Amos Tutuola: Debts and Assets
Monsieur Bernth Lindfors
Amos Tutuola began writing out of boredom. In 1948 he had taken a job as a messenger in the Government Labour Department in Lagos, an “unsatisfactory job,” he said, which left him with a lot of free time on his hands. The job must have been something of a comedown for him, for he had had six years of schooling, some professional training as a blacksmith, and experience working as a coppersmith for the RAF during the war. But post-war demobilization had thrown him out of work, and after an unsuccessful attempt to start his own workshop and a year of unemployment, he was ready to trade in his apron for a messenger’s uniform. The trouble with his new job was that often there was nothing at all for him to do. So to keep himself busy during office hours, he started to write down on scrap paper the stories he heard on Sundays from an old man on a palm plantation. He has spoken of composing his first story, *The Wild Hunter* the *Bush of Ghosts*, because “in a day I cannot sit down doing nothing. I was just playing at it. My intention was not to send it to anywhere.”


2. *West Africa*, May 1, 1954, p. 389. He may have written at other times
Then one day in 1950 he read an advertisement in a local paper listing the publications of the United Society for Christian Literature, and he conceived the idea of sending this organization his latest story, The Palm-Wine Drinkard and his Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads' Town, which he had written in two days. He spent three months enlarging the story, then drafted a final copy in ink and sent it off. The United Society for Christian Literature replied that they did not publish novels, but they would try to help Tutuola find a publisher. Faber and Faber received the manuscript from the society's Lutterworth Press on February 20, 1951, and published The Palm-Wine Drinkard on May 2, 1952. Grove Press brought out an American edition the following year, and by 1955 the book was available in French, Italian, German and Serbo-Croatian translations. Thus the bored messenger became the first Nigerian author to win international recognition and acclaim.

A writer almost by accident, Tutuola must have been greatly encouraged by Faber and Faber's acceptance of The Palm-Wine Drinkard. Eighty days after it appeared in print they received his second manuscript, My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, which they published on February 5, 1954. Like The Palm-Wine Drinkard it had been 'composed' in two days and 'revised' and expanded over a period of three months. Since then Tutuola has written four other major works of fiction—Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle (1955), The Brave African Huntress (1958), Feather Woman of the Jungle (1962), Ajaiyi and his Inherited Poverty (1967)—and has published several short stories in literary journals.

of the day as well. In The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa (London, 1966), p. 74, Claude Wauthier quotes him as saying he began writing because "I had nothing else to do in the evenings."

1. West Africa, May 1, 1954, p. 389. In another account Tutuola is said to have written the book "roughly with lead pencil three hours each day for five days": Listener, November 13, 1952, p. 819. In a 1964 interview Tutuola said, "The Palm-Wine Drinkard took me about [.] three days": Africa Report, IX (July 1964), p. 11.

2. Information in a letter to the author from Sarah Lloyd of Faber and Faber, May 1, 1968.


4. Information in a letter to the author from Sarah Lloyd of Faber and Faber, May 1, 1968.


All six of Tutuola’s longer works follow a similar narrative pattern. A hero (or heroine) with supernatural powers or access to supernatural assistance sets out on a journey in quest of something important and suffers incredible hardships before successfully accomplishing his mission. Invariably he ventures into unearthly realms, performs arduous tasks, fights with fearsome monsters, endures cruel tortures, and narrowly escapes death. Sometimes he is accompanied by a relative or by loyal companions; sometimes he wanders alone. But he always survives his ordeals, attains his objective, and usually emerges from his nightmarish experiences a wiser, wealthier man. His story is told in an unorthodox but curiously expressive idiom which is nearly as unpredictable as the bizarre adventures he undergoes in outlandish fantasy worlds.

The critics who have ventured to comment on Tutuola’s peculiarities have almost without exception tried to relate his works to more familiar forms of oral or literary expression. This is an understandable ploy, one which puts the critic at ease while exploring bewildering new territory, but is has led to unfortunate terminological confusion. Gerald Moore, for example, argues that Tutuola’s “affinities are really with Bunyan, Dante and Blake rather than with the Western novel [. . .]. He is something much rarer and more interesting than another novelist; he is a visionary, and his books are prose epics.”1 Ann Tibble, objecting to such ambitious comparisons and “wide-of-the-mark praise,” reduces Tutuola’s books to a “blend of psychological fantasy, myth and fable” but concedes they are “fine fairy

tales as well as contriving to be something more.”¹ Harold Collins, on the other hand, likes to speak of him as a “folk novelist” who writes “ghost novels,” but he uses Northrop Frye’s terms to carefully define Tutuola’s genre as the “naive quest romance” which verges on myth.² Martin Tucker considers Tutuola “more a mythologist than a novelist” and suggests he relies on a “personal mythology.”³ However, Ben Obumselu, a Nigerian critic, asserts that “Tutuola stands within the Yoruba tradition” and not only makes extensive use of the material of Yoruba folklore but also models the formal organization of that material “on the folktale about the hunter who ventures into the bad bush or the wrestler who takes his mortal challenge to the denizens of the spirit world.”⁴ In a similar vein John Ramsaran, a West Indian who teaches in Nigeria, notes that Tutuola’s writings “preserve at least two essential qualities of the native folktale: its dramatic spirit and its identity as lived experience integrated into the whole of life as seen and felt by the writer.”⁵ Another Nigerian, Emmanuel Obiechina, conceives of Tutuola’s writing “in the context of a transition between the oral tradition and the literary tradition.”⁶ Thus, in seeking some common ground on which to come to grips with Tutuola, critics have applied variety of familiar labels to his works.

The trouble with such labels is not that they differ but that they are too often applied so loosely or with so little backing that they fail to stick. The critic is content to merely suggest a likely parallel or link or source without bothering to present evidence to show that the suggestion has some validity. Assumptions take the place of research. For example, although everyone seems to agree that


⁴. Ben Obumselu, “The Background of Modern African Literature”, *Ibadan*, 22 (June 1966), p. 57. The Yoruba are not the only tribe with such a tale. Jack Berry, in his *Spoken Art in Africa* (London, 1961), p. 9, mentions an Ashanti cycle of tales about a “hunter, who (sometimes with the help of the long-haired little men) defeats not only the dangerous animals he encounters, but Sasabonsam the forest monster in the silk cotton tree and other supernatural spirits.”


Tutuola has his roots in oral tradition, they differ markedly in their estimates of how deeply into cultures other than his own these roots extend. The comparative mythologists who draw parallels between Tutuola's works and Indo-European narratives have arrived at some interesting conclusions, but a modest research effort shows that critics who sift the evidence available on Tutuola's native soil are on the safest and most rewarding ground.

Among the few remarks Tutuola has made on his own writing is the statement that he heard the story of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* from a very old man on a Yoruba palm plantation. Tutuola's amusing account of this incident is worth quoting in full. After roasting a big yam, the old man had offered Tutuola palm-wine.

"He started to serve the wine with bamboo tumbler. This bamboo tumbler was as deep as a glass tumbler, but it could contain the palm-wine which could reach half a bottle. Having taken about four, my body was not at rest at all, it was intoxicating me as if I was dreaming. But when he noticed how I was doing, he told me to let us go and sit down on the bank of a big river which is near the farm for fresh breeze which was blowing here and there with strong power. Immediately we reached there and sat under the shade of some palm trees which collected or spread as a tent I fall asleep. After an hour, he woke me up, and I came to normal condition at that time.

When he believed that I could enjoy what he wanted to tell me, then he told me the story of the Palm-Wine Drinkard."

