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# Dictionary of African Biography

EMMANUEL K. AKYEAMPONG  
and HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

*Editors in Chief*

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Fagih is the best known of the “sixties generation” of Libyan writers, which includes Kamel Maghur, Ramadan Bukheit, and Sadiq Nayhoum. His fiction focuses on questions of cultural identity, modernity, and social alienation in contemporary Libya, a society that has undergone enormous socioeconomic and political change over the last fifty years. Grounded in his rural background and personal experiences, his work frequently reflects themes of conflict and tension between the patriarchal life of the traditional village and the more individualistic, urban values found in the modern world.

Fagih is the most prolific writer of his generation, having published more than forty books in Arabic and a growing number in other languages, including English. His plays have been performed in many countries, including the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as at The New Theatre, a group he founded in Tripoli. His two-act play *Gazelles* was adapted by Adrian Mitchell and staged in 1982 at the Shaw Theatre in London. His first collection of short stories, *Al-Bahr la ma'fib* (There Is No Water in the Sea), appeared in 1965 and won the highest award of the Royal Commission of Fine Arts in Libya. Other writings include the trilogy *Gardens of the Night*, which in 1991 won the Beirut Book Fair award for the best novel in Arabic. In 2000 he published an edited volume of stories, *Libyan Stories: Twelve Short Stories from Libya*, written by several Libyan authors and published originally in *Azure* magazine. His latest novel, *Maps of the Soul*, was published in Cairo in 2008.

Fagih has been chairman of the Arab Cultural Trust, a non-profit educational organization with offices in Lebanon and the United States; general secretary of the Libyan Writers and Artists Union; and chairman of the Mizda Heritage Society. He has also served as the Libyan ambassador to Greece and Romania. In 2009 he lectured at the University of New England and participated in a program on literature and the Arab world at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Dr. Fagih is the recipient of his country's highest award, the Grand Al-Fatah Medal.

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RONALD BRUCE ST. JOHN

**Fagunwa, D. O.** (1903–1963), Nigerian writer in the Yoruba language, was born Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa at Oke-Igbo, Western Nigeria (present-day Ondo State), to Joshua Akintunde and Rachael Osunyomi Fagunwa. Originally followers of traditional Yoruba religion, the Fagunwas converted to Christianity, and this abiding influence, most probably, led D. O. Fagunwa to change his middle name from “Orowole” (“the Oro cult enters the house”) to “Olorunfemi” (“God loves me”). Fagunwa received his primary school education at St. Luke's School, Oke-Igbo (1916–1924), after which he taught in the same school for a year, as a pupil-teacher. Subsequently, he went on for further studies from 1926 to 1929, trained as a teacher at St. Andrew's College, Oyo, and on completion obtained his first posting, to St. Andrew's Practising School, Oyo, where he worked between 1930 and 1939.

In 1936 Fagunwa submitted for competition a manuscript entitled *Ogbójú Ode Ninú Igbó Irúnmalè* (The Brave Hunter in the Forest of Four Hundred Deities). *Ogbójú Ode* was later published by the Church Missionary Society Press in 1938. The book was quite popular and successful in preindependence Western Nigeria, and Thomas Nelson Press republished it in 1950. Fagunwa is often regarded as a pioneer of creative writing in Yoruba, due largely to the fact that no other writer in that language had as much impact and influence prior to his emergence on the literary scene. Fagunwa wrote book-length fiction, short stories, and biographical narratives, and edited a book of folktales. His works of fiction include “Iranse Eni Olorun Ti Lehin” (unpublished manuscript, 1939), *Igbo Olodumare* (1949), *Ireke-Onibudo* (1949), *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* (1954), and *Aditu Olodumare* (1961).

