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THE STUDY
OF YORUBA
LITERATURE

by 'Wande Abimbola



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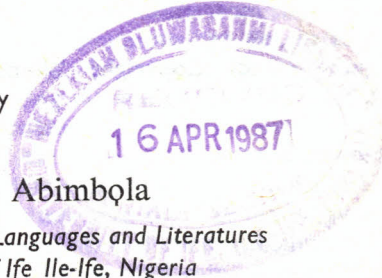
THE STUDY OF YORUBA LITERATURE:

An Assessment

by

'Wande Abimbola

*Professor of African Languages and Literatures
University of Ife Ile-Ife, Nigeria*



An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Ife
on 26 May 1977

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An Essay

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Professor of African Languages and Literatures
University of Ife, Ife, Nigeria

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THE HISTORY OF the study of Yoruba literature dates back to about one hundred and twenty-five years ago. During this period a lot of collection of oral literature was made and many critical works were published on oral and written literature. It is therefore necessary at this juncture to assess whether the efforts made so far have been in the right direction. The main thrust of this lecture is therefore to assess the study of Yoruba literature from that point of view and to examine whether new directions can be charted for the future progress of this discipline. In doing so we are going to identify certain problems confronting the study of Yoruba literature and propose solutions to these problems.

It may seem commonplace to start this lecture with a statement of the extent and the influence of Yoruba culture, but in view of the fact that it is not generally recognised that the Yoruba language is an international language embracing several African countries and with strong influences in the Americas, we are going to begin with a short statement of the geographical area embraced by this lecture.

In West Africa the Yoruba people and their literature are to be found in Nigeria, the Republic of Benin and the Republic of Togo. There are also strong Yoruba influences among the Creole population of Sierra Leone. In South and Central America, the influence of the Yoruba language and literature is very strong in many countries the most important of which are Brazil and Cuba. Indeed, the influence of the *òrìṣà* of the Yoruba people looms so large on many countries of South and Central America to the extent that there are millions of *òrìṣà* adherents among the black and white populations of those territories.

When we speak of Yoruba literature, we are speaking of an international form of literature which can be found and is being actively studied in two or three continents of the world. This lecture will therefore embrace the study of Yoruba literature as found in West Africa as well as in diaspora. It is important to state these facts from the beginning because the international nature of the Yoruba language and its literature is responsible for the linguistic medium for its study. Today, scholars of Yoruba literature are to be found in many parts of the world writing in not less than four major languages of the world apart from the Yoruba language itself. These languages include French, Spanish, Portuguese and English. We will return to this theme shortly, but it is important to state here that the varying linguistic media for the study of Yoruba literature has affected the focus and the direction of its academic appreciation.

It is equally important for us at the beginning of this lecture to define the nature of Yoruba literature. Like the literature of other

peoples of the world, Yoruba literature can be divided into the three well-known forms of poetry, prose and drama. In traditional Yoruba society, each of these three forms was developed to a very high level but the poetic genres constituted by far the most important form. Each of the poetic types is almost invariably linked up with one Yoruba divinity. When one remembers that the Yoruba people themselves claim that they have four hundred and one divinities, this means that there are many poetic types each with its own mode of chanting which distinguishes it from the others.

By far the most important type of poetry found among the Yoruba is the Ifá literary corpus. Ifá can safely be regarded as the generic form for all other types of Yoruba literature whether poetry, prose or drama. This is perhaps why the Ifá corpus itself is very extensive in scope. This fantastic corpus contains 256 chapters each of which is known as an *odù*. The Ifá priests believe that each *odù* contains not less than 600 verses, yielding a total of one hundred and fifty-three thousand and six hundred verses in all. Among the *odù* of Ifá are to be found verses reserved for the mythology and the praise of all the major divinities. As the generic form of Yoruba literature, Ifá also embraces the prosaic forms as well as the proverbs. Indeed, the Yoruba prose narratives can be regarded as the popular versions of Ifá verse. Ifá itself is a sacred form of literature mastered only by devoted priests after many years of training both in literature as well as in healing and divination. Ifá can therefore be regarded as the Yoruba traditional academic system and body of knowledge.¹ It is the store-house of Yoruba culture and the only undisputable point of reference for Yoruba history, philosophy, medicine and folklore.