On several other occasions Tutuola has admitted that he has always enjoyed hearing and telling folktales. Geoffrey Parrinder reports that "Tutuola has told me how he and his boyhood playmates would listen to such yarns on their farms in the evening." In an interview Tutuola said, "When I was attending school [. . .] I was always telling folklore stories [. . .], short stories to the other children in the school. So from the beginning I always liked to listen to the old people in my village when they were telling short stories in the night." Tutuola has also stated that he began writing because "it seemed necessary to write down the tales of my country since they will soon all be forgotten." In a recent letter he explained, "I wrote the *Palm-Wine Drinkard* for the people of the other countries to read the Yoruba folk-lores [. . .]. My purpose of writing is to make other people to understand more about Yoruba people and in fact they have already understood us more than ever before." Even if one

2. Foreword to *MLBG*, p. 10.
4. WAUTHIER, p. 74.
were to doubt the veracity of these statements, Eric Larrabee, who may have been the first one to interview him, confirms that "Tutuola does not think of himself as the creator of his stories. Stories exist objectively; he merely sets them down. When I asked him if he planned to write more, the question had no meaning to him. 'But there are many stories', he said."1 Furthermore, a Nigerian correspondent for West Africa reported in 1954 that Tutuola felt "written out" after his first two books and intended "to return to Abeokuta for a short time to rest and draw fresh inspiration from listening to old people re-telling Yoruba legends."2 The evidence that Tutuola has been influenced primarily by Yoruba oral tradition thus appears to be conclusive.

Even without such evidence, the reader familiar with oral literature from Africa or elsewhere will immediately recognize points of similarity between Tutuola's writing and oral narrative art. The content, structure and style of his works bear the earmarks of oral tradition. An analysis of The Palm-Wine Drinkard will serve as an illustration.

It is perhaps best to begin with a plot summary. One can do no better than to quote Dylan Thomas who in a book review entitled "Blithe Spirits" summarized The Palm-Wine Drinkard as a

"brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching story, or series of stories [. . .] about the journey of an expert and devoted palm-wine drinkard through a nightmare of indescribable adventures, all simply and carefully described, in the spirit-bristling bush. From the age of ten he drank 225 kegs a day, and wished to do nothing else; he knew what was good for him, it was just what the witch-doctor ordered. But when his tapster fell from tree and died, and as naturally he himself 'did not satisfy with water as with palm-wine', he set out to search for the tapster in Deads' Town.

This was the devil—or, rather, the many devils—of a way off, and among those creatures, dubiously alive, whom he encountered, were an image with two long breasts with deep eyes; a female cream image; a quarter-of-a-mile total stranger with no head, feet or hands, but one large eye on his topmost; an unsoothing something with flood-light eyes, big as a hippopotamus but walking upright; animals cold as ice and hairy as sandpaper, who breathed very hot steam and sounded like church bells; and a 'beautiful complete gentleman' who, as he went through the forest, returned the hired parts of his body to their owners, at the same time paying rentage, and soon became a full-bodied gentleman reduced to skull.

Luckily, the drinkard found a fine wife on his travels, and she bore him a child from her thumb; but the child turned out to be abnormal, a pyromaniac, a smasher to death of domestic animals, and a bigger drinkard than its father, who was forced to burn it to ashes. And out of the ashes appeared half-

1. Chicago Review, X (Spring 1950), p. 42. In another article (1953, p. 39), Larrabee says: "When I asked him what his future writing plans were, he said that possibly there were more stories down on the farm and that if I liked he might be able to get some."
bodied child, talking with a 'lower voice like a telephone' [...]. There is, later, one harmonious interlude in the Father-Mother's house, or magical, techni-colour night-club, in a tree that takes photographs; and one beautiful moment of rejoicing, when Drum, Song, and Dance, three tree fellows, perform upon themselves, and the dead arise, and the animals, snakes, and spirits of the bush dance together. But mostly it's hard and haunted going until the drinkard and his wife reach Deads' Town, meet the tapster, and, clutching his gift of a miraculous, all-providing Egg, are hounded out of the town by dead babies."

As can be inferred from this incomplete summary, The Palm-Wine Drinkard is pure fantasy, a voyage of the imagination into a never-never land of magic, marvels and monsters. But the beings and doings in this fantasy world are not entirely unfamiliar. The journey to the land of the dead, the abnormal conception, the monstrous child, the enormous drinking capacity, the all-providing magical object, the tree-spirits, the personifications, the fabulous monsters—these are standard materials of oral tradition, the stuff folktales are made of all over the world.

The palm-wine drinkard himself appears at first to be an unpromising hero. He has, after all, done nothing but drink palm-wine all his life. But once he starts on his journey to Deads' Town his extraordinary cleverness and unusual powers of endurance enable him to circumvent or survive numerous misadventures. He carries with him a substantial supply of juju so he can transform himself at will whenever he gets into a tight corner. However, even though he is part-trickster, part-magician, part-superman, he cannot overcome every adversary or extricate himself from every difficult situation; supernatural helpers have to come to his assistance from time to time. Eventually he finds his tapster in Deads' Town but cannot persuade him to re-enter the world of the 'alives'. The palm-wine drinkard and his wife leave Deads' Town and, several adventures later, arrive home only to discover that their people are starving. Heaven and Land have had a bitter quarrel and Heaven has refused to send rain to Land. The ensuing drought and famine have killed millions. The palm-wine drinkard springs into action and in a short time manages to feed the remaining multitudes, settle the cosmic dispute, end the drought and famine, and restore the world to normal functioning order. The unpromising hero who had set out on his quest with limited powers and purely selfish ambitions becomes in the end a miracle worker, the savior and benefactor of all mankind. He changes, in other words, from a typical folktale hero into a typical epic hero. Such a change does not take him outside the stream of oral tradition.

Further evidence that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is largely derived from oral tradition can be found in the inner structure of the story. Some critics have overlooked this evidence because they have focused only on the overall narrative pattern. Gerald Moore, for example, praising Tutuola’s “grasp of basic literary forms,” describes the palm-wine drinkard’s deliberate quest for his dead palm-wine tapster, a quest in the course of which the drinkard experiences many trials, labors and revelations, as a “variant [...] of the cycle of the heroic monomyth, Departure-Initiation-Return.”¹ This is a perceptive comment on the overall narrative pattern, but a close examination of the inner structure, of the way in which individual episodes are constructed, set in sequence and woven together suggests that Tutuola should be credited with a grasp of the basic forms of spoken art rather than with a “grasp of basic literary forms.” Indeed, the fact that the story consists entirely of a series of short, separable episodes immediately arouses a suspicion that it is little more than a collection of traditional tales strung together on the lifeline of a common hero. This suspicion is strengthened when we find many of these episodes rounded off with closing formulas (e.g., “This was how I got a wife,” “That was how we got away from the long white creatures,” “That was how we were saved from the Unknown creatures of the ‘Unreturnable-Heaven’s town’,” “This was the end of the story of the bag which I carried from the bush to the ‘wrong town’.”² Several episodes even have etiological endings (e.g., “So that since the day that I had brought Death out from his house, he has no permanent place to dwell or stay, and we are hearing his name about in the world,” p. 16). Etiological tales and closing formulas are quite common in West African oral tradition.

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard’s* neat cyclical narrative pattern rests on a very loosely coordinated inner structure. The hero is involved in one adventure after another but these adventures are not well integrated. Like boxcars on a freight train, they are independent units joined with a minimum of apparatus and set in a seemingly random and interchangeable order. There is no foreshadowing of events, no dramatic irony, no evidence of any kind that the sequence of events was carefully thought out. Tutuola appears to be improvising as he goes along and employing the techniques and materials of oral narrative art in his improvisations.

