural Studies, where the 'academic' and 'popular', and the 'modern' and 'traditional' dimensions of Yoruba culture intersect. In Nigeria he published books in Yoruba and English, which are compromises between different

orders of conventions in the presentation of the material.¹ Also, as a deservedly trusted transcriber and translator of recordings of oral performances and interviews, and more generally as a knowledgeable source of information and elucidation, he often mediated between academic researchers—both local and foreign—and Yoruba texts and traditional specialists. I think back, with nostalgia and gratitude, to the times when I first became indebted to him for that, in Nigeria and Britain. In England he taught a course in the Yoruba language at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham and, in cooperation with Karin Barber, put together the book *Yoruba Popular Theatre*, jointly published by them in America.² In addition, both in Africa and abroad, he introduced to the cult of the *Orisha* a number of foreigners willing to explore new avenues of personal religious experience.

The responsibility for Bayo's upbringing was distributed within his family in a way that distanced him from the Yoruba traditional religious practices of his parents, and led to his initiation into Christianity. He was a recipient, and later a conveyor, of Christian education (he attended teacher-training courses in 1961–2 and 1966–7). Then, in the fifth decade of his life, he decided to take a Diploma course in Yoruba Studies at the University of Lagos and eventually recreated himself as an *Orisha* priest. He changed his last name from 'Akanbi' to 'Ogundijo'.³

This was in part a return to parental, and ancestral, practices remembered from earliest childhood. But it was also part of an intellectual quest belonging very much in the late twentieth century, which he pursued along the interfaces of university studies, traditional religious expertise, popular knowledge of Yoruba lore, and neo-traditionalist movements. These movements, often involving active and retired academic staff, and in competition with equally university-based evangelical Christian and Muslim initiatives, have striven to retrieve Yoruba traditional religion while redefining it as a universal religion.

Bayo both apprenticed himself to traditionalists 'of the old school' and developed an interest in the new ideas behind the Yoruba Ifa Kabbalah Centre, established in 1997 by Dr Samuel Modupeola Opeola, a retired senior lecturer who had taught in the Faculty of Education of Obafemi Awolowo University. (Bayo became the Centre's first chairman.)⁴ One of the missions of this centre, vigorously pursued by Bayo, was to counter the notion of African traditional religion as 'pagan' and therefore inferior. As Dr Opeola told us, Bayo gave a paper at an international inter-religious dialogue conference in Tamale,

¹ His last two books were *Yoruba in Tables* (printed in Nigeria by BPC Wheatons Ltd, 1994), and *Eremode* (Ibadan: Penthouse Publications, 2005), which is on children's games and, sadly, came out only after his death.

² See Karin Barber and Bayo Ogundijo, *Yoruba Popular Theatre: three plays by the Oyin Adejobi Company* (Los Angeles CA: African Studies Association Press, 1994).

³ On the successive phases of this process see the memoir that follows, by Oladejo Okediji.

⁴ The YIKC was an offshoot of the Napatian Society founded by Dr Opeola in 1986, of which Bayo had been the first secretary.

Ghana in November 2004, in which he argued that no one religion is better than another. Equal opportunity should be given to all religious groups, as indicated in the country's constitution. All religions share fundamental goals.

A pagan worships idols, but most of the people of Africa, especially the Yoruba, do not. They only use signs to indicate the presence of their *oriṣa*. Nobody in his right senses will accept that a piece of stone is a graven image of Ogun, neither will anyone accept that five pebbles represent Oṣun or sixteen palm nuts Ọrunmila. This is similar to the way that the sign of the cross is used to signify Christian belief.

Bayo also established links with the National (later International) Council for Ifa Religion, which developed under the charismatic inspiration of Professor Idowu B. Odeyemi, a retired university professor of geology. Professor Odeyemi sees Ifa as God's message to all humankind, not the Yoruba alone, which must be taken to the whole world through a new evangelism ('Ifa-gelism').

Like the neo-traditionalists, Bayo was aware of the appeal of the *Oriṣa*, Ifa divination, and other aspects of Yoruba culture, for sectors of the international public not confined to the Yoruba diaspora. He travelled often to Britain and the United States (where he attended cultural events and practised as a *babalawo* at Bowling Green State University, Ohio), and visited Brazil and the Caribbean. When he was living in our house in Birmingham, more than once I took phone calls for him from initiates ringing from New York, and on one occasion he was driven up from London by young Yoruba cultural activists obviously proud of him, who made the trip just for his sake. In his room he kept a collection of herbal concoctions, the powers of which I could not fathom, and through the wall I would overhear him murmuring words I could not make out. For a while the house was a temple.

