

Essays

D. A. Ọbasá: The Man and the Significance of his Cultural Activism

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Abstract

This essay explores Adénrelé Adétímí kàn Ọbasá's creative ingenuity and how he put that into use as a poet, cultural activist, journalist, printer, and publisher of a bilingual newspaper, *The Yorùba News*. The essay traces Ọbasá's history; right from his birth to the period he became a renowned Yorùbá intellectual. The cultural identity theory which studies a person's sense of belonging to a particular culture and accepting the traditions, heritage, language, religion, and social structures of such culture is adopted for the analysis in this study. The study shows how Ọbasá projects himself as a unique individual who used Yorùbá culture to connect people. The essay concludes that Ọbasá is a lover of his indigenous culture and language.

Introduction

A good number of scholars have written on Adénrelé Adétímí kàn Ọbasá (1879-1945), including Babalọlá (1973), Ọlábímtan (1974), and Akínyemí (1987, 1994, and 2017). These researchers have discussed Ọbasá's use of language and style, and the content of his poems. This essay will discuss Ọbasá as a poet, journalist, scribe, publisher/printer and philosopher. An overview of Ọbasá's biography is presented, with examples drawn from some of his poems to consolidate our arguments. The approach adopted in this study is multidisciplinary.

Ọbasá was born in the year 1879 in Lagos to the family of Prince Awólẹ and Fọláwiyọ Ọbasá of Giẹsi ruling family in Ilé-Ifẹ. He had his elementary (primary) education between 1886 and 1890 in Lagos. He later attended Baptist Academy in Lagos between 1891 and 1896 for his secondary education. After secondary school, Ọbasá could not continue his education because there

were fewer post-secondary institutions in Nigeria as at the time. Therefore, he became an apprentice in furniture making and the art of printing from 1896-1899; but he loved printing more than furniture making.

Ọbasá joined the services of Paterson Zochonis (PZ), a British-owned company and manufacturer of health-care products and consumer goods in Lagos as sales manager in 1899. He was later transferred to Ìbàdàn in 1901 to oversee the new branch of the company. Ọbasá managed the company until 1919 when he resigned his appointment to start his own printing press. Thus, Ìláré Press was established in 1919 in Ibadan.



D.A. Obasa (sitting in the middle) and his apprentices at Ilare Press¹

Ọbasá joined a Yorùbá socio-cultural group in Ibadan called “Ègbé-Àgbà-Ò-Tán” because of his love for the Yorùbá language and culture. According to Akinyemi (2017), the group “played a major role in establishing in the collective psyche of the (Yoruba) people a sense of their own importance in the colonial system, (assuming) the role of community leaders or elders who acted as cultural brokers between indigenous socio-political paradigms and the novel creations of the colonial state” (7-8). Ọbasá gained a lot of knowledge from the seminars and meetings organized by the group. He learned

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Akintunde Akinyemi for providing this and other 11 photographs included in this article.

about different aspects of the Yorùbá culture and philosophy during those seminars and meetings.



D.A. Obasa (sitting in the middle) and other culture activists in Ibadan

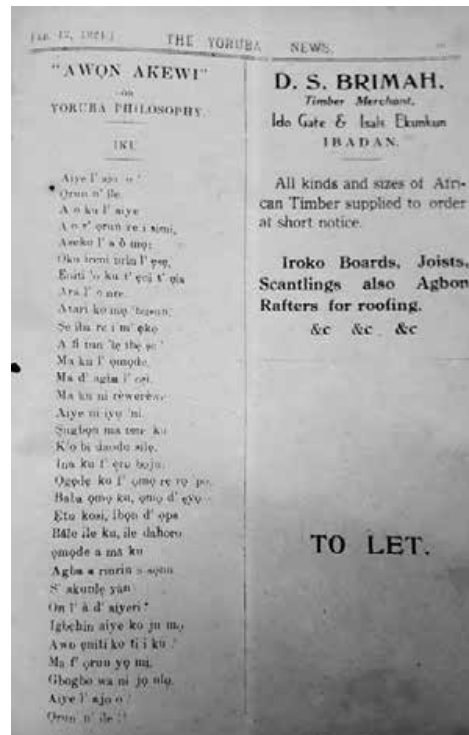
Ọbasá as a Publisher, Editor, and Printer