Among the other forms of Yoruba oral poetry, mention should be made of *Ìjálá*, *Orikì*, and *Èṣà*. *Ìjálá* is the Yoruba hunters' poetry chanted in praise of *Ògún*, the Yoruba god of hunting and war whose symbol is iron. Because of the closeness of the hunters to nature, *Ìjálá* contains, among other things, a deep appreciation of nature. *Ìjálá* also deals with the history of the lineages and the ancient settlements of the Yoruba people. This is the meaning of the *Ìjálá* verse which states that:

"Ìfá nii sọ baye ó ti ri,
Ìrèmòjẹ Ògún nii sọbi ilú gbé ṣẹ."²

(It is Ifá who foretells the future of the world,

While *Ìrèmòjẹ*, the poetry of *Ògún*, tells the origin of cities.)

Ìrèmòjẹ is a specialised form of *Ìjálá* chanted during the funeral of dead hunters. It is a funeral dirge or an elegy. This form of *Ìjálá* is chanted only at night and on the occasion of a funeral. This is why *Ìrèmòjẹ* is regarded as

"Orin tí a lí kọ lṣàán à fòru.

Orin tí áá kọ nígbà tò ba ṣòro fṓḍẹ."³

(The song which nobody sings in the daytime but only at night;
The song which one sings only on the occasion of a funeral.)

Oríkì is closely related to Ìjálá in that the content of Ìjálá deal mainly with Oríkì. It would seem that Oríkì has no specific chanting mode of its own. The different chanting modes of the other poetic types are therefore employed for the chanting of Oríkì. The content of Oríkì tells the history of the Yoruba lineages such as Òpó, Òlójèḗ, Alàràán, Oníkóyì and Àágberí. Oríkì traces the history of each lineage to its original home land and explains the occupation of the people as well as the physical characteristics of their territory.

Èṣà, otherwise known as Iwì Egúngún is the most important dramatic form of Yoruba oral poetry. It is chanted by the òjè (priests of Egungun), the Yoruba Ancestor divinity. Èṣà, like Ìjálá, also makes extensive use of Oríkì but within the framework of its own structure, style, chanting mode as well as the peculiarities of its own dramatic form.

There are two major prose types, namely Àlò and Ìtàn. Both are related in content but slightly different in rendition. Indeed they can together be classified as prose narratives. The Yoruba prose narratives deal with different themes ranging from stories of animals, especially the tortoise, to human stories such as the jealousy of co-wives and incidence of famine. The interesting thing about Àlò, as with the Ifá literary corpus from which it developed, is that all stories emanating from it are always personified. The tortoise, for example, marries a wife, pays dowries and christens his children just like human beings. This shows that the true object of the Yoruba prose narratives is human society itself. Embodied in the content and style of the Yoruba prose narratives is a powerful satire on human society. Man is invited to watch the silly, arrogant, avaricious, deceitful, petty, naive and idolent actions of animals and other creatures of nature but at the conclusion the moral of the story comes back to man himself. Eventually, man discovers that while laughing at the silly behaviour of the lower animals, he had indeed been laughing at himself.

During the last fifty years, Yoruba literature has developed in various dimensions including the introduction of the novel into Yoruba literature. Today, there are more than a hundred well-known novels written in the Yoruba language. Poetry has also flourished during the same period. Indeed, Ewi, as poetry is generally known nowadays, has become an important aspect of occasions such as funerals, marriages, and other ceremonies, not to speak of the regular broadcast of poetry on radio. In terms of the growth of Yoruba literature in this direction, we are witnessing a cultural revolution in our times. However, one significant difference between Yoruba traditional poetry and modern poetry must be stated here.

Yoruba traditional poetry was, as already mentioned, linked up with the worship of the Òrìṣà, each traditional form of poetry having a chanting mode of its own. Modern Yoruba poetry however is not directly linked up with any particular divinity nor does it preserve the traditional chanting modes or create a chanting mode of its own except that which is imposed upon it by the individual poet.

In the diaspora countries such as Brazil and Cuba, the relationship between Yoruba oral poetry and the òrìṣà is still being maintained even in modern times. Each òrìṣà has a body of literature of its own which is learned by heart by its devotees and transmitted verbally from one generation of worshippers to the other. This situation is the same as could be found among all the òrìṣà devotees in West Africa. Despite the giant strides being made by the so-called modern literature in West Africa the influence of the òrìṣà and their literature is still very strong.

