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REVIEW: D. O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga*. *Being a Translation of Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*. Trans. by Wole Soyinka. Illus. by Bruce Onobrakpeya (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2013) PB \$14.95. 153 pp.

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It is fitting that this review of *Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga*, Wole Soyinka's English translation of *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa's premier Yoruba novel, comes on the heels of the continuing celebration of the 50th anniversary of Fagunwa's death. While not merely serendipitous, it is also important to note that Soyinka was the consummate keynote speaker at the august gathering of eminent scholars from Nigeria and the diaspora, with Governors Mimiko (Ondo State) and Fayemi (Ekiti State), and indigenous rulers in attendance in Akure, Ondo State, on August 8-10, 2013. To mark the well-choreographed celebration, planned and successfully executed by the Fagunwa Study Group, Chams Publishers PLC of Nigeria made available an ample supply of their newly re-issued editions of Fagunwa's five Yoruba classics. Book sellers also were on hand as well with Soyinka's English translations of both *Ogboju Ode* and *Igbo Olodumare*, Fagunwa's first and second novels.

Thus, the Fagunwa-Soyinka relationship is not a recent or superficial one. It began some fifty years ago when Soyinka resolved to translate all five Fagunwa novels (*Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, 1938; *Igbo Olodumare*, 1949; *Ireke Onibudo*, 1949; *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje*, 1954; and *Adiitu Olodumare*, 1954). Why he wanted to take on such an arduous and thankless task, particularly after the sour reception that greeted his first attempt, speaks to the bond he shared (as did many Yoruba writers and critics) with Fagunwa, the consummate Yoruba story teller and word-smith extraordinaire.

Ogboju Ode, the book from which Soyinka derived *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* was one of the first published novels in Nigeria in 1938. Fagunwa wrote the novel in response to a literary competition organized by Miss Plummer in 1936; the manuscript was acquired and published in 1938 by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Its instant success as much-needed literature for the emerging literate class as well as its popularity in school curriculum took it through several reprints, making it arguably the most widely read book among

adults and school children. *Ogboju Ode* (as well as Fagunwa's four other novels) had a universal appeal in Yorubaland, especially for their delightful and entertaining stories and equally for their deliberate moralizing.

Briefly, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga* captures the story of the adventures of a brave hunter, Akara-ogun, alias 'Compound-of-Spells,' in the 'Forest of Irunmale' (literally, **forest of four-hundred spirits**) which is told by an old man to a young scribe who serves the important role of amanuensis. Enjoining him to preserve the story for posterity, the old man narrator describes one harrowing experience after the other, including sometimes reckless battles with weird, fiery and malevolent foes such as the fierce-looking Eru (Fear); Ijamba (Danger); the sixteen-eyed Agbako; the half-bird, half-human Ogongo (Ostrich-King); and the benevolent Iranlowo (Help) who offers the hunter and his fellow hunters active assistance. After several such encounters, and having gathered much wisdom and experience, the hunters return home.

It was in 1960, while he was in prison during the Nigeria/Biafra civil war, that Soyinka made an English translation of *Ogboju Ode*, giving it the title: *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga*. It was first published in 1968 by Nelson, the same publisher of all of Fagunwa's Yoruba originals, three years after Fagunwa's untimely and tragic death by drowning in 1963. In addition to this 1968 original edition, three others have since followed: 1) the 1982 Thomas Nelson edition, published under its Panafrican Library series; 2) a 1983 U.S. Random House edition that has been out of print for a while; and 3) the present USA edition published on September 24, 2013 by San Francisco's City Lights Publishers under the slightly revised title, *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*. To date, these are the three most commonly referenced.

In comparing City Lights' 2013 edition with the Panafrica Library edition from which it must have been made, it appears at first glance that there is no remarkable difference between the two editions apart from the obvious difference in book-cover design. Even this City Lights' edition's front-cover illustration is immediately recognizable as the signature linocuts by acclaimed Nigerian printmaker, Bruce Onobrakpeya. In essence, it appears the City Lights Publishers replicated the Panafrica Library edition completely without any revision of any of the following parts: Soyinka's two-page Translator's Note; the twenty-four -word glossary; and the original illustrations, unchanged and variously placed. However, the only variance is in the title – the omission of the definite article – which catches the eye, calling for scrutiny. The first two editions were

titled "*The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*," while the City Lights edition is titled simply, "*Forest of a Thousand Daemons*." Without an updated Translator's Notes page or a footnoted explanation of this title variance, one is unsure if this is Soyinka's singular revision of the book or, perhaps, it is the publisher's conscious decision to eliminate the article, or could it be an editing error? Regardless, the omission of "The" could very well change meaning/interpretation of Fagunwa's intent and meaning, or Soyinka's intent (should this be an editing error). The main prose text remains the same.

Frankly, to have reissued a new edition of a text thirty-two years from its original edition without any updates and/or revisions to its "up-front" material, is surprising. By not doing so, both Soyinka and City Lights Publishers missed a golden opportunity to update the forty-five year old Translator's Notes, particularly in light of the hostile reception of the translation in 1968. Although a revised Translator's Notes or a brand new Preface which could have enhanced the latest edition of *Forest of a Thousand Daemons* does exist, it is given elsewhere. Soyinka, I think cleverly conserved energy and redeemed himself in the 16-page Preface/Translator's Notes to *In the Forest of Olodumare* (2010), his English translation of Fagunwa's second and much improved novel, *Igbo Olodumare* (1949).

