

**REALMS OF LIMINALITY: THE MYTHIC TOPOGRAPHY OF  
AMOS TUTUOLA'S *BUSH OF GHOSTS***

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Liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white [...] the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. The interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture* (1994: 4)<sup>1</sup>

Amos Tutuola remains one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of modern Nigerian literature. He may have never achieved the critical and popular recognition accorded to other major Nigerian writers, such as his contemporaries Chinua Achebe and the Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka, yet he holds a unique place in the history of African literature. Amos Tutuola was arguably the first modern Afro-Anglophone writer to achieve international recognition and critical acclaim, in the years following the Second World War, at a time when sub-Saharan African literature was virtually unknown outside of the continent. He is perhaps best known for his first two novels, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), which are also artistically his most successful texts. These two works will provide the focus for this article. Tutuola's early narratives initially generated considerable critical attention, which was to continue into the 1960's and 1970's, although since that time his work has tended to

attract little academic interest. What is changing this situation is that Tutuola's writings are again being recognized as a unique early example of a hybridized interface between Nigeria's pre-colonial oral folklore and literary modes of discourse. This article will examine whether Tutuola's early narratives also retain a particular relevance today in the light of the considerable interest, amongst postcolonial cultural theorists, in contemporary notions of liminality and identity in the colonial and post-colonial eras.

There is a growing critical consensus that has sought to position Tutuola's work, alongside that of his literary precursor Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa, at the beginning of a Nigerian literary tradition whose filiation stretches forward through the writings of Wole Soyinka and on to the contemporary works of Ben Okri.<sup>2</sup> One of the principal reasons for this renewed interest has been the seminal influence Tutuola's work has had on Ben Okri's literary development, and particularly for his Booker Prize winning novel *The Famished Road* (1991) and its sequel *Songs of Enchantment* (1993). It has only been relatively recently that Tutuola has been recognized as one of the principal pioneers of a literary style, of which Okri is said to be the leading contemporary practitioner, that has controversially come to be known as African magical realism, or as it has more recently been described, African animist realism.<sup>3</sup>

Although Okri is not a Yoruba, having been born to Urhobo parents, both he and Tutuola share a common resource in the form of a Yoruba narrative discourse which incorporates aspects of their traditional metaphysical belief-system and its syncretic blend of elements from the real, the esoteric and the supernatural. Traces of this indigenous cultural resource-base are evident in the way both writers regularly employ episodic

narrative structures and mythic landscapes populated with animist deities, supernatural beings, and the ghosts of the ancestors. An example of this commonality is evident in Tutuola's first published novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) which contains one of the earliest appearances, in Nigerian fiction, of what he describes as 'a half-bodied baby or spirit' (37), which has mysteriously gestated in the thumb of the Drinkard's wife. This grotesque child is immediately recognizable as the Yoruba figure of the *abiku*, a wilful spirit child who masquerades as a human baby, only to repeatedly die and be reborn, causing grief and mischief among the living. Okri, of course, has an *abiku* named Azaro as the supernatural protagonist and narrator of both *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. Although close affinities between Tutuola's and Okri's literary landscapes are evident, the differences between the two writers go beyond the fact that Tutuola was writing at a time when Nigeria was still a British colony and Okri writes from the decidedly contemporary perspective of a Nigerian living in the diaspora. Whereas Okri is a literary sophisticate who produces postcolonial texts which are ironic, complex and poetic; Tutuola, in contrast, had scant knowledge of the world of letters and his writings, therefore, tend to be blithely unaffected by literary conventions, giving the impression that his texts are closer to being transcriptions of the improvised performances of a traditional Yoruba oral storyteller.

Amongst all of the Nigerian writers of fiction to emerge in the 1950's, and this includes such influential figures as Chinua Achebe, Timothy Aluko and Cyprian Ekwensi, it was certainly the work of Amos Tutuola that was most evidently indebted to the oral folkloric strategies and traditions of his own culture. One of the defining debates in critical and theoretical writings on African literature has centred on the relationship between the continent's

indigenous oral traditions and its literary practices. Karin Barber is one influential theorist who has been critical of the tendency for idealized, essentialist approaches to oral cultures in much African literary criticism, where they are often regarded principally as unproblematic signifiers of 'authenticity' and 'authority':

In Africanist literary criticism, romanticism still surrounds the notion of 'orality'. Even in post-colonial critical discourses informed by a destabilising irony, 'orality' sometimes remains the last unexamined, essentialist concept, projected as an imagined antithesis of writing. It is a highly value-charged term, which can be accorded almost talismanic authority. The mode of orality, underlying and breaking through into written, Anglophone or Francophone texts, is what is said to give such texts their distinctive Africanity [...] It is treated as both a source - the origin and precursor of 'modern' literature - and a resource - a rich heritage or fund of themes, motifs, images, and techniques upon which the 'modern' author can draw (Barber 1995: 6).

