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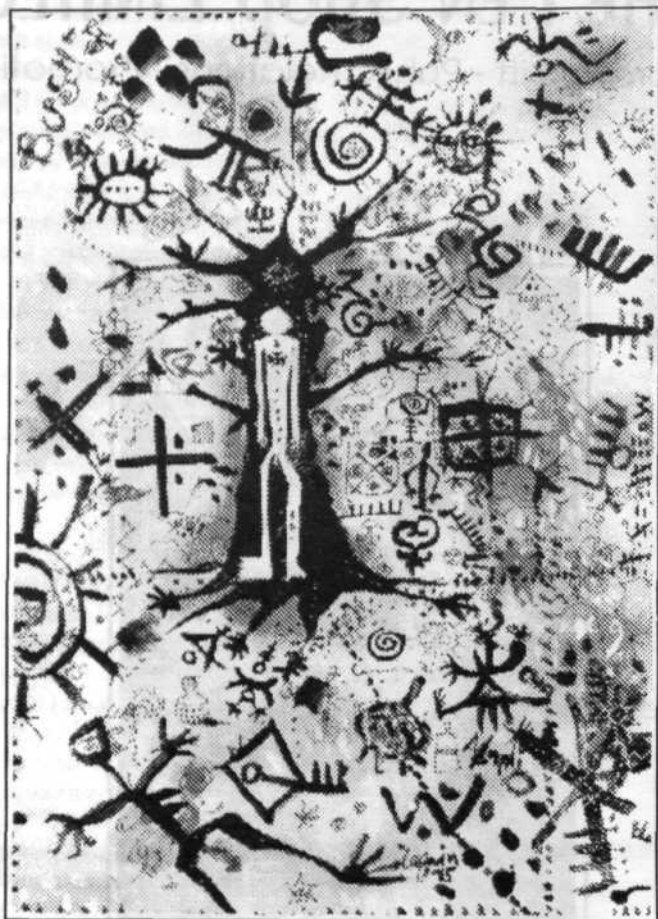
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REJECTED AMOS TUTUOLA'S STORY

SUNNY ORIBIOYE



Tutuola

equal claim to being Nigerian's entry, by a team that obviously had its fair share of Nigerians.

The selection of Tutuola's work has understandably come under fire from both the National Association of Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP) and the minister of information, Dr. Walter Ofonagoro. NANTAP at its recent bi-annual convention held to elect new officers at Ibadan in May criticised the adaptation, suggesting that the country could turn in a 'better' entry for its size and image.

Approaching the matter from a strictly nationalistic view point, Ofonagoro, a copious writer on Nigerian history who has of late been waging an unrelenting battle against perceived 'external detractors' argued for a production that takes into cognisance the nation's experience with colonialism and imperialism, such as *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, Ola Rotimi's saga of the bitter struggle waged by the late Benin king against the British empire in the dying days of the 19th century.

And of course, it is easy to see why these personalities take umbrage at the play, evidently because of the associations and images called up by 'bush' and probably 'ghosts.' A further examination of the objectives of 'Africa '95', one of which is to highlight the continent's artistic and cultural achievements and evoke a sympathetic understanding before the West against the backdrop of endless internecine conflicts leading to bloodshed, might also confirm the whiff of a suspicion. Which is that since we are the ones holding out the begging bowls, we might as well present 'something' that tallies with their notion of our art so-as not to offend their sensibilities.

My Life, according to Bruce Onobrakpeya, the renowned print-maker who drinks from the same creative fountains as Tutuola and who vigorously defends Tutuola's vision, was chosen by the 'Africa '95' co-ordinating body in London and arranged with playwright Bode Sowande, artistic director of Odu Themes Meridian. 'It's not for us to complain or say no,' Onobrakpeya asserts.

Watching the performance of Bode Sowande's adaptation of Amos Tutuola's novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, in the Agip Hall of the Lagos Muson Centre the other night, one couldn't have failed to be struck by the realisation that the play, scheduled for performance in London in September as part of the 'Africa '95' arts showcase, exposed itself to charges of subtle alignment with Western notions of African art.

