

**ANCESTOR, BOOK, CHURCH:
HOW NIGERIAN LITERATURE RESPONDS
TO THE MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER**

by

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ABSTRACT

Ancestor, Book, Church reinserts into Nigerian literary history the texts generated by the nineteenth-century Anglican missionary incursion into Yorubaland, in the southwest of today's Nigeria. I demonstrate how these early texts – in Yoruba and in English, written by Europeans and by Africans – and the histories and modes of thought that they reflect can be used as resources for understanding contemporary African literatures. Thus I argue against those who would dismiss the missionary text as absolutely foreign to and the missionary encounter as strictly an interruption of an “authentic” African cultural history.

In much of Nigeria during the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries the first literacy training was provided by missionaries, whose goal in teaching the ABCs was typically to lead indigenous people away from ancestral beliefs, through books, to the church. Yet this ideal linear sequence is inadequate as a description of what was in practice a complex, dialogical process. Sometimes the education and technologies associated with books enabled writers to reconfigure and revivify ancestral beliefs, to incorporate them into a revised form of Christianity, or to turn towards secularity. In all cases, I argue, literature in Nigeria engaged and engages with the legacy of missionary Christianity. I find evidence for this engagement not only in the contextual and thematic dimensions of literary texts but also, and especially, in a mode of signification exemplified by the English missionaries' favourite fictional text, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a translation of which was also the first work of extended fiction to be written in Yorubaland.

Ancestor, Book, Church reads nineteenth-century missionary texts and twentieth-century literary texts together as instances of the ways that Nigerians think and believe. It builds therefore upon research by anthropologists and scholars of religions, which it presents

in the first chapter, and then moves into a literary analysis, informed by postcolonial theory, of the Nigerian writers Samuel Ajayi Crowther, D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, and Wole Soyinka.

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As an extravert, I have always felt that Bunyan's Pilgrim's journey was too solitary, and regretted that he had to leave his friends and family in order to progress towards the Celestial City. Though his journey was his own, however, he depended upon the help of others at every stage, and so have I.

Interactions with my three generous and wise supervisors, Mark Vessey, Laura Moss, and John Barker, have been the most satisfying moments of my pilgrimage, and I thank them. In addition, I have benefited greatly from academic conversation with Andrew F. Walls, Maxine Hancock, Robert Miller, Bettina Stumm, Susan Kennedy Carter, Sarah Banting, and the members of UBC's Postcolonial Research Cluster; and from the gracious editing help of Jeremy Robinson, Christina Rowan, and Karen Giesbrecht. In Nigeria, Profs. Philip Adedotun Ogundeji, Dele Oshitelu, and Femi Osofisan shared their expertise; Prof. F. J. Ade Ajayi shared his library; Dr. Kunle Ajayi shared his home and car; and my dear friends Adeshina Afolayan and Chika Mba shared their knowledge of place and language.

My late Granddad provided the example of what I think is the best kind of academic, and Grandma and Aunt Marg have provided abundant fuel (the Tetley has never run dry!) for the journey. My parents not only got me started but encouraged me and prayed for me at every step, and with love I dedicate this dissertation to them.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The University of Ibadan, which has been regarded as Nigeria's premier research university, was founded in 1947 as Ibadan University College, and in its early years was affiliated to the University of London. More than any other institution in West Africa it has been a greenhouse for the growth of literature – particularly in the years surrounding Nigeria's independence in 1960 from the British (Wren 17). Internationally renowned Nigerian writers Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, Cyprian Ekwensi, Flora Nwapa, Christopher Okigbo, Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, and Wole Soyinka have all studied or taught there. The University also became famous in those years in relation to the development of nationalist African historiography; from UI came key early texts (by Jacob F. Ade Ajayi, Emmanuel A. Ayandele, and K. Onwuka Dike) that demonstrated that Africa had a history apart from European colonialism (Parker and Rathbone 124).

As an important producer of books about Africa, the University of Ibadan boasts a large bookstore, which I looked forward to visiting when I had the opportunity to visit UI in October of 2007. There I found plenty of scientific textbooks (many written by graduates of the university) and several of the novels and plays I was seeking. However, when I arrived at the bookstore, before I reached any of the academic books I encountered a small section

called the Christian Book Corner, located right at the entrance. From what I could gather, the CBC and the UI bookstore are interdependent but not strictly the same company, though the former has been housed in the latter ever since the bookstore opened in 1957. The floor space the CBC occupies is small, perhaps sixteen square meters, and in addition to Yoruba and English bibles and catechisms its shelves carry a wide selection of Christian books by Nigerian authors on topics from financial management to dating, from biblical interpretation to prayer.

The floor plan of the UI Bookstore – which suggests a body of Christian writing that is identifiably distinct from, but still related to, a larger body of scholarly writing – raises the questions that this dissertation poses to the body of texts we know today as Nigerian literature. What is the history of the relationship between Christianity and the earliest writing in Nigeria? What is the history of the distinction between Christian and scholarly writing in Nigeria? As the title of this work implies, in much of Nigeria the first literacy training was provided by missionaries, whose goal in teaching the ABCs was to lead indigenous people away from ancestral beliefs, through books, to the church – the place of salvation and civilization. However, as we will see, rarely was this ideal achieved. Nigerians found ways of reconfiguring what some missionaries imagined as a rigid, linear sequence. In practice, ancestor, book, and church were not like stations along a road through which a pilgrim might pass on his steadfast way towards some ultimate Destination.

Following a broadly chronological outline, the present work is structured around two poles, the texts associated with the nineteenth-century missionary encounter in Nigeria and the texts of twentieth-century Nigerian literature. The study begins with the hypothesis that both bodies of writing *respond* to the missionary encounter. The missionary texts do so more

obviously than the literary texts, though the latter (which, as *literature* – imaginative and stylized writing – are the principal concern of this study) do so in ways more similar to the former than we might have expected. My task will be to clarify the notion of response and to make distinctions within it.

Direct response is easily identified: certain texts in the archive illustrate missionary Christianity, or affirm it, or oppose it. Many responses, however, have less to do with what is said than how it is said: the Christian incursion inaugurated cultural transformations, most obviously by means of the technologies of reading and writing and the production and dissemination of books, that are so basic and far-reaching that they came to condition how communication could take place in Nigeria. Indeed, the literature I analyse here suggests that the two extreme forms of response available to this new religion in Nigeria, ignoring it and being absorbed into it, are not in fact available at all. On formal, thematic, institutional, and social levels, Nigerian literary writing has remained, persistently and ambivalently, in dialogue with missionary Christianity.

*

This opening chapter consists of two main sections that provide a methodological framework and a religious-historical context for the dissertation's literary analysis. Set before these, however, are two autobiographical excerpts that illustrate the historical situations in which writing could respond to missionary Christianity. The first is from the beginning of the period under investigation, when Christianity was a newcomer and Nigerians were just beginning to take up the pen; the second, though an account of events in the mid-twentieth century, was written and published just a few years ago and reflects the concerns of a Nigerian in the contemporary Western academy. The first *writer* has embraced and the

second has rejected Christianity, but both *writings* respond to missionary Christianity in intricate and idiosyncratic ways. Indeed, their historical context is such that they cannot but respond.

The journal of Robert Scott Oyeode can be found among the Church Missionary Society (CMS) archives, located at the University of Birmingham but also available on microfilms produced by Adam Matthew Publications. Oyeode was a Yoruba Christian who was employed as an agent of the CMS. He addresses this 1893 letter to the CMS secretary F. E. Wigram in London, who had evidently requested that African agents provide a short biography or conversion narrative.

Rev and dear Sir

I have a great pleasure in stating to you a brief record of my life, conversion, and desire for the ministry.

I am a native of Ibadan, [and] my father Mr D Kukomi was one of the first converts of Ibadan. After his conversion I was given to the late Rev D. and Mrs Hinderer in the year 1856, and was one of the boarders of those days; [and] under their foster care I had the privilege of a religious training.

My elementary instruction in the day school was under Mr now Rev D. Olubi who was then the schoolmaster.

Great attention was paid to our religious training by Rev D[avid and] Mrs Hinderer of blessed memory [and] by late Mr James Barber.

It went on well with us till the year 18[60] when the late Ijayi war broke out. The roads to the coast were shut, and Mr + Mrs Hinderer could get no supplies, our maintenance became a matter of great difficulty, and they were obliged to send us home to our parents till there would be a favourable circumstance. I went home also for the time being, but was recalled with my companions when the war was over.

In the year 1865, when the Rev D. Hinderer was going home on furlough, we were left in the care of his successor the Rev J. Smith.

2. My first religious impression began about this time. The Rev J. Smith gave me an English copy of Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress with a small English Dictionary to help me to read it to understanding, my knowledge of the English language being very poor. I am glad to say that I went through the book with great benefit to my soul; it first gave me an enlightenment as to what a true christian life is, and from that time I can date my conversion.

On the 7th September 1866. I was sent to the Training Institution at Abeokuta, but about the end of the year at the return of Mr [and] Mrs Hinderer from England, Mr F. L. Akiele and myself were sent for, and we returned home in January 1867.

when Mr [and] Mrs Hinderer took our education into their own hands, till the year 1869.

In the early part of the year I was taken down to Lagos by Mrs Hinderer, and I was put to the Government printing office in order to learn something of printing, so that the small printing press they had then might be put to use. Circumstance however prevented my long stay at Lagos; I had the opportunity of attending the office only 10 times when there was a rumour that the roads to the coast will be blockaded, owing to some misunderstanding between some of the interior chiefs and the Lagos Government. Mrs Hinderer was obliged to send me home. On reaching home, I made attempt at putting up the press, and after great efforts I succeeded [and] we had the use of it in printing a few things.¹

Here is a fairly unexceptional and orthodox conversion narrative, earnest and rational, respectful towards missionaries and appreciative of books. It is similar to, but certainly has more political content than, the Puritan conversion narratives that undergraduates often study in their American Literature survey classes. Like the Puritans' narratives, this late-nineteenth-century narrative could also be placed at the very beginning of a literary history of its nation: Robert Scott Oyeboode was one of the very first of the Yoruba to be literate – either in English or in his mother tongue. The books Oyeboode read and the books he printed were, apart from the few religious books in Arabic owned by the Muslim minority that had been present in parts of Yorubaland for more than a century, among the first books in the region. The press that Oyeboode set up for David and Anna Hinderer (pioneer missionaries, and important subjects of this work's third chapter) was the first printing press in Ibadan. Mr. and Mrs. Hinderer were clearly great admirers of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which David Hinderer translated into Yoruba in 1866; the translation was the first long work of fiction to be written and printed in Yoruba. Though the missionaries apparently urged Oyeboode himself to read the English original, perhaps because they had chosen him for a

¹ The cataloguing system employed for the CMS archives is idiosyncratic. This excerpt from Oyeboode's journals comes from the Church Missionary Society Archive; Section IV: Africa Missions; part 8: Nigeria – Yoruba, 1880-1934; reel 142. The shorthand for this location is G 3 A 2 O 1893. Subsequent references in the present work to the CMS archives will deploy this shorthand. For further explanation of the CMS archives see Keen.

Western-style education, Hinderer's translation was likely one of the first books Oyeode produced on his press; unfortunately, no publication record exists.

In a historical context like Oyeode's, any literary work produced would seem inevitably to respond – and probably, like the Yoruba translation of *Pilgrim's Progress*, to respond supportively – to missionary Christianity. Toyin Falola's 2004 memoir of his childhood, entitled *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, comes from a very different historical context. Falola is a prolific Africanist historian, based at the University of Texas, who grew up in the same city as Oyeode, one hundred years later. His first chapter is a playful and highly stylized account of his birthdate and his name, implicitly revealing the standard formulae – my name is John Doe, and I was born on the _th of _____, 19__ – to be limited and contextual, rather than universal and absolute.

My names embody the unity of time and season. To my maternal grandmother, I am Abiodun, someone born during a major holiday. Anyone could give me a name, and I collected seventeen of them, all now in disuse, a few being activated now and then. [...] [By] my parents, more likely my father than my mother, I was given a major name that referred to the Supreme God, Olorun.

God is not new, but Olorun has a history. When the missionaries came among the Yoruba, with Yoruba agents active in the process, the Bible was translated into the Yoruba language. This was a major challenge, as the translators were searching for equivalences. Some gods were unlucky in the process; they could not enter the Bible since the disciples in the New Testament and the prophets in the Old Testament were human beings with real names that could be converted by merely adding additional letters to make them meaningful. David becomes Dafidi and Solomon becomes Solomoni, easy enough to follow. One god was particularly unlucky, the respected gatekeeper to heaven, the king of the crossroads, Esu, the chief, the rebel was retained in the Bible as Satan. Esu can never mean the biblical Satan—their homelands and power are far different. As Esu got into the Bible and spread with Christianity, the old Esu suffered in the process, with his name soiled and damaged, destroyed for ever. The Supreme Being is luckier than His subordinate officer, Esu. The Yoruba used to call Him Olodumare, and one of His attributes is to define His abode as the sky, Olu Orun, the king who lives in the heaven. With so-called pagans clinging to the use of Olodumare, Olorun creeps into the Bible as the translation for God, no longer the homeless spirit, but now identifiable in the sky. Then, there were no airplanes, so no one could conceive the possibility of reaching Him if only to seek a favor or to check if He had relocated elsewhere.

Thus I am linked to God, the biblical one as well as the Yoruba Being whose abode is the large and reachable sky. Olorun cannot be a full name by itself. Something has to follow, to indicate His bigness, invincibility, immortality, and power. [...]

My name is simple and ambiguous: Oloruntoyin (God is enough to praise). The ambiguity is not in the name itself, but in the motives of the name giver. It is an affirmative statement that does not create opportunities for debate; one can praise God without even believing in His existence.

Falola goes on to take account of the various explanations given to him when he would

inquire about the reason for his name, Oloruntoyin, and he concludes as follows:

One day, when I began to talk and disturb others, creating a nuisance for adults, I was told that the motive for the name was to thank God that I came to the world so as not to cause too much trouble in heaven. One day, I may, but for now I only cause trouble on earth. The very first trouble I caused was to remove Olorun from my name, except when I am forced to fill out forms [...] (26-28)

This excerpt, like the work from which it is taken, suggests that Falola's life and thought have participated in a cultural process of secularization, and a move away from missionary Christianity. Falola concludes this section, which concludes his opening chapter, by truncating his name. Thus he takes intentional action to define himself apart from the literary and religious history associated with missionaries and Bible translation.

Nevertheless, his brief account of what Christian missions and Bible translation have meant for the Yoruba language, which is substantially historically accurate, points to one area in which he continues to stand in the legacy of missionaries and Bible translation. If the words used in his name (and perhaps the other Yoruba words key to his historiography too?) have been so affected by the missionary encounter, can he ever really unlink himself from the God whose name his parents gave to him? If the schools he first attended and the presses that printed the books he first read were established by missionaries, can we ever make historical, literary, or psychological sense of his story apart from the legacy of missionary Christianity? The present study suggests a negative answer, that *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, even in its

author's turning away from the legacy of missionary Christianity, continues to engage with that legacy. What is true of Falola is true, I will argue, of the literary tradition in which he stands, but first I must explain the tools that I think necessary for moving from the concreteness of a text like *Sweeter than Salt* all the way to the abstractness of a tradition, a turning, and a legacy.

Methodology

The present work situates itself in the field of literary history because it is concerned with the historical conditions of the production of literature and with the interconnections among texts that come eventually to constitute a literary tradition. It examines the history of literature in southwestern Nigeria, from the time of the first printed works in the vernacular to the present. It argues that by taking this body of texts as responding to missionary Christianity the observer can locate continuity and development within this particular sequence of texts – and continuity and development are what literary historians seek.

One prominent scholarly treatment of Nigerian literary history is found in Gareth Griffiths' wide-ranging *African Literatures in English: East and West* (2000), which develops a progressivist narrative of African cultural independence that is also a narrative of de-Christianization. Drawing on his vast knowledge of African and particularly Yoruba texts and invoking several writers who will be key to the present work, Griffiths argues that the influence of missionary Christianity is significant in the earliest stages of literary development:

[The] strong interrelationship between Christian education, publishing and the establishing of a national and African discourse in the period needs to be noted. [Samuel] Johnson's ground-breaking work [*The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, 1921], which historians

like [F. J. Ade] Ajayi and literary critics like [Ato] Quayson argue was a crucial part of the process of bringing into being the identity of the modern Yoruba culture, and the later emergence of a discourse of Nigerian nationalism, was published by the same Church Missionary Society to which [Samuel Ajayi] Crowther had delivered his reports a half-century earlier. Nevertheless, the work of Johnson, like that of Crowther, seems to me to be best treated as an enterprise which became *increasingly distinct* from that of the colonial authorities, secular and sacred, whose language and institutions they employed, as the [nineteenth] century wore on. (36-37, italics added)

In response to Griffiths, I would want to offer the clarification that missionaries like the Hinderers ought not necessarily to be lumped in with British colonial authorities (who, at the time Oyeboode was setting up his press and David Hinderer was translating his *Pilgrim's Progress*, had practically no presence in Ibadan). I am, however, in basic agreement with his postulation of a narrative of a progressively clearer *distinction*, which in *African Literatures in English* Griffiths goes on to extend into the twentieth century.

The present work probes beneath the surface of this *distinction* and shows that it is certainly not *disregard*. A survey of key writers – from Crowther, to Johnson, to Soyinka and Falola – suggests that the story of Nigerian literary history is much more complex than a movement from Christian to secular, from acceptance to rejection of missionary Christianity. I imagine this relationship figured in the floor plan of the UI bookstore: the shelves of all the various types of literature can only be reached by passing by the “Christian literature” section, which has become a partially but not fully independent unit; and from all the other parts of the store “Christian literature” remains in view. In other words, though Nigerian literature is increasingly distinct from the Christianity of the missionary movement it continues to respond to it.

The discipline or sub-discipline of literary history developed, through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in association with a national model of culture that expected, and in turn found, literature to articulate the national ethos. A nation's literature

was understood to evolve towards maturity in tandem with the nation itself; and sometimes the literature was regarded as an important sign that the nation had come into its own. One of the first monographs taking this approach to Nigerian literature was *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists, 1952-1966*, published in 1968 by the great Canadian writer Margaret Laurence.²

The present study, on the other hand, though indebted to this disciplinary history, does not take “Nigerian literature” as its field of operations. It does not cast its net so wide, but limits itself to the literature, both in English and in the vernacular, of the Yoruba region, which is today in southwestern Nigeria; a similar study could probably be written for southeastern Nigeria.³ In this case an ethnic rather than a political unit provides the boundaries inside of which the development of a tradition and the evolution of a culture can be investigated. This limiting is justifiable not just for keeping the present work to a manageable size but also because in Yorubaland literature developed in close proximity to religious, political, and educational institutions that, until the mid-twentieth century, took themselves to be more Yoruba than Nigerian. Though I will at times speak about my literary archive as Nigerian rather than as Yoruba literature, I do not mean to suggest that the former is synonymous with or even synecdochic of the latter. The reasons for this equivocation are,

² For helpful critical analysis of the “national model” see Hutcheon. For a clear example of the national model put to use, see Bruce King’s 1970 *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*. My third chapter will consider in depth the question of model in literary history and will engage directly with leading scholarly treatments of Nigeria’s literary history.

³ A study similar to this one would be difficult to write for northern Nigeria, where Muslims are in a majority and where few of Nigeria’s literary writers have come from. But the contrary is true for southeastern Nigeria, where the ethnically Igbo predominate. The Igbo, more Christianized than the Yoruba, have also a higher incidence of literary writers than the Yoruba. “Igbo make up half of [Nigeria’s] novelists, three times their proportion of the population” (Griswold 42). A compelling trajectory could be drawn from Equiano, through Ekwensi, Achebe, and Munonye, all the way to Abani and Adichie. In comparison with the present study, however, because of the smaller amount of historical and anthropological scholarship available, because of a more diffuse and less ethnically identified missionary campaign, and because of a less successful written vernacular, a study on Igbo literature as a response to missionary Christianity would probably have less to say about how missions helped generate early Igbo literary culture.

first, that I mean to refer to literature written not just in the Yoruba but also in the English language; and second, that I am acknowledging (not to say approving) that the texts in question are still often considered by the scholars with whom I am in conversation under the rubric of the national model.

As literary history, the present study looks diachronically at interrelationships among texts, but also at texts' interrelationships with their cultural contexts. In this case, the two overlapping cultural contexts (which Oyeboade and Falola inhabit and describe) are African and colonial. Missionary Christianity is a force that entered Africa from the outside and that helped initiate the massive cultural transformation out of which modern Africa has emerged. To understand Africa and colonial Victorian missions as cultural complexes will require specialized tools, especially given that the vantage point of the present writer and his primary readers are in the twenty-first century Western academy. The work of three cultural anthropologists – Jean and John Comaroff, and J. D. Y. Peel – provides such tools. I introduce them in order to draw out of their work several principles to help me establish lines of influence from the missionary encounter to Nigerian literature.

The Colonial Encounter as Conversational and Cultural

The work of Jean and John Comaroff has focused on the nineteenth and early-twentieth century encounter between African peoples, now known as the Southern Tswana and residing in northern South Africa, and white Westerners (in particular, British Nonconformist missionaries). They take the missionaries to be among the “vanguards of imperialism”⁴ and

⁴ *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, 36. This is the first volume of *Of Revelation and Revolution*, published in 1991. The second, published in 1997, is subtitled *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*. All subsequent references to *Of Revelation and Revolution* will simply be indicated by the volume and page number. Thus this present quote is I.36.

the bold ambition of their most substantial work, the two-volume *Of Revelation and Revolution*, is a historical and anthropological “study of the colonization of consciousness and the consciousness of colonization in South Africa” (I.xi). They take the missionaries as having strived and succeeded thoroughly to transform the “worldview” (I.17) of the Africans, that is, “African personhood and production, African habits and homes, African notions of value and virtue” (II.xvi). Unlike the missionaries (and indeed unlike the present study), *Of Revelation and Revolution* is interested in religion only inasmuch as it contributes to this colonization of consciousness through culture.

For the purposes of the present study, the Comaroffs’ work models how to overcome two difficult questions that stand in the way of our understanding the colonial missionary encounter and its implications for today. The questions and the way *Of Revelation and Revolution* overcomes them are as relevant to West as to South Africa. First, how can we go beyond the caricature of colonialism as monolithic mastery, and grasp a complex and textured understanding of the self-contradictory, dialectical and inconclusive character of the colonial encounter, which transforms and forms both colonized and colonizer? Second, how can we go beyond the great events of politics and the great proclamations by colonized and colonizing spokespersons, and grasp the encounter’s powerful and lasting impact upon the assumptions and activities of everyday life – that is, upon the broad domain of culture? The present study follows the cultural anthropological model set forth in *Of Revelation and Revolution* by taking colonialism as conversation and as culture. I will develop these principles after briefly explaining what I take to be the most outstanding contributions of this anthropological work to its own field.

In the Comaroffs' account, the nonconformist missionaries and their overseas directors and supporters sometimes emphasized religious change ("conversion" or "evangelism") as their overriding objective, but they often spoke, and they usually acted, as though the transformation of economic, social, psychological, and political characteristics of the Tswana was as important. They had firm opinions, for instance, on the abolition of traditional circumcision rites, on the replacement of nomadic cattle herding by plough cultivation and sedentary communities. They wanted the Tswana (especially the women) to wear European garments of cotton and linen, to use plenty of soap, and ultimately to constitute "an expansive civil society built not upon savage barter but upon transactions among self-possessed, moneyed persons" (II.171).

Sometimes the missionaries made sense of this incongruity between their missionary designation and their broader practices by conceptualizing their work as two-pronged, Christianization (which was more important) and civilization. The central assertion of *Of Revelation and Revolution*, which has become the consensus among scholars (Landau, "Hegemony and History" 501) is that the activities the missionaries assigned to the latter category have made a much greater difference in the lives of the Tswana. "Ironically," wrote the Comaroffs in an earlier article, "the evangelist failed where he hoped most to succeed—in creating a unified black Protestant church in a South Africa built on Christian principles—yet succeeded where his actions were least tangible," namely, "in restructuring the native conceptual universe," which "laid the ground for its integration into the industrial capitalist world" ("Christianity and Colonialism" 2). This explains why *Of Revelation and Revolution* focuses on "everyday life" rather than theology or politics: "The colonial encounter—whatever its higher motives, wherever lay its politics of grandeur—was first and foremost an

epic of the ordinary” (II.35). *Of Revelation and Revolution*, informed by Bourdieu, Certeau, Foucault, and Gramsci, wrestles with the way that more important acts of domination and resistance take place in the domain of the everyday – in spheres including the ritualistic, the domestic, and the commercial, the commonplace and the commonsense – than in politics and wars. More important struggles take place over the meaning of symbols and over aesthetic or poetic conventions than through specific acts or realist narratives (I.34).

The story told in *Revelation* is an instance of the narrative of colonial domination, but that is not all. What happened in colonial southern Africa, in spite of the economic and military advantage of the colonizer, is more like a conversation than a takeover. The authors’ use of the term “long conversation” to designate the encounter between the two parties, though not central to the structuring of their account, is now well-known, and is one of their best-known contributions to the field.⁵ The term, which is designed to include verbal as well as nonverbal communicative acts (II.428), suggests that the effects of colonization were not settled in advance and were not context-independent. Colonization happened interactively, and its participants were interdependent, because the thoughts and actions of each were designed as responses to the other, and designed to elicit particular responses from the other.

If, as *Revelation and Revolution* contends, the colonial encounter is a long conversation, then when we look at Christianity and at literature in Nigeria it will not be adequate to view either in simple terms as elements, ideologies, or tools by which colonizer dominates colonized. We must find a lens more nuanced than the Manichean binary,⁶ which, though it names a dominant form of colonialist logic, obscures much of the hybridity and

⁵ Ngwane “The Long Conversation.” More generally, for a sympathetic and careful review of *Of Revelation and Revolution*, see Paul Landau “Hegemony and History in Jean and John L. Comaroff’s *Of Revelation and Revolution*.”

⁶ This term, a generative one in postcolonial studies, harkens back to Abdul JanMohamed’s 1983 *Manichean Allegories* and to the critical responses it generated.

ambivalence that came into being on the ground. Domination did indeed take place (above all, as the Comaroffs repeatedly stress, the domination of the forms in which dialogue and exchange could take place), but *Revelation and Revolution* devotes plenty of attention as well to the forms of the Tswanas' discourse that evaded the Europeans. A colonial order does exist, but it is governed by no one and perfectly expressed nowhere, not even by the words or deeds of the European missionaries.

If we want to understand how the long conversation of colonialism affected the living and thinking of Africans we need to consider specific historical detail and acknowledge the ambiguous relationships between the actual historical figures, many of whom seem to stand on both sides of the colonial fence at once. We need to find the ways that each side fed off the other, that resistance was camouflaged in the midst of domination. We falsify, however, when we oversimplify, when we take either Christianity or literature as elements, ideologies, or tools by which colonizer dominates colonized or alternatively which colonized appropriates or translates to resist colonizer. Power finds expression through them, contingently, but not predictably or one-sidedly.⁷ *Olorun* is both Christian and Yoruba.

⁷ Here I am gesturing towards the distinction I see between first-wave and second-wave postcolonial theory, the first in the vein of Said and the second in the vein of Bhabha. Whereas the leading figures in the first wave, such as Said, Abdul JanMohamed, and Helen Tiffin, are literary critics who primarily relate texts to other texts, the leading figures in the second wave, such as Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Achille Mbembe, work in an interdisciplinary mode and practise a more materialist form of criticism. (The distinction between the two waves is developed in Graham Huggan, *Interdisciplinary Measures*, p. 10). Whereas the first identifies subtle but aggressive acts of colonial domination, the second discovers even these acts to be fragmented, ambiguous, or hybridized. Colonial domination, from the latter perspective, is still a problem – an ongoing problem – but to ignore the conscious and subconscious ways that domination is subverted by the colonized is further to disempower them. In the way I see both literature and Christianity in Africa I reject a first-wave interpretation that focuses on them as instruments of domination.

I situate the Comaroffs between the two waves. Their first volume (1991) precedes the crest of second-wave postcolonialism, and operates with a model that is in spirit perhaps closer to the Manichean binary than my own. To be more specific, the Comaroffs' tendency is to assume that any unfettered, unconstrained action by the Tswana people is bound to be resistance. Essentially, my concern is that they are wedded to the "resistance/domination paradigm," which, in the words of literary critic Adéléké Adéèkò, tends to foreclose "the appreciation of works that do not privilege standard oppositional tropes in their evaluation of Africa's contacts with the rest of the world" (2). This concern is precisely the concern Paul Landau has with *Of Revelation and Revolution* (Landau, "Hegemony and History" 515).

Oyebode's press, in its causes as in its consequences, is both domination and resistance. Informed by the Comaroffs, this denial of one-sidedness no longer figures as the end of the story; it is the beginning, and indeed the next chapter of the story told in the present study will centre on the hybrid individual who most famously brought together Olorun and the printing press, Samuel Ajayi Crowther.

The second understanding that the present study takes from *Of Revelation and Revolution* is that colonialism's force in the field of culture is greater upon forms than upon content. The colonial encounter was a "long conversation," but the voices of the various speakers were not necessarily equally free, or equally efficacious, because the colonizer generally controlled the form and style and language in which the interlocutors could speak and be acknowledged. In assessing the consequences of colonialism, the Comaroffs argue that medium was more powerful than message (cf. I.224).

What they mean by form is not only the forms used in written or oral communication but also spatial forms, forms of knowledge and argument, forms of social organization and visual, artistic representation (e.g. I.199). In any meaningful act, the form chosen – a sermon, a newspaper editorial, an appeal made to a chief – is rarely explicitly prescribed, but nonetheless constrains what can be said. As the Comaroffs state in the methodological introduction to *Of Revelation and Revolution I*, form is to content as hegemony is to ideology (I.29), which explains the centrality of "hegemony" in their methodology. The hegemony associated with colonialism is mute, non-agentive, tacitly assumed and thus nearly impossible to contest directly. Hegemony is, or seems to be, the way things must be. Once structures of domination can be identified and articulated, and thus contested, they are well on their way from hegemony to ideology, and thus they are less powerful, less dangerous.

For this reason, the Comaroffs in *Of Revelation and Revolution* are most interested in the assumptions made, and in the changes over time in what the various actors in the colonial encounter could take for granted.

The Comaroffs in *Of Revelation and Revolution* say little about specifically literary form. Writing is associated with the “content” rather than the “form” side of their structuring binary. It is the transmission of propositions, almost exclusively deployed by the colonizer or his allies, the mission’s “native agents,” and not an important place to search for the agency of the colonized. Publishing their first volume in 1991, when Anglo-American deconstructionism was a dominant academic force, they express their worry that a focus on texts can tend towards a denial that social and cultural reality is anything other than a smokescreen of signifiers requiring, but never guaranteeing, interpretation (I.14). They associate the missionaries with a lifeless, univocal textuality that severs word from world (I.229) and that is odd and unnecessary from the perspective of the Tswana, who were not only without literacy but also without indigenous dramatic or epic storytelling traditions (II.46). Most of the textual archive relating to their historical period is produced by Europeans.⁸ Most of the exceptions are produced by the “self-conscious, literate elite” (I.35, cf. II.46) who have already been shaped significantly by the Europeans, and who thus do not best represent an indigenous consciousness. *Of Revelation and Revolution* argues that when “mission-educated black intellectuals” undertook to “build a new literary canon” their work was impotent and rather uninteresting because they had

internalized the lessons of linguistic colonialism and the bourgeois ideology that lay silently behind it, concealed in such genres as narrative history and individual biography, such precepts as oral universalism and semantic transparency. (I.224)

⁸ The situation is slightly different for nineteenth-century Yorubaland where, as the next chapter will show, extant writings by Africans are numerous because many Yoruba worked for the Church Missionary Society, which asked its “native agents” to keep journals.

But does writing really have such power to damage a pure indigenous consciousness – and on what grounds, anyhow, can this kind of purity be demanded? Is it possible that there are more continuities between the works in this “new literary canon” and indigenous Tswana forms of meaning-making than the Comaroffs’ study identifies? The present study argues that for the Yoruba there are many such continuities, and in contrast to *Of Revelation and Revolution* finds writing and written forms to be fascinating and fruitful sites of contention and invention. The present study also finds more of interest than does *Of Revelation and Revolution* in the study of the religious elements of the colonial encounter.

The Colonial Encounter as Religious

The framework of Jean and John Comaroff’s work assumes the “colonial encounter” is a phase in the global, but nonetheless Eurocentric, spread of modern, industrial capitalism (e.g. I.15). Religion is interesting inasmuch as it contributes to that encounter, which explains why *Of Revelation and Revolution* finally has little to say on religion. Religion’s participation in other encounters historically distinct from modern European colonialism or its pursuit of purposes extrinsic to modern European colonialism are left out (e.g. I.11).⁹ Christianity matters only when it contributes to the conversation in which consciousness is colonized through culture. This restriction is deliberate and practicable. However, given that in Africa today, Africanized Christianity (a phenomenon the Comaroffs themselves acknowledge [II.48]) seems to have far exceeded the constraints and the expectations of missionary Christianity, studying Christianization as an aspect of colonization means that much about

⁹ For more on this omission see Robbins 8 and Landau “Hegemony and History,” 504. Landau’s 1995 *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* is an example of a historical anthropological study with a subject that is very close to the Comaroffs’ but that is attuned to aspects of religion that do not fit into a colonial framework.

Christianization will be overlooked – in particular, the innumerable African forms of Christianity that deviate (culturally, administratively, theologically, or politically) from what the missionaries intended.

In the Comaroffs' anthropological model, Christianity registers principally as a site for colonial domination and indigenous resistance. As I have explained, this model does not take colonial discourse as flat or univocal; neither does it suppose that Christianity or religion flatly or univocally contribute to either side of the colonial encounter. Nonetheless, it does have trouble seeing aspects of Christianity – and religion in general – that are neither colonial nor anticolonial but noncolonial. In this sense it is less helpful than the anthropologist J. D. Y. Peel's *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (2000), which is the second anthropological guide for the present study. His work is as eloquent, lucid, and wide-ranging as the Comaroffs', and though perhaps less influential in anthropological circles it is closer than theirs to my work, both in matter and in manner.

Religious Encounter is primarily a study of what the Church Missionary Society Archives can show about the development in Yorubaland, between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, of three things: Christianity, ethnic nationalism, and a class of educated leaders. For African historiography, the CMS archives are a rich and rare resource, since a large portion of them are journals and letters by African agents of the CMS, such as R. S. Oyeboade, rather than by white missionaries.¹⁰ Therefore even if the Comaroffs were seeking textual sites of the indigenous agency of the Southern Tswana they would have far less opportunity to do so than Peel has with the Yoruba. These journals he deems “a literary

¹⁰ *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* 23. All subsequent citations from Peel will be taken from this source unless otherwise noted.

accomplishment” (10) and they are accordingly granted careful attention as sites of a real, hybrid originality, not just as echoes of missionary Christianity or Yoruba tradition.

Overall, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* is less about the transmission of Christianity – in fact not many Yoruba became Christians in the period in question – than about how Christianity changed shape when Yoruba agents took ownership of it and when it was articulated using Yoruba culture and language (25). But as its title suggests *Religious Encounter* is certainly about religion, and Peel’s method, unlike the Comaroffs’, assumes throughout that religion can be differentiated sufficiently from other dimensions of human experience and history to be analyzed meaningfully. A specific corollary of this premise guides the present study: that the religious and Christian dimension of Nigerian writing, from the nineteenth century right up to the present, can be identified and discussed.

Peel effectively accuses *Of Revelation and Revolution* of overlooking religion. In his quite critical review of the first volume, he says it “evade[s] the difficult, but cardinal, issue of just what sense the Tswana did make of religious teaching they received from the missions” (“The Colonization of Consciousness” 329). In *Religious Encounter*, where disapproval of the Comaroffs’ work is evidenced more by silence than direct critique, Peel does take the time to comment that

Whatever else one wants to say about the social impact of Christian missions in Africa—and there is a great deal to be said, as the Comaroffs show at great length—the story will be radically incomplete if its effects are not adequately tied into the religious project which brought the missionaries in the first place. (4)

Thus he justifies his own work’s focus on “religious encounter.” He would deny that religion is superstructure in the Marxist sense; his book traces how religious change sometimes actually generates change in other spheres – economic, political, social. The problem with *Of*

Revelation and Revolution is that by focusing on the wide-ranging effects of the missionaries' "non-religious" activities (agriculture, commerce, domestic norms, etc.) it overlooks how the religion of both parties was changed; and by focusing on what emerged out of the colonial encounter it overlooks how this particular encounter is *also* an episode in other histories, for instance the long histories of the Christian and the Yoruba religions. Religion, as *Religious Encounter* sees it, may overlap with colonialism, but it is not contained in colonialism: "though the links between Christian mission and 'civilization' were extremely powerful and consequential, they were historically contingent and subject to strains" (5).¹¹ In this sense Peel moves further from the Manichean binary than do the Comaroffs.

What does Peel mean by religion, though? What does anyone mean by religion? The disagreement I have signaled recalls a longstanding debate across the human sciences about the status of "religion" as an analytical category. Is it just a muddled way of talking about socio-cultural and psychological phenomena?¹² Those who prefer to absorb it into the social

¹¹ Of course there is a mass of literature on this debate, the terms of which were provided in the third quarter of the nineteenth century by David Livingstone, in his stunningly effective international missions promotions. The strongest contemporary view on the equivalency between Christian missions and colonial "civilization" is Vincent Y. Mudimbe, who says the typical missionary

devoted himself sincerely to the ideals of colonialism: the expansion of Civilization, the dissemination of Christianity, and the advance of Progress. Obviously, the missionary's objectives had to be co-extensive with his country's political and cultural perspectives on colonization, as well as with the Christian view of his mission. With equal enthusiasm, he served as an agent of a political empire, a representative of a civilization, and an envoy of God. There is no essential contradiction between these roles (47).

The Comaroffs' and Peel's precise historical work calls into serious question Mudimbe's interpretation of missionaries as perfect, unambiguous representations of colonial nationalism. For a look into the debate, see Etherington "Missions and Empire," Stanley *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire*, and Sugirtharajah *The Bible and Empire*.

¹² We could ask, in turn, whether these are just conventional but, in view of recent scientific discoveries that show physicalism to be the best way of understanding life, muddled ways of talking about physical (neurological) phenomena. See Slingerland, who argues that meaning and belief are not as real as the phenomena studied in the natural sciences, but that human beings seem to have an innate proclivity to focus on, and take comfort in, such higher level explanations. Physicalism identifies these as illusory, but humanities scholars should not be afraid of accepting this judgement while arguing back that they are nonetheless

or the cultural, including the Comaroffs, continue to react against a view, often traced back to Schleiermacher, that protects religion from critical scrutiny and from the analytical tools of the human sciences, by making it wholly (holy?) personal, and thus subjective. They also fear, with some justification, that “religion” is a historically contingent category that comes with a set of assumptions inseparable from the European Enlightenment and from modern European colonialism.¹³ Talal Asad is a strong, contemporary critic of the use of religion as an analytical category in anthropology; his position, which he defines in opposition to the influential anthropology of religion provided by Clifford Geertz, is very close to the Comaroffs’. As Asad explains in his 1993 essay “Religion as an Anthropological Category” (reprinted in *Genealogies of Religion*), the “entire phenomenon” of religion

is to be seen in large measure in the context of Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations, even if that was a state never fully attained. My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes. (29)

It follows that studies of the Christian-colonial missionary encounter that analyze “religion” are in danger of attempting this same coherence and therefore of being unwitting allies of ongoing colonial domination.

important. The implication here is that even if physicalism is true, religion is no less valid as an analytical category, no less worthy of study.

¹³ This postcolonial and postmodern critique of “religious studies” is espoused by Richard King: “despite appeals to its apparently non-confessional and non-theological orientation,” it continues to be dogged by “Western (Judaean-Christian/secular) paradigms of what ‘religion’ is” (210). For an acknowledgement of this historical linkage coupled with a hope for a renovated and less biased discipline of religious studies see Willi Braun’s overview of the state of religious studies. Braun explains how most scholars today understand the history of the discipline: “The critical study of religion—a creation of European cultures—historically developed simultaneously as a negative process of disaffiliation from Christian theology and as a positive process of affiliation with the values of scientific rationality associated with the European Enlightenment” (7). Gregory D. Alles lays out the debate on how contaminated “religion” continues to be by modernity and/or colonialism (8761).

Though “religion” is clearly not *sui generis* but rather an intellectual construct with a specific, contingent history (Smith 280), I argue that it is a useful term for literary, as well as anthropological, study. In a moment, I will draw on Peel’s work to argue that “religion” is particularly useful for the study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Yorubaland. We do not need a universal definition of religion in order to use it to define loosely a set of phenomena, practices, events, objects, and hopes that characterize particular groups, and then to make comparisons among those groups. To be a helpful category, religion does not need to be given an academic monopoly over particular phenomena, to be taken as a fixed territory to be defended by its specialists. The majority of these phenomena can equally be subsumed under other frames, like ideology, knowledge, or discourse (Riesebrodt “Religion in Global Perspective,” 98). However, even if modern religious scholarship, making use of European languages and of the term “religion” and its cognates, is limited by its own history, this does not imply that analogous systems for conceptualizing sameness and difference have not been formulated at other times and in other places. Martin Riesebrodt draws attention to the Indian court under Ashoka (third century BCE) and the Chinese court in the first millennium CE as situations in which leaders grouped as members of a single class “religions” we know today, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Daoism (“‘Religion,’ Just Another Modern Western Construction?” 16).