His long-distance travels as a cultural agent were also modest business opportunities. He would bring over African cultic items required by *Oriṣa* devotees abroad, and take back to Nigeria excess baggage filled with bargains he had a flair for discovering (he soon got to know Birmingham better than me). Once he took back an old car, through various customs hurdles. Thanks to miracles of ingenuity performed by him and the Ife mechanics, it ran on the Nigerian roads for years and he gave me many lifts in it.

None of this ever made him a rich person. Besides, he was both a very practical person and a dreamer. The money he managed to save was often invested in dreams of one kind or another. One of these was to add a wing to his Ife home to create a self-financing centre, where visiting scholars would be able to lodge and enjoy IT working facilities. It may never have stood a chance of fulfilment, but I found myself dreaming along with him, as he showed me around the unfinished building. His tomb is in front of the house, which sits on a busy Ife street.

Over the years he went through some trying patches. But his astonishing resourcefulness enabled him to solve all sorts of bureaucratic and logistical problems, in situations where normality was a nickname for hardship.

He was partial to Irving Berlin's 1936 song 'Let's face the music and dance', the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers hit reflecting an America still in the process of moving out of the 1929 Depression. He sang it often, with a quantum of mischief, after learning it from a TV advert. In his voice it became an Africa-flavoured Internationale of problem solvers from all countries. In the title and refrain of Berlin's song, the 'us', at the same time singular and plural, particularly appealed to him. He was as much a helper as a survivor, and a man of great warmth and generosity. Going beyond duty to solve problems for others was sheer pleasure to him. The joy it gave him was unmistakable, and sometimes he celebrated it with a phrase which he had also picked up from TV, and which became a running joke in our conversations and letters: 'Do not hesitate!' He was quick to lend a hand, often literally, here to replace an Ifẹ elder in the task of cutting down a tree, there to help push a stubborn car off the road. (He was physically strong, quite able to sweep long unseen friends off their feet with his embrace). But this openness towards others, and this delight in language, were also at the intellectual core of Bayo's success as cultural agent.

His excellence as a transcriber and translator reflected intimacy with different dialects and registers of the Yoruba language, in addition to modern standard Yoruba. But, above all, it came from the intense interest he took in the materials he worked on. He loved to discuss the meanings in the texts he had transcribed, especially in their more obscure passages. And he had an unusual talent for sensing precisely, in each case, which fields of discourse should be explored with the interlocutor in pursuit of a common ground of understanding. In doing this he drew on his vast repertoire of oral lore and various apprenticeships with traditional specialists. However, the indispensable ingredient of success was his sensitivity to what he imaginatively perceived of his interlocutors' own mindsets (I can attest to this from the help he gave my work on narratives provided by the Arokin of Oyo).

He would create gradually tighter frames of comparison and commentary around the nuances of the texts. In this intellectual game, translating and clarifying difficult passages meant approaching them from a variety of angles. In the process the interlocutor gained information beyond the passages themselves as, in response to questions, Bayo went farther and wider in his construction of explanations and suggestions of meaning. It was a simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal dance, a game he played with generosity of mind, patience and shrewd intelligence, appreciating the particular nature of the problems faced by the interlocutor, and proposing solutions to them on the spot or in later conversations. It was also played with strict honesty: he never shied away from saying 'This I do not know' when he felt that necessary. Those were intense sessions of intellectual contact, pleasurable occasions all around, in which, ever a

helper and a man in pursuit of knowledge, he would find in himself new answers to new questions. The explanations gradually pieced together were never formulaic, though he had acquired extensive knowledge of traditional verbal formulae.

I feel tempted to say that, in terms of *Orisha* typology, he had an *Eṣu*-like affinity with linguistic and other crossroads and exchanges, and with the differences they embody and transcend. But I suspect he would have placed himself differently in that classification, pitied my misunderstandings, and tried to move me beyond them.

Of his warm humanity, playful sense of humour, and fortitude, I could have said much more.

ADEBAYO OGUNDIJO: ON HIS LIFE AND DEATH

Oladejo Okediji

It is current in Yoruba world views that there are two major planes of human existence, and that they manifest themselves and operate *pari passu*. There is the temporal, secular plane of the natural world, visible, audible, tangible, malleable, manipulable; a plane which is not only real but open to practical activities, logical analysis and scientific demonstration. Then there is the supernatural plane, metaphysical, occult, mystic, esoteric; a plane which is no less real and relevant than the first. At all times human beings are subject to the influence of both planes. They continually interact, but there are times in a person's life when the presence of one is dominant, making the other apparently dormant. However, each of these dynamic planes must be looked after and taken care of. Indeed, according to traditionalists, 'A human being has two homes, one in heaven and the other on earth.'