To search for an orderly system or well-developed artistic pattern in the succession of disjointed episodes in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*

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2. *PWD*, pp. 31, 43, 63, 95. Henceforth page numbers will be noted in the text.
is to search for symmetry in chaos, for deliberate design in chance. Some critics have risen to the challenge with bold imagination. Gerald Moore has found it

"of the utmost significance that the first of all the trials imposed upon the Palm-Wine Drinkard in his journey is the binding and bringing of Death [. . .]. It stands as a clear enough indication that the Drinkard's adventure is not merely a journey into the eternal African Bush, but equally a journey into the racial imagination, into the sub-conscious, into that Spirit World that everywhere co-exists and even overlaps with the world of waking 'reality'."

Unfortunately, this interesting creative interpretation is built on a factual error. The first of the trials imposed upon the palm-wine drinkard in his journey is not the binding and bringing of Death but rather the fetching of an unnamed object from an unnamed blacksmith in an unnamed town. An old man has promised to tell the drinkard where his tapster is if the drinkard can accomplish this impossible task. The drinkard succeeds in fetching the object, and the old man, instead of rewarding him, sets him a still more impossible task—the binding and bringing of Death. When the drinkard accomplishes this dreadful task, the old man and all the rest of the people in the town flee in terror.

The plot of this adventure resembles that found in many folktales. A hero must perform impossible tasks in order to gain important information. Each successive task is more difficult to perform. When the hero succeeds in performing the most difficult task, usually one in which he must risk his life, the task-setter, amazed and terrified, flees and never bothers the hero again. In such tales the function of the impossible tasks is to provide opportunities for an extraordinary hero to display his extraordinary abilities. But neither the tasks nor the hero's special skills in coping with them need figure in the tale again. Each successful performance of an impossible task can stand as a complete and independent tale within the main tale, an event which need not be closely related to previous or subsequent events.

And such is the case in the episode of the binding and bringing of Death. Nothing in this episode carries over into other episodes. The drinkard's triumph over Death is not permanent; he soon faces threats on his life again. What is most significant about this first contest with Death is not its place in the overall narrative pattern but its place in one segment of the inner structure; not, in other words, the fact that it launches the reader on a journey into the eternal African Bush, the racial imagination, the subconscious or the

1. Moore, pp. 44-46.
African Spirit World, but the fact that it has the form, place and function of an enclosed motif in an extended folktale. This episode affords structural evidence of Tutuola’s debt to oral tradition.

The style of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is essentially an oral style. The story is told by the drinkard himself, and right from the beginning we sense that he is speaking, not writing, of his experiences. Here are his first words:

“...I was a palm-wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life. In those days we did not know other money, except cowries, so that everything was very cheap, and my father was the richest man in our town.

My father got eight children and I was the eldest among them, all of the rest were hard workers, but I myself was an expert palm-wine drinkard. ... I was drinking palm-wine from morning till night and from night till morning. By that time I could not drink ordinary water at all except palm-wine.

But when my father noticed that I could not do any work more than to drink, he engaged an expert palm-wine tapster for me; he had no other work more than to tap palm-wine every day.

So my father gave me a palm-tree farm which was nine miles square and it contained 560,000 palm-trees, and this palm-wine tapster was tapping one hundred and fifty kegs of palm-wine every morning, but before 2 o’clock p.m., I would have drunk all of it; after that he would go and tap another 75 kegs in the evening which would be drinking till morning. So my friends were uncountable by that time and they were drinking palm-wine with me from morning to a late hour in the night” (p. 7).

The entire story is told in this naive tall-tale style, an idiom which preserves the flavor and rhythm of speech. Mabel Jolaoso, a Yoruba reviewer of Tutuola’s books, notes that the “loose structure of his sentences, his roundabout expressions, and his vivid similes, essentially African, remind one very forcibly of the rambling old grandmother telling her tale of spirits in the ghostly light of the moon.”1 Tutuola did not have to work to create this style; it was perfectly natural to him. A *West Africa* interviewer reported in 1954 that his “spoken and written English are identical and he writes exactly what presents itself to his mind.”2 Another Yoruba critic confirmed this, adding only that Tutuola’s writing “consists largely in translating Yoruba ideas into English.”3 According to anthropologist Paul Bohannan, many felt that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was “the same sort of thing that any Lagos Yoruba could talk.”4 It was merely oral art written down.

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The influence of Tutuola's native language on his prose style can be seen in the passage quoted above. Unorthodox constructions such as "I had no other work more than to drink," "I could not do any work more than to drink," "he had no other work more than to tap," and "we did not know other money except cowries" are taken directly from Yoruba (mo owó mîràn, âfì ọya owó). The phrase "by that time igbà yen" is also used in typical Yoruba fashion. It may have been stylistic eccentricities like these that led Mabel Jolaoso to remark that "the very imperfections of Tutuola's English have made him the perfect African storyteller." In syntax as well as imagery and narrative content he sounded exactly like a Yoruba raconteur.

In sum, it is evident that The Palm-Wine Drinkard has been greatly influenced by oral tradition. The hero appears to be a composite of the heroes found most frequently in West African oral narratives—the trickster, the magician, the superman, the unpromising hero, the culture hero—and he tells his story in an oral style. The story itself is little more than a cleverly woven string of loosely connected episodes many of which appear to have been borrowed or derived from folktales. The content, structure, and style of The Palm-Wine Drinkard reveal that Tutuola is not a novelist but a writer of concatenated folktales.

It is not difficult to prove that many of the folktales Tutuola uses exist in Yoruba oral tradition. Any sizable collection of Yoruba tales will yield a number of parallels, and some of Tutuola's most striking episodes can be found in more than one collection. For example, the celebrated passage in The Palm-Wine Drinkard in which a "beautiful complete gentleman" lures a lady deep into the forest and then dismembers himself, returning the hired parts of his body to their owners and paying rentage until he is reduced to a humming skull appears in at least four different versions in Yoruba folktale collections. There are just as many texts of the incident wishing to thank Edward Fresco, doctoral candidate in Linguistics at UCLA, for helping me to locate the Yoruba elements in this passage.

1. I wish to thank Edward Fresco, doctoral candidate in Linguistics at UCLA, for helping me to locate the Yoruba elements in this passage.
3. Collins (MS., p. 36) observes that "Tutuola's novels have the episodic structure of the more extended Yoruba folk tales; they are simply extended a little longer." It would be more accurate to say that they are extended a lot longer and that Tutuola extends them by concatenating different tales rather than by expanding a single tale.
of the all-providing magical object which produces first an abundance of food and later an abundance of whips.¹ Many other tales and motifs in this book—the quarrel between heaven and earth,² the carrying of a sacrifice to heaven,³ the tiny creature that makes newly-cleared fields sprout weeds,⁴ the enfant terrible,⁵ the magical transformations⁶—can be documented as traditional among the Yoruba. For those that cannot be so documented we have the word of Adeboye Babalola, a prominent Yoruba scholar, that

"the Yoruba are lovers of the marvellous, the awe-inspiring, the weird, the eerie. It is a small minority of [Yoruba] folk-tales that concern human beings only. The great majority of the tales feature human beings, animals behaving like humans, and often also superhuman beings: demons, ogres, deities."⁷

Further confirmation of Tutuola’s debt to Yoruba oral tradition comes from his Yoruba critics who insist that his stories are well-known.⁸