The piece is vintage Tutuola, cast in the form of his many moral fables drawing extensively on a repertoire of African folklore and myth. The director of the adaptation, Bode Sowande himself makes no pretence about this when he says in the blurb of the brochure advertising it, 'The morality running through Tutuola's books is man's quest for pilgrim's rest, away from ignorance and spiritual darkness. In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* of Tutuola the protagonist wanders in a spiritual wilderness for over 20 years not knowing that his exit home has always been right under his nose.'

It is all the more intriguing, however, that the adaptation was selected from a welter of literary works by Nigerian writers which had an

Onobrakpeya sees nothing wrong with *My Life* as a piece of literature or art work, and discloses that he is even considering a visual extension of Tutuola's themes by replicating them in his familiar medium of communication. The book has been translated into many European languages, and Tutuola is a favourite with the British audience, he says.

Not so the Nigerian. Tutuola has become the quintessential prophet who is shunned by his own people but accepted and lionised by foreigners. When his first novel, *The palm wine Drinkard* was first published by Faber in 1952, it was enthusiastically accepted outside. It received an equally enthusiastic review from the poet Dylan Thomas in *The Observer* (of London).

Introducing the book, Thomas wrote: 'This is the brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching story... written in young English by a West African...' Tutuola's exotic language caught the fancy of Thomas and his countrymen. But Tutuola was far from receiving acclaim from his own, for as Eldred Jones wrote in 1966, 'Many West Africans could not share the general enthusiasm because they feared that Tutuola's language would be taken as being representative of West African Eng-

lish and also because recognising...the folk stories which Tutuola so grotesquely embroidered, they gave his imagination less credit than would someone who came fresh to these fantastic adventures.'

Tutuola went on to write ten other novels. That he has been accepted and celebrated by his contemporaries both at home and abroad puts the quality of his work beyond doubt. But it is in the light of the country's recent nationalistic posturing that we can begin to understand the government's attitude.

However, if the authorities feel Nigeria must make a nationalistic statement through 'Africa '95' and therefore are predicating sponsorship of some aspects on the presentation of such a performance, Onobrakpeya says it is not too late to do so as *My Life* also contains aspects that can be played up to that effect. 'Colonialism is only one aspect of our literature; there are many others. But if the government feels that it should be highlighted, then why not pick that aspect where the traveller meets a missionary who had done so much to bring the good things of life to his people? But whether we like it or not, we still need money and the government should not forget that'.

Willy-nilly, Nigeria will be represented across the broad spectrum of events that form the tapestry of 'Africa '95' and drama is only an infinitesimal component of it. But that the committee needs money to prosecute these presentations is not in doubt. This figure has been put at £520,000 or N67.5 million for nine major events.

From the look of things, the London organisers of 'Africa '95' seem to have made a mistake in drawing up such an elaborate programme for Africa which forecloses inputs from African governments while expecting moral and financial support from them.

By all means, the country can register its protest against *My Life* if it feels that the play does not fulfil its nationalistic aspirations. But this minute aspect of it should not prevent it from putting up a good showing at the fiesta at which many Nigerian artists are poised to do the country proud.

And the only way this can be done is by contributing our financial and moral quota to the effort. It is a chance in a million to show our contributions to world culture in a true light. **GR**



Left: The neighbourhood as seen through Tutuola's window in Ibadan

TUTUOLA INDIFFERENT

Amos Tutuola who lives on the outskirts (Abeokuta edge) of Ibadan is undaunted and in fact indifferent to the developments around the choice and even-

tual rejection of his work in adaptation for the 'Africa '95' programme.

His attitude is well described by the words 'If

they find it all right to produce, fine. If not, fine too.' People are free to adopt whatever attitudes they wished toward any one of his works.

Tutuola who still occupies his old Brazilian styled storey building in the rusty corrugated iron-sheet terrain of Odo-Ona, Ibadan, West Africa's largest city, now lives in quiet retirement. Surrounded often by his kith and kin from the neighbouring Abeokuta who look up to him for the settlement of occasional family squabbles and to preside over clan meetings, Tutuola engages in a little bit of trading, spends the cool of the evenings attending prayer meetings at his home-church, a branch of the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) nearby. When inspired, he wakes up in the quiet of the night, peeps out through his window into the night sitting behind his long desk and portable typewriter.

'Now I also rarely accept invitations to travel abroad' he says. 'Most of the time, I return home worn and spent. Long journeys...(that often involve author's readings) are not good for me anymore'.