As stated earlier, Ọbasá established the Ìláré Press in Ibadan in 1919 after his resignation from Paterson Zochonis. There were no other printing facilities in Ibadan until that year. This gave Ọbasá an opportunity to earn more patronage from a larger portion of Yoruba cities in the southwestern part of Nigeria. Ọbasá, in one of the poems in his first book of poetry, alludes to Mr. G.A. Williams, a Sierra Leonean returnee who taught him the art of editing, printing, and publishing in Lagos:

*Ìbà tí mo jú un tògáà mi ni,
 Ọgbé ni G.A. Williams, oní nùure!
 Editor agba ní lẹ̀ Èkó...
 Ọun ló kọ mi ní sẹ́,
 Tí mo fi n'jẹun,
 Ni mo fi joyè Editor,
 Sí lẹ̀ Ìbàdàn mesì ọ̀gò (Obasa 1927: 3).*

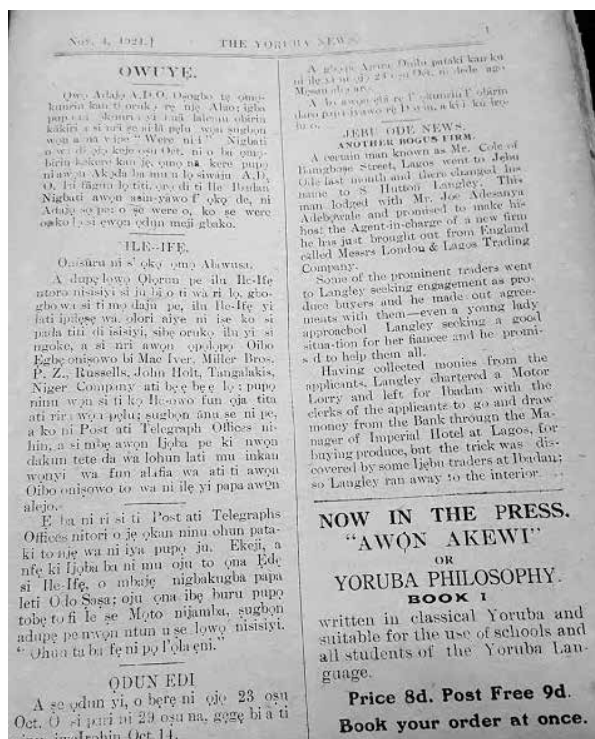
That homage is for my boss,
 Mr. G.A. Williams, a kind-hearted man!
 A renowned editor in Lagos...
 He taught me (the art printing press)
 That I live on today.
 In my present position as the editor
 In the great city of Ibadan

According to Akinyemi (2017), Ìláré Press flourished and became well known in the Yorubaland because of Oḃasá's multidisciplinary qualities as a creative writer, public intellectual, business owner, news editor, advertiser, and above all, his craftsmanship. All these influenced his popularity as a successful publisher and writer of great repute. Apart from publishing his creative works, Oḃasá also published other people's works. At the same time, he ventured into fulltime publishing of a weekly local newspaper, *The Yorùbá News*. Oḃasá published the first issue of *The Yorùbá News* on January 15, 1924. The main focus of the newspaper was to report on local issues and developments in Yorùbáland. His poems started appearing on the pages of the newspaper, regularly, as from February 12, 1924.



D.A. Obasa's first published poem "Ikú" (Death) in The Yoruba news on 12 February 1924

As Akinyemi's (1987) research revealed, Obasa pre-published excerpts of nearly all of the poems in his trilogy in *The Yorùbá News* before the eventual publication of the books in 1927, 1934, and 1945.



The first advert for Book One of D.A. Obasa's trilogy in The Yoruba News of 4 November 1924.

