

## THE STORY ABOUT LIFE: BIOGRAPHY IN THE YORUBA OBITUARIES <sup>1</sup>

What we intend to do here is to present the obituary as a simple story in which an individual's life makes sense in terms of cultural assumptions on values, on meaningful relations, and achievements. The brevity of the story we consider is made so by the relative dearth of information which an obituary contains. But, in spite of the scarcity of information, the story still reveals a clear orientation: the obituary has meaning only in the context of socio-economic inequality and the exchange facilitated by that inequality. Our task in this paper is to attempt a description of this orientation to an "outsider". The emphasis is not so much on the structure of the discourse but the cultural knowledge which guides the discourse.

<sup>1</sup> The word obituary is used interchangeably with "In Memoriam" as notice of the death of a person. An earlier version of the paper was presented at a meeting of Ife Humanities Society, The Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, in 1987. For written comments I am indebted to Olabisi Yai and Segun Gbadegesin.

In several recent studies, the writing and publishing of obituaries has been shown to be an expensive means of making sense of a social event (Togonu-Bickersteth 1986; Lawuyi 1987 (b)). The researchers have identified various obituary formats: a full-page, half-page, quarter-page, and classified advertisement. They suggest that the price of each advertisement varies with the format of the publication. Thus, a full-page advertisement can cost as much as ₦ 4,000 (\$1,000). The other formats are cheaper.<sup>2</sup> Only the very rich go for the full-page advertisement. These are usually located in the urban centres (Togonu-Bickersteth 1986).

Generally though, all forms of advertisement are patronized by the urban elites, particularly those in the middle and upper classes. They are able to afford the money since the wealth of most of the developing countries, including Nigeria, is located in the urban centres. These urban centres are sites of industries, of government bureaucracies, and of multi-national interests.

The contents of the different obituaries vary slightly. Mostly, they:

begin with a statement indicating the overall sentiment that the death has aroused in the minds of the survivors. These sentiments range from gratitude to God for a long life to resignation to God's will for taking away a young life. This statement is usually followed by the picture (photograph) of the deceased and the age at the time of death. Next, some indicators of the socio-economic or community position are given — the professional, religious and traditional titles of the deceased. The obituary also usually includes a list of survivors and their position in the society. The commonest style is to list all the children, including deceased ones. Lastly, the obituary contains details of burial arrangements — wake — keeping arrangement, when the motorcade will start; date, time and site of interment; date, time and venue of all social and religious ceremonies pertaining to the funeral (Togonu-Bickersteth 1986:85).

The information about the burial arrangements is featured in the obituary and not in the “In Memoriam”. All other informa-

<sup>2</sup> For those in the middle class, with an annual income of ₦ 5,000-10,000, the amount spent on the obituary is a substantial part of the income. Such commitment reveals a deep sense of attachment to a significant value: one which must invariably be connected to their being.

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tion is shared by both the obituary and the “In Memoriam”. Only in the case of the classified advertisement, and because of the small space involved, would many of the features — such as the picture — mentioned above be missing.

However, when Funmi Togonu-Bickersteth (1986) did her study, she only went on to detail the existence of the obituary as a cultural form. She highlighted the concepts which support the need to communicate feelings. She also focused the consequences of these concepts on interpersonal behavior. Although the study touched on a complex problem which can respond to dynamic and adaptive aspects of the experience of life, nowhere in the text is there an understanding and appreciation of the effect of change. Besides, issues that were raised were never linked to any schema or paradigm. Consequently, it is difficult to appreciate the life history given in the text or even replicate the study since there are no systematic procedures for arranging memories and for determining gaps in the data analysis.

On the contrary, we have pursued the issue of change in the obituaries as a form of ancestral worship (Lawuyi 1987 (b)). To us, the concept of ancestral worship lays out the features by which changes in the social communication of death can be perceived and rationalized.

The study demonstrates the possibility of continuity in ancestral beliefs.<sup>3</sup> But the suggestion is not that there is a conscious intention to identify with tradition. Rather, as we argued, the obituary publication is a symbolic manifestation of a tradition that has taken a new cultural form. It is a symbol with which the Muslims, the Christians and the traditional religionists all identify. Its flavour derives from both the struggle to constitute the identity of the dead as well as that of the living. For the individual, the symbol is a mechanism for the expression of self and for tackling the perennial problems of human existence, like life and death, good and evil, misery and happiness, fortune and misfortune.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the eldest son would sponsor the obituary of an aged father. There is a circle of intense excitement—every ten years—when the loss is commemorated with feasting. Whoever sponsors the obituary and also sponsors the feasting gains in prestige and assumes the jural authority left by the departed.

