Toward The Lossless Translation | Review by Tádé Ìpàdéọlá

Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún
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OLONGO AFRICA

THE AGE OF WHITE RULERS

Aiyé D'Aiyé Òyìnbó

ISAAC O. DELANO

TRANSLATED BY

AKIN ADEṢỌKAN

“The work itself is a study in how the ideology of the novel works, I think.”

—Akin Adesọkan, 2013.

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Chief Isaac Delano was one of the most important Yorùbá writers of the 20th century. The 'Chief' in his title and the spelling of his surname "Delano" may carry American echoes but they are emphatically African. Coming fully into his artistic prime mid-century, he became one of the earliest to task his mind and imagination with bringing forth literary fiction that could portray the truth of Yorùbá aspirations vis-a-vis their history, ways, culture and values. *Aiye D'Aiye Òyìnbó,* the book under review in translation, was written arguably at a time Delano's horses were in their finest fettle, unblinkered mustangs charging away. Ironically, this important writer is hardly discussed outside serious scholarly circles and classrooms even as the questions he concerned himself with are still with us today, alive and unresolved. Delano's approach to writing to his target audience was conscious psychologically, sociologically and politically. Not for him the ecstasy and delirium of stream-of-consciousness or the lush lure of the tropical phantasmagoric. His works shared reverberatory grounds with the works of Daniel Fágúnwà and Amos Tutùọlà, stylistically distant contemporaries, but kin nonetheless. Their uncommon artistic consciousness shared a certain understanding of proxemics and chronemics at a time that even European theorists were only beginning to recognize their unique contributions to nuance.

The wholly romantic notion of the translator as a being struck by grace, delivering a flawless rendition of a book in another language will not cease to appeal to humankind. The epigraph to this review, taken from correspondence with the translator himself circa 2013 when he completed the first draft of his translation of Delano's classic is telling. Translation is hard work, demanding a dogged application of mind to language and context. If, as it is in the case of all things human, grace does feature, it is after the practiced intellect has become accustomed to its work as to become second nature, not before. Akin Adéṣọ̀kàn straddles the varied Graceland and Wilderness of translation like a troubadour. It helps, and shows, that Adéṣọ̀kàn is a writer in English before he is a translator into English. It also helps that he is fluent in the metalaguages of the source and target languages. Other translations (of the text considered here) indicate the academic inclinations of the translators or their filial standing with the source language as juxtaposed against the target language. Adéṣọ̀kàn navigates slightly differently, his translator's instinct works like a bloodhound. In his translator's note published in the book, Adéṣọ̀kàn identifies the main ***problema*** in the translation of this endlessly fascinating book — how to keep Delano's ideological booby traps concealed.

While a couple of scholars (and some dilettantes) had translated portions of *Ayé D'Aiyé Òyĭnbó* over the years, the reader in English had to wait until now for a thoroughgoing and complete translation of the novel into English. For aesthetic and practical reasons, this work took its time in the translation void. Nevertheless, scholars like Professor Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá translated portions of *Ayé D'Aiyé Òyĭnbó* in order to illustrate aspects of Delano's philosophy of writing and to situate his stylistics within the context of his times. This new translation by Akin Adeṣọkan finally gives English readers access to one of the most thoughtfully wrought novels from the world of 20th century Yorùbá thinkers.

Aye D'Aiye Òyìnbó, completed by 1953 and published in 1955, is a story set in Ojúṣàngó, a fictional Yorùbá town. It is narrated through the far-sighted Àṣàbí, a daughter of privilege and ultimately a wife of consequence to Babalọlá, a prominent chief among his people. Girl, woman and witness – Àṣàbí was a very unusual choice for a medium/protagonist channeling Chief Babalola/Delano at the time the novel was published (even as it can be argued convincingly that Babalola and his creator are poles apart). In comparison, Amos Tutuola had a boy protagonist, for example, and Daniel Fágúnwà had a full complement of tested male protagonists. Delano early deployed a biblical trope of a stammering Moses, needing the help of an eloquent Aaron, the tag team that led a colonized people out of captivity into their land of freedom. Àṣàbí is the first hint we get in the book that we're really reading a book about brains, not brawn, strategy, not swagger. It would take Àṣàbí and Babalola working together to achieve their aspirations.

