

# Adebáyò Fálétí: The Passing of a Cultural Icon<sup>1</sup>

Akin Adeşokan  
Department of Comparative Literature  
Indiana University  
Bloomington  
[adesokan@indiana.edu](mailto:adesokan@indiana.edu)

## An Encounter

Through the open door of the room next to the editing suite at the offices of Mainframe Productions, near Oshodi, Lagos, a figure dressed in colorful agbada is visible, hunched over papers and books. Back turned to the door, he scribbles away, oblivious to all movement around him. But it is not difficult to know who it is. The cap tipped to the right and the brief side glance cast in reaction to approaching motion are enough to give him away, even if, as in such situations, a few moments lapse before recognition registers. The sight is riveting, forbidding and disorienting all at once. In more than an hour of chattering about the problems of Nigeria, I have been unaware of the presence in the same building of one of the iconic figures of the arts in Nigeria, probably at work making things even more complicated. It is late in the evening. We greet him and quickly withdraw, careful not to disturb him further. Walking out the building with cultural critic Toyin Akinosho at the end of a visit with the filmmaker Tunde Kelani, I also find it quite chastening.

This was my first personal encounter with Adebayò Fálétí, the Yorùbá poet, novelist, playwright, broadcaster and administrator, who died on July 22, 2017 at age 86. As fate would have it, there was a second encounter just a few weeks later, but I shall save it for last because what makes it memorable is the telling way it sums up the poet's view of his vocation.

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1 This essay originally published in the online edition of *Punch Newspaper* is a revised version and is reprinted here with permission.

The scope of Fálétí's achievements is so broad, his artistic range so capacious, that it is hard to make a general observation about his work. No less an authority than Wọlẹ Şoyinka has drawn attention to this fact by describing Fálétí in his obituary comments as "a pioneer in virtually every genre of literary creativity and its expansion." Of all Yorùbá writers of the twentieth-century, excepting Ọlatubọsun Ọladapọ and the late Afọlabi Ọlábímítán (and Akinwumi Işọla, to some extent), hardly anyone else was that productive in all modern literary genres.

Born in Agbóóyè, near Ọyọ́ (Ọyọ́ State), in December 1930, Fálétí showed early precocity and wrote his first book—a collection of 100 proverbs—before he turned seventeen. That work is presumed lost. He did not begin high school education until he was twenty, however, having held odd jobs as tax collector, sign-writer, producer inspector, and pupil teacher in the years since completing elementary schooling.

Although he was regarded primarily as a poet and received the most sustained scholarly attention in this area of his writing, there is no genre or medium of artistic expression available in Nigeria which Fálétí did not employ to excellent result. He received tertiary degrees in English and French, but Yorùbá was his chosen language of literary expression. Like most first-rate writers in any language, he left his mark on Yorùbá, joining Daniel Fagúnwà and Ọládẹjọ Ọkẹdìjì as perhaps the only writers who recreated the language in the process of using it. Late in his career, in response to gentle criticisms that he wrote only in Yorùbá, Fálétí tried his hands at English. The result was the elegant novel *Mágùn: The Whore with the Thunderbolt Aids*, the screen version of which was also Kelani's first English-language film—and conceivably the reason he was sweating it out that evening of our encounter at Mainframe.

His choice of Yorùbá was not straightforward, although once it was made, it only seemed so. According to the scholar Ọlátundé Ọlátúnjì, the expert on Fálétí's poetry, the author wrote several poems in English in the early 1950s. In September 1954, he "wrote a lengthy poem in English on the Ọyọ́ Riots [but] a friend advised him to be writing Yorùbá poems, and that was the end to poems in English." And how happy has been the result!

### A Poet of Poets

After that decision, Fálétí never looked back. He published regularly in *Àwòrẹrì ìn* (prose and poetry) and *Olókun* (poetry) between 1955 and 1965. *Àwòrẹrì ìn*, the bi-monthly magazine of features published by the Western Nigeria's Ministry of Home Affairs and Information, was his most consistent outlet at this stage, and its popular-culture format was well-suited to his

laid-back, self-assured creative outlook. Although the title poem of his first collection, *Orin Òmìnira* (Independence: Poems), had been written as early as 1956 and had won a prize that year, the book was still in press in 1978 when Òlátúnjì completed *Adebayo Fálétí: A Study of His Poems*.

