

ABSTRACT OF PHD THESIS

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TRADITION – RITUAL – MEMORY

Yoruba Folklore Tradition in Wole Soyinka's Oeuvre
or Meeting of *Ògún*, *egúngun* and *sàarà* on the Writing-Table

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Antecedents of the Research, Problematization

The Problem of Existence of African Literary Researches in Hungary and the Choice of Subject Matter

In 1998 I began to attend courses in the African Studies Programme at the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Lorand University. At the lectures Géza Füssi Nagy – professor of African Studies – emphasized the lack of Hungarian African Literary Researches since the death of Tibor Keszthelyi – scholar of African Literatures.

In the end I wrote my two MA theses about the genre-creating works of two African Nobel Prize winner writers, Najib Mahfuz and Wole Soyinka at Pázmány Péter Catholic University in 2006. During the course of my MA researches I examined all Hungarian and English secondary sources about African literatures that were available in Hungary. Then it became clear that I can hardly rely on any scientific basis throughout the researches related to my PhD.

Therefore in my PhD thesis I had to dissert about a completely new academic field in Hungary, also ensuring that my dissertation is understandable and receptive. The case of Wole Soyinka is very special because by providing the main basis for African literature, he is an excellent medium for reviving Hungarian African literary researches, however at the same time he is an internationally “overresearched” writer. This made my choice of subject matter much more difficult because writing about Soyinka is new in Hungary, but composing a new thesis about his works in the field of international African studies is one of the most difficult challenges.

After having read thousands of articles and studies together with almost fifty monographs specialized on Soyinka, I realized how few scholars examine the existence and function of folklore elements in Wole Soyinka's oeuvre. Those who paid attention to this phenomenon were not consequent and accurate; they neither did any research about the unity of Soyinka's narrative, nor they explained these traditional elements, they only signed their existence.

Need of Co-Researches of Folklore and Belles-Lettres

Literary forming of Yoruba traditions implies the question whether it is possible to treat folklore tradition or oral literature as a literary aesthetic? Where is the border between oral and written literature, and is there a border at all?

In the African literary histories these questions raise more striking problems because the presence of African oral literature beside written literature is far more dominant than in e. g. Europe. African literary histories do not give significance to this dominant literary corpus in every case.

Without applicable folklore collections and analyses the traditional elements interpreted into belles-lettres cannot be recognized, and it is not possible to extrapolate their function and aesthetic role either.

In postcolonial literatures it is also a problem to define the term of different literatures, so in my cases it is questionable whether Wole Soyinka is an English, African, Nigerian or Yoruba writer. By taking into consideration the aesthetic significance of folklore the postcolonial writers' identity could be more easily redefined.

From the African Tradition to the African Literature

The monitoring of how African folklore became belles-lettres could provide a researchable basis for such actual literary theories as the technologisation of the word *ongi*. Development of oral literature into the written one is considered as a medium change, which can primarily be observed in the “primitive cultures” according to Walter Ong’s followers, too.

Examination of Yoruba folklore literature and the traditional elements in Wole Soyinka’s oeuvre is a concrete analytical attempt to examine this kind of medium change and also to demonstrate such genre theories as how each literary theories were created in Nigeria. The roots of European literary genres can only be researched historically in hypothetic ways, but the origins of African genres can be studied by existing examples. Therefore it may facilitate finding response to questions of general genre theories and genre histories.

Significance of Yoruba folklore elements in Wole Soyinka’s oeuvre

Wole Soyinka’s oeuvre is primarily researched according to political and eurocentric aspects. Existence of traditional elements in his works is commonly accepted, but most of the scholars do not pay attention to them, they just handle it as a literary extremity, not as an aesthetical realization.

In case of some works a number of African literary historians deal with this problem in detail, but their method is different from European literary researches in technology and absorption. They mainly help to recognize traditional elements, but fail to analyze their function, and never compare the various types of phenomena.

Soyinka uses Yoruba tradition in each genre with different emphasis and function. While traditional elements form and give the structure and poetic language of the plays, in the novels they only give aesthetical shade to the writing. Examination of these differences shows us the specialities of Wole Soyinka's poetical narrative. Furthermore we have to keep in mind his essays about the connection of tradition and literature, too.

Researching methods

Due to the lack of antecedents the research of African literatures in Hungary proves to be difficult from the methodological point of view as well. Since the European literary scholars primarily follow colonial, political and European literary historical and theoretical methods, they ignore most of the African specialities from their analysis. In the meantime the African researchers do not emphasize these features because of their evidence for them, and they rather discuss about existential topics.

Hungarian researchers have a huge advantage as opposed to Western and African scholars. They can analyse African literatures without the urge to search for their own cultural sources or literary theories at every turn, as Western researchers do. They can also eliminate the African point of view of being busy with writing identity search and forming analyses in the shadows of colonial powers.