In 1949 Oxford University Press published, in two volumes, his autobiographical account of his experience in Britain, aptly titled *Irin Ajo Apa Kini* and *Irin Ajo Apa Keji*. In 1954 Oxford published *Itan Oloyin*, an edited work of folktales, and then in 1959 Thomas Nelson published a collection of short stories, *Asayan Itan*, also edited by Fagunwa. The same year (1959) Fagunwa coauthored, with L. J. Lewis, a primary-school Yoruba reader, *Taiwo ati Kehinde*, and, with G. L. Lasebikan, the short story *Ojo Asotan*, a posthumous (1964) publication.

Over time readers and critics have come to make a connection between the works of Fagunwa and the novels of Amos Tutuola. With Wole Soyinka's 1968 translation of Fagunwa's *Ogbójú Ode Ninú Igbó Irúnmalè* into English as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, critical attention has been further focused



on the works of Fagunwa. Besides Soyinka's effort, other authors such as Dapo Adeniyi and Wale Ogunyemi have, respectively, translated and adapted Fagunwa's works. Adeniyi published *Expedition to the Mount of Thought: The Third Saga: Being a Free Translation of the Full Text of D. O. Fagunwa's Yoruba Novel Irinkerindo ninu Igbo elegbeje* in 1994, while Wale Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* (1979) is a dramatization based on Soyinka's translation, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*.

Stylistically speaking, Fagunwa's novels are highly autobiographical; almost invariably, the author identifies with the scribe or note-taker who jots down the story. This technique of authorial intrusion, also found in the work of African writers such as Meja Mwangi, Dambudzo Marechera, and Christopher Okigbo, betrays a decidedly postmodern streak throughout Fagunwa's oeuvre, but also one that is residual in the antecedent oralist Yoruba culture. Beyond this, Fagunwa habitually stages a moment of meeting between the novel's hero and the writer, after which he makes the hero commence the narration, by and large becoming himself, the "fictional author" referred to in the narrative. Of all his works, this device is most compelling in *Ireke Onibudo* and *Igbo Olodumare* (replete with details of Fagunwa's matrilineal line). The typical Fagunwa fiction weaves the Yoruba folktale tradition into a longer narrative, and includes a diffusion of character types that admit of shades of the living and the dead in social and natural life.

Usually Fagunwa's hunter-hero figure is also a wanderer of sorts, journeying to far lands in order to return and share with his community the wisdom acquired from his sojourn. In spite of the fantasy elements (which could be influenced by animist realism) present in his works, they nonetheless also offer realistic portrayals of the Yoruban environment, both literally and metaphysically. It is as much a world of witches as well as sagely priests, of gnomes as well as ballpoint pens. The standard Fagunwa plot structure appears loose, thereby defying the traditional assumption of sequence or chronology, with the living casually commingling with the dead, the sudden animation of the inanimate, a beholding of forms without shape, the presence of disembodied voices, and the stepping in and out of the everyday cycle of events and experience. This is because he is substantially indebted to the Yoruba folkloric narrative style. Along with this, there is an inescapable feeling of the picaresque flavor in his fiction. This is hardly surprising, as

Fagunwa's influences are quite varied. As noted by Olakunle George, Fagunwa draws from the nuances and robustness of the Yoruba narrative traditions as well as the European creative tradition. In 1955 D. O. Fagunwa won the Margaret Wrong Prize for his writings, and by 1959 the British government conferred on him the honor of an M.B.E. (Member of the British Empire).

Aside from his literary endeavors, between 1955 and 1959 Fagunwa worked as an administrator and educational consultant with the publishing arm of the Ministry of Education in western Nigeria; and from 1959 until his death in 1963, he was the representative of Heinemann Educational Books in Nigeria.

Fagunwa drowned on 7 December 1963, suddenly falling into the Niger River while waiting to cross by ferry. He remains an exemplar of literary juxtaposition, as his work brought together the age-old, ebullient tradition of Yoruban folkloric aesthetics and an emergent African cultural modernity.

[See also Marechera, Dambudzo; Mwangi, Meja; Okigbo, Christopher; Ifekandu; Soyinka, Wole; and Tutuola, Amos.]

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SOLA OLORUNYOMI