Isaac Delano, literate enough in Yorùbá to write a dictionary of the language, actually completed the

writing of *Ayé D'Aiyé Oyĭnbó* in England. He would eventually publish 5 works in English and 4 in Yorùbá. It is worth noting that *Aye D'Aiyé Òyìnbó* was dedicated to Ẹgbẹ́ Ọmọ Odùduwà (not Afẹ́nifẹ́re, Afẹ́nifẹ́rere, ARG, YYF etc etc) and that London was, at the time of the writing of the book, the main locus of Ẹgbẹ́ Ọmọ Odùduwà. This translation was completed in Indiana in 2013. London and Indiana here aren't mere factoids. They represent the prominence that the diaspora has since assumed in the understanding of what it means to be Yorùbá in the present age.

There is a density of dialects in spoken Yorùbá language, less so in literary Yorùbá, but sufficiently there to challenge the fortitude of a translator from Yorùbá into any other language. Delano's literary Yorùbá meets all his translators including Adeṣọkan at his designated linguistic halfway house. That deliberate choice by Delano was most likely because political independence was still only on the horizon by the time he completed the novel. Things weren't in the bag yet. They still aren't.

Writing (in English) what a canny European District Officer could recognize as irúgbìn búburú (incendiary material) despite Àṣàbí's protestations otherwise would be unwise to say the least. But so would writing in Ẹ̀gbá, the dialect of the major published poets of the time and the predominant dialect of the first Yorùbá newspaper. Delano aimed for a novel that would become an emblem of Yorùbá identity and its formation after the 100-year internecine wars and in the face of indirect Western imperialism. If he put it in the mouth of a local chief that the white man had become the lord of the age, it would have required a feeble-minded white man to believe the blandishment. Delano's playbook masquerading as a novel envisioned a long game of Ayò with 'Òyìnbó' his portmanteau term for the Caucasian and even the contemporary Chinese. *Ayé D'Aiyé Oyĭnbó* was code-talk to Baba Sy and all the savants of Africa.

An interesting paradox, for a reader literate in English and Yorùbá, is the readier access one might have to Delano's thoughts in the English translation. This is because the 1955 novel had elementary orthography, and also, there are expressions in the original that are in the Ẹ̀gbá dialect for which other Yorùbá readers apart from the Ẹ̀gbá may need a dictionary of that dialect whereas the meaning in English is available to the average reader literate in English immediately. It is a testimony to the thoughtfulness (and tenderness) that went into the translation.

Although published prior to Nigeria's political independence in 1960, *The Age of White Rulers* poses many questions for the contemporary reader in the 21st century, decades after our ostensible independence. Delano vigorously denies that the novel is a realistic portrayal of persons within the society of his time but an ideologically aware reader today can identify who the Àṣàbí in the community is, who the 'Lagosians' are, who Maku is, who the obfuscators are and who the scoundrels Suberu are. That Àṣàbí casually refers to slave raids conducted by her powerful and fond father is interesting chronemics. In reality, two generations passed after the abolition of slavery (and raiding) before African representative democracy.

The Age of White Rulers is not a realistic narrative but there are enough artifacts from history to make it come across as such. What it is, is an extended metaphor for strategic intent in the face of imperium that has the malevolent machinery of industrial capitalism at its disposal. On its pages, we can more readily recognize our own connivance with and condonation of empire, but also play our part henceforth with the endgame in mind. Àṣàbí is constant in decrying the position of women in society but might her lamentation be a metaphor for the emasculation of the African in the face of the new white lords of the manors? A somewhat ribald admonition in the Yorùbá language is for a woman not to keep silent in the face of monstrous assault. In *The Age of White Rulers*, modernity is regularly pitted against the bastion of tradition and there are always intimation of Bastille Day, one day to be stormed by an army of conscientized people.