Ọbasá's love for the Yorùbá language and cultural practices prompted him to write in the language instead of English language. He wanted to promote his indigenous language and address his local audience. Nnodim (2006:158) as cited in Akinyemi (2017) observed that Ọbasá perceives his task as that of "writing culture"; that is, writing the oral traditions and language of his people to recover an art and knowledge that he perceived to be endangered. This shows Ọbasá as a man of cultural conviction. He wanted to be identified with the cultural heritage, norms, and values of the Yorùbá. It is a fact that Ọbasá was a lover of his heritage as he named his printing press after his family compound in Ile-Ife, Ọ̀gbún-Ìl̀arẹ̀.

Ọbasá promoted Yorùbá language in the publication of his weekly bi-lingual newspaper, *The Yorùbá News*, which he printed in his Ìl̀arẹ̀ Press. *The Yorùbá News* was in circulation from 1924 until 1940 when Ọbasá became ill and could not continue to oversee its publication. According to Akinyemi (1987), Ọbasá sold the newspaper to a famous Yoruba politician, the Late Chief S. L. Akíntòlá in 1945.

As noted by Akinwumi (2013:3), the “real” literary activities in Yorùbá language began with Adétimí kàn Ọbasá’s *Ìwé Kìíní Tí Àwọn Akéwì* in 1927. Using his status as an editor of a weekly newspaper, Ọbasá was able to win the patronage of Yorùbá audience who were looking for secular texts written in their language. Akinwumi argues that Ọbasá’s trilogy focused on how to uphold moral values among the Yorùbá.

Ọbasá’s Ìlàré Press recorded a huge success not only with the publication of *The Yorùbá News*, but also because of the publication of books such as *Ìwé Kìíní Tí Àwọn Akéwì* (Yorùbá Philosophy), 1927; *Iwé Keji Tí Àwọn Akéwì* (Yorùbá Philosophy) 1934; *Ìwé Kẹta Tí Àwọn Akéwì* (Yorùbá Philosophy) 1945; and *Ìwé Ori kì Tí Àwọn Ori lẹ̀ èdè Yorùbá*, 1945, all written by Ọbasá himself. He also published other books such as *Ìtàn Àti Iṣẹ̀ Wòlìì Joseph Babalọlá* and *Àwọn Ọrọ̀ Ìjìnlẹ̀ ti Wòlìì Joseph Babalọlá – Ará Ìlọfà (Òjìsẹ̀ Ọlórún)* in 1931. Ọbasá also published books for other authors in his Ìlàré Press. These are: *Ìwé Àdùrà Mímọ̀ tàbí Ìsinmi Onígbàgbọ̀* written by J.A. Àlàbí and *Ìwé Àdùrà Gbogbonise (Kọkọrọ̀ Ìwòsàn)* written by J.P.O. Babáfẹmi. Both titles were printed and published at Ìlàré Press. These historical records confirmed that Ọbasá was a man of culture whose quest for the promotion of Yorùbá language in general was endless. He was among the first local intelligentsia of his time.