However, his poetry had previously received an important boost from Adéagbo Akínjògbìn's *Ewì Ìwòyí*, an anthology of modern Yorùbá poetry first published in 1969. Thirteen poets were featured in that volume, and Fálétí's eleven poems received the most extended attention, taking up about a third of the space.

Òlátúnjì singled out Fálétí's poetry as most deserving of scholarly attention, because of the poet's "concern with the timeless and the universal." That assessment was in contrast to the didacticism prevalent in modern poetry, especially with poets like Lánrewájú Adèpòjú, Òlátúbòsun Òladapò, Ifayèmi Èlẹ̀bùibòn, Iyabò Ogúnşòlá, and the late Lakin Ládeèbó.

Òlátúnjì's study gives a thorough analysis of Fálétí's poems in print through 1978, with a judicious treatment of their contexts. For example, he is viewed as having a "philosophical disposition," steeping his writing in archaic, poetically rich lexical items associated with an agrarian environment. Oral poetry is one of the sources of his work, and he remains devoted to it as a fathomless reservoir of poetic practice. For Fálétí, the poet is an *alóre*, a sentinel, on behalf of society. But to him, "preaching" is not a primary objective in poetry: "my duty in [my narrative poems] is primarily to tell an interesting story [and] if anyone thinks there is a moral [...] for him to draw, let him do so."

Òlátúnjì's labors on Fálétí's poetry are enormous and outstanding. In addition to the monograph, he also prepared a two-volume critical edition of the poems, the first volume appearing the same year as the monograph. It is possible that this was a successful attempt to rescue the poet's long-suffering manuscript from a publisher's slush pile.

Before scholarly opinions gained grounds, however, Fálétí had been widely acknowledged among poets as their doyen. I had my earliest intimation of this status when a friendly schoolteacher responded to my enthusiasm over Adèpòjú's first LP with the disbelieving question, "Have you heard or read any of Fálétí's poetry?" Òládapò, a recording musician, put four of Fálétí's poems on an LP record in 1977 and included on the album sleeve the following lines:

*Ìgúnngún ni wòn n rí tí wòn n dásàa gbaguruyẹ  
Akalamagbò làwò n rí tí wòn n dásàa bagebàgẹ  
Adebayo Fálétí ni wòn n rí tí gbogbo ayé n dásà ewì kí kẹ  
Omọ Fálétí dagbo ijó, ẹf'orin f'eni tó lorin*

*Àgbà nínú akéwì tí í sọ̀rò ì jìnlẹ̀.*

The sight of the vulture's moves inspires the copycats' garrulous gait  
 The sight of crow's steps inspires their fancy footwork  
 It is Adebayo Fálétí's example that inspires others to become poets  
 Child of Fálétí struts to the dance floor, leave the song to its owner,  
 Master-poet with high diction.

The two poets apparently got along well. Fálétí begins a 1974 poem titled "Ìtàn Ìbàdàn" (The Story of Ìbàdàn) in a playfully patronizing tone (which may be a sublimated sign of the sibling rivalry between Ọyọ and Ìbàdàn):

*Ọlátúbòsún Àlámú*  
*Mo ní nńkan ọ̀tun lẹ̀nu tí mo fẹ́ sọ*  
*Àlámú, pẹ̀lẹ́, ọ̀mọ èrè l'Àpà.*  
*Nítóótọ́, irú ẹ̀yin lè morin*  
*Orin lásán nírúu yín le kọ...*

Ọlátúbòsún Àlámú  
 I have a new thing to say  
 I salute you, Àlámú, offspring of the Python of Apa.  
 True, your type is good at singing  
 Mere song is your suit and your peers'...

The typical Fálétí poem is extended, narrative, free-versal, and innovative of the prosodic rule of lexical set pairing. In observing this rule, according to which poetic effect is achieved through contrasting sounds in three tones (*dò-re-mí*), many contemporary poets are constrained to compose through a chanting pattern that favors the tercet but can, at length, come to sound formulaic. Fálétí observes this rule by default, the demands of literary composition nudging him in the direction of putting sense, sound and their mediation on an equal footing. The result is poetry at its most linguistically ebullient, with aesthetic pleasure as top priority. The last two lines of the verse quoted above give a sense of this approach. Their tonal pattern does not introduce a contrast because, having observed the rule in the first three lines, the poet quickly sets his gaze on a task implicit in the relationship between him and the named persona.

