

CHAPTER I

Palm Wine, Amos Tutuola, and a Literary Gatekeeper



Once or twice it happened that I went in the late morning with my research assistant, a local young man, to Ungwar Rimi, a village just outside Kafanchan, to see a tapster who would just be coming down from the palm trees, and could serve the fresh harvest in a calabash. Unfermented, this was of course literally palm juice rather than actually palm wine. The palm wine bars in Kafanchan would be serving the stronger stuff. Although I once ran into a son of the local Hausa emir in one of them, they drew mostly a southern Nigerian clientele. The local drink around Kafanchan, popular not least at market places, was *burukutu*, made from Guinea corn or millet.

So it is appropriate that Amos Tutuola, the author of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), the first work of Nigerian fiction to really draw international attention, was a Southern Nigerian. (Meanwhile, it seems that the great *burukutu* novel remains to be written.)

My first copy of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was in Swedish, one of apparently about a dozen languages into which it was translated. Dated in 1961, it was launched in a new book series of “contemporary novels from the entire world,” each with an introduction by a well-known Swedish literary figure, Artur Lundkvist, with a reputation for knowing about more faraway literatures. In this instance, the introduction does not at first seem so promising: “About *Amos Tutuola* from Nigeria not much is known. It appears he is a negro of the peaceful Yorouba [*sic*] people . . .” (my translation). But as it continues, Lundkvist shows his fascination with Tutuola’s story, noting themes and high points, and making an effort to mediate culturally between the text and its Swedish readers. Some of the traces of social critique that Lundkvist detects seem a bit Borealist, and might have puzzled Tutuola if he had ever come across them.

The palm-wine drinkard's story, told in the first-person singular, is a weird tale of encounters and events, with people and unpeople. The drinkard starts out as a rather spoiled young man, presented with a plantation of 560 thousand palm trees by his father, with an expert tapster to go with it. Indeed, he spends his days drinking, but there is enough for a great many people to start dropping by to share the liquid produce.

Then disaster strikes: the father dies, and a little later that tapster falls down from a tree and dies, too. There is no palm wine, and those thirsty friends are gone. So the drinkard embarks on a quest to find his tapster, in the Land of the Dead, to persuade him to come back. That becomes a very extended adventure. He brings all his *juju* tools that his father left behind, and occasionally they became useful: when it is practical, for example, to transfigure into a bird. For a time he works for a man who had lost his beautiful daughter. She had had a stall in the market place, but had been drawn to an extraordinarily attractive man, and had followed after him when the market closed for the day. But how surprised she was when she found that along the way he returned all his beautiful features, one by one, to their rightful owners, and paid rent for them! In the end he had only his skull left, and went back to his frightening community, where everybody was only a skull. The palm-wine drinkard fights the skulls and liberates her, and her father therefore allows him to marry the girl. And so, continuing through the Land of the Dead, there are now the two of them. Eventually, after more striking experiences, they find the dead tapster, rather more alive and well in this special territory (although walking only backward), but they are told that there is no way he can come with them—once you are a denizen of the Land of the Dead, that is where you stay.

The two of them, however, do manage to get out—as they had never really died, they had just been there as visitors. They also bring a wonderful egg that the dead tapster had given them as a farewell gift. Back in the drinkard's home town, life could return more or less to normal. (Returning from the Land of the Dead, perhaps the drinkard was already a been-to of sorts?) There had been a terrible hunger, however, with millions of people dying, and others reduced to eating their own children. That wonderful egg helps, so in some miraculous way or other, there is soon food for everybody. Moreover, after a long period of drought, causing famine, the rains come back. And around there, the palm-wine drinkard's story ends.