Barber's analysis can be seen as a reaction against a general tendency amongst critical approaches to African literature, often prevalent in the 1970's and early 1980's, which portrayed modern African writing as having simply incorporated, or evolved out of, an oral discourse that is redolent with arcane cultural signifiers which embody the historical weight of traditional cultural identities. Barber alerts us to the inherent dangers of theoretical models which either attempt to delineate 'a universal cognitive and cultural divide between the "oral" and "literate"' (ibid. 7) or which define the relationship between the two as somehow symbiotic and unproblematic. She instead suggests that a resolution to these complex questions may partially lie in a number of recent interventions in the theory of orality and literacy which have:

offered accounts of specific, localised cultural configurations which show that reading and writing, like oral production and reception, take historically specific forms, and that almost everywhere, oral and written forms of discourse interpenetrate, sometimes antagonistically and sometimes in a mutually constitutive way (ibid. 7).

Critics of Tutuola's work have too often been content to note the close affinity between his literary narratives and Yoruba oral discourses without attempting to analyse the sometimes complex relationships which exist between his texts and the specific historical and cultural context in which he was writing. Heeding Barber's warnings about such value-charged terms, my discussion will attempt to address the problematic role of oral discourses in Tutuola's work by initially analysing how oral and written forms interpenetrate in his texts before examining how his narrative spaces engage with the wider context of Yoruba conceptual and symbolic ideations.

Tutuola was essentially a self-taught writer and his stridently non-realist, mythopoeic mode of storytelling often found its inspiration in the themes and motifs of the Yoruba's oral traditions rather than in any substantive non-African literary tradition. Yoruba culture had developed a number of extraordinarily sophisticated oral forms, including their *Odu Ifa* divination poems, *oriki* praise-chants, and the related form of *ijala* hunter's poems in praise of the deity Ogun which Wole Soyinka has described as 'the supreme lyrical form of Yoruba poetic art' (Soyinka 1976: 28). Although there is no evidence to suggest that Tutuola utilized these particular poetic forms in his work, it is generally accepted that he constructed his narratives around an interconnected series of autonomous episodes and fragments, many of which he appropriated from the Yoruba's expansive corpus of myths, folktales and religious lore, as well as from their extensive use of

riddles, proverbs and humorous stories. The difficulties with attempting to locate his narratives in relation to the Yoruba's oral corpus are twofold: firstly, not enough Yoruba folklore has been published to ascertain the true extent of his appropriations and/or inventions; secondly, Tutuola never wrote anything about his sources or working methods and he remained a diffident interviewee throughout his life. Ato Quayson has persuasively argued in *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (1997) that while Tutuola was heavily indebted to the themes, motifs and tales of the Yoruba storytelling tradition, his work has no direct parallel in that tradition:

The hallucinatory realms he elaborates and in which he places a superhuman hero in one quest or another are not mentioned by any of the critics of Yoruba storytelling traditions [...] It appears that the tales Tutuola sets down are an uncommon type of cautionary tales told to children which seem never to have crystallized into a definable genre. These normally involve the most frightening aspects of life outside the village community. Cautionary tales often draw on traditional travel narratives and on the experiences of hunters in the forests (Quayson 1997: 45 - 46).

Tutuola leavens this relatively unusual form of harrowing tale with a range of more easily recognized genres from his oral heritage so that his narratives evolve into concatenations of various elements from the Yoruba oral tradition and, therefore, cannot be easily categorized in one mode or genre.

Tutuola undoubtedly followed a form of narrative structure first employed by D. O. Fagunwa, in his stories written in Yoruba and published in the 1930's and 1940's. During this period Fagunwa was the best known writer of fiction in the Yoruba language. His sophisticated narratives drew inspiration from such diverse sources as The Bible, classical texts, Christian religious literature, as well as from Yoruba folktales. Tutuola's early tales all

adopt a similarly consistent narrative structure to Fagunwa's, with brief framing passages at the beginning and end of each story set in the real world, while the majority of the action takes place in the spirit-realm of the 'Bush of Ghosts'. All of his extended narratives display a similar pattern: a young individual or small group will leave the communal site of the village or town to undertake an adventurous quest in order to resolve a particular problem that effects their status in society. Tutuola, though, subverts the 'given' heroic stature of Fagunwa's more traditional protagonists and his work displays none of the strident Christian moralism and didacticism of his precursor. This is evident in the humorous opening lines of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, which describes his eponymous narrator's status within his family and society, together with his decidedly unheroic motivations and desires:

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-wine 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 I would be drinking till morning. So my friends were uncountable by

that time and they were drinking palm-wine with me from morning till a late hour in the night (Tutuola 1952: 1).