Ọbasá as a Scribe

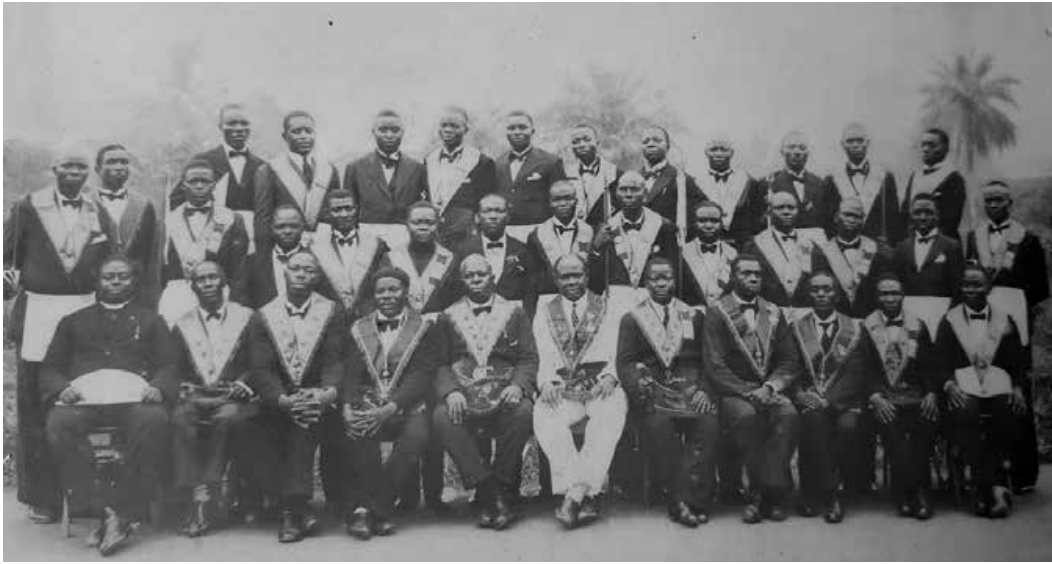
Earlier, we described Ọbasá as editor, publisher, and journalist. Ọbasá can also be called a scribe. A scribe is a person who serves as a professional copyist, especially, one who makes copies of manuscript before the invention of automatic printing. Ọbasá was a man of great wisdom. He collected and collated Yorùbá traditional sayings and made use of them in a creative way while writing his poems. However, Ọlábímtán (1974) averred that Ọbasá’s greatness as a poet did not consist only in his mere assemblage of Yorùbá traditional sayings. Ọbasá himself declared that his role was more than that of a scribe recording traditional sayings. He says in the poem “Ìkíni” that,

*Èmi l’Akọwé Akéwì
Èmi l’Akéwì Akọwé
Bí mo ti n kẹ kíkẹ
Bẹ̀ẹ̀ náà ni mò n kọ kíkọ
Èmi a si má a tẹ̀é lóti tẹ̀* (Obasa 1927: 3)

I am the poet’s scribe
I am the literate poet

As I chant what is to be chanted
I also write what is to be written
And I print what is to be printed

As a lover of his culture, Obasa chose to write all his poems in Yorùbá language at a time when most of his contemporaries were being influenced by English poetic styles (Akinyemi 2017; Olabimtan 1974).

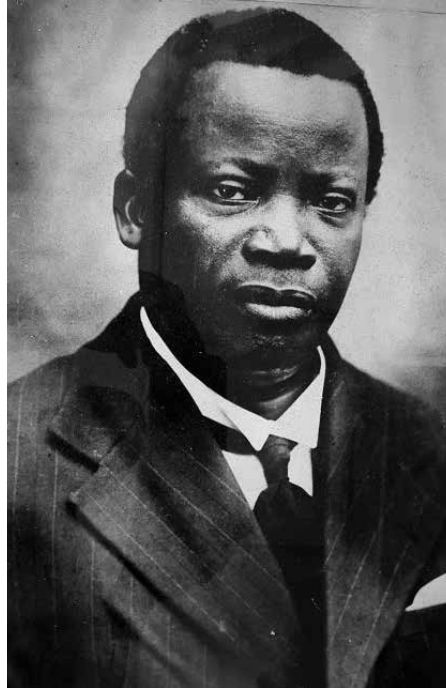


D.A. Obasa (sitting 5th from right) with other members of elitist class in Ibadan

Oḃasá's creative ingenuity in the artistic propagation of Yorùbá culture shows in the composition of his published poems. He was one of the foremost Yorùbá culture activists of his time and he took advantage of the opportunities provided by the socio-cultural group, "Egbe-Àgbà-O-Tán", formed in 1909 to protect the Yoruba language. The socio-cultural group, drew attention of the Yorùbá indigenes to the promotion of their language and culture during the colonial period. Members of the group combined western values and norms with the Yoruba local cultural heritage to develop their society/community.