When *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was published in England, there was an enthusiastic review in *The Observer*, the quality Sunday newspaper,

by Dylan Thomas, and that probably contributed to its quick success: “This is the brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching story, or series of stories, written in young English by a West African . . .”¹ The fact that I first encountered *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in Swedish, however, as *Palmvindrinkaren*, meant that I would not be immediately aware of one fact that quickly caused controversy in Tutuola’s home country. Dylan Thomas had it as “young English,” and indeed Tutuola’s language of writing was not exactly Standard English. More or less highly educated Nigerian contemporaries, anxious not to deviate noticeably from correct form, were inclined to look down on Tutuola’s somewhat creolized Yoruba English. Moreover, some anxiety might be involved. Would such idiosyncrasy of style actually fuel a belief among an overseas readership that Africans were still only half-educated semiliterates?

Tutuola had indeed had rather little formal schooling. He came from a family of cocoa farmers, became at age seven the servant of an Igbo man who, instead of paying him, put him in a Salvation Army primary school. He continued from there to an Anglican school but left after altogether six years of education, trained as a blacksmith, and worked as a breadseller and a messenger.² But he had learned to write, and so he went on to explore what he could do with it. Later writers, Nigerian and/or Afropolitan, such as Ken Saro-Wiwa and Uzodinma Iweala, have made a point of engaging with styles of “bad English” more playfully. Some sixty years later, too, finding a website named BBC Pidgin, catering to a Nigerian audience, one could wonder who had the last laugh.³

Abroad, readers tended to invent their own Tutuolas: one finds the Yoruba heritage, another finds Jungian stereotypes, yet another the globally recurrent mythological themes of a Joseph Campbell.⁴ Perhaps a temporally fitting metaphor for the variety of imaginative readings of a mid-twentieth-century body of work is that Tutuola’s writings offer readers a Rorschach test, with the polysemy of given inkblot forms meeting their personal minds.⁵

And then some twenty-first-century readers might place *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in a fantasy genre. As it turned out, it would not be the last time the work of a Nigerian writer has crossed the borders of conventional genres.

Amos Tutuola continued to write, yet nothing could equal the success of his first published book. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle* (1955), and *Feather Woman of the Jungle* (1962), following in fairly quick succession, could all be good reads, but did not have the massive surprise value of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Still he continued to write. His last novel, *Pauper, Brawler and Swindler* (1987) came out thirty-five years after his first, with the same publisher, Faber and Faber, in London's Bloomsbury. (And there would be yet another collection of stories.) While writing, he held a rather modest storekeeper job at the government radio station in Ibadan, which is where I went to greet him once in the early 1960s. He came out to see me in a green shirt and shorts, markings on his cheeks, listening seemingly anxiously, speaking eagerly, his voice turning to falsetto as he replied. In the early 1980s, he made a brief visit to the land of the academics, as an associate of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. He died in 1997, aged 77. The manuscript of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, as well as Tutuola's eyeglasses and driver's license, are now in a rich collection of Africana at the University of Texas.⁶

Another twenty years later, and some two-thirds of a century after *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* appeared, there was Francis B. Nyamnjoh's *Drinking from the Cosmic Gourd: How Amos Tutuola Can Change Our Minds* (2017). Nyamnjoh is a Cameroonian anthropologist, at the time of writing a professor at the University of Cape Town, publishing extensively and at times controversially in his academic field, but also writing novels, and, moreover, running his own publishing house out of Bamenda, Cameroun.⁷ The book has a brief foreword by Richard Fardon, a British anthropologist with extensive experience of northeastern Nigeria. Fardon perhaps makes a gesture toward taming the thought that has gone into the body of the text, but mostly he forewarns of the academic fireworks on the pages that follow.

Nyamnjoh brings a wide-ranging set of intellectual tools and baggage to his inquiry into the enduring meaning of Tutuola's work. Frantz Fanon, Pierre Bourdieu, and V. S. Naipaul are all there. So are J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter bestsellers, and Roald Dahl. African authors are also on the scene: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek, Ngugi wa Thiongo. Nyamnjoh's own discipline gets occasional attention, too, and he cites another writer who compares the palm-wine drinkard, exploring the Land of the Dead, to an amateur ethnologist (Rooney 2000: 82). A chapter is devoted to considering the cultural affinities between Tutuola's Yoruba-based imagination and Nyamnjoh's own homeland in the Cameroon grasslands. The product, for anyone examining the results of Nyamnjoh's investigative endeavor, is impressively rich.

