

**The Author(ity) of the Text: The dialectic tension between fidelity and creative freedom**  
The Case of Wole Soyinka's "Free" Translation of D. O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode*

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Article abstract

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# THE AUTHOR(ITY) OF THE TEXT: THE DIALECTIC TENSION BETWEEN FIDELITY AND CREATIVE FREEDOM — THE CASE OF WOLE SOYINKA'S "FREE" TRANSLATION OF D. O. FAGUNWA'S OGBOJU ODE<sup>1</sup>

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## Résumé

*Partant de la prémisse selon laquelle toute traduction est nécessairement une interprétation, on examine la traduction de Wole Soyinka d'un texte yoruba de D. O. Fagunwa et on discute du problème de la liberté en traduction en commençant par bien situer l'auteur et le texte dans leur contexte culturel et politique.*

The sense of an author, generally speaking, is to be sacred and inviolable. (John Dryden, *Preface to the Translation of Ovid's Epistles*, 1680)

*Le traducteur n'est maître de rien; il est obligé de suivre partout son auteur, de se plier à toutes ces variations avec une souplesse infinie.* (Batteux, *De La Construction Oratoire*, n.d.)

...the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring from its seed, or it will bear no flower — and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel. (P. B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 1821)

The very essence of the art (of translation): The resurrection of an alien thing in a native body; not the dressing of it up in native clothes but the giving to it of native flesh and blood. (H. Belloc, "On Translation", *The Taylorian Lecture*, 1931)<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

From the classical viewpoint of translation, the "ideal" translation "should be like a completely transparent pane of glass through which people can see the original without being aware of anything intervening,"<sup>3</sup> but alas, the legacy of the "curse of Babel" and the dilemma of the translator's task of reconciling *faithfulness* and *adaptation, spirit and letter* — the four requisites set forth in the view that an original is reproducible without transformation, language differences notwithstanding. More modern views of translation (Mounin 1964; Nida 1964; Catford 1965; Vinay 1968; Derrida 1972; Steiner 1975), though bound by the fetters of equivalencies, have however expanded through their recognition of the transformative and productive powers of translation the translator's latitude by defining the centrality of interpretation, judgment, and equivalence.

By its very nature, the translation process provokes a dialectic tension based on the claims of the source and target languages and cultures. As Peter Newmark (1981: 20) noted:

A text to be translated is like a particle in an electric field attracted by opposing forces of the two cultures and the norms of the two languages, the idiosyncrasies of one writer (who may infringe all the norms of his own language), and the different requirements of its readers, the prejudices of a translator and possibly of its publisher.

In determining his relationship to the text, the translator must understand this dialectic tension at the outset, and because of his scrupulous respect for the original text, he must understand that it is the prime unit. At this point, the priorities for analysis of the text should consist of four basic strategies: the intent of the text; the intent of the translator; the target audience; and finally, the authority of the text. Yet with this kind of delineation, the question still remains: How much letter, how much spirit? It is in the light of this dialectic that I would like to consider the example of the Yoruba reaction to Wole Soyinka's 1968 translation of D.O. Fagunwa's novel *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*. However, this reaction needs to be situated in its proper cultural and "political" contexts in order to problematize the argument.

#### FAGUNWA: THE AUTHOR

D. O. Fagunwa is no stranger to Yorubas, "young and old." His eminence as purveyor of Yoruba language and culture is unparalleled with a legacy of *five*<sup>4</sup> multiple reprinted seminal novels, two travel books, a collection of folk tales, a popular, co-authored school reader, and an unfinished novel on which he was working before his untimely death in 1963. Yoruba critics and scholars Abiola Irele (1981), Ayo Bamgbose (1974), Adebisi Afolayan (1968), and Adeboye Babalola (1971) situated this eminence in its linguistic and literary perspective when they aptly observed that Fagunwa responded early to the need for a literature 'of a less exclusively religious character' in the vernacular "by translating the oral tradition into a written form, and laying the basis for its transformation into a literate culture" (Irele 1981: 177). Nigerian critic Emmanuel Obiechina (1967: 143), noted that apart from the mass of historical and social anthropological writing of the first decade of the twentieth century, and the political and autobiographical publications between 1920 and 1946, the first creative work of any significance produced by an educated West African was Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmalo (The Brave Hunter in the Forest of Four Hundred Spirits)*. By showing how folktales could be "legitimately and profitably used for narrative prose fiction in the Gutenberg era," (Babalola and Gerard 1971: 193) Fagunwa initiated "one of the most remarkable trends in African indigenous literature" (*idem.*: 193). Consequently, his literary genius has exerted a most pervasive influence on Yoruba creative writing to the extent that critics speak of Yoruba novels in the "Fagunwa tradition," a tradition in which the folklore is expanded into an extended narrative. In fact, most of the novels within the Fagunwa tradition are said to "range from outright imitations [...] to serious and imaginative adaptation of the type that one finds in Amos Tutuola's novels" (Bamgbose 1974: 5).