The scholars of Eastern-Europe - amongst them Hungary - had the opportunity to first observe this remote culture during the time of the Soviet regime. So their interpretation of these literatures is completely different from Western-Europe or America. African literary histories which were written in the 60s and 70s in East- or Central-Europe prove this hypothesis. Following this researching tradition is a perfect opportunity to form a new aspect while continuing the Hungarian African literary studies.

Consequently, in my methodology I wanted to create a new direction in African literary studies. Furthermore I attempted to analyse folklore elements by literary methods.

In order to make easier the recognition and reception of the special structure of Soyinka's works, I wrote introductory parts to all three of the

main chapters. Therefore at the part about poetry I introduced Yoruba traditional poetic forms. Then at the beginning of the section about the plays I wrote about Yoruba festivals; and finally in the chapter of novels – due to the lack of traditional example – I began my matter with defining the actual literary genre.

Following from there I apply the same process in all three chapters, id est. I examine how the writing narrative changes from the beginning till our days. The works to be analysed were chosen accordingly. My main scope was the traditional structural transformation, the poetical language and the interdisciplinal elements.

In all three cases I provided a detailed explanation about the mythological characters, elements and their function; along with the significance of choice of traditional topic and dance-mask-song, also including an analysis of Yoruba linguistic problems. Naturally I also discuss about the special questions related to the particular writing, but the above mentioned views were my main aspects.

When writing about African features I used my own experiences of my trip in Nigeria, together with the writings of African folklorists and Yoruba religious communities. In the case of European researches I try to give a critical view because during my studies I experienced that European scholars working on African ground had to encounter the trap of colonial conflicts, or without linguistic knowledge they often divulged inexactitudes.

Analysing folklore by literary methods

As above mentioned one of the new results of my dissertation is the method itself: the analysis and examination of folklore texts and elements according to literary methods. It is an attempt to renew and alloy the Western and African scientific methods by using the advantages arising from the special outsider perspective of my country.

This kind of examination of the traditional elements attempts to resolve the problems between the culturally different literatures and their critic, and it also tries to fill the scientific gaps. It connects two literary theory views which operate with completely different methods. They misunderstand each other, not finding the common way arising from their colonizer/colonized past.

I effort to analyse African folklore as an aesthetic value, also to renew the collecting and analysing method of African literary histories, furthermore to justify their role in the reception of the actual literatures.

Classification of Yoruba traditional poetic forms

One of the specialties of my dissertation is the critical classification of Yoruba traditional poetic forms. We have much information about the researches related to Yoruba poetic tradition, but scholars used them quite vagariouly. They mention lots of poetic forms without analysis; then they treat others in detail that are connected to a folklore collection – but usually these are the same popular forms e. g. *ijala*, some others are given faultily. Moreover I found cases where European researchers mentioned such poetic forms which unequivocally do not exist. This suggests that the collectors did not speak Yoruba and must have been deceived.

I classified Yoruba traditional poetic types according to the works of African folklorists and Nigerian university textbooks using thematic views. By this way I facilitate not only my work, but I also provide a new approaching system for European researchers.

Formation of African literary genres – Effects of African tradition on African belles-lettres

In my dissertation I primarily researched the effect of African culture and literary corpus on the oeuvre of an African writer which is missing from the European and African studies, too. The examination of the influences of African tradition on African literature is a peripheral field giving lots of new results. On the one hand it has significance in the survey of African literatures along with the demonstration and analysis of the formation of African literary genres. On the other hand it is good example to demonstrate the formation histories and theories of the European literary genres.

Researching traditional elements in Wole Soyinka's oeuvre indicate the process of traditional poetry transforming into belles-lettres: one can observe how Yoruba festivals form the structure of a play which are basically thought to be a Shakespeare structure, and also how Soyinka's autobiographies change into the subsistent literary museum of Yoruba culture.

Survival of the Soyinka narrative – Effects of African literatures on African literatures; analysis of contemporary Nigerian literatures

By researching the traditional elements I conclude that Soyinka uses an individual narrative in his works, whose survival can be proved in the contemporary Nigerian literature. Due to the length limits of the PhD thesis I only introduce two examples of them, but they illustrate well the fact which is not acceptable among European scholars: in Africa literature reached a new multiple-generation level. As a result of this the literary works are not only based on European tradition, but – and primarily – on African literary tradition.

I mentioned Soyinka's literary antecedents in the drama analyses, but I think the most important result is the new approach of contemporary literatures, in which we essentially have to examine the survival of African literary tradition. The survival of the Soyinka narrative is a primary example for this, which is stated among the new result of my dissertation.