One significant difference between Yoruba literature in diaspora and in West Africa is that diaspora literature has not witnessed any significant creative growth during the last one hundred years. One can in fact say that Yoruba literature in diaspora has, during the last century, been fossilised due mainly to the influence of Latin American culture among the peoples of the diaspora. The fossilisation of Yoruba literature in diaspora, however, gives the student of comparative literature a particular advantage in that we are able to collect the ancient and fossilised forms in the diaspora countries and by comparison establish the changes which have come upon the Yoruba language and literature since the diaspora. Furthermore, it would seem that in the diaspora areas the hundreds of chanting modes of Yoruba oral poetry have fallen together into a few basic chanting patterns which are employed for the praise of the òrìṣà in South and Central America. This development probably took place during the years of slavery. The result is that the few chanting modes of Yoruba oral poetry in diaspora are to some extent distinct from those of West Africa. Nevertheless, the content, style and rhythm of African literature in diaspora still reveals an unmistakable Yoruba form.

Before we proceed to assess the present-day study of Yoruba literature, it will be necessary for us to state however briefly a short history of the study of Yoruba literature both in Africa as well as in diaspora. The study of Yoruba literature dates back to 1852 when Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther published *A Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* which included a collection of Yoruba proverbs.⁴ This work included some introductory remarks by Rev. O. E. Vidal on the Yoruba language. Writing on the nature of Yoruba proverbs, Rev. Vidal states as follows:

They are in the main metaphorical: some objects of sense

are selected to which the character intended is attributed and some quality or other accident is predicated of that subject of sense which is designed to figure the intended predicate... This metaphorical style is... most highly conducive to the poetic character of the proverb.⁵

Crowther himself made the following observation on Yoruba proverbs in his 1852 work:

There is a degree of moral light observable in them which renders them peculiarly interesting and gives them, I may add, a real value in connection with the inquiry into the moral government of the universe... but there is something more striking: the high standard of morality observable in the sayings of the Yoruba displaying as it does peculiar virtues which we commonly regard as being appreciated only in civilised societies. Were we to measure this people by the standard of their proverbial morality, we should come to the conclusion that they had attained no inconsiderable height in the development of social relations having passed out of the savage barbarism in which every individual lives for himself alone into a higher state of being in which the mutual dependence of one member on another is recognised, giving room for the exercise of such virtues as a sort of moral contract for the safeguard of society⁶.

Between 1852 and 1960, several important collections and studies of the Yoruba literature have appeared, including Lijadu⁷, Epega⁸, Beyioku⁹, Oşiga¹⁰ and Bernard Maupoil¹¹, all writing on Ifa literary corpus. There were also many important collections of oral poetry such as those of Obase (1927, 1934 and 1945)¹² as well as many collections on proverbs and prose narratives such as those made by Ajibola (1947)¹³, Akintan (1930)¹⁴, Allen (1995)¹⁵, Lakuru (1930)¹⁶, and Oyeleş (1948)¹⁷. In 1885, the first pamphlet on Yoruba prose narratives was published by D. B. Vincent¹⁸. Tugbiyele published a collection of Aḷo Apamḷo in 1949¹⁹.

In Brazil, Carneiro wrote his important work on the Candombles of Bahia in 1948²⁰. In 1954, Pierre Verger published his well-known work on the *òrişà*²¹. In Cuba, Fernando Ortiz wrote his work on Negro theatre and folklore in 1951²² while Lydia Cabrera published her *El Monte*²³ in Habana in 1954. Other important works dealing directly or indirectly with Yoruba literature were published in Haiti²⁴ during the same period.

Despite the great efforts made by pioneers of the study of the Yoruba literature during the century following the publication of Crowther's 1852 work, it cannot be said that any significant contribution to the study of Yoruba literature was made during this period. Most of the studies of the period were sociological in content

dealing only indirectly with the study of literature. A beginning was however made especially in the area of collection of oral literature which was to form an important foundation for the collectors and the critical analysts of the 1960s and 70s.

