

**What is Yorùbá Metaphysics? Or,  
How Not to Write about Yorùbá  
Culture. A Review Essay on Toyin  
Falola's *Yorùbá Metaphysics:  
Spirituality and Supernaturality*.  
Athens: Ohio University  
Press, 2025. 472 pages, ISBN  
97808221426302 (paperback)  
\$39.95 and ISBN 9780821426296  
(hardcover) \$120.**

Adeshina Afolayan  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Ibadan, Nigeria  
Research Fellow  
The Free State Center for Human Rights  
University of the Free State, South Africa  
[adeshinaafolayan@gmail.com](mailto:adeshinaafolayan@gmail.com)

### **Introduction**

The Yoruba constitutes one of the most studied ethno-national groups in the world today. And this, no doubt, is due to the most astonishing level of civilizational development of a culture that invented the Ifá literary, divinatory and epistemological corpus; a complex system of urbanism; a numeracy that rivals any in the world; a spirituality that is famed for its cosmological and humanistic components; and even metallurgy. The Yorùbá philosophical framework is grounded on a deep sense of ontological and cultural beingness, or *ìwà*. This cultural understanding of be-ing and belonging radiates the

connection between the cosmos, the individual, and the community. This intriguing connection has been the source of diverse studies that orient African (cultural) studies and especially the need to understand Africa's postcolonial predicaments.

In this essay, I will be interrogating yet another contribution to the unraveling of Yorùbá cultural and philosophical underpinning. Toyin Falola's *Yorùbá Metaphysics* promised to add another deep layer of sociocultural and philosophical understanding of how the Yoruba perceive their reality. This is a fundamental endeavor, and one that could only be undertaken by a scholar that is well-grounded in such a cultural understanding. Toyin Falola is eminently qualified not just as an African historian but a humanities scholar whose Africanist credentials are not in doubt. Beyond his African historical scholarship, Falola's commitment to the humanities, and especially Africa's cultural studies, speaks to an Africanist ideological sensibility that is both recuperative and reconstructive.<sup>1</sup> *Yorùbá Metaphysics*, out of a range of many other intellectual offerings, is best reckoned with as another component of an enduring cultural project that is meant to make Yorùbá cultural achievements—from politics to philosophy—even more visible and grounded within the global academic consciousness. And this is all the more so given the rampaging extent of the coloniality of knowledge.

The objective underlying the book derives from the necessity, given centuries of imperialist and colonial violence and oppression, to excavate and understand “how the Yorùbá people perceive the world.... The goal of this work is to help [readers] understand and appreciate a worldview that may be foreign to them but is widely accepted by others.” (xi). And the significance of that worldview is that it is grounded on a metaphysical foundation that provides the underlying framework for understanding the key philosophical terms and concepts by which the Yorùbá take stock of their space and place in the universe. And to clarify this “big picture,” Falola provides a three-level summary:

1. We exist in a universe that is not fully comprehensible to us. Some forces and beings possess significant spiritual power over humans.
2. Humans can engage with these spiritual forces and exert some influence over them. However, we are ultimately responsible for shaping the course of our own lives.

---

1 In “The ‘Africanization’ of an African Diaspora Household: Toyin Falola and the Idea of Diasporic Home-Making,” *Yoruba Studies Review*, 4(1), 2019, Babatunde Jaiyeoba and Adeshina Afolayan articulate an architectural-philosophical analysis that delineates the unique Africanist sensibility in the intentional configuration of the aesthetic interior of Falola's household in Austin, Texas.

3. These forces exist in an unseen or invisible realm, known as Òrun, distinct from our physical world. This unseen realm is often described as fantastical, magical, and challenging to grasp. Yet it is closely intertwined with the physical world, with its inhabitants, including the Supreme Being, playing a vital role in it. Conversely, while primarily residing in the physical world, humans possess certain unique qualities that make them semispiritual and capable of interacting with the invisible realm under specific circumstances. Òrun is also the dwelling place of deceased ancestors and the origin of human existence before birth (xii).

This summary of the big metaphysical picture already signals the direction Falola intends to take his understanding of “metaphysics” (as we will see shortly). And that direction is signaled by the subtitle of the book: *Spirituality and Supernaturality*. Indeed, the cover art of *Yorùbá Metaphysics* is not just an artistic attempt at rendering the deeper details of what reality consists of for the Yorùbá; it is a pictorial mean of giving voice to Yorùbá and Africans who have encountered what Falola considers “metaphysical”: mysterious occurrences that are beyond rational and scientific explanations. This is the context that also gives *Yorùbá Metaphysics* a personal dimension. In Falola’s words:

Moreover, my sobriquets are connected to the supernatural world—Iwin, Yemoja and Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀. These are not formal names given at birth but were assigned to me later in life based on my actions and activities. Each of these three deities holds a metaphysical significance: Iwin inhabits the world of both the living and the dead and is a spirit of power; Yemoja embodies the unconquerable force of the ocean; and Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ is the mysterious all-knowing one. Many have told me that without those esoteric associations a book like this would not have been possible. It was initially difficult for me not to feel angry about the statement, as it diminished my achievements as a workaholic and it explained me in supernatural terms.... My revision of this manuscript coincided with a stroke and a pulmonary embolism that affected my kidneys, lungs, heart, and brain. Although this was a serious incident, I was told the Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ cannot be killed by a stroke. *By regaining strength, I confirmed that the sobriquets Iwin, Yemoja and Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ actually have meaning! In my writing, I have become a part of the subject matter* (xx, xxii. Emphasis added).

