Yoruba literature

Yoruba literature is the spoken and written literature of the Yoruba people, the largest ethno-linguistic group in Nigeria, and in Africa. The Yorùbá language is spoken in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, as well as in dispersed Yoruba communities throughout the world.

Contents

- 1 Writing
- 2 Mythology
- 3 Fiction
- 4 Theatre
- 5 See also
- 6 References
- 7 Sources

Writing

Yoruba did not have a common written form before the nineteenth century. Many of the early contributions to Yoruba writing and formal study were made by English-educated Anglican priests. The first Yoruba grammar was published in 1843 by Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther. He himself was of Yoruba origin. The written form of the Yoruba language comes from a Conference on Orthography from the Church Missionary Society in Lagos, in 1875. The first history of the Yoruba people was compiled by Reverend Samuel Johnson in 1897 who was also
of Yoruba origin. Thus, the formation of written Yoruba was facilitated by Yoruba people themselves despite the use of the Roman alphabet.

**Mythology**

Yoruba religion is intertwined with history, with Yoruba claiming to descend from divinities, and some kings becoming deified after their deaths. *Itan* is the word for the sum of Yoruba religion, poetry, song, and history. Yoruba divinities are called Orishas, and make up one of the most complex pantheons in oral history.

*Ifá*, a complex system of divination, involves recital of Yoruba poetry containing stories and proverbs bearing on the divination. A divination recital can take a whole night. The body of this poetry is vast, and passed on between Ifa oracles.

**Fiction**

The first novel in the Yorùbá language was *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmale (The Forest of A Thousand Demons)*, written in 1938 by Chief Daniel O. Fagunwa (1903–1963). It contains the picaresque tales of a Yoruba hunter encountering folklore elements, such as magic, monsters, spirits, and gods. It was one of the first novels to be written in any African language. Fagunwa wrote other works based on similar themes, and remains the most widely-read Yorùbá-language author.
Amos Tutuola (1920–1997) was greatly inspired by Fagunwa, but wrote in an intentionally rambling, broken English, reflecting the oral tradition. Tutuola gained fame for *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1946, pub 1952), and other works based on Yoruba folklore.

Senator Afolabi Olabimtan (1932–1992) was a writer, along with professor, and politician. He wrote Yoruba language novels about modern Nigerian life and love, such as *Kekere Ekun* (1967; *Lad Nicknamed* Leopard Cub), and Ayanmo (1973; *Predestination*).

**Theatre**

In his pioneering study of Yoruba theatre, Joel Adedeji traced its origins to the masquerade of the Egungun (the "cult of the ancestor").[^1] The traditional rite is controlled exclusively by men and culminates in a masquerade in which ancestors return to the world of the living to visit their descendants.[^2] In addition to its origin in ritual, Yoruba theatre can be "traced to the 'theatrogenic' nature of a number of the deities in the Yoruba pantheon, such as Obatala the god of creation, Ogun the god of creativeness and Sango the god of lightning", whose worship is imbricated "with drama and theatre and their symbolic and psychological uses."[^3]

The Aláàrinjó theatrical tradition sprang from the Egungun masquerade. The Aláàrinjó were a troupe of traveling performers who were masked (as were the participants in the Egungun rite). They created short, satirical scenes that drew on a number of established stereotypical characters. Their performances used mime, music and acrobatics. The Aláàrinjó tradition influenced the Yoruba traveling theatre, which was the most prevalent and highly developed form of theatre in Nigeria from the 1950s to the 1980s. In the 1990s, the Yoruba traveling theatre moved into television and film and now gives live performances only rarely.[^4]
"Total theatre" also developed in Nigeria in the 1950s. It used non-Naturalistic techniques, surrealistic physical imagery, and exercised a flexible use of language. Playwrights writing in the mid 1970s made use of some of these techniques, but articulated them with "a radical appreciation of the problems of society."[5]

Traditional performance modes have strongly influenced the major figures in contemporary Nigerian theatre. The work of Hubert Ogunde (sometimes referred to as the "father of contemporary Yoruban theatre") was informed by the Aláàrìnjó tradition and Egungun masquerades.[6] He founded the first professional Nigerian theatre company in 1945 and served in many roles, including playwright, in both English and Yoruba.

Wole Soyinka is "generally recognized as Africa’s greatest living playwright" and was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature.[7] He writes in English, sometimes a Nigerian pidgin English, and his subjects (in both plays and novels) include a mixture of Western, traditional, and modern African elements. He gives the god Ogun a complex metaphysical significance in his work.[7] In his essay "The Fourth Stage" (1973), Soyinka argues that "no matter how strongly African authors call for an indigenous tragic art form, they smuggle into their dramas, through the back door of formalistic and ideological predilections, typically conventional Western notions and practices of rendering historical events into tragedy."[8] He contrasts Yoruban drama with classical Athenian drama, relating both to the 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's analysis of the latter in The Birth of Tragedy (1879). Ogun, he argues, is "a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues."[9] He develops an aesthetic of Yoruban tragedy based, in part, on the Yoruban religious pantheon (including Ogun and Obatala).[10]
Akinwunmi Isola is a popular novelist (beginning with *O Le Ku, Heart-Rending Incidents*, in 1974), playwright, screenwriter, film producer, and professor of Yoruba language. His works include historical dramas and analyses of modern Yoruba novels.

**See also**

- Oriki

**References**


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- African literature: Yoruba literature Britannica Student Encyclopedia article