Prior to the publication of Soyinka's 1968 full-length translation, random passages from Fagunwa's first three novels had been translated and published in journals by scholars such as the famous German critic Ulli Beier, and once, formally, by Fagunwa himself; however, it was Soyinka's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga* translation of *Ogboju Ode* that not only fully introduced D. O. Fagunwa and his Yoruba novels to the English-speaking literary world, but it also placed his works squarely at the center of the Amos Tutuola and modern African Literature canon discourse of the 1970's and 1980's. The unwelcoming reception and scathing criticism of the translation by Yoruba critics notwithstanding, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga* served as the "gateway" to Fagunwa's work for fifteen years, until other English (and French) translations of Fagunwa's novels came on the scene: the first by Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith's in 1983 – unpublished Ph.D. dissertation/translation of Fagunwa's second novel *Igbo Olodumare*, titled *The Forest of the Almighty*, followed in 1985 by yet another English translation of *Igbo Olodumare* titled, *The Forest of God* by Gabriel Ajadi.

In every story, Fagunwa dazzled his readers with extremely visual language

that brims with humor, rhetoric, turns of speech, inventiveness, bizarre imagery and much more. Thus, it is against this hallowed view, admiration, and reception of the works of this master rhetorician that writers who followed after him had to contend with. This then was/is the bar against which the aspiring translators of Fagunwa must measure their mettle. Soyinka was fully aware of this high standard which calls for nothing short of linguistic gymnastics, creativity, artistic confidence, and judgment combined, to match Fagunwa's language use.

However, despite Soyinka's own acclaimed strong verbal skills in English, skills for which he is lauded in his own right, Yoruba critics and Fagunwa diehards immediately greeted his translation of Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode* with cynicism for two major reasons – essentially what they called his “unduly free” translation. First, he was accused of taking undue liberties in translating the title which literally should have been “The Forest of Four Hundred Spirits,” and secondly, for mutilating the very essence of the novel which Fagunwa expressed in the first twenty-one lines of the novel. For instance, to Fagunwa's rather “cryptic” *Eyin Ore mi, bi owe bi owe ni a nlu ilu ogidigbo, ologbon ni i jo, omoran ni si i mo o*, Soyinka offered the following English translation: “*My friends all, like the sonorous proverb do we drum the ogidigbo. It is the wise who dance to it and the learned who understand its language.*” As a Yoruba-speaking reader, I accorded to that sentence high marks as a beautifully-phrased English sentence, worthy of emulation,⁷ when I first read this translation in 1975, but almost immediately scratched my head in confusion at the conflation of ogidigbo with Fagunwa's original ogidigbo. Then again, in the context of Soyinka's prefatory remarks and explanation of his choices and equivalences, all the elements and atmosphere of story-telling were resonant with the Yoruba original. The verbal ebullience, a significant characteristic of Yoruba prose, and indeed Fagunwa's forte, was fully sustained. Unfortunately, the translation of the Key word “ogidigbo” (a special Yoruba drum) as “agidigbo” (a modern Yoruba dance) and the different metaphoric import of each term remained puzzling even though Soyinka outright identified the difficulty of finding “the right sound of [Fagunwa's] language” as the translator's major challenge. And the fact that these two contentious points occurred at the very beginning of the translation made it suspect and fanned the close, critical reading frenzy.

Yoruba writers and critics, among them Abiola Irele, Ayo Bamgbose, Niyi Osundare, and Olaoye Abioye were quite vocal in their disappointment at Soyinka for allowing his ‘sensitive exploration of and adeptness at the English

language' to intrude and thus "betray" the voice of Fagunwa (Irele 176). In fact, unaccepting of all Soyinka's justification for his pattern of choices, Abioye (translator of all five Fagunwa novels into French) set himself the daunting task of scrutinizing the translation word-for-word and line-by-line, and coming up with a 15-page (unpublished) essay of evidence of what he outright called "mis-translations."

Despite Soyinka's justification that "'daemon' was closer in essence to Imale than gods, deities, and demons" translating 'Irun' of the novel's title as one-thousand rather than the literal four hundred and substituting 'daemons' for the culture-specific 'male,' literally spirits infuriated Fagunwa diehards who unabashedly were still venting their personal indignation about Fagunwa at the hands of profit-conscious Nelson Publisher who they claim was more "interested in having Soyinka on their list than in giving the wider world a taste of Fagunwa's creative genius" (Irele, 176). Thus, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* was dismissed as an 'adaptation' rather than a translation. I wondered back then if it was a matter of the translation being "too good" to be an appropriate literary translation of the original by virtue of its refinement of style. By way of explaining his translator's license, he chose "felicity of phrase rather than mere accuracy, beauty of style rather than plain fidelity."

With shifting attitudes over the years towards translation, other writers, scholars, and critics are understanding the what? the Why? and the How? of translation and are themselves venturing into the field of literary translation. Already, there are calls for translations and (re)translations as the interest in and for translations grow. And for all the criticism levelled at Soyinka and his so-called "adaptation" of Fagunwa, it is clear that his effort in *(The) Forest of a Thousand Daemons* has endured the many rounds of criticism, and contributed much to the translator's tool and task and how we negotiate the nuances of the art. If nothing else, Soyinka's effort remains a much-needed guide for future translations of Fagunwa's works. "Fagunwa is not an easy writer to translate," Soyinka wrote in the Preface of *In the Forest of Olodumare*, his 2010 English translation of Fagunwa's second novel, *Igbo Olodumare*, the sequel to *Ogboju Ode/(The) Forest of a Thousand Daemons*. Thus, in the final analysis, whether it is 'adaptation' or 'translation' or 'interpretation,' the translator's main concern/qualification is ultimately, a symbiotic relationship with the original text.

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