In this review essay, I will outline in three sections, how *Yorùbá Metaphysics* fails to live up to its expectation of a thrilling new contribution to our understanding of a Yorùbá metaphysical architecture. My critical intervention

will essentially be methodological. In other words, I will be grounding Falola's contribution within its possible contribution to African studies or African philosophical trajectories, the understanding of (African or Yorùbá) metaphysics, and lastly the essentials of the cultural beingness of the Yorùbá (not fully developed for space, and because of my willing deference to those who are more knowledgeable about it). I must warn ahead that this review is not celebratory or hagiographic. It takes *Yorùbá Metaphysics* seriously as a proposed attempt to contribute to our understanding of one of the most studied cultures in the world.

My conclusion is very stern: *Yorùbá Metaphysics* is a deeply flawed project, one that raises more queries than it ever hopes to answer about how the Yorùbá articulate reality. Falola intends to ground how the Yorùbá developed a social, political and administrative system, and philosophy that are founded on their metaphysical understanding of reality (16). This in itself is unenlightening as the subject matter of a book. This is because there are already so many good accounts of the Yoruba philosophical architecture of reality.<sup>2</sup> In this current effort at stipulating the metaphysical framework for understanding reality, Falola goes to great—and quite unnecessary length—to prove that for the Yorùbá as against the West (that terrible boogeyman of the Afrocentrists), reality is supernatural and spiritual. This effort therefore encourages many arguments—all through the entire over three hundred pages of the book—that have the unsavory feel of an exhibitionist endeavor very much in the same level as Senghor's binary opposition between European reason and African emotion. *Yorùbá Metaphysics* evokes for me a confusing cornucopia of conceptual over-projections that I think do more damage to our understanding of how the Yorùbá perceive reality. What is clear is that the book is not written by a philosopher with a critical eye for conceptual nuances, especially the types that attend the kind of recuperative and reconstructive weight the book is meant to carry.

### **Africanity as an Alternative Space**

*Yorùbá Metaphysics* is situated, expectedly, within an Afrocentric framework that, again expectedly, contrasts the cultural project of enunciating how the Yorùbá perceive reality against how the West perceive the Yorùbá perceiving reality. And Falola is relentless in insisting that the Yorùbá worldview is *unlike* the Western worldview. From the very beginning of the book, Falola inserts the Yorùbá into a binary opposition against the West. Africanity is

---

2 A few of these bears noting: Abiodun (1989, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 2002, 2014); Abimbola (2006); Lawal (1996, 2001, 2009), Akiwowo (1986), Olupona and Abiodun (2016), Gbadegesin (1991), Drewal, Pemberton and Abiodun (1989), etc.

constructed as an “alternative” that one needs to be careful in relating with. In fact, we have to set aside logic and rationality because “Applying scientific rationality to alternative metaphysics is challenging.... [The challenge requires grasping] *a worldview that does not incorporate these elements*” (xi. Emphasis added). The two worldviews—one scientific and rational and the other supernatural and spiritual—are then contrasted all through the book. If you are, at this juncture, reminded about Robin Horton’s notorious essay, “African Traditional Thought and Western Science”, you are right on point! But I suspect we are thinking of that essay from different methodological perspectives. In the 1967 essay, Horton alleged that Western social anthropologists who are dismayed by African traditional religious thought “have been unfamiliar with the theoretical thinking of their own culture” (1967: 50). Kwasi Wiredu insisted that these social anthropologists “have also apparently been unfamiliar with the folk thought of their own culture” (1980: 38).

I am wont to turn these two correlated criticisms of western social anthropologists around and insist, too, that in *Yorùbá Metaphysics*, Falola seems to deliberately set aside the theoretical and folk thought of Western societies in his consistent rendering of the tenor of these societies as “scientific” and “rational”. He seems to have elided the facts not only that “Western societies too have passed through a stage where explanation of phenomena likewise relied on the agency of spirits” (Wiredu, 1980: 38), but also that the traditional Yorùbá society was not entirely supernaturalistic. Or more fundamentally that the understanding of Yorùbá metaphysics cannot be rendered in entirely supernaturalistic terms as if it excludes rational and scientific understanding of reality. It is in this sense that an Afrocentric understanding of the world—or Falola’s version of it—often misses the point of pluriversality. This is all the more surprising in the case of Toyin Falola because he insists on the methodological point that the essence of a pluriversal epistemology and methodology is to

create an “African universalism” in the context of “multiple universalism”.... In its distinctive character, pluriversalism must enjoy an academic autonomy that rejects imposed concepts of universalism. In promoting the idea of multiple ontologies, it will not see itself as the “Other,” as in the Otherness created by so-called universalism. An African epistemology must be clearly distinctive, creating its own protocols, methodologies, and provenance. It will not regard itself as a “perspective”.... Why not a “perspective”? A “perspective,” on its own, does not stand on just its own two legs; instead, one of its key legs is an extension of European methodology and definitions, while the other leg can merely be a counter-discourse balanced by the first. *Therefore a perspective may fall into the trap of holding a dialogue with outsiders, but with insiders in mind, tailored to voices that require clarification.* In targeting outsiders, a perspective may be using the

very methodology and epistemology it should be running away from. It may, for example, be retooling western epistemology instead of pluralizing alternatives, while still arguing for other forms (Falola, 2018: 889-890. Emphasis added).