As already mentioned, the 110 years before Nigeria's independence witnessed the collection of different types of Yoruba oral literature but the real academic study of Yoruba literature started shortly after independence. Collections of *Ìjálá*, *Ifá*, *Oríkì*, *Èṣà*, *Àlò*, *Ìtàn* and other genres of Yoruba oral literature were intensified shortly after independence. The formation of the *Ègbẹ Onimọ Èdè Yoruba* in 1970 gave a real impetus to the study of the Yoruba language. While the *Ègbẹ Ijinlẹ Yoruba*, formed in the 1950s, is devoted to the promotion of the Yoruba culture generally, the *Ègbẹ Onimọ Ede Yoruba* is committed to the academic study of the Yoruba language, literature and culture. The first Ph.D. in Yoruba literature was obtained in the University of London in 1963 by Adebayo Babalola. His dissertation on *Ìjálá* was published in book form in 1966 by Clarendon Press, Oxford.²⁵ Other studies soon followed on *Ifá* by Abimbola (1968, 1969, 1975, 1976 and 1977)²⁶. Bascom (1969)²⁷, *Èṣà* by Olajubu (1970 and 1972)²⁸. Classification of Yoruba Oral Literature by Olatunji (1971)²⁹, *Ṣàngó-Pipé* by Iṣola (1973)³⁰, *Oríkì Orilẹ* and *Àlò* by Babalola (1968 and 1973 respectively)³¹. In 1974, Lydia Cabrera published her important work on *Ọṣun* and *Yemoja* based on the worship and the literature of these two divinities in Cuba³².

Creative writing in Yoruba dates back to 1848 when Thomas Townsend published his Yoruba Hymns³³. This was followed by other authors such as Ṣobọ Arobiodu³⁴ whose first poems were published in 1902. Others such as Oluṣẹgun Ṣowande (1938)³⁵, Ogunji (1946)³⁶, Ọbasa (1927, 1934 and 1945)³⁷, Ọladele Ajao (1955)³⁸ and Ọdunjọ³⁹ soon followed. The first full length novel in the Yoruba language was published in 1929⁴⁰ but it was not until 1939 when Fagunwa published his *Ogboju Ọdẹ Ninu Igbo Irunmọlẹ*⁴¹ that the tradition of novel writing in the Yoruba language actually became established. Today, there are dozens of Yoruba poets, play-wrights and novelists such as Adebayo Faleti⁴², Ọladejọ' Okediji⁴³, Kọla Akinlade⁴⁴, Afọlabi Ọlabimtan⁴⁵, Akinwumi Iṣola⁴⁶ and Ọlanrewaju Adepoju⁴⁷, to mention only a few.

The academic study of Yoruba oral and written literature received a real impetus in 1965 when the first degree programme in Yoruba language and literature was established in the University of Ibadan. Similar programmes were established in Lagos (1966) and at *Ifẹ* (1970). Recently, another programme of Yoruba studies was established at the University College, Ilorin, in 1976. In all these Universities, students undertake courses in Yoruba language and literature leading to the B. A. Degree in Yoruba. In two of these

Universities, namely, Ibadan and Lagos, there are post-graduate programmes leading to the award of M. A. and Ph.D. degrees in Yoruba language and literature.

During the past 125 years, a lot of collection of Yoruba oral literature has been carried out. For example, on Ifá literary corpus alone, not less than twenty-five pamphlets and full length books have been published. Many pamphlets and full length works have also appeared on Oríkì, Òwé, Èṣà, and Àlò. In spite of the laudable efforts of collectors on various aspects of Yoruba oral literature, the point must here be made that collection has neither been copious nor systematic enough. When one considers the fact that the *Ifá* literary corpus has a total of not less than 153,600 verses, what has been collected so far on that subject is still a drop in the ocean. There is therefore the need for scholars of Yoruba oral literature to intensify their effort in collecting and compiling more materials for academic study. There are, at the moment, many òrìṣà whose sacred literatures have not been collected at all. Furthermore, collection of materials on oral literature is an urgent task in view of the fact that most of the carriers of this tradition are passing away. Since modern Nigerian society does not preserve continuity in the transmission of culture from father to son, we stand the risk of losing some aspects of our oral literature unless systematic efforts are made to collect oral traditions in our time.