D.A. Obasa, Akòwé Akéwì (The Poets' Scribe & Culture Activist)



D.A. Obasa, Akéwì Akòwé (The Literate Poet & Philosopher)

Babalola and Gerard (1971) as cited in Akínyemí (2017) pointed out that it was Oḃasá who provided the “link between traditional beliefs and writing in modern vein.” This portrayed him as a local intellectual who identified with his culture. Oḃasá had been a member of the Eḡbẹ̀-Àgbà-Ò-Tán from its inception, and he used to read excerpts of his poems to members of the group. The publication committee of the socio-cultural group later encouraged him to publish the poems. Oḃasá chose first to publish some excerpts of the poem in the weekly newspaper *The Yorùbá News* before publishing them as *Ìwé Kìíní Ti Àwọ̀n Akéwì* (Yorùbá Philosophy) in 1927 *Iwé Kejì Ti Àwọ̀n Akéwì* (Yorùbá Philosophy) in 1934 *Ìwé Kẹta Tí Àwọ̀n Akéwì* (Yorùbá Philosophy) in 1945 and *Ìwé Oríkì Ti Àwọ̀n Orílẹ̀ èdè Yorùbá* also in 1945.



Oḃasa (sitting 3rd from right) with other members of Ibadan Tennis (Elitist) Club

Oḃasá as a Philosophical Poet

Oḃasá was a renowned poet of his time and his greatness as a poet is not restricted to the collection and publication of traditional sayings, which Akínyemí (2017) says embodied the traditional wisdom of the Yorùbá people; though, this would have stood as a singular achievement on its own for Oḃasá. He also specialized in presenting Yorùbá philosophical views in his poems. Some of the Yoruba thoughts and philosophical views in Oḃasá's poems are on Olódumarè (the Supreme Being), Oḃo (The Child), Iku (Death), Àyànmọ̀ (Destiny), Iwà Oḃolúàbí (Good character) and Obìnrin (Women). The

Egbé- Àgbà-Ò-Tán socio-cultural group's agenda was based on Yorùbá concept of good characters, norms, and values of the Yoruba. Obasá made use of these philosophical views in his poems.

Philosophy plays important role in the day-to-day activities of human beings. It monitors and examines everything that has to do with culture, norms, and beliefs. Oládipò (2007) averred that Yorùbá philosophy should be understood to mean not simply a body of ideas, collective and individual in terms of which the world and the twist and turn of human experience are explained, but also a system of values and attitudes which guides lifestyles and conduct. He reiterates that Yorùbá philosophy not only includes the ideas of the Yorùbá on life, it also encapsulates existence, reason, knowledge, and so on, as embodied, and as exhibited in their social practice. We can infer from the above assertion that each individual has his or her own philosophy and that the Yorùbá people in general manifest it in their thoughts, words, and actions. The most important thing to Obasá in his creative writing, especially in his three books of poetry is the title given to the books in English language 'Yorùbá Philosophy'. In his thinking, the collected poems are all about thoughts and beliefs that are gradually going into extinction, which should be protected for the coming generations. He alluded to this fact in the maiden edition of the newspaper, *The Yorùbá News*:

Ìlòsí àti ìhùwàsí ènìà wa tí ó n yí padà ló joojúmọ́ n fẹ́ àbójútó àti tí tọ́ sọ nà rere fún ire ìlú wa. Àwọn ìmọ́ àti ogbọ́n ì jìnlẹ́ ti àwọn baba wa n parun lọ fírífírí, a ní láti sà wọ́n jọ kí a sì tún wọ́n se.

The acts and deeds of human beings that are changing by the day need to be taken care of and protected for the benefits of our land. Our forefathers' traditional wisdom and lore are gradually going into extinction, we need to collate and preserve them.

Excerpts of Obasá's poem based on Yoruba philosophical will be examined in the remaining part of this essay.