The discerning reader who has also waded through *Yorùbá Metaphysics* would immediately see how Falola succeeds in trapping himself into just that perspectival methodology of “*holding a dialogue with outsiders, but with insiders in mind, tailored to voices that require clarification.*”

The underlying tragedy of *Yorùbá Metaphysics* is that it takes what is a defining characteristic of traditional African thought—a characteristic that defines all traditional thought—and makes it the sole defining characteristic of African, and Yorùbá, metaphysics. The first chapter of *Yorùbá Metaphysics* has an epigraph from Sir Edward B. Tylor, the notorious English anthropologist, and his definition of culture which Falola quotes with glee and keeps referring to throughout the chapter.<sup>3</sup> Falola argues: “Suppose we concede Tylor’s conclusion that culture is a ‘complex whole,’ which describes a people’s knowledge as an element of routine activities; we cannot rely on knowledge sourced from mental capabilities of humans, which involve their thought and thought systems. This gives us the foundation for our argument that African metaphysics rests on the belief that there are spiritual dimensions to happenings within the physical world. ... Many Africans consider the universe overtly mystical. Where others see scientific gaps to be filled, they see evidence of a mystery that cannot be logically explained” (6-7).

Wiredu would caution that there is only a tenuous line between supernaturalism and superstition. Indeed, for him, the latter might even be the basis for the former. Supernaturalism is essentially ethical for Wiredu. It is an outlook, fundamentally opposed to humanism, that promotes the “tendency to seek the basis of morality in some supernatural source” (Wiredu, 1980: 5). And Falola draws such an ethical connection between the existence of some supernatural forces, and the human sense of good and bad: “Although the forces governing the universe remain elusive to humans, there is still a sense of right and wrong, and one’s ‘goodness’ is believed by the Yorùbá to be divinely ordained” (xii). Falola seems not to be bothered by the possible policy implications of such a supernaturalistic ethics—that actions and policies detrimental to human interests can be pursued with quiet determination as long as they are in accord with

---

3 The paradox of deploying Tylor’s understanding of culture is lost on Falola! Tylor’s understanding of cultural evolutionism was suitable for the colonial import of his anthropology. That evolutionary framework led to his understanding of supernaturalism, which Falola conceives as the fundament of African metaphysics, as the sign of a savage mentality and a primitive culture.

a divine will.<sup>4</sup> By *superstition* is meant “rationally unsupported belief in entities of any sort. The attribute of being superstitious attaches not to the content of a belief but to its relation to other beliefs. Purely in respect of content the belief, for example, in abstract entities common among many philosophers in the West is no better than the traditional African belief in ancestor spirits. But these philosophers are given to arguing for their beliefs, and while I happen to think their arguments for abstract entities wrong-headed, it is not open to me to accuse them of superstition” (Wiredu, 1980: 41).

In a very sharp contrast to Falola’s uncritical denomination of Yorùbá understanding of reality as supernatural, Wiredu offers a more philosophically nuanced understanding of the Akan’s mediation of the nature-supernature continuum. The long quote makes a crucial point:

Neither the notion of the supernatural nor that of the spiritual can convey any coherent meaning to an Akan understanding in its tradition condition. No line is drawn in the Akan world view demarcating one area of being corresponding to nature from another corresponding to supernature. Whatever is real belong to one or another of the echelons of beings postulated in that world view.... An important axiom of Akan thought is that everything has its explanation, *biribiara wo nenkyerease*—a kind of principle of sufficient reason; and a clear presupposition of Akan explanation of phenomena is that there are interactions among all the orders of existents in the world. Accordingly, if an event in human affairs, for instance, does not appear explicable in human terms, there is no hesitation in invoking extrahuman causality emanating from the higher or even the lower rungs of the hierarchy of beings. In doing this there is no sense of crossing an ontological chasm, for the idea is that there is only one universe of any strata wherein

---

4 Indeed, he argues: “Many people will find it difficult to function in the African intellectual system because they have committed themselves to relying on technological knowledge derived from human-centered research. That reliance has made them skeptical about the existence of any other sort of life in the metaphysical world. Ironically, placing humans at the center of the universe, a characteristic of western epistemology, has led to projects, programs, and issues with dire consequences for humanity.... The belief that the world exists for humans to explore has led to the wanton extraction of fossil fuels and a rise in carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, contributing to rapid climate change. This behavior does not concern scientific fundamentalists, as they do not comprehend the necessity of maintaining tranquility in the universe for the well-being of beings in both the tangible and the intangible realms” (6). This is not just a sample of Falola’s adherence to a supernatural ethics, but also a wanton generalization that sees, for instance, “western epistemology” as a monolithic concept. Or fails to see why the same western epistemology has birthed deep ecological challenges that has forced the hand of scientism and traditional human ethics into considering the fate of the environment, without falling into a supernatural mode of perceiving the universe.