This way of thinking permeates Yoruba thought and life, whatever an individual's religion, wealth, age, or social status. It is shared among Christians, Muslims and traditionalists. It is at the basis of all religions practised in Yorubaland. But the traditionalist invests particular care in performing rites that facilitate links between his personal planes of existence, between happenings in the present and the past, and between the now and the hereafter, and that mitigate negative repercussions of past behaviour and thought.

Bayo Ogundijo, a man who played many parts in life, came round to the traditionalist's way. He lived it. He died in it.

He grew up in a Christian atmosphere as a ward of his maternal uncle, the late Mr Akanbi, a government sanitary inspector in the colonial era. Mr Akanbi being a Christian, Bayo automatically adopted Christianity. He was baptised Gabriel, and was enrolled in school as 'Gabriel Adebayo Akanbi'. Later he attended a Christian Teacher-Training College, and became a teacher in Baptist schools. He was the Baptist church agent in several out-of-the-way villages where he taught

at different times. Then he left teaching and went to the University of Lagos for a Diploma course in Yoruba Studies. His exposure to traditional religion started then.

His next job was as a radio broadcaster (an assistant producer of Yoruba programmes at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, now Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, Ikoyi, Lagos). He began then to evince attraction to traditional religion.

His final 'apostasy' happened when he was given the job of cultural officer at the Institute of Cultural Studies at the University of Ife, now known as Obafemi Awolowo University. At this point he definitely broke with Christianity and changed to traditional religion. There is no doubt that this decision was much influenced by his constant contact with intriguing and bewitching worship customs in a university setting. The new environment smothered his faith in Christianity and fired his conversion.

Bayo did not believe in taking half measures, so he quickly went all out into *Orisa* worship in all its ramifications. That is why, when he abandoned Christianity, among many other things he also abandoned monogamy. He added wife after wife to his expanding family, until he had quite a sizeable polygamous household. He was considerate though, for he permitted his wives and children to worship however they liked. Some of them remained Christian while some followed him into the cult of the *Orisa*.

Involvement in traditional religion is usually concurrent with trust in the efficacy of traditional medicine, making the adherents prefer it to modern scientific medicine. In any case, usually the traditional doctor is also an *Orisa* priest or an Ifa diviner. Therefore, when Bayo opted for traditional religion, as he did not want to do so half-heartedly he went to apprentice himself to a *babalawo* and native doctor. He studied the technicalities and intricacies of cultic healing practices. Eventually he became a full-fledged and acknowledged adept, able to practise oracular divination, diagnose ailments and diseases, dress sores, and prescribe, dispense and administer herbal preparations. He could organize propitiations and prescribe taboos, or alternatively establish lists of ingredients for sacrificial rites. He knew the incantations to recite and what rites were appropriate in given circumstances.

He answered to the name 'Gabriel Adebayo Akanbi' until 8 August 1988, when, already converted to *Orisa* worship, he changed his surname to 'Ogundijo'. When I asked him why he wanted to change his name, he said, 'I want to be called by my real father's name, not my uncle's any longer. That's the only way I shall be able to make meaningful and effective metaphysical contacts with my ancestors in the spirit world.' As an outsider I could not follow his argument fully, but I acknowledged his right to change the name by which he wanted to be called. As I nodded my acquiescence, he noticed that I was not particularly awed, so he added 'And note the date, 8/8/88. It has great significance in the spirit world.' How could I fault that?

He laid the foundation of his personal house on 29 February 1992, performing prescribed rites as bricklayers mixed the concrete.

In consonance with his belief in the significance of numbers and dates, he had deliberately chosen the day. 'Oh yes,' he said, 'I searched long before finding this perfectly balanced date, 29-2-92.' I congratulated him, for he certainly had a big catch there. I don't know how he chose the dates of his weddings but, if I had asked him, I am sure he would have been able to analyse the figures. I know that when he completed building his house, he moved into it on his birthday. He told me it was deliberate.