They are known not only in Yorubaland but throughout West Africa. The distinguished anthropologist Melville Herskovits remarks in the introduction to a collection of Fon tales from Dahomey that “it will be instructive for one who reads the narratives in this volume to go to Tutuola’s books with the motifs and orientations of the tales given here in mind. He will find them all.”⁹ Though this is certainly an overstatement, it serves to emphasize the fact that folktales known to the Yoruba are known to other West African peoples as well. Tutuola’s tale of the self-dismembering “complete gentleman,” for instance, has been found among the Fon of Dahomey,¹⁰ the Ibo,¹¹

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² PWD, pp. 120-124; Ogumefu, pp. 80-84; Fuja, pp. 125-128; Phebean Itayemi and P. Gurrey, Folk Tales and Fables (London, 1953), pp. 81-85;
⁴ PWD, pp. 118-119; Idowu, pp. 50-51.
⁵ PWD, pp. 124-125; Idowu, pp. 50-51; Fuja, pp. 34-36.
⁶ PWD, pp. 48-50; Fuja, pp. 88-91; Ellis, pp. 254-255.
⁷ PWD, pp. 31-37; Itayemi and Gurrey, pp. 46-50. Cf. also, Ajantala in Tutuola’s story, “Ajantala, the Noxious Guest”, in Hughes, pp. 121-127.
⁸ There are 23 magical transformations in PWD. Of the most striking is the hero’s transformation into a pebble (PWD, p. 117) which is thrown across a river, thereby enabling the hero to escape from his pursuers. This motif can be found in Itayemi and Gurrey, p. 43.
¹⁰ Johnson, p. 322.
¹² Ibid., pp. 243-245.
and Ibibio1 of Nigeria, and the Krio of Sierra Leone.2 According to Jack Berry, the tale of the magical food-and-whips producer is very widely distributed in West Africa, as are tales of ogres and other supernatural beings.3 Alice Werner, in her study of African mythology, reports that stories of people who have penetrated into the world of ghosts and returned “are not uncommon”4 and that shape-shifting transformations are not only present in many folktales but also “are believed in as actual occurrences at the present day.”5 Thus The Palm-Wine Drinkard, a lineal descendant of Yoruba oral tradition, hails from a large family of West African oral narratives.

What has been said about The Palm-Wine Drinkard also applies to Tutuola’s other books, for his method and content have not changed much over the years. The quest pattern basic to his fiction has already been described: a hero or heroine sets out on a journey in search of something important and passes through a number of concatenated folktale adventures before, and sometimes after, finding what he seeks. Though Tutuola varies this pattern from book to book, he never abandons it entirely. He never chooses a totally different pattern. One suspects that his roots in oral tradition run so deep that he knows of no other way to compose book-length fiction.

Nevertheless, minor changes in Tutuola’s writing are worth noting, for they reveal that though Tutuola has not moved any great distance from where he was in 1950 when he wrote The Palm-Wine Drinkard, he has not been standing still all these years. His most radical departure from the quest pattern came in his second book, My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (1954), which opens with its narrator-hero, a boy of seven, being maltreated and abandoned by his stepmothers, separated from his older brother, and left to wander in the bush during a tribal war. Frightened by the sounds of gunfire and unable to distinguish between bad and good, he enters the Bush of Ghosts and spends the next twenty-four years wandering in an African spirit
world replete with towns, kings, civic ceremonies, festivals, law courts, even a Methodist church. He has experiences both harrowing and happy and at one point considers taking up permanent residence in the "10th town of ghosts" with his dead cousin. But he can't bring himself to do it because he keeps longing to return to his earthly home. Eventually a "Television-handed ghostess" helps him to escape, and he is reunited with his mother and brother and begins to lead a more normal life.

As can be seen from this brief summary, the hero's journey is not really a quest. Harold Collins describes it as a "West African Odyssey," and Gerald Moore sees it as "a kind of extended Initiation or 'rite of passage' [.. .] or Purgatory [in which the] initiation of the boy-hero is not sought, but is imposed upon him as the price of his development into full understanding." Both of these interpretations are apt, but they presuppose a degree of premeditation, of careful organization and methodical development, which cannot be found in the story. Again the plot consists of a string of loosely-connected episodes set down in random order. There is a distinct beginning and a distinct end but the middle is a muddle. When Geoffrey Parrinder asked Tutuola "the reason for the apparently haphazard order of the towns of the ghosts" in this book, Tutuola replied: "That is the order in which I came to them." Here is confirmation of the improvisatory nature of Tutuola's art. He moves from one tale to another not by calculation but by chance. And when he gets to the end of the chain, when all conflicts are resolved and his hero returns to a state of equilibrium, as most folktale heroes do, Tutuola rounds off the narrative with a moral: "This is what hatred did." The moral reminds the reader that the hero's sufferings and misfortunes can be blamed on his stepmothers who rejected him twenty-four years before. Tutuola thus ends his story in typical folktale fashion by using it to teach a lesson about human behavior.

In his third book, Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle (1955), Tutuola returns to the quest pattern. Beautiful Simbi, an only child who has never known poverty and punishment, desires to set out on a journey "to know and experience their difficulties." Her mother

3. Moore, p. 59, admits that Tutuola does not sustain the idea of the extended Initiation or 'rite of passage' and fails to relate the hero's "disorganized adventures" to it.
4. Foreword to MLBG, p. 11.
and others warn her not to, but she feels she must. One hundred and twenty pages later she is fed up with poverty and punishment. She has been kidnapped, sold into slavery, beaten, starved, almost beheaded, set afloat on a river in a sealed coffin, carried off by an eagle, imprisoned in a tree trunk, half-swallowed by a boa constrictor, attacked by a satyr, shrunk and put in a bottle, bombarded by a stone-carrying phoenix, and petrified to a rock. Fortunately, she is a talented girl who can sing well enough to wake the dead and she gets plenty of assistance from girl-friends, gods and a friendly gnome, so that in the end she manages to return home to her mother. Then, "Having rested for some days, she was going from house to house and was warning all the children that it was a great mistake to a girl who did not obey her parents" (p. 136). Simbi, too, has a lesson to teach.

Although it resembles Tutuola's other books in matter and manner, *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle* marks a new stage in Tutuola's development as a writer, for it displays definite signs of formal literary influence. It is the first of his books to be divided into numbered chapters, each encompassing a major adventure, and the only one to be written in the third person. Gerald Moore has pointed out that it contains far more dialogue and more frequent adverbial 'stage directions' than the earlier books. Furthermore, there are creatures such as goblins, imps, a gnome, myrmidon, phoenix, nymph, and satyr whose names, at least, derive from European mythology. And there is one passage which closely resembles an episode in a Yoruba novel by D. O. Fagunwa, whose influence on Tutuola will be discussed later. It is clear that Tutuola must have been doing some reading between July 22, 1952, and November 26, 1954, the dates *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle* were submitted for publication. When Eric Larrabee interviewed him in 1953, Tutuola owned no books and did not think of himself as an author, but after his second book was published, another interviewer found that he had "decided to attend evening classes to 'improve' himself, so that he [might] develop into what he describes as 'a real writer'". Reading was no doubt a part of Tutuola's program for self-improvement. When Larrabee offered to send him books, Tutuola requested *A Survey of Economic Education* published by the Brookings Institution, Aldous Huxley's *The Devils of Loudun*,

1. Moore, p. 54.
2. *SSDJ*, pp. 74, 47, 61, 25, 74, 90, 73 ff.
3. Information in letters to the author from Sarah Lloyd and Rosemary Goad of Faber and Faber, May 1 and 14, 1968.
and "some other books which contain stories like that of the P.W.D. [The Palm-Wine Drinkard] which are written by either West Africans, White men or Negroes, etc." Larrabee recalls that of the other books sent, "the two he seemed most to enjoy were Joyce Cary’s Mr. Johnson and Edith Hamilton’s Mythology, which he said contained stories similar to those he had heard as a child." It is not surprising then to find traces of literary influence in Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle. Between 1952 and 1954 Tutuola was becoming conscious of himself as an author, was reading more widely, and was trying hard to ‘improve’ his writing. He could still tell only one kind of story, but should the nearby palm plantation or the campfires of Abeokuta ever fail to provide him with sufficient material, he could now turn to a number of other sources for fresh inspiration.