### **Broadcasting and the Media**

Fálétí started reading his poetry on the radio as early as 1958, but he had spent the two previous years as a cinema commentator with *The Nigerian*

*Tribune*. He was employed as a producer by the WNBS/WNTV between 1959 and 1976, when Radio O-Y-O was established with the creation of Oyo State. This was how his careers as poet, dramatist, actor, producer, broadcaster and administrator coincide: nearly all his literary work, with the possible exception of the fiction, found an outlet in radio and television broadcast. Through the Alébiósù Theater Group which he founded in the late 1960s, he wrote, produced and directed a detective series, *Adégboyè*, which ran in both media between 1969 and 1975, and was revived again in the 1980s.

His work as a dramatist came to its own in this period, through such titles as *Ìtàn Ìbànú jé Ti Baṣòrun Gáà*, *Fẹrẹbíẹkùn*, *Ṣawo Ṣẹ̀gbẹ̀rì*, *Ìdààmú Páàdì Míkáílù*, and others. These plays were adapted for the television and performed by the group, sometimes in alliance with others. *Ìdààmú Páàdì Míkáílù* is one of the early modernist plays in Yorùbá, like Iṣòlá's *Kòṣeégbẹ*, Babatunde Olatúnjì's *Egbínrìn Ọ̀tẹ̀*, and Òkédijì's *Rẹ̀rẹ̀ Rún*. These plays break with the dominant perspective in dramatic representation seen in the traveling theater idiom through their eschewal of the "cause-effect" template based on supernaturalism, and often with an otherworldly resolution. They are also known to focus on the plight of the downtrodden, or play up the efforts of the progressive sections in society in their conception of dramatic conflict. They hardly ever go so far as to suggest the kind of radical, systemic change that Marxist/materialist critics consider necessary for social transformation. Fálẹ̀tí especially receives a sharp rebuke from then-young critic Tẹ̀jùmọ̀lá Olaníyan on account of the perspective dominant in *Ìdààmú Páàdì Míkáílù*: "Running through the play is a strong Christian ethic," Olaníyan observes, "polished at intervals with brilliant poetry. But even this is hardly enough to stave off charges of poor artistry and boring moralizing."

Crimes and high misdeeds are almost always punished through the instrument of the modern state, either in the form of the police and the legal system, or in the deployment of scientific, forensic procedure like poisoning, gunfights, and stabbing. The general appeal in these dramas is to a moral uprightness, not so much an ideological critique.

In a short tribute following Fálẹ̀tí's death, Kelani reflects on the screen version of the play: "...[M]y first attempt at adaptation from literature to film was my choice of...*Ìdààmú Páàdì Míkáílù* (*The Dilemma of Father Michael*) which I found fascinating for its drama and my favorite theme of a clash of cultures. The film was titled *Ìwà*, adapted by Lọ́lá Fani-Kayòdé, [and] was released to mixed reception from the audience and finally disappeared to Rank Film Laboratory after the two prints wore out. But the project gave me enough experience in producing and adapting film from literary source which has strengthened and shaped my career as an African filmmaker."

The coming of Nollywood gave much spark to Fálétí's skills as a man of the screen media. He played bit parts in some films in the early 1990s, but it was with Kelani's *Şaworoide* (1999), *Agogo Èèwò* (2002), and *Thunderbolt* (2001) that he really found his mettle. His role as *Òpálába*, the gnomish, easily neglected old palace wit in the first two titles, is foundational for Nollywood aesthetics because its disposition finally became a model for characterization in a number of Nollywood genres, especially those in Yorùbá. Playing the *babaláwo* (diviner-herbalist) in *Thunderbolt*, Fálétí admirably combines esoteric knowledge and earthiness by launching into beautiful Ifá chants moments after wondering why an attractive woman cannot understand Yorùbá! In *Ó Le Kú* (1997), Kelani's film version of Işola's campus novel, he appears on television in a family scene, reading the news as "Ajíbádé Elèètú," based on the format of "Ìròhìn Àtelejò" (news in brief) which he broadcast on TV in the 1960s and 70s.

### The Artist in a Bureaucracy

Fálétí was appointed controller and acting director of programs services in the newly established Radio O-Y-O, later named BCOS, the Broadcasting Corporation of Òyò State, in August 1976. After four short months, he was removed from the position. In a 2010 interview with the journalist Gbenro Adéşínà published in *The News* magazine, Fálétí remembered his ordeal: "I was detained for a crime I didn't commit.... I was removed from Radio Òyò but later returned when they found out that I was not guilty of what I was accused of. The detention period was a trial moment of unhappiness because I didn't commit any offence."