God, the ancestors, humans, animals, plants, and all the rest of the furniture of the world have their being.... Suppose we use the term “the world” to designate the totality of ordered existents fashioned out by God in the process of “creation.” Then, of course, God, being the author of the world, is not a part of it, in the Akan scheme of things. But we might, then, reserve the term “universe” for the totality of absolutely all existents. In this sense God would be part of the universe. Apart from regimenting our terminology, this gives us the opportunity to reinforce the point regarding the Akan sense of the inherent law-likeness of reality. And the crucial consideration is that God’s relationship with the rest of the universe, that is, the world, is also conceived to be lawlike. This is the implication of the Akan saying that “The Creator created Death and Death killed the Creator” (*Odomankoma boo Owuo na Owuo kum Odomankoma*).... But though God’s relation with the world is conceived to be lawlike, He is not made the basis of the explanation of any specific phenomenon, for since everything is ultimately traceable to Him, *Biribiara ne Nyame*, references to Him are incapable of helping to explain why any particular thing is what it is and not another thing. Divine law-likeness only ensures that there will be no arbitrary interferences in the course of the world-process. Thus the reason why Akan explanations of specific things do not invoke God is not because He is thought to be transcendent or supernatural or anything like that but, rather, because He is too immanently implicated in the nature and happening of things to have any explanatory value. Still, in facing the cognitive problems of this world all the mundane theaters of being, human and extrahuman, are regarded as *equally* legitimate sources of explanation. Thus, if an Akan explains a mysterious malady in terms of, say the wrath of the ancestors, it makes little sense to ascribe to him or her a belief in the supernatural. That characterization is intelligible only in a conceptual framework in which the natural/supernatural dichotomy has a place (Wiredu, 1996: 50-51).

One will search in vain for a deeply and philosophically nuanced analysis such as this—that explicate the Akan metaphysical framework without the drawback of generalization and simplification that Falola favors—in *Yorùbá Metaphysics*.

I speculate, therefore, that *Yorùbá Metaphysics* fails critically to build on the existing methodological and substantive foundations in African studies in terms of how African cultural studies ought to be carried out within an ideological framework that ensures that cultural phenomena are not subjected to foreign categories that nullify their conceptual contents. Thus, throughout the book, we encounter concepts like “deities,” “spirits,” “gods,” etc. whose understanding are already complex, and requires critical nuances and

phenomenological exploration in ways that enable the understanding of what we need them to refer to. Falola, for instance, consistently construe Olódùmarè as the “Supreme God” of the Yorùbá, and asserts that the Yorùbá have a *creation* story, possibly similar to the Judeo-Christian’s, in which Olódùmarè created the universe and the other Òrìṣà. This is followed by gross generalization and oversimplification of the African and Yorùbá realities. All through the book, we are confronted with bogus claims that speaks to the unity of Africa’s metaphysical knowledge and reality. Barry Hallen argues, in an essay appropriately titled “African Meanings, Western Words,” that in the attempt by African philosophy to articulate a distinct self-identity, one tactic that has been deployed is

a progressive *disconnection* from much of anthropology’s theoretical superstructure. Philosophers had to embrace a *methodological* skepticism that distanced itself from interpretations of African cognition that regard traditions as substitutes for reasons; that take cross-cultural symbolization patterns as semantically fundamental; that type modes-of-thought according to articulated expressions for thinking about thinking. One consequence of disconnecting from this theoretical superstructure was the suspension of specific presumptions about the African intellect as a qualitative “other” (1997: 3).

*Yoruba Metaphysics* does not display this progressive disconnection that fails to keep speaking back to the monolithic West, and in the process juxtaposes tradition or supernaturalism to reason.

Lastly, Falola also unfortunately muddles a long trajectory of African philosophical thought which he not only refuses to explore and exploit but, when he does, also consistently misapplies all through the book.<sup>5</sup> Rather than crit-

---

5 There are many cases of attributing specific thoughts to the editor of edited volumes, rather than to the editor’s or contributor’s chapters in the said volume. On page 5 of *Yorùbá Metaphysics*, Falola notes that “Many philosophers and epistemologists have discounted the possibility of a parallel existence because this claim has a weak empirical basis.” And he referenced Kwasi Wiredu’s 2004 edited volume, *A Companion to African Philosophy*, a 47-chapter book on a range of philosophical issues. There are many such mis-ascriptions. And when I was quoted, in my introduction to the special edition of the *Yoruba Studies Review* on “Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary Nigerian Realities” (Vol. 3, 1: 2018), it was grossly out of context! I defined Yorùbá philosophy as the “philosophical discourse—traditional and contemporary—regarding assumptions, principles, worldviews, and attitudes that have been deployed, interrogated, and refined over millennia” (2018: 6). In *Yorùbá Metaphysics*, Falola deployed that definition as my understanding of Àṣà or culture! That is not all. My “deployed, interrogated, and refined over millennia” became in his quotation: “established, questioned and perfected over millennia”! Endnotes 43, 44 and 46 that discussed justice, family cohesion and unrest in precolonial Yorubaland were ascribed to me in that same introduction. I never discussed justice, family cohesion or unrest in pre-colonial Yorubaland!

ically engaging with African scholars and philosophers, Falola summarizes them into conceptual and theoretical caricatures! Take his attempt, for instance, to fit Paulin Hountondji into his discussion of African metaphysical knowledge. He notes:

Contributing to the debate about the validation of African metaphysical knowledge is Paulin Hountondji, who provides a convincing explanation of African philosophy through the artful connection between philosophy and myths, aiming to demonstrate that a people's collective ideology reflects their comprehension of the society in which they reside. Their ideas are not formulated in a vacuum but stem from the community's collective thoughts and imagination regarding the unseen world and their assessment of their environment. Hountondji creates another viewpoint from which the African epistemological terrain can be considered (31).