Tutuola did succeed in improving the structure of his narratives considerably. His last three books do not differ markedly from his first three in content or narrative pattern, but they tend, like Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle, to be organized into rather more neatly demarcated chapters. In The Brave African Huntress (1958) and Ajaiyi and his Inherited Poverty (1967), he adopted the practice of citing one or more proverbs at the head of a chapter and then using the action in that chapter to illustrate the proverbs. In Feather Woman of the Jungle (1962), his most stylized work, he created an Arabian Nights structure by having a 76 year old chief entertain villagers every night for ten nights with accounts of his past adventures. Both of these narrative techniques must have entered literature from oral tradition. If Tutuola picked them up from his reading as appears likely, he is to be commended for selecting those that suited his material perfectly. Using such techniques he could remain raconteur and at the same time could link and unify his concatenated tales more effectively.

The tales were still woven into the familiar quest pattern. Adebisi, the heroine in The Brave African Huntress, ventures into the dangerous Jungle of the Pigmies to rescue her four brothers. The chief in Feather Woman of the Jungle sets out on a series of hazardous journeys in quest of treasure and adventure. Ajaiyi in Ajaiyi and his Inherited Poverty simply wants to get out of debt and is willing to go to the Creator, the God of Iron, the Devil, and assorted witches, witchdoctors and wizards to ask for help. Each of these adventurers, after a succession of ups and downs, achieves his objective.

As for the tales themselves, Tutuola appears to have continued

1. LARRABEE, 1956, pp. 40-41.
2. Ibid.
to rely more heavily on traditional Yoruba material than on non-Yoruba material. In *The Brave African Huntress* there are references to “elves, genii, goblins, demons, imps, gnomes” and a “cyclops-like creature,” but the actual monsters encountered and the adventures undergone are not unlike those in Tutuola’s earlier books. The episode in which Adebisi the huntress cuts the hair of the king of Ibenmbe Town and discovers he has horns has been cited by critics as a possible example of European or Indian influence because it resembles the story of King Midas and the Ass’s Ears, but Tutuola, in a letter to Harold Collins, has stated: “The king who has horns is in the traditional story of my town.” In published Yoruba folktale collections it is not difficult to find parallels to other tales and motifs such as Adebisi’s palace adventure in Bachelors’ Town in *The Brave African Huntress*; the three dogs that rescue their master from woodchoppers, the journey to the underwater kingdom, and the town where people eat only water in *Feather Woman of the Jungle*; and the dead rats that come alive, the person who hides in the pupil of a blacksmith’s eye, and the quarrel between lenders in *Ajaiyi and his Inherited Poverty*. Moreover, these later books are packed with Yoruba deities, towns, customs, superstitions, and proverbs. Tutuola, despite his reading and increased sophistication, apparently chose to remain a teller of Yoruba tales.

A few critics, seeking to demonstrate how Tutuola improves upon the material he borrows, have contrasted passages in his books with analogous folktales. This type of argument, no matter how well documented, is not very persuasive because the critic cannot prove that the particular folktale text chosen for comparison is the version of the tale that Tutuola knew. Perhaps Tutuola had heard a different version, perhaps even a better version than he himself was able to tell. Eldred Jones makes the mistake of assuming that the Yoruba traditional tale on which Tutuola based his account of the self-dismembering “complete gentleman” in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is

1. *BAH*, pp. 9 and 25.
2. *Ohunfelu*, p. 57; *Ramsaran*, p. 18. This tale is number 782 in Antti *Aarne* and Stith *Thompson*, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* (Helsinki, 1964). Literary redactions appear in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Bk. XI) and Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* (III, 951 ff.).
3. 1960-61, p. 28.
9. *AHIP*, pp. 163-164; *Itayemi* and *Gurrey*, p. 44.
11. *Jones*, pp. 24-29; *Collins, MS.*, pp. 70-100.
very similar to the Krio version of this tale. Jones therefore credits Tutuola with the invention of several striking details which, though absent from the Krio version, are quite common in published Yoruba texts of the tale. Even a critic familiar with all the published Yoruba versions would not be able to draw a firm line between borrowed and invented details in Tutuola’s redaction. Without knowing exactly what Tutuola borrowed, it is impossible to know how much he contributed to the stories he tells.

Critics who search for literary influences on Tutuola’s writing are on safer ground insofar as texts are concerned, but very few serious comparative studies have been attempted. Despite several excellent leads for research, Tutuola’s reading has been virtually ignored. Tutuola claims that he read only textbooks while in school, but some of these must have been literary works. It is known, for example, that Aesop’s fables were read in Nigerian schools in the 1930’s and that John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress was available in Nigeria in a simplified English version as early as 1937. It is also known that at least twenty-six school books classified as ‘General Literature’ were published in Yoruba between 1927 and 1937, and that many others have been published since. Moreover, in recent years Tutuola has acknowledged that there are many stories like his written in Yoruba and has admitted in a letter that he read The Pilgrim’s Progress and The Arabian Nights in 1948, just two years before The Palm-Wine Drinkard was written. As noted earlier, he also told Eric Larrabee that he enjoyed reading Joyce Cary’s Mister Johnson and Edith Hamilton’s Mythology, which presumably is the book responsible for the enrichment of his mythological vocabulary. But the effects of such reading on Tutuola’s writing have not yet been adequately studied.

The influence of Bunyan on Tutuola appears to be one of the most promising avenues for future research. Like The Pilgrim’s Progress, each of Tutuola’s narratives takes the form of a quest. Persevering heroes journey through supernatural realms and encounter many marvels and monsters before finding what they seek. Sometimes

3. Obumenu, p. 57.
their adventures are almost identical to those Christian experiences on his way to the Celestial City. For example, the episode in which Death shows the palm-wine drinkard the bones of his former victims appears to be modeled on Christian's meeting with the giant of Doubting Castle. A number of the towns the drinkard and other Tutuolan heroes visit bear a distinct resemblance to Vanity Fair. And Tutuola's monsters often seem to belong to the same sub-species as Bunyan's Appolyon who was "clothed with scales, like a fish, [...] had wings like a dragon, feet like a bear, and out of his belly came fire and smoke, and his mouth was as the mouth of a lion." However, unlike The Pilgrim's Progress, Tutuola's narratives are not religious allegories. They have been influenced far more by Yoruba oral tradition than by the Bible. Bunyan may have taught Tutuola how to put an extended quest tale together but he did not convert him to Christianity. In substance and spirit Tutuola remained a thoroughly African storyteller.

