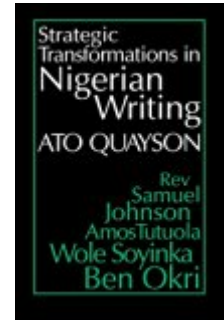


Ato Quayson. *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, and Ben Okri.* Oxford and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. x + 180 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-33343-8.



Reviewed by David Mesher

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The "transformations" of Quayson's title involve the usage of Yoruba traditions, especially religion and folklore, in Nigerian literature written in English. They are transformations because, as one might expect, each of the writers Quayson covers—Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, and Ben Okri—has adapted those traditions for his own purposes, knowingly or not. They are strategic, according to Quayson, because these adaptations are the "deployment of indigenous resources," designed to create a "'will-to-identity' in African literature" generally and Nigerian literature in particular. Quayson's argument, then, is not that we can see a consistent usage of orality in work of these four writers, but that we can see a consistent intent of connecting Nigerian literature to its oral roots.

Because the relationship between orality and literature cannot literally be one of intertextuality, and because "the semiotics of a culture does not always require prior textualization," Quayson proposes the term "interdiscursivity" to describe this feature of Nigerian writing. And he begins with Johnson's eclectic *The History of the*

Yorubas, (completed in 1897 but not published until 1921) because "a focus on imaginative literature alone would impoverish such an analysis by focusing us to see it as a separate activity from a broad regime of culture discourse." But Quayson hedges his bet here by choosing a text that is part history, part invention, part folklore, and part documentation, and by focusing his discussion on the more creative elements of the work. Beginning with Johnson's *History*, according to Quayson, is not just a gesture of "commitment to interdisciplinarity," but also an acknowledgment of "the indispensability of this work for understanding a period of cultural transition in its fullest complexity, just as the traditional boundaries of a 'Yoruba' culture were being formed in the face of wider historical processes that were to integrate it into a larger nation that was to become Nigeria."

More than half a century later, and while Nigerian independence was still more than a decade off, the publication of Amos Tutuola's first two works, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), presents

Quayson with a rather different model of strategic transformation. For, while many critics have attempted to show Tutuola "debts to Yoruba storytelling traditions," Quayson argues that these critics have missed something important: that Tutuola's "art form has no direct parallel" in those traditions. Instead, Quayson sees Tutuola's fiction as cutting across the oral genres on which he draws, an innovative usage emphasized by the non-traditional anti-hero of both those fictions. "In this way, he generates significations that the folktale in oral culture might leave muted or unarticulated because of its totalizing imperative."

Whereas Johnson's history affirmed a traditional "Yoruba consciousness within the new literary mode of production," and Tutuola's fiction "expresses the free play of the artistic imagination on the material available in the culture," Quayson finds that Wole Soyinka not only liberally rewrites Yoruba myth, but does so "in the service of a clearly expressed aesthetic and political ideology." Looking closely at the Noble laureate's recasting of the Ogun myths in general, and at his plays *The Strong Breed* (1964) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) in particular, Quayson argues that Soyinka's writing attempts to bridge the cultural gap between Yoruba traditions and the modern world outside Nigeria and Africa.

The strongest sections of Quayson's study are the two chapters on Ben Okri, the first focused on his short fiction and the second on his Booker-prize winning novel, *The Famished Road* (1991). Okri's biography seems to make Quayson's point that Yoruba orality has come to inform a more general modern Nigerian consciousness, because Okri himself was raised in Urhobo traditions, though Quayson also admits that the many disjunctures in Okri's early life, within Nigeria and between Nigeria and England, may have weakened the writer's cultural allegiances. This helps to explain the centrality of the "abiku," or spirit child, who narrates *The Famished Road*. The "abiku" derives from Yoruba and Ijo traditions,

and is related to the "ogbanje" of the Igbos. But, as Quayson admits, a number of Nigerian writers have used this belief before, though none so extensively as Okri. Quayson suggests that we call such aspects of Okri's fiction not "magical realism" but "animist realism."

Often insightful, Quayson's study also has some serious problems of design and execution. The writing is frequently overwrought, heavy with jargon, and sometimes impenetrable: "Local ethnic boundaries become irrelevant when identity requires definition outside boundaries where the parameters of ethnicity acquired specificity." He plays up biographical details about Okri's moveable childhood and about Tutuola's supposed acquisition of the story on which *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is based, but almost ignores Johnson's Christian biases in selecting and retelling Yoruba oral traditions. Finally, though his readings of the individual writers are often rewarding, and his notion of "interdiscursivity" is very helpful in identifying differences between text-text influences and orality-text ones, Quayson's formal thesis about a "strategic transformation" operating more or less uniquely in Nigerian literature probably creates more questions than it answers. The result is a noticeably flawed but worthwhile study.

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