Thus it is important to mention here that no European researcher has ever researched Ademola Dasylva or Ahmed Yerima before. Thus my dissertation introduces their works in Europe for the first time.

Neo-traditional narrative and its categories

In the field of African literary theories I defined two new concepts: neo-traditional narrative and sociographic memoir.

Soyinka's religious and folkloric poetic language - alloying English and Yoruba languages - is the renewal of traditional writing narrative. I called this individual linguistic form neo-traditional narrative in my thesis. I differentiate two subcategories: *pseudo-traditional* narrative, being based on the creation of mythologies similar to the Yoruba (e. g. Shokoriko in

King Baabu); and *alternative traditional narrative* which applies his subjective traditional aspects as a narrative (e. g. first chapters of *Aké*).

Neo-traditional narrative is also the African extrapolation of postcolonial literary theories. Its language, style, theme, social problems and questions are perfect examples of postcolonial literatures. Soyinka's oeuvre created an individual and traditional narrative which has followers and developers not only in Nigeria, but in all Africa. This poetic language appears in his poetry, dramas and autobiographical writings in similar but also diverse ways.

The main object of my thesis was to introduce this neo-traditional narrative which is not solely Soyinka's literary feature by today; because its antecedents are also observable in such writer's works as Amos Tutuola. However these writers use this narrative in only one single genre, whereas Soyinka uses it his poetry, plays and novels, too.

Sociographic memoir

There is a special category among African memoirs, this is a genre staying on the border line amongst Eastern-European literary sociography, Western memoirs and autobiographic novels. This genre cannot be clearly confined into the concept of Bildungsroman, apprenticeship, psychological or autobiographical novels. An African writer always aims at more than enacting a literary role. An African writer wants to ransom the pain of slave ancestors, by his unique mission way he resists against the white power and colonization; and – which is the most important feature in the case of Soyinka – he covers the ethnical, religious and psychological problems of a whole continent.

Consequently the novels of Soyinka and the African autobiography- and memoir-writers are the part of a unique genre which I call *sociographic memoir-literature*. Soyinka`s novels belonging to this genre are impregnated with this neo-traditional narrative appearing as a unique phenomenon in African literature in the meantime also differing from European examples.

The sample of *Aké* as a sociographic memoir is not surviving in contemporary Nigerian literature. It has a very simple reason: while Soyinka`s poetic and dramatic neo-traditional narrative was created and popularized in the 60s, his autobiographies were published decades later.

Analysis of Soyinka`s work after 2000 (*Samarkand*, *King Baabu*)

One of the primary parts of my thesis is the analysis of Soyinka`s newest works, which are still only reviewed by the international literary critics.

During my researches I examine such works as *Samarkand* and its poem, *Twelve Canticles for the Zealot* – I translated and observed the features of neo-traditional narrative in it – and the play *King Baabu* – in which I also emphasised the appearance of Yoruba traditional elements and the changes of the unique Soyinka narrative.

I also analysed Soyinka`s newest novels (*Isara* and *Ibadan*), however I could only deal with them within the framework of my topic – because of the extension limits.

These novels are still outside the scope of international critics, therefore I think my analysis of them accompanied by the examination of neo-traditional narrative is a considerable result of my thesis.

Publications in the research theme

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2. *Sony Labou Tansi.* Afrika Tanulmányok. 2008. 4. 68-69. (portrait)
3. *Az írástudók árulása. Betekintés az afrikai irodalomkutatás világába.* Szépirodalmi Figyelő. 2008. 6. 42-47. (article)
4. *A nigériai joruba drámák sajátossága.* Nagyvilág. 2009. 5. 477-489. (study)
5. *Nigériai írók a joruba hagyományok vonzásában. Az afrikai irodalomtörténet-írói szemlélet megújulásának szükségszerűsége.* In: CSIZMADIA Sándor and TARRÓSY István eds. *Afrika ma. Tradíció, átalakulás, fejlődés.* Pécs. Publikon. 2009. 377-400. (study)
6. *Wole Şoyinka: Tizenkét ének a vakbuzgóért* In: FINTA Gábor ed. „...friss szellő eleven virágból...”. *Versértelmezések Sipos Lajos tiszteletére.* Piliscsaba. 2010. 185-195. (Pázmány Irodalmi Műhely, Tanulmányok) (translation and dissection)
7. *Connections of Traditional Yoruba Theatre and Nigerian Drama Writing (The Problems of Canonization and Reception of African Literature)* In: MAYAUX, Catherine, Joanna NOWICKI, SZÁVAI Dorottya and HORVÁTH Kornélia, eds. *La littérature et ses marges, Literature and its Margins.* Cergy-Pontoise. 2011. 219-239. (study)