The extraordinary outburst of literary activity between 1948 and 1951 which saw the publication of at least nine of his books had not only made Fagunwa a household name among Yoruba readers but also served as a model for later writers, some of whom dedicated a few novels to him. In addition to paving the way for the increased publication of creative works in Yoruba by the succeeding generation of writers, the example of Fagunwa's success and the remarkable way in which he deployed the full resources of the Yoruba language, prompted the younger writers, Nobel prize winner, Wole Soyinka, and Amos Tutuola among them, to write creatively in literary genres other than the novel. With this kind of legacy etched in the cultural and literary consciousness of the Yoruba who "feel a firm commitment [...] to reconciling their tradition with the imperatives of contemporary life," (Okpewho 1982: 174) little wonder that even fifty-two years after the publication of his first novel, the virtues of Fagunwa's fantastic imagination, his storytelling ability, his verbal adroitness, and his peculiar, unparalleled method of fabulation have endeared him to an evergrowing circle of passionate admirers, young and old. This admiration perhaps accounts for the near canonization of his works. An examination of Fagunwa's own prefaces to all of his novels should explain the solidity of his legacy and

the question of the critical concept of textual authority which many Yoruba scholars and critics (and indeed general Fagunwa admirers) invoked on the issue of translating Fagunwa into English.<sup>5</sup>

Each of his five novels begins with an authorial preface, pithy in the first three novels, and quite elaborate in the last two. The length or style of the prefaces not being the issue here, the authorial intent, hence textual intent are unequivocal:

*Iwe yi wa fun tomodetagba lokunrin lobirin ni ile enia dudu [...] ti won mo ede Yoruba ka dada, ati papa fun awon omo ile eko; [...] ki nwon ka a ki nwon gbadun itan re o si wa fun awon ti nse idanwo kembiriji ki nwon ka a nitori ati ko ijinde Yoruba, bakanna l' o si wa fun enikeni ti o le wa na ipokipo ni ode aiye yi lati ma fa ogbon yo jade. (Igbo Olodumare, "Preface")*

This book is for Black Africans, old and young, men and women who are able to read Yoruba well. Particularly, it is for students [...] to read and enjoy its stories. It is also for those students studying for the Cambridge examination to read and learn (deep) Yoruba idioms. So also is it for anyone in all works of life, to extract wisdom from this story.

A slight variation to this intent in one novel extends the intended audience to include not only "all peoples of Yorubaland" but also "anyone in the world who can read the Yoruba language well" — anyone in the diaspora no doubt. Authorial intent, textual intent, and audience identification are all at once delineated in Fagunwa's stated reasons for writing: for reading pleasure; for secondary school pupils who need to learn Yoruba idioms in preparation for the Cambridge School Leaving Certificate examination; and for the moral edification "[...] of all human beings everywhere." Consequently, as base texts the novels are broadly grounded, and Fagunwa the author, is taken to be the ultimate locus of the novels' authority.

To accomplish these tasks, Fagunwa began the narrative of three of the five novels specifically with an invocation (implied in the other two novels): *Enyin ore mi...* (*My friends all...*). What is at stake in the translation of Fagunwa is the latitude for /degree of the transfusion of the sense and meaning of Fagunwa. Essentially, the cynicism of Yoruba adulators of Fagunwa's originals towards what they called Soyinka's "unduly free" translation of *Ogboju Ode* raises issues about the role of the context of the text, the context of the author, as well as the context of the space and time of the code with which the author worked. Assuming the obvious, that the text informs and to a degree is the essence of the translation, the issue in the Yoruba reception of Soyinka's translation of Fagunwa then becomes: What does "[...] translating the author as he would have liked to be translated" mean? Did Soyinka "translate" or "adapt" Fagunwa?