It is fashionable for scholars of oral literature in Africa to look down on collection as a sub-academic activity. This attitude cannot be established on any rational grounds. Collection of oral literature can be an academic endeavour if it is carried out painstakingly and systematically. Oral literature should be recorded on tapes rather than written down by dictation. This is the only way by which we can preserve the musical properties of the material alongside with the linguistic information. When such a collection is being published, a sample gramophone or tape of the original material should also be published. Unless this is done, no meaningful academic work on the rhythm and the sound system of particular texts can be carried out. When the material is being transcribed on paper, it should be carefully written down by the researcher who should employ a phonemic orthography which alone can assist the readers in getting as close as possible to the original sound system of the texts. Unfortunately, most researchers working in the area of Yoruba oral literature at the moment do not take the trouble to transcribe their own tapes. Since collection is regarded as a sub-academic activity, the transcription of tapes is left in the hands of research assistants who may not have the academic preparedness for this delicate work. Collection and transcription of tapes can certainly be done by research assistants but they must be experienced

and well-trained researchers who have participated in such activities for several years under the proper guidance of their masters.

Another important problem of the documentation of oral literature is that few researchers take the trouble to reveal the identity of their informants for future reference. A properly documented collection should state the name, age, address and occupation of the informants as well as the date and time of collection, the place of collection and the identity of the collectors themselves. Such information will reveal a lot about the artists from whom the materials are collected and will aid future researchers working on the same subject.

After the material has been transcribed and documented, the tape itself should be stored under adequate temperature and a copy of it should be deposited in the University library. This is the only way in which such a delicate material can be preserved for future reference. Today, there are hundreds of tapes in private collections which are wasting away due to improper storage and classification. It is only when such well preserved, classified, documented and well written materials are available in large quantities that we can begin to do meaningful work on certain aspects of oral literature. Since our own age is a transitional one between illiteracy and literacy, and since our society is witnessing rapid socio-economic development, this is the time for us to turn our attention to massive collection of oral tradition. Universities and governments should in fact establish institutes for the documentation of oral literature which would be devoted solely to the collection and documentation of oral traditions. Materials produced in such institutes would in fact be useful to researchers not only in the field of literature but in many other humanistic and scientific fields.

As stated earlier, apart from the Yoruba language itself, not less than four well-known languages of the world are being employed for the study of Yoruba literature. This would have been in order if the Yoruba language itself is being exploited to the same degree as any of these other foreign languages for the study of Yoruba literature but the fact is that this is not the case. Certainly it cannot be claimed that the Yoruba language has any inherent defects which makes it unable to cope with the task of using it as an analytical tool for the study of its own literature. What then is responsible for the inability of scholars to employ the Yoruba language for the analysis of Yoruba literature? Two main difficulties have been identified, namely, the problem of technical vocabulary and that of meta language. Since most of the studies so far made on Yoruba literature have not been done in the Yoruba language, there is therefore a lack of technical terms to be employed in the critical study of Yoruba literature. Yoruba literature as an academic discipline has therefore not deve-

loped a language of its own to be used in critical analysis.

There are two solutions to this problem of technical terms. In the first place, Yoruba scholars must meet from time to time with a view to borrowing technical terms from other languages into their own language following the grammatical rules which the language would normally employ for the borrowing of such technical terms from another language. Once these terms have been so borrowed, they must be disseminated and used by Yoruba teachers and students both in the secondary and tertiary levels of education. In this way a stock of technical terms would be developed within a short time which would become part and parcel of the Yoruba language. Secondly, Yoruba scholars must search for appropriate technical terms in the Yoruba language itself so as to discover terms which could be adopted for the analysis of literature. It is only when this is done that the Yoruba language would develop a meta language of its own which can be used for the study of literature. We must therefore stop lamenting the absence in the Yoruba language of technical vocabulary when we ourselves are not making any determined efforts to create them. The Yoruba language would forever remain inadequate for the study of its own literature unless its scholars would grapple with the problem of technical vocabulary and meta language and employ their own language consistently for the study of literature. It is gratifying to note that some of the Universities running undergraduate and post-graduate programmes in Yoruba literature have already started to make use of the Yoruba language for the teaching of Yoruba literature. This practice should be extended to the post-graduate level so that M.A. and Ph.D. dissertations can be written completely in the Yoruba language giving only a summary of the work in the English Language for the sake of the international academic audience to which the thesis is addressed. Furthermore, Yoruba scholars must now turn their attention to the use of the Yoruba language for the writing of serious academic papers for publication. A few articles of this nature have already appeared in *YORUBA*, Journal of the Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria. It should also be possible to write academic pamphlets and books entirely in the Yoruba language.

