

## Book review

**Blurred boundaries: Femi Abodunrin's *It Would Take Time: Conversation with Living Ancestors*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2002. Paperback.**

Blurred Boundaries. This expression captures best the significance of Femi Abodunrin's recent publication. The text indeed transgresses boundaries; and this at formal, stylistic, generic, contentual and thematic levels. The transgression is evident even in the sub-title as the author conflates the "living" together with the "ancestors". To resolve the seeming contradiction, the word "time" comes into play. Time indeed stands as the essence of concern in this work. Femi Abodunrin is concerned with how time past impacts upon time present and how both impinge on the future. The immediate point of reference is his contemporary Nigerian society. The country came into existence following a decision by the British colonizers to amalgamate the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914. Since this arbitrary act, the country has continued to totter at the edge of the precipice, transiting as it were, from one crisis to the other. *It Would Take Time* represents therefore a kind of quest, a search actually for an alternative to the current obsolescence.

But it will not be surprising if the author takes umbrage at this kind of reading. There, of course, are clear references in the text which point to the writer's country of origin. But as important as these are however, abundance evidence demonstrates also that Nigeria can only represent a kind of image in the context of *It Would Take Time*. The author's concern actually extends to the whole of the black race. Writes Abodunrin in the preface to the volume:

There is hardly any African thinker of the immediate pre-and post-independence era who has not given tacit or implicit assent to what amounts to the major dilemma of the twentieth century: the need for beleaguered Third World nations and cultures to shed the cloak of traditionalism, give empirical thought-systems a central place in their lives, beg, borrow or steal the scientific and technological know-how of the Western world. In this frenzy of pseudo-scientific postulations, the issue of what would then serve as cultural back-up for the new scientific outlook that these elite readily covet was relegated to the background.(p. 9)

It is this search for the cultural back-up that Abodunrin carries out in *It Would take*

*Time*. To be sure, even as a scholar, Abodunrin has always been concerned with the possibility of negotiating a path through the past to the future of the black race. In *Blackness: Culture, Ideology and Discourse*, his book published as issue number 44 of Bayreuth African Studies series in 1996 Abodunrin proposes a theory of black criticism derived from the carnivalesque perspective of Esu, the Yoruba god of fate and of the crossroad. In articulating his perspective, Abodunrin pursues the line of analysis proposed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his article "The Blackness of Blackness: a Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" merging it with the Bakhtinian theory of the carnivalesque. Thus emerges a theory which is rooted in Abodunrin's indigenous Yoruba heritage but which also betrays a clear poststructuralist bent.

Directly the Yoruba world-view has it that there originally existed a single god-head called Orisa who lived at the foot of a cliff attended by his slave, Atunda. The slave ministered to his master day-in and day-out, a routine which by nature he detests. One evening, Atunda rolled a huge boulder on Orisa, his master, thus causing the god-head to shatter into innumerable pieces scattered in different directions of the universe. Esu's status as a rebel derives partly from a version of Yoruba creation myth which identifies him with this slave who caused the disintegration of his master. It is because of this that Abodunrin moves away from the myths of Sango, Ogun and Obatala who hitherto had received focused attention from writers, theorists and critics. While, following Soyinka, Sango is dismissed as a tyrannical ruler of Oyo who was forced to abdicate the throne by his subjects thus causing him to kill himself, Ogun is analyzed as a "rigid" god whose commitment to restorative justice may be "inadequate in resolving contemporary issues such as miscegenation and racism facing 'a universal black world' in a postcolonial context". On his own, Obatala's near total identification with the perfect forms puts him, according to Abodunrin, at a remarkable distance from the discursive perspective of the oppressed humanity. Seeing as Atunda on the other hand, Esu becomes the first revolutionary who converts the monolithic perspective of divine essence into a plurality of visions. Writes Abodunrin:

What looks like an evil destruction is in fact a divine plan - to spread the divine essence throughout the world. In contemporary terms however, according to Hans Witte, "in contrast to the Orisa and earthspirits, who attract worshippers on the basis of family tradition, profession, special vocation, orunmila and Esu are venerated by every traditional Yoruba. The cosmic system would fall apart without the integrating activity of the oracle and the trickster."(p. 39)

Another factor that recommends Esu Elegbara to Femi Abodunrin inheres in the god's

transgressive capabilities. While Obatala is a plastic, serene god who maintains an attitude of complete abhorrence of the profane, Esu, on the other hand, is a god who traverses freely between the world of the spiritual and that of the mundane. Once, for example, and according to the same myth of creation, it happened that Obatala returned home on a famished afternoon to discover a gourd of fresh palmwine waiting at his doorstep. Caught at his supreme moment of weakness, the god of creation simply settled down to satiate his thirst. Giddy with wine, Obatala returned to his sole assignment of molding human forms. Expectedly, the products of this unsteady moment were badly deformed. Some were crippled. Others were lame. Several were hunch-back while the rest were albinos and the blind. Obatala regretted deeply this act of error and he lays it down for his followers to totally abstain from alcohol.

To Abodunrin, the products of Obatala's original error constitute the class of the primordial "low". Esu shares a physical attribute with these people because he himself walks with a limp. Reinforcing this identification is his innate love for the carnivalesque essences of celebration, of singing, drumming and dancing. Esu indeed is a god of the threshold, one who is always in and out, a god who stays in a permanent state of transition.