Another author whose influence on Tutuola has not gone entirely unnoticed is Chief Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa, a Yoruba writer who before his death in 1963 produced five 'novels', a collection of stories, two travel books, and a series of graded readers for schools. Fagunwa was an extremely popular author in Yorubaland. His first novel, Oxboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale (The Brave Hunter in the Forest of the Four Hundred Spirits), published in 1938, immediately established his reputation and became a standard textbook in Yoruba schools. His second novel did not appear until ten years later, but it was quickly followed by his third in 1949. These new works were so enthusiastically received that Fagunwa's publishers brought out a new edition of Ogbaju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale in 1950, the year Tutuola wrote The Palm-Wine Drinkard. Since then Fagunwa's

3. With perhaps one exception (Irèkè Onibùdó), Fagunwa's books are no more novels than Tutuola's. L. Murby, an editor for Fagunwa's publisher, calls them indigenous epics or allegories which "bear definite resemblances to the Odyssey and Beowulf and the early medieval romances on the one hand, and on the other hand to that great cornerstone of the English novel, Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress." Cf. "Editor's Foreword", in Ogbaju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale by D. O. Fagunwa (London, 1950). Wole Soyinka has recently published an English translation of this novel, entitling it The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga (London, 1968).
6. Ibid., p. 26. However, the first publication date listed in the Nelson editions of these two works - Igbo Olotumare and Irèkè Onibùdó - is 1949.
novels have seldom been out of print (one had been reissued sixteen times by 1963), and the total printing of his six major works is estimated to run into the hundreds of thousands.1

At mid-century Fagunwa was Nigeria’s most prominent and prolific man of letters. Between 1948 and 1951 he published at least nine books.2 Tutuola, who had read Fagunwa’s first novel at school,3 must have been aware of this extraordinary outburst of literary activity. Indeed, it is conceivable that he got both the idea of writing stories and the idea of submitting them for publication from seeing Fagunwa’s works in print. The title of Tutuola’s first short story, *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of Ghosts,*4 which was not written for publication, is suspiciously close to the title of Fagunwa’s first novel, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale.* And there is abundant evidence in critical articles5 and English translations of excerpts from Fagunwa’s fiction6 that Fagunwa’s influence on Tutuola extends well beyond titles.

A. Olubummo, a Yoruba critic, describes the general pattern of Fagunwa’s first four books in the following manner:

“One fine day, a brave hunter finds his way into a thick jungle in search of big game. He encounters the most fearful monsters, fights with a giant snake with a human head and wrestles with a ghost with one eye in front and one eye at the back of his head. Armed with his gun, the charms of his forefathers and an unshakable belief in an omnipotent God, he comes out successfully in all these encounters. On returning home, he is appointed by the chief of his town to lead a group of men to a far-off land in search of wisdom. They miss their way into the outskirts of hell and wander through curious places like the city of dirt where nobody has ever thought of the idea of having a bath and the city where all the inhabitants eat, drink, laugh or weep simultaneously. After more trouble and hair breadth escapes, they reach their goal and return home richer and wiser.”

2. Besides the three fictional works he published two travel books—*Irinajo Apa Kini* and *Irinajo Apa Keji*—and four “Taiwo and Kehinde” school readers during this period. See *Books for Africa,* XXI (April 1952), p. 34.
This sounds very much like a description of Tutuola's books. In addition to the quest, the monsters, and the curious places, one finds some of the same motifs: e.g., the city of dirt, the hunter in search of game, the outskirts of hell. Moreover, Ulli Beier compares Fagunwa's plot structure to "a rambling, somewhat disorganized fairy tale. It is a succession of adventures, loosely strung together." This could serve as an excellent characterization of Tutuola's plots.

But there are several significant differences between Fagunwa and Tutuola. Ulli Beier notes that although there are elements of traditional Yoruba folktales in Fagunwa's books, he "does not draw as heavily on Yoruba folklore, as Tutuola. Most of the stories are invented, many of them are also taken from European tradition." Tutuola, writing in a foreign language and largely for a foreign audience, remains more closely tied to Yoruba oral tradition.

Beier goes on to state that "Tutuola differs from Fagunwa in two major points: Tutuola does not moralize and he is never sentimental. Fagunwa is much more a Christian writer [...] [one who] loses no opportunity to moralize and improve his reader. He can also be sentimental and even sloppy." Although Beier overlooks Tutuola's tendency to append folktale morals to many of his heroes' adventures, he is quite right about the absence of missionary zeal and sentimentality in his writing. Olubummo confirms that "Fagunwa's code of morality and philosophy of life are decidedly Christian. In this connection, it is interesting to compare him with a writer like [...] Amos Tutuola whose ideas of right and wrong on the whole seem to spring from more indigenous sources.”

Aside from these differences, they are in the same class. Beier claims that "as an observer of the Yoruba mind at work Fagunwa is still unsurpassed," but that "Tutuola rivals him as a story teller." Perhaps one reason both are excellent story tellers is that both learned to tell good stories by hearing good stories told. Perhaps another reason is that what Tutuola did not learn from oral tradition he learned from Fagunwa.

2. *BAH*.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 54. However, *Obumselu* (p. 57) says that "they both make extensive use of the material of folklore", and *West Africa*, October 2, 1954, p. 917, says that the tales Fagunwa heard in his youth "formed in his mind the basis of the fascinating adventure stories for which he is now so well known throughout Yoruba country, and Nigerian children in primary and secondary schools are learning the folk-lore of their country through this medium."
Certainly they share a lot of common ground. Tutuola has been praised for the way he uses "the paraphernalia of modern life to give sharpness and immediacy to his imagery." The classic example is his description of the terrible "red fish" in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*:

"Its head was just like a tortoise's head, but it was as big as an elephant's head and it had over 30 horns and large eyes which surrounded the head. All these horns were spread out as an umbrella. It could not walk but was only gliding on the ground like a snake and its body was just like a bat's body and covered with long red hair like strings. It could only fly to a short distance, and if it shouted a person who was four miles away would hear. All the eyes which surrounded its head were closing and opening at the same time as if a man was pressing a switch on and off" (pp. 79-80).

Arresting images such as the umbrella-like horns and the electrically operated eyes seem quite original, but Fagunwa had used images of this sort in his first novel. Here is part of Fagunwa's description of Agbako, an evil spirit:

"His head was long and large, the sixteen eyes being arranged around the base of his head, and there was no living man who could stare into those eyes without trembling; they rolled endlessly round like the face of a clock. His head was matted with hair, black as the hearth and very long, often swishing his hips as he swung his legs."

Fagunwa's manner of describing monsters appears to have made a profound impression on Tutuola, leading him to strive for similar hallucinatory effects.

Sometimes Tutuola will base an entire scene on something he has read in Fagunwa. In *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle*, for example, Simbi's first encounter with the Satyr closely resembles Olowo-Aiye's meeting with *Esu Kekere Ode* ("Little Devil of the Ways") in *Igbo Olodumare*, Fagunwa's second novel. The monsters themselves are very much alike. Here is Fagunwa's *Esu Kekere Ode*:

"He wore no coat and he wore no trousers; he had no hat on his head and tied no cloth round his loins, for it was with leaves that the wretch covered his nakedness. He had only one eye and that was wide and round like a great moon. He had no nose at all because his eye was so much bigger than the ordinary bounds of an eye. His mouth was as wide as a man's palm and his teeth were like those of a lion, and these teeth were red as when a lion has just finished eating a meal of raw meat. The sprite's body was covered with hair like a garment and resembled that of a European dog. A long tuft of hair grew on the top of his head. From his shoulder there hung a scourge and from

1. Moore, p. 43.
his neck a great bag which filled one with fear. This bag was smeared all
over with blood and on this blood was stuck the down of birds, while various
medicines were attached to its sides.”