The death of the Drinkard's father is swiftly followed by the accidental death of his beloved palm-wine tapster, which precipitates a crisis in the social status of the pampered and indolent young Drinkard, and leads him to go in search of his dead tapster in the land of the 'Deads'. This passage also illustrates the anachronistic syncretism that is so often a feature of Tutuola's narrative landscapes. He locates the tale in an indefinite pre-colonial era when 'we did not know other money, except COWRIES', yet the narrative goes on to mention such seemingly incongruous modern artefacts as guns, bottles of wine, and a dancehall in which 'the lights [...] were in technicolours and they were changing colours at five minutes intervals' (Tutuola 1952: 68 – 69).

An almost identical narrative structure is adopted in Tutuola's second novel, when a young boy unwittingly escapes from the problems of a polygamous family life when a battle engulfs his village in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, which chronicles the protagonist's twenty-four year quest to escape from the bush and be reunited with his mother and brother. Tutuola's protagonists experience both great joy and extreme hardship in the 'Bush of Ghosts', invariably involving the machinations of the supernatural beings and ghosts who inhabit its surreal landscapes. The Tutuolan hero learns the mores and secrets of the inhabitants of the bush and returns home endowed with newly acquired magical powers and enhanced knowledge, thus transforming his social position or personal stature in the community. Tutuola's protagonists are all impelled by circumstances, or a desire for existential change, to abandon family and community to undertake an often



solitary and perilous journey in the 'Bush of Ghosts' which will eventually lead to a re-integration into society.

The anthropologist Margaret Thompson Drewal observes in *Yoruba Ritual* (1992) that the notion of 'the journey' is an important organizing symbol in Yoruba thought and religious belief. Drewal argues that it signifies both a physical movement or trajectory through the landscape and an ontological journey that engenders a transformation in the individual's understanding, in relation to their prior experience and knowledge. In Drewal's analysis, this conception of the ontological journey is central to the Yoruba's understanding of the meanings attached to their complex system of religious and divination rituals, whose performance processes embody many of the symbolic characteristics of the journey. Drewal quotes extensively from her conversations with a *babalawo*, a divination priest of the *Ifa* cult, who describes the ontological nature of the journeys taken by initiates and participants in their elaborate rituals performed in sacred spaces in the bush:

All people who go to the sacred bush (*igbodu*) benefit from it [...] for there is a belief - and it's an agreement between ourselves and Odu (the deity) within the sacred bush - that we are reborn ourselves. Even we priests, we are getting another rebirth. At every ritual, we are becoming new because we have something to reflect upon. We have something to contemplate during the journey, at the journey, after the journey. Our brains become sharper. We become new to the world. We think of everything. We *do* there, and we *see* there (Drewal 1992: 37 - 38).

Whereas anthropologists and ethnographers have tended to analyse the rituals of so-called primitive societies in terms of their social function, Drewal argues that this approach risks obscuring the processes of ontological transformation that individuals experience through their

participation in ritual performances. In the context of Tutuola's narrative structures, I would describe the journeys that all his protagonists undertake as ritualistic movements or performances which carry both connotations: as representations of the symbolic processes of initiation into the social and as individuated forms of regeneration and rebirth.

Some of the principal signifiers of ontological transformation in Tutuola's narratives are the numerous physical transmutations his characters accomplish, either willingly or through coercion. Anthropomorphism and shape-changing are a regular feature of Yoruba folktales and mythology and Tutuola's stories are similarly littered with magical transformations and episodes involving metamorphism. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* the young protagonist uses the magical powers of his ju-ju to change into a variety of birds, a lizard, an aeroplane and even a pebble; while in one disconcerting episode in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* the young narrator is captured by a town of ghosts who transform his torso into a pitcher, with only his grotesquely distorted neck and head sticking out. The numerous transformations that occur in Tutuola's stories problematize notions of individual identity which privilege autonomy and fixity within an immutable universe. In their place Tutuola employs a conception of the Self that embraces fluidity, transformation and heterogeneity within the unstable ontological space of the 'Bush of Ghosts'.