Religion is a helpful subcategory of culture in the present work even though it is neither trans-historical nor objectively delineable, because it corresponds to distinctions freely made (rather than imposed by foreigners) by many of the Nigerian characters in the story of Nigerian literature’s development. Riesebrodt’s defence of “religion” against the charge of colonial complicity could find plenty of support in Yorubaland. Wole Soyinka,

today's best-known Yoruba writer, frequently makes use of the category of religion for explicitly postcolonial and non-Christian purposes by condemning the way that the "world religions" have, by their dogmatism and intolerance, upset the harmonious balance that has long existed among the various belief systems in Yorubaland. He characteristically proceeds to recommend the Yoruba religion (he sometimes calls it "Yoruba religious culture") as an antidote to violence and fanaticism.¹⁴

As Yoruba writers including Soyinka tirelessly argue, before the first European missionary arrived the Yoruba were well acquainted with diversity in beliefs about who, what, where, when, and how to worship. They have as a rule been particularly accommodating of diversity in belief and practice.¹⁵ Muslim communities were well established in the north of Yorubaland by the eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, Usmanu dan Fodio's jihad created a caliphate with its capital at Ilorin, in the far north of Yorubaland. Subsequently the Fulani preacher named Salih (called also Alimi, "the learned") traveled during the 1810s through the region of Ilorin and was the key figure in Islam's spread in the early years after the jihad (Morton-Williams 12; Ryan 116). But throughout most of Yorubaland, Islam arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without jihad, with a thoroughgoing spirit of accommodation to local laws and beliefs (Falola *Violence in Nigeria* 27). In southern Yorubaland, Islam was making its appearance at about

¹⁴ See Soyinka's *Credo of Being and Nothingness*, *Climate of Fear*, and, for the clearest statement, "The Tolerant Gods." The latter is his contribution to a recent collection edited by Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey entitled *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion*. This collection's editors advance the notion that because of its influence in the Americas as well as in Africa "Yorùbá religious culture" (note the careful avoidance of the plain term "religion," perhaps because the former is too narrow, other-worldly, or dogmatic) should, "like Christianity [...] now be considered a world religion" (3). Of course nobody would say that the Yoruba traditions Oyeboade practised prior to his conversion should be considered as a "world religion." This is a twentieth century development. Christianity's influence upon "Yoruba religious culture" deserves some responsibility for this development, as do global population movements, high-profile devotees such as Soyinka, and careful academic study.

¹⁵ On Soyinka see Jeyifo, "Introduction" xxix. See also Peel 8, Ryan 124, Adesanmi.

the same time as Christianity, and to the chagrin of most of the Christian and many of the Muslim preachers the two religions were often taken by the Yoruba as two similar paths towards God and a new religious identity (Peel 205). Perceptions of the new also forced new perceptions of the old: because of its extended, competitive but generally peaceful, contact with the two monotheisms, devotees of Yoruba gods began imagining themselves as possessors of a *religion* and, as consequence, rationalizing and systematizing their practices.¹⁶

In the Yoruba world prior to the arrival of Christianity and Islam it makes little sense to talk about religion as a separate sphere of life (Peel 89), but by late nineteenth century, when large numbers of Yoruba had converted to the “world religions,” it made sense to identify a person according to his or her religion, in addition to other cultural identifiers (ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and so on). The Yoruba term for religion, *ẹsin*, proved to be necessary for making sense not just of the distinction between traditional ways and the new religion of Christianity, but also Islam. By the twentieth century, Yoruba religion was also frequently understood as *ẹsin*. This is certainly how the missionaries and most of the Yoruba CMS agents commonly saw it, for they aimed to convert the people *from* their former religion and *to* Christianity.

As evidence of the triad of options that came to exist in the minds of many Yoruba by the end of the nineteenth century, Peel’s *Religious Encounter* reproduces the following sketch by the Yoruba Christian physician Samuel Crowther Jr. (son of the famous bishop and Bible translator) that characterizes the triad, giving, of course, implicit approval only to the third. Compared with the representative “heathen” whose prostration before a large

¹⁶ These are the processes Riesebrodt associates with the process by which a system of beliefs becomes a religion (“‘Religion,’ Just Another Modern Western Construction?” 8, 16).

monument suggests sensuality, and with the representative “Mahomedan” whose dress and outside location suggest a lack of discipline, the sketch of “Christianity” seems intended to evoke an austere civility: a group of worshipers stand together, heads bowed, before a table on which are placed two books, in a well-built thatched hut.



Figure 1. Pro-Christian cartoon of the three prominent religions among the Yoruba, by Samuel Crowther, Jr. (Peel 89).

Another example comes from the journal of James White, a Yoruba man employed as an agent of the CMS. The following description captures White’s perception of the religious options available in 1870 in a southern Yoruba town, Ota. In promoting what he took to be the Christian interpretation of a fire that had just demolished Ota, White

made sure to remind the chiefs of the sacrifices made only a few months earlier to the Ale (a local god) and to Sango [the Yoruba high god associated with lightning], consisting of three cowries and a half-burnt piece of wood for every person. The “heathens” said the fire was due to the neglect of some other god. Others said it was a judgment by the gods of a robbery by one Odunlami, at whose house it had started. The Muslims said it was due to the chiefs having failed to give them a black bullock to offer prayers against fire, when they had predicted it. The Christians said it was God’s punishment of Ota for its unbelief and hardness of heart. On 19 March, the King sent round to collect contributions for another sacrifice—to an undisclosed power. (Peel 99)

To the parties involved in this scenario, “religious” decisions and affiliations were crucial, and were presumably decisive in determining subsequent action – perhaps even violent

action. Through incidents like this one, during the course of the colonial encounter, Africans and foreign missionaries developed increasingly clear and comprehensive categories corresponding to the interpretative options identified by White. The present study finds reason to follow the example of Peel's work in arguing that a focus on "religion," as an identifiable field of culture, is particularly effective at illuminating certain aspects of and certain incidents in the colonial encounter in Africa – and even more particularly effective in the tri-religious context of Yorubaland.

To review the foregoing methodological discussion: in its analysis of texts originating in Yorubaland between 1850 and 2000 the present work identifies itself as literary history, but unlike much literary history focuses on the relationship of these texts to a religious movement rather than a (colonizing or postcolonial) nation. This study follows the cultural anthropological model of J. D. Y. Peel in taking religion – and in particular religion in Yorubaland – as an important field of culture with comparative, cross-cultural validity. It also follows the cultural anthropological model of Jean and John Comaroff in viewing colonialism as a decentred and conversational process the results of which upset (and exceed) its participants' expectations; and in contextualizing missionary Christianity within a complex web of cultural forces in which the impact of the colonial encounter is better measured in everyday cultural forms and assumptions than in the explicit ideological content advanced by politics and preaching.

Literature in Yorubaland responded and continues to respond to the trio of religions that dominate among the Yoruba. Even though the literature seems to feel a stronger need to respond to Christianity than the other two religions – recalling how the UI Bookstore grants more of its floor space to Christian books – this is not to say that the literature is silent about

Yoruba religion and Islam. Both had significant influence over the form writing would take in Yorubaland, and furthermore, the form Christianity took in Yorubaland was itself in part a response to Yoruba traditional religion and Yoruba Islam. For example, *alufa*, the word chosen by Crowther to designate in the Yoruba language a Christian clergyman (and still used) was borrowed from Yoruba Islam (Peel 195). For an example more relevant to the rise of literature, James White wrote to his superiors in 1855 that when he preached the importance of the Bible he had to insist to his unconverted listeners that, “Book is not an Oriṣa [Yoruba deity] as many suppose, nor do we worship it as a god” (P. McKenzie 357). Before exploring the earliest of the written responses to Christianity in Yorubaland it is therefore necessary to say a little about the other two religious options.

Religious-Historical Contexts

Yoruba Religion and Yoruba Literature

Because of assumptions originating outside Yoruba culture and religion, until recently most of the scholarship on Yoruba religion (which is classified as an African Traditional Religion) centred on questions geared towards what Christians call the doctrine of God: who is Ọlorun, and how can he be known, and how does he relate to the host of oriṣa? Often the preoccupation is determining whether he is compatible with the Christian or the Muslim God. Bolaji Idowu (1913-1993), religions scholar and first Patriarch of the Nigerian Methodist Church, is prime example: his 1962 *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* sets out to prove that Yoruba religion is not essentially polytheistic and that oriṣa devotion was originally intended as an aspect of devotion to Olodumare, the God of the universe, but has degenerated to the point where it seems to be an end in itself (58). Idowu’s Christianized version of “original”

Yoruba religion cannot ultimately be proven, however; actual Yoruba religion, having neither Mecca nor Bible, is rooted in local conditions and tends towards a relativism that expects different people and communities to make use of different religious practices. As such it is more about the innumerable *oriṣa* (or *orisha* – deities associated with particular places, activities, or histories) than the high-god *Olodumare*. It is more about the manifold religious societies and shrines than the ancient city of Ilé-Ifè, the central site in its ethnic and spiritual geographies. This decentred quality of Yoruba religion was, according to Yoruba historians, particularly strong in the nineteenth century.

A helpful way of defining “Yoruba religion” is as a complex system of beliefs and practices directed towards securing what the Yoruba call *àláfíà* or *alafia*. *Alafia* broadly means well-being, and unlike the English term “salvation” almost never refers to the kind of future or “spiritual” well-being that Christians associate with heaven. The Yoruba seek *alafia* in a world that is charged with unseen powers that are able to determine what happens in the human and the natural world. Accordingly, Yoruba religious practices focus on securing, through prayers and offerings, dances and songs, keeping rules and making sacrifices, the help of these unseen powers.

God himself (Yoruba *Olodumare*) does not command the centre of Yoruba religion in the same way that he does in the Abrahamic religions. More attention is given to ancestors and *oriṣa* than to *Olodumare*, though the distinctions between these three categories are far from absolute (Peel 96). The ancestors are viewed to be more alive and more powerful in death than they were in life, which partly explains why the Yoruba pay so much respect to their elderly. (The aggressive and frightening masked dancers called *egungun*, who feature in many works of modern Nigerian literature, represent the ancestors of a clan.) The *oriṣa* are

numerous, and each is served by a group of devotees who are responsible to secure on behalf of the community the benefits of the oriṣa's favour. They range in status from the creator Oriṣà-nlá (Oduduwa), the deity of divination Ọrunmìlà (also called Ifá), Ogun, Sàngó, and Èṣù – all known and worshipped throughout nineteenth-century Yorubaland – to deities known only by a few, associated with particular features of the natural world or with a particular clan.

Before *and* after the arrival of Christianity and Islam, the everyday lives of most Yoruba women and men were geared towards the pursuit of *alafia* by securing the goodwill of the oriṣa and the ancestors. They sought to determine the will of the gods by Ifa divination, and they honoured and remembered the ancestors by means of the sacred egungun dances. In the various Yoruba localities religious practices varied widely, and indeed certain oriṣa were considered patrons of certain villages. Nonetheless, throughout Yorubaland these four Yoruba concepts, *alafia*, *oriṣa*, *Ifa*, and *egungun*, which from a contemporary religious-studies perspective we can regard as religious concepts, seem to have been regarded as central. In the present study, despite its focus on Christianity, these four terms will frequently reappear and will serve to recall that indigenous, non-Christian African beliefs and practices persisted even in populations, institutions, and texts that were heavily marked by Christianization: “the history of African conversions to Christianity has demonstrated time and again [that] the old order [i.e., African indigenous religions] persists in the new” (K. Olabimtan 332). Each chapter of this dissertation will provide examples of how the apparently objective and decisive label “conversion” is, from an anthropological as well as from a literary perspective, actually exceedingly complex and fraught with ambiguities.

Although they were not concerned with books, Yoruba religious beliefs conditioned how individuals thought about words and, once it arrived, writing. The Yoruba were accustomed to sacred objects that aided in securing help from the *oriṣa* and in fending off evil forces. Written texts naturally came to be imagined as such objects. The physician Samuel Ajayi Crowther Jr. writes in his journal from 1852 how he affixed to his patients' medicine bottles explanations printed in Yoruba; but if the label fell off the patient, convinced that the medicine's efficacy required the written text, quickly returned for a new one (C A2/O32/55). In 1907 in Ekiti, eastern Yorubaland, persecuted but defiant Christian converts tried to intimidate their foes by marching around the town waving sticks to which were tied copies of *Iwe ABD*, the Yoruba language primer that the elder Crowther had translated.¹⁷ These two examples illustrate how important were pre- or non-Christian ideas in the process of cultural transformation out of which would eventually emerge Nigerian literature. Obviously an individual's decision to convert does not immediately usher her or him into the Christian and "civilized" understanding of textuality that was promoted by missionaries and by their agents such as Crowther, Jr. Both examples above suggest a notion of writing as a means of securing power over real-world troubles that is in accordance with Yoruba religion as summarized above.

According to Peter McKenzie's 1994 study of nineteenth century Yoruba religion, *Hail Orisha!*, which draws from the first-hand reports collected in the CMS archive, the Yoruba religion was like Christianity and Islam a religion of the word (300), not to say of the book. McKenzie has in mind the elaborate, sacred praise formulas (*oriki*) used for acknowledging leaders and gods; the fables and proverbs passed down carefully as moral and

¹⁷ This story is given on a website called "Usi-Ekiti Home Page" that covers the history of a town in Ekiti State. Because of a personnel change among the research staff of this website (personal communication with Lateef Bakare, www.ekiti.com webmaster), I am unable to locate the source from which the story was originally taken.

religious instruction; and most importantly the immense corpus of verses, tied together by narratives, memorized by priests and drawn from in Ifa divination, which is among scholars today the best-known Yoruba religious practice.

The important implication of McKenzie's point is that though Yoruba religion is oral it does not therefore use words imprecisely or uncritically or peripherally. It is capable of influencing how literature is written and how it is read, not just literature's content. The gap between an oral and a literate religion – or for that matter an oral and a literate culture – is not as vast as some have thought. Karin Barber, who knows as much about the development of Yoruba-language literature as anyone, describes how Yoruba-language writing developed in the twentieth century:

Unlike in many African contexts, there was no sharp divide between a domain of orality, indigenous language and the traditional past on the one hand, and literacy, English, and modernity on the other. Rather, there was a continuous circulation and appropriation of materials and modes of transmission. ("Literature in Yoruba" 374)¹⁸

Furthermore, recent scholarship suggests that classifying a society, or a society's religion, according to whether it focuses on writing or not reveals little about the society's sophistication. Reacting against the technological determinism of earlier anthropological models that divide the world into oral and literate societies, as though the practice of writing inevitably provided a certain way of thinking, scholarship since the 1970s on orality and literacy has tended to emphasize the very continuity that Barber refers to. Quantitative but rarely qualitative changes are generated in a society when writing is introduced. What the "Great Divide theories" (Finnegan 13) of an earlier generation of scholars identified as traits of an "oral society" can in fact persist even once writing is widely introduced. Likewise, the

¹⁸ This continuous circulation is explored in depth in Ato Quayson's *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, which I will discuss in the third chapter. For a listing of traditional Yoruba oral literary forms see Atanda.

stable notion of truth, the consciousness of historical development, and the stylized, figurative mode of language that a previous generation of scholars associated with writing (Goody and Watt, Ong) have more recently been identified in some “oral societies” (Finnegan, Goody).

All this implies that Yoruba religion’s lack of written texts cannot rule it out, in a new age of increasingly prominent literacy, as a generator or an influencer of literature. Recent scholars looking for specific evidence of this role often emphasize the practice of Ifa divination, which is perhaps the defining element in the Yoruba religious system.¹⁹ In Ifa divination, the petitioner visits a *babalawo* (priest of Ifa), and asks his or her question. After the petitioner has paid the appropriate fee, the *babalawo* prays and proceeds to read the divine message by interpreting the configuration of palm nuts on the divination tray. There are a limited number of configurations available, and each one corresponds to one of the 256 *odù* (signatures). Each *odù* corresponds to a large corpus of highly stylized poems (*ẹsẹ*). Each *ẹsẹ* remembers a past instance of Ifa divination, names the *babalawos* who were involved and the sacrifices that were prescribed, and comments upon the client’s obedience or disobedience and the moral lessons to be drawn from the whole process (Abímbolá 13). The *babalawo* selects from among these verses and chants them aloud. After soliciting the help of Eṣu, the trickster *oriṣa* associated with interpretation, the *babalawo* pronounces an answer to the petitioner’s question.

¹⁹ Such scholars include Gates (pp. 11,22) – we will return to his interpretive method in the Conclusion – and Dathorne. For accounts of Ifa divination see also Barber, “Literature in Yoruba” 359; Idowu 7-9; and Peel 225.

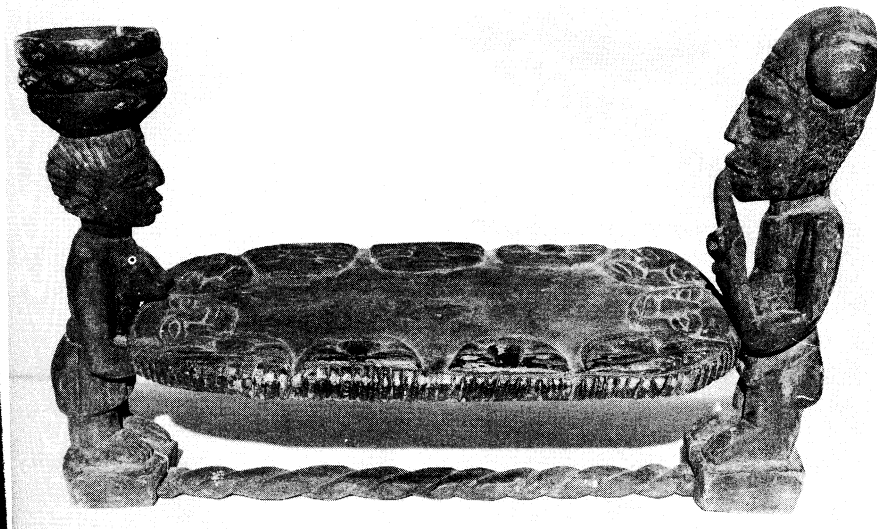


Figure 6. Opon Ifa. From the collection of Robert Farris Thompson. Photo by Sarah Whitaker.

Figure 2. An Ifa divination tray, or *Opon Ifa* (Gates 11). Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

The knowledge associated with Ifa is esoteric – accessible only to those who can afford it and who know where to find it – but not abstract: the oracle says what in particular should be done. Contemporary scholars who discuss what the practice of Ifa might mean for literature emphasize the breadth of interpretive creativity allowed to the diviner (Dathorne 8, Gates 22) and the non-confrontational posture taken in Ifa’s statements with regard to other religions (Soyinka “Faiths”). These, I suspect, would be prominent themes in a study of how Nigerian literature responds to Yoruba religion.

In the literary criticism of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., formulated in the 1980s, Ifa divination, and particularly the part Eṣu plays in it, is our best access point to a truly African literary theory. What is most interesting about Gates’s investigation in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* is how most of the Eṣu traditions, which come to us from an almost exclusively oral society, imagine the divine messages in

terms of writing: “graphocentric figures are employed to account for the workings of a phonocentric system” (39). Indeed, precolonial Yoruba religion prized words but lacked writing, and the 256 odù of Ifa were not written down until the mid-twentieth century (P. McKenzie 357). Nonetheless, as Gates suggests, precolonial Yoruba religion comprises insights that bear heavily on writing and literature; the dichotomy often supposed between the stories and even the modes of thought of oral (precolonial) and written (postcolonial) societies is not absolute. This allows it to harmonize with one of the goals of his former tutor at Cambridge, Soyinka: to retrieve through literature an authentically Yoruba consciousness and a usable past for today’s challenges. This project has strong anticolonial implications, too, for if the thoughts of devotees of Eṣu have for centuries contained the ingredients for an authentically African theory of literature, indeed a progressive theory that relishes ambiguity and tolerates difference, then the arrival under colonialism of Shakespeare, Eliot, and a “literary education” are no longer the main events in the history of literature in Africa.

The potential of Yoruba religion as ideological or hermeneutical foundation for literary writing has generated actual literary writing. Indeed, since the middle of the twentieth century, thanks to the literary and critical writing of figures such as Soyinka and Gates, the voice of Yoruba religion in the conversation that is Nigerian literature seems to have grown much louder, even though it is during this period that Christianity has extended to half of the Yoruba population. Conversely, in the nineteenth century, though Christianity had made little headway in Yorubaland, most of the publishing and printing took place within Christian circles. The first work published in the Yoruba language was in 1848: Henry Townsend’s hymnbook (E. A. Olabimtan 173). Treatments of Yoruba religion in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts were rarely from the standpoint of the devotee. Instead, they

were from the standpoint of the modernizer striving to save Yoruba religion from irrelevance (e.g. Ladipo Solanke's 1931 *Yoruba Proverbs and How to Solve Them*) or of the Christian, claiming the inferiority of Yoruba religion (e.g. E. M. Lìjàdù's 1897 *Ifá*). The only exception of which I am aware in these early years is Joseph Odùmósù's 1905 *Ìwé Ìwòsàn* ("Book of Healing"), with native therapies for 172 diseases, including 66 recipes to thwart *àbíké*, the malevolent spirits of children that want the children to die before puberty.²⁰

The works just mentioned are propositional and prosaic rather than figurative works. However, traditional forms of oral religious poetry do finally begin to be written, rewritten, and published in the early years of the twentieth century. The most important poet in this period is the ardent Christian J. S. Šówándé (also known as Šóbò Aróbíodu) who published at least a dozen books of poetry (Olatunji 1974). Some of his poems clearly display the solo and refrain structure of the sung *Orin-Àrùngbè* poetry. This poetic form has a central place in the men-only *Orò* cult (E. A. Olabimtan 157), which like egungun is a form of devotion to the ancestors. Excepting *Pilgrim's Progress* 1866, the first long works of prose fiction are not written in Yorubaland until around 1920 (Falola *Yoruba Gurus* 18, Adebajo 35).

When the longer works of literary prose and drama finally come, Yoruba religion is typically portrayed positively in them, as though with authorial recommendation.²¹ But apart from folktale-like works such as D. O. Fagunwa's and Amos Tutuola's that have a heavy ahistorical, mythic component, Yoruba religion in the literary works from the mid-to-late twentieth century tends to surprise or even to remain unrecognized by the main characters, in

²⁰ These early Yoruba publications, which I have not been able to locate myself, are discussed in Adebajo (10, 18, 19) and in Falola *Yoruba Gurus* (13, 19).

²¹ There are exceptions to this generalization, most importantly the many plays of Femi Osofisan, which pursue a more aggressively secular-Marxist agenda. His plays *Morountodun* (1983), *Another Raft* (1989), and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1991) all expose how Yoruba religious traditions have been used by the dominating classes to disempower the poor.

whose minds Yoruba religion is associated with the past and is identified with elderly, minor characters. The writers thus implicitly acknowledge Yorubaland's dominant narratives of Christianization and secularization, and yet suggest that Yoruba religion, though "traditional" and marginalized, nonetheless remains potent and accessible. This is how I read literary works such as Soyinka's 1965 novel *The Interpreters*, in which the modern, secular/Christian protagonists' moral and political failures point to the moral and political potential of Yoruba religion; 'Biyi Bandele's 1995 play *Death Catches the Hunter*, in which a traditional Yoruba proverb that warns against hubris and blind-faith serves as explanatory framework to tell the story of a charlatan Christian prophet; Osonye Tess Onwueme's 1997 play *Tell It to Women*, in which two self-righteous, urbanite feminists who come to enlighten and emancipate rural Yoruba women are shown to be less creative, less tolerant, and less equipped to advance women's rights than the leader of the village women, a devotee of the Yoruba sea goddess; and Helen Oyeyemi's 2005 novel *Icarus Girl*, in which a half-Nigerian British girl visits her secularized mother's Christianized family in Ibadan and finds herself in a deep friendship with a mysterious person who can only be understood in terms of the Yoruba notion of *abiku*.

Oddly, though over the course of the twentieth century Yoruba religion has unquestionably become a smaller force in people's everyday experience, it has simultaneously become a larger force in the literature produced in Yorubaland. Promulgating it has become a major focus in the recent non-fictional work of Soyinka, and a recent work such as Dele Sonubi's 2004 novel *The Grandfather's Mandate*, unlike the works just described, manages even to make it overt and take it for granted as the timeless foundation of a vibrant local culture. The situation is entirely different from Yoruba Islam, which experienced immense growth under British colonialism. When the Europeans first arrived in

the mid-nineteenth century, apart from the far north of Yorubaland Islam could only be found in scattered pockets in the main cities, but now about half of the Yoruba are Muslim (Falola, *History of Nigeria* 7). Ironically, the growth of Yoruba Islam was fastest at around 1900 (Steed and Westerlund 60; Gbadamosi 52, 230), the time of strongest Christian missionary activity and also the time at which Yoruba writing and publishing first began to take place apart from missionary institutions. In spite of the growth in Yorubaland's Muslim population and the decreasing influence of Christian missionaries, literature from Yorubaland has shown surprisingly little interest in responding to Islam.

Islam and Yoruba Literature

In many historical contexts Muslims have identified themselves or been identified by others centrally as book people, but not so in Yorubaland. Islam probably first entered Yorubaland from the northwest, from the Songhai empire, in the sixteenth century (Ryan 105). More recently, Yoruba Islam has identified itself with, and benefited from the help of, northern Nigerian political units, most importantly the Sokoto caliphate, which dominated almost the entire northern Nigerian region through the nineteenth century. There were Muslims throughout most of Yorubaland, which is in today's southern Nigeria, before the first permanent Christian mission was established in 1845 (Peel 191). In a 1849 report from Abeokuta, Crowther indicates that tensions between Muslims and traditionalists had been common before his arrival (Peel 193). One reason Islam spread so rapidly during the whole pre-independence period of Christian missionary activity in Nigeria is that it tended to conflict less often than Christianity with the religious traditions it encountered. It tended to make fewer "high level [...] cultural demands on its potential converts" (Peel 205) than

Christianity, which required pre-baptismal instruction and the casting off of “polygamous” wives. Thus in the nineteenth century many Yoruba felt that becoming Muslim was an easier step to take than becoming Christian.

Unlike to the north in Hausaland, where the jihad had succeeded in generating an at least nominally Muslim society, in most of Yorubaland Muslim military as well as preaching efforts yielded Muslim individuals and families, even ruling families, but not necessarily Muslim societies. In this context, greater cultural and even theological accommodation were required. Thus Islam has over the past two hundred years been accommodated to Yorubaland, so that Yoruba Muslims are able without censure to remain involved in far more pre-Islamic rituals and festivals than Hausa (northern Nigerian) Muslims. This involvement – even including marriage rituals and Ifa divination – is often taken to be broadly cultural rather than strictly religious, and is seen as a form of faithfulness to the ancestors and of community solidarity (Danmolé 207).

When the Anglican CMS began exploring Nigeria in the mid-nineteenth century, there were Hausa-speaking Muslims throughout the country, and at that time shared language could have helped unify Nigeria’s Muslims as a single community. However, a central element of Islam’s accommodation to Yorubaland has been its embrace of the spoken Yoruba language since the mid-nineteenth century. Traders and missionaries who were Yoruba in culture and language spread southward from Ilorin (in the northern part of Yorubaland that had been annexed to the Sokoto caliphate); they presented to prospective converts a pre-translated version of the religion (Danmolé 204).²² In many parts of North and West Africa, writing was a decisive contributor to Islam’s spread (Griffiths “Writing,

²² Likewise, as the next chapter will illustrate in detail, thanks to returnees from Sierra Leone the Christianity that arrived in Yorubaland was already adapted to Yoruba culture and religion.

Literacy and History in Africa” 44), though this seems not to have been the case in Yorubaland – or at least not to a great degree; and Yoruba-language writing by Muslims was uncommon.

Probably the earliest account of Yoruba people encountering writing associates writing with Islam: in 1720 a French Dominican missionary described the amazement of a crowd when they witnessed some Muslim slave-traders “writing down,” evidently in Arabic, “everything they saw [including] the people’s customs” (Ryan 109, translation mine). But this was not writing in Yoruba; and though Muslim traders and preachers in the nineteenth century had their Qur’anic portions and their written charms writing was not a central part of their identity as it was for Christians. Few copies of the Qur’an, let alone other books, were to be found among Yoruba Muslims. Though a Yoruba translation of the Qur’an was produced in 1906, not a single copy was purchased because the Lagos Muslim community was incensed, understandably, by the (Christian) translator’s preface that subordinated Muhammad to Christ (Adebajo 17). Nor were Yoruba Muslims associated during the early colonial period with schools, for though Edward Wilmot Blyden²³ with British support established a Muslim school in Lagos, such schools only appeared in the Yoruba interior in the 1920s (Ryan 119, Abubakre and Reichmuth 191). These schools’ first project was getting students to memorize portions of the Arabic Qur’an. Christian missionaries, on the other hand, had been establishing schools since the 1850s, and for them the foundation was the Yoruba primer. In West Africa Christianity has tended in general to be more embracing of vernacular languages than Islam; another example is that Islam often imported into Yoruba

²³ This is the Blyden who was a father of African anticolonialism and Pan-Africanism, and whose 1887 book on the innate suitability of Islam to African people, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, went on to inspire a twentieth century revival of Islam among African Americans. Though he had earlier been sponsored by Henry Venn and the CMS, his ideas on Islam were unsurprisingly poorly received by the Christian and colonial populations of Lagos (Hastings, *The Church in Africa* 355, 356). See also Griffiths *African Literatures*, 30.

Arabic words to convey particular theological concepts, whereas Christianity accepted Yoruba vernacular words (Sanneh, *Translating* 29; Peel 198).

That Islam in Yorubaland was less strongly associated with writing than Christianity was not something that modern historians were the first to notice. Christian missionaries like Samuel Crowther Jr. trumpeted it as part of their evangelizing. He writes in his journal for September 30, 1852:

I had a long conversation with two Mahomedans this morning who came for medicines. [...] I asked [one of them] whether he knew every thing connected with his religion, + whether he knew Mahomet, he answered in the affirmative; I further asked him the date of the Hegira, + the circumstances of Mahomet[']s death, he seemed at a loss what to say, for our conversation took place in the midst of a great number of heathen people[.] I brought an Arabic Prayer Book + desired him to read it, he looked at it for a long time, + said he could not, I therefore exclaimed, as if struck with much astonishment, at the idea of his not being acquainted with these most important things connected with his religion, although we are Christians I told him [and don't] worship Mahomet, yet we know these things + would have been able to answer these questions if they were proposed to us at last he replied "you Oibos [white men] are learned folks how do you know all these things."²⁴

Crowther's rhetoric here is disingenuous and aggressive, and the comparison would have been more interesting had he compared himself with an educated mullah. However, even if we subtract his theatrics we can see that he and his Muslim interlocutors agree in associating Christianity with literacy, a mastery of multiple languages, and book-learning, and they agree in regarding that association as advantageous.

Yoruba Islam lacked this association partly because of reasons intrinsic to itself, that is, because it remained anchored to scriptures, legal traditions, and rituals in Arabic, the language of its founder. Political reasons were at play, too. British colonial policy actually encouraged the Arabic-language focus of educational institutions catering to Nigeria's Muslims. Colonial rulers feared the progressive ideas of western-educated Nigerians would

²⁴ C A2/O32/55, sent from the Yoruba town of Abeokuta.

undermine their own authority and also anger and destabilize the Muslim emirs, who were the linchpins in their own Indirect Rule strategy (Falola, *Violence* 27). Thus the British wanted to produce future leaders who were politically conservative, dedicated to the system of emirates that was in turn dedicated to British rule. A Qur'anic education was in this sense viewed as more advantageous than a Western one. One important consequence of this policy is that Muslim Nigerians, less educated and less Anglicized, were ill-equipped, in comparison with Christian Nigerians, for direct involvement in the management of the colonial and the post-colonial state (Steed & Westerlund 61).

Now we finally turn to how Nigerian literature has responded to Islam. Consequent upon the steady development of education specifically for Muslims in Yorubaland over the twentieth century has been the production of poetry in Arabic, common since the 1950s (Abubakre and Reichmuth 191). Still, there are very few literary works written by Yoruba Muslims; a rare example is Olatunde Olatunji's novel *Àsírí Tú*.²⁵ Wendy Griswold's sociological study *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (2000) concludes that for Nigeria, and I think it is safe to assume the same is true for the Yoruba part of Nigeria, Muslims are much less likely to be readers or writers of literature than Christians (42, 99). Of course, non-Muslim writers are still able to respond to Yoruba Islam, but not many have: Soyinka in "The Swamp Dwellers" (1963) gives a crucial role to a wise and blind Muslim beggar, but marks this character as a definite foreigner with respect to Yorubaland. More common is the critical perspective exemplified by Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1976) which ridicules the Yoruba Muslim character Amusa for being a lackey to the colonialists and for being ignorant that in his community and even in his own subconscious mind Yoruba religious culture remains intact, and potent; or Ola Rotimi's 1977

²⁵ This obscure novel was mentioned to me by Akintunde Akinyemi, in a personal email of 24 November 2009.

dramatic comedy *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, in which the Yoruba Muslim protagonists all move towards a critical stance with respect to their religion; or Osofisan's 1980 play *Once Upon Four Robbers*, in which the Yoruba Islamic identity of some of its main characters is pure opportunism, a part of their strategy for robbery.

The purpose of the present study is not to compare the breadth or the depth of Nigerian literature's responses to the nation's main religions. I have given attention to Islam and to Yoruba religion because analysing the historical situation that generated Nigerian literature requires coming to terms with the cooperation and competition among the three religious options. Furthermore, as will be shown throughout the study, the Christianity to which Nigerian literature responds is itself something of a response to the other two religions. This literature responds to a Christianity that is constituted by comparison and contrast with a Yoruba religion that pursues *alafia* by securing the help of ancestors and *oriṣa*, and that demonstrates reverent interpretive sophistication through Ifa divination; and it responds to a Christianity that could not help but be aware of Islam's reverence for sacred texts and syncretistic coexistence with Yoruba religion.

*

At its most basic level, the structure holding together the chapters of this work is chronological. As literary history, it draws a century-and-a-half-long line of influence – from the first published texts in Yorubaland, which were quite obviously partisan responses to the missionary movement, to recent literary texts, which are either ambivalent or antagonistic toward the missionary movement. It seeks to demonstrate how none of the texts in this literary-historical sequence are independent of the missionary movement, or fully disconnected from its legacy. As literary criticism informed by anthropology, this work takes

its primary texts not as proclamations transcending and authoritatively interpreting the cultural contexts of their production, but as historically embedded artefacts. In the multivocality of their theme and their content they reflect the complex cultural and religious situation of colonialism in Yorubaland; but because they are read, copied, and cited by human actors they become more than reflectors. They are responses that generate further responses – in writing, but also in thinking and acting.

By focusing on the life and oeuvre of Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c. 1806-1891), who in the late twentieth century was taken up as a patriarch of Yoruba nationalism and of Nigerian intellectual culture, the second chapter explores the missionary context of the earliest writing in Yorubaland. In this period Yoruba Christians were sometimes known as Book-people, and the two books they stereotypically carried were the Yoruba Bible and the Yoruba primer, both substantially written by Crowther. By studying the part he played within the CMS we can see why missionary policy put so much emphasis on books, rather than on building churches, evangelizing through preaching, or developing agricultural exports. The missionary project produced Book-people partly because the CMS, along with many other Anglican and Protestant missions societies at the time, promoted the study of indigenous culture and vernacular languages and the raising up of indigenous leaders. However, these priorities were exceptionally effective and other, more autocratic and less scholarly, missionary priorities were displaced in Yorubaland, and the best way to understand why is to study Crowther: fitting the CMS priorities so well, he was in his works and writings eventually given authority to shape an emerging literary culture.

The third chapter picks up speed in order to travel all the way from early missionary writings in the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, when political, educational, and

cultural developments made it possible for writers and critics alike to take the existence of “Nigerian literature” as self-evident, as a “tradition.” In order to cover this ground, this chapter draws upon the resources of postcolonial literary history. From a postcolonial perspective, the question of how “literature” might respond to the “history” of the missionary encounter is itself problematic, since the missionary encounter is associated with the very rupture that postcolonialism seeks to overcome. However, once a sufficiently nuanced model of literary history is developed this chapter is ready to turn to the first literary work in Yoruba. The literary form of this missionary-produced translation of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* suggests a way of understanding literature as education in moral interpretation that suits the missionary project well, but that proves versatile enough to be taken up in literary writing performed apart from missionary patronage. The chapter concludes with a look at three important Yoruba literary writers, Fagunwa, Tutuola, and Soyinka, in terms of how they reconfigure the missionary hermeneutic as exemplified in Bunyan’s classic (English) text.

Many Nigerian writers have given pronounced attention to Christianity, but many – and in the past few decades most of the best-known writers – have not. The burden of the final chapter is to demonstrate through the writing of Wole Soyinka how literary texts designed neither to echo nor to promote the legacy of the missionary movement continue to respond to it, to make their arguments by comparison and contrast with it. The chapter begins with a look at Soyinka’s idiosyncratic, but thoroughly Yoruba, religious vision, which is articulated in his public addresses but which, I argue, is articulated most complexly in the form of the composite image of his protagonists. Before giving special attention to his only well-developed and sympathetic Christian fictional character, I survey Soyinka’s protagonists, describing them in terms of his own religious framework and showing how the

hermeneutical labour they perform as heroes identifies them – and, by implication, Soyinka – as creative reconfigurers rather than as rejecters of the legacy of the missionary encounter. If even the works of Soyinka can be located close enough to missionary writing to respond to it (and, indeed, I found a small autobiographical work of Soyinka's at the University of Ibadan Bookstore, just a few metres beyond the Christian Book Corner) then, I suggest, perhaps the same is true for the corpus of Nigerian literature in which Soyinka is the leading figure.

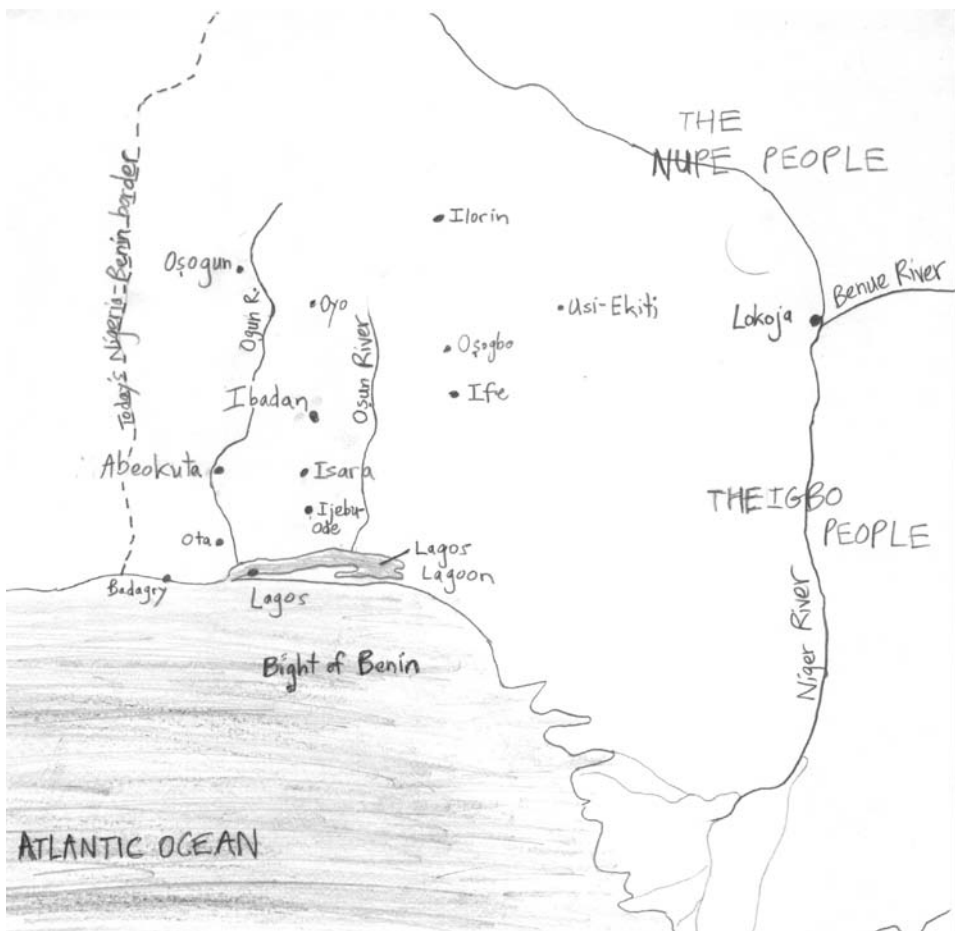


Figure 3. Map of key nineteenth-century towns of the Yoruba, in today's southwestern Nigeria.

CHAPTER TWO

A Book-Person: Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Beginning of Writing in Yorubaland

Literary critic Dan Izevbaye contends that the missionaries' promotion of books and reading among the Yoruba transformed Yorubaland profoundly:

The missions were interested in developing literature primarily for sustaining the young culture of literacy and for their evangelism. The endeavor of the Christian missions, which began in the nineteenth century before the formal establishment of British imperial rule in West Africa,²⁶ did more to transform the African worldview than colonial rule itself. The translation of *the Bible and its supplementary texts* was one of the chief instruments of this transformation. ("West African Literature in English," 479. Emphasis added.)

The large and vibrant literary corpus that emerged from Yorubaland in the twentieth century testifies to this transformed "African worldview," which seems to involve faith in literature

²⁶ Izevbaye alludes here to a historical point that ought to be made clear at the outset of this chapter. The principal historical setting of this chapter – Yorubaland between the 1840s and 1880s – was not strictly colonial until the 1870s, when the British government began seeking to control of large sections of West Africa. Before the 1870s, in Yorubaland as in the rest of West Africa apart from enclaves like Freetown, Lagos, and Dakar, European incursion made very little difference for either urban or rural people. Their traditional governing structures remained in place, and their economies were only lightly affected by the arrival of European goods and by the European promotion of export crops. Even the missionary impact was confined to the major urban areas, and only in cities like Lagos were there enough conversions to produce a powerful Christian social group.

Though the terms colonizer and colonized are thus partially inaccurate, and though as I indicated when discussing *Of Revelation and Revolution* using these terms to partition the world is a dangerous oversimplification, I find it impossible to avoid them altogether. This is partly because so much of the theoretical discussion I depend upon is committed to them. It is also partly because I am looking at the African writers and writings I study in terms of the roles they have played in the stories of modern African (and Nigerian, and Yoruba) history and literature, abstractions that have acquired meaning through a process of dialectical interaction with their Western counterparts. These terms will find increasingly utility when I move in the next chapter into the writings of Africans like Fagunwa and Soyinka, who were raised under the flag of British Nigeria.

as an effective vehicle for articulating cultural identity and for intervening politically and socially. An obvious piece of evidence supporting Izevbaye's claim is that the earliest among the literary works from Yorubaland, which were typically written by people trained at missionary schools, provide clear evidence of indebtedness to "the Bible and its supplementary texts." Yet, as subsequent chapters of this dissertation will demonstrate, even late twentieth-century literary works, many of which are in obvious ways disconnected from Christian institutions, bear the memory of literature's particularly strong association with Christianity in Yorubaland. Preparing for the next chapters' evidence that the reception of the missionary movement and its books were decisive for shaping Yoruba literature and literary culture, this chapter focuses on the individual who did most to determine that reception.

