amos tutuola; or interlanguage

Learning Objectives

In the sixth unit, the students will familiarize themselves with the work of one of the fathers of African writing in English – Amos Tutuola. Of all the writers introduced in the course, Tutuola’s work may feel the strangest and most distant to a European reader, partly because of his deployment of English suffused with Yoruba influences. It is this linguistic aspect of Tutuola’s work that will be thoroughly examined in Unit 6.

Keywords

* Authenticity, interlanguage, grammar

Time Required for this Unit

* Theory: 45 minutes
* Tasks: 90 minutes

The Theory

Amos Tutuola was termed “one of the great eccentrics in African literature” in a *Dictionary of Literary Biography* essay. Before his death in 1997, the Nigerian writer had enjoyed a somewhat accidental literary career as the author of nine epic novels whose bizarre, comical, and at times grisly events were indebted to his country’s Yoruba folklore. Tutuola possessed only a nominal formal education, but his works, beginning with 1952’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads’ Town,* were well received in European literary circles and hailed as outstanding examples of “primitive” literature in English. In [Nigeria](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/africa/nigeria-political-geography/nigeria), however, the reception was less than enthusiastic; though he was his country’s first internationally recognized writer, his works were derided as ungrammatical and poor examples of Nigerian culture.

Tutuola was born in 1920 in Ipose-Ake, Abeokuta, a Yoruba area of Nigeria that was situated some fifty miles from Lagos. The Yoruba are one of Nigeria’s main ethnic groups, along with the [Hausa](http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/anthropology-and-archaeology/people/hausa), Ibo, [Fulani](http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/anthropology-and-archaeology/people/fulani), and several others. At the time of Tutuola’s birth, the country was a British protectorate, and it remained so for the following forty years.

As a child, Tutuola heard Yoruba folk tales told by his mother and aunt and soon began to enjoy telling them to others himself. His father was a cocoa farmer, and for a time Tutuola was able to attend a school run by Salvation Army missionaries. When his father could no longer afford the tuition, Tutuola learned how to farm; he later took a job as a houseboy to a local government clerk, who then paid for Tutuola to continue his education. The man was transferred to Lagos, and Tutuola went with him, where he enrolled in high school.

As a young man, Tutuola learned the coppersmith trade and served in [Britain](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/britain-ireland-france-and-low-countries/british-and-irish-political-geography/britain)’s Royal Air Force during [World War II](http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/modern-europe/wars-and-battles/world-war-ii) as a blacksmith. He married Victoria Alake in 1947, with whom he had eight children. An attempt to begin his own blacksmith business failed, and so Tutuola took a job instead as a messenger and storeroom clerk for Nigeria’s Labour Department. To while away the idle hours at his desk, he began jotting down Yoruba tales.

He never intended to publish anything, but one day he contacted an English photography-book firm and inquired as to whether they would be interested in a book about Nigerian bush tales—illustrated with actual photographs of the spirits said to inhabit the forest. An amused editor replied in the affirmative and soon received a 76-page manuscript, in Tutuola’s hand, with photographic negatives that were snapshots taken of artistic renderings of the spirits. That work, *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of the Ghosts,* did not appear until 1982, well into Tutuola’s career, but it contained all the hallmarks of his fiction: its hero sets out on an epic journey fraught with peril, witnesses many ghastly events, and survives through his own intelligence or, failing that, through the intervention of a protective spirit.

In the early 1950s Tutuola came across an advertisement in a Nigerian magazine from the United Society for Christian Literature that listed some titles by African authors. He sent another manuscript to them, and while the editors there passed on publishing it themselves, they believed it imaginative enough to send to professional colleagues elsewhere. London’s Faber and Faber bought *The Palm-Wine Drinkard,* and upon publication in 1952 it became a minor sensation in Britain. A review by notable Welsh poet Dylan Thomas in the *Observer* newspaper did much to publicize the book, which went on to American and French editions soon afterward. Thomas termed it a “brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching story,” and he concluded that here Tutuola’s “writing is nearly always terse and direct, strong, wry, flat and savoury…. Nothing is too prodigious or too trivial put down in this tall, devilish story.”

The hero of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* admits his fondness for such alcoholic spirits and relates how his father once hired a tapster for him so that he might drink to his heart’s content. The tapster dies, and the narrator sets off in search of him. He indeed finds the Tapster in Deads’ Town, but then he returns home to a village that has been struck by famine. Heaven and Land have fought, and Heaven retaliates by withholding rain; the draught causes starvation, and the hero solves the problems and sets the world right again. Interspersed in this plot are encounters with strange creatures or spirits drawn from familiar Yoruba tales, such as a “beautiful complete gentleman” who lures woman into forest, then dismembers himself to leave only a vibrating skull; he had only rented the limbs from others in order to fool her. There is also a Red Fish, a monster with thirty horns and numerous eyes that close and open “at the same time as if a man was pressing a switch on and off.”