He provided no details of what happened, but it is on record that the radio station had, in December 1976, broadcast a program critical of Cuba, a country which Nigeria, then ideologically committed to African liberation movements, considered a strong ally. Several days of detention and interrogation in Lagos followed, and although he was released just before Christmas, he was not to resume that position until March 1977.

At the funeral service for Fálétí at the First Baptist Church in Òyò on September 8, 2017, the journalist Wálé Fátádé reports, the presiding preacher Archbishop Ayò Ládígbòlù informed the audience of how the broadcasting service "under Fálétí had just one outside broadcasting van [because] he refused to inflate the cost of new vans as demanded by those who [would] approve the purchase."

Those who had close relationships with Fálétí at this period also testify to his efforts at staving off the 'commercialization' of broadcasting, especially with the onset of Pentecostal invasion of public media. There may be

no systematic accounts yet, but the period when Fálétí became involved in broadcasting at the managerial level was significant in another respect. Practices arising from social change in twentieth-century Nigeria quickly found their expression in the Yorùbá language in a process of translation meant to make them familiar in everyday use. Thus, phenomena and procedures like armed robbery, insurance, competitive sports, apartheid, religious fundamentalism, liberation movement, and sundry bureaucratic protocols became the staple of news broadcast as standard information. Had the French philosopher Jacques Derrida visited Ìbàdàn in the 1970s and listened to the news, he would not have made the laughably Eurocentric statement that no language could bear the contamination that translating “apartheid” entailed.

### The Long View of Art

“The day of one’s death heralds one’s veneration” is a moral fragment that could have found its way into Fálétí’s poetry. Despite his mastery of aesthetic and customary resources of Yorùbá culture, Fálétí remained a man of his times. His poetry was innovative, even experimental, enlivened by his conviction that “nothing is beyond the poet’s imagining.” He was also notably restrained and cautious in his worldview. What Ọlátunjí praises as “philosophical disposition” may be another way of characterizing this cautiousness, which very much resembles the Yorùbá ethos of moderation.

Yes, there was always something of the cunning peasant in Fálétí. The “boring moralizing” that Ọláńíyan decries in *Ìdààmú Páàdì Míkáílù* is not aberrant. One can hear it in the poetry suffusing *Baṣòrun Gáà*, in the poem “Èdà Kò Láròpin,” in the untroubled surface of *Mágùn: The Thunderbolt*, and in the character of Ọpalábà, the wise old man recumbent on the palace stoop voicing moderated reason at intervals in *Ṣaworoidẹ*.

The spirit of Ọyó, custodian of the imperial heights of Yorùbá culture, found its survival in Fálétí, and this came to me with a striking immediacy during my second encounter with him.

The setting shifts to the University of Ibadan and goes public. The economist Adebayo Adédèjì is giving the 1998 Ọdúnjọ Memorial Lecture at the Conference Center, a political choice under the circumstance: the Sani Abacha terror is at its nadir, and Adedeji’s former boss, retired General Oluṣẹgun Ọbasanjọ, is among those serving time for an alleged coup plot. Before the lecture, Fálétí appears on stage with a very arresting rhetorical gesture. Without preambles, justifications or explanations, he reads about four short Yorùbá poems authored by Josiah Ọdúnjọ, the man of letters after whom the lecture series is named.

At the end of the performance, Fáléti turns to the audience and provides the gloss: Once upon a time in Ọ̀yọ̀, there was a professional barber, who worked the streets of the downtown area. You knew he was in the neighborhood the moment you heard the call-out about his diverse skills. Only after having proclaimed his services in this way did he turn to acknowledge the environment, by greeting the people around him. One day, the barber was challenged on this unseemly habit. He apologized but explained that salutations changed according to the time of the day, but the nature of his job was unchanging.

The shooting of *Şaworoide* was in high gear as Abacha died in 1998, and its sequel, *Agogo Èèwò* appeared three years later. The old Ọ̀pálábà has the last word in both films, and his exhortatory address is more direct in the latter. The poet says through art what the climate of fear prohibits on the podium, confident that art is longer than life, brutish or glorious.