In its early stages, the missionaries' literary "endeavor" had its most direct effect, of course, upon the Yoruba who chose to convert to Christianity. In the late nineteenth century, in fact, they were known popularly as "Book-people," according to Peel's *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (223). This is nothing unusual: in many languages similar titles have been given to identify Christian missionaries or their converts with the Bibles they cherished.²⁷ Jean and John Comaroff offer the generalization that "Protestantism was the faith of the book, in that it required the convert to make a self-conscious commitment to 'the word,' that is, to a textualized truth" ("Christianity and Colonialism" 14).

The first attestation of the label "people of the Book" is actually in the Qur'an, which usually uses it with "opprobrium" (Jeffrey xi). Applied to the Yoruba, the label is interesting to Peel, who, as I have explained, is more interested in the texts that emerged out of the missionary encounter than are his fellow anthropologists the Comaroffs. The latter tend to

²⁷ David L. Jeffrey xiv; Anna Johnston, "The Book Eaters" 14; Paul Landau, *The Realm of the Word* 19; D. Anthony Low 25.

view “textualized truth” itself as contaminated by colonial or missionary domination and thus as a relatively unpromising site for discovering the consciousness and the oppositional agency of the colonized. Consistent with his title, in *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* when Peel considers books he identifies the processes of religious change and conversation they signal and encode. His surprising contention, adducing evidence from the CMS archives, is that late-nineteenth-century Yoruba Christians’ identity was pinned not to just one book, but to two.

In seeking for the key to unlock the power of Christianity, Yoruba attention was focused on its character as a religion of the Book. The name by which Christians were most commonly known was *Onibuku*, “Book-people”: a man asks of a girl’s Christian intentions with the words *Iwọ nfẹ gba buku?* [Do you mean to take book?] In his dying hours, a young male convert at Abeokuta insists on his books being placed beside his bed, so as to show his pagan relatives that he remains a “book-man.” The books in question were, first, of course, the Bible; and second, and hardly of lesser importance, the Yoruba reading primer, known as *Iwe ABD* (“The Book of ABD”), which contained religious texts as well as reading exercises. Indeed, since the primer was the book which the inquirer came to first and opened the path to conversion, it was perhaps that which most deserved the designation *buku*. (223, square brackets in original.)

Unlike other contexts where missionaries or converts were known as Book-people, here the designation refers to two books, to the Bible and its “supplementary text,” the Yoruba reading primer. Emphasizing the discontinuity generated by the missionary encounter, Peel is highlighting how unfamiliar to the Yoruba were both books and Christianity, which they encountered together. The association was not always complimentary to the Christians: Yoruba CMS agent James Johnson reported that at Abeokuta in 1878 devotees of the Yoruba orisha made a pun with *bùku*, the Yoruba verb “to degrade” and *buku*. Christianity, they mocked, is that which degrades, and Johnson suspected that this mockery was effective at keeping many away from church (P. McKenzie 357).

However, there are also important continuities between the new cultural situation Peel describes and what came before. Consider that whereas *buku*, borrowed from English, arrived with the missionaries, the Yoruba word *iwe* was, then as now, a common and perfectly acceptable gloss for the English “book.” Perhaps Christians encouraged the neologism in order to distance themselves from the Muslims and their *iwe*, the Qur’an. Consider also the expression *gba buku*, “to take book.” Peel is surely right when he proposes that the expression is a modification of the commoner *gba ikin*, “to take palm nuts” that describes the petitioner’s receiving the divine message in Ifa divination (224).²⁸ These examples show that early Yoruba Christians had no monopoly on books or on receiving materially encoded divine messages. Spiritual and social beliefs and identities had previously been associated with books and with writing, but for Christians the association was much stronger.

Protagonist in the story of Yoruba Christianity’s bookish identity is the translator and missionary Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c. 1806-1891). He deserves the label Book-person more than anyone else, because he himself translated much of the Yoruba Bible (*Bibeli Mimọ*) and wrote the *Iwe ABD*. When in 1858 the Smithsonian Institution published as part of its “Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge” series a volume on the Yoruba language, in the preface a list of eleven previously published works in Yoruba is given. At least eight of them – all books on the Yoruba language or books of the Bible – are by Crowther (Bowen xxii). In obvious ways, therefore, Crowther laid the foundation for literacy and literature in Yorubaland, and for a mode of literacy and literature that cooperate with Christianity. Accordingly, in the twentieth century Crowther became a symbol of the power and the

²⁸ As explained in the previous chapter, Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey* takes the further step of demonstrating how theories of reading and writing are anticipated in practices of Ifa divination. We will return to his Ifa hermeneutic at the conclusion of this dissertation.

appropriateness of books in Yorubaland; for the Yoruba nationalist intelligentsia, he came to stand for a literate Yoruba nationalism, and for the Yoruba Christians, he came to stand for a literate Yoruba Christianity. It is because of Crowther's historical and symbolic importance that I here propose a study of his writing as foundational to a study of Yoruba and Nigerian literature.

This chapter makes the claim that Crowther himself is partly responsible, due to his unexpected influence within the missionary movement, for the bookish character of Yoruba Christianity. Because of Crowther, scholarly work became an even bigger part of missionary Christianity in Yorubaland than the admittedly book-loving Protestant missionaries would have had it without him. The quintessential Book-person is therefore also the exemplar for all the *Onibuku*. Drawing on primary sources as well as some contemporary writers' assessments of Crowther, I clarify a causality that others have only implied. The chapter opens with biographical information on Crowther's conversion to Christianity and to books, and then on his growth into a leading proponent of a very literate form of Christianity and into a leading producer of books. Following the biographical section is a discussion of Crowther's agency within a colonial-missionary context where missionary censorship of Africans was counterbalanced by missionaries' preoccupation with converting Christianity into African vernaculars. As a lens for reading several of his writings I posit two versions of Crowther, a pro-English evangelist bearing a Bible and a pro-Africa scholar bearing a Primer, only to demonstrate how complementary and inseparable they are. I conclude with a recent literary evocation of Crowther as evangelist and scholar. The next chapter will proceed to show how when in the twentieth century historical and imaginative, literary writing came

to be produced apart from the authority of the missionary movement it nevertheless bore the mark of its influence.

Crowther's Life and Works

The difficulties we face in finding the real Samuel Ajayi Crowther begin with his name. Even this name stems from a long conversation, a story of colonial and religious interactions in which controlling agency is hard to assign. His family name prior to his baptism was Ajayi, but we have no record of his given name. In his adult life he was usually known by his baptism name of Samuel Crowther. Under this name – borrowed directly from a London vicar he had never met, a member of the home committee of the CMS – he published his books. We do not know whether he preserved this title wholeheartedly, or as a mere concession to bibliographic consistency, or in begrudging submission to his missionary superiors. Later in life he himself seems to have coined the name “Samuel Ajayi Crowther,” using “Ajayi” as a middle name (Walls, “Samuel Ajayi Crowther” 20). Recently, scholars have reinterpreted “Ajayi” as the first half of a bipartite (indigenous and colonized) surname.²⁹ Rejecting Mr. Crowther in favour of Mr. Ajayi-Crowther emphasizes that the man was not merely the invention of Victorian missionaries, and thus reflects a fair interpretation of the man's own self-presentation in his writing.

He was born either in 1806 or in the year of Britain's Slave Trade Act, 1807, in the town of Oşogun (modern spelling Òşòogùn), in the land of the Egba, who have since the mid nineteenth century been considered one of the principal Yoruba subgroups. Egbaland in the early nineteenth century was ravaged by the wars that were precipitated by the decline of the

²⁹ See in particular F. J. Ade Ajayi *A Patriot to the Core: Bishop Ajayi Crowther* (2001). See also Femi Osofisan's play *Ajayi Crowther*, which will be examined at the end of this chapter.

Oyo empire, and the population was terrorized by Fulani raiding parties from the north. Crowther himself was captured by slave-traders in 1821 and taken to the coast to be sold. On April 7, 1822, the very day of his embarkation on a Portuguese slaving ship – he tells us himself in a detailed published autobiographical letter³⁰ – Crowther and his 186 fellow slaves were rescued by a group of British anti-slavers and whisked off to the new British colony of Freetown, Sierra Leone, more than two thousand kilometres to the west.

Freetown in the early nineteenth century was a remarkable place, unique in Africa, where “recaptives” enjoyed a prosperous and ethnically pluralistic society, built on a European model, under the governance of the London-based Sierra Leone Company.³¹ Financially and politically supported by leading abolitionists such as William Wilberforce,³² Freetown exemplified their hopes for an Africa without the slave trade. Abolitionists took Freetown as proof that Africans could achieve what Europeans regarded as civilization. (Later in the century, the racist tendencies of European anatomical and linguistic scholarship, as well as the shift of European attention from anti-slavery to imperialist economics, would put an end to this scenario.) Although the missions were heavily invested in the colonial vision of Sierra Leone, while Crowther lived there the missionaries promoted an innovative policy of leadership by ex-slaves and ex-captives. There, under the tutelage of CMS

³⁰ This letter was originally published in the October 1837 issue of the *Church Missionary Record* (VIII:217-23), a publication of the CMS. It was republished at least four times subsequently, in 1842, 1910, 1967 and 1970. The 1842 republication was as an appendix (pp. 371-385) of the Niger Expedition journals that I will be discussing shortly. For commentary on the autobiographical letter see Adéékò 2009. The secondary sources I have drawn upon for my portrayal of Crowther include Ade Ajayi “Crowther and Language in the Yoruba Mission,” Walls “Samuel Ajayi Crowther,” and, most importantly, Ade Ajayi *A Patriot to the Core*.

³¹ For discussions of early colonial Sierra Leone that focus on the stories of Yoruba recaptives and their subsequent contributions to their homeland see Hastings, *The Church in Africa* 338-358, Sanneh *Abolitionists Abroad* 110-138, Walls “The Sierra Leone Experiment,” and Zachernuk 19-21.

³² Along with Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Henry Thornton, Thomas Clarkson, and Thomas Gisborne were early promoters of the Sierra Leone company (incorporated in 1791) who were also members of the Clapham Sect of evangelical Christians (see J. Walker 101). In 1799, members of the Clapham Sect, most notably Wilberforce and Thornton, founded the Church Missionary Society. Thus the potential of Freetown as missionary stronghold was consistent with the ambitions of its founders.

missionaries, Crowther developed a consciousness of his Yoruba identity and a set of hopes for his people as a nation. Six months after his arrival the fifteen-year-old could read the English New Testament on his own and was pursuing a priestly vocation.

In 1826-27 he was sent to England to study at Islington Parish School, and returning to Freetown became the first student at the new Fourah Bay College, now the oldest institution of higher learning in West Africa (Ade Ajayi *Patriot* 21). By this time he was writing with ease the journals he was required by the missionaries to keep regularly; the missionaries must have been pleased to see him so warm to the written word and to the missionary vocation. In 1829 he married another Christianized Yoruba recaptive, Susan, a schoolmistress and a former Muslim. He spent the 1830s in Freetown developing his skills as a linguist, a schoolmaster, and an evangelist, as well as raising a family (*ibid.* 69). By 1841 he was sufficiently trusted by the missionaries that he was recommended for a berth on Thomas Fowell Buxton's Niger River Expedition, of which more will soon be told. Summoned to England the following year, he was ordained by the Bishop of London in October of 1843 – probably the second African Anglican to be ordained priest.³³ On that brief trip, Crowther completed his *Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language*. Prefaced by his *The Grammatical Elements of the Yoruba Language*, a short work that begins with the first written history of the Yoruba people (Law 71), Crowther's *Vocabulary* was published by the CMS in 1843 and printed in London. It was almost certainly the first linguistic analysis

³³ Crowther was not the first African ordained as an Anglican priest. The first seems to have been Philip Quaque, from the Cape Coast (today's Ghana), who was ordained by the Bishop of London on May 1, 1765. In 1841, Crowther, stopping by Cape Coast on the way to the mouth of the Niger, visited Quaque's grave and seems to have been impressed by the discovery that an African could be, and had been ordained (see Crowther's 1841 journals, 350).

published by a native speaker of an African language (Walls, “Samuel Ajayi Crowther” 18).³⁴

In the years following Crowther’s rescue from slavery, as British forces met with increasing success at stamping out slaving in West Africa and as the Yoruba recaptives in Sierra Leone grew in solidarity, the CMS began to allow them to return to their homeland. At this time Yorubaland was already a pluralistic society, having for a century entertained Hausa traders from the North. Many Yoruba had already embraced Islam, and until at least the end of nineteenth century the missionaries would often wonder why Christianity could not keep up with its competitor. Islam in Yorubaland therefore did not figure as an overwhelmingly foreign religion, but neither did Christianity, for even once the missionaries arrived the region’s prominent Christians were Yoruba returnees, educated and converted in Sierra Leone, newly returned to the land of their birth. Thus, remarkably, Christianity was somewhat acclimatized to Yorubaland before the CMS, seeing a golden opportunity for evangelization, began preparing for a Yoruba mission in 1842.

In 1844 this plan received a great boost when the CMS, in an expression of its new leader Henry Venn’s policy of promoting indigenous leadership, sent Crowther to Abeokuta to assist the missionary Henry Townsend. Crowther was to spend the rest of his life serving the CMS within the territory that today comprises Nigeria. By this time, Crowther was producing comparative charts and grammars and Bible translations for half a dozen West African languages. He was midway through his translation of the Yoruba Bible – and

³⁴ Crowther was preceded by the German-born CMS missionary John C. Raban, who mentored and baptised Crowther at Freetown. Between 1830 and 1832 Raban had devised his own system of Yoruba orthography and published the three volumes of *A Vocabulary of the Eyo, or Aku* (Ade Ajayi “How Yoruba was Reduced to Writing” 49, Law 83). Crowther’s work builds upon Raban’s. Crowther was probably not aware, however, that a system of Yoruba orthography based on Arabic script had already been developed by Muslim Yorubas, though it was used very rarely (Ogunbiyi).

linguistic work was increasingly his occupation. The hostile opposition that Townsend was to show to Crowther and to his growing prominence in the CMS, beginning in the 1860s, can partly be traced to the differences in approach of the two men in these early days: Crowther was a scholar and a teacher, while Townsend was a builder and a preacher; yet Crowther was nonetheless an effective evangelist.

He wrote his *First Primer in Yoruba*, colloquially known as *Iwe ABD*, in 1849.³⁵ Just sixteen pages long, *Iwe ABD* is the book that early twentieth-century converts in eastern Yorubaland tied to the sticks they waved belligerently as they marched around the town in defiance of their persecutors (see above, p. 31). The first half of the booklet simply lists the Yoruba alphabet, syllables, and simple Yoruba sentences such as “mother does not see her child” (8). The second half consists of passages from the biblical books of Psalms, Proverbs, Matthew, and Luke; explanations of how punctuation and accentuation works; and Christian slogans such as “May all the world fear the Lord,” and “the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin” (15). Clearly therefore the primer sets itself up as subordinate to *the Book*, the Holy Bible or *Bibeli Mimọ*.³⁶ Such importance do Crowther and the CMS missionaries place

³⁵ All translations are my own. I base my comments upon a 1905 edition of the primer, which specifies neither its writer nor its publisher. Located in the British Library (shelf mark 12910.o.29), it seems to have been adjusted slightly according to the decisions made since the 1840s on Yoruba orthography. It was printed in Exeter, England by James Townsend and Sons, Printers, a company that was founded by a relative of Crowther’s CMS colleague Henry Townsend and that went on to publish many books on behalf of the missionaries. Though several contemporary writers on Yoruba writing and missionary history refer to the primer, none give any evidence of actually having seen it (Falola *Yoruba Gurus*, 17; Law 83; Peel 223). Falola’s bibliography in *Yoruba Gurus* mentions an 1849 primer called *Yoruba Primer, Iwe Kinni* (306), which may be another title for *Awe ABD*. For a summary of the missionary discussions on how to write Yoruba, and on Crowther’s pivotal role in these discussions in the 1840s, see Ade Ajayi “How Yoruba Was Reduced to Writing.”

³⁶ To anticipate the argument of the latter part of this chapter, these two foundational Yoruba books must not be regarded as separable, one sacred and the other secular, one preparing the way for missionaries and the other for scholars. The concept of “primer” has a very religious genealogy, in fact. According to the OED, in Britain before 1600 a “primer” was generally understood to be a prayer book or devotional manual for lay people (“Primer” def. n. 1). This book was as a matter of course used for teaching reading, and gradually that secondary sense of the term became primary. Still, however, into the early nineteenth century prayers, creeds, and catechisms would not have seemed out of place in a British reading primer. Crowther’s 1849 Yoruba primer, therefore, full as it is of biblical quotations, evokes a historical context similar to Britain a century or

on individual access to the *written, vernacular* Bible, however, that though the primer is subordinate it is also essential as a companion to the Bible.

The 1850s were years of great productivity for Crowther and also for the Abeokuta mission. Crowther's scholarly output proceeded apace, with the first biblical book in Yoruba, the Epistle to the Romans, published in 1850. In England, the mission was lauded as a perfect success story in CMS magazines and in a certain Miss Sarah Tucker's 1853 book entitled *Abbeokuta; or Sunrise within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*. Tucker's glowing review of the lifting of the twin darknesses of slavery and heathenism was immensely popular, in Britain as well as in the United States and Germany.³⁷ In 1852, Crowther was invited back to England, where he recited the Lord's Prayer in Yoruba to Queen Victoria and exhorted Cambridge students to enlist as missionaries to Africa (Owadayo 33). With the friendship and ambitious support of CMS head Henry Venn, Crowther came to represent the hopes of British Christians for a Christianized Africa. This hope was made official when Crowther returned to England in 1864, with a hero's welcome, to be consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury as "bishop of the countries of Western Africa beyond the Queen's dominions" – the first African Anglican bishop. He also received an honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Oxford.

However, Crowther had been adamant that he was not seeking responsibility and honour of the sort that came with ecclesiastical advancement. He preferred to gain influence by literary means, which he did by co-producing, with the help of several bilingual African and European colleagues, the majority of the Bible's books in Yoruba, the Anglican liturgy

two earlier in the sense that the primary social location for books and for literacy was the Christian church and the primary content of books was religious.

³⁷ Tucker's book was reprinted in England many times and was translated into German, but apparently never printed in Nigeria. According to WorldCat, copies printed in eleven different years between 1853 and 1875 are extant.

in Yoruba, and an English-language instructional tract about how African Christians should interact with Muslims. Nonetheless, the last twenty-seven years of his life, during all of which he served actively as bishop, come across in his journals as more strenuous and less satisfying for him. Quite apart from the fact that there was not enough time for literary work, he bore the weight both of Europe's great expectations and of his white colleagues' jealousy and disappointment. After his great promoter Henry Venn died in 1873, Crowther was left with the de jure authority of a bishop but very little of the respect from the Anglican hierarchy (in England or Africa) required for shaping major policies. Still, though he was treated increasingly disrespectfully, he was too capable and influential for the CMS to risk losing. With few precedents for African CMS agents, the Society had partly to define its own attitudes towards race and nationality with reference to Crowther. Particularly in the earlier part of his career he was (by his example as well as his decisions as bishop) able to make his mark in the CMS and, therefore, on the CMS "field" of Yorubaland.

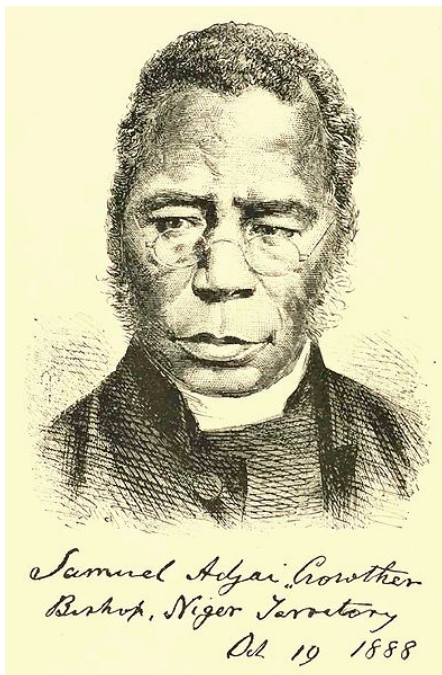


Figure 4: Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther in 1888 (public domain).

Censorship and Vernacularization: Crowther among the Missionaries

On March 20th, 1828, the twenty-one-year-old Crowther refers to himself in the third person when he writes:

This evening the boys received a book from their Master, the Youth's Magazine, which has been sent for them by the [Church Missionary] Society, and the boys desire to send their thanks to their kind fathers in England. This same evening Master had a very hot fever which confined him to bed the whole of Friday. (C A 1 O79)

As we would expect given the expectations of the genre, there is no shadow here of deviance from the standards that the CMS must have had for Crowther. The CMS's reconstruction of the boy's identity appears in this short excerpt to be complete; his biological father in Oşogun has been erased and now his fathers are those unnamed, unknown Englishmen who run the CMS. "It is extremely difficult and highly problematic," writes literary historian Anna Johnston, "to read for indigenous agency or resistance through such highly mediated texts as those of colonial evangelisation" ("Book Eaters" 15). Undeniably, Samuel Ajayi Crowther's personal agency as a writer and an actor was constrained by his interpellation as a subject of the missionary movement. His lifelong loyalty to missionaries and missionary institutions was not begrudging, and yet it certainly meant that he was not free to determine the interpretations and implications of his words and actions. To some extent, he was a pawn deployed by the missionary movement and in particular by his friend and overseer Henry Venn, about both of which more must soon be said. In this context, how should we approach what Crowther wrote?

Because of the political and cultural forces to which he was subject, problems arise immediately when we try to access Crowther's subjectivity or even gauge his particular influence upon subsequent events and writings through the journals he submitted to his CMS

superiors. Indeed, colonizing forces complicate every discussion about the author, the agency, or the genre of texts written by African participants in the Victorian missionary movement.³⁸ The Europeans were their editors, publishers, printers, and most often their readers; Africans like Crowther looked for ways to express themselves and accomplish their writerly goals within the constraints of the only system available for the large-scale dissemination of their thoughts. The books Crowther wrote were all published by missionary presses – mostly in England but also, after Townsend set up a small press on his missionary compound in 1851, in Yorubaland. Having spent so many years under the supervision of foreign missionaries, Crowther would have known that certain of his thoughts and feelings were not suitable for publicizing to his masters. So is it at all possible to retrieve what he thought and felt? If all accounts of what he thought or felt are subject to the censorship of the missionary movement, is there any sense in trying to identify how he himself influenced the missionary movement? These concerns recall the nomenclature question we have already considered, but perhaps not dispensed with: what can we know about the Ajayi who so successfully played the part of Samuel Crowther as it was assigned to him?

This difficulty extends to the level of literary form. All of Crowther's extant journals were originally written as reports to his CMS overseers, and all his ethnographic, linguistic, and evangelistic writings were published by them. The system of quarterly reports, required of Crowther once he was officially a member of the CMS, was intended to keep the head office in London informed about the external progress of the African mission, but also of the internal progress of the Gospel in the lives of mission personnel – both Europeans and natives. More than just a gauge, however, the report journal also functioned as a tool for

³⁸ These problems are the central concern of De Kock; George "Missionary Moments"; Gareth Griffiths "Appropriation, Patronage and Control" and "Trained to Tell the Truth"; and Johnston *Missionary Writing and Empire*.

disciplining the inner lives of its writers into the shape of the individualistic, literate, and evangelical form of Christianity that, as we will see, Henry Venn stood for. A form of censorship is embedded into the literary form: Crowther was required to give his narrative an autobiographical, chronological frame. He was not free to write about the advantages of African religions nor about the unsuitability of Christianity in Africa. Nor was he free to represent his life as centred around his longing for home, his sexual desires, his material poverty, or his intellectual journey. He was to write a missionary's journal.

On the other hand, censorship did not fully filter out Crowther's voice. Once he mastered the conventions, he, like all censored writers, attained partial freedom. This freedom was particularly broad in his case because at the core of the CMS's operating ideology was what I will call the vernacular principle³⁹ – the preference for Christianity to be expressed in a way that was comprehensible to indigenous peoples and contextualized in indigenous practices. Historical contingencies affecting Crowther and the CMS, such as the terribly high missionary mortality in the mid-nineteenth century and Crowther's close relationship with Venn, meant that the vernacular principle sometimes overpowered the missionaries' desire for control; they hurried to devolve power. Evidence from his biography and his writings suggests that Crowther had more autonomy than most nineteenth-century Africans who were trained by Europeans.⁴⁰ Particularly Crowther's early writings, from the 1840s and 1850s, emerge from a historical context in which both parties – “colonizer” and

³⁹ Here I follow Andrew F. Walls (*The Cross-Cultural Process* 87).

⁴⁰ This is the argument of Gareth Griffiths, who takes Crowther as an exception to the rule that Africans' subjectivity cannot be retrieved from African conversion autobiographies published before the twentieth century (“Trained to Tell the Truth” 170). Griffiths contends that for Africans contemporary and subsequent to Crowther, his “work and writings came to symbolise the inadequacy and falsity of the denigratory European characterisation of Africans” (*African Literatures in English: East and West* 54). As Griffiths states, an important piece of evidence that Crowther never fully became a pawn of the missionaries and therefore that his writing should not be regarded as their ventriloquism is that in the latter part of his career he was in increasing conflict with several European missionaries in West Africa who resented his ecclesiastical and his literary power (*ibid.* 53).

“colonized” – were in dire need of each other, and therefore willing to make allowances for each other. I propose censorship and vernacularization in Crowther’s life and writings as roughly equal and opposite forces. The missionary-approved genres of all his writings, including those to be examined later in the chapter, should be seen as sites of complex negotiation and compromise that enable him to enter a conversation in which his and his European interlocutors’ objectives were both at stake.

The implied interlocutor for many of Crowther’s journals and published works is Henry Venn, his friend and supervisor. Henry’s father John Venn wrote the charter of the Church Missionary Society when it was organized in 1799 (Shenk “Henry Venn”). Like the smaller and less influential Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (est. 1701), the CMS was self-consciously an Anglican missions society, though the CMS was not officially an arm of the church. It had an evangelical flavour and in comparison with the SPG it stressed personal conversion more and the reproduction overseas of Anglican church structures less (Yates 486).⁴¹ Nineteenth-century Christianity in Yorubaland and throughout Nigeria was shaped by the CMS more than other European missionary societies (Ade Ajayi *Christian Missions*, xiv).

Members of the CMS agreed that training “natives” to read and write in the vernacular was a non-negotiable part of their work. As Protestants, they assumed that the only way to avoid a situation in which individuals are manipulable by an elite, hierarchical (and generally corrupt) clergy was for each individual to have access to the Bible, God’s

⁴¹ The only British missionary society that was better known than the CMS in the nineteenth century was the London Missionary Society, which was not Anglican at all, but non-denominational, with Congregationalists predominating; David Livingstone was its most famous representative. Thus, in terms of cultural accommodation, the CMS tended to tread the middle path between the LMS, which let converts and churches emerge in styles suitable to the foreign context, and the SPG, which aimed to build a single but global ecclesiastical (Anglican) community. On the origins of the CMS and its relationship to the other missions societies see Brian Stanley and Kevin Ward, *The Church Mission Society and World Christianity, 1799-1999*. On how the various societies functioned in Africa see Adrian Hastings *The Church in Africa*.

written word, which was the only sure access to God. Following in the path of John Wesley they prioritized individual conversion and regeneration, and following in the path of Martin Luther they were convinced that the knowledge conveyed by the Bible alone (*Sola Scriptura*) provided all that was essential for salvation (McGrath 181, 208). They further believed that the individual's Bible ought to be in his or her mother tongue, because true conversion is characterized by an inner, visceral conviction which foreign words were unlikely to evoke. In terms of missionary efficiency and control the vernacular principle is very costly, for if sufficient resources are allocated to language work there are fewer available for proselytizing and preaching. If liturgical and doctrinal statements in the vernacular are taken as authoritative the missionary implicitly cedes a portion of his or her authority to the converts, the unmistakably superior interpreters of their own language.⁴²

Henry Venn, who was at the helm of the CMS from 1841 to 1872,⁴³ was the champion of the vernacular principle. Born in 1796 at Clapham, a London suburb, Venn was nurtured in the Clapham tradition of “combin[ing] personal piety with social activism” (Shenk, “Henry Venn”). He stayed true to this tradition all his life. A superb propagandist, he valued and promoted practical principles and administrative efficiency rather than sophisticated theological or cultural theories. In his thirty-one years directing the CMS, though he never visited missionaries overseas he maintained voluminous correspondence with them all. Venn's thought on Christianity and cultural difference was self-contradictory

⁴² Typically, this transfer of authority conflicts with projects of colonial supremacy. A very common situation during Christianity's modern expansion – the period in which it has overlapped with European imperial expansion – is that the secular authorities representing the colonizing power want the “natives” to be taught the colonizer's language for the sake of more efficient administration, but the Christian missionaries resist, and push for vernacular education. Evidence for this dynamic in Yorubaland is given by Ayandele (299) and Barber *Time, Space, and Writing* (110). For an account of CMS missionaries' adamantly pro-vernacular position in New Zealand in the 1830s and 1840s, see D. F. McKenzie 84.

⁴³ He was officially the Honorary Secretary, but this title reflects not his subordinate status but rather his insistence that he would not draw a salary.

in the sense that on one hand he took for granted that even as they moved towards independence indigenous churches should measure up to the standards of Western churches, while on the other hand he insisted that missionaries should accommodate themselves to the cultures of their hosts, have patience when indigenous churches developed in unexpected ways, and graciously hand over the reins of power.⁴⁴ Much more than his CMS successors or a contemporary society like the SPG, Venn focused on the production of “native agents” who could translate “the message of the Gospel across the frontiers of language and culture” into the vernacular (Ade Ajayi “Henry Martyn Lecture II”).

That the vernacular principle could have such an effect in shaping Venn’s policies, particularly inasmuch as they bear on Crowther, is partly the natural outcome of historical circumstances. The policies emerge out of the middle of the nineteenth century, while British imperial confidence was somewhat tentative, before the rebellion of 1857 in India and the Governor Eyre affair of 1865 in Jamaica had created the impression that ruling an empire required a heavy hand, and before the social Darwinist theories of the 1870s had given scientific credibility to the opinion that non-European “races” could be easily tutored to attain “civilized” ways of thinking and organizing society.⁴⁵ In these years British political influence in West Africa was still slight, and confined to the coastal areas. European missionaries, there and in much of the world, were typically content to live as guests of local rulers rather than as ambassadors of distant but approaching empires (Barker 104). Missions

⁴⁴ For Venn’s urging missionaries to be accommodating, see Wilbert Shenk, “Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn” 170; and Peter Williams, “Not Transplanting” 170. Venn operated on the conviction that the mission is fundamentally a scaffolding for the indigenous church, and that the mission should therefore direct its efforts towards its own eventual euthanasia and the indigenous church’s independence (Shenk “Henry Venn”). The indigenous church in any nation should move towards the goal of becoming, according to the “three self” formula which Venn first proposed in the 1850s, self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating (Shenk, “Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn” 168).

⁴⁵ For an account of this change in British thinking on race and imperialism, see Brian Stanley “From ‘the Poor Heathen’ to ‘the Glory and Honour of All Nations,’” p. 4, and Peter Williams “The Church Missionary Society,” p. 109.

societies were particularly small and poor (though they would grow tremendously in the closing decades of the century) and, most important of all, missionaries' life expectancies in the tropics were so short that the missions societies were eager for the day when Europeans could stay home and trusted indigenous leaders could carry on with the work.

Thus Venn's and other missions administrators' theological convictions combined with historical necessities to produce a situation in which British missions policy had room to accommodate the leadership of Samuel Ajayi Crowther. It claimed him and censored him, but it also empowered him to pursue his own goals. Furthermore, it was shaped by him more than the administrators admitted and probably more than they realized. Starting in the 1840s, Venn and the CMS were deeply impressed by Crowther's writing and the African agency that to them he stood for. The legacy of the nineteenth-century missionary movement in Yorubaland came to depend crucially on Crowther as both influence upon and implementer of the theories popularized by Venn. Crowther will thus appear as a founding figure both of the Nigerian/Yoruba literary tradition that, as I will argue, persists to engage in dialogue with the tradition of nineteenth century missionary Christianity, and of that religious tradition itself. The rest of this chapter will demonstrate, through a literary and historical study of several of Crowther's writings, how he construed the relationship between Christianity and books, and how his construal became influential.

Two Crowthers in Three Works

To analyze Crowther's work in view of its subsequent cultural effects we might imagine two distinct versions of him. The first is Crowther the missionary, who is loyal to the British Empire and who becomes a founder of the Nigerian church. In his hand he carries the *Bibeli*

Mimpo. The second is Crowther the scholar, who is loyal to African cultures and who becomes a founder (or at least an ancestor) of the Nigerian university. In his hand he carries the *Iwe ABD*. I argue that these two versions are inseparable and complementary, though some who have studied his writing have preferred to separate them.

At the end of Crowther's life, G. W. Brooke, one of the British missionaries most opposed to the authority he was given over the mission in Nigeria, expressed great disapprobation at how Crowther the scholar seemed to be getting the upper hand over Crowther the missionary. Brooke accompanied Crowther to meeting with several Igbo chiefs, and reported that while Crowther advertised the educational advantages of the CMS mission, particularly its schools, "The existence of a future life was never once even remotely alluded to," and at only one of the meetings "did he allude to the existence of God" (Ade Ajayi *Christian Missions* 218). Brooke adds that he was astonished, however, and pleased in spite of himself to see how Crowther preached to his congregation as a missionary ought to; he "preached the blood of Christ" (*ibid.*). Brooke, as well as many of Crowther's nineteenth and twentieth-century Christian biographers who have appreciated Crowther primarily for his role in propagating the Anglican church, tends to take his linguistic and ethnographic work, and indeed all the work that prepared the ground for future scholarship, as important basically for their contribution to evangelism (e.g. Owadayo's book on Crowther in the series *Makers of the Church in Nigeria*; Page's oft-reprinted *Samuel Crowther: The Slave Boy Who Became Bishop of the Niger*; Stock's *History of the Church Missionary Society*).

Quite unlike Brooke, twentieth and twenty-first century scholars with an Africanist or a postcolonialist bent, if they have any interest in Crowther at all, tend to minimize his missionary role. An example of this is Andrew Apter, who in his 1990 book *Black Critics*

and Kings identifies my two versions of Crowther, and definitely prefers the second. In developing an account of indigenous African intellectual history Apter argues that Crowther's affirmation, particularly through the Bible and his autobiographical writing, of the "European missionary and commercial ideology" was merely "outward" and that it "concealed the more critical," which is to say less colonized and more nuanced "consequences of his Christian conversion" (194). However, "[t]hese consequences were permitted freer reign in Crowther's other major project—the development of a Yoruba grammar and orthography to promote literacy in Yoruba and the spread of the Christian gospel in his Yoruba translations of the Bible" (*ibid.*).

Whereas Apter takes what I have called the scholarly Crowther as the essential Crowther, I argue in the balance of this chapter that the two versions of Crowther do not exist in significant tension; his missionary work and the scholarly work were interdependent and complementary. This is evident in particular in three of the texts he authored: the 1841 Niger Expedition Journals, his 1844 CMS report journals, and his 1872 report on an overland journey through southern Nigeria. Using these texts I argue, furthermore, that part of the reason the two projects could be interdependent and complementary – and why in subsequent generations churches and books maintained their strong association in Yorubaland – is Crowther's shaping of a bookish Christianity. Crowther did experience significant tension, on the other hand, when external forces threatened to define his missionary role in such a way as to impede his own scholarly activities. He felt his translations were his most important work (Yates 148). In 1860, at a moment when his ecclesiastical duties were overwhelming, he had written to Venn that he preferred not even to continue with his assigned itinerant missionary work in south-central Nigeria: "I should like to spend the

remainder of my days among my own people, pursuing my translations as my bequest to the nation” (C A3/4). Alarmed, Venn managed to convince Crowther to endure.

The Journals of the First Niger Expedition (1841)

The first Niger Expedition, an initiative of Thomas Fowell Buxton’s ambitiously named Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and for the Civilization of Africa, was intended to generate anti-slavery treaties with local authorities, to promote the establishment of legitimate agricultural trade with the inland tribes of the Niger basin, and with the help of the CMS to begin Christianizing them (Salvaing 34). Thus Buxton’s project was a continuation of the vision that had motivated British, Christian abolitionists several decades earlier to establish Freetown. Though David Livingstone’s popularizing of the phrase was not for another decade, “Christianity, Civilization, and Commerce” were the Expedition’s harmonious goals; indeed, the published journals of Crowther and his fellow CMS missionary George Frederick Schön do not question the harmonization. The journals, which are essentially the reports that the two men submitted to CMS headquarters upon arriving back at the mouth of the Niger, were the first published accounts of the Expedition.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Only in 1848 was the official Expedition report by one of its captains, William Allen, and one of its medical officers, T. R. H. Thomson, published. In *The Examiner* on 19 August 1848 Charles Dickens published a review of Allen and Thomson’s *Narrative of the Expedition sent by her Majesty’s Government to the river Niger in 1841* that dismissed the entire project as ill-conceived and inhumane. Dickens does not believe that the British should worry about civilizing or Christianizing (he takes the two to overlap) the ends of the earth before they have dealt with the darkness at home:

To change the customs even of civilized and educated men, and impress them with new ideas, is – we have good need to know it – a most difficult and slow proceeding; but to do this by ignorant and savage races, is a work which, like the progressive changes of the globe itself, requires a stretch of years that dazzles in the looking at. It is not, we conceive, within the likely providence of God, that Christianity shall start to the banks of the Niger, until it shall have overflowed all intervening space. (125)

Dickens dramatizes this critique in the character of Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House*, who has grandiose plans for civilizing natives on the bank of the Niger but who is oblivious to the domestic poor.

Nonetheless, the actual CMS missionaries distinguish themselves from a critic such as Dickens not so much, as he would have it, in their lack of concern for the British poor (for their promoters, such as the

In terms of its stated objectives the Expedition was an utter failure, and British colonial aspirations for the region were set back by at least a decade. Only two treaties were signed; the experimental farm established at Lokoja was short-lived; a third of the Europeans died of fever; and because of all the invalids none of the three steamboats made it more than a hundred miles up the river (see Ajayi, *Patriot* 73). Yet I take the 1841 Expedition and its mediation in Schön's and Crowther's reports to be crucial events in Nigeria's colonial history and indeed in West African cultural and intellectual history. For the effect of the Expedition was to encourage both imperial and missionary policies that focused on religious goals and psychological methods in precedence to commercial goals and sociological methods. Nigerian historian F. D. Ade Ajayi shows in his 1965 *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1894: The Making of a New Élite* that one result of the recommendations Schön and Crowther made in their report was that missionary education in West Africa came to emphasize "classical, literary and linguistic training to the almost total exclusion of technical education" (xvi); here is direct evidence that Crowther helped define Christians as Book-people. A more immediate and concrete result of the 1841 Expedition and its report was that the CMS postponed its Niger basin initiatives and expedited its plan to launch a mission by land to the west of the Niger basin, in Yorubaland – a mission that would involve many of the Yoruba, including Crowther, who had been educated in Freetown and who were eager to return home.

The manner in which Crowther both acted in and narrated the Expedition anticipates the bookish identity that would be ascribed to his Yoruba Christian successors half a century later. On the political level, the Expedition failed to open a way to commerce and civilization

Clapham Evangelicals, tended to be involved in domestic charity), or their lack of respect for cultural diversity (this lack characterizes Dickens as much as them, for he spares no opportunity to point out the Africans' barbarity), but in their humanist belief in Africans' potential.

in the heart of Africa, but on the cultural level it yielded a book, based upon Crowther's and Schön's journals. That book, as well as Crowther the writer, attracted some of the enthusiastic support originally intended for commercial and civilizing projects. This book brought to Britain's attention the possibility of African writing and the possibility that African writing could directly influence political decisions. Further, Crowther's narrative of the Expedition itself illustrates in microcosm the large-scale policy direction that would follow from it: from European to "native" leadership, from commercial exploitation to educational and ideological influence. The failure of the Expedition rocketed the timid, deferential, 34-year-old schoolteacher Crowther into positions of European-delegated authority.

Prior to the Expedition Crowther was living in Freetown, and his journals indicate that his interest was growing in the language and culture of his birth. He wrote to his supervisors on 25 June 1841 about his first work on reducing to writing the Yoruba language:

I have made [a dictionary] of English Yoruba, it being my native language. [...] [The politically unstable] state of Yoruba being so at present, it requires only the interference of some foreign and disinterested power as that now employed, to abolish the slave trade, to bring the people to be at peace with each other, to establish legitimate trade, and to encourage agriculture. (C A 1 O79)

That his thoughts on language are followed immediately by his hopes for conquest suggests that Crowther understood his own scholarly project of mastering the Yoruba language as linked to the project of civilizing and Christianizing the Yoruba people – which was in fact how the majority of his British missionary sponsors understood it. At this point Crowther, full of Christian-colonial idealism but basically inexperienced. However, his baptism into the role of missionary-translator practitioner came only a week later, when he embarked on the first Niger Expedition as one of the CMS's two representatives.

Crowther's missionary education had trained him in descriptive writing and in evaluating African customs from a Christian and European perspective. His assignment on the Expedition drew on these skills: he was to provide anthropological and economic analysis of the peoples of the Niger. In his sympathetic descriptions of the Igbo people's religious practices, which centred around the creator-God Chukwu, he suggests they possess a remarkable theological advantage that could lead them up to the door of Christianity and equip them to start opposing the slave-trade (50-53; cf. Sanneh, "The CMS" 180).⁴⁷ Crowther's evangelical religion conditions him to look for the efficient means of Christianizing each culture he encounters, and the means he characteristically identifies are cultural and linguistic rather than economic or political.

