

ORATURE AND YORÚBÁ RIDDLES

AKÍNTÚNDÉ AKÍNYEMÍ



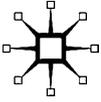
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*For Bólú and her brother, Tòmíwá—
the bridge between the past and the future.*

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C O N T E N T S

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Note on Transcription and Translation of Yorùbá Data</i>	xv
Introduction	1
One Yorùbá Riddles in Performance: Content and Context	11
Two Riddles and Metaphors: The Creation of Meaning	37
Three The Dynamics of Tale-Riddling	89
Four The Variability and Function of Song-Riddle	131
Five Current Trends in the Use of Enigmatic Forms	179
Six Orature and Indigenous Education	231
<i>Notes</i>	237
<i>Bibliography</i>	247
<i>Index</i>	253

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I L L U S T R A T I O N S

Table

1.1	Intertwining of riddles with other verbal art forms during performance	23
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Figures

2.1	The intersection of “vehicle” and “tenor” in metaphor	43
2.2	The intersection of common features of “vehicle” and “tenor” in metaphor	44

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Quotations of riddle excerpts from published works of the following authors appear with permission of the holders of various copyrights.

1. The poem “Èlà Lọ̀rò” in Ọ̀látúndé O. Ọ̀látúnjì, Ed. *Ewì Adé́báyò Fálétí (Ìwé Kíní)*. Ìbàdàn (Nigeria): Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Limited, 1982a, by permission of Heinemann Educational Books, Nigeria.
2. The story “Aádámù àti Eéfà” in Akínwùmí Ìṣòlá, *Fàbú: Àkójopò Àwàdà*. Ìbàdàn (Nigeria): DB Martoy Books, 2008, by permission of DB Martoy Books (Nigeria).
3. A storytelling session in *A Treasury of Childhood Memories*, unpublished manuscript by Pamela J. Olúbùnmi Smith, being a translation of the Yorùbá novel *Ogún Omọ́dẹ́* written by Akínwùmí Ìṣòlá and published by the University Press Plc. Ìbàdàn, 1990, by permission of Pamela J. Olúbùnmi Smith and University Press Plc. Ìbàdàn (Nigeria).
4. An illustration of the intersection of the common features of “vehicle” and “tenor” in metaphor adapted from Ọ̀labiyi Yàì, “Some Structural Aspects of Yorùbá *Àlọ́ Apamò*.” *Seminar Series Part II*, Ed. Ọ̀lásopé Oyèláràn. Ilé-Ifẹ́ (Nigeria), Department of African Languages and Literatures, University of Ifẹ́, 1977, p. 449, by permission of Department of African Languages and Literatures, University of Ifẹ́ (now Department of Linguistics and African Languages, Ọ̀báfẹ́mi Awólówò University, Ilé-Ifẹ́, Nigeria).

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NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION
AND TRANSLATION OF
YORÙBÁ DATA

The task of transcribing and translating oral material has been rendered rather challenging by the ethnopoetic revolution of the 1970s, which has demanded of scholars a considerable faith in their representation of texts they collect from oral artists, poets, singers, and storytellers, in such a way as to respect the orality of the enterprise and thus the accuracy of the material. Therefore, it will be appropriate to comment briefly on the method of transcription and translation adopted in this study. I have attempted to transcribe the data collected from the field between 2007 and 2012 as accurately as possible, using the Standard Yorùbá Orthography. The orthography adopted is phonemic, which allows as much as possible for adequate representation of all recorded phonemic sounds. I have utilized commas and semi-colons to delineate the line endings and breath pauses in the original delivery as recommended by Ọlátúndé Ọlátúnjí (1984: 13). However, due to space limitation, not all Yorùbá data are included in the book. For instance, while narrations of tale-riddles are presented only in English translation, regular riddles, poetic riddles, and song-riddles are presented in both original Yorùbá version and English translation.