Not least, however, does Nyamnjoh emphasize some key concepts for an understanding of human life that can be drawn out of Tutuola's work, and that he feels may serve to revitalize contemporary world

views and academic thought. Tutuola is a precursor to recent debates on flexible and fluid categories, social and biological bodies. There is conviviality—a term elsewhere put to somewhat different uses, but here referring to what has also been termed sociality, the basic fact that human life is relational, rather than solitary or individual. There is incompleteness: “To seek or claim completeness is to ignore, to one’s peril, the reality of imperfection and impurity as the normal order of things and being” (Nyamnjoh 2017: 21). All in all, Tutuola offers “a basket of possibilities for exploring and entertaining conversations with consciousness” (Nyamnjoh 2017: 27). It celebrates what it means to be a “frontier being,” at the crossroads and junctions of multiple influences and potentialities. Frontier Africans, straddling identity margins, bridging varied divides, will “recognize and provide for the interconnections, nuances and complexities in their lives made possible or exacerbated by technologically inspired and enhanced mobilities and encounters” (Nyamnjoh 2017: 3). Perhaps we can sense here some particular intellectual challenges to Afropolitans, as frontier beings?

So much for now for Amos Tutuola and his commentators. But, in fact, the Swedish writer who contributed that introduction to the translation *Palmvindrinkaren* deserves some attention as well, in the context of a literary history of Nigeria. Artur Lundkvist was born on a small farm in southern Sweden. But he grew up to turn left politically, and to travel in much of the world, an unusual cosmopolitan for his time. In 1951, *Negerland*, his account of a journey through Africa, was published (in Swedish, of course); the journey would seem to have occurred in the late 1940s. In large part Lundkvist traveled overland, crossing the Sahara by French colonial bus services, passing Agadès—somewhat the same route as taken by West African refugees in the twenty-first century, but in the opposite direction. Arriving in Nigeria, he stayed at the rather unassuming Hotel de France in Kano. (I remember it was still there some thirty years later.) In front of the hotel, he could rent a bike to ride around town and along the mud walls of the old city. Despite the human diversity, his strongest visual impression may have been the flocks of bats at dusk and the white owl he found in his bedroom one night.

From Kano to Lagos he took the train. Secluded from the mass of local third-class passengers, he would share his compartment with a Greek and an Indian, both in local businesses; the Greek was somewhat ill at ease with having the Indian there, as he considered him “colored.”

Lundkvist’s Lagos was a dazzlingly lively place:

Toward the evening the houses of the Whites wake up, all doors and windows are opened, family and social life begin on verandahs and

balconies. They play cards forever, everywhere, with a brief break now and then for a drink and a cigar. The women play, too, or lift their arms easily over an embroidery, or hurry around in the rooms under the lit lamps. Occasionally a piano is heard: a spasmodic musical craft. But you seldom see anybody reading. They sit there, encapsulated in their circles of electric light, inaccessible above the wallowing dark city. (Lundkvist 1951: 114)

On the other hand, there are the varieties of locals:

There are the Black gentlemen in shining cars, infinitely superior as they sweep past a poor pedestrian European. There are mission-type Negroes, in dark dress, struggling to be pious, stiff from idealist self-consciousness. There are ragged hooligans, with insolent eyes and big mouths, unwilling to get out of the way of anything. There are snobs in European, Islamic, Indian or African attire, deeply contemptuous of any style imitation except their own. There are demobilized jungle soldiers from Burma, who have learnt to whistle after White women, too, and to shout American impertinences. (Lundkvist 1951: 115)

He could observe a ritual feast, and a street brawl, and a lively sex trade, and the crowd gathering around a wizard or a political agitator. The street scene included animal life: goats, pigs, tame monkeys, snakes, parrots, turtles. (Perhaps the farm boy Lundkvist took special notice of animals in the streets, as matter out of place.) In the evening, life in the alleys might quiet down. But the morning would start early, with Muslim prayers from the rooftops mixing with the loud cries of a multitude of roosters.