His account inevitably also tells us much about Crowther himself as a writer and linguistic scholar. He writes clearly and without undue gravity, and is attuned to problems of translation: he pokes fun at a little local boy who acts as interpreter between the people of the Expedition and the residents of a certain village but who truly knows only two English words, "Yes" and "Tabac" (276). Crowther's only job was not field ethnographer, however: he spent much of his time aboard the ship working busily to complete the assignment given to him by the CMS, the Yoruba vocabulary that would be published in 1843. On the 6th of July, 1841, as he records,

the Captain sent for me to ask me some questions, and as our conversation led to the subject of writing, I took the opportunity of telling him of the difficulty I found in writing on board, and especially on deck, where I was frequently disturbed by the sailors. He very kindly offered me his cabin to do my writing business in, any time after breakfast. He was very anxious that the Yaruba [*sic*] column of the Vocabulary should be filled up [...] (261)

⁴⁷ In later years, with the sanction of the CMS, Crowther would publish a primer for the Igbo language (1857), as well as for another language he encountered on the Expedition, Nupe (1860).

There are no signs in the Journal that Crowther was treated as a second-class citizen on the Expedition. He proved one of the most effective participants. Strictly speaking, the linguistic work he describes had nothing to do with the Niger Expedition, which explored territory far to the east of Yorubaland. Yet the Captain evidently regarded Crowther's work on the Yoruba language as important nonetheless.

Indeed, the evangelicals behind Buxton's Society assumed the vernacular principle, prioritizing the reduction of every major language to writing and the translation of the Bible into every major language. Crowther had argued as much in his journal entry for July 25, 1841: "The plan of studying the language of the people, and translating the Scriptures into it, ought to be immediately adopted by every Missionary sent into the heathen world" (268). This is partially a self-interested comment – for Crowther's ambition was to do exactly this for his mother-tongue – though it is also unquestionably a characteristically Christian understanding of religious transmission (Sanneh, *Translating* 4). Unexpectedly, however, Crowther's mastery of Yoruba proved to be a great asset on the Expedition. Along the river he met several exiled Yoruba speakers who became his key informants as to the political and cultural characteristics of the peoples of the Niger (317). He does not deploy this fact as part of an argument for linguistic missionary work, but the reader cannot but notice how the events Crowther narrates implicitly grant to linguistic scholarship a central place in missions.

As he narrates the Expedition, Crowther lets his reader imagine him with pen in hand, observing in writing the "rude" huts along the "splendid" river (280), the unfortunate forms of slavery persisting among the riverine peoples, and their colourful but often unenlightened cultural characteristics. On the surface, these observations are part of the project of coming up with solutions to the problem of African- and European-sponsored slavery, but they also

evinced a concern with culture in itself. There is every indication that Crowther identifies himself culturally with the Europeans aboard ship rather than with the Africans along the river. Take, for example, his description on August 28 of a King Obi:

He is a middle-sized man, between the age of forty and fifty: his countenance is soft, and he appears to be of a peaceful temper. [...] As far as we could count from the feet of his trousers, when he moved, each of his feet about the ankles was ornamented with eight strings of coral; a dull old brass-button closing each string, and two leopard's teeth attached to the strings of coral on each foot. He had on a red cap; over which was a marine's cap, decorated with brass scales and other pieces, and coloured cords. His Majesty was not a little proud of this new equipment from the Commander of the Expedition. He marched about the quarter-deck, with apparent satisfaction at having White Men for his friends. He consented to the treaty; and made a proclamation the same day, among his people, for the abolition of the slave-trade in his country. (282, 283)

If he is aware of the irony in his slightly patronizing description of one whom many Europeans would regard as his "countryman," Crowther does not let it disrupt his consistently Europhile tone. Like many Europeans of the time he depicts African rulers as pompous and simpleminded. They are also unmistakably illiterate, and he drops a comment about the "fears" excited among local peoples when they witness him writing (326), whereas he and his European colleagues and readers take writing for granted as transparent and natural. He is secure in his membership in the Europeans' club, and though the situation would be drastically different by the 1870s, there was apparently room in this club for an African in the 1840s.

As the Europeans on board got sicker, Crowther gradually took on more important roles such as giving Bible lectures to the crew (330), caring for the sick (334), and conducting anti-slavery discussions with local leaders (334). As a reliable, multitalented, multilingual middleman, he exemplified the hopes that mid-nineteenth century British Christians pinned to "native agency." This is exactly the interpretation of him implicitly

commended by the CMS's publication of Crowther's childhood narrative as an appendix to his and Schön's journals. Crowther's missionary sponsors presented him to their British readers as a symbol of the Africa to come. In addition to the childhood narrative, the appendices include letters written by both Schön and Crowther that explain how Africans should become more involved in the missionary and educational work in Africa. Reflecting on the Expedition, Crowther strikes a balance between deference and self-promotion:

Great Britain is willing to do what she can for Africa; but the obstacles are very great, because of the insalubrity of the climate. As regards Missionary labours on the banks of the Niger and in the Interior of Africa, I think the Committee will see, from the condition of the Expedition, that very little can be done by European Missionaries except such as have, before ascending the river, become inured to the climate of Africa. I am reluctantly led to the opinion, that Africa can chiefly be benefited by her own Children. (349)

Becoming even more specific, Crowther goes on to say that there is no reason why Africans should not be trained as priests, provided Europe is willing to provide them with educational "means of improvement" (350). Two years later, upon his ordination as priest in London, he would become the fulfilment of his own hopes.

On the Niger Expedition Crowther was already a Book-person, though he had not yet brought into being the two books that late-nineteenth century *Onibuku* in Yorubaland would cherish. Not only did the political and economic failure of the Expedition open the door for him to promote a model of missions that made more room for scholarship, but already, on the Expedition, Crowther was carving out for himself a role as scholar-missionary. His identity as a Book-person gave him an advantage over the missionaries who were sponsoring him and allowed him partially to determine the very policies designed ultimately to generate "native agents" like himself. He assumed this identity not simply because missionaries felt they could accomplish their purposes by shaping him into one, but also, and I suspect more

importantly, because this is an identity he sought for himself. He spoke from the heart when he wrote Venn: “I should like to spend the remainder of my days among my own people, pursuing my translations as my bequest to the nation” (C A 3 / 4). In much the same way as his writing about the missionaries’ Expedition helped create a context where Yoruba individuals like himself (Africa’s “own Children”) would play a large part in determining missionary policy, Crowther’s translating and his writing about translation helped create a context where books, and particularly books in the Yoruba language or rooted in Yoruba culture, would play a large part in determining the shape of Yoruba Christianity.

Crowther’s 1844 Report Journals

As with so many of languages of the non-Western world, the codification and standardization of the Yoruba language depended upon the multilingual and cosmopolitan situation arising out of the colonial encounter and upon the Christian imperative of evangelization. Freetown at that time was a laboratory for linguistic research as well as for missionaries’ dreams of a civilized and Christianized Africa. A fifth of the population was attending school and recaptives and missionaries were working together on many grammars and Bible translations (Ade-Ajayi *Patriot* 67). The year 1844 was decisive for the work of Crowther the African linguist and scholar, and also for Crowther the Anglican and missionary. Consider several excerpts from Crowther’s 1844 journals that chart the development of his linguistic and ethnic consciousness immediately prior to his departure for Abeokuta to found, with Henry Townsend, the permanent Yoruba mission.

On Tuesday, January 9 Crowther conducted the world's first Yoruba church service, which, according to the journal he sent to London later that month, he hoped would draw Freetown's Yoruba speakers towards Christianity:

This afternoon at half past four o'clock, I opened the Yoruba service in the Mission Church in Freetown. As it might be expected, the novelty of the thing brought a large number of people together, both Yorubas, Ibos, Calaba[r]s to witness the reading and preaching the gospel of Christ in a native language in an English Church. (C A 1 O79)

Christianity was monolingually English in the minds of Crowther's intended audience. But he intended to change that:

Although the language is my native tongue, with which I am well acquainted, yet, on this occasion, it appeared as if I was a babe just learning to utter my mother tongue. The matter I was employed in, the place I stood, and the congregation before me were altogether so new and strange, that the whole proceeding seemed to myself like a dream. (*ibid.*)

Crowther compares the change he is undergoing to a return to childhood and thus his dream is of recovering what he once had. However, in several ways he is also stepping into something unprecedented. He is witnessing a birth: the birth of Yoruba as a vehicle for the transmission of Christianity, as a language able to fulfil the same functions as European languages, and as possession and chief identifier of the people who know themselves today as *the* Yoruba.

At the time, the ancestors of the people today known collectively as the Yoruba consisted of about a dozen political groupings speaking mutually intelligible dialects, but had nothing resembling a collective self-consciousness as a people or a nation. Crowther's linguistic work was indispensable to Yoruba nation-building.⁴⁸ According to his

⁴⁸The first attestation of the word "Yoruba" given in the OED is from a linguistic manual that was prepared for the 1841 Niger Expedition, not written by Crowther. But Crowther's linguistic and ethnographic writings presupposing and describing that term gave it much firmer footing. Since Crowther, the identifier "Yoruba" has been universally adopted by the people groups of Western Nigeria as well as Benin and Togo who trace their

Grammatical Elements of the Yoruba Language, which he worked on during the 1841 Expedition, the language the Yoruba people(s) spoke was at the time far from uniform: “People from all parts of Yoruba are now together, in the colony of Sierra Leone; and each party contends for the superiority of its mode of utterance” (1). Understandably, but significantly for the future of the language, he chose his own dialect as the standard when in the 1840s he prepared the Yoruba grammar, vocabulary, and primer. Religious concerns aside, the church service on January 9, 1844 was therefore a birth moment because it was the first public use of a Yoruba-language text and because at that moment an assortment of people were interpellated as speakers of the Yoruba language – and by implication as Yoruba people.

Yet religious concerns were never left aside by Crowther’s scholarship. His linguistic inquiries led him naturally into and out of historical and religious matters – and he seems to have relished these excursions. On the 25th of February he writes that “A brief account of the origin of Shango [Şango] the god of thunder and lightning may not be uninteresting” and goes on to relay a detailed mytho-historical account of the kings of the ancient Yoruba city Ife and dispassionate explanation as to why many Yoruba worship Şango today. His overseers did not request this account, which because of its early date is of great interest to today’s cultural or religious historian.

ancestry back to the city of Ife and who speak various mutually intelligible dialects of the Niger-Congo language family.

Reading after Benedict Anderson, we are not surprised to learn that language standardization and institutionalized instruction made ethnic consciousness and nationalism possible. The Yoruba situation, however, highlights a contributing factor that Anderson neglects: the central role played by Bible translation. Bible translation into a language that a group of people identify as their own facilitates the growth of an institutional church with an ethno-linguistic identity (e.g. Yoruba Anglicans) and allows the group to read themselves as “nation” into the biblical stories of Israel. This is the argument of Adrian Hastings in his *The Construction of Nationhood*, which is in part a response to Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and which highlights the Yoruba case. Hastings notes that “Samuel Ajayi Crowther, translator of the Yoruba Bible, as well as Anglican Bishop on the Niger, was a figure of immense importance in triggering national consciousness, the sense of sharing the name of Yoruba, whether you lived in Ibadan or Ilorin, Ife or Oyo” (158). Hastings’ general argument is strongly corroborated by Peel’s *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*.

On the 3rd of March he brings a cheerful report:

My Vocabulary is growing larger every day. I have collected 500 new words since my arrival. The more the language is cultivated the richer harvest it yields. – I have a Yoruba class of twelve young men in my house every Monday afternoon, and two school boys of Yoruba parents, whom I am teaching to read the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in Yoruba. They like it very much, and are fast becoming familiar with the words of their mother tongue in letters. (C A 1 O79)

Training young boys as native agents to work in their homeland was obviously advantageous from the perspective of the CMS, which was preparing to launch the mission to Yorubaland. Reading Crowther's journals, however, we might sometimes suspect that Crowther is talking about a "harvest" of scholarly results as well as Yoruba souls.

On the 11th of September, still in Freetown, Crowther gives an account of his linguistic work:

I devoted the early part of the day, immediately after the morning prayers, at seven o'clock, to the study of the Yoruba language, as long as I am not interrupted by the wants and cares of the [Fourah Bay Training] Institution till two, when the school opens which closes at three. – As the language is my vernacular tongue, no difficulty at first sight may be anticipated in studying it. (*Ibid.*)

He goes on to reflect upon the difficulty he has in producing dictionary definitions for all Yoruba words; so many seem indefinable and untranslatable when removed from the sentence. He does not for a moment allow his CMS supervisors to doubt that his linguistic work will serve missionary purposes:

I have got through the first draught of the Gospel of St. Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistle to the Romans. I am daily securing suitable and significant words, towards their revision. – In tracing out words and their various uses, I am now and then led to search at length into some traditions or customs of the Yorubas, a brief account of one of which I now give you.

The Funeral procession of the Yorubas
The Yorubas have no particular burying place; each one buries his dead where he thinks proper, but a great regard is paid as to those who are to be buried in the bush, behind the walls of the house, or in the house itself, according to custom. (*Ibid.*)

The account of the Yoruba Funeral procession is a long (perhaps 2000-word) work of ethnography, an outsider's dispassionate and careful description of a Yoruba way of life that concludes with an explanation of how one year after burial the deceased person becomes *egungun*. This passage, much like the passage on Šango that he had written six months earlier, enacts a progression from evangelization to translation to ethnography. Crowther wants to Christianize the Yoruba people so, abiding by the vernacular principle, he examines their language, which leads him to address their cultural traditions. That the study of Yoruba "words" leads to the study of "traditions" and "customs" is, I think, inevitable. I see three interpretations for this progression.

First, it is a eulogy. Crowther is acknowledging and memorializing cultural practices that will soon, due to the forces of colonization and Christianization, be wiped out. Because he himself cooperates, generally willingly, with these forces, his account is burying Yoruba tradition alive.

Second, it is an inculturation of Christianity. Crowther is beginning to discover that he cannot put Christianity into a new language without simultaneously putting it into a new culture. On this reading, his work in the vernacular opens the door to the possibility of an Africanized adaptation of Christianity, and we can expect him and those he influences gradually to develop Christian justifications for the very burial practices that Crowther describes as non-Christian. This scholarly investigation thus folds into missionary methodology, though its result is often not the kind of Christianity the European missionaries anticipated.

Third, it is a distraction from the missionary imperative and thus a step towards secularization. Crowther is, wittingly or not, being led away from his commitment to

Christianization and toward a modern kind of cultural relativism that points towards the university rather than the church. Here as elsewhere Crowther evinces an anthropologist's keen eye for cultural differences, and seeks logical and scientific rather than religious explanations for them. He is more interested in understanding the ways of man than proclaiming the ways of God. Indeed, in an 1862 letter to Venn about his experience as a translator he expresses anxiety about precisely this shift in priorities. He identifies in himself this "danger[ous]" tendency: "open a passage of Scriptures for devotion, instead of feeding one's soul with manna from Heaven, one's thought runs to 'How should this passage be translated, which is the most suitable word, the most correct rendering, etc.'" (C A 3 / O4). By this means, "thoughts about the translations soon take the place of meditation" (*ibid.*) This kind of secularizing trajectory can be expected to lead a scholar such as Crowther gradually to lose zeal for the missionary vision for Africa.

All three of these interpretations capture an essential aspect of what Crowther, in his life and in his writing, helped accomplish, as well as what the two books of the *Onibuku* stood for. None of the three are anachronistic; they were available even in Crowther's lifetime. As a brief example of how the way of the Book-people threatened traditional Yoruba religion we may consider the Ibadan convert who in 1875 was accused of using her Yoruba primer to bewitch her fiancé, whom she refused to marry, thus violating the traditional authority of her family (Peel 225). As an example of how the way of the Book-people tended towards an Africanized Christianity, we may consider the scholarly work of the pioneer Yoruba historian Samuel Johnson (1846-1901), Anglican priest, who wrote the magisterial *The History of the Yorubas*, which builds a narrative for Yoruba history that

parallels biblical Israel's history, suggesting a movement towards Christianity (Quayson 36, Hastings *Nationhood* 158).

How Crowther's linguistic and ethnographic endeavours could lead towards secularity is more complicated, simply because this tendency is contrary to his own primary intention. Emmanuel Ayandele's *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914*, which takes the missionary movement as fundamentally imperialistic, suggests that the earliest CMS missionaries – including Crowther – were already wary of the potentially secularizing consequences of what they called a literary education. By literary education they meant an education that was not purely directed towards a particular trade and that included “impractical” components such as literature and classics. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, once several CMS schools were established, missionaries began discovering that Africans who had received a literary education were not necessarily effective as evangelists (287). Education was for many students a means of gaining economic and social advantages, and it seemed to certain missionaries, particularly Henry Townsend, actually to discourage fervent faith (291). Education according to the two books reconfigured the Yoruba traditions in which students were raised as local, not universal, loosening those traditions' hold on the students; but education did not consistently provide a replacement.

There is no doubt that missionary education and writing did empower Yoruba men and women to move in directions contrary to the missionaries' plans, which is why Brooke was so alarmed about the lack of explicit religious reference when Crowther promoted education. Books and schools could indeed have the effect of quenching religious zeal. However, the English missionaries who were anxious about education and whom Ayandele cites overestimated the danger of education from the perspective of Christianization; they

themselves tended to be poorly educated (Salvaing 93), and so their anxieties were probably intensified by their insecurities about educated Africans eventually challenging them. More importantly, these missionaries could not have foreseen that Crowther (or Samuel Johnson, or D. O. Fagunwa, or Amos Tutuola, all of whom will be considered in the next chapter) would find ways of keeping complementary the religious project associated with missionaries and the scholarly project associated with schools. The Bible and the primer continued to travel together in Yorubaland long after Crowther's life was over.

Crowther's 1872 Journal on his Overland Journey

Between the traumatic 1841 Expedition and 1872 the situation of British missionaries in Nigeria changed dramatically. Permanent mission stations were established in perhaps a dozen towns in the interior, and British companies began regular trade along the major inland waterways. If the 1841 Expedition and Crowther's account of it had encouraged a more modest missionary movement, more focused on books than farms or even churches, these effects had partly worn off by 1872. In 1872 Crowther, who was now Bishop of the Niger Territory, was on his yearly visit to his riverine congregations when the steamship *Victoria* ran aground and he was forced to lead the party overland to Lagos, passing through the Muslim city Ilorin which is at the northernmost extremity of Yorubaland.

In the introduction to Crowther's report, an unnamed representative of the CMS Committee (which was led still by the ailing Henry Venn) writes that the CMS was publishing Crowther's account in order to "show that there is every prospect of Africa being opened to Christianity and lawful commerce, through the agency of her own converted sons." (Here again Crowther becomes the embodiment of Venn's ideals of "native agency": the

trailblazer in a treacherous journey across Nigeria, the rescuer of several stranded white traders, the encourager of African churches.) However, for this opening to happen “the funds of the Society need to be enlarged, and the hearts of Christian friends need to be stirred up to more abundant prayer to the Lord” (4). Thus Crowther’s journal is reframed as an appeal for support.

Indeed, Crowther himself does narrate his journey in such a way as to invite European contributions. The bulk of his report consists of updates on politics – he is particularly eager to testify to the reliability and generosity of the Muslim king of the Nupe, Masaba, who should be a worthy ally of the British – and on roads: “This short description of the difficulties of travelling in this country,” he writes, “shows how much is wanting to improve this country” (7). But letters and books are also central to his account: the letters are necessary for communicating with worried officials and loved ones in Lagos; the books are necessary for demonstrating Christianity.

Crowther’s description of his activities at Ilorin on Sunday the 7th of January is probably his most thorough published account of how books fit in to his missionary work, as well as a perfect illustration of the bookishness of early Yoruba Christianity, which the present work proposes as important precursor to twentieth-century Nigerian literary culture.

In the afternoon I got my horse saddled to answer the King's request; I took only one of the clerks with me to carry my bag of books. On my arrival outside the gate of the palace I halted, while the King sent to call several of his principal officers, the Lemamu, or chief priest, and other mallams to be present. In a short time the palace was filled with a large assembly of people of all descriptions. The King having got all ready, I was invited in, and at his request, to tell them something of the Christian religion. I opened my bag and took out my English Bible and the Yoruba translations, the English prayer-book and the Yoruba translation, and my pocket English Dictionary (Johnson's), and the Yoruba Vocabulary; having classed these six books side by side, I explained to the audience that the Yoruba translations of the Scriptures will always interpret the English by my reading the same passages in both;

that the nine prayers in the English language have been translated into Yoruba, which we have been using in all our mission stations in the Yoruba country.

The subject I first broached was the sonship of Christ, as declared by the Angel Gabriel; I opened St. Luke i. 28-35, which I first read in English, after which I turned to the same passage in the Yoruba translations and read it [...].

Then I was requested to read a prayer to them out of the Prayer Book, so I read the one for the Queen's Majesty, first in English; when I was reading it in Yoruba I told them that the name of the sovereign in whose dominions we reside may be substituted as occasion might require. They admired the prayer as being very suitable.

I then explained to them the use of the dictionaries, to illustrate difficult words which may be met with in either language, without the aid of a teacher, who may not be at hand. [...] After [the dictionary] was examined by the Lemamu, it was returned to me by saying, that I was truly a learned Lemamu! and then the query, how I came to know so much of book knowledge? (18, 19)

One of Crowther's obvious concerns here is to assert his authority to the Yoruba-speaking people of Ilorin. This authority stems not only from his capacity on this expedition as a messenger of the British Crown but also, as is evident in this passage, from his mastery both of the Europeans' "book knowledge" and of the vernacular, and no less importantly his ability to correlate the two. Crowther is not uninterested in a magician's dramatic effect here, for the three pairs of European books would have elicited instant respect from the Muslims and traditional religionists of Ilorin. Yet he is also in earnest, promoting the fruit of his decades of hard scholarly work on the Yoruba Bible, the Yoruba prayer book, and the Yoruba Vocabulary.

Again, there is a gesture towards secularization in Crowther's missionary deployment of scholarship. It is the secularization of vernacularization, for just as an English text can be converted into a Yoruba text, and just as a prayer for an English Queen can be converted into a prayer for an Ilorin king, so the Christian intention of the scholarly skills Crowther wants to teach the people of Ilorin can be diverted; literacy, converted away from Christianity, can become an end in itself.

But this gesture is slight, and by far the more important implications of Crowther's demonstration to the people of Ilorin are Christianizing. Not only does he show the people how his religion can function in their language, but he shows them how to pursue his religion in his absence, and indeed in the absence of any trained professional. Therefore his instruction in using dictionaries "without the aid of a teacher" is designed to contribute to Henry Venn's goal of devolving power to Africans and ultimately euthanizing the mission. That this was at the back of Crowther's mind when he wrote the 1872 report is suggested at several points by his happy observations on the tenacious faith and steady church attendance of Christian converts who because of political turmoil in northern Yorubaland had not seen a missionary in a decade.

In this light, we can be more specific about why, apart from the personal pleasure he seems to have taken in studying languages and cultures, scholarship was so important to Crowther's missionary ambitions. He and Venn agreed that if the African church was to thrive it had to be led by Africans, and scholarship was the way of empowering them to lead. We can take *Bibeli Mimọ* and *Iwe ABD* to represent, respectively, Christianity and the decolonization of Christianity. We have just examined three of his written works as examples of how the scholarly Crowther and the missionary Crowther are complementary. They are evidence that when he requested in 1860 to step down as Bishop, and to "spend the remainder of [his] days among [his] own people, pursuing [his] translations as [his] bequest to the nation," he was not repudiating his own missionary role but rather specifying it.

The present chapter's exploration of Crowther's life against the backdrop of CMS missions has suggested that in mid-nineteenth-century Yorubaland the promotion of Christianity and the promotion of books were mutually reinforcing. There was no

contradiction between the religious knowledge contained in the Bible and the linguistic knowledge contained in the primer. The chapter concludes with a look at a contemporary dramatic treatment of Crowther that creatively comments on his status as founder of traditions that from today's standpoint are difficult to regard as continuous. By returning to an incident in Crowther's later life the play in question finds no deep discontinuity between a commitment to books and to the Book, between Crowther's literary and his religious legacies. It allows the possibility that in spite of his ambivalence about secular literature and of his loyalty to the Queen Crowther is part of the foundation of the Yoruba literary tradition.

A Literary Response to Crowther's Legend

The prolific playwright Femi Osofisan, professor at the University of Ibadan, is not himself a churchgoer.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, he accepted a commission by the Redeemed Christian Church of God – a Lagos-based denomination – to write the play *Ajayi Crowther: The Triumphs and Travails of a Legend*. The RCCG is an African Initiated Church (AIC) as opposed to a mission church, and its origins are home-grown. It began in 1952 when a Yoruba man named Pa Josiah Akindayomi, who had been trained and baptized under the CMS, followed God's call and started a house-fellowship in Lagos. He could not read, and his charismatic preaching was in Yoruba. The movement has spread rapidly, and today there are over ten thousand churches in Nigeria and a hundred other countries. Like other AICs, it defines itself in opposition to the “pagan” past of the Yoruba and other Nigerian ethnicities, but also in opposition to the “mission churches” such as the Anglicans, which are viewed as foreign and un-African. Furthermore, like other charismatic churches it is a decidedly modern institution,

⁴⁹ Personal interview, 2 November 2007.

more interested in individual prosperity and morality than community or even national solidarity, self-consciously rejecting the terms and beliefs of precolonial religion. The version of Crowther it wants to use to educate its people is not Crowther the Anglican or the proto-Yoruba-nationalist but Crowther the religious writer.

First performed in 2002 and published in 2005, the play takes as its narrative present the last few days of Crowther's life in 1891, as he is tended by his granddaughter Emma. Crowther narrates to her some of the highlights of his long life, such as his first attempt to wear shoes (59) and his audience with Queen Victoria, who is terribly impressed with his Yoruba translation of the Lord's Prayer (74). In these events as in others, Osofisan demonstrates careful research and an unwillingness to deviate from the historical account, coupled with a highly accessible and forthright style.

Much of the plot's energy comes from the conflict between Crowther, bishop of the Niger, and his son Dandeson, on the one hand, and the young CMS missionaries Eden and Brooke on the other hand. We have already seen the historical Brooke and his hostility to Crowther. Osofisan's Brooke and Eden represent a late Victorian breed of missionaries convinced that Africans have not yet reached a level of self-discipline and Christian maturity to govern their own churches and, fortified by scientific discoveries on malaria and quinine, willing to stay at the helm for the long-term. Thus they represent a missionary movement with very different means and objectives than Venn's CMS several decades earlier. Eden and Brooke are self-righteously horrified at the stories of sexual sin and inadequate education among the pastors that Crowther oversees.

Osofisan makes these inexperienced missionaries utterly unsympathetic by highlighting the racism and ignorance fuelling their contempt of Crowther's authority. By

contrasting the first generation of Englishmen who inspired, trained and promoted Crowther – the Venns and Wilberforces – with their successors, Osofisan manages to defend Crowther against claims of being a turncoat, a native informant, without hiding his profound loyalty to Anglicanism. “The CMS is our mother! Our father!” (95), proclaims Crowther, in agony over the schism that he fears is imminent. By opening up a space between Christianity and colonialism the play paves the way for that schism without offending its Christian audience or raising doubts about Crowther’s unwavering faith. In a flashback about his 1880 visit to Onitsha, right after the town had been bombed by the ships of the Royal Niger Company, Crowther remembers one of the local people exclaiming, “We thought the white men were Christians, since they brought the religion to us. But they bombed us, and on a Sunday too!” (105).⁵⁰

The play concludes with the heroic protagonist’s stoical death, which takes place almost immediately after he agrees with his son that the Delta Pastorate should unilaterally secede from the CMS and become an independent body under Canterbury:⁵¹ “I am tired of the game, tired of running. We ARE Christians. [...] Go then and tell the Lagos people, the African people shall be free” (128). “We” and “the African people” draw in the play’s audience, who are acknowledged secondarily as Christians but primarily as Africans. Osofisan, as I will proceed to explain, opens a space for secularity by turning the (Christian) faith that to his original audience is presumably an intrinsic good into an instrumental good.

How does Osofisan configure the link between the missionary (Crowther) and literature – the latter of which is the means by which Crowther is mediated as well as the

⁵⁰ Compare Homi Bhabha’s famous discussion, in the essay “Signs Taken for Wonders,” of the fragmenting of colonial authority when it faces colonial difference (in particular the appropriation of Christianity and its Bible by colonized peoples). Bhabha tells the story of Christian converts in 1817 near Delhi who wonder, “*how can the word of God come from the flesh-eating mouths of the English?*” (*The Location of Culture* 166).

⁵¹ The incident is historically accurate (Stock 396).

expertise of Osofisan? Two passages are especially instructive. The first is where Crowther tells his granddaughter of an epiphany by which he discovered genre contextualization as a way of navigating through a changing world. (Osofisan presumably sees himself to be doing the same work as Crowther in this regard.) Crowther tells his granddaughter that he heard a “secret voice” while he was translating the biblical book of Proverbs:

Of what use quoting and quoting the Bible, mouthing dry sermons, to people who are largely illiterate? To reach a people, don't you know you must do as their popular storytellers do, speak in the language of their legends and fables?— Or had Jesus himself not shown the way? That was it! Oh why had I not seen it before? And so I began, with the stories my mother taught me, adapting them to the teachings of our Lord. And how it worked! (33)

It worked, and the proof is that many Yoruba chose to convert. Osofisan's scene dramatizes how interlingual translation (from Hebrew or English into Yoruba) extends towards cultural translation: from the perspective of Osofisan and his Crowther it is not enough to render the words of the missionaries' Bible in Yoruba words. We may recall Crowther's journal entry: “In tracing out words and their various uses, I am now and then led to search at length into some traditions or customs of the Yorubas, a brief account of one of which I now give you.” The Christian message transmitted at British schools and mission stations can be reframed to be more accessible and therefore more culture-affirming to his Yoruba community. We might be tempted to conclude, then, that literature is merely instrumental whereas indigenized culture is central, until we recall that Osofisan himself is deploying literature – realist drama, in particular – to make the point.

History confirms that Crowther's realization (which is the Africanization of Christianity) can be incorporated in the movement towards institutional (that is, ecclesialastical) decolonization or separatism, for the Niger Delta Pastorate did secede on the day after Crowther's death. As the Comaroffs argue, a shift in medium is certainly as

significant as a shift in message; in this case the foreign, propositional, literate message is being reframed by an indigenous, imaginative, nonliterate medium that remains compelling and accessible to the Yoruba despite foreign cultural and political incursion. The binary colonial model is further dismantled by the fact that Crowther's reframing of Christianity is motivated not just by his loyalty to Yoruba culture but also by the very biblical texts the missionaries provided to him. Crowther turns out to be following "the way" that Jesus showed.

The second passage is taken from Osofisan's production notes, adapted as an introduction to the printed play. Here Osofisan more clearly provides an argument for the complementarity of Crowther's missionary and scholarly roles. Implicitly he justifies his willingness to exonerate the historical Crowther from charges of being "a lackey to the white colonials" (4) when he quotes approvingly from the first biography written of Crowther, *Samuel Crowther: The Slave Boy who became Bishop of the Niger*, by Jesse Page (1892). By the logic Page and Osofisan employ, the followers of Crowther should be expected to be *Onibuku*:

No man ever appreciated intellectual culture more than the Bishop, and he frequently pointed out the disadvantage under which the African labours through having no written language, and therefore no literature. He assured his clergy that, apart from gifts of tongues, of healing and miracles, which God gave as credentials of their Divine mission, the Apostles found it a great advantage that the age in which Christianity was introduced into the world was that of literature. (Osofisan 4,5 = Page 282)

Crowther and his disciples are here evangelists of writing, not just of the Gospel. The passage implies that neither the historical Crowther, nor Page, nor Osofisan have any serious doubts about the good that would result from introducing writing to the people of Africa.

It is unclear what Page's Crowther means when he says Christianity began during "the age of literature," for the great Greek dramatists and Hebrew poets lived centuries before Christ. This is probably not the Romantic definition of literature as imaginative writing, but a simpler definition: literature as learned writing, writing done by the *literati*.⁵² What matters to Page about "the age of literature," and what he takes to matter to Crowther, is the benefit literature provides to Christianity. Osofisan, on the other hand, is focusing on the benefit that Christianity provides to literature, and evaluating Crowther's legacy according to that principle. This is not an absolute disagreement, but a significant shift in emphasis that yields an alternative conception of Nigerian literature's relationship to the missionary movement.

Osofisan is adamant that Crowther not be accused of repudiating his culture and assimilating to the British. This is arguably the conviction that motivates Osofisan to write a positive portrayal of a man who, as a key player in the Christianization and colonization of Nigeria, stands for much of what Osofisan stands against.⁵³ In scene five, there is a flashback to the young Crowther's sermon about charity which, instead of a strict biblical exposition, consists of a retelling, with audience participation, of a Yoruba folktale. "God loveth a cheerful giver," Crowther begins, "But our own forefathers, if I may remind you, preached nothing less. Remember 'The Story of Òréké and Her Husband'?" (35). This Crowther may preach a message of modernity and demystification, or a message of the Africanization of Christianity, but never a eulogy for Yoruba traditional religion.

⁵² Still, he is implicitly proposing a synchronism by which first century Mediterranean is equivalent to nineteenth century West Africa. This proposed synchronism is not, it seems to me, without warrant. Both periods were sites of a dramatic increase in the availability of religious texts, particularly booklets, as well as in the activity of travelling missionaries. For the first century context, see Lieu or Stroumsa.

⁵³ Osofisan's plays characteristically demonstrate the continuing dynamism and relevance of precolonial belief systems by giving materialist but ethical readings of them. See *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* and *Another Raft*.

In the play's closing scene, having finally accepted the fact that the CMS missionaries are fundamentally racist and imperialist, Crowther asks Emma to open up a box of beautiful wooden carvings that he had kept under lock and key for thirty years. These were carved by rural Nigerians and given to him as an expression of gratitude for the spiritual and economic help he had given to them. Crowther, always eschewing controversy, had kept them hidden because "our church people would not have understood. For many, such is their zeal, any carved wood is a piece of devilry" (120). However, Osofisan's protagonist realizes on his dying day that denying his culture is too high a price to pay for respecting missionaries and the institutions they founded. Thus Crowther and, implicitly, the Nigerian Christianity and churches that follow after him and bear his two books ultimately come out in support of a creative and hybrid version of indigenous culture, which is expressible through literature.⁵⁴

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Extending Osofisan's suggestion that Crowther opened the way for a modern and Christianized articulation of Yoruba culture in literature, in the next chapter I make the claim that Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the CMS Yoruba mission can be taken as ancestors of Yoruba or Nigerian literature. In addition to Osofisan, contemporary literary scholars are increasingly turning to Crowther as they seek to understand the development of African literatures. The Winter 2009 issue of *Research in African Literatures*, for example, contains two articles about Crowther; in one of them Laura Murphy asserts boldly that "it is integral that we look to works such as [twentieth-century Ghanaian literary writer Ama Ata] Aidoo's

⁵⁴ The way that Bible-and-primer Christianity, in the story of Osofisan's fictional Crowther, eventually benefits pre-Christian, indigenous traditions is the same as in the story of the real-life Yoruba convert and evangelist Emmanuel Moses Lìjádù (1862-1926), born at Aké and trained at Abeokuta's CMS Teacher Training Institute. According to Adebajo, "Though Lìjádù studied *ifá* to wage war against *ifá*, he unknowingly helped the propagation of Yorùbá folklore. Till date, the two Ifa books produced by Lìjádù are sure sources of Yorùbá myths, legends, proverbs, songs, memorates [*sic*] and folklore" (11) Lìjádù led a movement, the Evangelistic Band, that separated from the Anglican church in 1901. So here Christianity unwittingly helps indigenous culture, potentially to its own detriment.

and Crowther's to understand the way in which the slave trade's effects are coded within the literature of West Africa" (62).

To demonstrate that Crowther is a literary ancestor calls for the techniques associated with the field of literary history. Because of the difficulty of thinking about how Nigeria's literature emerged in a colonial context and depended upon printing technologies, literary conventions, and Christian ideas that were imported rather than indigenous, a postcolonial mode of literary history is particularly helpful. Though Crowther helped build the main tools that were used by missionaries in the education of the men and women who went on to produce early Nigerian literature – foremost are Crowther's Yoruba primer and Bible, but also his Yoruba vocabulary and grammar – Crowther himself was not a writer of imaginative literature. Therefore, to show how the missionary movement became foundational to Nigerian literature, I draw attention to the missionaries' favourite literary text, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which Crowther's CMS colleague and friend David Hinderer translated into Yoruba in 1866, and which European missionaries steadfastly promoted well into the twentieth century. It is quite possible that Crowther provided assistance to Hinderer as he translated, for CMS missionaries often gathered at Abeokuta and Lagos, and Crowther was unofficially the linguistic consultant for the whole Yoruba mission. At any rate, while postcolonial literary history guides a literary historian in interpreting how an authentic literary tradition may have emerged out of a history marked by colonial incursion, the Yoruba *Pilgrim's Progress* seems to have guided pioneering Yoruba literary writers in interpreting how their own variously Christian and secular writings could be construed to emerge out of a Yoruba religious past.

This chapter has given an account of Samuel Ajayi Crowther as the quintessential Onibuku and demonstrated why both Bible and primer, both evangelistic book and linguistic book, were intrinsically linked in his mind and in the minds of the “Book-people” whose numbers rose slowly in the nineteenth but rapidly in the twentieth century, as Africans finally began assuming leadership in Christian churches. The chapter has argued that Ajayi Crowther was not simply delegated as evangelist-translator and figurehead of native agency by missionary superiors – committed as they were to the vernacular principle – but that he sought and shaped his own position of authority to a surprising extent. This was the authority of an author as well as of a bishop. I therefore extend Osofisan’s gesture to propose that Crowther both symbolizes the *ideal* of, and did important preparatory work to make *actual*, a modern, Yoruba, and Christian mode of literature.

CHAPTER THREE

English Pilgrim and African Ancestor:

Towards a Postcolonial Literary History

By demonstrating commonalities between the African versions of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and three great twentieth-century Yoruba literary writers, this chapter disagrees with a common literary-historical periodization that imagines a Christian-colonial interruption, located in the nineteenth and perhaps early twentieth century, that "authentic" African cultural production has subsequently had to recover from and, with difficulty, to learn to disregard. Several commonalities in the respective contents of the two bodies of text(s) are easily identified: direct allusions, for instance, and similarities of plot or moral message. However, as the second half of this chapter will argue, a more important aspect of Bunyan's (and thus the missionaries') influence is the hermeneutical form by which the text endeavours to move its reader. This form involves first creating a gap between the story or event depicted and the moral message intended for the reader, and secondly instructing the reader on crossing the gap. Whereas Bunyan creates a gap between the reader's everyday life and a Christian eschatological morality, the Yoruba writers create a gap between traditional Yoruba culture or belief and a variously Christianized and secular modernity.

The chapter thus disagrees with a certain linear periodizing of literary and cultural history, that proceeds from the traditional past through the Christian-colonial interruption to an “authentically” African modernity, and that imagines African literature, while located within the third stage, to draw its vitality purely from the first stage. This model tends to absolutize a notion of Christianity as the binary opposite of African religious culture. Instead, I argue, all three “stages” should be taken as elements of what Ato Quayson in *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* refers to as literature’s “cultural resource-base” (13). As Quayson reveals, that Nigerian literature demonstrates continuities with precolonial oral forms does not mean that it is simply an automatic extension of them (2). This chapter’s examination of the work of Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, and Wole Soyinka takes Quayson’s point that literature is the product of creative authors’ “strategic choices exercised in filiation with the indigenous conceptual resources” (6) but extends it to take into account the nineteenth-century missionary encounter. Specifically, I propose that *The Pilgrim’s Progress* from England can be taken as an African (literary) ancestor.

In most African cosmologies, the community’s deceased ancestors continue to define the present as well as, through interaction with those still living, to establish the future. In the literary historical narrative this chapter will develop, the place of Crowther and the nineteenth-century missionary movement he represents are like that of an ancestor to which – in terms of the central claim of this dissertation – Nigerian literature persists in responding. However, this neat claim of historical continuity between missionaries and contemporary Nigerian writers does not sit comfortably with the fact that European colonialism was experienced, by those who lived through it and those who have reflected upon it, as a rupture. (It was not only a rupture, of course, for as the Comaroffs, Peel, and all scholarly accounts of

the encounter show, it did not generate a new world *ex nihilo*.) If the colonial encounter eventually allowed the Yoruba *Pilgrim's Progress* to be promoted to the position of literary ancestor, it also demoted other ancestors whom the Yoruba were worshiping and believing in and communing with prior to colonialism; unquestionably, missionary Christianity encouraged this demotion. If the missionary encounter helped to usher in a political and social economy where books and church membership were valuable, it also helped usher something out. For these reasons, honouring missionary texts with the title literary ancestor to a body of African (and not European) literature is a provocative move, perhaps offensive to some. As groundwork for my claim, therefore, I open this chapter with three short sections that think about historical continuity across the rupture of colonialism and in the literature that responds to colonialism. I take account of the scholarly discussions that have generated the literary-historical periodization with which I take issue and I show how these discussions have taken place under the scholarly umbrella of postcolonialism.

Questions of History and Literary Periodization in Postcolonialism

Colonialism as Historical Rupture

In addition to an obituary for Henry Venn, the 1873 issue of *The Church Missionary Intelligencer, A Monthly Journal of Missionary Information* contained a twenty-five page unsigned essay entitled “The Negro.” It is a review of and a response to several recent books about Christianity and West Africa, and with frightening clarity it articulates how colonialism could be allied to a notion of historical discontinuity:

To a superficial observer it might seem as though Africa had had some share in the history of the world. But if we distinguish that which is perhaps somewhat affectedly yet intelligibly termed Nigritia from the fringe of civilization which has perpetually clung to her borders, it will be patent that the part which Africa has played in history

has been the part played by those who have been the oppressors of her sons. [...] Not even along the fertile valley of the Niger are there any traces of the past which have yet been brought to light and submitted to the intelligent scrutiny of the present generation. No written character or engraving of any sort has preserved to posterity by faithful record the vicissitudes which have befallen the nations of Africa and borne witness to the times of old. The utmost, we believe, that her sons claim is that by oral tradition, sententious proverbs embodying wisdom, and rude verses lingering in the recollection of aged men, telling of great warriors and successful forays, may yet be met with. [...] A recollection of two or three centuries would probably exhaust the traditions of the past, except so far as they might be of a most vague and general import. In the absence of all such monuments and records which constitute in some shape or other the glory of nations, and which, even when they have perished, preserve a memorial of them to future generations, it is painful to make the declaration, but there seems no possibility of escaping it, that the *Africa of the negro has no past*. (227, 228, italics in original)

Needless to say, this conception of African peoples and what Crowther described on the 1841 Niger Expedition are poles apart. On the Expedition his role was to discover within the heart of Africa the very things that this excerpt claims do not exist.¹ With the death of Venn and the rising Empire-mindedness of British popular opinion in the 1870s, Crowther was to find his authority increasingly assailed, whereas in Britain and even among CMS missionaries overseas the viewpoint articulated in the *Intelligencer* was increasingly widely held.