Unfortunately for Falola, in *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Hountondji deploys his entire critical arsenal against all and any notion of collective or communal ideology, especially those masquerading as ethnophilosophy. In his objection to Kwame Nkrumah, a criticism that rings loudly against Falola's own methodology in *Yorùbá Metaphysics*, Hountondji argues:

Once he has defined the relation between philosophy and ideology, Nkrumah proceeds to show that traditional African societies were not without ideology; and, forestalling the objection that could easily (but incorrectly) be raised—namely, that African societies lacked writing — he proclaims: ‘What is crucial is not the paper, but the thought.’ On closer scrutiny, it becomes obvious that Nkrumah is here banging at an open door. For anyone who has heard of Marx — I shall not say *read* — and is minimally informed about the fundamental theses of historical materialism, it goes without saying not only that precolonial Africa had its ideology but also, and more accurately, that it had a plurality of competing ideologies, like any other society in the world. In his obdurate attempts to demonstrate that African society had a single ideology, however, Nkrumah in fact links up with the vast majority of Africanist anthropologists and accepts the classic ethnological ideology. In this way he neglects the pluralism of precolonial African culture, forcing an artificial unity upon what is really irreducibly diverse, and hence impoverished — the classic African tradition (1996: 148).

Indeed, in Hountondji's deep critique of Placide Tempels and his *Bantu Philosophy*, we again see a similar critique of Falola, his *Yorùbá Metaphysics*, and a horde of African metaphysicians who are fundamentally intent on locating, beneath the various manifestations of African civilization, beneath the flood of history which has swept this civilization along willy nilly, a solid bedrock which might provide a foundation of certitudes: in other words, a system of beliefs. In this quest, we find the same preoccupation as in the negritude movement — a passionate search for the identity that was denied by the colonizer — but now there is the underlying idea that one of the elements of the cultural identity is precisely “philosophy”, the idea that every culture rests on a specific, permanent, metaphysical substratum (Hountondji, 1996: 59-60).

In his reference to Hountondji's “artful connection between philosophy and myths,” therefore, Falola must have been confused by the title of Hountondji's book!

### **What is (African) Metaphysics?**

Toyin Falola has a very curious and bewildering understanding of what metaphysics is. He begins by asserting that

Metaphysics is a concept that is ethereal, spiritual and difficult to grasp. It serves as a framework for viewing the world, acknowledging the existence of energies, forces, beings, and other phenomena beyond human comprehension. It evokes a sense of helplessness in the face of the powerful and unknown yet brings comfort in the understanding that there are methods and mindsets to comprehend and engage with these aspects.... Metaphysics assumes that there is a parallel world to the one known to science. Metaphysics falls within the domain of thoughts that are beyond sensory access (xii, 4, 5).

African, and Yorùbá, metaphysical configurations derive from this operationalized understanding. According to him, “Although there are methodological and ideological differences in the African approach to metaphysical interpretation, one common element permeates African metaphysical understanding: practitioners are unanimous in their belief that the metaphysical universe substantially influences and shapes their thinking about the world and the reality of the people. This suggests that in African metaphysics, visibility and physicality are not features of the parallel universe” (5).

Since, for Falola, “African metaphysics is the core of African philosophy and epistemology, as it focuses on understanding human existence and reality from both physical and metaphysical perspectives” (8), then it has deep implication for human personality, social relations, administrative functionality and political/policy orientation. Take disability or congenital health challenges and impairment, for example. Falola insists all through the book that “Western scientists will never understand that these disabilities also have mystic [sic] and supernatural dimensions. We cannot dismiss the working of the metaphysical domain with the statistics of progress that Western science has made, for the inability of people to function maximally in some areas is not because of their physical attributes but because of their emotional nature, and science cannot always configure human emotions” (8). Indeed, he argues, “African metaphysical knowledge is substantially valid” (9).<sup>6</sup>

Let us begin to unpack Falola’s understanding of metaphysics. And as soon as we engage with it, several problems emerge. Metaphysics, for Falola, is synonymous with the preternatural, the supernatural or the mysterious rather than an encompassing philosophical framework for *attempting* an understanding of the totality of what constitutes reality or what is real. And in his understanding of this idea of metaphysics, it is not only concerned with a mysterious *parallel universe*, it also has practitioners! All through *Yorùbá Metaphysics*, Falola never attempts to critically engage in any philosophical and rational effort to explore what it means for the Yorùbá to believe in a parallel universe, or what that concept of “parallel universe” implies from a critical perspective. *Yorùbá Metaphysics* is riddled with many examples of the “metaphysical,” like the example he got from someone’s inaugural lecture which instigated the reflection that led to the writing of the book. Falola quotes the incidence: “As an adolescent, I witnessed two elderly men fighting; one used a whip, the other used the potency of ‘the spoken word’. The former *died* under the spell of the latter’s spoken word” (xxi). The emphasis on “died” in the quote is Falola’s. This example is a species of the Yorùbá saying: *Àje ké lánàà, ọmo kú lónií; ta ni ò mò pé àjé ànà ló ọmọ jẹ?* (A witch cried malevolently yesterday, and a child died today; who does not know that it is the malevolent action of the witch that killed the child?) But Falola takes it as gospel! And *Yorùbá Metaphysics* is a drawn-out attempt to ground the validity of that belief in the supernatural.

---

6 This is a very baffling statement. It is as if Falola has some deep insights into the spiritual world, and *Yoruba Metaphysics* is his own way of furnishing us with that knowledge. Every need for epistemic cautiousness is thrown away. The book is not written from the perspective of an investigator who is intent on a rational investigation of the Yorùbá understanding of reality; rather, it is a verbose articulation of epistemic certitudes about issues of which certitudes cannot be achieved.