*“The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was praised by critics outside of Nigeria for its unconventional use of the English language, its adherence to the oral tradition, and its unique, fantastical characters and plot,” noted an essay on Tutuola in *Contemporary Authors.* “Nigerian critics, on the other hand, described the work as ungrammatical and unoriginal.” In an essay that appeared in *Research in African Literatures* two years after Tutuola’s death, the critic Steven M. Tobias explained some of the reasons behind the controversy. “Many educated Nigerians were highly incensed to discover that such a ’primitive’ book, written in broken English by a lowly messenger, was being lauded in European intellectual circles as the pinnacle of Nigerian culture,” Tobias noted. “In particular, with Nigerian political independence nearly in sight in the early 1950s, Tutuola’s world of bogey-men was one that most educated Nigerians would have liked to purge forever from global perceptions of their country.”

On the other hand, the chorus of praise for Tutuola and his literary debut included notable short-story writer V. S. Pritchett; others noted similarities with [Homer](http://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/classical-literature-biographies/homer)’s [*Odyssey*](http://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/classical-literature-mythology-and-folklore/classical-literature/odyssey)*,* Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress,* and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels.* Tutuola later said that he had read Bunyan’s work during his brief years in school.

Tutuola next wrote *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts,* published by Grove in 1954. The work is less a quest novel than an extended tale of the initiation rite: a seven-year-old boy narrates a story of how his abusive stepmothers turned him out of his home, and he then wanders in the bush during a dangerous tribal war era. Terror leads him into the Bush of Ghosts, and he spends 24 years in this spirit world-a place “replete with towns, kings, civic ceremonies, festivals, law courts, and even his cousin’s Methodist church,” noted Bernth Lindfors in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* essay. “He has experiences both harrowing and happy, and at one point he considers taking up permanent residence in the Tenth Town of Ghosts with his dead cousin, but he cannot bring himself to do it because he keeps longing to return to his earthly home.”

In *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle,* which appeared in 1955, Tutuola presented a cosseted but curious little girl who wishes to see how others live. Her family cautions her against such a venture, but she disobeys, and is then “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 into a rock,” listed Lindfors. A clever girl, Simbi sings her way out of trouble, for she can summon the dead for help with her voice. When she makes it back home, she rests but then sets off to warn her playmates about heeding their parents’ wishes.

Tutuola wrote three more novels over the next dozen years, ending with *Ajaiyi and His Inherited Poverty* in 1967. In 1979, he became a visiting writer at Nigeria’s University of Ife for a term, and a year later he published his seventh novel, *The Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town.* Its plot centers upon a hunter and his wife who cannot conceive a child; the husband undertakes a journey to find a cure for her, and six years later, after many sojourns and encounters with fantastical characters such as the Abnormal Squatting Man of the Jungle, arrives in Remote Town. He meets the witch-herbalist of the title and departs with a special broth for his wife but, famished from his journey, decides to drink some of it himself. A review from Edward Blishen in the *Times Educational Supplement* was typical of the praise that Tutuola’s novels generated in the West: “The language is wonderfully stirring and odd: a mixture of straight translation from Yoruba, and everyday modern Nigerian idiom, and grand epical English,” remarked Blishen. “The imagination at work is always astonishing.”

Tutuola published a collection of shorter fiction in 1990 as *The Village Witch Doctor and Other Stories,* all of which were drawn from Yoruba folk tales. Here “the same buoyant imagination is in evidence, the same fascination with comically grotesque fantasy worlds,” Lindfors found in his *Dictionary of Literary Biography* essay. “Tutuola, after more than forty years of writing, remains a very resourceful raconteur.” The writer died in Ibadan, Nigeria in June of 1997. He was 77 years old. Robert Elliot Fox, who shared an office with him at the University of Ife in the late 1970s, recalled his memories of Tutuola in an article for *Research in African Literatures,* and concluded by firmly placing him in the canon of twentieth-century African literary icons.

“Whatever else may be said about his work, it undeniably is part of the foundation of African writing—that part which is sunk most deeply in the substratum and psyche of African culture and imagination,” asserted Fox. “However high and wide the African literary edifice grows, we’ll keep coming back to Tutuola, not just as an historically important entity, but as a necessary counterpoint to other developments.”