On the one hand, the patent falsity of many of these assertions, such as the claims about the complete lack of writing in the interior of Africa and the short memory span of oral traditions,² immediately disqualify them as itself a source of information on the African past. On the other hand, despite or even because of their factual errors they are a useful source of information on colonial desire, on what was increasingly at the end of the nineteenth century a dominant ideology of race and culture in Europe. If the Hegelian assertion was correct that

¹ Like the impression given in Osofisan's play, Crowther was characteristically curious about the history of the African peoples he worked with as missionary. In his account of the second Niger Expedition in which he participated, in 1853, Crowther provides an overview of the history of the Igala people, whose territory sits between Achebe's Igbo people and Soyinka's Yoruba (174). This is among the earliest information we have on the Igala.

² On writing in Nigeria prior to European contact see Patrick J. Ryan, *Imale: Yoruba Participation in the Muslim Tradition*. For an explanation of the complexity, artfulness, and historical memory of orality in West Africa see Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*.

Africa had no history, implications were as disturbing as they were clear: the anonymous author goes on to defend what he takes to be the CMS policy of training the African recaptives at Sierra Leone to live and think like Europeans. “Why Europeanize them? The answer may be, What else could even be done? We have already shown that Africa has no past. How, then, were race instincts to be respected which either had no existence or which were fatal and soul-destroying to the negro?” (244). By this logic, a history is necessary for cultural autonomy and political autonomy, so Africa disqualified for both.

In view of this colonial ideology, it is no surprise that many of the earliest published texts written by sub-Saharan Africans were histories. The colonizer assumes that civilization and nation required as their foundation a history; the colonized respond energetically by demonstrating they have one. The Yoruba case is typical: the missionary-educated intelligentsia first took up the pen to help produce prayer books and Bibles and tracts, and not long after that they turned to local histories – a history of Lagos in 1916, of Abeokuta in 1917 (Adebajo 38). Of course, these endeavours were no match for the thick, several-thousand-year written histories of the European “races,” nor for the ideologies of racial superiority underpinning late nineteenth-century colonization. However, African histories produced under European colonization should not be understood simply as uncritical, reflex-like reactions to an invasion, destined to fail. They were also wise and brave responses to the experience of destabilization, of being cut off from a way of life that had been developed over great spans of time and that was *not* rendered obsolete by the rupture of colonialism. Furthermore, to forge organic continuities with ancestors and their way of life was in itself a powerful method of defence. This is because the colonial project justified itself partly by means of the ideology of modernity, which imposed a separation from the predecessors (cf.

Appiah, *In My Father's House* 125, Mignolo 173). In modernity, the past was (re)defined as the age of narrow provincialism rather than cosmopolitanism, of the individual's slavery to the group's fixed and ahistorical notions of religion and tradition, and of ignorance of technology and empirical knowledge.

Supreme among the products of this desire to assert an ethnic and an African history in the face of the expanding presence of Europe and Eurocentric history is the Yoruba clergyman Samuel Johnson's *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*. Spanning more than 700 pages, Johnson's *History* was written in the 1890s but not published until 1921 because the original manuscripts were lost by the CMS in England in 1899. Samuel's brother Obadiah, who after the death of his brother in 1901 took on the heavy responsibility of rewriting the *History* from Samuel's notes, comments wryly in his preface that the "so-called loss of the manuscripts" was "so strange that one could not help thinking that there was more in it than appeared on the surface" (ix). Strange indeed, given the prevailing view at the time that African had no history, and therefore no civilization.

Samuel Johnson is transparent about his motives in his preface:

What led to this production was not a burning desire of the author to appear in print—as all who are well acquainted with him will readily admit—but a purely patriotic move, that the history of our fatherland might not be lost in oblivion, especially as our old sires are fast dying out.

Educated natives of Yoruba are well acquainted with the history of England and with that of Rome and Greece, but of the history of their own country they know nothing whatever! This reproach it is one of the author's objects to remove. (vii)

Johnson must be regarded to have succeeded in this object of overcoming the historical rupture entailed in colonialism. He traces the Yoruba people back to their founder, the "mythical personage" Oduduwa (143), and does so without any servile efforts to make his

account palatable to the demythologizing European mind. He mentions the arrival of the first European missionaries halfway through his account, and identifies this as the moment when “light began to dawn on the Yoruba country” (296) which was at the time embroiled in “a series of fratricidal wars” (293). Nonetheless, foreigners occupy but a tiny portion of his account. He gives the impression, which is certainly an accurate one, that until the 1880s the Europeans’ presence was hardly felt among the Yoruba.

The *History of the Yorubas* is to this day the most comprehensive source of precolonial Yoruba history. By drawing together masses of written records and eyewitness accounts of nineteenth-century history as well as scores of oral traditions, collected in the author’s extensive travels around Yorubaland, Johnson creatively bridges the oral-literate divide (cf. Quayson 29). According to Peel, the greatest achievement of the *History* is “to reconcile the contradictory claims of Christian faith and Yoruba identity” (305). Adrian Hastings claims that it did for the Yoruba what Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* did for the English, which is to say it provided for the Yoruba a national history that could eventually underpin both a modern nation-state and a national Christianization (*The Construction of Nationhood* 158). Johnson’s father Henry Johnson was, like Crowther, a recaptured slave educated by the CMS in Freetown. That is where Samuel was born and where among the substantial community of exiled Yorubas he learned to conceptualize his ethnicity and his country. Pioneer CMS missionary David Hinderer recruited Henry in 1858 to return to Yorubaland as his assistant (Doortmond 169). Thus Hinderer, to whom Samuel Johnson with great gratitude dedicates his *History*, and Mrs. Anna Hinderer came to be Johnson’s teachers and mentors in his adolescent years. Johnson exemplifies how the

colonial rupture generates among the colonized people a desire to find – that is, to produce – their history.

Many histories of African peoples were produced in the early twentieth century, and the mid-century was characterized by a strong national self-confidence among African leaders and thinkers. African nations were evidently moving rapidly along the road that European nations had taken a century or two earlier. However, by 1960, perhaps a little before, several writers began to wonder whether the standard ways of thinking about nation and history might be unhelpful or even inappropriate for Africa. Evidence was mounting that the transition to political independence was going to be very far from the experience of social and individual emancipation that were independence's stated goals. Out of this experience of disappointment emerged literary and theoretical writings – by authors such as Frantz Fanon, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Amílcar Cabral, Chinua Achebe – that have now been taken up as core texts of postcolonial studies.

Postcolonialism is the collection of approaches and questions and texts in relation to which the issues considered in this dissertation are generally studied by scholars at most Western and many African universities. The questions of what to make of history and of how to make history in the wake of colonialism are constitutive of postcolonialism, as evidenced by their prominence in many postcolonial anthologies and handbooks.³ For the remainder of this section, as I chart the development of specifically literary thinking about history in Yorubaland, I will be engaging directly with the development of postcolonialism as a discipline. I situate my own scholarly endeavours within it and, indeed, I would be severely handicapped in my efforts if I did not draw upon the terms and methods it has developed

³ For example, Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*; Helen Tiffin, Bill Ashcroft, and Gareth Griffiths *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*; Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*.

over the past three decades. By the end of this chapter, however, I will find reason to challenge what I see as an error it characteristically makes in evaluating the missionary encounter.

Postcolonialism's Literary Responses to the Question of History

Since its emergence as a field of inquiry in the 1980s, postcolonialism has made much of literature. Though it is constitutively preoccupied with political and social problems, its most important proponents tended to be literary scholars (Edward Said, Abdul JanMohamed, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak). These leading postcolonialists have not had to apologize for their literary approach: one conviction that unites postcolonialism's assorted practitioners is that literature is a suitable vehicle for responding powerfully and oppositionally to colonialism because colonialism is not just about guns and treaties and governments, but it is also crucially about how people think and feel. Graham Huggan explains in his recent prognosis for postcolonial studies, *Interdisciplinary Measures*: "in the continuing struggle to create new possibilities of thinking, as well as living, for previously exploited and dispossessed peoples, literature plays a formative role" (13). Even if the damage of colonialism cannot be undone by means of anti-colonial guns and treaties and governments – we might even say *because* they cannot be undone – hope remains in the "transformative power of the imagination" (13).

Many of the earliest African literary writers in regions where written literature arrived with colonialism focused directly on representing a precolonial or a-colonial *African* past that was compelling, that was experienced by the community as continuingly relevant, and that made a case against the *Intelligencer's* claim that Africa had no "share in the history of the

world.” Examples are the Ugandan Akiki Nyabongo’s 1936 novel *Africa Answers Back*, the Béninois Paul Hazoumé’s 1938 novel *Doguicimi*, the Ghanaian R. E. Obeng’s 1941 novel *Eighteenpence*, and the best-known African novel, Chinua Achebe’s 1958 *Things Fall Apart*. Commenting in a 1965 lecture on his first three novels, Achebe, an Igbo from south-east Nigeria, explains how his goal in writing was to make a historical claim:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 44)

The enthusiastic responses to Achebe’s early novels suggest that he accomplished this goal. *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, stresses how the traditional social structure and patterns of religious and agricultural practice in the Igbo village Umuofia represented complex, logical thinking, and preserved genuinely historical memory. In Gareth Griffiths’ words, the tragedy of the protagonist Okonkwo’s demise and his community’s penetration by colonial forces takes the “African world [...] as a participant in the historical events [of colonial contact], and not merely as [their] victim” (*African Literatures* 120). It achieves this without denying “imperfections” such as the society’s staunch patriarchy (King-Aribisala 194).

Achebe’s intention of restoring to his African readers their history is part of his broader project of fostering their self-confidence as Africans and also as citizens of particular nations and members of particular ethnicities. There are two problems, however, with the way that in the quoted passage he reacts against the colonization of history. First, he suggests that the religious (that is, Christian) components of Europeans’ motivations or actions contributed unambiguously to the destruction of African history and, by implication, cultural self-confidence. Though the *Intelligencer* article points to such a conclusion, missionary-sponsored writings that commend or commemorate the African past, by Crowther and

Johnson and others, point in an opposite direction. This error is endemic to postcolonialism, which, according to Robert Young, “scarcely values subaltern resistance that does not operate according to its own secular terms” (338). In actuality, Christian identity and practice are deployable both by and against colonizing forces; we will return to this concern about postcolonialism at the chapter’s end. The second problem with Achebe’s assertion is that he does not challenge the assumptions, hidden in terms such as “savagery,” that prop up the European infatuation with history. Achebe’s stated project of restoring his people’s self-confidence by the rehabilitation of their Igbo or African history recalls Xenophon’s writing on Greek history and Sir Walter Scott’s writing on Scottish history. However, there are problems inherent in any postcolonial, African version of those European projects.

In the academic study of postcolonialism since the 1980s a consensus has emerged that history has been, in the words of *The Post-Colonial Studies Handbook*, “a prominent [...] instrument for the control of subject peoples” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 355). As a result, “Direct opposition to Eurocentric notions of progress,” says Huggan, “is one of postcolonialism’s most readily identifiable features.” So too is the challenging of “easy temporal categorizations that might divide the world into postcolonial and (pre)colonial, the future and the past” (16). Therefore, to generate a counter-history of the same sort as the colonizer’s history, that is, a linear, teleological, nationalistic history in the realist mode, is an inadequate strategy for resistance.⁴ Postcolonialism proposes a range of alternatives: stories

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty has provided an influential critique of history as a modernist project and a colonial weapon, particularly in *Provincializing Europe*, but also in the article “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History.” He contends that when the discipline of history turns to non-European subjects it invariably operates by implicit comparison with Europe, and thus Europe is its “sovereign theoretical subject.” In response, rather than jettisoning the discipline he argues for a mode of historical research that “deliberately [makes] visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices” (“Postcoloniality” 383, 388). Thus one might deconstruct key terms in colonial historiography such as “savagery” and “civilization,” “faithful record” versus “oral tradition,” revealing them to be not transparently universal but, rather, partisan, historically contingent, and often repressive in their deployment.

and myths rather than chronological timelines; magical realist rather than historical novels; aesthetics and ecology rather than politics, great battles and great men; the heterogeneous, the comparative, and the imaginative rather than the linear, the teleological and the metropolitan. Such a proposal is already present in Achebe (inchoately in his early novels, and more overtly in his more recent writings such as the 1987 novel *Anthills of the Savannah* and the 2000 essay *Home and Exile*). For instance, what the *Intelligencer* disparaged as merely “rude verses” and “sententious proverbs embodying wisdom” are in *Things Fall Apart* generally both wise and beautiful. The “monuments and records” fetishized by the *Intelligencer* are not essential components of a civil society; the Evil Forest in Umuofia, the *egwugwu* dances, the protocols for important conversations – all three anchor group identity and warn against the mistakes of the past.

Caribbean poet Derek Walcott is representative of a large number of postcolonial writers and theorists who more radically reject the colonial model of history. Walcott calls presumptuous the “people who believe that history represents achievement” (“Derek Walcott” 24) and decries how an artist is rendered impotent when interpreters subject him by historical-contextual interpretation to “the bondage of time, which is called ‘history’” (23). Walcott’s best-known evocation of his proposed alternative is in his 1979 poem, “The Sea is History”:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that gray vault. The sea. (25)

In Walcott’s ironic dethroning of the colonialist notion of history, European “discovery” stands in for Genesis and the Middle Passage for Exodus, but those do not qualify as history at all. The kind of history that Walcott valorizes – in this poem as in his 1978 play

Pantomime and his 1990 epic poem *Omeros* – is immeasurable and shapeless as the sea; and it is always recreating itself. Doubting that the colonizers (“Sirs”) are asking for history in good faith, unlike Samuel Johnson he refuses to comply.

Walcott’s approach thus signals a development within postcolonialism that moves beyond Achebe’s because it draws upon the particular abilities of literature to respond to, and ultimately to reject, the colonialist preoccupation with history. Walcott critiques certain historical assumptions as both exogenous and detrimental to Caribbean culture; in the next section I consider, more broadly, how postcolonialism thinks about the foreignness of literature itself.

The Status of the Foreign in a Postcolonial Literary History

Postcolonialism tends to be as dissatisfied with the use of singular and linear historical narratives for delineating and justifying nations and societies as it is for delineating and justifying bodies of literature. We would be ill advised to presume that establishing such a genealogy is in *any* context, let alone a postcolonial context, a straightforward matter.⁵ That there is a single linear sequence of literary works linking *Beowulf*, for instance, to *Paradise Lost* or *Ulysses* is highly questionable; such a sequence would have to assume what literary historian David Perkins calls “a unified and therefore unsophisticated conception of the past” (20). Only the rather arbitrary imposition of a racist or nationalist framework can

⁵ German literary critic Wolfgang Iser had noted as early as 1969 that literary history could no longer “be conceived in terms of a linear arrangement of literary works that keep influencing one another and seem to be on the way to an as yet undisclosed telos” (Hutcheon 80).

make such a sequence possible,⁶ which is why it is unpopular today and why it is utterly impossible in a postcolonial context.

The problem is even more acute in a postcolonial context, however, where literary languages such as English, literary technologies such as the book, and literary genres such as the novel are, according to a certain historical understanding, all “foreign.” Indeed, we might without difficulty subscribe to a neat, linear, and globalizing model of literary history that matches the global expansion of European political and economic control. We might suppose that just as the explorer Columbus inaugurated the latter, the novelist Cervantes, under the flag of Spain, or perhaps the flag of a Europe-to-come, inaugurated the former. Both by the twentieth century had occupied the globe. Building such a narrative of literary history as colonial history might help unmask colonialism’s ongoing complicity with cultural and academic processes that comprise “literature” (cf. Mignolo 176). However, the methodologies of postcolonial literary studies are unwilling to abandon literature as irredeemably colonialist. A postcolonial literary history demonstrates that the development of literature is not merely an aspect of the development of the colonial world-system. Indeed, postcolonialism tends to focus its attention on the precolonial and noncolonial currents that flow into literature.

Responses to the problem of postcolonial literary history for Nigeria can be arranged along a spectrum according to the amount of “foreign” contribution they allow, from a conciliatory response that stresses what is indigenous while anticipating the development of a

⁶ Though scholarship today repudiates a racist frame for literary history, it is far from unanimous that a nationalist frame is inappropriate. Linda Hutcheon in “Rethinking the National Model” and Imre Szeman in *Zones of Instability* both argue for the usefulness of the national model of literary history and of the literary attempt to create a nation, in spite of the nation’s artificiality. With respect to postcolonial nations they advocate a strategic and pragmatic essentialism. That is, even though the modern nation-state has been foisted upon much of the world, it has become a useful tool for the defence of the very interests that have been subordinated to it and that it now has the power to authenticate (e.g. Szeman 13, Hutcheon 13).

literature that follows the Western pattern, to a separatist response that discards all that is not indigenous. All of the literary historical writing dealing with Nigeria of which I am aware, however – from Bruce A. King’s 1971 collection *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, or Bernth Lindfors’ 1973 monograph *Folklore in Nigerian Literature* right up to Olakunle George’s 2003 *Relocating Agency* and Dan Izevbaye’s 2004 overview article “West African Literature in English” – has in common an interest in demonstrating literature’s continuities with cultural traditions that are predominantly oral and that originate prior to European contact. The earliest literary-historical writing in the 1960s and 1970s, because it has few African disciplinary precedents and because postcolonial theorizing had not yet begun in any self-conscious way, is generally conciliatory, implying a model where African and Western literatures are overlapping spheres that are gradually evolving towards unity. It allows a great deal of “foreign” contribution, though it prefers to give attention to that which is indigenous. Exemplary is King’s introduction to his 1971 collection *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, one of the first monographs on an African national literature.⁷ “Just as each European nation has its own literature,” he asserts, “so each nation in Africa can be expected to produce its own literary tradition” (11). King writes with the optimism about national politics and culture that characterized the first decade of Nigeria’s independence, during which time Nigeria seemed to be a shining example of a mature corpus of African literature, free of foreign control, for other nations to follow (Gérard 630).

If he is to show that Nigerian literature stands on the level with Western literature, King must necessarily show that it is not merely an offshoot of European literature. Thus,

⁷ Similar in perspective are most among the earliest monographs on African literature, including Margaret Laurence *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists* (1968), and Bernth Lindfors *Folklore in Nigerian Literature* (1973). Most of these early critics are non-Africans.

It was once felt that Nigerian literature grew out of the study of English literature. But, as the writings of Tutuola, Ekwensi and Clark show, modern Nigerian literature has many roots, including tribal poetry and legend, traditional drama, and even that unclassifiable body of pamphlets and short stories printed in Onitsha and other urban centres. (10)

This nonlinear framework has now become conventional. But King is reluctant to move too far from the standard ways of imagining Western literature, and is ambivalent about claiming for Nigerian literature fully distinct standards for classification or evaluation:

Form and style in Nigerian literature in English are often perceptibly different from those found in European literature. How much of the difference is the result of new literary conventions developing out of African culture and how much of the difference is simply the result of inexperience in handling European literary forms? [...] Nigerian writers, for example, seem more interested in communal rather than personal problems. Consequently, characterization in their novels and plays is often lacking in depth. (8)

King is certainly charitable here, accepting the position of an outsider, implicitly suggesting that an African critic might be better equipped than he to evaluate the indigenous elements of Nigerian literature. A postcolonial perspective, however, would challenge him for evaluating African literatures by explicitly Western standards.

Literary historical writing about Nigeria since the late 1970s has tended to be less willing than King to regard as benign the contributions of colonialism to literary development.⁸ For this reason Gareth Griffiths, for instance, doubts whether much of the earliest literary writing in West Africa (he is thinking particularly of autobiographical conversion narratives) is “African writing” at all, because Europeans exerted such direct and indirect restrictions on form and content (*African Literatures* 62). Aware of Europeans’ intent to “civilize,” he is cautious about classifying as African literature any of the books generated by nineteenth-century missionaries’ programs of literacy education for prospective

⁸ For example, see Abiola Irele, “Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka” 51; Bernth Lindfors, “Amos Tutuola: Literary Syncretism and the Yoruba Folk Tradition” 644.

converts (“Writing, Literacy and History” 147) or even by twentieth-century secular educational presses, which refused to print in vernacular languages (*ibid.* 153).

Griffiths is on the lookout for censorship and ventriloquism in early African writings, though he is also attuned to subtle signs that African writers are deviating from missionaries’ expectations. Much more aggressively anti-imperial, however, are the *nativist* literary histories that emerged in the 1970s and ’80s. They draw upon notions of Negritude associated with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, and conceive of their intellectual project in stark anti-imperialist terms; this is an unabashedly separatist model of literature and criticism. This position is loudest and clearest in an opening salvo of Nigerian critics Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike’s 1980 *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*: “African literature is an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literature. [...] Its constituency is separate and radically different from that of the European or other literatures” (4, italics in original).⁹ As a matter of course, these three critics argue that twentieth-century Nigerian literature has developed smoothly out of oral precursors; and the Nigerian writers they prefer are those whose dependence upon oral sources is most overt (234). So whereas King de-emphasized and Griffiths disparaged Nigerian literature’s European roots, Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike deny them. They

⁹ Another examples of a nativist perspective on Nigerian literature is Phaniel Akubueze Egejuru’s 1980 *Towards African Literary Independence: A Dialogue with Contemporary African Writers*. Stemming from the Negritude movement and close in spirit to nativism’s literary separatism are Abdul JanMohamed’s division of African literary history into two categories, colonialist (hegemonic) and African (non-hegemonic) literatures (*Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* [1983]) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s attack on the European-language study of African literatures as a continuing colonization (*Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*).

Referring in part to translations of African texts into European languages, Ngũgĩ decries how “In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Europe stole art treasures from Africa to decorate their houses and museums; in the twentieth century Europe is stealing the treasures of the mind to enrich their languages and cultures” (xii). Most Nigerian writers, most notably Achebe, have generally disagreed with Ngũgĩ, insisting on their ability to mould a foreign language to purposes of their own. They point out that, unlike Kenya where Swahili is effectively a national language, spoken by all who have attended school, many African countries have no single African language that is widely enough spoken to unite the country.

pursue decolonization through retaliatory warfare, and their weapons include the abolition of departments of European literatures in Nigerian universities (397) and the complete takeover by African critics of the institution of the criticism of African literature (302).

Obviously they have not been unopposed in their extreme views: one of the fiercest and most famous scholarly confrontations in the whole field of African literatures was their argument in the late 1970s with Soyinka, whom they accused of obscurantist elitism and of a cultural inferiority complex leading to assimilationism (182, 236); he charged them, in a 1975 rejoinder, with an anti-intellectual primitivism and an unsophisticated Manicheanism (“Neo-Tarzanism”). By the 1990s, however, once postcolonialism had progressed beyond the stark binary frameworks of its infancy and ideologies, and once epistemologies of Eurocentrism had been exposed and critiqued, nativism declined in popularity. In his 1992 *In My Father’s House*, philosopher and literary critic Kwame Appiah looks back at Soyinka’s charge and develops it by showing how Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike are in their African separatism in fact deploying a “reverse discourse” that reconfigures the “the West’s own Herderian legacy—its highly elaborated ideologies of national autonomy, of language and literature as their cultural substrate” (59). Here, and in his other writings,¹⁰ Appiah is taking a stand for a “cosmopolitan” mode of thinking and reading that respects difference but resists the nativists’ absolutizing of difference by a robust will to cooperate and an awareness of interdependency. He concludes his discussion on nativism as follows:

for us to forget Europe is to suppress the conflicts that have shaped our identities;
since it is too late for us to escape each other, we might instead seek to turn to our

¹⁰ Appiah demonstrates in *In My Father’s House* the deep linkage between race, nation, and literature in nineteenth-century European thought (50). His clearest statement, however, is in his 2002 article “Cosmopolitan Reading.” Olakunle George provides a similar perspective on Fagunwa in particular in his 1997 article “Compound of Spells.” For George the nativists, which he names “proponents of alterity,” reinstate by opposition to it the category “Europe” as a self-sufficient frame of reference, thereby missing a chance to step out of the rigid binary framework of colonialism (92).

advantage the mutual interdependencies history has thrust upon us. (*In My Father's House* 72)

This chapter's literary historical project can be understood to be directly in line with Appiah's exhortation: precolonial Yoruba culture and the indigenizing Christian culture are interdependent. They have historical status and, equally importantly, their memories and their effects condition the present.

If the nativists were too dismissive of literary history's entanglement with colonialism, their work is not therefore repudiated. They showed there was something distinctively African about African literatures and their separatist methods produced what can be understood as a politicized and strategic essentialism that was, at its historical moment, perhaps the only available way of dissenting from a colonial universalism. Achebe stated as much, as early as the very 1965 lecture in which he articulated his the historical aim of his pedagogy: "the African Personality," "African democracy," and "negritude" were "all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them any more" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 44). Another of those props is the historical periodization that, rather than taking the missionary encounter as an episode in literary history, continuing to have influence, like a famous ancestor, configures it as an interruption that has fortunately been overcome. On the contrary, it is one important component of the postcolonial writer's cultural resource base. This does not exclude other components: postcolonialism's critique of linear narratives of roots and origins allow us to postulate multiple, overlapping and sometimes competing, temporalities.¹¹

¹¹ I am instructed in this approach by Olakunle George who, in his article "The Oral-Literate Interface," combats another literary-historical periodization: the sequential progression from an oral to a literate culture. Using literary examples including Gabriel Okara's novel *The Voice* and Ngugi's novel *Matigari* he shows how "orality and literacy appear as coeval dimensions of modern African reality" (17).

The balance of this chapter focuses on “the mutual interdependencies history has thrust upon” the Yoruba literary writers who found themselves responding to the missionary encounter. To do so, it links literary works generally acknowledged as modern Yoruba classics and as re-presenters of Yoruba tradition to the classic missionary text, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Preliminary to that analysis of modern texts, the next section examines *Pilgrim’s Progress* in terms of what Protestant missionaries saw in it and of what happened to it when, by a missionary’s labour, it became the first long work of fiction in Yoruba.

Pilgrim Comes Home to Yorubaland:

Indirection plus Instruction in the Missionaries’ Bunyan

The foregoing section cleared a space for the insertion of the missionary encounter and its texts into a literary-historical narrative for Nigeria. This section considers the missionaries’ favourite fictional text – the only work of fiction that can be considered one of the “supplementary texts” to the Bible that, as Izevbaye notes (479), contributed to the transformation of African worldviews in the missionary encounter. We ought to keep in mind that the missionaries’ loyalty to *The Pilgrim’s Progress* never interfered with their commitments to the one Holy Book, or to the Primer that provided the tools necessary for access to all other books. Though literature, which is by definition open to divergent interpretation, was something of a risk for the missionaries, its advantages made it too attractive to resist. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, in particular, proposes an easily transplantable hermeneutical model that both serves the missionaries’ interests of Christian education and, in my reading, inspires subsequent literary writers to create works that point back both to traditional Yoruba and to Christianized texts and stories that are identified as ancestors.

Pilgrim's Progress in the Missionary Movement

“The Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*” were, according to historian Jonathan Rose, the two books most often on the bookshelves of the nineteenth-century British working classes (85). They were also, not incidentally, the first long works translated into Yoruba. Although British evangelicals often condemned fiction as frivolous and deceptive, John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* (1678) was the first work to earn their widespread acceptance (McGrath 364). Just as *Pilgrim’s Progress* was an evangelical staple at home, nineteenth and twentieth-century evangelical missionaries promoted it overseas; generally given very little training, they tended to reproduce abroad the educational and evangelistic strategies they were familiar with from Britain (Hofmeyr “How Bunyan Became English” 450; Salvaing 93). In many parts of the globe, they invested significant resources in translating *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and looked for it to contribute to both their primary work of Christianization (in particular, catechesis of new converts) and their secondary work of Civilization (in particular, literacy and literary education).

Even Henry Venn, who in comparison with many contemporary missionary strategists promoted a hands-off approach that made room for missionized peoples to respond to the Gospel in their own way and time, was very cautious about using imaginative literature in missionary contexts. He explained his anxieties to missionary James Long of Calcutta on 11 July, 1843, just a few months before he achieved his great goal of having Crowther ordained the first African priest:

There is one point connected with your letters to which the attention of the [CMS] Committee has been directed. You state that you are accustomed to read with your Christian Students Milton’s works – and also to other students Pope’s works. [...] There are so many unobjectionable Christian Poets – upon which their time would be

much better employed – and there are so many wrong sentiments in Pope and so many things in Milton which are calculated to lead into erroneous views any one not thoroughly established in the truth. I am aware of the difficulty of judging as to the impression which Milton’s work would make upon a heathen – but surely it would be difficult to draw the distinction between truth and fiction – or to guard the heathen against some countenance being given to polytheism. (C I 1 L3, pp. 40-42)

These great literary works he took to be suitable only for the mature, which is to say for the educated Englishman. In contrast, for Venn Bunyan was apparently unobjectionable, which is why his subordinate David Hinderer was not opposed when in the 1860s he translated *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

By definition, imaginative literature risks blurring the distinction between truth and fiction, for it is never the most straightforward method of representing the world. Even in the mind of a conservative like Venn, however, when duly hedged the risk was worth taking – and particularly in a colonial context. According to Victorian ethnology, indigenous people were like children, with imaginations both volatile and fertile. In her study of the use of literature under British rule in India, *Masks of Conquest*, Gauri Viswanathan considers how mid-nineteenth century British missionaries and administrators promoted English literature in India. The former did so understanding that by appeal to Indians’ fertile imaginations literature could promote Christianity, and the latter understanding that it could promote civilized morality.¹² The missionaries to India, who tended to be the trendsetters that missionaries to Africa followed, had seen that modern science did not always turn indigenous

¹² Thus in 1844 Governor-General Sir Henry Hardinge passed a resolution that Indians with a grasp of European literature be given preference for public service jobs (Viswanathan 89). Scots missionary Alexander Duff, loudest advocate in the 1830s and 1840s for missionizing India through European education, in his curricula emphasized Romantic writers in order to prepare Indians for the Bible’s both logical and emotional appeals through images rather than reason. Thomas B. Macaulay, a bureaucrat with great influence over British policy in mid nineteenth-century India, called Bunyan’s *Pilgrim* “the highest miracle of genius” (Macaulay 383), and while he famously disparaged India’s traditions of learning he likely promoted *Pilgrim* as a worthy alternative. Missionaries’ confidence in literature was to wane in the 1870s – the period of heightened racism during which CMS policy turned against the leadership of indigenous Christians such as Crowther – and Indians were thought unable to separate myth and history, their “unbounded” imaginations vulnerable to contamination, through stories, by superstitious and oppressive thinking (Viswanathan 110).

people towards Christianity. On the other hand, they were confident that literary images functioned to “illustrate and reinforce the truth,” and that an effective means to conversion was, accordingly, through an appeal to the imagination (Viswanathan 54).

Missionaries to Africa, for their part, seem to have been more interested in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* than all other literary works combined. As Isabel Hofmeyr shows in her *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of “The Pilgrim’s Progress,”* at least sixty of the approximately eighty translations now available in African languages were produced by missionaries (Hofmeyr 240-242). (Hinderer’s, from 1866, was the third to be completed.) Hofmeyr reveals that Bunyan was so well received in Africa that in subsequent literary production “various African writers address themselves to Bunyan, not as an ‘imperial’ writer but as a long-standing African presence” (28); thus she validates the claim of the present study that Hinderer’s text became part of the cultural resource base of subsequent generations of writers.

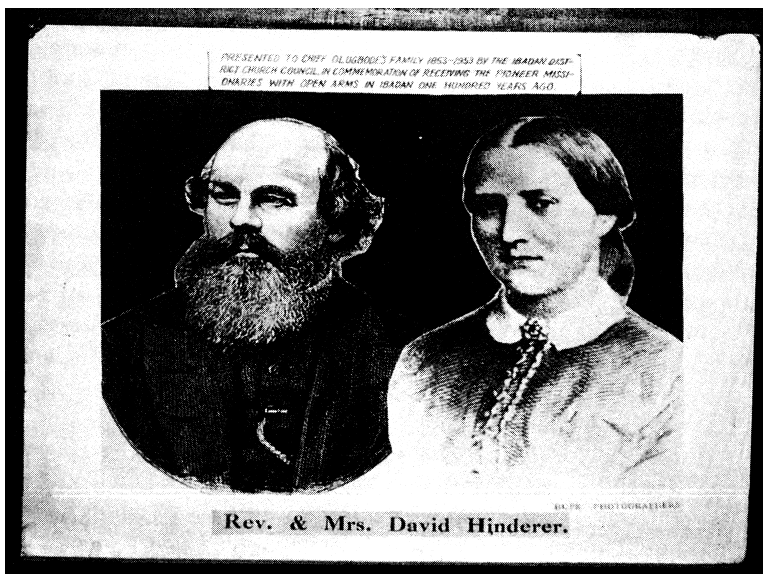


Figure 5: Portrait of David and Anna Hinderer (Peel 138).

David Hinderer's Yoruba translation of *Pilgrim's Progress*, entitled *Ilọ-Siwaju Èrò-Mimọ̀ lati Aiye Yi si Eyi ti Mbọ*, was published by the CMS in 1866 but seems not to have been widely available in Yorubaland until 1911, when it was reissued and distributed widely (Barber "Literature in Yoruba," 366). It is still used today (Ade Ajayi "Crowther and Language," 14). Hinderer began translating at his Ibadan missionary station in 1862, during a bout with "fever" (probably malaria). He completed the work in 1866 during the blockade caused by the 1862-1865 Ijebu Wars that embroiled Ibadan as well as Abeokuta, when it was very rare for supplies or letters to leave or enter the Hinderers' station at Ibadan. On the last remaining scraps of paper, Hinderer, unable to go about on his preaching circuit, busied himself with *Pilgrim's Progress*. Of this manuscript his wife Anna writes on November 17, 1862 that "we indulge in the hope of taking it home to print before long, and we think it will be particularly interesting and useful to our Africans. This work has been a great pleasure to [David], and helps to reconcile him to the quiet life he has been obliged to lead of late" (187, 188).

David Hinderer's linguistic and literary work grew out of his principal concerns as a missionary to what was possibly sub-Saharan Africa's most populous city,¹³ where he and his wife Anna had in 1853 established a CMS mission station that eventually included agricultural and educational facilities as well as several satellite churches. Yoruba was their principal language. Anna's major responsibility was directing the school, where she taught reading, writing, and Bible stories, as well as hygiene and music. Gradually she obtained the help of several native teachers whom she and her husband had trained, the first and most

¹³ Stephen Neill in *A History of Christian Missions* says when the Hinderers arrived Ibadan was "greatest of African cities" (309). Anna Hinderer estimated there were 100,000 inhabitants (Anna Hinderer 92).

important of whom was Daniel Olubi, Wole Soyinka's great-great-grandfather.¹⁴ For both David and Anna, books were fundamental to the missionary's work. She points out how strange books were in the eyes of the people of Ibadan, and that she had "to be careful not even to throw down a little piece of paper, for it would surely be taken and used as a charm" (Anna Hinderer 100). Still, from the Hinderers' point of view the book was a non-negotiable part of God's purposes in Africa. So it is appropriate (as well as consonant with Peel's comments on the *Onibuku*) that, as Anna recounts, those who chose to enter the community that grew up around these missionaries found themselves regarded with contempt by their neighbours as "book-followers." This epithet was accompanied by others that indicate that books, in Ibadan, were seen as far more than just a technology of communication: "forsakers of their forefathers and despisers of their gods" (100).

In numerical terms, the results of the Hinderers' evangelistic work during their residence at Ibadan were disappointing. The implicit and explicit demands their version of conversion placed upon their subjects were heavy: in order to conform to Christianity's moral and social expectations and in order to avoid ostracism, converts, especially young

¹⁴ Though Olubi's mother had been a priestess of the Yoruba divinity Ogun, he was converted through the preaching of Henry Townsend and he accompanied David Hinderer on his original 1853 scouting trip to Ibadan, later worked as director of Anna's school for Yoruba children, and upon the Hinderers' departure became the first Yoruba who had not been raised outside the country to run a mission station and, in 1871, to be ordained priest (Peel 139; see also Gibbs). Daniel Olubi lived with the Hinderers for almost nineteen years and became their right-hand man, whom they frequently laud in their letters; on one occasion, David Hinderer wrote to his CMS superiors:

We have the comfort of seeing some of our native teachers promise to become efficient ministers of the Gospel, and foremost among them is Daniel Olubi. He seems to be increasingly faithful, diligent and pious, and I hope, ere long, he will be ordained by Bishop Crowther. (Anna Hinderer 312)

Olubi was indeed ordained, in 1871, though it was by the Bishop of Sierra Leone rather than by Bishop Crowther, the latter's jurisdiction not extending to Ibadan.

In addition, Olubi became the patriarch of one of the most important families in Yoruba political and religious history. Olubi's grandson I. O. Ransome-Kuti was one of the founders of the Nigerian Union of Teachers, one of the writers of the report that led the British administration to found Nigeria's first university at Ibadan, and the principal of Abeokuta Grammar School when his son Fela Kuti and his great-nephew Wole Soyinka studied there. Indeed, Soyinka descends from a long line of highly educated, Christian, Yoruba leaders; the following chapter will explore how this is the heritage he writes from and, sometimes, against.

converts, often left their homes and came to live at or near the Hinderer's compound.

Tellingly, the plot of *Pilgrim's Progress* concerns a man whose ultimate (that is, eternal) good requires that he abandon not only his country, work, and self-understanding but even his family. This he does without a second thought:

the man began to run. Now he had not run far from his own door then his wife and children, perceiving it, began to cry after him to return; but the man put his fingers in his ears, and ran on crying, Life! life! eternal life! Luke 14:26. So he looked not behind him, Gen. 19:17 [... .] (12,13)

The narrative bears out that this costly decision was more than worthwhile – not only for the protagonist, Christian, but also for his wife and children who finally in Part 2 change their minds and follow him to the Celestial city. The pilgrimage is a harrowing one for every pilgrim, of course, but this is what makes the narrative interesting; what is opposition and persecution for the character is drama for the reader. For the early Yoruba inquirers listening to the Hinderers' message, or reading their books, the implications of this story are straightforward: the social, political, economic and religious systems that join the individual to his or her community can and should be forsaken for the sake of the good that Christianity signifies to him or her.

At first glance, then, Bunyan's story recounts a one-way journey and it imagines human life as a one-way journey; its full title is *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That which is To Come*. However, its central technique for drawing its readers into this one-way Christian journey is to lead them on a two-way hermeneutical journey, a journey that we can refer to as literary indirection. Bunyan knows that few of his readers will keep pace with Pilgrim and reach the Celestial city upon reading the last page; when he sends them from the narrative's imagined world, with its innumerable symbols and metaphors, back to the "home" of their everyday lives, he intends that they bear insights or principles they can use. They are

invited imaginatively to journey with Pilgrim to the metaphorical “Valley of Humiliation” and encounter the metaphorical “Giant Pope,” but then they are expected to journey home again bearing messages regarding real humiliation and the real Pope. They are reminded repeatedly of their distance from the action – access to Pilgrim is mediated by a narrator who constantly reminds the reader that he is relaying a dream, not an actual occurrence – and yet they are expected to place themselves imaginatively into the story. The narrator’s “Hearty Prayer” is that his text may “perswade some that go astray, / To turn their Foot and Heart to the right way” (136).

Pilgrim’s Progress may strike the modern reader as artlessly direct and didactic, but its author was clearly worried about the opposite accusation. Bunyan feels compelled to defend himself against seventeenth-century critics who, like Venn, were anxious about the risk that indirection might not get its point across. Introducing Part 2, Bunyan explains why he effectively requires the reader to journey abroad before returning home hermeneutically:

Things that seem to be hid in words obscure
Do but the godly mind the more allure
To study what those sayings should contain,
That speak to us in such a cloudy strain.
I also know a dark similitude
Will on the curious fancy more intrude,
And will stick faster in the heart and head,
Than things from similes not borrowed. (134)

In Bunyan’s time, Puritanism, having been convinced by empirical science’s refutation of the medieval Doctrine of Correspondences, could no longer put its faith in analogy, no longer assume fixed analogical connections between things in the material and in the spiritual world. Instead of analogy, the Puritanism that Bunyan espoused eventually seized upon metaphor, which took the “book of nature” not as a representation of spiritual truths but at least as an emblem of them – an emblem requiring the individual’s careful interpretation (Hunter 409).

Some clarity was sacrificed, but at least the ability of pictorial storytelling to “allure” was saved. So though Bunyan did not have nineteenth-century Africans in mind, his literary goals merge with those of Venn. The interests of Christian evangelism could, in theory at least, be well-served by literary indirection.

I suggest that there are three principal reasons why Victorian evangelical missionaries were so eager to disseminate *The Pilgrim’s Progress*: biblicism, individualistic piety, as well as literary indirection. Firstly, an evangelical classic for good reason, on every page the work indicates by means of verse-references that its authority is subordinate to the Holy Book. It lays out a model of the Christian life that gives central place to Bible-reading and an important, but subordinate, place to the certified minister or missionary.¹⁵ Upon our first glimpse of him, Pilgrim already understands the book well enough to read in it his condemnation as a sinner. Evangelist soon chances upon him, and when he advises the despondent man to flee his city he produces a scroll that gives Matthew 3:7, “Fly from the wrath to come.” By analogy with Evangelist, missionaries like David Hinderer are given the role of an expositor rather than a commander, subordinate to the book they themselves have brought, but nonetheless with a key role in the plot.¹⁶

Secondly, as has already been explained, *Pilgrim’s Progress* gives a pattern for the Christian life whereby the convert, out of concern for his own soul and for a well-being that endures beyond the grave, embarks on a difficult journey that requires a new mode of conduct and implies a new community identification. This is the Pilgrim’s one-way journey.