It is important that non-Yorùbá speakers and nonacademic readers of this book are familiar with the orthographic guide—an English comparison, a mere approximation of the Yorùbá sounds—that I used in preparing the Yorùbá texts in the book. Hopefully, this will assist such readers in the pronunciation of the cultural nuggets that follow:

Consonants: Consonants sounds are approximately similar in pronunciation in both Yorùbá and English except the following:

- {gb} which should be pronounced together with emphasis on the “b” to produce a sound like a thud [gb]—for example, *gbogbo* and *ìgbàgbò*
- {p} which should be pronounced as [kp̄] together to produce a forceful “p” sound as in *pátápátá*.
- {s̄} which should be pronounced like the “sh” in the English word “should”—for example, *òrìsà*
- {y} which should be pronounced like a “y” in the English word “you”—for example, *Yorùbá*.

The following English alphabets are however absent in Yorùbá: {c, q, v, x, z}.

Vowels: There are two types of vowels in Yorùbá: nonnasalized (oral vowels) and nasalized vowels. The nonnasalized (oral) vowels are written as {a, e, ẹ, i, o, ọ, u}.

- {a} should be pronounced like the “a” in “apple”—for example, *àṣà* and *adé*
- {e} should be pronounced like the “a” in “age”—for example, *èdè* and *ewé*
- {ẹ} should be pronounced like the “e” in “egg”—for example, *egbé* and *ájé*
- {i} should be pronounced like the “e” in “evening”—for example, *ilé* and *ìlú*
- {o} should be pronounced like the “o” in “old”—for example, *odò* and *ìgò*
- {ọ} should be pronounced like the “aw” in “awe” or the “o” in “dog”—for example, *ọmọ* and *òdó*
- {u} should be pronounced like the “u” in “full”—for example, *Yorùbá* and *ibùdó*

Nasalized vowels are produced by adding the consonant [n] to an oral vowel symbol {that is, an, ọn, in, ẹn, un} except where such a symbol is preceded by the consonant [m] or [n] (e.g., “*ọmọ*” [child] or “*òndà*” [path])

The syllabic structure in Yorùbá language consists of either a vowel, for example, {a} (we) and {i} in “*ilé*” (house); a consonant followed by a vowel, for example, “*mu*” (drink), or a syllabic nasal, for example, “*n̄*” in “*ń lọ*” (S/he is going). Consequently, any word in Yorùbá having more than one syllable may be described in terms of the combination of the

types of syllable above, for example, *òrìṣà* = ò-rì-ṣà—a lesser god/deity—(vowel, consonant + vowel, consonant + vowel) and *àṣà* = à-ṣà—culture/tradition—(vowel, consonant + vowel). Each syllable in Yorùbá bears one of the three tones in the language: high—acute—{ó}, low—grave—{ò}, or mid—{o} (usually left unmarked).

In order to ensure consistency in the use of diacritics or tone marks in this book, the following is a list of style rules that we adopted for Yorùbá words: (i) capital initials but no italics for all tone-marked proper nouns, including but not limited to personal names, names of animal characters in folktales and tale-riddles, names of cities, societies, and associations or organizations, for example, Akíndélé, Ìjápá, Yorùbá, Ògún, Ìbàdàn, Ègbé Àgbà ò Tán, and the like; (ii) italics and tone marks (but no capital initials) for titles that are not part of proper nouns listed in (i) above for example, *òrìṣà*, *baálè*, *àṣín*, *òba*, and the like; (iii) italics and tone marks for shorter sample of Yorùbá riddle texts embedded in body of work, but with no quotation marks; and (iv) longer Yorùbá riddle texts are italicized, tone marked, and indented.

As for the English translation of the Yorùbá data in the book, I have attempted to strike a compromise between a literal and a literary translation, although many words in Yorùbá frustrate translanguing transportation by the sheer complexity of their polysemic range. Such words are so culture bound that they do not translate easily to English, especially when their metaphysical polyvalence in Yorùbá has no equivalent in English. Therefore, my English translation of Yorùbá data in this book yields place to mediation as I am constrained to try out or devise a series of strategies of transposition and transference, which in the words of Níyì Òṣúndáre (2000) leads to “kiss and quarrel” between the concerned languages (15). According to him, when two languages meet, they kiss and quarrel. They achieve a tacit understanding on the common grounds of similarity and convergence, then negotiate, often through strident rivalry and self-preserving altercations, their areas of dissimilarity and divergence.