One could see parallels between Lundkvist's portrayal of Lagos and that offered by Nigerian novelists some years later—although for him, the colonialist presence was still conspicuous. The etiquette of race relations was based on strict hierarchy, as well as mutual incomprehension. The British, in administration and in business, would withdraw to their own neighborhoods after the working day was over, for card games or whatever. Some evidently preferred colonial expat living to being in a Britain that had come under a post-World War II socialist government.

From Lagos, this traveler had side trips to Ibadan and Abeokuta, sizeable cities but still inhabited mostly by farmers. The Public Relations Department of the colonial administration had provided him with a car and a chauffeur. In Abeokuta, he was received by the resident high-level colonial administrator, who lived on a hill in his out-of-the-way villa, but could still hear the native drumming going on forever, every night. Lundkvist was also taken to a school, where he had a long interview with an eloquent, intensely nationalist female

head teacher. Nowhere in his reporting on Nigeria did Lundkvist name names. People remained types, rather than individuals. But there is every reason to recognize this teacher as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti—indeed a prominent political figure, in party politics and as the leader of a women’s movement, although later also known as the mother of Fela Kuti, the Afrobeat musician. At the time of Lundkvist’s visit in Abeokuta, Fela would have been about ten years old. Some thirty years later, in 1978, when Fela’s famous compound, the Kalakuta Republic in Lagos, was stormed by soldiers, his mother, who was staying with him, suffered injuries from which she eventually died. Abeokuta, of course, was also Amos Tutuola’s hometown, but at the time of his visit there, Lundkvist certainly did not know of that as-yet-unpublished writer.

Returning to Lagos from his Yorubaland excursion, Artur Lundkvist would next depart by boat for Matadi in the Belgian Congo. The Nigerian part of his African journey was over.

In his book there would be about sixty-five pages about Nigeria, as far as I know never translated from Swedish into any other language. As in the case of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, one could again sense a potential language controversy: a twenty-first-century reader of *Negerland* might be annoyed by the title, and find it disconcerting that even this enlightened, radical writer is so immersed in colonial discourse—not outright racist, but using a vocabulary of primitiveness and backwardness as a matter of course. This was the time of old-style colonialism’s last hurrah, but its echoes infiltrated far-away Swedish discourse as well. Lundkvist could not entirely escape it.⁸

He would go on to prominence in Swedish literary and public life. When he was awarded a Lenin Prize by the Soviet Union, he denied he was ever a Communist. Elected as a member of the Swedish Academy, he was widely understood to be its unofficial expert on more exotic literatures. To a degree, he became thereby a gatekeeper for the Academy’s awards of Nobel Prizes in literature. This seems, for one thing, to have involved a long and successful campaign to hinder a prize for Graham Greene—who was, of course, another traveler in Africa. Did he have a part in the award of a prize to Wole Soyinka in 1986? It is difficult to say, as Academy proceedings remain secret for a very extended period. He had by then long been ill, but it seems likely that he had been involved in the groundwork, as awards are not made in a hurry. Artur Lundkvist died in 1991. His first farm home is now a museum and a guest house for writers.

Then, finally, almost fifty years after Tutuola’s palm-wine drinkard and his search for his lost tapster, came another palm-wine tapster, in the short story “What the Tapster Saw,” included in one of Ben Okri’s

(1999) collections. This tapster tied three empty gourds to his bicycle and rode out toward the palm trees. Times had changed, we sense—he came to a signboard that read “DELTA OIL COMPANY: THIS AREA IS BEING DRILLED. TRESPASSERS IN DANGER.” But he continued on to a cluster of palm trees that looked promising. He climbed one of them, but fell. As he woke up, he started having strange experiences. He met three turtles, for example, one of which had the face of a friend of his, an herbalist named Tabasco. Witch doctors tried to prevent torrential rains from falling in an area where the oil company wanted to drill, but as they failed, the company flew in an expatriate with explosives left from the last war, and that somehow worked. The tapster also saw people being shot: in coups, in secret executions, in armed robberies. Other unusual things happened, but eventually he ran into Tabasco, who told him he had actually been dead for a week. So here again we have been in the Land of the Dead.