By leaving the village and entering the mysterious space of the jungle, the Tutuolan hero crosses the boundary or threshold between the real world and the realm of the sacred and the supernatural. The narrative space is delimited by the boundary between the settled community, with its ordered civilization and culture, and a contemporaneous spirit-realm inhabited by supernatural beings, the ancestors, and the gods. The division of the physical

landscape in Tutuola's narratives is analogous with a conceptual dichotomy in the textual space between the real and the esoteric, the secular and the sacred. Each new community encountered in the 'Bush of Ghosts' either manifests distinctively utopian or dystopian characteristics that sets it apart as a symbolic antithesis to the protagonist's own society and culture in the world outside the bush. The denizens of the spirit-realms exhibit strange physical traits and live in social structures with unusual cultural mores, languages and moral systems. As they travel through the 'Bush of Ghosts', Tutuola's heroes undergo an intense period of introspection in which they are compelled to question the fundamental assumptions of their own cultural identities before they emerge from the jungle, having acquired not only new knowledge, but a new state of being. The structures of his protagonist's ontological journeys take the form of ritualized initiations and are analogous to the symbolic frameworks of the 'rite of passage', when individuals undertake a ritualized transformation from one status, or form of identity, to another.

Anthropologists have been studying the symbolism of various classes of rituals across cultures for over a century, and particularly those characterized as 'rites of passage', which include various initiation rites and the rituals that attend the important times of birth, puberty, marriage and death. In Arnold van Gennep's seminal work of anthropology, *Les Rites de Passage* (1908), he argued that all rites of transition are marked by the three distinct phases of separation, transition and re-incorporation. These phases were conceptually defined by van Gennep as the pre-liminal, the liminal, and the post-liminal respectively (van Gennep 1908: 11). Between each phase is a powerful border or threshold which the initiate must negotiate by observing certain prescribed ceremonies or rites. During the intervening

liminal period, the state of the ritual subject is ambiguous as they pass through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Ato Quayson cites the work of van Gennep in his study of liminal thresholds in Tutuola's work, and it leads him to conclude that:

In the folktale form as elaborated by Tutuola, there is a recourse to a specific signification of the liminal phase. The spirit threshold in his tales is a zone of liminality which reveals a strong sense of anxiety attached to the crossing of the boundary between the real world and that of spirits [...] The liminal and/or marginal is not fully integrated into social structure and its affective status is one of danger because it is perceived as anomalous (Quayson 1997: 57).

I find myself in disagreement with Quayson's reading of the anxiety and danger attached to the crossing of thresholds in Tutuola's landscapes. The 'Bush of Ghosts' is certainly a dangerous realm for the living yet it also contains many benevolent and utopian communities which welcome travellers from the land of the living, and his characters often reside happily in these towns for a number of years. Tutuola's protagonists actually display an unusually ambivalent attitude towards crossing the boundaries between the realms of the real and the supernatural. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* there is no hint of danger in the young Drinkard's description of his initial entry into the realm of the 'Deads':

When I saw that there was no palm-wine for me again, and nobody could tap it for me, then I thought within myself that old people were saying that the whole people who had died in this world, did not go to heaven directly, but they were living in one place somewhere in this world. So that I said that I would find out where my palm-wine tapster who had died was.

One fine morning, I took all my native juju and also my father's juju with me and I left my father's hometown to find out whereabouts was my tapster who had died (Tutuola 1952: 9).

The Drinkard eventually escapes from the realm of the 'Deads' by turning himself into a pebble in order to skip across a river to evade pursuing ghosts, who he later realizes are forbidden to cross this particular boundary. Instead of signifying danger for the Drinkard, the crossing of this threshold actually signifies freedom and escape from danger. At the end of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* the returning protagonist is questioned by his family about his recollections of meeting his dead cousin in the 10<sup>th</sup> Town of Ghosts, and he has this to say:

'They asked me whether I feared him as he had died in our town here in my presence before I left the town, so I replied that if anybody enters into the Bush of Ghosts he or she would not fear for anything within a week he or she entered into it' (Tutuola 1954: 174).