Here is Tutuola’s Satyr:

“He did not wear neither coat nor trousers but he wore only an apron which
was soaked with blood. Plenty of the soft feathers were stuck onto this apron.
More than one thousand heads of birds were stuck to all over it. He was
about ten feet tall and very strong, bold and vigorous. His head was full of
dirty long hairs and the hairs were full up with refuses and dried leaves. The
mouth was so large and wide that it almost covered the nose. The eyes were
so fearful that a person could not be able to look at them for two times, especially
the powerful illumination they were bringing out always. He wore plenty of
juju-beads round his neck” (pp. 73-74).

Some of the descriptive details are different but a great many are
the same. Moreover, the action that follows is almost identical.
Fagunwa’s monster first interrogates the presumptuous earthling
that has trespassed on his domain and then boasts of past conquests:

“Who are you? What are you? What do you amount to? What do you
rank as? What are you looking for? What do you want? What are you
looking at? What do you see? What are you considering? What affects
you? Where are you coming from? Where are you going? Where do you
live? Where do you roam? Answer me! Human being, answer me in a
word! One thing is certain—you have got into trouble today, you have
climbed a tree beyond its topmost leaves, you have fallen from a height into
a well, you have eaten an unexpected poison, you have found a farmplot full
of weeds and planted ground-nuts in it [. . .]. You saw me and I saw you,
you were approaching and I was approaching, and yet you did not take to
your heels [. . .]. Have you never heard of me? Has no one told you about
me? The skulls of greater men than you are in my cooking pot and their
backbones are in the corner of my room, while my seat is made from the breast-
bones of those who are thoughtless.”

Tutuola’s less eloquent Satyr says the same:

“Who are you? What are you? Where are you coming from? Where are
you going? or don’t you know where you are? Answer me! I say answer
me now! [. . .] Certainly, you have put yourselves into the mouth of ‘death’!
You have climbed the tree above its leaves! You see me coming and you too
are coming to me instead to run away for your lives!

By the way, have you not been told of my terrible deeds? And that I
have killed and eaten so many persons, etc. who were even bold more than
you do?” (p. 75).

1. Whiteley, pp. 73-74.
2. Ibid., pp. 74-75.
Both Fagunwa’s hero and Tutuola’s heroine respond by standing their ground and hurling back boasts of their own. In the strenuous wrestling match that ensues the monster is subdued.

It is encouraging to note that Tutuola and Fagunwa differ considerably in their description of this epic struggle and its aftermath. Such differences indicate that Tutuola is not merely translating Fagunwa and that he is sensitive to the demands of his own narrative. They also suggest that even when he follows Fagunwa most faithfully he does so from memory rather than from a printed text, that instead of actually plagiarizing he vividly recreates what he best remembers from Fagunwa’s books, knitting the spirit if not the substance of the most suitable material into the loose fibers of his yarn.

Because Fagunwa occasionally makes use of material from Yoruba oral tradition, it is not always easy to tell when Tutuola is borrowing from Fagunwa and when from folktales. For example, both writers use motifs such as the “juju-compass” which helps travelers to find their way, the hall of singing birds which turns out to be a trap, the fierce gatekeeper who must be overcome in combat, and the deer-woman who marries a hunter. Tutuola’s handling of these motifs may owe more to Yoruba oral tradition than to Fagunwa. Indeed, it is conceivable that Tutuola seems closest to Fagunwa when Fagunwa is closest to oral tradition. Without folktale texts suitable for comparative study it is impossible to accurately assess Tutuola’s debts. But it can be assumed that Fagunwa’s books were among those which taught Tutuola how to weave a number of old stories into a flexible narrative pattern that could be stretched into a book. Fagunwa’s contribution to Tutuola should perhaps be measured more in terms of overall structure and descriptive technique than in terms of content. Tutuola followed Fagunwa’s lead and traveled in the same direction but he did not always walk in Fagunwa’s tracks.

Tutuola’s first two books, The Palm-Wine Drinkard and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, got both good and bad reviews. European and American readers were on the whole very enthusiastic, but a number of Nigerian readers were quite angry that books written in such a manner by a lowly messenger should receive so much publicity and praise abroad. The harshest criticism came from fellow Yoruba

1. Ibid., p. 71; BAH, p. 48.
2. Beier, p. 54; SSDJ, p. 109.
3. Beier, p. 52; MLBG, pp. 79-80; BAH, pp. 48-54.
4. Odu, 9 (September 1963), p. 37; MLBG, pp. 112-135; “The Elephant Woman”, Chicago Review, X (Spring 1956), pp. 36-39. Yoruba versions of this tale, which is known in European oral tradition as a “Swan Maiden” tale (Tale type 465 in the Aarne-Thompson index), can be found in FUJa, pp. 77-82, and Walker and Walker, pp. 11-16.
who tended to focus on Tutuola’s inadequate education, imperfect English, borrowings from Fagunwa and oral tradition, and his damage to the image of Nigeria in Europe and America. Babasola Johnson said that he and his friends who had read *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* had found it a “long tale written in a language we did not understand.” Johnson felt that the book “should not have been published at all” for it was

“bad enough to attempt an African narrative in ‘good English’ [but] worse to attempt it in Mr. Tutuola’s strange lingo [. . .]. The book ought to have been written in West African Patois proper, or in Yoruba, but then Mr. Tutuola’s literary tactics would have been exposed. Besides the fact that his stories are well-known, and have been published in one form or another, most of his plots were borrowed from Fagunwa’s *Ogboju Ode.*”

Olawole Olumide, in an article entitled “Amos Tutuola’s Reviewers and the Educated Africans,” attributed Tutuola’s decision to write in English to “daredevilry,” an “unflagging belief in himself,” and perhaps an awareness that he could not equal Fagunwa writing in Yoruba. I. Adeagbo Akinjogbin, after admitting that he had not read either of Tutuola’s books, went on to say that from reviews and descriptions of Tutuola,

“it is clear that the author is not an academic man and therefore I submit that it is not a high literary standard that has attracted so many European and American readers. What then? [. . .] Most Englishmen, and perhaps Frenchmen, are pleased to believe all sorts of fantastic tales about Africa, a continent of which they are profoundly ignorant. The ‘extraordinary books’ of Mr. Tutuola (which must undoubtedly contain some of the unbelievable things in our folklores) will just suit the temper of his European readers as they seem to confirm their concepts of Africa. No wonder then that they are being read not only in English, but in French as well. And once this harm (I call it harm) is done, it can hardly be undone again.”

Akinjogbin concluded that Tutuola’s books “are of no literary value [. . .], show no marks of possible future development and [. . .] are incapable of giving accurate information about Africa (or Nigeria for that matter).”

The Nigerian critics’ condemnation of Tutuola’s English and suspicion of European motives for praising his books are understandable. J. V. Murra points out that

“to a reader whose excellent English [. . .] is gained at the cost of neglecting his own tongue, mostly in mission schools with their distrust of the pupil’s spontaneity and imagination—Shakespeare and the Governor’s Annual Report

1. Johnson, p. 322.
are the proffered models in matters of style—all this recognition for ‘translating Yoruba ideas in almost the same sequence as they occur to his mind’ must indeed be a puzzle and a shock.”

In the early nineteen-fifties such recognition must have been a great embarrassment as well, for educated Nigerians in their growing eagerness for political independence were becoming acutely conscious of their image abroad. They wanted to give an appearance of modernity, maturity, competence and sophistication, but the naive fantasies of the Lagos messenger projected just the opposite image. Gerald Moore suggests that Tutuola aroused the antipathy of some of his countrymen by reminding them of a world from which they wanted to escape. To such readers Tutuola was a disgrace, a setback, a national calamity.