#### THE TEXT

Working from the premise that every translation perforce is an interpretation since there are hardly any two languages that enjoy a one-to-one correlation, we examine the extent of Soyinka's creative freedom in his *free* translation of the very essence of Fagunwa's novel, which was expressed in the first twenty-one lines of *Ogboju Ode* as follows:

Eyin ore mi, bi owe bi owe mi a nlu ilu **ogidigbo**, ologbon mi ijo o, omoran ni si imo o. Itan ti ngo so yi, ilu **ogidigbo** ni; emi ni eniti yio lu ilu na, enyin ni ologbon ti yio jo o, enyin si ni omoran ti yio mo o pelu. Awon agba a ma pa owe kan — e ko bi mi bi nwon ti npa a ndan? Nwon ni, "Bi egun eni ba jo re ori a ya ni." Toto o se bi owe o. Nko fe ki e jo ilu mi bi igbati yanmuyanmu ba njo ibenbe, ti nta ese waiwai ti ese re ko si ba ilu dogba, sugbon kaka be ki e jo ilu na dada, ki e jo o tayotayo, ki e jo terinterin, to be ti awon enia yio ma fi owo le yin lori, ti nwon yio ma ju aso si yin loju ijo, ti awon okunrin yio ma dobale, ti awon obinrin yio si ma kunle ni waju yin, migbati ijo yin ba ndun mo won; sugbon bi e ba si nfe ki ijo yin dara, ohun meji ni e o ni lati se: ekini ni pe, nigbati enikan ba nsoro ninu itan yi, e o fi ara yin si ipo oluware e o ma soro bi enipe enyin gan ni. Bi enikan ba si nda enikeji lohun e o ka

*itan na bi enipe enyin ni e joko ti enikan nba yin soro ti e si nfun oluware ni esi ti o ye. Gege bi omoran pelu eyiti ise ohun keji ti e o se — e o ma tika rayin fa awon ogbon yo bi e ba ti nka itan yi lo. Nko fe ki nsoro pupo ni ibere yi ki nma ba dabi onisokuso, ati bi eniti a fi oju ona sile ti o nba inu igbo kiri. Ngo gbe ilu mi nisisiyi ngo si ma lu u, mo si fe ki enyin na tun agbada yin se, ki e ju apa re le ejika yin. Ki e murasile fun ijo, ki oran na ba le papo bi oro ti o wipe: “Emi le jo iwo le lu kokoro meji lo pade.” Owe agba ni o. [my emphasis] (*Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, p. 1)*

*My friends all, like the sonorous proverb do we drum the agidigbo; it is the wise who dance to it, and the learned who understand its language. The story which follows is a veritable ogidigbo; it is I who will drum it, and you the wise heads who will interpret it. Our elders have a favorite proverb — are you not dying to ask me how it goes? — they tell it thus, ‘when our masquerade dances well, our heads swell and do a spin.’ Forgive my forwardness, it is the proverb which speaks. Now I do not want you to dance to my drumming as a mosquito to the deep bembé drums, its legs twitching haphazardly, at loggerheads with the drums. Dance my friends, in harmony, with joy with laughter, that your audience may ring your brow with coins and pave your path with clothing; that men may prostrate before you and women curtsy in sheer pleasure at your dancing. But for a start, if you want this dance to be a success, here are two things I must request of you. Firstly, whenever a character in my story speaks in his own person, you must put yourselves in his place and speak as if you are that very man. And when the other replies, you must relate the story to yourselves as if you, sitting down, had been addressed and now respond to the first speaker. In addition, as men of discerning — and this is the second task you must perform — you will yourselves extract various wisdoms from the story as you follow its progress. [my emphasis] (*The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, p. 7)*

A beautifully executed translation of the original undoubtedly, especially in the transcription of the culture-specific metaphor of drum and dance. The yet-to-be-created imagery and atmosphere of story-telling is resonant with the vitality of the Yoruba original. The verbal ebullience which is a salient characteristic of Yoruba prose style is fully sustained. Yet, many Yoruba critics and scholars are “disappointed” that Soyinka’s “sensitive exploration of and adeptness at the English language” were allowed to intrude and thus “betray” the voice of Fagunwa. Here we see a clear case of the effects of the dialectic tension between faithfulness and creative freedom. In spite of Soyinka’s justification in his prefatory notes that “*daemon* was closer in essence to *imale* than gods, deities, and demons,” translating *Irun* of the novel’s title as one thousand rather than the literal four-hundred and substituting daemons for the culture-specific *male*, literally spirits, infuriated Fagunwa adulators who, according to Irele, were still venting their personal indignation about Fagunwa’s fate at the hands of the profit-conscious Nelson publisher whom they claim was more “interested in having Soyinka on their list than in giving the wider world a taste of Fagunwa’s creative genius.” (Irele 1981: 176) Additionally, the critics argued that exercising the translator’s creative license to the extent of translating the kernel notion of Fagunwa’s literary vision expressed in the opening lines of *Ogboju Ode* as Soyinka did makes his attempt more of an adaptation of Fagunwa than a translation. As an adaptation, they feel he succeeded “in writing in the way only Soyinka is capable of writing,” but as a translation, “he fails to capture Fagunwa’s voice, since Fagunwa would not have used such refined linguistic style.”<sup>6</sup>