¹⁵ I do not think this schema is antithetical to *Paradise Lost*, where the human interpreters rely upon God’s “ministers” Raphael and Michael. However, for good reason given the interpretive history of *Paradise Lost* itself, Venn was probably worried that its reader would not emerge with the same trust Pilgrim manifested, that God’s ways are best.

¹⁶ Here is another advantage *Pilgrim’s Progress* had over *Paradise Lost*, where the text only clearly confesses its subordination to the text of the Bible in the final two books, Books 11 and 12, where Michael provides Adam with an overview of postlapsarian biblical history.

Early Yoruba readers of Hinderer's translation would have been part of an economic system centred on bartering rather than on money, part of a political system in which the most important factor in governing was kinship, and part of a religious system that focused on community balance; but *The Pilgrim's Progress* makes the claim that all of those commitments should be subordinated to personal Christian commitment.¹⁷ Thirdly, like the biblical parables, the return journey of literary indirection constitutes an effective method of indoctrination and motivation for new converts. In this third reason the relevance of *Pilgrim's Progress* to missionaries and its relevance to literary historians converge.

Deploying an additional level of indirection, Bunyan's text goes so far as to imply that it stands in for the gospel message itself. In his introduction to Part II, the narrator expresses hope that readers would "imbrace" his second volume, and thus show "*they of Pilgrims lovers are*" (131). This is probably an allusion to the biblical Jesus' frequent statements to the effect that those who accept and welcome his followers are thereby accepting and welcoming him – thus confirming their salvation (e.g. Mark 6:11, 9:37). Bunyan is light-hearted, making jabs at his critics and hoping to increase his sales, but he is also earnest: his story must be accepted and interpreted in the right way, which is to say a Christian way. Fortunately for the earnest reader, he provides ample instruction on how correctly to "imbrace" his text.

¹⁷ Like most of the German missionaries working for the English CMS, the Swabian David Hinderer's church background was Lutheran pietism. Compared with most of their English colleagues, these Germans tended to be more concerned about personal piety and less concerned about transforming social and political structures. Thus *The Pilgrim's Progress* was a perfect choice for them. (See P. McKenzie 306.)

Instruction at the House of the Interpreter

The primary narrative site of this instruction is near the beginning of Pilgrim's journey, at his first stopping-place: the House of the Interpreter. After leaving his home in the city of Destruction, Pilgrim is waylaid by the false counsel of Mr. Worldly-Wiseman, rescued and rebuked by Evangelist, then encouraged and redirected by Good-will, who points him towards the House of the Interpreter. The following episode is metatextual in the sense that the way Interpreter tells Pilgrim to "read" the signs is the way that the first-person narrator is telling the reader to read the whole book, and thus to proceed across the gap created by metaphors and symbols to the practical principles they signify for the readers' lives. This section thus functions as an interpretive key to the whole work.

The Yoruba equivalent David Hinderer chose for "Interpreter" is *Ogbifonow* archaic, which combines the root *gba* ("take") and *fọ* ("speak") (*Ilọ-Siwaju* 19); thus an interpreter is someone who takes language from one person and re-presents it for the consumption of another. In this section, Interpreter shows Christian several scenes (a fire that would not be quenched, a sad man sitting in a cage, and five others) and provides, for each one, an explanation of its meaning. The second, about a dusty parlour, is particularly interesting because it is a simple domestic scene, evidently intended to minimize the gap between the text's and the reader's world. When Interpreter calls for a man to come and sweep the parlour, the dust flies up into the air and threatens to choke Christian. To solve the problem, Interpreter calls "a damsel" (Yoruba *wundia*) to come and sprinkle the room with water, after which the room is easily swept (20). In the Interpreter's authorized interpretation of the scene, supported by seven Bible references, the room is a man's unsanctified heart and the dust his "original sin and inward corruptions." He is unable to purify his heart, and equally

Law, the first sweeper, is unable. The heart must first be sprinkled by the Gospel with her “sweet and precious influences.” (The question as to what constitutes the Gospel is answered elsewhere in *Pilgrim’s Progress*.) Interpretive instruction is so thorough that no doubt is left as to what the scene means for Pilgrim; all that remains before the hermeneutical gap is neatly closed is for the reader to imagine herself as Pilgrim.

However, for the version of *Pilgrim’s Progress* that has been transplanted to Yorubaland, the hermeneutical gap is wider. This is so for *Pilgrim’s Progress* as a whole, because of the very foreignness of books: as Anna Hinderer found, for Yoruba people to read books was to subject themselves to charges of being disloyal to their history (“forsakers of their forefathers”) and to their religion (“despisers of their gods”). Additionally, though *Pilgrim’s Progress* is a simple domestic story, with little introspection and few abstractions, and though its first author was clearly attempting to be as accessible as possible, from a Yoruba perspective there are still many particularities that impede accessibility. In the sweeping scene, these concern theological vocabulary and setting. The reader must travel further away from her “everyday life” before she can return home with a usable meaning.

There is no one in the text to interpret Interpreter’s theological terms. Hinderer was transparently literal and uncontroversial in his choices for translating theologically freighted words like “original sin” (*ẹ̀ṣẹ abinibi*, literally “sin inborn”) and its antidote, “Gospel” (*ihinrere*, literally “good-news”) (20).¹⁸ Nonetheless, Yoruba people and their language were innocent of the associations accreted to these words in English (by, for instance, centuries of Augustinian and anti-Augustinian debate on human depravity) so the words must have come across quite differently than what Bunyan, or what Hinderer, intended. There is no one in the

¹⁸ Many of Hinderer’s decisions for translating theological vocabulary were surely copied from Crowther’s Yoruba New Testament, which was finally published as a whole a year before Hinderer completed his translation.

text to interpret Interpreter's Yoruba. As Bunyan and the Puritans had lost the interpretive certainty provided by the Doctrine of Correspondences that paired material with spiritual realities, now through linguistic and cultural translation Hinderer loses the interpretive certainty provided by a single theological vocabulary. An English reader might respond to an implicit accusation of his dusty "original sin" with contrition or else with nonchalance, while a Yoruba reader would be more likely to respond with puzzlement. The Yoruba reader's membership in a particular (Christian, Bible-reading) interpretive community – the community of literate converts at the Hinderers' station, for instance – might limit but it could never erase these ambiguities.

Ambiguities about setting further compromise the writer's or the translator's ability to direct the reader's interpretation. Pilgrim is presumably shown a wooden floor, whereas the Yoruba readers were used to dirt floors, which would merely be turned to mud if sprinkled with water. The Hinderers' first house in Ibadan had a dirt floor (Anna Hinderer 56), but they were not content with it, and the impressive two-story house they built in 1854 had the sort of floor which would make sense of Bunyan's illustration. To get to the "parlour" (Yoruba *yará*, the standard word for "room") in the story, the Yoruba reader must leave home and travel to the missionary's home. This reduces the immediacy of the text's impression for the Yoruba reader, for whom Pilgrim is accordingly less of an everyman character than for the English reader. The Yoruba reader is thereby forced to go outside the text for interpretive help – to think about European colonial architecture, Crowther's Bible, and Protestant missionary teaching. Samuel Crowther Jr., in the drawing reproduced above on p. 26, captures the distinctiveness of the "Christian house" in Yorubaland.

Straight after leaving the Interpreter's house, Pilgrim will ascend a hill to the cross, where he will lay down the burden he had been carrying on his back. But in his final exchange with the Interpreter, the latter suggests that Pilgrim should never really leave the Interpreter's house:

Keep everything in yourself intact, that they may be a goad at your side, to push you forward in the way you are going. [...] May the Comforter be with you always, you good Christian, to lead you in the way that leads to the city. (*Ilọ-Siwaju* 26, translation mine)

Bunyan makes two points here. First, the parables shown by the Interpreter continue to call for interpretation. By an act of the intellect, the principles revealed must yet be inserted into the concrete situations of the individual's life. Lest this imply, however, that Pilgrim is free or obliged to interpret independently, Bunyan secondly provides a clear reference to the Holy Spirit, the Comforter (cf. John 14:16) who is to give Pilgrim interpretive assistance along the journey. Likewise, as this section is something of an interpretive key to the entire story of Pilgrim, the reader is to read the rest of the story – and indeed, if she follows the text's interpretive instruction, to live the rest of her life – in a faithful and ethical way that matches Interpreter's examples.

While the Yoruba *Pilgrim's Progress* sets a pattern of indirection plus interpretive education that subsequent literary works can be seen to follow (particularly literary works by writers trained in contexts like Anna Hinderer's schoolroom), it also raises a question that those works will need to answer. For if it carefully opens a gap between the "everyday life" it depicts and the Christian precepts it aims to teach its reader, providing in addition careful guidance for closing that gap, it does not address the gap between a Christian message from England and Yorubaland. This gap is religious, cultural and linguistic. However, both because colonialism tends to configure indigenous religion, culture, and language as

belonging to the past and because anti-colonialism characteristically roots its identity in a certain notion of the past, this gap is also inescapably historical. It underlies the problems of national and literary history that have been discussed above. If Pilgrim can become Yoruba and if Bunyan's and Hinderer's message can become compelling to a Yoruba reader, how can they be related to Yoruba history? For the balance of this chapter, we will examine the work of three great Yoruba literary writers as responses to this problematic, all of whom carry on in the pattern of Bunyan's instructional indirection. Thus they implicitly theorize for themselves a literary history that is more complex and less separatist than a nativist critic might theorize for them.

Into the Folkloric Forest and Home Again:

Three Yoruba Writers and the Question of (Literary) History

The following works by Yoruba writers Daniel Olorunfemi Fágùnwà, Amos Tutuola, and Wole Soyinka are episodic folktales that concern harrowing journeys to mysterious forests filled with the fanciful, supernatural creatures of Yoruba folklore. In all cases, the exhausted but triumphant protagonist returns to his hometown. By the operation of indirection the texts invite the reader to step imaginatively into an unfamiliar and fantastical world. Then, recalling *The Pilgrim's Progress*, they suggest how to return home to everyday life; and their suggestion for how to interpret the message of the folkloric forest in the reader's modern context involves bending it to fit with Christianity.

Much literary-critical work has been done on these modern Yoruba writers, and the influence upon them of the Bible and of *Pilgrim's Progress* has not gone unnoticed.¹⁹

¹⁹ Bruce L. King says in his 1971 study, for instance, that

However, critics of Fagunwa and Tutuola tend to agree that the writers' greatness lies in their having enacted, or at least begun, the transition from precolonial to modern society, from colonialism to cultural independence; they are open to the new while remaining generous and faithful towards the old. Thus their achievement can be depicted on a literary-historical timeline. (Soyinka is a separate case, and this chapter will only deal with his translation of Fagunwa. Speculating about his main achievements will have to wait until the next chapter.) As converts themselves, Fagunwa and Tutuola face the added challenge of holding their respect for Yoruba tradition in tension with their embrace of an identity that links them to histories in England and Palestine.²⁰ We can imagine a similar question arising for the writer as for the convert: how to position oneself in relation to those who have gone before?

Daniel Ọlórúnfẹ́mi Fágúnwà

Hinderer's *Ilọ-Siwaju* may not appear in some accounts of Yoruba or Nigerian literary history, but Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa appears in each one. Born in 1903, he spent most of his life studying or teaching within the CMS educational system. After writing his first two folktale-novels, from 1946-8 and again from 1950-5 he studied in Britain, and upon his return he was hired as Education Officer for the Publications Branch of Western Nigeria's

Attention will also need to be given to the influence of translations from English into Nigerian languages. I am thinking in particular of the probable influence of the Yoruba translation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the Bible on Tutuola and, perhaps, Fagunwa. Until more research has been done and more texts made available, it will be impossible to write a real history of Nigerian literature. (10,11)

For the influence of *Pilgrim's Progress* upon Fagunwa, see Barber, "Time, Space, and Writing in Three Colonial Yoruba Novels" and Bamgboṣe, *The Novels of D. O. Fagunwa*.

²⁰ During the missionary encounter in Africa, says Adrian Hastings, "Christian conversion was often painful above all because it appeared to demonstrate disloyalty to one's dead relatives" (*The Church in Africa* 330). However, Africans have not generally solved the problem by cutting their ties: continuity with the world of the ancestors has remained a fundamental belief of African Christians (Jenkins *Next Christendom* 133).

Ministry of Education (Bamgboṣe 2).²¹ In spite of his stay in Britain, the three novels and numerous short books that he published after his return are not dramatically different from those that preceded them; the influence of Christianity and the European literary classics is profound upon even his earliest work, as is the influence of Yoruba folktales, myths, and religious beliefs upon his latest. Major critics estimate Fagunwa's stature with claims such as that Fagunwa's influence on Yoruba literature is comparable to Shakespeare's influence on English (Lindfors, *Early Nigerian Literature* 15); that Fagunwa's oeuvre "exerts the most pervasive influence on every category of Yoruba literary expression" (Irele 177); and that until around the 1960s "almost all [...] Yoruba novels followed Fagunwa's pattern of the story of the wandering hero" (Bamgboṣe 5).

Though Fagunwa is often placed at the head of the Yoruba literary tradition, he is in many ways a bridging figure who navigates the transition from oral tradition to written modernity. In their form and their content, his five published folktale-novels give the immediate impression of stories told around a campfire in a bygone age.²² Fagunwa scholar Ayọ Bamgboṣe shows how all five follow the generic pattern of Yoruba oral folktales in their didacticism, their invitation for audience participation, their omniscient narrative strategy, their quick-moving and unrealistic plots, and in that they testify to a morally coherent

²¹ Much like Crowther, Fágùnṣà's name reflects a complex individual and societal history. As a young man, his given names were actually Daniel Oròwọ́lẹ̀, where the first reflects his parents' conversion to Christianity but the second registers the persistence of Yoruba religion: Oròwọ́lẹ̀ means "Orò enters the house" and refers to the secret men-only cult of the bull-deity Orò. Later on in life he changed his second name to a monotheistic one common among Christians, Ọlórúnfẹ́mí, which literally means "God loves me" (cf. Bamgboṣe 1, Agbetuyi 340). But he did not change his family name, which translates as "Ifa sits on the throne." Before conversion, his father was actually an Ifa priest. A name's etymology is proof of nothing, of course, but this etymology suggests what further investigation confirms: that this individual straddled the gap between two cultural and religious worlds.

²² The label "folktale-novel" is meant to suggest the uneasiness with which Fagunwa's prose writings sit in the category "novel." If a novel requires realist technique and psychological interiority, then Fagunwa did not write one. These are the names of the five: *Ògbójú Odẹ́ nínú Igbó Irúnmalẹ́* (1938), *Igbó Olódùmarè* (1949), *Ìrèké Oníbùdó* (1949), *Ìrìnkèrindò nínú Igbó Elégbèje* (1954), and *Àdìtù Olódùmarè* (1961). The first was published by the CMS and the others by Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd.

universe where vice is punished and virtue rewarded (Bamgboṣe 17). Filling his melodious and fluent sentences with quirky puns, traditional proverbs, and artful parallelisms, Fagunwa is acknowledged as a master of the Yoruba language by his readers, including Soyinka, who testifies to “the experience of sheer delight in his verbal adroitness” (*Forest of a Thousand Daemons* 2).

Nonetheless, Fagunwa’s works bear subtle marks of colonial modernity and the cultural pluralism it brought. His allusions draw from far afield, including texts in English such as *The Odyssey*, *Aesop’s Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Doctor Faustus* and *Arabian Nights*, and of course the Yoruba Bible and Hinderer’s *Ilo-siwaju*. Echoes of the latter in Fagunwa include a narrative backbone consisting of an individual’s difficult journey, the Christian concept of heaven, and obviously allegorical characters (Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan* 194-198; Bamgboṣe 26). Furthermore, a conception of ethics and providence that is manifestly Christian unifies the episodic plotlines of Fagunwa’s five folktale-novels. This conception is evident in particular in his first and best-known work, *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmalẹ̀*, in English roughly “Brave Hunter in the Forest of the Pantheon” or “of the Spirits,”²³ which will now be discussed.

Fagunwa’s *Ogboju* caught the attention of the CMS when it was entered in a 1936 writing competition, and the CMS Bookshop in Lagos published it in 1938. Immediately it found a large readership in Nigeria’s fledgling school system, where it was prescribed for the Yoruba section of the Cambridge School Certificate Examination (Bamgboṣe 3, 54). In the words of critic Dan Izevbaye, it “enacts the transition from an oral consciousness to a literary

²³ Pace Soyinka’s translation of Fagunwa’s title, “four hundred spirits” is not the best gloss for *Irunmale*. I am convinced by Oduyoye that *irun* is not a particular number but rather an obscure derivative of the Arabic root *hrm* that means forbidden or sacred. *Male* refers to the earth, and thus *Irunmale* means the sacred beings in general that dwell on the earth (Oduyoye).

imagination in the story of a scribe who writes down for posterity the fantastic adventures being narrated to him by the hero,” Akara-ògun (Izevbaye 478). It is the story of how when Akara-ògun was young he undertook and completed three challenging journeys, two to the forest of the pantheon of spirits and the third to a town called Mount Langbodo. Hinderer’s *Ilọ-siwaju* was one of only a handful of long Yoruba texts that Fagunwa would have read before he penned his first folktale-novel, and possibly the only one other than the Bible that he would have been taught at school. Its influence, however, is not to be found in *Ogboju*’s metaphysical framework: in Hinderer’s translation of Bunyan the everyday world of earth and the spiritual world of heaven exist in a sequential, chronological relationship (Pilgrim’s quest takes him from this world to the next – and the two can be cleanly separated), whereas in Fagunwa the two worlds interpenetrate constantly and the protagonist oscillates between the two, sometimes seeming to be in both simultaneously. This reflects a basic Yoruba understanding that is articulated in a common saying: *Aye l’oja, orun n’ile*, “earth is the market, heaven is home.” On the other hand, *Pilgrim* testifies to modern Europe’s “empty skies,”²⁴ where, apart from metaphorical interpretations of physical things, contact with spiritual forces is anticipated but not experienced. Pilgrim’s world is thus more modern in Max Weber’s sense of secular or disenchanted.

Fagunwa’s *Ogboju* is akin to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, on the other hand, in the sense that it is interpretive education, inviting the reader imaginatively to insert himself or herself into the story and thus to learn to read reality as the characters read it. *Pilgrim* does this explicitly in the Introduction to Part II where he asks the reader to “imbrace” his book, and

²⁴ Peter Brown uses this expression to describe the spiritual geography assumed by post-Enlightenment European Christians (19). Brown contrasts this perspective with the early Christians, living under the Roman Empire, who lived in “a universe crowded with intermediary beings,” though the contrast would work equally well with the nineteenth-century West Africans that post-Enlightenment European missionaries sought to convert.

implicitly through the device of the Everyman character; in *Ogboju*, the unnamed frame-narrator makes the invitation even clearer. He says that his story is like the music of an *ogidigbo* drum – a traditional Yoruba drum used to transmit messages, especially in wartime, and to accompany dancing – and he asks for his listeners to dance to it (1). The instructions for how the listener (that is, Fagunwa’s reader) is to “dance” leave aside the dancing metaphor and make two literal requests: firstly, that when any character in the story speaks, the listener put himself or herself “into the position of the same person” (*si ipo oluware*) and then “speak like that very person” (*soro bi enipe enyin gan ni*). This makes for a pleasurable experience for the reader, and also potentially an experience of education by imaginative role-playing. Secondly, he asks that as the story progresses the listener would extract “wisdoms” (*awon ogbon*) “for yourself” (*tikarayin*) (1).

This is essentially the same invitation to individual, imaginative, and moral reading that is basic to Bunyan’s Protestant subjectivity and that finds expression in Bunyan’s literary hermeneutical method. It seems reasonable to suggest that this similarity is more than just coincidence, given Fagunwa’s education in a context where Bunyan’s text was given such authority. Some of Fagunwa’s narrator’s wisdoms are laid out explicitly – especially near the end of the book, when Akara-ogun and his friends are lectured by the immortal wise-man Iragbeje – but most of them are implicit. Virtues like loyalty, determination, and generosity intermittently characterize Fagunwa’s protagonist and his allies, and in the author’s most didactic moments he urges that these virtues should become hallmarks of the fledgling “country of Nigeria” that gave his listeners life (71). He apparently has none of Bunyan’s and Venn’s anxieties that his implied audience might fail to find the truth that is entangled in, or

concealed beneath, the fiction; perhaps this is because his intended audience is already steeped in the conventions of the didactic Yoruba folktale.

Though Fagunwa's narrator does not frequently interrupt the story to address the readers directly and call them back to their assigned task, he does so on the last page of *Ogboju*. After reminding them that as "men and women of Yorubaland" (*okunrin ati obinrin ni ile Yoruba*) they know that an older person's words are to be highly regarded, he provides the novel's strongest interpretive imperative, which I quote and translate below:

ẹ fi itan inu iwe yi ẹ *arikoḡbọṇ*. Olukuluku yin ni o ni iṣoro lati be pade ninu aiye, olukuluku ni o ni Oke Langbodo tirẹ lati lọ [...] (97, italics mine)

Use the story in this book as an *incident to gain wisdom from*. Everyone of you has a problem that is met in the world, everyone has his own Mount Langbodo to go to [...]

Like the Interpreter's parables which are intended to be to redeployed by Pilgrim in other circumstances, "as a goad at your side," *Ogboju* thus presents itself as instrumental – to be used for the sake of something greater. The imperative to use the story as "an incident to gain wisdom from" (this corresponds to the single Yoruba noun *arikoḡbọṇ*) would earn *Ogboju* the reprimand "moralizing" if it were considered alongside Western novels from the 1950s, though the same imperative makes it at home with what is probably its primary textual influence: the Yoruba *Pilgrim's Progress*.

More can be said about Fagunwa's implied addressees ("everyone of you") and about the kind of Mount Langbodo he supposed they would encounter. They inhabit a religiously diverse environment, where Šango, Oya, Anabi (Muslim Yoruba term for "the prophet") and (the Christian) God are all available for supplicants to call upon (24, 73). They seem to be faced with same hermeneutical challenge as we face in considering Yorubaland's literary history: how to cross the gap between the Christian identity and the Yoruba past. And here

Fagunwa, unlike the nativist critics, clearly focuses on continuity rather than discontinuity, relativizing Yoruba belief and identity by reinterpreting it in Christian terms. Izevbaye points out that this move repeats Crowther's: "Fagunwa's characterization often follows the precedence of the choices made by the translators of the Yoruba Bible by making the deities of the Yoruba pantheon perform new functions in a narrative that is explicitly Christian in form and spirit" (480).

An example of the pattern Izevbaye refers to, which responds to the historical problematic raised by the Yoruba *Pilgrim's Progress*, comes close to the end of the novel, when the seven heroes meet Iragbeje. To explain how Iragbeje came to be immortal, Akara-*ogun* summarizes the old Yoruba tale about the creation of humanity by the sculptor-god *Obatalá* (also known as *Òriṣà-ńlá*), who was delegated by the high-god *Olódùmarè* (66). But by changing *Obatalá*'s name to *Ògódògo* ("glory shines forth"), and on the next page by mentioning that *Ogodigo* began his work only *after* Adam and Eve were created, Fagunwa manages to affirm Yoruba culture and mythical history while adjusting it to fit into Christianity's biblical-historical time scheme. Fagunwa's protagonist takes a pilgrimage into the forest of the Yoruba folktale and comes home with an inculturated form of Christianity. Granted, this Christianizing reinterpretation is only a gesture, not a complete outworking, but its implications are vast for our understanding of how Fagunwa sees his literary vocation and of how we should see him literary-historically. Not only does his work represent a creative figuration of the transition between oral tradition and written modernity, but it also represents, perhaps more deeply, a creative figuration of the transition between Yoruba religious culture and Yoruba Christianity. By opening up the gap of literary indirection and then showing how to cross it, Fagunwa's folktale-novel provides guidance for the reader who

seeks to make sense of a world where neither the indigenous nor the colonial, the traditional nor the modern, the oral nor the written, Olódùmarè nor God, are dispensable; none reside in a historical period that can be consigned to the past.

Amos Tutuola

With good reason, critics tend to regard Amos Tutuola as an Anglophone Fagunwa, with his imaginative folktale-novels about brave hunters and weird spirits navigating the same passage between orality and literature as Fagunwa. Tutuola is, also justifiably, generally viewed as less original than Fagunwa, primarily because he modeled himself so heavily upon the latter. Bernth Lindfors makes the point succinctly: “Tutuola appears to have learned from Fagunwa how to transmute this oral art into written art” (*Early Nigerian Literature* xv). Furthermore, Tutuola’s semi-pidgin English is full of solecisms and lacks the artistry of sound and imagery that Fagunwa’s Yoruba is famous for. However, as the first Yoruba writer to write a long work of Anglophone prose fiction for publication (*The Wild Hunter in the Bush of the Ghosts*, 1948 but published 1982) and the first actually to be published and gain acclaim overseas (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, 1952), Tutuola is important to consider in relation to this chapter’s claim that early Yoruba literature’s indebtedness to missionary Christianity is evident in the educational mode of indirection it shares with *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, as well as for the dissertation’s claim that the missionary encounter is a crucial episode in Nigerian literary history.

Tutuola was born at Abeokuta in 1920. In his twenties he obtained a job as a messenger at the colonial Labour Department in Lagos. This job left him with many idle hours, and, in the words of an anonymous 1954 biography,

To free his mind from the boredom of clock-watching [he] reverted to an almost forgotten childhood habit of story-telling. But an office worker cannot very well tell stories through the spoken word, even with the indulgent employers Tutuola seems to have had, so he wrote them on scrap paper. (Lindfors “Introduction” xi)

At first glance, this is a compact snapshot of Africa’s transition, catalyzed by colonialism (here represented in the social context of the Labour Department and in the technology of writing), from (oral) primitiveness to (written) modernity. However, the transition is not so natural nor Tutuola so uncomplicated as this, either in his first, fantastical folktale-novel, *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of the Ghosts* – the one he worked on at the Labour Department – or in his least fantastical and most secular folktale-novel, *Ajaiyi and His Inherited Poverty*, written in the latter half of his career. In discussing these two works I will suggest that though the differences between them indicate a certain secularizing progression they both continue to engage with the questions and answers associated with the missionaries. Lindfors is thus mistaken when he claims, implicitly subscribing to the unhelpful literary-historical periodization this chapter opposes, that “Tutuola, after [with *Wild Hunter*] following Fagunwa’s example in Africanizing Bunyan, *returned to* more indigenous sources of artistic inspiration and wrote less homiletic secular sagas” (“Introduction” xvi, italics added).

Wild Hunter, completed in 1948 but not published until 1982, is like Tutuola’s other folktale-novels and like Fagunwa’s an episodic adventure story of a hero forced to go on a challenging journey into a forest full of bizarre spirits, some awesome and some unremarkable. The disparate episodes have very little thematic or symbolic unity, but they suggest a wide variety of influences. There is a cruel ghost who mounts the Wild Hunter and rides him like a horse (31) – a scene apparently borrowed from Fagunwa’s *Ogboju*. There is a den of hungry lions who, miraculously, choose not to eat the Wild Hunter when he is thrown to them (11) – a scene alluding to the biblical book of Daniel. There is, as one final

example, an incorrigibly sinful ghost who refuses to change his character and to whom an exasperated God says “I would drive you away from the heaven, and I would send you to the Bush of Ghosts, and I would put you among the wild beasts, poisonous snakes, and scorpions” (51). This stubborn ghost’s temperament, his divinely instituted punishment, and his function as moral warning for protagonist and reader liken him to the Man in an Iron Cage that Pilgrim meets in the sixth scene at the Interpreter’s House; this Man lives in bleak expectation of “dreadful threatnings, faithful threatnings of certain Judgement and fiery indignation, which shall devour me as an Adversary” (30). Tutuola’s ghost’s last punishment is to be transformed into a little hill; thereupon Wild Hunter affixes a sign on which he writes the ghost’s Bunyan-like name, WOE, as a warning for other ghosts. He calls this a “remembrance” (53) recalling many such commemorative monuments in the Bible and in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

The fifth town of ghosts which Tutuola’s Wild Hunter and his companions journey through turns out to be Hell, a Kafkaesque affair that was clearly inspired by the efficient but soulless colonial bureaucracy Tutuola knew in Lagos; it even has a Records Office that the reader is encouraged to write (c/o Tutuola, at his Lagos address!) to find out whether he or she is destined to dwell there (130). At last, there is a Heaven, which is the goal of the hunters’ quest, just like it is the goal of Pilgrim’s (though, of course, the hunters will finally return to their town whereas Pilgrim will enjoy eternity in the Celestial city). Following a map given them, the hunters proceed down a road that

was very narrow, and it was four feet wide, twenty miles deep and it was very straight as a ruler or railway. On the day we started the journey, we completed up to 99 miles from the 5th town. When it was five o’clock p.m., we brought down our bags, and ate our dinner at the roadside, and we slept at the same spot because there was no house which was near. But what made us fear in the night, was the difference of wild animals, which were parading about on the way, [...] and we did not know that these

wild animals were not killing the person who has no sin, and nothing happened to us throughout the night. [...] Inside a Valley which was called “Human--Skeleton Valley”, and there we spent our Sunday Services with the Skeletons in their Church. (133)

Tutuola’s playfulness outweighs his didacticism. The way he weaves together the technologies and the precision of colonial modernity, the core doctrines and practices of Christianity, and the absurd and imaginative creatures of traditional Yoruba storytelling continues to make him fascinating to read. He found fame in the West because he seemed to open a window on a society in transition toward modernity that retained a healthy vitality rooted in a traditional world that seemed exotic.

The hunters attain heaven in due course, and the last thing they do there before they are sent back to their hometown is to meet the first CMS missionary to Abeokuta, Henry Townsend, and two famous Yoruba CMS agents, David Williams and Samuel Ajayi Crowther. This suggests that the concrete facts of Yorubaland’s missionary history have become part of the repository from which the writer of fiction may draw creatively. Perhaps a figure such as Crowther endures, even in cultural production that is eagerly establishing a link between a modern technology and a precolonial and indigenous tradition, because of his great deeds – contributions to the Yoruba language and Bible – and because, as Peel demonstrates, he and the missionaries contributed subtly to the long process of Yoruba ethnogenesis. He endures principally, however, because he helped establish the Yoruba Church, with which Tutuola the writer identifies himself.

The Church is also where Ajaiyi, protagonist of Tutuola’s little-known 1962 folktale-novel, *Ajaiyi and His Inherited Poverty*, concludes the series of journeys he took throughout Yorubaland and the string of encounters he had with malevolent people and spirits. In that this novel depicts the largest gap between the modern, disenchanted present and the world of

Yoruba folktales, it is closer to *Pilgrim's Progress* than Fagunwa's and Tutuola's other long works of fiction. Still, like all of Tutuola's work, *Ajaiyi* draws heavily upon traditions of Yoruba myth and storytelling: formally, for example, one of its basic structuring devices is to begin a chapter with a traditional Yoruba proverb (translated into English) and then during the course of the chapter to interpret it for the reader and the protagonist. Unlike *Wild Hunter*, *Ajaiyi* locates itself in modern Nigeria less by referencing objects and ideas than by its central theme, which is about getting out of financial debt. This is basically a secular theme, and indeed a secular, disenchanted story. "*Ajaiyi* is meant," says Bruce King, "to show the superiority of the modern world to the tribal past" (2). In *Ajaiyi* there are still spirits and juju magic and freakish characters recalling Yoruba folktales (such as a vindictive and verbose lump of iron), but these are less important to moving the plot forward than kola-nut trees and greedy kidnappers and pounds sterling.

In fact, the central development in the story is psychological: the protagonist begins the story under the conviction that magic is the reason he is perpetually poor, and thus he makes a treacherous journey to seek the Creator's help. The Creator refuses even to see him, but dismissively writes him a note stating that money is "the creator of all the insincerities of the world" (109) and so Ajaiyi is left to fend for himself. Near the end of the novel he turns to the village Witch Doctor for help, but he and his colleagues turn out to be crooks who had grown rich off all the sacrifices, supposedly offered to ancestors, that they prescribed for their clients. Here Ajaiyi acquires the zeal of a Protestant reformer, unmasking the impostors and confiscating their gold. A mysterious, mythical religiosity gives way to a transparent moral psychology, for God, Ajaiyi finds, helps those who help themselves. Because the six thousand pounds are far more than Ajaiyi needs, he resolves, unexpectedly, to build churches

with them (234). The Church is clearly the religious institution, or the religious symbol, that makes most sense to Tutuola; it requires no explanation. It does not stand for thoroughgoing individualism, capitalism, and secularization, for in it sicknesses are healed and resources are shared, but it does represent a step towards disenchantment.

One reason that *Ajaiyi and His Inherited Poverty* is rarely considered by scholars is that it lacks some of the exuberant and fantastical quality of Tutuola's earlier novels. A more important reason, however, is probably that its promotion of a mildly rationalistic Christianity over against what it takes to be a corrupt and retrogressive Yoruba religious culture disqualifies it, according to nativist as well as more broadly postcolonial assumptions, as valid African cultural expression. In this story the journey into the conceptual world of the Yoruba folktale is made in order to expose that world and then to dismantle it, leaving it with no independent validity of its own. Here Tutuola seems unwilling to allow the coexistence of multiple cultural or spiritual systems, and in this sense the religious outlook resembles that of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

We have seen how the transplantation of *Pilgrim's Progress* to Yorubaland opened it up to a broader range of interpretations and, in the Yoruba folktale-novels it helped inspire, allowed a redeployment of its own hermeneutical approach. This approach opens a gap between the traditional and the modern and then provides education on crossing the gap. Along with a Yoruba hero, for instance, the reader journeys into a folkloric forest and then returns with something he can use at home. However, *Ajaiyi* effectively dismantles the forest, rejecting the beliefs and customs associated with the precolonial (thus premodern) past. This folktale-novel makes a firm point but its use of literary indirection is unsophisticated and thus it requires very little hermeneutical skill of its reader; this may be another reason why critics

have not given it much time. If the reader journeys imaginatively into the forest with *Ajaiyi* all she can bring back with her is the knowledge that there is no forest. There is now only one story, one temporality.

Tutuola's other folktale-novels, such as *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* (1948) and *The Brave African Huntress* (1958) are less amenable to this modernizing and secularizing reading.²⁵ But it would not be incorrect to say that in general Tutuola's approach is quite forcefully to modernize and secularize traditional motifs and beliefs. Compared with Fagunwa, his foremost literary influence, Tutuola's interpretation instruction is firm and direct. When Wole Soyinka responds to Fagunwa, on the other hand, he endeavours to free the narrative from any fixed system of interpretation, to open up a hermeneutical gap without prescribing how to close it.

Wole Soyinka

With his 1968 translation of Fagunwa's *Ogboju, Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, Wole Soyinka writes into the conversation that this chapter's literary history has explored. In a sense, *Forest* is a bookend for the literary historical sequence begun with Hinderer's translation of Bunyan, which was completed a hundred and two years earlier. Whereas Hinderer's *Ilọ-Siwaju* introduced into the Yoruba language the possibility of an extended, unified, and fictional piece of writing, Soyinka's *Forest* introduced to the international community the possibility of a thoroughly Yoruba novel that could offer some combination

²⁵ Quayson contends in *Strategic Transformations* that in his writing Tutuola sought to challenge dominant Christianity and to revive what Christianity had marginalized as taboo. I contend on the contrary that Tutuola more often introduces irrational and gruesome Yoruba tales in order to reinscribe them into a basically Christian conceptual world. Certainly *Ajaiyi* is an exception to Quayson's claim that Tutuola loses his Christian zeal in his later works (61).

of pleasure and insight. This section demonstrates how Soyinka's translation signals both that he is linked to the legacy of the missionary encounter and that he is uneasy about it.

Like many other young Yoruba, Soyinka encountered Fagunwa's works as a schoolboy (Msiska, *Postcolonial Identity* xvi) and as an adult he developed an acquaintance with the older writer through the Mbari arts club at Ibadan. *Forest* is Soyinka's only major translation project from his mother tongue into the language of all his literary output. That he translated it is an act of homage, implying that he believes that Fagunwa's achievements should be made available to those who do not read Yoruba. This is, in fact, part of his larger goal, which he takes as fundamental to his entire oeuvre and which the next chapter will centre upon, of retrieving and representing a Yoruba past for use today. Apparently there was quite strong popular opinion against Soyinka's decision to translate Fagunwa. One academic article on this subject claims that most Yoruba at the time said the translation was a "ludicrous" idea because Fagunwa's *Ogboju* is "*the repository of 'ijinle Yoruba' [deep Yoruba idiom]*" (Olubunmi Smith, "The Author(ity) of the Text" 458, italics in original). This prohibition of translation expresses an anticolonial nativism that quite understandably resists the export of "native treasures" to the West, but expresses more strongly an assumption of incompatible audiences. How *could* a Westerner understand Fagunwa, so embedded as he is in Yoruba myth and history? Yet Soyinka was undeterred.

Still, his is not a very literal translation – he says as much, pre-empting his critics, in his two-page "Translator's Note," which warrants our close attention. Most of this Note describes Soyinka's strategy for rendering the names of types of mythical forest creatures into a language that has no terms for them. To complicate the matter, they are names that matter not just for what they signify but also for how they sound: "the most frustrating

quality of Fagunwa for a translator is the right sound of his language” (2). Thus the forest daemon known from Yoruba folktales as *ewe* becomes “dewild.” At the end of the Note Soyinka acknowledges humbly that no translation could ever be adequate, but insists that there is something universally appreciable in Fagunwa that translation cannot destroy. To make this argument he deploys, and then translates, a modern Yoruba proverb:

‘onişango di kiriyo, o l’oun o jo bata, ijọ o gbo duru, ejika ni kōtu fa ya.’

The Christian convert swore never again to dance to Sango drums; when he heard the church organ, his jacket soon burst at the seams. (2)

The interpretation of the proverb that Soyinka seems to intend is as follows: even when a real Yoruba person is straitjacketed in colonial clothing, even when he or she is influenced to the point of accepting a Christian identity and listening to Western music and repudiating traditional dancing, his or her Yoruba instincts and desires do not die. His or her *deep* cultural identity can thrive despite the *surface* changes.

Early in the present chapter Soyinka appeared as an opponent of the nativist way of imagining Africa as pure alterity with respect to the West. In other writings, however, particularly since the 1970s, he has encouraged instead of indifferent self-acceptance a concerted effort to identify, celebrate, and solidify genuine African cultural tradition; Jeyifo in *Wole Soyinka* calls this new emphasis Soyinka’s Neo-Negritudinist stage (46). By citing and translating this proverb, Soyinka seems to be drawing a parallel between converting and translating in order to articulate the view that the historical missionary encounter is an interruption. Conversion and translation may ultimately be mystifications or unfortunate impositions, he suggests, constraints analogous to a European jacket, but the cultural identity that they mystify or modify they do not destroy. Fagunwa and the Yoruba spirit (Soyinka implicitly equates them) are irrepressible.

He takes them as irrepressible even though he holds to no simplistic translation theory of direct correspondence. He does not presume to deny that meanings always change when texts are translated: Soyinka confesses that he has changed a lizard (*agiliti*) to a toad in order to do a better job of conveying “the vivid sense of the event” (1) which he thinks is the most important characteristic of the original. For “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” (1). In the first few lines of *Forest*, as Pamela Olubunmi Smith points out, he has also taken the liberty of changing Fagunwa’s “*ogidigbo*” to “*agidigbo*” (457, italics Soyinka’s). This change is hard to account for. *Agidigbo* is a vivacious and informal contemporary dance, whereas with *ogidigbo* Fagunwa referred to a kind of drumming used to transmit messages, especially in wartime. Is Soyinka so focused on Fagunwa’s verbal artistry that he dares to convert Fagunwa’s determined moral message into pure, non-didactic entertainment?

Not exactly, for such a conversion would amount to a total rewriting; and in his Translator’s Note Soyinka even admits that Fagunwa is a “pious moralist” (2), a fact that his translation will not conceal. On the other hand, Soyinka does tend to accent a “battle” located in the text between Fagunwa as “inventive imagination” and as “morally guided” (*ibid.*), emphasizing the dissonance between the two qualities. (This is the opposite worry to that which Venn and Bunyan’s Puritan critics had about literature.) Next, drawing a striking parallel between *Ogboju* and *Paradise Lost*, he articulates this dissonance in the following way: Fagunwa’s

total conviction in multiple existences within our physical world is as much an inspiration to some of the most brilliant fiction in Yoruba writing as it is a deeply felt urge to “justify the ways of God to man.” (2)

If *Ogboju* warrants this implicit comparison then Soyinka cannot be condemning the novel for its Christian apologetics. Still, what the tone of this passage suggests, which is also what his mistranslation of *ogidigbo* suggests, is that he wishes at least to accentuate the first half of these binary pairs, to emphasize literature rather than religion, indirection rather than instruction. This strategy is entirely defensible in the sense that Soyinka's goals as a writer and as a person are distinct from Fagunwa's, but troublesome in the sense that it produces a misleading view of Fagunwa as writer and potentially overlooks the entanglement of a literary with a religious history.

This same oversight of Soyinka's is, I think, suggested in his use of the Yoruba proverb he uses to justify his own project. Both translation and conversion are, for him, mystifications or unfortunate impositions that "all truly valid literature" – including, of course, "the essential Fagunwa" – "survives" ("Translator's Note," 2). But what happens when we add to this proverb the unavoidable fact that "the essential Fagunwa" is a convert; that Fagunwa wears a jacket and attends church? Soyinka would apparently have us take Fagunwa's Christianity as a straitjacket that his "essential" literariness and Yoruba-ness broke free from. Fagunwa, on the other hand, would not have approved of this dichotomizing of his identity nor of this devaluing of his choice to convert. We have seen that in Fagunwa's *Ogboju* the identification with Christianity is not superficial but rather exists at a deep level; *Ogboju* is an attempt at translating the Yoruba past into a Christian thought-framework. The division between essential and nonessential, which is to say translational, elements within Fagunwa's psyche, or Fagunwa's oeuvre, or, for that matter, Fagunwa's Africanness cannot be substantiated.