In this case, as in many others in the book, there is no attempt at any rational interrogation of the belief. Of course, as Falola insists, the metaphysical universe is not amenable to rational inquiry. And yet *Yorùbá Metaphysics* was written as an attempt to rationally persuade us to accept what has not been made rationally probable. If a critical reader is presented with *Yorùbá Metaphysics* and Wiredu's account of Akan metaphysics excerpted above, the latter is more probable than a dogmatic parroting of the Yorùbá metaphysical knowledge without a deep philosophical reflexivity about its plausibility or why an otherwise pragmatic and empirically-rooted people would resort to supernatural explanation. Falola simply takes it for granted that the Yorùbá believe in a mysterious world that has the potency of affecting the physical world. Is a mysterious world synonymous with a parallel universe? What is the conceptual relationship between the immaterial, the invisible, the divine, and the quasi-material in metaphysical understanding? Is the supernatural synonymous with the non-natural?

Chapter fourteen of *Yorùbá Metaphysics* is dedicated to what Falola calls "discursive metaphysics". What "discursive metaphysics" means is not made clear in the chapter, but it certainly throws up more conceptual confusions. So strangely, Falola seems to rediscover the conceptual understanding of what metaphysics means, and insists that "To comprehend the rational foundation of Yorùbá spiritualism, it is necessary to distinguish between spiritualism and metaphysics"! (300). According to him, therefore,

Metaphysics is a philosophical approach that aims to understand reality. It employs rational thinking and abstraction to construct a view of the cosmos and reconstructs one's world perception. On the other hand, spirituality is one of the several explanations employed to make sense of reality and construct an understanding of the cosmos. Spiritualism, therefore, emphasizes the place of immateriality as the building block of the universe. Religious experiences such as out-of-body encounters, mediums, dreams, and clairvoyance are expressed within the confines of spiritualism because of the overarching notion that spiritual phenomena are accepted with little room for debate, validation, or rational argumentation. While metaphysics acknowledges the potential existence of immaterial and non-sensory experiences, it does so within philosophy's rigorous examination and analytical domains, in which assumptions must be thoroughly demonstrated or justified before they are accepted beyond a reasonable doubt. Yorùbá spiritualism employs the best of the metaphysical and spiritualistic tenets to provide a robust and consistent worldview that respects the authority and place of the spiritual while also leaving room for human effort to mediate,

investigate, and understand the spiritual nature of things through Ifá divination (300).

And so, metaphysics is no longer “a concept that is ethereal, spiritual and difficult to grasp.” It no longer should be considered a framework that acknowledges “the existence of energies, forces, beings, and other phenomena beyond human comprehension.” Or one that “evokes a sense of helplessness in the face of the powerful ad unknown yet brings comfort in the understanding that there are methods and mindsets to comprehend and engage with these aspects.”

It is difficult to explain this conceptual flipflopping? Why make metaphysics a mysterious and preternatural concept initially, and then suddenly realize it is a theory of reality that theoretically subsumes supernaturalism? We can also even ask, most fundamentally, if spirituality and spiritualism are philosophical synonyms? If spiritualism is a sub-dimension of metaphysics, why not title the book, *Yorùbá Spiritualism and Supernaturalism*? Why *Yorùbá Metaphysics*? There is more conceptual confusion. Falola asserts that “As a metaphysical doctrine, spiritualism proposes that reality is composed of two primordial substances, matter and spirit, from which every other thing is derived” (299).<sup>7</sup> This is one unpardonable conceptual and philosophical error. It makes succinctly my methodological interrogation of the book. And there are many more, too numerous to enumerate. And I suspect deeply that they are all a species of an unreflexive methodology that fails to conceptualize the book properly.

### **Yoruba Metaphysics without Philosophy**

As noted in the introduction, I gladly leave the entire portion of *Yoruba Metaphysics* that discuss the substantive elements of Yoruba metaphysics—Ifá (chapter 3), Èsin (chapter 4), Àṣà (chapter 5), Ìgbà (chapter 6), Ori (chapter 7), Ayé (chapter 8), Òrun (chapter 9), Èniyàn (chapter 10), Ìwà (chapter 11), and Ìlara (chapter 12)—to the more critically grounded scholars of the Yoruba culture; I am but a scholarly dabbler. And yet, there is the urgent need to make one or two preliminary points. I made a claim earlier that Falola does not take a full advantage of the trajectories of African philosophical thoughts; and where he seems to have done so, they were mis-ascribed or

---

7 This description of spiritualism is suspicious. A Wikipedia entry—Spiritualism (beliefs)—says “A metaphysical belief that the world is made up of at least two fundamental substances, matter and spirit.” Another entry—Spiritualism (philosophy)—says “the concept that there is an immaterial reality that cannot be perceived by the senses.” Here is a clear danger on why Wikipedia is itself suspect as an intellectual resource!

even summarized out of contexts. I need to add that, given his attention to the basics of Yoruba philosophical dynamics touched on in the book, Falola does not seem to have taken even the existing critical studies on Yoruba cultural philosophy seriously.

From Rowland Abiodun and Segun Gbadegesin to Barry Hallen and Babatunde Lawal, we have series of methodological insights that serve as the pre-conditions for coming to the study of Yorùbá cultural philosophy. First, there is the critical acknowledgement that Yorùbá myths, mythical configurations, and mythical narratives are many. From Yorùbá religion or spirituality to Yorùbá ethics, indeed the entire Yorùbá lifeworld, there are so many narrative logics and interpretive dynamics that serve as the basis for more critical interrogations rather than magisterial pontification. Imposing one narration over the other demands a dexterity that demands logical and cultural ingenuity. Babatunde Lawal achieves this level of intellectual and cultural dexterity in his essay, “Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yoruba Art and Culture” (2008). That brilliant essay raises critical questions about how multiple Yorùbá myths conduce to different ways of understanding the Yorùbá lifeworld. And how these narratives further excite philosophical questions about how the Yorùbá perceive reality. Second, there is the problem of conceptual obfuscation deriving from careless employment of terminologies that fail to peer beneath the obvious or the superficial. Yorùbá cultural studies, therefore, calls for epistemic humility, critical attention to narrative details and philosophical scrutiny.