Yorùbá thoughts on the importance of Children

The importance of children to the Yorùbá people cannot be overemphasized. The people believe that children cannot be bought with money and anyone who gives birth to children is considered lucky. This excerpt below corroborates that thinking:

Ọmọ, ọmọ ọsì n
 Ọmọ niyùn, ọmọ nide
 Kò sí láte,
 Olówó kò rí i rà
 Ọmọ tá à bá fowó rà
 Ọun ní jẹ́ rú ẹni
 Ẹrú ní runni
 Ọmọ ẹni kì í runni (Ọbasá 1927:34).

Children, Oh precious gift
 Children are precious gold, they are precious brass
 Children cannot be bought in the market
 Wealthy people cannot buy children
 A child bought with money
 Is a slave
 Slave can be destructive
 One's biological children will not destroy one's property

In the above excerpt, a child is likened to *iyùn* (expensive golden bead) and *ide* (brass). These are costly ornaments cherished by the Yorùbá. Ọbasá established the philosophy of the Yorùbá that a precious child cannot be bought with money.



At the Wedding of one of D.A. Ọbasá's Daughters

Another philosophy of the Yorùbá is that one's biological children would take care of whatever is left behind after the demise of the parents. Therefore, it is necessary for parents to train their children:

Ọmọ dùn ní ìkeyì n
Ju ká mẹ́rú ẹ̀lẹ́:
Ìbí tó mọ ní ìjẹ́ ọmọ
Ọmọ kò láyọ̀lẹ́
Èni ọmọ sin
Ùn ló bí mọ, tó bí rere (Ọbasá 1927:34).

Children are pleasure to have in one's old age
 Than slave
 The importance of children is indescribable
 But, it is not enough to have children
 Only those who are fortunate to be buried by their children
 Are considered to have given birth to good children

Yoruba philosophical belief is that children are like cloth with which God covers the nakedness of parents because children cover the nakedness of their parents upon their death.

Yorùbá thoughts on Olódùmarè (Supreme Being), Iku (Death) and Àyànmọ (Destiny)

The Yoruba believe that the Supreme Being (Olódùmarè) has the ability to do the impossible. Nothing is too hard for Him. He knows how to pay back all human beings in their own coins. He can do and undo. This is the thought expressed by Ọbasá in the excerpt below:

Ọlórùn kókó-yi bí rí
Ùn ná ní fojú alásejù
Bomi gbi gbóná
Èni tó bá wù kókó-yi-bí rí
Òun ni fọrẹ alásejù le lọ wọ
A ní kẹ́rú kó na ẹ́rú
Kọmọ kó nọmọ
Kí tálákà kó na tálákà
Kólówó kó nolówó (Ọbasá 1982: 72).

An unsearchable God

Who dipped an extremist's face-
 Into hot water
 Whoever the Unsearchable God likes
 He uses to bless the extremists
 He asks one slave to beat another
 One child to beat another
 One pauper to beat another
 And one wealthy individual to beat yet another

Ọbasá presents *Oló̀dùmarè`* (God / the Supreme Being) as an Unsearchable Being whom no one can question. This is a strong belief of the Yorùbá. No one dare ask the Supreme Being why He chose to do some things. The Yoruba believe that God who created the earth has made humans realize that death is inevitable. Therefore, the Yorùbá would argue that humans are on a journey on this earth, and they will surely go back 'home' one day. They also believe that no one knows where, when, and how he or she will die.

*Aiyé lojà, Ọ̀run nilé,
 Bí a bá kú láyé,
 A ó rọ̀run rée simi
 Àsì kò la á sọ
 Àtàrí kò mobùsùn* (Ọbasá 1934:61).

The world is like a market place, heaven is home
 If one dies in this world
 We would go and rest in heaven
 We talk of seasons
 No one knows where he or she will die

Ọbasá also wrote on the Yorùbá concept of destiny (*àyànmọ̀*). The Yorùbá believe that whatever situation that befalls a man or woman must have been predestined. So, the best approach to life, according to the Yoruba, is to accept such as fate and not to be discouraged. Ọbasá brings this thinking to the fore in the following poetic lines:

*Àkúnlẹ̀yàn
 Ùn la dàí yé rí
 À kúnlẹ̀, a yàn ẹ̀ dá
 A dáyé tán, ojú n' yán ni
 Iṣẹ̀bọ̀ sọ̀ògùn
 Bá ti wáyé wá rí,*

Ùn là á rí
Ibi tórí dá ni sí
Ùn là á gbé (Ọbasá, 1982:58).