As a last comment upon the Yoruba proverb Soyinka uses to justify his having taken the risk of translation, we may observe that it is the organ, rather than traditional Yoruba drum, that activates the convert's deep Yoruba instincts: "The Christian convert swore never again to dance to Sango drums; when he heard the church organ, his jacket soon burst at the seams" (2). Does the organ have this effect simply because it is so unpleasant to the convert's Yoruba ears? Or, on the contrary, does the organ itself, the paradigmatic colonial-Christian musical instrument, transcend its original cultural location and activate something fundamentally (and irrepressibly) Yoruba? Or – a final possibility – could it be that the organ is playing one of the Yoruba hymns, in a Yoruba musical idiom, written by the Rev. Canon Josiah Jesse Ransome-Kuti, Soyinka's great-grandfather, whose wife Bertha Olubi had attended Anna Hinderer's school? Ransome-Kuti is claimed as the first Nigerian to write original church hymns, many of which are still used today.²⁶ Ransome-Kuti, somewhat like Osofisan's Crowther, represents the possibility of Yoruba cultural expression within the fold of Christianity. Make no foolish oath, we could imagine them telling their acolytes, but dance to the organ like you used to dance to the Sango drums!

Of course, all this history is not encapsulated in one allusive, little proverb. But the crucial point is that if Yoruba cultural production today wants to find historical grounding, it would do well to remember the missionary encounter. To forget would be to cut itself off from some of its own roots.

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Adrian Hastings argues in his 1997 book *The Construction of Nationhood*, which is in part a response to Benedict Anderson and which anticipates some of the arguments of Peel's

²⁶ This information comes from an unsigned article, "Josiah Jesse Ransome-Kuti: Fela's Grand-Father was Nigeria's First Gospel Musician." See also Delano.

Religious Encounter, that the Yoruba are the clearest illustration in Africa of the way that Christian missions prepares the way for literary production and, eventually, nationalism. He summarizes the relationship between Christian literature and Yoruba national consciousness as follows:

the coming of Christianity with its concomitant of a vernacular literature [...] brought the Yoruba into full consciousness of being a single people” and ultimately “a single, self-aware nation,” even though “Christians by no means dominate among the Yoruba” (158, 159).

The narrative he has in mind presumably involves Crowther, Hinderer, Johnson, Fagunwa, Tutuola, and Soyinka – precisely the writers that the present work dwells on. Hastings ascribes to literary writers powerful, though generally unintentional, political influence.

Rather than focusing on questions of Yoruba nationalism, however, in this chapter I have considered literary history – both the way that literary texts can be linked together according to their influence on one another and the way literary works position themselves in relation to traditional, colonial, and missionary histories. Rather than taking literary history as a linear narrative that begins in the pristine Yoruba past and moves through the interruptions of missions and colonialism to a revitalized, perhaps modernized, Yoruba sensibility, I have proposed that these stages be thought of as overlapping temporalities that continue to register in Nigerian literature as dynamic sources of influence, analogous to the dynamic role of ancestors in many African spiritualities. Though the influence of the missionary movement could be measured in terms of its educational institutions and technologies, or allusions to its key figures such as Crowther, or gestures of loyalty towards the religion and culture it promoted, I have focused on a particular hermeneutical method that the missionary movement promoted, particularly through its favourite literary text, John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. This method, indirection plus instruction, turns literature’s

very unreality – its fictionality and, in Yorubaland, its foreignness – into tools that make it consequential in the real world.

It was in light of that literary-historical continuity that I expressed a caution, in the opening chapter, about Gareth Griffiths' assertion that the work of late nineteenth-century Yoruba writers like Crowther and Johnson "became increasingly distinct from that of the colonial authorities, secular and sacred" (*African Literatures* 37). Certainly Griffiths is right that official missionary control over what Nigerians could write and publish gradually diminished, and viewpoints antagonistic to the missionaries gradually appeared in print, as did texts that reproduced Yoruba narrative forms or represented Yoruba beliefs to such an extent that a missionary could never have dreamed of writing them. My reservation, however, is that Griffiths' comment can be interpreted as reflecting the narrative of African literary separatism that is prominent within postcolonial studies. This narrative assumes firstly that missionaries were effectively imperial agents, and that their work necessarily contributed to colonization; and, secondly, that a text is more African simply by virtue of being dissimilar to the texts brought or promoted in Africa by Westerners. On the contrary, the previous two chapters of this dissertation have demonstrated the difficulty of equating the work and the legacy of CMS missionaries to Yorubaland with the monolithic abstraction of "colonialism"; and the present chapter has demonstrated how deeply entangled are even the "classic" works of Yoruba literature with missionary history and the formal literary techniques associated with the missionary movement.

CHAPTER FOUR

The New Generation of Interpreters:

Wole Soyinka Writes beyond the Missionary Encounter

This chapter sets out to establish continuities between Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka and the legacy of the nineteenth century-missionaries. I identify an important and quite consistent religious thrust in Soyinka's oeuvre, which I name "a Yoruba, secular religion" and which, as the name suggests, is idiosyncratic, and not committed to Christianity. However, careful examination of Soyinka's two references to Crowther suggests that in fact Soyinka's idiosyncratic and forceful religious position is not a simple rejection of missionary Christianity. I use the Yoruba deity Ogun and the work of American anthropologist Paul Radin as a lens in which to typify the traits of Soyinka's fictional protagonists, traits which I show to be expressions of an interpretive method as well as of his religious views. This method, though it emphasizes indirection more and instruction less than Hinderer's Bunyan or Fagunwa, has not moved far from the Interpreter's House of missionary literature, as I demonstrate by an extended examination of Soyinka's first novel, *The Interpreters*. Like Fagunwa and Tutuola, when Soyinka uses his fiction to orient a reader's or a society's journey through what he sees as the important contemporary challenges, he recalls the interpretive work that was at the centre of the nineteenth-century missionary movement.

Soyinka's Yoruba, Secular Religion

Soyinka's published works span fifty years and a host of genres and themes, so claiming for them a consistent ideological thrust is difficult. Nonetheless, his interest in religion and his admiration for a certain Yoruba religion are evident in work from each decade of his career – increasingly so in his public addresses since 1990. This interest corresponds to his prediction that religion will be the defining issue for the twenty-first century (Lee), a prediction that he frames as an update of W. E. B. Du Bois's 1903 prediction in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (19). Thinkers including Fanon, Senghor, and Bhabha have contributed to an analysis of how racist logic underpins global forms of oppression, an analysis that has become fundamental to postcolonial theory. Soyinka's prediction, however, is an invitation for this kind of critical analysis to be brought to bear on religious questions. The field of postcolonialism has not, by and large, taken up his challenge by devoting significant resources to inquiry into religious questions. I offer this chapter, which relates Soyinka's work both to the religion his biography began with and the religion his writing propounds, as a contribution to filling this gap in scholarship.¹

Soyinka's attention to religion begins with critique. One of the phenomena he has consistently criticized is the kind of religion that dogmatically fills in the gaps between the traditional past and the modern present, or between the certain present and the uncertain future. Soyinka wants to critique the kind of simplifying certainties that often, in Christianity

¹ Particularly helpful for my inquiry into the Yoruba religious aspects of Soyinka's work have been several of the writings of Olakunle George, for instance *Relocating Agency*, and of Biodun Jeyifo, for instance “What is the Will of Ogun?” Helpful also are Bamidele, Garuba, Idegu, and Morrison.

and Islam, travel under the name “prophecy.” He himself explains in a spoken address how his 1985 play, *Requiem for a Futurologist*, responds directly to a Nigerian situation in which many Christian leaders were gaining popular influence by claiming to foretell the future and, in particular, by foretelling disaster for those who refused to respect their authority (*Credo of Being and Nothingness* 25). The play shows how the Rev Godspoke Igbehodan is beaten at his own game by his acolyte, Eleazar Hosannah, whose prophecies and then announcements of his master’s death are so compelling that Godspoke can do nothing to convince the fanatical crowds that he is not, in fact, dead. One obituary reads:

With gratitude to God for life well spent, we regret to announce the untimely but anticipated death of our beloved brother, colleague, mentor and spiritual guide, the Rev Godspoke Igbehodan, Mystic, Clairvoyant, Parapsychologist, Occultist and Futurologist. We give thanks to God that, in spite of his brief existence, he passed the power of his knowledge into the minds of his devoted followers, who were thus enabled to predict and prepare for his death. (*Requiem* 6)

By the end of the play, Eleazar has not only convinced the whole populace that Godspoke is dead and convinced Godspoke that he should play along, but he is himself also acknowledged as the reincarnation of Nostradamus. The closing scene is comical, but the underlying point is not. Soyinka suggests that the reason the (Christian, Nigerian) religious system satirized in this play is so harmful is that it grants to untrustworthy authority figures the power to legislate simplistic or even false interpretations of reality and to distract the population from the real challenges of the present by pretending to guarantee the future. Eleazar’s religious system is the polar opposite of what Soyinka commends.

Soyinka’s attention to religion commends the secular. Secularity is appropriate in what he sees as a universe where overarching, all-embracing truths cannot be found – though they can and should be sought. A well-known Yoruba myth regarding the origins of the deities tells of the shattering of the one original deity, Oriṣa-nla, when his rebellious slave

Atunda sent a boulder rolling down the hill to land on the master. In Yoruba religion this represents the loss of primal oneness and explains our experience of social and psychic fragmentation.² It corresponds to the interpretive gap between an expression and its intention, or between a word and its meaning, that, as we have seen, Soyinka is reluctant to fill prematurely with moral instruction.

Soyinka's secularity echoes Edward Said, who, in the writings that were to become the foundation of postcolonial studies, proposed what he called "secular criticism." This is a mode of scholarly practice intended to contribute to peace and justice. The secular critic is detached and unpartisan, unfettered by membership in any particular group and by the group's particular dogmas and claims to have the universe figured out. Convinced by Foucault's analysis of academic knowledge as an institutionally located component of the apparatus of Western power, Said counsels the literary or cultural critic to follow him and disaffiliate from insular scholarly traditions such as Orientalism, as well as from nationalisms and, as implicit in his choice of the term "secular criticism," religions.

From Said onwards, a preference for secular detachment rather than religious identity is embedded in postcolonialism, which is the academic conversation in which Soyinka's work is most often considered. Orientalist discourse, which Said famously critiques, is like religion. He argues in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* that "each serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly" (290). Each "expresses an ultimate preference for the secure protection of systems of belief (however peculiar those may be) and not for critical activity or consciousness" (292). Said generally urges that

² Soyinka deals with this story in several places: "Idanre" 16, *The Interpreters* 224, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* 27. For discussion see Msiska, *Wole Soyinka*, 62; Idowu 59.

religion allow its boundaries to be blurred, to subject itself to rational evaluation, and to make compromise its *modus operandi*. Because of his deep and overt commitment to Yoruba religion and his partisan involvement in several political movements Soyinka is perhaps not a thoroughgoing secular critic in Said's sense; however, in his secular appeals for tolerance and this-worldliness he resembles a Saidean secular critic. The next section will analyse this secularity, after a description of the biographical and political contexts out of which it emerges.

Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka grew up on St Peter's church compound in the centre of Abeokuta. This is precisely where in the 1840s Henry Townsend and Samuel Ajayi Crowther had established the first missionary outpost and then the first church in the interior of Yorubaland. Soyinka's mother, Grace Eniola, was from a leading Christian Yoruba family, descending from Daniel Olubi, David Hinderer's assistant and eventually his successor. Soyinka's father, Samuel Ayodele, was employed by the church as primary school headmaster, and apart from occasional visits to his father's hometown of Ìsarà Soyinka lived his childhood within a Christian Yoruba subculture. Nonetheless, he recalls that he never found compelling the Christian belief system or, in particular, its claims to refute Yoruba religious belief ("Wole Soyinka on Yoruba Religion"). As he relates in one of his semi-fictionalized autobiographical works, he experienced a distaste for structured religion from a very early age (*Ibadan* 90), and a symbolic moment was when at around the age of eleven he won a prize for his essay "Ideals of an Atheist" (*ibid.* 166). When he went away to boarding school at Ibadan, he turned away from the path his parents had intended for him. He would have been glad if his family had turned with him, as he suggests in his most recent autobiographical work in the scene where he explains his discomfort with the dramatic

evangelical conversion of his volatile younger brother Kayoos (*You Must Set Forth at Dawn* 153); but he was also willing to journey into Yoruba religion alone.

For Soyinka, the movement away from the site where Townsend and Crowther used to serve as missionaries was also, quite directly, a move towards a secularity informed by Yoruba religious culture. In this movement away from the missions compound, Soyinka's biography parallels the history of literature in Yorubaland that was explored in previous chapters. His literary writing stays away, too, unless it is to satirize corrupt Christian leaders³ or to reveal that they are in fact more deeply rooted in Yoruba religion than in Christianity.⁴ This is part of what makes Soyinka a strong poet in Harold Bloom's sense, how he creatively separates himself from his background. Similarly, Olakunle George regards Soyinka's turn away from Christianity as Oedipal. This is to say, the turn functions to differentiate him from his literary fathers such as Fagunwa, most of whom were Christians and were missionary-trained, and who from Soyinka's perspective "bought too readily into Western ideology" (*Relocating Agency* 139). In such a literary-biographical and literary-historical context, secularity can function as postcolonial critique.

Soyinka's commitment to secularity is partly a response to the political situation of his country. Even though many of the leading campaigners for independence were Christians (including some of Soyinka's own Ransome-Kuti clan), Christianity was associated in mid-twentieth-century Nigeria more strongly with Britain than Nigeria, and therefore the rejection of Christianity fits well with an anticolonial and nationalist impulse. The position of a Saidean, non-sectarian secular critic is attractive, furthermore, because religious zeal has been a contributor to the country's notorious and violent instability since its independence in

³ Consider three of his plays: *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964), *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973), *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1985).

⁴ Consider Soyinka's play *The Road* (1965).

1960. News reports of terrible violence in Plateau State in early 2010 suggest that the religious element is more determinative today than ever before. Soyinka himself points out how the British set the stage for these problems by dividing Nigeria politically according to a notion of three main ethnicities, by granting the Hausa-Fulani in the north political dominance, and by encouraging the latter to believe that “power [was] divinely, preternaturally lodged within their enclave” (*Open Sore* 62).

These colonially imposed distinctions were reinforced by the federal structure of the new Nigeria, and in 1966 they erupted into large-scale violence between the predominantly Christian Igbo people, dominant in the southeast, and the mostly Muslim northerners. The two massacres of 1966 were followed by the grisly Biafran war from 1967-1970, in which Soyinka acted, at great personal risk, as a peace-broker, but without success. Even after the ceasefire, Soyinka continued to be actively involved in the struggle to turn Nigeria into a democratic nation, through the creative arts (plays, novels, popular music, poetry, and film) and also by journalism, mobilizing underground networks of opposition, and even directly confronting corrupt dictators. The background to his religious thinking is always Nigeria’s endemic ethnic factionalism and political corruption, and the history of its violent sequence of regime changes, oscillating between mostly Christian southerners and mostly Muslim northerners. In this political context, state-sanctioned secularization was a sensible policy; soon after independence, for instance, in response to the demands of Muslims the government of Northern Nigeria nationalized many schools and hospitals that had been founded and operated by missionaries (Falola *Violence in Nigeria* 36). In this context, Soyinka’s preference for the secular reflects his tireless commitment to justice in Nigeria.

Soyinka's secular stance reacts to the use of religion forcefully to reduce plurality to unity, and to abolish ambiguity. However, nearly all of his literary writing since the late 1950s demonstrates an interest in the religion of Yoruba tradition, and a conviction of its essential relevance to pressing practical questions. To specify what Soyinka likes best about Yoruba religion, and how he construes it as compatible with secularity, I focus on several of the public addresses he has given since the 1970s. In them, Soyinka is clear about the two main aspects of traditional Yoruba worship that are worth promoting.

First, he refers to its *accommodative* character, its fluidity and willingness to incorporate rather than expel what is unfamiliar. This stems partly from historical and political factors: for centuries the Yoruba have been confronted by alien systems of belief – Islam and, starting in the nineteenth century, Christianity; Yoruba society was typically uncentralized, with as many religious cults as towns (Hastings, *The Church in Africa* 350). In a 2002 article in *The Guardian*, Soyinka commends “[t]he accommodative spirit of the Yoruba gods,” which he locates equally in a Vedic saying, “Wise is he who recognises that Truth is One and one only, but wiser still the one who accepts that Truth is called by many names, and approached from myriad routes” (“Faiths that Preach Tolerance”). Second, Soyinka commends the *this-worldly character* of Yoruba religion. It is unwilling to defer quality-of-life questions to the eschatological future, and so it harmonizes with a secular modernity. It is more concerned with deeds than creeds. This characteristic includes a this-worldly view of texts. Soyinka explains that the

failure to see transmitted texts, with their all too human adumbrations, as no more than signposts, as parables that may lead the mind towards a deeper quarrying into the human condition [...] has led to the substitution of dogma for a living, dynamic spirituality. And this is where the Yoruba deities have an urgent and profound message to transmit to the rest of the world. (*ibid.*)

He goes on to argue that because Yoruba religion has no closed canon of texts it tends towards a greater openness to alternative perspectives.

These two characteristics correspond to the moments in his “Translator’s Preface” to *Forest of a Thousand Daemons* where, as I have identified, he distances himself from Fagunwa. Soyinka admires his literary ancestor Fagunwa for his “inventive imagination” for “the experience of sheer delight in his verbal adroitness,” but is ambivalent about Fagunwa the “pious moralist” (2). Soyinka protests against a kind of Christianity that would presume to forbid its convert to dance to the *agidigbo* drums. What I take as essential to Soyinka’s Yoruba, secular religion is its ability to keep interpretive gaps open that other kinds of religiosity would presume to (fore)close. I offer as illustration of Soyinka’s Yoruba, secular religion a written obituary and two published lectures.

On several occasions he has upheld as model Susanne Wenger, the Austrian-born high priestess of Osun, the Yoruba river-god of fertility. Wenger arrived in Yorubaland in 1950 as an artist (she was a sculptor, an architect, and a potter) and eventually became a devotee, dedicated to reviving the worship of Osun and to restoring his shrines in the wake of their marginalization at the hands of Christianity, Islam, and colonialism. She was also an educator, training countless pilgrims as well as her fifteen adopted Yoruba children in Yoruba spirituality. Her efforts led to UNESCO’s designation of the Osun-Osogbo sacred grove, one of the last remaining sacred groves in Yorubaland, as a World Heritage Site. Soyinka commended Wenger’s example – a westerner willing to learn from, even convert to, Yoruba faith – in the address he gave at the 2009 African Literature Association conference, and also in an online obituary he wrote, “Wole Soyinka on ‘Adunni Osun’ Susanne Wenger,”

upon her passing in January of the same year. In the latter, he contrasts Wenger with the intolerance of many African Muslims and Christians:

[i]t is when these latter-day convertites assume the mantle of Absolute, Incontrovertible Truths to the extent that they affect to despise other Truths, destroy their icons, mutilate their heritage and embark on orgies of intolerance, even to a homicidal extent, that they declare themselves subhuman, and earn the righteous wrath of other claimants to the altar of spiritual verities.

Susanne Wenger, re-named Adunni Olorisa, mapped out the path of tolerance, of spiritual ecumenism, the choice of being true to oneself yet accommodative of others.

We will see several of Soyinka's fictional characters who like Wenger earn his approbation as embodiments of an accommodative and this-worldly religion.

When Soyinka directly promotes Yoruba religion, he does so with humility, conscious that dogmatic proselytizing is exactly what bothers him about certain other religions. In *Climate of Fear*, a published adaptation of Soyinka's 2004 Reith Lectures, he explains how terrorist groups with inflexible ideologies have the effect of destroying individual freedom because the fear they instil forestalls dialogue. To concretize his vision, he concludes with a proposal that his reader consider embracing key elements of Yoruba religion, which, because its watchword is tolerance, is one of Africa's best gifts to the world (136). In his 1991 published lecture, *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*, for the sake of world peace and for the elimination of the "structured ignorance" (15) that religions often cultivate with respect to each other, Soyinka urges his listeners at the University of Ibadan to

study the spirituality of this continent. As in all things, selectiveness is the key. To limit myself to that with which I am on familiar grounds, I say to you: go to the *orisa*, learn from them and be wise. (32)

Credo is a well-reasoned plea for empathetic but securely secular education, in which the truths of history and the value of compassion cannot be compromised by statements of faith. Soyinka argues that the narrowly-minded religious, who deny the humanity of those who do

not share their beliefs, need to be taught about the riches in traditions other than their own and about the “horrors” that their own religions have wrought (19). Here again Susanne Wenger embodies his religious proposal.

In summary, Soyinka has built upon his own analysis of religions’ immense contribution to violence and misunderstanding in Nigeria and throughout the world by developing and promoting through his writing a position I refer to as a Yoruba, secular religion. In keeping with his belief that the primal oneness of the universe has not been restored, and indeed will not be restored in this world, he promotes a religious position that appreciates ambiguity, accommodates diversity, and refuses dogma. This is a secular position in Said’s sense, but it is also deeply rooted in Soyinka’s understanding of Yoruba religion, for which he has become an international promoter in the past twenty years. He upholds Suzanne Wenger’s example over against prophets such as those in *Requiem for a Futurologist*, whose prophetic certainties are oppressive and false. For Soyinka a good leader, or a good writer, does not force his follower or reader to interpret in one particular way.

A Colonialist and a Forest Spirit:

Two Readings of the Missionary Encounter

As in his fiction, in Soyinka’s semi-autobiographical and theoretical writing missionaries such as Crowther do not figure as important interlocutors. In his two literary-philosophical monographs, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) and *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage* (1988), he interacts predominantly with twentieth-century Anglophone and Francophone West African philosophers, literary critics, and writers, and also occasionally with ancient

(Greek) and modern (European) playwrights and theorists of theatre. In Soyinka's four works of fictionalized autobiography (*Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981), *Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay"* (1989), *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years: A Memoir 1946-1965* (1994), and *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006)),⁵ political themes predominate and Nigerian political figures often make appearances; but religious themes are rarer than in Soyinka's public addresses. Samuel Ajayi Crowther appears once, however, in Soyinka's literary-philosophical writing and once in his fiction. These two evocations, which I will quote at length, suggest two dramatically different Crowthers, one who cannot be accommodated within Soyinka's religious proposal, and one – a subtler and more literary one – who can be accommodated; one who cannot be incorporated as ancestor in the religious and literary history that we locate Soyinka in, and one who can. Taken together, they suggest that Soyinka would have us construe his work as ambivalent about, rather than as uniformly opposed to, the missionary encounter in Yorubaland.

The project of *Myth, Literature, and the African World* is to show that literature and a theory of literature can be derived from indigenous African sources, without depending upon exogenous or colonialist ideas. The first half of the book considers theories of dramatic expression and the second half, which we will concentrate on, explores novels by Camara Laye, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Mongo Beti as positive illustrations of literature grounded in genuinely African thought. Soyinka is carefully navigating here between what he sees as two inverse forms of anti-universalism, which are, in his view, dangerous, and tantamount to cultural self-negation. The former can be identified as Eurocentrism, which is the abandoning

⁵ Critics sometimes identify these fictionalized autobiographical works as Soyinka's "faction." To be precise, *Isara* is actually a fictionalized biography of Soyinka's father, though in form and in content it fits clearly into the category of Soyinka's "faction"; furthermore, implicit connections to the author's biography and contemporary Nigerian politics are found throughout *Isara*.

of African culture as primitive or provincial and the embracing of a Western, Manichean mode of philosophy and literature. The latter can be identified as Négritude, which in spite of its protestations of anti-colonialism actually fails to challenge Eurocentrism's racist, Manichean reasoning. It admits that Europeans are more advanced because of their analytical thinking, but then adds as a footnote that Africans deserve respect too, but because of their emotional sensitivity and intuition (127). Rather than the European's "I think, therefore I am," Négritude encourages the African to say, "I feel, therefore I am" (138). Soyinka's criticism of the literary separatism of Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, examined in the previous chapter, is that in demanding for themselves a fully separate literary and critical system they effectively fall into this same Négritude and concede that Africa has no truth to offer the world.

Both of these poles, for Soyinka, concede far too much. Though he is in this work manifestly a believer in Yoruba myth and tradition, Soyinka is here taking a stand for a certain universalism. He does not intend an African world-view that is fundamentally at odds with others. Rather, in *Myth*, by demonstrating the *secular* qualities of African *religious* thought, its accommodativeness and this-worldliness, he shows how what is distinctively African is an avenue towards what is universal. An African world-view proposes a "cosmic totalism" which can generate, as it does in Camara Laye's 1955 novel *The Dark Child*, "an exaltation of constantly revolving relationships between man and his environment above [that is, rather than] a rigid pattern of existence mandated by exteriorised deities" (122). Because African thought (and particularly Yoruba thought, which generates most of his specific examples⁶) can make sense of the whole world – though, to its credit, it never

⁶ Consider here the critique of Appiah in *In My Father's House* that the only way Soyinka can make particularities of Yoruba thought stand in for African thought is because of the colonialism that Soyinka so

dreamed of political conquest of the whole world – European categories need not be imported. What Soyinka here affirms in other writers, and accomplishes in his own writing, is in the helpful words of Quayson a “de-sacraliz[ng of] cultural resources for the purposes of accommodating the values of increasingly international cultural realities” (77).

At the end of his preface, by explaining how he relates Africa to the world Soyinka explains his purpose in writing, adducing Crowther as exemplary of the “self-negation” that constitutes colonialism:

Nothing in these essays suggests a detailed uniqueness of the African world. Man exists, however, in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context, the African world, like any other “world” is unique. It possesses, however, in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity. To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is, for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent. There is nothing to choose ultimately between the colonial mentality⁷ of an Ajayi Crowther, West Africa’s first black bishop, who grovelled before his white missionary superiors in a plea for patience and understanding of his “backward, heathen, brutish” brothers, and the new black ideologues who are embarrassed by statements of self-apprehension by the new “ideologically backward” African. Both suffer from externally induced fantasies of redemptive transformation in the image of alien masters. Both are victims of the doctrine of self-negation [...] Like his religious counterpart, the new ideologue has never stopped to consider whether or not the universal verities of his new doctrine are already contained in, or can be elicited from the world-view and social structures of his own people. (xii)

If there is a specific incident of Crowther grovelling to which Soyinka alludes, it remains obscure. Regardless, the Crowther that Soyinka has in mind is presumably the Crowther of the *Bibeli Mimọ* not of the *Iwe ABD*. The “black ideologues” are perhaps some of the Nigerian intellectuals who in the mid-twentieth century were embarrassed at the international

scrupulously avoids crediting as philosophically generative, the colonialism that to some extent invented “Africa.” Appiah is denying that Africa has metaphysical unity (78).⁷ This may be an allusion to “Colonial Mentality,” one of the best known and most polemical songs of Soyinka’s mother’s cousin, Fela Kuti, the pioneer of Afrobeat music. “Colonial Mentality” was released the year after Soyinka’s *Myth*, in 1976, but I think it is likely Soyinka had already heard the song in 1976.

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success of Tutuola's early folktale-novels because they evoked an Africa that seemed to them unsophisticated and pre-modern, teeming with weird spirit-creatures and purveyors of sententious proverbs (Wehrs 130). Soyinka suggests that Yoruba thought is in many ways better equipped to deal with global modernity than Western thought, and thus he is contemptuous of Crowther and the ideologues inasmuch as they reject their continent's own resources.

If the Crowther evoked by Soyinka in *Myth, Literature, and the African World* is a figure of colonial capitulation, a reminder of a historical moment that Africa must overcome, the Crowther evoked in *Aké: The Years of Childhood* is a figure of the hybridity that postcolonial analysis seeks to understand, and a hopeful sign of Yoruba cultural resilience. However, this latter Crowther is intended as mere fiction, as the unreal imagining of a precocious child. Though Soyinka usually seems to want to jump back in time to anchor himself to a tradition that precedes colonialism and Christianity, in *Aké* he discovers and discloses a small space within the Christian system where there was room for his secular, Yoruba consciousness to develop. Though it does dramatize the protagonist's turn away from his parents' religion, *Aké* is not essentially a narrative of a child's leaving home, but a narrative of an adult who rediscovers home, by means of creatively remembering childhood. And he discovers that he still feels at home there. *Aké*'s opening chapters, which describe through a child's eyes the remarkably harmonious and creative intersection of Christian and Yoruba culture and myth, seem to be in part a protestation of loyalty to the world that he first knew, the world that he witnessed from his vantage point in the Anglican parsonage at the heart of Abeokuta. This second Crowther, though presented as imaginary, demonstrates that

Soyinka's religious project is not straight rejection of the missionary encounter, which is not construed as a simple interruption into the pure stream of African culture.

In the small child's imagination that is the core of *Aké* is plenty of room for the dialogue of perspectives that the adult Soyinka, in his writings and addresses, values so highly. Initially, *Aké*'s geography suggests a clear division between what is "pious" (which is to say Christian) and what is "pagan." Thus the book's opening paragraph depicts the child's consternation that when God descends from the sky he should have to visit Itoko – the highest hill Wole could see, a "pagan" hill – before arriving at St Peter's Church (1). Thus we are shown the child standing on the shoulders of Joseph, his parents' household helper, who stands at the top of a ladder, which leans against the long wall of the compound, and from these heights he first witnesses the dancing *egungun* and the fascinating police band, and he first learns that his particular cultural and religious community is marginal. It is a Copernican shift when he, only a pre-schooler, realizes that his life is situated inside an enclosed space and that there is a bigger world outside. Soon the adventurous child manages to get through the gate in the wall, and joins a police band as they follow the road that passes along the parsonage wall. Eventually,

the wall rolled away into a different area I had never seen before. Soon it moved away altogether, was covered up by houses and shops and disappeared for ever. It upset my previous understanding of the close relationship between the parsonage and *Aké*. [...] Those token bits and pieces of *Aké* which had entered our home on occasions, or which gave off hints of their nature in those Sunday encounters at church, were beginning to emerge in their proper shapes and sizes. (38)

The neat geographical distinction between the Christian world and the Yoruba world, reconfigured here, is not the whole story. In the child's mind, and in the minds of all but the flattest and most dogmatic characters inhabiting his world, there is no firm boundary between the two. This world is not the Manichean world where individuals succumb to what Soyinka

in *Myth* called “externally induced fantasies of redemptive transformation in the image of alien masters” (xii). This is, rather, a thoroughly Yoruba world that can nonetheless make sense of difference.

Appropriately, the Yoruba mythical-cultural framework seems to have been securely established in the child’s consciousness from the start, even though his mother and father and teachers (all the individuals who had direct influence over him) were part of a well organized movement to teach the Yoruba to speak English at school, to quote the Bible at Sunday School, to eat with knife and fork, and to honour the King. This is partly just the precedence of experience over imposed precept. However, Soyinka is not just pointing to the child’s innocent experientialism, and he is not just exercising his own playful iconoclasm, when he makes the Bishop Ajayi Crowther that the child imagines an *òrò* (a small forest spirit or sprite), and when he makes the St Peter that the child imagines, staring down at Wole from the church’s stained glass window, an *egungun*. Wole had seen Crowther’s photo in one of the pictorial biographies that Nigerian Anglicans loved to produce on Crowther, but in the child’s accommodative imagination Crowther was no different from one of the characters he might have encountered in one of Fagunwa’s folkloric forests: he says he used to imagine “Bishop Ajayi Crowther” peering mysteriously out from among the foliage, “whenever I passed by the house on an errand to our Great Aunt, Mrs Lijadu” (4). Crowther would undergo eerie transformations such as dropping his eyeballs into his opened silver pocket watch. “That Bishop Ajayi Crowther frightened me out of that compound by his strange transformations only confirmed that the Bishops, once they were dead, joined the world of spirits and ghosts” (5).

What Soyinka is highlighting here is the resilience of the Yoruba world-view as well as both the ability and the willingness of Christianity in Yorubaland to accommodate to it. Perhaps Crowther's Christianity is actually odder and more frightening than the adults realize (for they do not see the *òrò* or his eyeballs), but neither to adult nor to child is it destructive or incomprehensible according to their way of thinking. The preschooler asks his mother,

"Was Bishop Crowther an *òrò*?"

Wild Christian [the nickname he gives her throughout *Aké*] laughed. "What next are you going to ask? Oh I see. They have taught you about him in Sunday school have they?"

"I saw him" I pulled back at the door, forcing Lawanle [the helper charged with bathing the Soyinka children] to stop. "I see him all the time. He comes and sits under the porch of the Girls School. I've seen him when crossing the compound to Auntie Mrs Lijadu."

"All right," sighed Wild Christian. "Go and have your bath."

"He hides among the bougainvillaea. . . ." (8)

So Soyinka shows how easy it is for Crowther, who to the adult mind is squarely in the camp of the Christians, to inhabit the other camp, to be interpreted through indigenous categories.

The *Aké* of his preschool years is a hopeful, harmonious vision – one of the most hopeful in all of Soyinka's oeuvre – but *Aké* hints strongly that the vision does not correspond well to the world of adults. In the book's closing sentence the eleven-year-old narrator, bravely preparing for a move to boarding school at Ibadan, announces to himself that "[i]t was time to commence the mental shifts for admittance to yet another irrational world of adults and their discipline" (230). *Aké* is much like Kipling's *Kim* in that it manages to imagine, by looking at the world through the lens of the life of a precocious child, a beautiful harmony where previously there was only fragmentation: colonialism and conquest, incompatibilities and misunderstandings. The child's voice in *Aké* is occasionally interrupted by the sad voice of the adult writer, looking back. "An evil thing has happened to *Aké* parsonage. The land is eroded, the lawns are bared and mystery driven from its once

secretive combs” (3). “The smells are all gone. In their place, mostly sounds, and even these are frenzied distortions of the spare, intimate voices of humans and objects alike which filled Aké from dawn to dusk” (149). For this adult voice, the age is over in which Crowther could be an òrò, St Peter could be an egungun, and the women of Egbaland, led by Soyinka’s aunt and mother in protest against arbitrary taxation of women by the local king, could join “irrespective of their leanings” in singing songs to the orisa, to Allah, and to Christ (217).

Crowther as imagined by the young Soyinka is one of the implicit founding figures of this Aké, where Christianity is characterized by the very secularity that Soyinka promotes, where the “universal verities” of Christianity and Yoruba religion are mutually accommodating. That this scenario can even be imagined is evidence, I think, that the Soyinka’s religious program is not simply the negation of what he sees in the missionary movement.⁸ However, we must turn to other figures in order to find the embodiment of his religious program.

Radin’s Priest-Thinker and Ogun:

Two Figures of Soyinka’s Religious Position

We have seen at various points in the present work how a variety of scholars, for instance F. D. Ade Ajayi, J. D. Y. Peel, and Andrew Apter, take Crowther as paradigmatic of a certain historical or cultural movement. Crowther is not, however, central in Soyinka’s thought. In the next section I present two figures, both rather mythical, who can function as paradigms

⁸ Another piece of evidence comes from his early comic play *Jero’s Metamorphosis*, which concludes with a suggestion of compatibility between Christianity and the this-worldly, accommodating, and genuinely African culture that Soyinka celebrates. The play concludes with the cast marching out “in strict tempo” to the tune of the American Christian chorus “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho.” But suddenly the “elated” trumpeter transitions into a “brisk indigenous rhythm” and the marchers transition accordingly into a “dance-march” (213). Imported Christian rigidities seem equipped to accommodate and perhaps even to facilitate their own hybridization with African culture.

for the form of religion Soyinka promotes. I go on to discuss several of his fictional protagonists as instances of this paradigm, which, I finally argue, is equivalent to an interpretive method that is different in degree rather than in kind from Bunyan's. By focussing in this section on patterns of characterization I keep in mind Jean and John Comaroff's suggestion that the consequences of the missionary encounter are better to be sought in the "form" of everyday patterns and routines than in the "content" of explicit utterances on the subject.

There is a remarkable consistency among Soyinka's protagonists, a consistency that I think corresponds closely to the prophetic role Soyinka sees for himself as a politically and socially engaged artist. An efficient way of schematizing it is to frame it as an amalgam of two conceptual systems, both of which seem to have been influential upon Soyinka's intellectual reflection: the work of the American anthropologist Paul Radin and the mythology surrounding the Yoruba *oriṣa* Ogun.

Soyinka encountered the work of Paul Radin, who received his doctorate under Franz Boas in 1911, while imprisoned in solitary confinement between 1967 and 1969 because of his attempts to broker an agreement and stave off the Biafran war. Radin's *Primitive Religion: Its Nature and Origin*, first published in 1937, was one of the very few books that several courageous prison officers smuggled into the prison. Soyinka begins his prison narrative *The Man Died* (1972) by explaining how he actually did his own writing – poems, plays, and a diary – between the lines of Radin's book. Much of Soyinka's writing is in a symbolic sense written between the lines of Radin's, that is, an elaboration of Radin's thinking. The two men share a respectful understanding of primitive society and its religious rituals as an arena for the universal human drama.

As an anthropologist, Radin distinguished himself by his concern with the individual, and in particular with the individual religious leader. Though he studied religion and myth as features of communities, he felt that the majority of a community's people are religious only in the weak (and not very interesting) sense of desiring the power available through religion to help them meet their needs. Based on his extensive fieldwork among the Winnebago people of the US Southwest and particularly his study of their Medicine Dance, Radin came to the conclusion that

Such a highly artificial drama can manifestly represent the achievement only of men who have thought deeply on the meaning of life, who possessed the artistic skill to articulate their vision and the leisure in which to do it, not to mention an audience that was willing to accept it. (*Primitive Religion* 305).

Radin was fascinated by this elite group, which he alternately calls “primitive philosophers,” “religious formulators,” and “priest-thinkers” (14); they were, he felt, where the essence of religion and myth could be found. These exceptionally gifted people have an intellectual bent – they constantly analyse religious phenomena in order to understand it – as well as the ability to reinterpret, revitalize, and repopularize myth so that it has potency and purchase at a particular time and place. The common people may regard society's principal rituals of transition in pragmatic terms – preparing a man to reproduce and to go to war, preparing the corpse for burial – but the priest-thinker sees the ritual as sacred, and exhorts others towards his own religious understanding (102). The priest thinker's essential contribution in his society is not through conforming to the majority, nor anchoring them to fixed and authoritative traditions, but through interpreting stories in a way that is socially relevant yet that respects what is mysterious and ancient; and through leading the way towards social transformation. This power can be dangerous, as can all power, and in the words of Stanley

Diamond, Radin “was constantly aware of the linked exploitative and creative roles of intellectuals of the kind he called ‘priest-thinkers’” (Diamond 57).

Soyinka’s interactions with Ogun, one of the most prominent of the many Yoruba oriṣa, are better documented than his interactions with Radin. Ogun is the fierce and hyper-masculine divinity of iron and war (see Idowu 87). In the densely allusive 1969 literary-critical essay “The Fourth Stage,” Soyinka explains how the characteristic Ogun story is about the time when Ogun led the way for the gods, responding to the “primal severance” associated with the splintering of Oriṣa-nla by Atunda’s boulder, to descend to earth and reunite with “human essence” (*Myth, Literature, and the African World* 144). To follow Ogun and “dare transition is the ultimate test of the human spirit,” he contends; the schism he has in mind here is between the individual’s “essence” and her “self,” but implicitly it includes the gap between ancestral tradition and modernity, and the gap between art and social needs. “Ogun is the first protagonist of the abyss” (*Myth* 158). There is no indication that Soyinka intends Ogun as an everyman figure in the sense that Bunyan’s Pilgrim is – for Soyinka is focused on the heroic and somewhat alienated individual – but nonetheless both figures are assigned an important hermeneutical task.

Soyinka retells the story of Ogun in the long poem “Idanre,” published in 1967, which takes place on two levels. The poet takes a walk through a rainstorm near the Yoruba town of Idanre (considered the home of Ogun), and interspersed with this account is a retelling of the main Ogun myth, where the deity takes the initiative in transgressing the divide between humans and deities. One original contribution here is Soyinka’s lauding of Atunda as “First revolutionary / Grand iconoclast at genesis” (83) for splintering the god and generating “a million lights” (68). He takes Atunda to represent the celebration of difference

and thus the invitation for creativity. The poem frames Ogun as successor to Atunda; both are “contemptuous of womb-yearnings” (*ibid.*), which means they stand against the kind of loyalty to a homogeneous past that characterizes the nativists (Osundare 191).

Ogun establishes a pattern that many of Soyinka’s protagonists will follow when he responds courageously and selflessly to overcome (though not to erase) fragmentation:

Wordlessly he rose, sought knowledge in the hills
Ogun the lone one saw it all [...]
[...]
 To think, a mere plague of finite chaos
 Stood between the gods and man
He made a mesh of elements, from stone
Of fire in earthfruit, the womb of energies
He made an anvil of the peaks, and kneaded
Red clay for his mould. In his hand the Weapon
Gleamed, born of the primal mechanic
 And this pledge he gave the heavens
 I will clear a path to man [... .] (70, 71)

As in the standard versions of the myth, when Soyinka’s Ogun succeeds, the Elders of the town of Ire insist on making him king, giving him an authority that he lacked the discipline to wield well. Called upon to lead the townspeople in war against their enemies, in a drunken stupor he accidentally kills them. Thus here, as elsewhere in Soyinka, the creative and destructive principles are paradoxically twinned; a fierceness is required for crossing the gap.

For several decades, Soyinka has been referring to Ogun as his patron deity (e.g. *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* 191),⁹ following the ancient Yoruba practice whereby individuals or communities develop a special relationship with one particular orisha. He himself follows Ogun’s interpretive example even in his reformulation of Yoruba deities for the modern world: Atunda can represent nuclear physics (“Idanre” 82) and Ogun is “today’s god of precision technology, oil rigs and space rockets” (*Art, Dialogue and Outrage* 329). He

⁹ In the fictionalized autobiography of his childhood, *Aké*, Soyinka describes a ritual in which his paternal grandfather sealed Soyinka’s devotion to Ogun (143).

follows this example, too, in designing protagonists for many of his literary works, five of which will now be considered. Taken together, they recall Ogun – they wrestle with the conflicting potentialities in themselves; they have the ability to mediate to their communities empowering resources of tradition and of the human spirit, but equally the ability to withhold and to destroy. They also recall Radin’s priest-thinker in that they are gifted with the abilities to revitalize ancient wisdom for today’s secular circumstances and to lead in the performance of symbolic ritual for the good of the community.