I wonder how, for instance, Falola will respond to Karin Barber’s excellent 1981 essay, “How Man Makes God in West Africa.” Falola struggles all through *Yorùbá Metaphysics* to narrate the essence of the human person in relation to supernatural beings, and keeps insisting contradictorily that the supernatural *determines* the physical and Yorùbá ethics, *but* humans still manage a level of free will. On the contrary, Barber argues that “The *òrìṣà* (‘gods’) are, according to Yoruba traditional thought, maintained and kept in existence by the attention of humans. Without the collaboration of their devotees, the *òrìṣà* would be betrayed, exposed and reduced to nothing” (1981: 724). Thus, the Yoruba would say, *Òrìṣà, bí o le gbè mí, se mí bí o ti bá mí* (Òrìṣà, if you cannot improve my lot, do not worsen it) (Owomeyela, 2005: 34). And yet this does not imply the abandonment of religion. In this case, there is rational and humanistic basis for religion: the pursuit of the good life. Indeed, for Segun Gbadegesin, this speaks to a humanistic orientation within which spirituality does not serve the deterministic purpose Falola takes it to serve. In other words, “Far from having a religious foundation, then, we have here a system of morality which, while it makes use of religion as a motivating factor, is clearly pragmatic and this-worldly to the core” (Gbadegesin, 1991: 78).

Gbadegesin, like Barry Hallen, is compelled by the multiplicity of available narratives to ask philosophical questions: “First, how true of the Yoruba cosmological idea is this account? Second, in view of these ideas, is it correct to describe the Yoruba as a deeply religious people? Third, from a philosophical perspective, is this Yoruba conception of the universe a defensible one?” (1991: 89). These kinds of reflexive questions provide guidelines for circum-spective reflections and interrogation. Thus, while Falola ascribes so many jumbled and contradictory descriptive terms to Olódùmarè, and pontificates on Olódùmarè’s essence (“Supreme God,” “cosmic force,” “supreme being,” “supreme force,” “cosmic architect,” etc.), Gbadegesin pursues the rational logic of interrogating oral traditions and the Ifá corpus to tease out the concept of Olódùmarè and Olódùmarè’s attributes that stands in contradistinction to those of the Judeo-Christian God.

Barry Hallen’s contribution to this discourse is also key. It is an attempt to undermine the limiting understanding of the African consciousness facilitated by what he calls the poetic-symbolist school of which we can place Leopold Sedar Senghor and Toyin Falola. This school

gives the impression that the African consciousness, at the proto-rational level to which it has evolved, is a maelstrom of ancestors, cults, demons, divinities, incantations, magic, masquerades, sorcerers, witches, and agencies of predestination over which the individual can never exert sufficient control. In such interpretations the spiritual dimension and the dramas it carelessly inflicts upon the merely human become of such exaggerated importance that the role human intelligence plays in imposing order upon human experience becomes of secondary, virtually minor, importance. That humanity is the victim of forces it cannot fully understand and certainly cannot overcome becomes in fact the defining characteristic of the African worldview (Hallen, 2000: 38-39).

This constraining mindset, Hallen insists, need to be reconstructed in favor of an understanding of the African cultural system that grounds “the role of articulated, conscious, systematic thinking in the African cultural context” (Hallen, 2000: 39).

I think one of the most unfortunate and fundamental omissions in *Yorùbá Metaphysics* is the elision of the strong rationalistic elements of Yorùbá culture and the deep humanistic basis of its ethics. On the contrary, Barry Hallen identifies what he considered to be the deeply pragmatic, rational and empirical basis of street-level discourse among the Yorùbá. And he asks so fundamentally: “The question then becomes how or why a people who are

linguistically ‘pragmatic’ or ‘commonsensical’ on the everyday level make such a categorically distinctive conceptual ‘leap’ when it comes to the theoretical? Why or how do they have recourse to talk of things like ancestors and other spiritual forces when causal factors of a more highly abstract or theoretical character become involved?” (Hallen, 2000: 8) Falola does not ask this type of questions that would in all likelihood have generated deep reflexivity about the culture. And yet he struggles all through the book to correlate the obvious logical and rational dimensions of the Yorùbá with the imperative of supernaturalism. He argues, for instance, that “The Ifá corpus is...profoundly rooted in rationality and logic, manifested in its use of binary nodes and symbolic arrangements to arrive at divination” (296). But then, when he keeps insisting, *ad nauseam*, that the unseen “fundamentally dictates” the activities in the physical world, we need to ask what that mean if Ifá employs rationality and logic? Does that imply that the supernatural realm operates on a rational basis? Or that Ifá converts the irrational to the rational in divination? Or what? We do not have a methodological and rational mechanism, in *Yorùbá Metaphysics*, for reflecting about the relationship between the secular and the spiritual in Yorùbá culture.