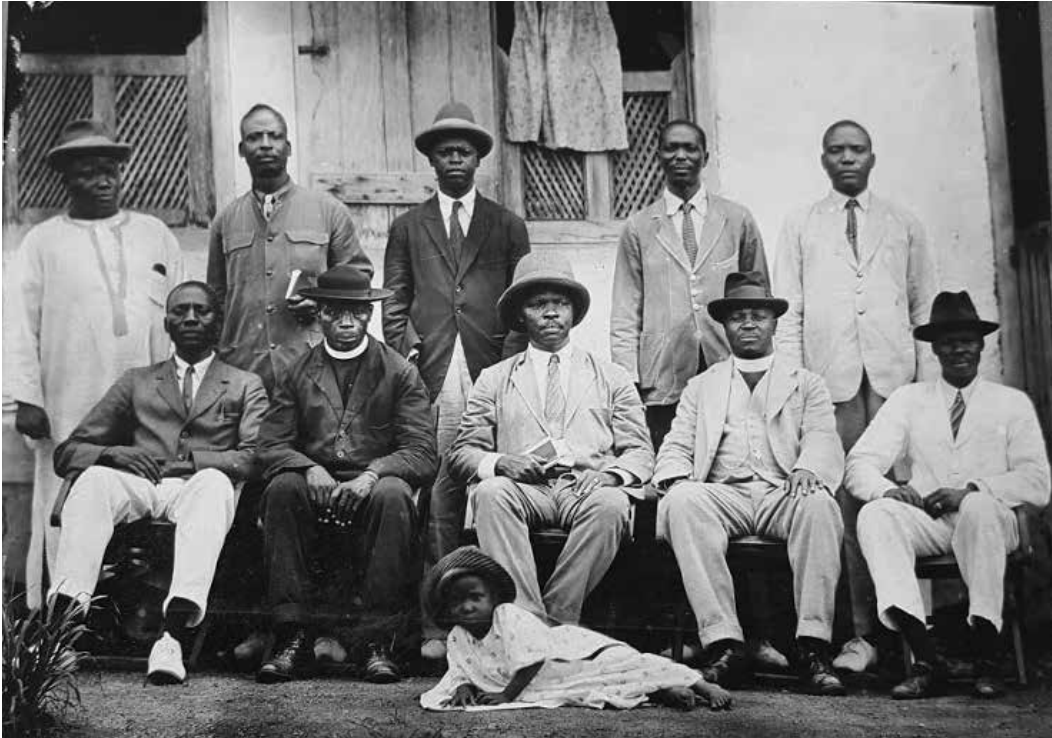
What we ask while kneeling in heaven
 Is what we achieve on earth
 We knelt down to ask for our lots
 We came into the world and became impatient
 No sacrifice
 Will change what we are destined to be
 Destiny will surely come to pass
 Whatever our fate may be
 We should accept it.

Other philosophical poems of Ọbasá focused on women and good character, as advanced by the Yorùbá in their thinking. It is our opinion that the presentation of the above philosophical views is enough to present Ọbasá as a philosopher.

Ọbasá's Love for Politics and Christianity

Ọbasá was a lover of politics of his time. He was always chosen as a representative of his people. As a matter of fact, the colonial masters provided opportunities for him to participate in politics. Akinyemi (1987:47) records that one of Ọbasá's apprentices, elder E.O. Amusan confirmed that, *Bi ó (Ọbasá) se jé ẹni tí wọn kà sí ọlogbón àti onímò ẹ́dà tó, bí wọn bá yan 'councilor' ní Ìbàdàn láti jí ròrò nípa ìlú, ó (Ọbasá) maa n wà ní bẹ ní gbogbo ìgbà. Bí wọn jé méré pére Ọbasá yóò wà ní nù wọn* (Ọbasá was regarded as an intelligent man. Therefore, if councilor were to be chosen to represent Ibadan in political discussion, Ọbasá will always be there. Even if they are just four in number, he would be one of them).