Translation, in the context of what I presented in this study, means literally “carrying across,” and this implies all other forms that carry the prefix *trans-*. It also means not only transportation or transmission or transposition but also transformation and transmutation, for all these activities take place when translating literary material in an African language to the English language. My approach to the notion of translation should be seen first in the orthodox sense as the linguistic operation that consists in transporting meaning from one language to another. However, as Anuradha Dingwaney (1995) points out, if translation is one of the primary means by which texts produced in one or another indigenous language of the various countries arbitrarily grouped together under the “Third,” or non-Western, world

are made available in Western, metropolitan languages, it is not restricted to such linguistic transfer alone. For Dingwaney (1995), “translation is also the vehicle” through which “Third World cultures (are made to) travel—transported or “borne across” to and recuperated audiences in the West” (4). Unfortunately, most Western-oriented, linguistic-based translation theories are not applicable or relevant to Yorùbá oral texts because of the multiplicity of meanings usually attached to specific words in the language. The major weakness of these theories is that they do not take into consideration underlying sociocultural factors in works produced by Africans. A consideration of these factors in African-language literature will produce what Kwame Appiah (1993) has called “thick translation” and which he defines as “a translation that seeks...to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context...A description of the context of literary production, a translation that draws on and creates that sort of understanding, meets the need to challenge ourselves...to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others” (817–818).

It is this form of translation, which Wọlé Šóyínká employs in translating the work of the eminent Yorùbá creative writer Daniel Ọlórúnfẹmi Fágúnwà (1968), that I also employed in my English translation of Yorùbá riddles in this book. In his assessment of Fágúnwà’s works, Abíólá Ìrèlé (1981) notes that “Fágúnwà’s works belong then to the great tradition of allegorical and symbolic literature, set within the framework of a particular complex of cultural references. His achievement resides in his creation of a form in which the Yorùbá imaginative tradition can be given a translation in modern terms, and in the process acquired new vitality” (182). I opted for this form of translation because what Ìrèlé alludes to as “cultural references” in Fágúnwà’s works also permeate the Yorùbá riddles discussed in this book.

Consequently, my translation of Yorùbá enigmas in this book sets out to capture the spirit and depth of the riddles in English by striking a compromise between a literal and a literary translation. The translation is based on a free but not entirely literal approach keeping to the sense of the Yorùbá original as much as possible. This allows some of the devices used in the Yorùbá original to come up to the surface in the English version. This method of translation is mid-way between a purely literal and a fine translation. My intention was to produce an English text that will be enjoyable and accessible to a diverse audience, including but not limited to students and scholars of African linguistics, sociology, anthropology, history, political science, religion, and folklore. Precedence was thus given to accuracy, clarity, simplicity, effectiveness, and faithfulness in my translation. All translations in this work are mine except where specified.

Introduction

This book takes readers into the hitherto unexplored undercurrents of one of the so-called minor genres of African orature—riddles. There is no existing critical work on this subject among the Yorùbá, a major ethnic group in Africa, with established connections with the black diaspora in North America and the Caribbean. The strength of the Yorùbá as the focus of the study is impressive indeed: a rich oral and written culture; a large and diverse population; and an integrated rural-urban society. Conclusions from this study are intended to inform other studies, and certain general principles from this study are expected to influence studies of similar societies in Africa and elsewhere.

Orature is that vast field of knowledge in which cultural information and messages are transmitted verbally from one generation to the next. It is a complex corpus of oral arts created to recall, honor, and preserve the past. On occasion, the term *orature* is used interchangeably with oral tradition, oral literature, and folklore or storytelling elements—language and belief systems shared by a common group. It is a verbal legacy contributing significantly to cultural and national identity. In contemporary usage, orature is reflected in popular and group-oriented cultural expressions.

Orature is governed by certain characteristic features—including the situation or context in which it is produced, the audience, language, and structure or format. A primary feature of orature, which relates to the nature of performance, is community involvement (both in the creative and critiquing processes). Each performance is for and about the audience. The main objective of the performer is to entertain, amuse, and impress the audience so as to earn praise, admiration, and, on occasion, material gifts. In creative performance, members of the audience neither listen silently nor wait for the invitation of the performer before joining