Adebáyọ̀ Fálétí: The Passing of a Cultural Icon

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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 Adebáyọ̀ 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 Faléti’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 Wole Soyinka has drawn attention to this fact by describing Faléti 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 Ọlatunji Ọladapo and the late Afọlabi Olabinmàn (and Akinwumi Isola, to some extent), hardly anyone else was that productive in all modern literary genres.

Born in Agbóóyè, near Ọyo (Ọyo State), in December 1930, Faléti 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 Faléti 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 Fágúnwà and Ọládejo Ọkedíji 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, Faléti 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 Ọlatunji Ọlatunji, the expert on Faléti’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 Ọyo 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, Faléti never looked back. He published regularly in Àwọrẹ́rì in (prose and poetry) and Olo kùn (poetry) between 1955 and 1965. Àwọrẹ́rì in, 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 Ōmìnira* (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 Ọlătùnji completed *Adebayọ Fálétí: A Study of His Poems*.

However, his poetry had previously received an important boost from Adéagbo Akínjógbìn’s *Ewí Íwóyí*, 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.

Ọlatùnji 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 Lánírewáju Adépọju, Ọlátúbọsun Ọladapo, Ifayémi Èlébúi bon, Iyabo Ógunšọlá, and the late Lákín Ládeèbo.

Ọlatùnji’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.”

Ọlatùnji’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 Adépọju’s first LP with the disbelieving question, “Have you heard or read any of Fálétí’s poetry?” Ọladápọ, a recording musician, put four of Fálétí’s poems on an LP record in 1977 and included on the album sleeve the following lines:

*Igúnúnún ní wón n rí tí wón n dáṣàa gbaguruṣẹ
Akàlàmàgbọ̀ làwò n rí tí wón n dáṣàa báṣébáṣẹ
Adebayọ Fálétí ní wón n rí tí gbogbo aye n dáṣà ewi kí kẹ
Ọmọ Fálétí dagbo ijó, e f’orin f’éni to lorin*
The sight of the vulture’s moves inspires the copycats’ garrulous gait
The sight of crow’s steps inspires their fancy footwork
It is Adebayọ Fáléti’s example that inspires others to become poets
Child of Fáléti struts to the dance floor, leave the song to its owner,
Master-poet with high diction.

The two poets apparently got along well. Fáléti begins a 1974 poem titled “Ìtàn Òdàdá” (The Story of Òdàdá) in a playfully patronizing tone (which may be a sublimated sign of the sibling rivalry between Òyó and Òdàdá):

*Olatúbọsún Álámú*
Mo ní nnkan ọtun lẹnu tí mo fẹ sọ
Álámú, pèlé, ọmọ èrè l’Àpà.
Ní tóoto, íru eyin lè morin
Orin lásàn nirúu yín le kọ…

*Olatúbọsún Álámú*
I have a new thing to say
I salute you, Álámú, offspring of the Python of Apa.
True, your type is good at singing
Mere song is your suit and your peers’…

The typical Fáléti 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. Fáléti 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**

Fáléti 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 Ọ̀yọ 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 Alebijìosù Theater Group which he founded in the late 1960s, he wrote, produced and directed a detective series, Adegbọyè, 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 Ìbànujẹ Ti Bàṣòrun Gàà, Ìrèbìèkùn, Ọ̀ṣò Ìgbèrì, Ìdààmù Ìààdídì Míkáílù, and others. These plays were adapted for the television and performed by the group, sometimes in alliance with others. Ìdààmù Ìààdídì Míkáílù is one of the early modernist plays in Yorùbá, like Èṣòlà’s Kòṣèègbè, Babatunde Qlatunji’s Ègbìnùn Òtẹ, and Òkèdiji’s Rèrè Run. 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. Faletí especially receives a sharp rebuke from then-young critic Tèjúmọlù Oláníyan on account of the perspective dominant in Ìdààmù Ìààdídì Míkáílù: “Running through the play is a strong Christian ethic,” Oláníyan 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 Faletí’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...Ìdààmù Ìààdídì 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 Lọlà Fani-Kayòdè, [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 Fáléti’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 Saworoiđe (1999), Agogo Èëwọ (2002), and Thunderbolt (2001) that he really found his mettle. His role as Òpálába, the gnomic, 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 babalowo (diviner-herbalist) in Thunderbolt, Fáléti admirably combines esoteric knowledge and earthiness by launching into beautiful Ìfá chants moments after wondering why an attractive woman cannot understand Yorùbá!

In Ọ Le Kú (1997), Kelani’s film version of Isọla’s campus novel, he appears on television in a family scene, reading the news as “Ajibádé Elèètú,” based on the format of “Ìròhin Àtelejo” (news in brief) which he broadcast on TV in the 1960s and 70s.

The Artist in a Bureaucracy

Fáléti 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 Adeşià à published in The News magazine, Fáléti 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 Fáléti at the First Baptist Church in Òyò on September 8, 2017, the journalist Wálé Fátádé reports, the presiding preacher Archbishop Ayọ Ládìgbołù informed the audience of how the broadcasting service “under Fáléti 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 Fáléti 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 Fáletí 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 Ìlòbàn 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 Fáletí’s poetry. Despite his mastery of aesthetic and customary resources of Yorùbá culture, Fáletí 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 Fáletí. The “boring moralizing” that Ọláníyan decries in Ìdààmú Pààdì Mí káí lù is not aberrant. One can hear it in the poetry suffusing Bàṣọrun Gàà, in the poem “Ìdá Ko Láròpin,” in the untroubled surface of Mágun: The Thunderbolt, and in the character of Òpálàbà, the wise old man recumbent on the palace stoop voicing moderated reason at intervals in Sawo oride.

The spirit of Òyọ, custodian of the imperial heights of Yorùbá culture, found its survival in Fáletí, 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 Adédejì is giving the 1998 Ọdùnjo 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 Olúṣẹgun Obasanjò, is among those serving time for an alleged coup plot. Before the lecture, Fáletí appears on stage with a very arresting rhetorical gesture. Without preambles, justifications or explanations, he reads about four short Yorùbá poems authored by Josiah Ọdùnjo, 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 Òyọ, 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 Ṣaworoide was in high gear as Abacha died in 1998, and its sequel, Agogo Èèwọ̀ appeared three years later. The old Ṣàpàlába 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.