Ọbasá was also well known in the religious sphere. He was a member of the Baptist Mission in Nigeria.

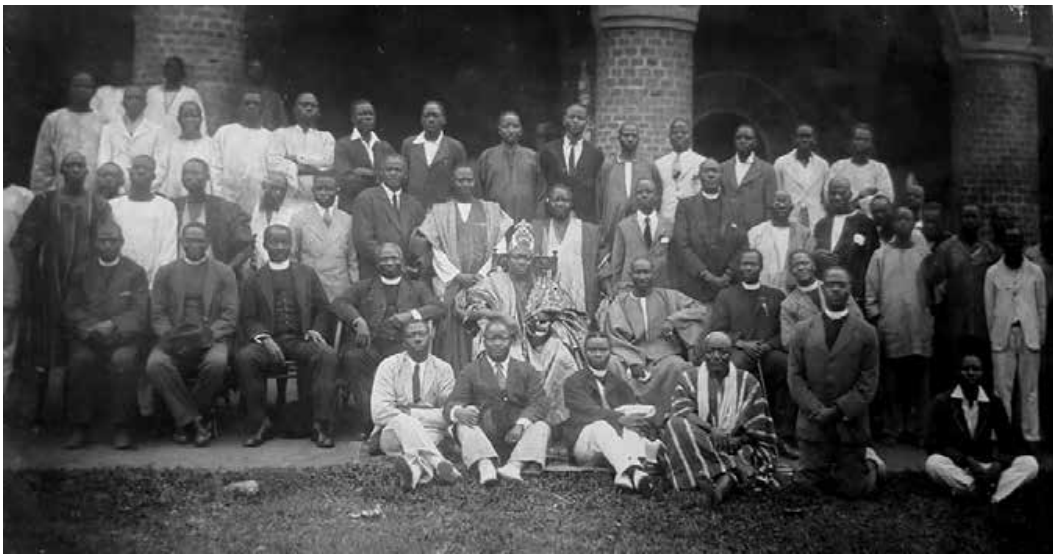


D.A. Oḃasa (sitting 2nd from right) with other leaders of the Baptist Church Mission in Ibadan

He had been a member of Baptist church since he was in Lagos. He brought the Baptist Church Mission to Ibadan. The church mission was established at Ìdí-Ikan, on the same street where Oḃasa had his house and printing press. He also established the First Baptist church in Ilé-Ifè, his home town at his family compound in Ìlàré. In addition, he published the Nigerian Baptist monthly bulletin in his Ìlàré Press. In recognition of Oḃasá's commitment to the service of God, the First Baptist Church, Ìdí-Ìkán, Ibadan, convinced his family to inter his remains in the church premises upon his death in 1945. This is in recognition of his pioneering role in the church's establishment.



D.A. Obasa (1st from right second row) and other Christian leaders in Ibadan



D.A. Obasa (sitting 2nd from left front row) and other Christian leaders in Ile-Ife during a visit to the then Ooni of Ife, Oba Adesoji Aderemi

Conclusion

This essay has revealed that D.A. Obasa was a man whose love for his indigenous language and culture made him to exalt the virtues, values, and norms of the Yoruba. The underlying factor for his excellence as a local intelligentsia was the promotion of the Yoruba language and its culture. Ultimately, the

study of Ọbasá under the cultural identity theory has offered us a rich understanding of his persona. He was able to identify himself with the Yorùbá socio-cultural group “Ègbé-Àgbà-O-Tán” whose major aim was to promote Yorùbá indigenous language and culture. This assisted Ọbasá to succeed as a journalist, publisher, printer, scribe, poet, philosopher, politician, and a religious man.

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