A number of critical works written in English have already been published on Yoruba literature. Most of these works are in the area of oral literature. The study of Yoruba written literature has not received the same attention. The first major analytical work on prose was that of Bamgboṣe which was published in 1974 on *The Novels of D. O. Fagunwa*⁴⁹. In the same year, Afọlabi Q̄labimtan submitted a Ph.D. dissertation to the University of Lagos on *A Critical Study of Yoruba Written Poetry: 1848 - 1948*.⁵⁰

When one examines the critical works published so far on Yoruba

literature, it would seem that an analytical trend or tradition has already started to appear. Most of these studies begin with a few pages of introduction, usually entitled cultural background. This is followed by a structural and stylistic analysis especially in the case of poetry. Then follows the study of the content of the texts. In the case of poetry, a collection of texts is attached to the end of the work. An English translation of the texts is also usually provided immediately after the Yoruba original texts. No attempt is made to co-ordinate these four sections of the work: each one standing, as it were, as an independent entity.

The study of structure, for example, is hardly ever related to the cultural background which forms the beginning of the work. Structure is therefore treated as if this area of analysis is not related to culture. This is why the study of structure is usually unnecessarily technical and unrelated to the total meaning of the text which is being studied. No meaningful work on structure can be produced if this aspect of analysis is completely removed from the true meaning of the text from which it is extracted. Structure means order and patterning in terms of the sequence of the linguistic information evident in the text. The study of the structure of any text should therefore reflect the Yoruba concept of order or disorder within the framework of the world view of the Yoruba people.

The study of style is also usually not sufficiently related to the cultural background of the texts. Indeed, what is regarded as stylistic analysis by Yoruba scholars is no more than a mere identification of stylistic features. A true stylistic analysis must go further than this. Once the stylistic features have been identified, they must be related to the full meaning of the text concerned as well as to the aesthetic values for which they stand. Obviously an explanation of the aesthetic beauty of stylistic features concerned can also not be done without reference to the Yoruba concept of aesthetics in general. Therefore, stylistic analysis should be approached from the standpoint of a given cultural continuum.

As for the study of rhythm in Yoruba literature, this is influenced more by the theories of metre and syntactic structures of Indo-European languages rather than a true attempt to understand the beauty of the melodic sounds characteristic of Yoruba chants. There is now so much confusion in the study of the rhythm of Yoruba literature that one can safely say that no meaningful work has yet been done in this area.

The study of the content of Yoruba literature is characterized by the same levity and lack of sensitivity to culture. It is in fact becoming fashionable nowadays among students of Yoruba literature merely to list the themes evident in the prescribed texts. No attempt is made to relate these themes to the cultural background analysed

at the beginning of the work. The point that is often forgotten by students of Yoruba oral literature is that the Yoruba chants were born out of intense devotion to the òrìṣà and out of the Yoruba social and environmental realities. An analysis of content must therefore be based on these realities.

The study of Yoruba literature has developed steadily since the humble beginnings of the last century. Many critical works on poetry, prose and drama have been published in several languages and countries of the world. However, there still remains to be solved a few problems which have affected the growth and development of this discipline. The study of Yoruba literature cannot take off the ground until Yoruba scholars have started to employ the Yoruba language itself for the study of Yoruba literature. The question of technical vocabulary and language of academic study can also not be solved until the Yoruba language is used as the vehicle of academic work both for teaching and for communication of any form of academic ideas either through writing or verbal discussion. Greater effort should be devoted to collection so that we may have a bigger chunk of materials on which to base academic analysis. Such academic endeavour as the classification of Yoruba oral literature cannot be carried out unless and until more materials are available both in written as well as recorded forms. Today, there are many Yoruba òrìṣà whose literature have neither been recorded nor written down. Such òrìṣà include well-known and important divinities as Odùduwà, Qràányàn, Qṣóòsi, Òrìṣàoko and Erinlẹ. How then can we classify materials which have neither been collected nor sufficiently identified? Instead of regarding collection as a sub-academic activity, the scholars of Yoruba data should be directly involved in massive collection of oral literature before it is too late. Collection should however be systematic, properly classified and documented in order to be useful in the future. Lastly, the cultural approach must be adopted for the analysis of Yoruba literature. Literature is culture and no literature can be meaningfully analysed outside the facts of the culture which produced it. When we study Yoruba literature what we are trying to do first of all is to understand through it the Yoruba culture and the Yoruba mind. We are also trying to understand how the Yoruba people make use of their own language to create images, aesthetic effects and situations whether real or imaginary which can be used to visualize the Yoruba conception of their own universe.

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