Soyinka’s early play, *The Strong Breed* (1963) reflects the year he traveled, in a jeep paid for by the Rockefeller Foundation, around Nigeria to research popular dramatic forms. Thus he studied several instances in Nigeria’s indigenous religions (including the Yoruba) of what he called “ritual carriers,” individuals selected to carry a year’s worth of the community’s sins to the grave. The play’s protagonist is Eman, a schoolteacher, who embodies Ogun’s redemptive agency in that he voluntarily takes upon himself the role of ritual carrier, dying in the place of an innocent young boy whom the corrupt village priests had selected. “I know I find consummation only when I have spent myself for a total stranger,” he says (125). Eman’s action is secular in that it is motivated by a rational strategy towards an ethical goal rather than by the pursuit of an otherworldly goal or by rigid religious obedience. The play concludes inconclusively, though with a hope that Eman’s self-sacrifice might succeed to disenchant the community and point them towards the freedom of a secular, ethical form of religion. Through Eman Soyinka shows how the strong leader can respect tradition as well as subject it to a rigorous critique and wrest it from the hands of a corrupt priesthood (see Msiska, *Postcolonial Identity in Wole Soyinka* 156).

The protagonist of Soyinka's novel *Season of Anomy* (1973), which he began while in prison, is Ofeyi. Though the novel's plot has the same shape as the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice – Ofeyi embarks on a quest to save his abducted lover, Iriyise – Ofeyi probably has more in common with Ogun than Orpheus (see Roy and Kirpal 524). Like Ogun, Ofeyi is a warrior and an artist, constantly torn between living actively and reflectively, violently and creatively. He is an educated young man with a good job for the Cartel, an evil cocoa corporation that is ruthlessly exploiting the nation's people and soil, and widening the already huge gap between rich and poor in the postcolonial nation that represents Nigeria. Thrust into a leadership role in mobilizing a subversive advertising campaign and, later, a violent resistance movement to overturn the Cartel's power, he finds his spiritual and psychological grounding through an unexpected loyalty to the village of Aiyero, an idyllic socialist utopia, and through the guidance of its elderly leader, Ahime, custodian of the traditions of the past. Though at first Ofeyi appears to be a trailblazer in his attempt to apply the humane and ancient principles of Aiyero and in the context of modern, secular national politics, he realizes later that he had underestimated the sophistication of Aiyero, which turns out to be the centre of a nation-wide reconnaissance and resistance network. Ancient, local traditions are more modernizable and more universalizable than the modern hero expected.

In Soyinka's 1973 revision of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, though he avoids the anachronism of introducing Yoruba religion directly he presents Dionysos as an Ogunian figure of destruction and regeneration.¹⁰ As in Euripides' original, jealous and powerful

¹⁰ Elsewhere Soyinka has called Ogun "totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues" (*Myth*, 141). In keeping with his suggestion that Yoruba culture and religion are innately cosmopolitan, indeed more suitable for Africa *as well as for* global interactions today than the Western-Christian ideologies that engendered colonialism, Soyinka in several places highlights similarities between Yoruba and ancient Greek thinking. In *Credo* he says

Dionysos engineers the destruction of the authoritarian and iconoclastic King Pentheus, who in Soyinka's retelling is also a perpetrator of slavery. Pentheus exhibits everything intolerant and bureaucratically rational against which Soyinka defines his religion. In exasperation, the blind seer Tiresias says to him, "Why do men quibble and clutch the literal for the sense?" (259). As protagonist, Dionysos is therefore both the sign of a healthy (because accommodating) ancient religion and the agent of redemption and emancipation for a community that desperately needed to "embrace a new vitality" (243). At the end of the play, Tiresias interprets the tragic action of Pentheus's death in terms that recall Yoruba ritual sacrifice: though "[u]nderstanding of these things is far beyond us [...] perhaps our life-sustaining earth / Demands [...] a more / Than token offering for her own needful renewal" (306). *The Bacchae of Euripides* is both an evocation of a form of accommodative and humane religion, represented by Dionysos, and a warning about the results of its absence.

Written during the exile that followed Soyinka's release from prison, Soyinka's most famous play, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), provides another secular-religious protagonist, in this case the young Yoruba man Olunde, the firstborn son of the King's Horseman. Olunde has trained as a physician in the UK, gaining the opportunity to understand the West: he has embraced modern medicine, analysed modern Christianity, observed the destructiveness of modern Western politics. Distance from his home culture has only enhanced his appreciation for it. He stands for the same secularity as Soyinka in that he can accommodate difference in beliefs and cultures, and in that he interprets religion in a demystified and this-worldly manner. For example, while other Yoruba characters are thrown

before islam or christianity can propose that either is tailor-fitted for a the nude body of African spirituality, it should first take a spiritual journey through ancient Egypt, ancient Greece and the Far East of hinduism. (23)
 For more on the Dionysos-Ogun connection in this play, see Msiska *Wole Soyinka* 69.

into panic when they see the District Officer and his wife desecrating egungun masks by wearing them at a costume party, Olunde remains calm.¹¹ His dispassionate secularity allows him to communicate with, and ultimately to critique, the colonial authorities. He describes what he learned in England to the District Officer's wife: "I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand" (41). The play's climactic conclusion brings the discovery – a shock to the Western characters and readers, though not to Olunde's community – that his secularity is compatible with an allegiance to the ancient Yoruba traditions. Olunde's privilege has not paralysed him or swept him into colonial modernity or eliminated his solidarity with the common people. It has empowered him to act creatively and self-sacrificially on their behalf: he states himself that he does not "want to do anything wrong, something which might jeopardise the welfare of my people" (46). Thus he sacrifices his life to maintain the cosmic balance that his father's indiscipline threatened.

Soyinka's dramatic output has slowed since the 1980s, but one play since then, *The Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope* (1995), is notable because it is his first work to focus on the urban poor. The set is a cluster of vendors' ramshackle stalls next to an "opulent shopping plaza" (97). The protagonist is the charismatic and intelligent Sanda, who though raised in a slum has managed to attend college. Despite the promise of a bourgeois future, Sanda is convinced that real education means fighting creatively alongside the oppressed. He sees the city as a contested space, where elite and corrupt officials make schemes for concealing the "blemish" of the millions of urban poor; but also as opportunity, for he courageously sets aside his privilege and enters into the urban space of the poor in order to show them how to be unified and to lead them in political resistance. Sanda is a

¹¹ Olakunle George demonstrates how Olunde can be read as Soyinka's alter-ego and, in particular, analyses this scene in terms of Olunde's secularity, in *Relocating Agency* (164).

weaker example of the Ogunian-Radinian paradigm than are Eman, Ofeyi, Dionysos, and Olunde, but, like them, though he is privileged he renounces his privilege and acts self-sacrificially for communal justice.

My readings of these fictional texts in terms recalling Ogun and Radin's priest-thinker are not genealogical, as if to suggest that these two figures are the secret source of Soyinka's ideals. I do not claim to write his intellectual biography. I suggest, rather, that the areas of similarity between the two figures and Soyinka's protagonists are significant in determining the basic shape of the literary works' narratives, and that these areas correspond with Soyinka's basic religious position as I have outlined it. I observe, furthermore, that those who embody this position are effectively interpreters across a historical and ideological gap. Without needing to draw from outside, they find in their own tradition (which, whether or not it is explicitly identified as Yoruba, clearly reflects Soyinka's formulation of his own people's religion) the resources they require in order creatively and courageously to lead their community in responding to contemporary challenges. Nothing in this paradigm or in these five instances of it draws sympathetically from the nineteenth-century missionary encounter. A sixth instance of the paradigm, however, is an exception.

Lazarus, an important character though not a protagonist in Soyinka's first novel, *The Interpreters* (1965), is the interpretive key to a novel that focuses on interpretation. He is also the novel's character whose religious position seems to receive the author's greatest approbation and the best developed Christian character in all Soyinka's oeuvre. Because as an educated preacher he stands at the terminus of the sequence suggested by the title of this dissertation – from Ancestor to Book to Church – and because he demonstrates a hermeneutical practice that moves skilfully between traditions or texts and contemporary

social reality, Lazarus helps provide an answer to this work's basic question about the relationship between the missionary encounter and Nigeria's literature.

Lazarus is the Ladder: *The Interpreters* as Interpretive Education

The proverb with which Soyinka introduced his translation of Fagunwa's *Ogboju* suggests that he has seen Nigerian churches – perhaps he is even thinking of St. Peter's Aké – that are committed to uprooting Yoruba belief and practice. Clearly, he rejects simplistic and moralizing interpretations of the world or of literature that reduce complexity to a single message, as though the world were simply the beat of an *ogidigbo* drum, or as though Atunda had not shattered originary oneness. In *The Interpreters* he signals this rejection through the death, at the novel's midpoint, of the admirable character Sekoni. Sekoni seems to represent Oriṣa-nla, because with stuttering voice he is constantly making utterances about the “d-d-dome of c-c-continuity” and the “com . . . plete unity of Llife” (9, 122). Soyinka does not scorn Sekoni's idealism, which bears unmistakable traces of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's religious philosophy (e.g. “Kubla Khan”; see Owusu 192), but he does indicate its impracticality. In contrast to Sekoni's all-embracing interpretive certainty is Lazarus.

The Interpreters are a group of six young Nigerians who became friends ten years prior to the novel's action while they were university students at Ibadan in the 1950s – precisely when their author was. Profoundly cynical about the ostentation and corruption of the generation ahead of them, who had just been given the reins of the new country of Nigeria, they nevertheless lack the strength of will and the creativity for the redemptive and self-sacrificial action that Soyinka's fiction suggests any real change requires. They are existentialist anti-heroes, pursuing the absolute, unfettered neutrality that the novel calls

“apostasy” (177) rather than braving the pain of community solidarity. Mark Kinkhead-Weekes, whose interpretation of the novel seems to me the most illuminating, takes its central insight to be that “the murderer and the saint are nearer each other than either is to the nonentity” (234); the novel is thus a call for energetic engagement. However, though the Interpreters are privileged with knowledge of their Nigerian traditions as well as a Western, university education; and though they have the tools necessary to be the kind of priest-thinkers, or reactivators of tradition, that Soyinka advocates, they apostasize.¹²

The painter Kola’s large canvas “The Pantheon” might seem to make him a positive candidate for the embodiment of Soyinka’s religious ideals. Located in a studio at the University of Ibadan, the painting is an ambitious representation in a contemporary medium of Yoruba religious tradition. Since Kola uses seven contemporary Nigerians as his models for seven Yoruba deities, the painting proposes continuity between individual and social life, between the precolonial and the postcolonial present. However, the novel resists the reading of the canvas as its microcosm. Kola’s painting is a failure, aesthetically as well as conceptually. Kola knows it – he confesses to a friend, “I am not really an artist” (227) – and at the end of the novel when it is unveiled all those who see it leave quickly (243). The painting is a failure because it reduces Yoruba religious truths to flat certainties, abolishing the contradictions inherent in the human condition. Thus another of the interpreters, Egbo, Kola’s chosen model for Ogun, is angered that Ogun is portrayed “at his drunkennest,” as a “bestial gore-blinded thug” rather than “Ogun of the forge, Ogun as the primal artisan” (233). Both of these elements ought to be preserved, in tension, but Kola fails to capture the tension

¹² Sekoni, who unlike Lazarus *is* one of the group of Interpreters, is an exception here. By his courageous beliefs as well as his commitment to producing a state-of-the-art power plant for a remote village, he is implicitly absolved from any charges of apostasy. However, as I have mentioned, his denial of the world’s fragmentation and his early death disqualify him as the novel’s interpretive centre.

artistically; and, more reprehensibly, Egbo fails, in his own career and relationship decisions, to overcome the temptations of a self-indulgent and practical career. He will not take responsibility for his passions and his privilege. So in a society where the new generation of leaders are so inadequate, Soyinka's commitment in this novel to realism will only allow him to convey his ideals by their ironic absence.

He discloses them partially, however, in the second half of the novel, when Lazarus emerges as an important character. Like Sekoni in the first half, Lazarus is a character in comparison with whom the Interpreters on whom the novel focuses (Egbo, Sagoe, Dehinwa, Bandele, and Kola) are revealed to be poor interpreters, cynics, wasting the advantages their society has bestowed upon them. Lazarus is a Nigerian albino who claims to have been black before he was miraculously raised from the dead. Now he is a charismatic preacher in an independent charismatic church in Lagos. He is chosen as the last of the seven models Kola requires for his Pantheon, as the model for the Yoruba rainbow-deity Esumare. After all but Esumare had been painted, Kola states that the painting "requires only the bridge, or the ladder between heaven and earth. A rope or a chain. The link that is all. After fifteen months, all that is left is the link" (225). After selecting Lazarus he paints him as "an arched figure rising not from a dry grave, but from a primordial chaos of gaseous whorls and flood-waters. He is wreathed in nothing but light, a pure rainbow translucence" (232). This description of Esumare as a bridge between gods and men actually recalls Ogun, Soyinka's patron deity; perhaps if Kola were more perceptive he would have chosen Lazarus rather than Egbo for Ogun.

Though Lazarus strikes the educated, privileged Interpreters as primitive and enlightened because of his zealous Christianity, ironically he is the most effective and

exemplary interpreter in the novel. Critic Kofi Owusu asserts that “Lazarus himself embodies the convergence of Yoruba, Christian and Greek mythologies: he is the biblical interpreter who mediates between the Christian God and men” (192). Egbo, like his five friends initially contemptuous of the fire-and-brimstone prophet, upon reflection gradually changes his mind: “If you seek to transform, you must not be afraid of power. Take Lazarus” (*Interpreters* 182). Lazarus is courageous enough to commit himself to an imperfect reality and creative enough to change it; he is willing to take on the responsibility of promulgating an ideal and leading his community towards it.

Five of the protagonists had attended Lazarus’s church, “a thatch and beer-case splinter hovel” (164) in a Lagos shantytown. The description of the worship service implies that Lazarus’s church is associated with the Aladura movement. This is a vast network of churches, now worldwide, that sprang up in the early twentieth century in south-western Nigeria under the leadership of leaders who left the missionary denominations (Anglican and Methodist) because the Pentecostalist and traditional African elements in their belief and worship were not accommodated. These churches are characterized by their members’ white robes, by faith healings and ecstatic worship, by the pursuit of revival and of spiritual power in everyday affairs, and by the fight against witchcraft.¹³ They would seem to embody a fanaticism that is the opposite of a dispassionate Saidean secularism, but on the other hand

¹³ The three major Aladura organizations are the Christ Apostolic Church, the Cherubim and Seraphim Society, and the Church of the Lord (Aladura). All originated in the years immediately following the First World War, when many African Christians left the missionary denominations. Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist churches were staunchly opposed to political and ecclesiological leadership by Africans, unwilling to accommodate common African practices like polygamy and ancestral worship, and, probably more significantly, dismissive of the dramatic charismatic experiences undergone by those who would become leaders of the independent churches. In addition to Peel’s and Ade Ajayi’s historical accounts of the genesis of African independent Christianities in the late nineteenth century, see G. A. Oshitelu *History of the Aladura (Independent) Churches 1918-1940: An Interpretation*.

their creativity in integrating Yoruba belief and in recontextualizing Christian texts resemble Soyinka's secularism.

The first main part of the service is Lazarus's long sermon, which moves from an explanation of the doctrine of resurrection, focussing on both Christ's and the biblical Lazarus's; to a dramatic and fantastical account of a dream in which the preacher was miraculously delivered from a ghoulish attacker and from suffocation under a deluge of cotton wool; to a pastoral interpretation of a church leader's recent death; and finally to the theatrical installation announcement of a new apostle. Here is an excerpt from the first section, on resurrection, in which the recent death of Ezra, the death of the speaker himself (subsequently undone by resurrection), and the death of Christ are all entangled. The biblical narrative, which is repeatedly inserted into the sermon by a parishioner (and identifiable in the text because of italics) is totally hybridized with local form and content:

"It is my duty, as you all know, when an important member of our church dies to reassure you . . .

Be of good faith; the Lord is with you.

". . . that before you were born, before I was born, long before our great great great grandfathers were born, the Lord Jesus Christ defeated death . . .

Where is thy sting, where death thy victory?

"He wrestled with death and he knocked him down. Death said, let us try *gidigbo* and Christ held him by the neck, he squeezed that neck until Death bleated for mercy. But Death never learns his lesson, he went and brought boxing gloves. When Christ gave him an uppercut like Dick Tiger all his teeth were scattered from Kaduna to Aiyetoro [...] even then do you think Death would give up? Not so, my friends, not so. Death ran to his farm, took up his machet and attacked Christ from behind. Christ dodged him like an acrobat, and then he brought out a long shining sword of stainless steel and he cut Satan's machet in half. But he did not want to kill him altogether, so he gave him small tiny cuts all over his body and Death was walking about in bandages from head to toe like *ologomugomu* [a Yoruba bogeyman]. My brothers, they had many more fights, but Death knows his master today, his conqueror whom he must obey. And that man is Christ. (165, 166)

In a percussive and surrealistic style that recalls Fagunwa and Tutuola's literary adaptations of Yoruba oral folktales, Lazarus effortlessly weaves into his message the words of the King

James Bible and allusions to the top Nigerian boxer. He weaves a spell over them, calming their fears about sickness and death, feeding their appetite for hope. Soyinka is eloquent through Lazarus, whose oration always demonstrates stylistic and rhetorical expertise.

Lazarus's religion is a good representation of the Aladura churches, and more broadly of what scholars call African Initiated Churches, but more surprisingly it is also a good representation of Soyinka's Yoruba, secular religion. Lazarus's method is fierce and his demands on his church members are stringent. However, his goals involve the procurement of power for overcoming this-worldly challenges and his methods are cognisant of local conditions – water for washing feet, a large wooden cross to touch and hold, and the rain waters that threaten to overwhelm the ramshackle building. Lazarus is accommodative both of elements of biblical Christianity (most importantly the biblical text) and of Yoruba tradition (the matchet and the *ologomugomu*, for instance) and the felt experience of Lagos's urban poor. In particular, his creative approach to textuality – respecting the Bible's artistry and rhetoric as well as its doctrinal content, blurring the boundaries between it and the “texts” of culture and personal experience – approaches Soyinka's kind of religion rather than the “substitution of dogma for a living, dynamic spirituality,” which he disparages.

Lazarus's sermon deftly achieves its effect, activating the church members into a frenzy of charismatic dancing, singing, and prophesying, and a joyful show of support for the new apostle. For the five visitors, what is activated is mostly cynicism; the journalist Sagoe, for instance, can only think of the recognition he could find by writing a sensationalist series of articles about Lazarus. Bandele, however, identifies their cynicism, then gives his own sarcastic rejoinder to the question of what he intends to gain from the visit to Lazarus's church:

“Knowledge of the new generation of interpreters.” (178)

This is an attack on his friends’ sterile pettiness, which seeks only to gain personally from the uncomfortable socioeconomic and religious difference represented by Lazarus’s church, and which fails to achieve any sympathetic understanding. Bandele, who during the course of the novel becomes the most perceptive of the group of friends, goes on:

“It didn’t matter whether I did or not [believe Lazarus’s account of death and resurrection]. But at least one thing was obvious, this man did go through some critical experience. If he has chosen to *interpret* it in a way that would bring some kind of meaning into people’s lives, who are you to scoff at it, to rip it up in your dirty pages with cheap cynicism” (179, italics mine).

This seems to be the author’s judgement on Lazarus, too. Like Radin’s priest-thinker, Lazarus stands as an interpreter on behalf of his generation. He has creatively developed a numinous experience into a mythology, and has mediated it to mobilize a community toward hope and collective activity.

The first surprising thing about Lazarus, given that he seems to be so close to Soyinka’s vision for today’s leaders and thinkers, is that he is located within the Christian church, albeit a more indigenized branch of the church than Soyinka’s parents’. *The Interpreters* is, of course, an early work, and perhaps the uniqueness of Lazarus in Soyinka’s corpus indicates that Soyinka has become since 1965 less hopeful that the kind of religious leadership he admires can be found within Christian institutions. Perhaps it indicates that Soyinka perceives these institutions to be less conducive than they were in 1965 to the secular virtues of accommodativeness and this-worldliness. In any case, it also suggests that the relationship of Soyinka’s thought to the missionary encounter cannot adequately be characterized as rejection.

The second surprising thing about Lazarus is that, of all the protagonists we have considered, he is the only one who is an expert with written texts; and in this way he resembles his author and Bunyan's Pilgrim. It is odd that Soyinka, whose chief cultural and political influence comes from the creation and interpretation of texts, does not provide more examples of characters who use texts to accomplish what Ogun accomplished with the sword and what Radin's Winnebago priests accomplished with drama and dance. In his fiction, the characters who seem to embody his sense of his own vocation tend to be political figures who lead the people and suffer on behalf of the people. I suggest that part of this discrepancy lies in Christianity's particularly strong association with textuality in Yorubaland, and Yoruba religion's relatively weak association with the same. Thus when Soyinka develops a Yoruba, secular religion that allows itself to be guided by texts he is like Lazarus and Crowther. The text-centredness of Soyinka's cultural and religious project is another reason why he is not far from Bunyan's Interpreter's House.

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In a 2008 article about Susanne Wenger by Andrew Walker, entitled "The White Priestess of 'Black Magic,'" one of Wenger's adopted sons, Sangodara Ajala, is quoted as telling the BBC how Wenger responded when as a child he first asked if he could go to school. "She shouted: 'No! you cannot go to school, they will turn you into a Christian and your life will be over!'" The article goes on to state that Ajala is still illiterate, though it adds that he is in the process of establishing a school where children can receive an education that includes the traditions of the *orisa*. Nonetheless, the article makes this school out to be but a future possibility. Unambiguous and unquestioned in the article, however, is Wenger's

reputed assumption of a strong correlation between literacy, schooling, and Christianity in Yorubaland.

Soyinka obviously differs from Wenger in this, though he deeply respects her; as an educator at the University of Ibadan and several other universities in Nigeria and abroad he has provided demonstration that the text-based institutions that Wenger repudiates can be made to serve goals much like Wenger's. On the other hand, Soyinka is aware of literacy and literature's deep historical and hermeneutical entanglements with missionary Christianity, and I suggest that his commitment to literacy and literature is part of why his work refuses finally to repudiate missionary Christianity. In particular, Soyinka suggests through the character of Lazarus how aspects of his own work – as writer and as religious advocate – are continuous with the work of the earlier writers that this study has explored: Crowther, Johnson, Fagunwa, and Tutuola.

Though *The Interpreters* is not interpretive education in as direct or explicit a way as Bunyan's or Fagunwa's or Tutuola's fictional works, it nonetheless provides examples of how to build a bridge between the ideals of the university and the reality of politics, between an indigenous past and a cosmopolitan future, between an individual's thinking and a society's suffering. These examples are presented as unsuccessful in varying degrees, for even Lazarus, the best interpreter, turns out to be mercenary in his dealings with the boy Noah. The bridges are never quite as rigid as Bunyan's, for Soyinka would never be so blunt as to state that the dust is our "original sin and inward corruptions." Soyinka may therefore be more complex than his "ancestors." As a Radinian priest-thinker and a modern-day Ogun he is not, however – and we interpreters of Soyinka are not justified in taking him as –

discontinuous with the writers of the missionary encounter. He draws from those writers' tradition when he offers literary guidance for new generations of interpreters.

Soyinka himself is prolific on the subject of his own variety of Yoruba religion. The dearth of his writing on the missionary movement or even on its twentieth century reverberations is principally a reflection of his interest in numerous alternative themes – historical, political, as well as religious. In this chapter I have focused on his religious themes and have proposed the figures of Ogun and Radin's priest-thinker as distillations of his key thoughts on religion. Rather than proposing Christian replacements for these figures, I have simply pointed out complementarity: despite Soyinka's promotion of a Yoruba, secular religion and his disapprobation of Crowther and other Christian writers in a book such as *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, his hermeneutical strategy is different rather in degree than in kind from the Christian writers. Hermeneutical and even religious differences are sometimes less pronounced than he himself suggests, at least in *Myth* and his public addresses. In his literary writing, however, Soyinka gives more indication of the continuities between his religious project and the Africanized missionary Christianity that so deeply marked his childhood.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion: The Two Faces of Eṣu

Most of the arguments in the foregoing work have been more supplementary than oppositional, and more descriptive of the past or the present than prescriptive for future scholarly work. I was adding a layer to the work of colonial and missions historians when in the second chapter I proposed that Samuel Ajayi Crowther affected the character of the missionary encounter in Yorubaland by making the association between books and a distinctly Yoruba interpretation of Christianity even stronger, and when I demonstrated the complementarity of his evangelistic and scholarly work. I was supplementing the usual approaches of literary historians when in the third chapter I proposed Bunyan's hermeneutic of moral indirection as a way of tracing the formal lines of influence from missionary to literary writers. I was pre-empting a possible misinterpretation of Soyinka when in the fourth chapter I framed him as a religious advocate whose thought evinces continuities as well as discontinuities with the missionary encounter associated with Crowther.

Here, by way of conclusion, I offer a proposition that is more oppositional and prescriptive than what has come before: we cannot assume that critics who put forward philosophical or literary-critical systems as authentically African are justified in excluding

elements whose arrival in Africa required missionary Christianity. In other words, Christian Africa is an authentic Africa.

The title of this dissertation, as I stated at the outset, should not be taken to describe Nigerian cultural history as an irreversible linear sequence that reduces the ancestor to obsolescence and the book to instrumentality. “Ancestor, Book, Church” stands for a set of complex interrelationships that are not linear, for whenever one term points towards a second term, the second points back to the first. Now we return to the same trio of terms and add a countervailing caution: failing to consider the place of the Church (in its innumerable forms) in Nigerian cultural history may impede our understanding of the place of the Book or the continuing place of the Ancestor.

The notion that Christian Africa is an authentic Africa may appear as a truism, and indeed the anthropological and historical scholarship on Africanized Christianities is substantial.¹ With regard to literary scholarship, quite substantial as well is the scholarship that focuses on Christian themes in African literature.² However, I am not calling for more scholarship on Africanized Christianities or on Christianity’s place in African literature. Rather, I am calling for more of the scholarship that retrieves and re-presents historically rooted resources in the formulation of a distinctively African literary-critical methodology to pay attention to Christian Africa. My rationale for this is that, as I think I have shown, Christian African literary history is part of an authentic African literary history.

¹ In addition to the Comaroffs and Peel, see Marshall-Fratani, Maxwell, Meyer, and Probst.

² Mathuray shows how commentary on the work of the Kenyan writer Ngugi has overemphasized Christian themes. Mugambi shows how several East African writers have engaged with the possibility of Christianity. VanZanten Gallagher’s collection explores the biblical theme of justice in the work of many African literary writers. In addition, this dissertation has cited many critics who comment on Christian themes in Nigerian literature, for instance, George “Compound of Spells,” Izevbaye, Olatunji, and Quayson.

Several literary critics who propose innovative and helpful Afrocentric theories of literature that build on concepts drawn from African religious cultures – here I single out Georgene Bess Montgomery, Biodun Jeyifo, Henry Louis Gates, and Femi Osofisan, all of whom draw concepts from Yoruba religion³ – seem to assume that Christian African tradition is not an authentic African tradition. To conclude this dissertation I briefly describe how these four critics make use of Èṣù, the Janus-faced trickster among the Yoruba orisha to elaborate their literary-critical methodology, and I show how they implicitly reject as un-African the Christian reading of Èṣu. I conclude by proposing a Janus-faced manner of using African tradition that overcomes the oversight of these other critics.

A divine messenger and interpreter like the Greek Hermes, the Yoruba Èṣu is a master of all languages and a trickster-teacher (Gregersen 16). The advantages that several critics see in making Èṣu a central imaginative component of their model of African culture and literature are that well-known diasporic versions of Èṣu exist in Cuba (Eshu) and Brazil (Exu), as well as in Yorubaland – which makes possible a gesture towards a pan-African critical principle – and that in all of these versions Èṣu is associated with interpretation.

The most recent such critic is Georgene Bess Montgomery, who in *The Spirit and the Word: A Theory of Spirituality in Africana Literary Criticism* generates a “paradigm” (4) for interpreting African American literature that draws its terms from the practice of Ifa divination. As we have seen, Èṣu is the orisha charged with interpretation. Accordingly, Bess

³ Among African literature critics, Soyinka and, by implication, those who study him have the most to say about what African religion has to do with criticism today. I do not include Soyinka in my critique about the omission of Christian Africa as authentic African history, however, because as I showed in my analyses of *Aké* and *The Interpreters* Soyinka is aware that the processes of literary indirection and cultural accommodation he delights in are not foreign to Nigerian Christianity. His preference to promote a secular Yoruba religion pushes this awareness to the margins of his thinking, but does not fully obscure it.

The most interesting recent example of a literary reading built centrally upon a vision of African religion is Mtshali, who reads the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah’s novel *Two Thousand Seasons* as an expression of the Akan religious notion of a communal journey through the realm of the ancestors to the realm of the living. See also Omiegbe on Igbo religion in the novels of Achebe.

Montgomery demonstrates her method by producing a reading of the African American Tina McElroy Ansa's novel *Baby of the Family* that takes one character's subtle identification with Eṣu as the novel's interpretive key. For Bess Montgomery, Ifa stands two things: the spirituality that unites all living things (8) and the decoding of symbols (2). Accordingly, her underlying goal is to identify a unifying principle for African American writing – she imagines Ifa and Eṣu as embodiments of the pure African essence, before it was contaminated by colonization and slavery – and to decode its aesthetic and non-propositional elements.

Whereas Bess Montgomery deploys Ifa and Eṣu in her search for a text's meaning, Biodun Jeyifo focuses in *Wole Soyinka* on the problems preceding and sometimes preventing the discovery of meaning. In his critical analysis of Soyinka, he proposes the major oriṣa Ogun and Eṣu as a dialectical pairing for explaining how Soyinka's work unites cultural politics with verbal artistry. Jeyifo disagrees with critics who take Soyinka's dense, allusive language (which Jeyifo matches with Eṣu, the principle of the "unfinalizability" of meaning (36)) as incompatible with his advocacy of justice and democracy in the political realm (which he matches with Ogun, the principle of uncompromising justice and clear representation). Instead, Jeyifo shows how Soyinka's writing is itself an argument for "the redemptive, sacramental power of words and language" (35). Jeyifo implies that Yoruba religion holds these opposing principles together, and hence the religion provides a helpful pattern for today's literary critic who finds herself or himself torn between a passion for language and a commitment to the world.

Henry Louis Gates, who while a student at Cambridge was tutored by Soyinka, is the third critic who builds a critical framework on principles taken from Yoruba religion. He

focuses on Eṣu, and by showing how his particular re-presentation of Eṣu excludes the Christian version of Eṣu I will make my case that this exclusion is not necessary in the formulation of distinctly African philosophical or literary-critical systems.

Gates formulated his Afrocentric model of literature modeled upon Ifa divination and Eṣu in the 1980s. From today's standpoint, this model appears perhaps less innovative than it originally did; in its demonstration and celebration of the free-floating signifier it now reveals itself as an African-American translation of Derrida's deconstructionist and Bakhtin's carnivalesque models of literary language (e.g. 63). Still, as a translation it is significant; particularly interesting is its determination (the same determination evinced by Bess Montgomery's text) to find a precolonial, African, and religious grounding for a model of interpreting African American literature today.

When Gates makes the Yoruba Eṣu the historical antecedent to the African American "Signifying Monkey," which is his central literary-critical principle, he admits that he cannot demonstrate a strict historical link. Nonetheless, he insists on positing a symbolic and largely subconscious link between his contemporary, black understanding of literary language and a precolonial, African (and specifically Yoruba) system of thought and belief. In this sense his 1988 *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* resembles the Negritudist and nativist critics I discussed in my third chapter more than the (more recent) postcolonial theory that resists the absolutizing of difference characteristic of nativism and acknowledges historical and literary cosmopolitanism (e.g. Appiah, *In My Father's House*; George, *Relocating Agency*).

Gates sets out to refute the claim that Africans had no reading and no theorizing about the figurative use of language prior to the arrival of the Anglo-Roman alphabet and the

Anglo-Christian Bible. As the Yoruba received messages from their gods, through Ifa divination, and as they interpreted with the help of Eṣu, they were effectively reading and theorizing (11). For Gates, Eṣu is the best ingredient black cultural-religious traditions can supply for the production of a theory of reading that neither depends upon nor duplicates the theories generated out of the Western Tradition. His starting point for this theory is stories about Eṣu, many of which concern

the origin, the nature, and the function of interpretation and language use “above” that of ordinary language. For Esu is the Yoruba figure of the meta-level of formal language use, of the ontological and epistemological status of figurative language and its interpretation. The literature of Esu consists to a remarkable degree of direct assertions about the levels of linguistic ascent that separate literal from figurative modes of language use. (6)

For Gates, figurative indeterminacy is the essential ingredient in literature, and also the essential attribute of Eṣu. Eṣu is the African figure of the literary critic, who is understood not as authoritatively decoding meaning but playfully preserving indeterminacy and respecting indirection (13).

The fourth and final critic who makes Eṣu a principle for the elaboration of an Afrocentric literary theory does so in a play. In his 1991 play “Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels,” Femi Osofisan uses the character of Eṣu to model an interpretive method that is rather different from Gates’. Osofisan reads culture more like Marx than like Derrida; as in several other plays, here Osofisan puts forward a hermeneutic of disenchanted human empowerment. At a crossroads, Eṣu meets five bedraggled and hungry minstrels. Recalling the traditional understanding of Eṣu as a trickster figure who tests people to reveal their inner motives, Osofisan’s Eṣu gives magical powers to the minstrels and then tests them to see whether they will use their powers for society’s good, or selfishly. The minstrels turn out to

be not only selfish, but also fatalistic, assuming that blessing comes at random, and thus if it finds them they hoard it. Against them Eṣu preaches a message of personal responsibility –

Esu loves to help men, but only
When they show that they can live
Happily among other human beings (32)

– that counters the foolish characters’ fatalism with a firm secularization. The closing chorus proclaims that

Esu does not exist
save in your imagination! (95)

Dramatically, this secularization is the outworking of Osofisan’s steady commitment to breaking the theatrical fourth-wall; he wants his audience members to see themselves as participants in the social drama his plays reference, and in this play he instructs the actors to mingle with the audience and to invite the audience to join a debate over the culpability of one of the characters (90). Theologically, however, the play’s demonstration that the only sense in which Eṣu exists today is as a guide for human action is a simpler and more optimistic version of the message of Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*. Both writers suggest that traditional Yoruba religion can successfully be adapted for a modern, technological world where appeals to supernatural forces are no longer necessary. Yet both writers also treat the original tradition with respect; they work to rehabilitate an essence that seems to have been lost in the modern age.

In a literary-critical article about Nigerian theatre, Osofisan describes how Soyinka’s writing does this:

One particular area in which white supremacist ideology asserted itself was religion. Against our traditional faiths, Christianity was triumphantly proclaimed to be superior, and all our gods were held in open contempt, dismissed as pagan nonsense. All who went to the missionary schools were raised to fear our native deities as the utmost incarnations of evil and barbarism. But defiantly, and far in advance of his

contemporaries, Soyinka began to incorporate these same gods and their rituals into the fabric of his work. It was a shock, but Soyinka gave both visibility and plausibility to the gods of the Yoruba pantheon, such as Ogun, Eshu, Orunmila and so on. (“Literary Theatre”)

Against the background of this cultural history, Osofisan’s rendition of Eṣu makes sense.

This Eṣu is sneaky but not unfathomable or malevolent. Belief in this kind of Eṣu is personally and socially beneficial, because it leads the believer to interpret his or her challenging circumstances as opportunities for creative action rather than as obstacles to bemoan.

Osofisan implies here that the missionary encounter promoted a popular reinterpretation of Eṣu and the other oriṣa that flattened their ambiguities into pure evil. We should take his dramatic evocation of Eṣu as, in part, a counter-interpretive move. Similar to Osofisan, Toyin Falola critiques the missionary misinterpretation when he explains his given names, in the passage included in my first chapter. Falola states that “Eṣu can never mean the biblical Satan” (*A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* 27). Scholars of religion agree that Eṣu (as commonly understood in precolonial Yorubaland) and Satan (in orthodox Protestant interpretation today) are quite different in their attributes (e.g. Bewaji; Idowu 80; Olubunmi Smith, “Literary Translation” 224), but equating them is exactly what has happened in the Yoruba imagination, and this is because of the influence of the missionaries.

What did the missionary encounter have to do with such a shift? A full analysis is beyond the scope of this study, but suffice to say that the unifying function of the Yoruba Bible was decisive. When Crowther translated the biblical book of Luke in Sierra Leone, he chose to translate “evil spirit” by *emi esu*, which literally means “spirit of Eṣu.” He seems to have translated “Satan” as Eṣu in the biblical book of Matthew; at any rate, though I have not been able to confirm this with a nineteenth-century manuscript this is what contemporary

revisions of Crowther's Bible do. Likely Crowther came to this translation decision in Freetown through conversations with Yoruba recaptives who associated Eṣu with unpredictability and deception. Crowther's decision, like his book, soon became canonical. When D. O. Fagunwa wanted the Christian Satan as a character in his 1949 folktale-novel *Igbó Olódùmarè*, his decision to call him Eṣu was natural.

In literary terms, this reinterpretation was a flattening and simplifying of a hitherto complex character. More disconcertingly, it was in religious terms an implicit judgement upon Yoruba religious practice (particularly Ifa divination) as Satanic – which is to say evil, and thus best abandoned. However, it also allowed Yoruba Christians to connect their previous religious experience, and the religious elements of their cultural history, with their current experience as Christians. Scholars of religious change study this kind of reinterpretation as simultaneously a conquest of the indigenous religion and a preservation of it. In Birgit Meyer's terms, the “diabolisation of the indigenous religion” lets the old “spiritual powers continue to exist” (xxi). Peel, speaking specifically of the Yoruba, asserts that

the Devil had an [*sic*] crucial cognitive function in the emergence of Yoruba Christianity. He permitted the converts to incorporate old beliefs, which they could not yet or wholly abandon, in the active existence of *oriṣa* and other spirits, into the framework of their new religion. (262)

When a new religion imposes itself on an old one, sometimes its strategy is iconoclasm, to assert that the former gods were nonexistent and their devotees therefore foolish. The main alternative strategy – which is described by Peel, is exemplified by Crowther's translation, and was followed by the majority of modern missionaries to Africa – is demonization, what Meyer calls diabolization. This strategy tends to reconfigure the devotees of the old gods either as deceivers or as victims themselves of a deception, and furthermore provides impetus

for commitment to the new religion because of the dangers associated with the old gods. The CMS archives contain evidence of Yoruba men and women, Christians and not, who eagerly promoted this way of relating Yoruba religion to Christianity (Peel 263).

However, it is partly against this demonization that Bess Montgomery, Jeyifo, Gates, and Osofisan write when they promote an element of Yoruba religion such as Eṣu. Because this presumed equivalency can be taken to imply that Yoruba religious practice is pure evil, these critics' response is understandable and salutary. If it suggests that until the missionary or colonial encounter all was darkness, then their literary or literary-critical ambition is sensible to excavate into the Yoruba past and locate a solid foundation for their own cultural projects. However, this ambition can also be taken to suggest that the Christian interpretation of Eṣu is simply a colonial misconstrual, best consigned to the dustbins of history. This is false. Crowther's demonizing interpretation is not un-African, and even more importantly it is *an* interpretation of the Eṣu that the Yoruba language and culture provided for Crowther and the missionaries – just like Osofisan's neo-Marxist and Gates' deconstructionist Eṣu are interpretations of that precolonial Eṣu. (Both of the latter, incidentally, have much in common with a version of Satan put forth in the biblical book of Job, in Crowther's own Bible. Job's Satan is much more of a trickster figure than an embodiment of evil omnipotence.)⁴

The Yoruba-English literary writer Helen Oyeyemi provides another interpretation. Her 2007 novel *The Opposite House* imagines Yoruba deities, including Eṣu, surviving the

⁴ Consider also that the complex, gradual, and uncomfortable process by which Esu came to serve as a substitute for what European Christians referred to as *Satan* (or *Satán*, or *Satanás*, and other cognates) parallels the development by which the Greek *Σαταν* came to serve as substitute (in this case it was linguistically a transliteration) for Hebrew שָׂטָן (*ṣṭn*). In classical Hebrew sources, for instance the biblical book of Job, Satan is an ambiguous figure, a powerful but subordinate agent of God whose tendency is to trick and to accuse (Pagels 106). But in sectarian (apocalyptic) streams of Judaism in the second and first centuries BCE, Satan came to be understood as a personal figure, grander and more malevolent, and it is this notion that the early Christians incorporated into their cosmology.

Middle Passage and taking up residence in Cuba. More tolerant than Osofisan of the Christian reinterpretation of Eṣu, her novel frames the oriṣas' "adopting [of] Christian incarnations and amalgams" (115) as their shrewd survival strategy. In Cuba, Eṣu, in fact, has been disguising himself as Jesus (112).

Colonialism and Christianity arrived in Africa and demanded interpretation. The interpretation suggested by Eṣu = Satan is one such interpretation and, because it characterizes the cultural standpoint both of many of the key figures in the history of writing in Yorubaland and most of the Yoruba today, this interpretation is worth reckoning with by the literary critic seeking an African cultural or religious grounding for her critical framework. Since Christianity and Islam⁵ in Yorubaland both tend to use "Eṣu" as the Yoruba equivalent of "Satan"/"Shaitan," probably the majority of the Yoruba today think about Eṣu in terms closer to Crowther's than to Gates', Osofisan's, or Oyeyemi's.

What would it look like for a literary critic to incorporate the Christian version of Eṣu into a critical methodology for today? Perhaps the methodology would be more suitable for illuminating the evils of racism or political corruption than the free-play of signifiers in abstract poetry. I do not claim to foresee the results of such an attempt; I only suggest that just as a precolonial (and certainly non-Christian) Eṣu is available for use in contemporary cultural analysis, so is the Christian, Yoruba Eṣu.

Many Eṣu myths ascribe to him a Janus-face, which symbolizes either his penchant for deception or his susceptibility to multiple interpretations. Focussing on the latter, I invite other scholars of African literature today to consider, when giving attention to aspects of

⁵ Even though, as I suggested in the first chapter, Islam in Yorubaland has not been a religion of the book to the extent Christianity has, Yoruba Islam is increasingly well integrated into cultural production in Yoruba. Much scholarship remains to be done on the transformations and translations – in Yoruba literature, music, and visual art – that have resulted from Islam's transplantation into Yorubaland.

Yoruba tradition, mythology, or culture, whether one of Eṣu's faces today might be a Christianized face. I have tried to give an accurate description of this face, and offer my work in hope that it will generate response.

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