In his human form, Esu's homing ground could be found in the inner chambers of the palace but it could also be found in the open space where the peasants market their wares. It is these multiple characteristics that recommends him to Abodunrin as the patron god of black literature. The critic states, arguably, that literature as a genre of discourse belongs in the realm of high culture. He, however, argues additionally that as a distinct body of imaginative expression, black literature exists in the limbo. Well, as he points out, the literature lacks nothing in terms of the distinctive characteristics of other branches of world literature. However, being the discursive expressions of ex-slaves and formerly colonized peoples, the works have continued to exist as marginal literatures. And who else can relate effectively with it if not the one who himself inhabits the "margins of discourse". Abodunrin's final words:

The discourse that emerges from the fruitful interaction of the black profane discourse and its signifying 'Other'... is dialogic rather than monologic, and it is further described by Foucault as the form "which ultimately matters, a discourse against power, the counter-discourse of prisoners and those we call delinquents...". the enigmatic African deity known as Esu... misread for centuries within the African/black matrix itself supplies the 'special tenor' of this counter discourse of 'the low'. The deity's carnivalesque essence is a celebration of the power of those marginalised and confined, because when they speak through the deity and the deity speaks through them, they possess the equiv-

alent of what Foucault refers to as an individual theory, of prisons, the penal system, and justice."(190)

*It Would Take Time* represents a creative consummation of the visionary elaboration contained in *Blackness: Culture, Ideology and Discourse*. The work is actually a parade of the pantheon of Femi Abodunrin's favorite avatars. As can be gleaned from the subtitle, the author prefers to conceptualize them as living ancestors. Blurred boundaries, evidently. Well, this is very much in line with African cosmic articulation which, as has been said, Femi Abodunrin analyses in his theoretical discourse.

*It Would Take Time* projects two categories of pantheons with the first comprising of gods and their manifestations and the second of noteworthy thinkers, scholars, activists and revolutionaries from the black world. The former include Latosa, an emanation of Esu Elegbara, Alasofunfun, a representation of Obatala and Atunda who already has been projected as the first revolutionary. The second, on the other hand, have, as examples, Amilcar Cabral, George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah, Malcolm X, Walter Rodney, Martin Luther King Jr., and C.L.R. James. Beside these, two other individuals are singled out for praises in the work. These are Wole Soyinka - again the author does not mention him by name but the references are clear - and Ulli Beier. Blurred boundaries, once more - especially if it is remembered that Beier is a German citizen. His original mission in Nigeria was as a lecturer of English Phonetics at the newly created University College, Ibadan in 1950. No sooner had he settled down however, than Beier found himself wandering out of the colonial enclave that the university represented. He went deep into the heartland of Yoruba nation emerging eventually as a well-rounded ambassador of Yoruba culture. Abodunrin met Ulli Beier between 1994 and 1995 when he was an Alexander von Humboldt research fellow at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. Beier was at the time the director of Iwalewa Haus, the world famous Africa Center of the University. The homage paid to him in *It Would Take Time* is for the education the author received at the feet of the man concerning his culture.

The work essentially, and to use the author's own expression, is a "drama of consolation". It is actually a kind of exorcism: the persona having traveled far and wide now resolves to come to terms with himself; he now decides to re-claim his identity. There are two narrative voices or, rather, two voices engaged in a kind of dialogue. Presently the reader comes to understand that they are siblings with the major voice being that of a female and the other one being that of the elder brother. Both of them are concerned with the future of the race, the black race. Abodunrin conceptualizes this future in terms of a child which Mosunmola - for that turns out to be the name of the female voice - carries and which already "is asking complicated questions while still in my womb."(p. 2) The first

part is introductory. The voice is essentially that of Mosunmola as she addresses an elder brother that the reader is yet to meet. The part establishes the reason for the choice of form; why that is, it has to be an epic - which of course requires some time to compose - rather than a sonnet or an iambic. It also sets the aim of the composition which is to "procure antidotes for this perversion, this invasion of my womb/before the realities and paradoxes of time and history"(p. 29).

Expectedly, Esu plays very significant role in the core of the narrative. The first drama takes place in Igbo Igbale - meaning sacred grove - which is well-known as the abode of Esu Elegbara. Here Abodunrin projects the fate of the black race in metaphoric terms. The people are like three goats possessing completely different characteristics and pursuing completely different ways. Part four of the narrative enacts the second drama of consolation. Alasofunfun still sucks over his original error and Esu is revealed to have caused it. The kind of exorcism which takes place in this scene is one that Abodunrin considers necessary if the race must take a meaningful step in the direction of the future.

Now, given the narrative structure, the question may be asked as to whether Abodunrin's recent text is a piece of poetry, a work of drama or a short form of prose fiction. One way of answering the question will be to point to the warning in the preface where Abodunrin makes it clear to purists that he would be experimenting deliberately with forms. *It Would take Time* actually collapses boundaries combining the narrative characteristics of long poetry with the dialogic features of drama. The author describes the work as an epic but again this description is problematic. A traditional epic is heroic in structure. The personage himself stands at the center and it is through his exploits and achievements as well as weaknesses that the communal history and world-view are gleaned. *It Would Take Time*, on the other hand, parades a pantheon of deities and human beings and there is no one hero but a collection of voices. It is probably an oversight on the part of Abodunrin that he fails to articulate his own specific perspective of an epic.

But there probably is even a more fundamental problem with the work. While they no doubt may share certain characteristics in common, there still exists distinct differences between poetry conceived as performance and drama which is meant to be enacted on stage. If at all included, the stage instruction in the former is always very light, handled in such a way that it does not affect the flow of poetry. This does not seem to be the case with Abodunrin's work. The consequence, now and again, is that the author loses grip making the poetry to break down in parts.

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It must be said, all the same, that *It Would Take Time* is a very ambitious project. Abodunrin clearly perceives poetry in terms of performance and this certainly is laudable. Beyond this, it is great to see a fresh perspective introduced into black people's attempts at cultural self-apprehension.

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