But to readers in Europe and America Tutuola was an exotic delight. Reviewers hailed The Palm-Wine Drinkard as “a fantastic primitive,” a book “possessed of an imagination that [...] seems to be progressively eradicated as ‘civilization’ advances.” The New Yorker went so far as to say: “One catches a glimpse of the very beginning of literature, that moment when writing at last seizes and pins down the myths and legends of an analphabetic culture.” In a similar vein, V. S. Pritchett claimed that My Life in the Bush of Ghosts “discernibly expresses the unconscious of a race and even moments of the nightmare element of our own unconsciousness [...]. Tutuola’s voice is like the beginning of man on earth.” The image-conscious Nigerians apparently had good reason to worry.

What fascinated many non-African readers of Tutuola was his style. V. S. Pritchett characterized it as “a loose, talking prose,” Dylan Thomas as “young English,” another as “naive poetry.” One critic even spoke with enthusiasm of the emergence of a “new ‘mad’ African writing” written by those who “don’t study the rules or grammar; they just tear right into it and let the splinters fly.” To native speakers of English Tutuola’s splintered style was an amusing novelty; to educated Nigerians who had spent years honing and polishing their English it was a schoolboy’s abomination.

2. Moore, p. 50.
5. Anthony West, New Yorker, December 5, 1953, p. 222.
7. Ibid.
Tutuola's later books were not as enthusiastically received in England and America as his first two. Reviewers complained that "Tutuola's idiom has lost its charm and spontaneity,"¹ that "his effects are a good deal more calculated than they used to be,"² that "there is none of the nightmare fascination of the earlier books,"³ that "one's attention flags here and there."⁴ Tutuola's writing now seemed repetitive and "deliberately childish" rather than "pleasingly child-like."⁵ Since Faber and Faber no longer took pains to cleanse his manuscripts of their grossest linguistic impurities,⁶ he appeared more inarticulate, more splinterly, at times almost unintelligible.

The Times Literary Supplement, in a review of Feather Woman of the Jungle, recalled the 'literary sensation' Tutuola's first two books had caused:

"There had been nothing quite like them before, and the strangeness of the African subject matter, the primary colours, the mixture of sophistication, superstition, and primitivism, and above all the incantatory juggling with the English language combined to dazzle and intoxicate. Novelty-seekers, propagandists for the coloured races, professional rooters for the avant-garde—any avant-garde, anywhere and at any time—were alike delighted, and none more vociferously than the thinning ranks of the Apocalypse."

But now, with the publication of his fifth book, which "very much is the mixture as before [. . . ], increasingly one's reaction is irritation, a desire to say 'So what?' in quite the rudest way, and to protest against what is dangerously near a cult of the faux-naïf."⁷ Clearly, Tutuola's novelty had worn off, and the pendulum of critical opinion had begun to reverse its direction.

Nowadays one of the commonplaces in African literary criticism is that Tutuola has been "either praised or blamed for the wrong reasons."⁸ Critics usually make a statement of this sort before throwing their own bouquets and brickbats at him, presumably for the right reasons. Certainly the European and American critics who credit Tutuola with far more originality, sophistication, or

3. V. S. Naipaul, ibid., April 5, 1958, p. 444.
5. Raven, p. 597.
6. PWD, p. 24, contains a 'page from the author's MS., showing the publisher's 'corrections'.' In a letter to the author dated May 1, 1968, Sarah Lloyd of Faber and Faber says: "Rather less correction was needed for Tutuola's later books as the author has become more practiced in writing." After MLBG Tutuola's books contain many more errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. For discussion of Tutuola's errors, cf. Collins, MS., pp. 159-185.
naiveté than he possesses are just as wrongheaded as the African critics who belittle him for writing ‘bad English’ or for borrowing from Fagunwa and Yoruba folktales. Between these two extremes there exists a large middle ground inhabited by old and new explorers intent on determining Tutuola’s rightful place in the African literary landscape. Many maps have been drawn, many claims and counter-claims made, but because Tutuola’s full dimensions are still not known and his limitations still the subject of lively debate, no firm boundary lines have been established. Since Tutuola’s works will no doubt continue to strike African and non-African readers differently for some time to come, it is not likely that the critical battle will end soon. No one denies that Tutuola is an extraordinary writer. The issue seems to be whether he is extraordinarily good, extraordinarily bad, or extraordinarily lucky.

Of course, it could be argued that he is all three. As a raconteur of bizarre Yoruba tales, he is remarkably good. As an undisciplined stylist whose imperfect grasp of English occasionally blocks effective communication, he is at times extremely bad. And as a naive artist who happened to create something original almost by accident, he is extraordinarily lucky. It is Tutuola’s rare combination of talent and ineptitude that continues to endear him to many non-African readers.

It could also be argued that in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, Tutuola has been extraordinarily influential. Gerald Moore doesn’t think so. He finds Tutuola’s books “far more like a fascinating cul-de-sac than the beginning of anything directly useful to other writers.”1 Certainly in terms of form and technique Moore is right. No one has tried to imitate Tutuola’s writing and no one probably ever will. He is not the sort of writer who attracts followers or founds a school. His achievements are unique because his background, imagination and linguistic equipment are unique. In this sense he is a literary dead end.

But it should be remembered that he was the first Nigerian writer to publish a full-length work of fiction in London and that he was a very prolific writer in a decade when Nigerian writers were rare. His second book was published eight months before Cyprian Ekwensi’s first novel, *People of the City.*2 And he had four books to his credit before Chinua Achebe had one.3 Moreover, Tutuola’s first works received immediate international recognition and acclaim; he was

1. Moore, p. 57.
2. *MLBG* was published on February 5, 1954. Ekwensi’s *People of the City* was published on October 11, 1954.
the first world-famous black African author.¹ If a Lagos messenger could become a renowned writer, why couldn’t a university-educated member of the Nigerian elite? “If he can do it, why can’t I?” One wonders how many would-be writers in Nigeria asked themselves this question. Surely Tutuola’s astounding success must have been a great spur to someone like Ekwensí, who already considered himself a writer.² Such success can easily awaken or reinforce another’s urge to write.

Equally important is the fact that Tutuola succeeded by breaking all the rules. He did not write ‘good English’. He did not try to create realistic situations and realistic characters. He did not bother with a plot. But blending the only narrative forms he knew—folktales, Fagunwá’s *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, the *Arabian Nights*, and Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—he created in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* a thoroughly African literary work that had to be accepted on its own terms. Some have called it a literary bombshell, but few have realized how beneficial an explosion it was for Nigerian letters. Not only did it make much noise and attract much attention, but it also swept away inhibitions and restraints, reduced real and imagined obstacles, and thus dramatically cleared the way for other Nigerian writers. Best of all it was unorthodox. And Tutuola’s writing has remained steadfastly unorthodox, despite his own best efforts to improve himself educationally in order to develop into ‘a real writer’.³ Tutuola’s books are *sui generis*. As the *Times Literary Supplement* remarked, “there had been nothing quite like *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* before.”⁴ If there has been nothing quite like them since, except his other books, this does not necessarily mean that Tutuola has had no influence on African literature. His originality set an excellent precedent for later writers who might otherwise have followed too parasitically the literary fashions of Europe.

Amos Tutuola is most important as an innovator. He was one of the first African writers to contribute something entirely new to Western literature. Although few of his innovations were conscious or calculated and many were borrowed from Fagunwá and Yoruba oral tradition, he deserves to be called the father of experimentation in Nigerian fiction in English.

¹ Peter Abrahams, a Cape coloured writer from South Africa, was also well-known at this time; by 1955 his early novels had been translated into eleven languages. Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal was known chiefly in France and French Africa.