Now for a closer look at the translation itself. Initially, Adéṣọ̀kàn was in two minds about giving his

work the title it now bears or to name it "*Then Came The Foreign Ways*" and I am happy he chose the present title. Examples abound of such choices. There are also examples of weaker translations in the initial manuscript that were discarded for much stronger and deeper translations. For example, Adeṣọkan initially translated "Ehinkule Lota Wa" as "The Enemy Lives Indoors" but later chose "The Enemy At Close Quarters", another happy choice. But there are also examples where technical precision was absent and close cousins (false friends) were substituted for each other in the same breath. For example, Asabi fell gravely ill and part of the ritual prescribed for her recovery was for her to lie in a casket. The translator uses the word 'coffin' interchangeably but they are not the same. These pedantic pet peeves aside, the translation from the original is lossless. Coffins, after all, have six sides and Nigerian carpenters would rather not be bothered by their morbid geometry.

Meaning is transcendental and the pursuit of meaning is noble. Of all cultural workers, translators are among the noblest because they make the apprehension of meaning, not merely its pursuit, their aim across visible and invisible borders. Their quest for the protean essence of language before Babel has to be admired for the ineffable delight it gives across time and thought.

And how does this translation compare with other translations by other translators? The taste of the pudding is in the eating. Delano, as mentioned before, enjoys the attention of thinkers. For this exercise we have Professor Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá (who translated a portion of Delano) and Professor Michael Ọládẹ̀jọ Afọ́láyan who undertook an academic translation of the text that he titled "*Welcome to the White Man's World.*"

Take these samplers:

Delano:

"Bayi ni oniruru irira-okan ati itanje oju pọ̀ ninu ile olobinrin púpọ̀. O sese wa ye mi wayi ni. Niti emi, bi mo je okunrin, ng ko ni fe ju iyawo kan lo nitori ohun ti oju mi ri ninu ile baba mi ati ninu ile oko mi papa lowo orogun ko kere."

Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá:

"This is how you find a lot of contempt and hypocrisy in a polygamous home…As for me, if I were a man, I would not marry more than one wife because I suffered much in the house of my father and in my husband's house, especially in the hands of the other wives."

Michael Ọládẹ̀jọ Afọ́láyan:

"Such was the nature of hate, suspicion and deceit that permeated a polygynous household. I am just beginning to understand that complexity. As for me, if I were to be a man, I would never marry more than one wife. My first-hand experience in the household of my father with the clashing and crashing of multiple wives and even in my own household later in life, have been my teacher in this life journey of understanding the danger of polygyny!"

Akin Adéṣọ̀kàn:

"In such a manner did distrust and intrigue fester in a household with multiple wives. It is now that I am advanced in years that these things seem less confusing to me. If I were a man, believe me, I would take no more than a wife on account of my experience, as a daughter and as a wife."

And again "Àṣàbí, ọbẹ̀ kò ńmì n'íkùn àgbà." – Delano.

Adéṣọ̀kàn translated that as "Àṣàbí, the turnip soup does not turn in the tummy of an elder."

But in the earliest version of his translation, Adéṣọ̀kàn translated the same as

“Àṣàbí, the mind of an elder is a sea of temperance.” And though shorn of all references to the alimentary canal, I much prefer the earliest version, sublime in its Pacific temperament, to the published version.

For further contrast, Afọ́láyan translates the same sentence as: “Àṣàbí, the stew does not shake in the stomach of an elder.” Thus we come to appreciate the thin line a translator from Yorùbá to English walks. The myriad possibilities before them and the joy awaiting the conjuration of the essence.