And finally, there was the issue of (mis)translation of the main essence of Fagunwa’s novel which the critics concluded is being inappropriately justified as creative license. The literal translation of “...*Bi owe bi owe ni a nlu ilu ogidigbo, ologbon ni ijo, omoran ni si imo o...*” should have been preserved literally and figuratively thus: “like the proverb we beat the cryptic *ogidigbo* drum, only wise men can dance to it, only experienced men can understand it” [my translation]. A literal translation such as this conveys all at once

the figurative implications and the tone of the narratives to follow, as well as the resonant vitality of the original text without resorting to a stylized refinement. The *ogidigbo* drum served a dual purpose in earlier times as a telegraphic means of encoding/decoding messages, particularly during times of tribal wars, and was also one of many percussion instruments for traditional folk dances. In modern times, the *agidigbo*, and note carefully the difference, is a vivacious dance, now transformed by the more modern “high life” blend of Afro-american-cuban jazz rhythms and pop, enjoyed by urbanized Yorubas. The mixed metaphor of ‘crypticity’ and ‘sonority’ in that crucial proverb appropriately captures the essence and intent of Fagunwa’s narrative which is intended to be both intellectually taxing yet pleasurable, *if* comprehended. But even in a ‘free’ translation, the transference of *ogidigbo* to *agidigbo* is unsettling. Unless perhaps Soyinka is ‘imposing’ a brand new metaphor on the opening scene of the novel that is distinctly his and not Fagunwa’s. My sense is that *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* is a translation that is perhaps “too good” and therefore unrecognizable as a Fagunwa novel to a local audience by virtue of its “refinement of style.” This conjecture no doubt immediately raises specific and general questions of audience, purpose, and reception. If literary translation aims at “fidelity of phrase rather than mere accuracy, beauty of style rather than fidelity,” the paradox of primary audience and audience-at-large must be evaluated as part of the translation process. The Fagunwa audience is clearly delineated as we noted earlier. The shift in emphasis of the authorial intent and intended audiences of the SL and TL texts in itself accounts for Soyinka’s conscious stylistic choice. While the authorial intent and intended audience of the SL text are multifaceted, that is local and universal, those of the TL are singularly Eurocentric as the chart below reflects:

	Audience	Purpose
TEXT 1 (SL)	1. Yoruba (primary)	To edify, entertain, and impart wisdom /moral guidance
	2. Non-Yoruba (African) with reading knowledge of Yoruba (secondary)	
TEXT 2 (TL)	1. Euro-American (primary)	To delight

The active judgment of text 2 (TL) makes only a partial claim of the original. Soyinka (1968: 4) was forthright about his claim:

The experience of sheer delight in his verbal adroitness is undoubtedly a great loss in translation, but is not reason enough to limit Fagunwa to the readership of Yoruba speakers only [...] The essential Fagunwa, as with all truly valid literature, survives the inhibitions of strange tongues and bashful idioms.

#### CONCLUSION

In spite of the criticism of Soyinka’s translation, my general view is that ‘better a “free” translation of the seminal works of this celebrated Yoruba writer than no translation at all.’ Nonetheless, while we are not calling for prescriptions on faithfulness, the questions raised by the critics, as well as those implied by Irele’s comment about the Nelson publishers’ ulterior motive for inviting Soyinka to translate Fagunwa remain valid in the Yoruba context of *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*: How creative is “free”? How legitimate is the translator’s calculated lexical imposition on the original text? To what extent is textual integrity minimized by faithfulness/unfaithfulness to the primal roots of the Yoruba original? Does Soyinka achieve the goal of “expressive identity” between the

SL and TL texts, or should the claim that Soyinka the translator allegedly “eclipsed” Fagunwa the author necessarily damn *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* to the same seemingly singular fate of overprotection the Yoruba originals now face?