Notes

1. Dylan Thomas’ review, “Blithe Spirits,” was in *The Observer* on 6 July 1952. Before that, as the Tutuola manuscript arrived in London, the response in local publishing circles had apparently been happy-puzzled. I learned from Bernth Lindfors’s (2010) careful mapping of consultations between editors and Africa experts that the advice of Daryll Forde was also sought, and was favorable; Forde was a professor of anthropology at the University College London, and the director of the International Africa Institute (again, Lord Lugard’s creation, in 1926). He had also done field research of his own among the Yakö, at the extreme southeastern corner of Nigeria. We encounter him again early in chapter 12. I was Forde’s guide in Stockholm for a day some time in the early 1960s, when he was in town for a meeting connected to the International Africa Institute. At the Institute, Forde long had the administrative assistance of Barbara Pym, doubling as a well-known novelist, who has offered not entirely flattering portrayals of anthropologists in a couple of her books—*Less than Angels* (1955) and *An Academic Question* (1986).
2. I have the information about Tutuola’s early life from the current *Wikipedia* entry. Perhaps his Abeokuta origins and his early schooling contributed to the fact that he took to writing in English—he interacted with an Igbo master, and his schooling was probably largely in English. And he was not a Lagos Yoruba. In Lagos there had already been a lively Yoruba publishing scene for many decades (see, e.g., Barber 2012).
3. See a *New York Times* report by Freytas-Tamura (2017).
4. One rather early commentator, Gerald Moore (1962: 42), writes about Tutuola that “he is something much rarer and more interesting than another novelist; he is a visionary, and his books are prose epics rather

than novels.” Moore had been an extramural tutor in Igboland in the 1950s; in the acknowledgments for his book he thanks Ulli Beier (see chapter 6) for his work and for stimulating conversations.

5. In a somewhat wider context, one could remember that in the 1960s and 1970s, there was an upsurge of interest among anthropologists and historians in the supposedly great divide, with regard to thought and communication, between societies depending on orality only and those who had come to combine it with literacy. One book by the British anthropologist Jack Goody, who had a major part in initiating this field of scholarly debate, had the provocative title *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977). Goody had a long-term intensive involvement in West African studies—primarily in the Gold Coast, turning into Ghana, but one can hardly doubt that he was aware of Tutuola’s writings. Yet, perhaps in his own dealings with the topic, he may have avoided transgressing the academic boundary between anthropology and comparative literature, and so Tutuola’s creative brokerage between orality and writing gets no mention here. Goody, a scholar displaying his intellectual creativity in many areas, was a professor of social anthropology at the University of Cambridge, long a center of West African anthropology. In the introduction we encountered Keith Hart and G. I. Jones, both Cambridge anthropologists, commenting on potential or real linkages between anthropology and fiction. We can note later, in chapter 13, that this was also where Ibrahim Tahir would earn his doctorate. One gets a sense of its importance in Goody’s (1995) overall account of British anthropology in colonial and early postcolonial times, with research in Nigeria discussed in various places, and in a more autobiographical account (Goody 1991).
6. I am grateful to Bernth Lindfors for informing me about the holdings of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin—including also, for example, handwritten materials by, or involving, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka.
7. Some years earlier, Nyamnjoh (2011) commented on the troubled relationship between anthropology and African intellectuals, suggesting that fiction could play a mediating role; his example is a novel of his own, on “bushfallers,” somewhat like a latter-day Cameroonian counterpart of “been-tos.”
8. One may want to compare it with Geoffrey Gorer’s account of a journey mostly through France’s West African territories in the mid-1930s, in *Africa Dances* (1945)—a mixture of sometimes astute observations with frequently bizarre interpretations.

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