Many roads lead to the marketplace. “Ó ṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀ wá yé mi wàyí ni.” in the original is left untranslated by Akínwùmí Ìṣọ̀lá even as it is not untranslatable. It is translated as “I am just beginning to understand that complexity” by Michael Afolayan, and as “It is now that I am advanced in years that these things seem less confusing to me” by Akin Adéṣọ̀kàn. One reason why Ìṣọ̀lá may have made the interesting choice to leave the sentence untranslated (a strategy Wole Soyinka has used in translating Fagunwa) except for the ellipsis is that its function within the paragraph in which it occurs ***sounds*** summative when in fact a practiced listener to Yorùbá understands that it is actually formative. The Yorùbá make a distinction between the speaking art and the listening art. Ìṣọ̀lá chooses the efficiency route, imagine a sound engineer transmitting an mp3 file instead of a WAV file. The ultimate meaning is retained even if the vehicle travels lighter.

Now let us consider the Adéṣọ̀kàn and Afọ́láyan choices, as extended as they are in comparison with the Yorùbá original. Both display an implicit understanding of the ‘tending toward quotient’ in the sentence despite the occurrence of the definitive ‘wàyí’ in the original. And yet one effort out of the two is closer to the intended meaning of the original and that effort is the Adéṣọ̀kàn translation. Think of Delano’s intended meaning as $\boldsymbol{\pi}$ otherwise known as Pi. Then think of Adéṣọ̀kàn’s translation as 3.14159 while Afọ́láyan’s is 3.1415. Pi is a transcendental number and is capable of being expressed beyond the 762nd decimal point. By and by, we hope a Feynmann will come along in the future and improve on the translations even if by one decimal point. For now, we rejoice at the transcendental in the various efforts even if the transcendental is also elliptical.

Adéṣọ̀kàn captures the pith and concision of the original for the most part and with poignant fidelity. A dynamic, darkly humorous Isaac Delano is hard to translate without a playful ear but Adeṣọkan’s fiddle flows in pitch-perfect tandem with Delano’s first across the registers. The attentive reader going through ***The Age of White Rulers*** will encounter the troughs and cusps of life in Ojúṣàngó, the carefully plotted dilemma tales of the African population and the denouement as Delano devised it – but those who can indulge in reading the Yorùbá original and the translation should, to appreciate just how poetic Adéṣọ̀kàn’s work is. He has successfully translated the trebles in the Yorùbá into splendid syntax in the English language. Grammarly wouldn’t agree but what does AI know? In the hands of the duo of Delano and Adéṣọ̀kàn, we’re in the realms of “man meaning to man”, as the inimitable Níyì Ọ̀ṣúndáre rendered it.

And yet, there are coda that even the assiduous Adéṣọ̀kàn could not penetrate. How does the reader of this translation into English enjoy the humour and the winding staircase onomatopoeia in the noun Ṣorowanke?

The average contemporary literary scholar, competent to translate from Yorùbá into English and vice versa may feel a niggling sense of guilt at his or her neglect when it comes to the many works awaiting translation. The very act of committing to the task and following through in the execution is worthy of all commendation and acceptation, to use biblical language. And it is on that note that I emphatically recommend this new, nuanced, poetic and extraordinarily aesthetic translation of one of our most important Yorùbá novelists by one of our most attentive listeners.

Delano is a storyteller-strategist. When his characters say it is the age of white rulers in the morning, they remember to show the ‘learned’ lawyer in his paraphernalia prostrating before the illiterate farmer for votes at the next polls. If the farmer pretends not to know where the power lies, the lawyer should not fool himself. The keen observations of the village chief help in clarifying the lumping of Ègbé and Afenifere, distinguishing between substance and simulacra. As Dave Chappelle stated once, the people know.

This is a translation that we have waited for. It took all of sixty years to arrive and then another twelve to make it through the interstices of publication machinery. It is worth the wait. This translation is to be treasured, it is worth its weight in gold.

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