The sins of Toyin Falola, in *Yorùbá Metaphysics*, are so many. One, he adopts a methodological strategy that enables him to overgeneralize to the point of absurdity. There is an inflated understanding of “the west,” “western science,” “African metaphysics,” “Yorùbá metaphysics,” “Yoruba culture,” and many more, that leads to excessive and hasty generalizations.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this is one key reasons why seasoned scholars of the Yorùbá cultural beingness need to engage with *Yorùbá Metaphysics* deeply beyond my methodological intervention. Two, he overlooks the many mythic narratives that articulates

---

8 Space will only permit me to identify a few of these unfortunate generalizations: “Western science has not accepted that beings exist in multiple dimensions” (12), “In general, humans despise anything considered evil because it appears they are naturally opposed to it” (14), “Western scientists have persistently attempted to negate the epistemic foundations of knowledge in regions beyond the West, particularly in Africa, in fields such as metaphysics, philosophy, and ontology” (22), “The notion that the environment possesses spiritual essence is not widely held in the Western world. While some Europeans may find inspirations in their surroundings, they generally do not attribute spiritual significance to them” (27), “Plato wrote that supreme spiritual designers oversaw the creation of humans. Unlike the Yorùbá, he dwelt little on the distinction between the body and the soul and did not place much importance on the body” (29), “Religions that are widely followed do not provide a systematic and philosophical perspective on spirituality, unlike the systematic exploration of spiritualism, as evidenced in Yorùbá metaphysics” (300), “The knowledge of geomancy found in Ifá cannot be attributed to any specific authors, supporting the claim that the knowledge stored in Ifá is metaphysical or spiritual in origin” (302-303), etc. One needs to write another essay in order to be able to identify the flaws and fallacies in these hasty claims.

the Yorùbá understanding of themselves as a people. Indeed, there is hardly any reflection on the significance and role of myths in cultural understanding. Three, there is a deep and perplexing level of brash pontification that overlooks the essence of philosophical analysis and epistemic cautiousness in presenting the metaphysical frameworks of the Yorùbá not only to those who have preceded him in this sphere, but also to the world.

Given the (non-)understanding of metaphysics provided by Falola, it becomes clear why *Yorùbá Metaphysics* is not undergirded by a critical appraisal of fundamentals, which is the very essence of philosophy itself. And here, we see a very significant manifestation of anachronism on which Falola grounds the Yorùbá culture—the irrational, unscientific and unanalytic cast of mind that spirituality and supernaturality have imposed on the Yorùbá understanding of reality, according to him. What *Yorùbá Metaphysics* succeeds in achieving is an uncritical veneration of spirituality and supernaturality. We can concede that life and societal dynamics, not only in Africa but everywhere else, are shot through by elements of the spiritual, the religious, the supernatural and the emotional. This gives a depth to the point that life is more than logic. And yet, this fundamental point is not an excuse to reify a culture, and definitely not the Yorùbá culture, into a metaphysical framework that abjures logic and rational procedures in their understanding of and encounter with reality. On the contrary, for Wiredu, and we will all agree, “it is as true in Africa as anywhere else that logical, mathematical, analytical, experimental procedures are essential in the quest for the knowledge of, and control over, nature and, therefore, in any endeavour to improve the condition of man” (1980: 12).

## References

- Abimbola, Kola, 2006. *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*. London: Iroko Academic Press.
- Abiodun, Roland, 1994a. “Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics: The Concept of *Ase*,” *African Arts*, 3, XXVII, 1994; pp. 68-78, 102-03, 1994a
- Abiodun, Rowland, 1994b. “Àṣẹ: Verbalizing and Visualizing Creative Power through Art,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 24, Fasc. 4 (Nov.): 309-322.
- Abiodun, Roland, 1995. ‘*What Follows Six is More Than Seven*’: *Understanding African Art*, London: British Museum Press, 1995.
- Abiodun, Rowland, 2002. “African Aesthetics” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35, 4, winter 2002, 15-24.
- Abiodun, Rowland, 2014. *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

- Akiwowo, Akinsola, 1986. "Asuwada Eniyan," *Ile: Annals of the Institute of Cultural Studies*, 1:113-123.
- Barber, Karin, 1981. "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitude Towards the Orisa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 51, No. 3: 724-745.
- Drewal, Henry John, Pemberton, John and Abiodun, Rowland, 1989. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of Art and Thought*, Co-authored with H.J. Drewal and J. Pemberton III, New York: Center for African Art and Harry N. Abrams Inc. 1989.
- Falola, Toyin, 2018. *The Toyin Falola Reader on African Nationalism, Culture, Development and Epistemologies*. Austin, Texas: Pan-African University Press.
- Gbadegesin, Segun, 1991. *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Hallen, Barry, 1997. "African Meanings, Western Words," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April): 1-11.
- Hallen, Barry, 2000. *The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yoruba Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Horton, Robin, 1967. "African Traditional Thought and Western Science," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Jan.): 50-71.
- Lawal, Babatunde, 1996. *Gèlèdè Spectacle: Art, Gender and Social Harmony in an African Culture*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Lawal, Babatunde, 2001. "Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (Sept.): 498-526.
- Lawal, Babatunde, 2008. Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yoruba Art and Culture," *African Arts*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring): 24-39
- Olupona, Jacob and Abiodun, Rowland, 2016. *Ifá Divination: Knowledge, Power and Performance*. Co-edited with Jacob Olupona, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Owomoyela, Oyekan, 2005. *Yoruba Proverbs*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Wiredu, Kwasi, 1980. *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiredu, Kwasi, 1996. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.