He wrote and published books, one of them co-authored with Karin Barber. He had had co-authoring in his mind since 1990, when he suggested that he and I should jointly write a novel. The project was attractive to me, as it would be a novelty. It is true J. F. Odunjo with A. A. Oladipo had already published *Kadara ati Egbon Re* [Destiny and his Older Brother], but the co-authors had not sat down together to write it: one of them *wrote* it and the other later '*repaired*' it with amendments. *We* would write together. So we sat at work two or three hours on appointed days, drinking beer as we wrote. It took us more than six months to write. When we concluded the work, he advised that we should seek oracular guidance before sending it out for publication. Somehow we never got around to consulting any oracle: we procrastinated; some prescribed ingredients were hard to find; other interests intruded; there was not sufficient enthusiasm all around. We had written the manuscript without a hitch and there was a publisher willing to accept it. So we sent the script to the publisher, and got a letter of acceptance. The only snag is, today, seventeen years after acceptance, the book has not been published; and it is not likely ever to see the light of day, for that publishing house is not as vibrant as it used to be.

When Bayo was born in 1939, his parents feared that he might die in infancy. They had had several children before him, and most of them had died as babies; so the parents believed the family was afflicted with the *abiku* scourge. In the *abiku* syndrome, the victims undertake while still in the womb that they will survive on earth only so many months or years, and will then return to the 'ancestral home in heaven' to re-unite with their playmates in the spirit world. Each will stick unwaveringly to that schedule unless prevented by stronger spiritual forces. Parents who think their expected child is *abiku* therefore spare no effort to thwart the child's intention. They approach medicine men to secure protection for the mother's pregnancy and, later, for the new-born baby.

Bayo's parents did just that. They got *babalarwo* and herbal doctors to make special toilet soaps to bathe mother and child, mix potent *agbo* concoctions, cut appropriate scarifications, incise with *gbere* cuts, and fabricate and energize *aaja* bangles and anklets for the child. They also made ritual propitiations in order to stem the incidence of *abiku* in the family.

Apparently they succeeded, as Bayo survived throughout his infancy, childhood and youth. He lived for sixty-five years. The sad thing is that he died just a fortnight before his last book *Eremode* was published. For about a year he had been tantalized by *Eremode*, but he did not

live to see a single copy of it. Had he undertaken before coming to the world to die on the eve of the publication of the book on children's games?

Mrs Lanrewaju Abimbola¹ (née Akanbi), Bayo's cousin and schooldays contemporary in his guardian's care, threw some light on Bayo's *abiku* connections. When she saw how devastated I was at his sudden death, she told me 'You're so shocked only because you don't know his antecedents. When he was born, he was given the name "Morawo", which, as you know, is an *abiku* name. He donned his *aaja* neckwear and bangles everywhere he went until he was eight years of age.' She remembered that he still wore them after starting school, and school children ridiculed him. As he grew up, he felt embarrassed by the jeers he got on his way to and from school, and in school. He had to plead long with his parents before he was ritually unshackled. And on that occasion they made him pledge not to die young ('and he so pledged', confided Mrs Abimbola).

He died on 2 February 2005. Was that a chosen day, a day with some numerological significance? 2-2-2005? How would he have analysed this date for us? Add all the 2s together and you get 6. Then there is 5. Is that how he got his 65 years? Or did he just 'bow out when ovation was loudest'? For Bayo had become a celebrity at the time of his death. He had been awarded two *Oriṣa* chieftaincy titles in Ile-Ife, another such title in Oḷa, and yet another in Oyo, his place of birth. He was prominent in *Oriṣa* circles all over the Yoruba-speaking areas of Nigeria and the Republic of Bénin, and had been invited to other parts of West Africa, and to London, Birmingham and the USA. He had also been to Brazil and the West Indies. The last paper he delivered in his life, 'Peace, preachers and politicians', was given at an inter-religious conference in Tamale, Ghana, in November 2004. In addition to his deep knowledge of the Yoruba language, he could communicate well in English and had a smattering of French and Portuguese.

He was respected in his capacity as the head of a large family, and as a published author, and enjoyed many other proofs of public esteem. Besides having been the first chairman of the Yoruba Ifa Kabbalah Centre established by Dr S. Modupeḷa Opeḷa, he was an officer of the Ile-Ife Chapter of the International Council for Ifa Religion. He was the chairman of the Parents and Teachers Association of the Oluorogbo Community Primary School, Ile-Ife, and secretary of the Oyo Alaafin Descendants' Union, Ile-Ife Branch; a Co-operative Union in the Obafemi Awolowo University; and the Oluorogbo Landlords' Association. He became a Justice of the Peace a few days before his demise. He was working on the manuscript of yet another book which he discussed with me. He was loved by all and sundry, humorous, accommodating, generous and selfless.

Bayo Ogundijo lives on in the memory of his numerous friends, associates, patients, admirers and beneficiaries.

¹The wife of Professor Wande Abimbola, the authority on Ifa.