Far from showing any anxiety at the thought of returning to the Bush of Ghosts, the narrator hints to his mother and brother that he would like to return there to witness the centenary celebrations of the 'Secret Society of Ghosts'. Although he is forbidden by his family from returning, he ends the narrative with these words: 'I dreamed a dream that I am present when this "Secret Society of Ghosts" is performing and I believe so, because my dream always comes true in future, however it may be. So you will hear about this news in due course' (Tutuola 1954: 174). In both the narratives I have been discussing, the central character's reach a point where they have become so accustomed to the ways of ghosts and supernatural beings that they ponder whether to give up on their desire to return home and instead

become denizens of the 'Bush of Ghosts' themselves, or as the protagonist in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* articulates the conundrum: 'To go back was harder and to go further was the hardest' (Tutuola 1952: 64).

In proposing that the liminal nature of the 'Bush of Ghosts' is more ambiguous than Quayson suggests, I will briefly refer to the influential theories of Victor Turner, who had further developed van Gennep's theories in his book *The Forest of Symbols* (1967). Turner made a detailed study of the symbolism attached to, and surrounding, the 'liminal persona' during performances of rites of passage ceremonies in traditional African cultures. He describes the symbolic characteristics of an initiate's liminal persona as being twofold:

They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified. In so far as they are no longer classified, the symbols that represent them are, in many societies, drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism, and other physical processes that have a negative tinge [...] The essential feature of these symbolizations is that the neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories [...] We are not dealing with structural contradictions when we discuss liminality, but with the essentially unstructured (which is at once destructured and prestructured) and often the people themselves see this in terms of bringing neophytes into close connection with deity or with superhuman power, with what is, in fact, often regarded as the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless (Turner 1967: 96 – 98).

It is within a theoretical framework of liminality, such as that suggested by Turner's analysis, that I would hope to locate the ambivalent significations of Tutuola's 'Bush of Ghosts'. The protagonists of his tales are akin to initiates, of uncertain status, journeying in an ambiguously-charged space

where they are confronted by other forms of being and contradictory social structures and cultural systems. Their status in the 'Bush of Ghosts' is continually being thrown into question and the Tutuolan hero eventually becomes 'neither living nor dead' and 'both living and dead'. The passage through this realm of liminality between identities brings those who undertake the journey into close connection with the normally unseen world of supernatural beings, the ancestors, and the gods. Tutuola's protagonists experience both great joy and extreme terror in the 'Bush of Ghosts' when they come into contact with 'the unbounded, the infinite and the limitless', yet they eventually emerge from this ambivalent liminal realm having experienced a fundamental transformation in their status and identity.

There has been considerable interest amongst contemporary theorists in postcolonial representations of liminality, and especially the symbolism associated with passages through the interstitial spaces between fixed designations of identity. I began this article with an epigraph written by Homi Bhabha, perhaps the most prominent theorist working in this area, who argued in *The Location of Culture* (1994) that representations of the liminal space are often a defining feature of postcolonial artistic practices. Bhabha named this in-between, liminal site of enunciation the 'Third Space', and goes on to state that 'It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance' (Bhabha 1994: 38). There is an implicit assumption in Bhabha's position which views liminality primarily as a product of the clash of cultures occurring in the colonial and/or post-colonial periods. My study of Tutuola's work has revealed that postcolonial tropes of liminality, in certain instances, can be traced back to the symbolic ideations of pre-colonial cultural discourses. It is clear that Amos Tutuola's 'Bush of Ghosts' is a liminal space that is not

necessarily predicated on the colonial or post-colonial clash of cultures, for it also represents an era in which the colonizing Europeans do not yet figure. The world of Tutuola's early narratives becomes an interstitial landscape, one which paradoxically exists in a mythopoeic space somewhere between the Nigeria of the 1950's and a contemporaneous spirit-realm, a syncretic site where 'traditional' and 'modern' worlds tentatively converge. In Amos Tutuola's work from the 1950's we encounter a uniquely prescient example of a liminal space, one that has its roots in the metaphysics of the Yoruba's ancient oral culture, yet it is a realm that has evidently inspired and influenced a number of contemporary African writers who have appropriated and reinterpreted these notions of liminality in the postcolonial novel.

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is taken from Bhabha's discussion of the work of the African-American installation artist Renee Green. This analysis provides one of Bhabha's most transparent explications of his notions of postcolonial 'liminality', 'identity' and 'hybridity'.

<sup>2</sup> See Kole Omotoso's article 'No Poor Relation' (1993), a review of Ben Okri's *Songs of Enchantment*, and Ato Quayson's *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (1997).

<sup>3</sup> The use of the term 'African magical realism' has been advocated by Brenda Cooper in *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* (1998) where she employs it in relation to the work of Ben Okri, Syl Cheney-Coker and Kojo Laing. The case for preferring the term 'African animist realism' is persuasively made by Ato Quayson in *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*.



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