Founded or unfounded by translation theory requisites, what the Yoruba reception of the Soyinka translation does is to raise the question of the standards of faithfulness. Admittedly, because a translation is defined by an object, the text to be translated, the desire is for the translation to bear the semblance of the text that the author would have written had he written it in this other language. But the fact remains that because an author consciously chooses his medium of expression, there is no guarantee that even he can make the modes of signification of the translation of his own work “mirror” those of his original text. Fagunwa consciously chose to write in Yoruba instead of English which he knows quite well. A short translation attempt of his third novel, *Irinkerindo ninu igbo elegbeje*, discovered at the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, confirms Paz’s (1971: 28) observation that “translation implies a transformation of the original.” Because this transformation, albeit slight (in the case of author-translated texts) or major (in author-translator texts), necessarily involves varying degrees of creativity, translations become variants of (authoritative) texts.

Ultimately, a resolution of the issues of faithfulness and creativity raised by the Soyinka translation of Fagunwa would require a re-evaluation and comparative criticism of the text in light of other English and French translations<sup>8</sup> of Fagunwa’s novels (when they are published).

#### Notes

1. This essay is a sequel to two essays, “Literary Translation and Culture Consciousness: The Experience of Translating D.O. Fagunwa’s *Igbo olodumar* From Yoruba into English”, and “D.O. Fagunwa and the Art of Fabulation.” The latter is scheduled for publication in the Fall 1990 issue of *The Literary Griot: International Journal of Black Oral and Literary Studies*, Vol. 2 n° 2.
2. These selected excerpts, used as prefaces and commentaries to several sections of translations, are quoted in *Chemin de la traduction*, L. Bonnerot et al. (Eds.), pp. 239, 137, 34, and 193 respectively.
3. Gogol, quoted by M. Meyer in “On Translating Plays”, *Twentieth Century Studies*, 11, 1974: 51.
4. *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, Edinburgh, Nelson, 1950 (first published by the CMS Bookshop, Lagos, 1938). Published under a less literal title, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, trans. Wole Soyinka (London, Nelson, 1968) (thirteen reprints since 1958). *Igbo Olumare*, Edinburgh, Nelson, 1949 (nineteen reprints). *A Forest of the Almighty*, trans. Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith, 1984 (publication pending). *Ireke Onibudo*, Edinburgh, Nelson, 1949, (fourteen reprints since 1956). *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje*, Edinburgh, Nelson, 1954 (sixteen reprints since 1961). *Adiitu Olodumare*, Edinburgh, Nelson, 1961 (three reprints since 1962).
5. Almost every Yoruba who has seen the four walls of a classroom has encountered Fagunwa in one form or another. For the not so literate, their Fagunwa experience has been through itinerant theatre troupes, the re-diffusion (Nigerian Radio), or the television. Consequently, I conducted several informal interviews and dialogued with a cross section of Yorubas. Older Yorubas found the notion of translating the Fagunwa classics into English inconceivable, in fact preposterous, implying that translation would desecrate what many have come to regard as the repository of “*ijinle Yoruba*” (deep Yoruba idioms). Generally, many middle-aged and younger Yorubas dismissed the notion of reading Fagunwa in any language other than Yoruba as ludicrous. The general attitude was to preserve the “Yoruba-*tales-as-only-Fagunwa-can-tell-them*” in their pristine form. Yoruba scholars and critics (Abiola Irele, Niyi Osundare, Ayo Bamgbose, and others), while not crusaders for English translations of Fagunwa’s novels, expressed linguistic and stylistic concerns. Yet it is interesting that leading Yoruba scholar Ayo Bamgbose published *The Novels of D.O. Fagunwa*, a one-of-kind analytical study of Fagunwa’s novels in *English*. One has to wonder about the purpose of the publication, and for what audience it is intended. Perhaps the general *laissez faire* attitude (subtly cynical sometimes, blatantly outraged at other times) accounts for the seeming lack of interest and/or enthusiasm in translating Fagunwa in the sixteen-year lapse between Wole Soyinka’s 1968 translation and the most recent unpublished translations of *Igbo Olodumare* by Ajadi (1984) and Smith (1984).
6. There is evidence that Fagunwa did try his hands, though briefly, at translating his own work. Indeed there is some truth to this claim, although it was not based on evidence of the typescript (Ms 326709) which Bernth Lindfors discovered in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of

London, and quoted in his essay, "Form, Theme, and Style in the Narratives of D. O. Fagunwa," *The International Fiction Review*, 6, n° 1 (1979: 11-16). Since all irregularities in spelling and punctuation are preserved as Lindfors claims, it is accurate to conclude that Soyinka captured his own voice and not the voice of Fagunwa.

7. See note n° 6.

8. French translations of Fagunwa's five novels have been made by J. O. Abioye. They await publication.

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