But then, our approach, while indicating the dimensions of change in the obituaries, nevertheless does not capture the life histories in them. In fact, it completely ignores feelings and emotions constituting the textuality of the deceased's experience. Yet, careful scrutiny of the obituaries does show that each is a story about a life, to be recognized and appraised by achievements, academic or social. Hence, much in line with story structure, the obituary must be seen as a "connected, meaningful text which describes a set of situationally important or relevant events in a structured manner for the purpose of making or illustrating some point" (Rice 1980: 157).

One would look hard though for a long story in any obituary. Usually, the texts are cryptic and abstract, and it is this that makes a discussion of them equally abstract. For, the texts do not disclose much about the different phases of life history. Rather, they describe a situation (of how death resulted) in which life is also embedded. This embeddedness manifests in at least two ways. The first is that the obituary is a sign of death. On one hand, it points to the end of a life. On the other hand, and rather paradoxically, it also brings the dead alive for public reading. That is, the writing of an obituary happens only when people die and then for a reason often specified in the framework of loss and change: "you have been missed"; "life has not remained the same", "your friends have deserted", "I am lonely". The mood dictates what is written. But even without the mood, the social context necessitates that some kind of reflection be undertaken and publicized. For instance, in a polygamous situation, where accusations of witchcraft, hatred, and selfishness are common, it is necessary to absolve one from any blame with regard to the death in the family. Also, in a different vein, if a rich man or woman refuses to advertise a parent's death, then he or she could be accused of being a miser or of being disrespectful to the dead. It would seem as if he or she never appreciated the significance of the parent to his or her achievements. So much is expected from the publications and the expectations are ground for the constructions of meanings. Thus, if one who used to advertise full-page suddenly changes to a half-page, there may be speculations on his or her downward mobility. The fear of what people might say motivates the continued publication of the obituaries,

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unless something else has happened which, culturally, would make such publication unnecessary—for instance when the widowed partner has remarried.

Whatever the reason, though, when someone dies, a relative or friend decides to write as a biographer, as one attempting to understand the life of the deceased and thereby sensitise the readers to meaningful aspects of social relations in that society. In doing so, the writer may be projecting himself/herself by symbolically exhibiting his or her wealth through this means. But more importantly, the writer brings into the foreground a reality that the reader, if a member of the same society, can always feel.

We would reflect in another essay, on how the writer could symbolically project him- or herself more than the deceased. For now, it suffices to point to the fact that the content of the obituaries have consequences within the setting in which they are produced. Our second point therefore is that the accounts are not mere intuitive statements or disinterested vehicles of opinions and feelings; rather, they project cultural values (of gender relations, of social mobility, etc.) and thus structure social relations. The values are, in the case of the Yoruba, intrinsically linked to particularistic concepts by which they are made emotionally acceptable, as presented in obituaries, as image of an actual state of affairs. Given this, we cannot talk of the image and concepts in the publications as inconsequential. Instead, they should be considered for their own socially constituted nature, their own textuality and their own paradox.

The idea of how one text deviates from the other can emanate from a discussion of the structure which informs every publication. Hence, our conceptual choice of biography. There are, of course, many similarities between the obituary and a biographical writing. First, both are statements about a significant life worth knowing or appreciating. Second, the individual discussed is not free to construct a story of his own. Rather a story is constructed for him. Third, the thing most biographers do is to see the life as “unit reality”, as an abstraction and a generalization.

None of the reasons above justifies any consideration of obituary as biography *par excellence*. Rather, in the conceptual frame of a biography, we are assuming that there may be a wider reality than may normally be available in an obituary. The biographical

approach is an analytic tool both representing what is and what ought to be; in this instance, a schema for understanding events. A focus on obituaries as more or less a biography therefore imposes an order on data such that the accounts read as situated discourse, that is, as one which appeals to the establishment of a universe of shared meanings as signalled by subtle linguistic and non-verbal cues. The organization of these shared meanings has been neglected in the literature. But it is just this type of organization that we are primarily seeking in thinking of biography as schema for understanding obituaries.

The analysis that follows is based on an examination of over seven hundred cases of obituaries collected between July 1985 and December 1987. Its main focus is on the Yoruba obituaries published in the *Daily Times* of Nigeria. The *Daily Times* is one of the oldest dailies in Nigeria. Also, its daily publications contain more obituary advertisements than any other newspaper. Indeed, previous analyses of obituaries (Togonu-Bickersteth 1986; Lawuyi 1987 (b)) have been based on data collected from the *Daily Times*.

## THE SETTING

The Yoruba, with over 10 million population, live in the south-western part of Nigeria. The area includes the forest and savanna vegetations, both of which have conditioned a distinctive social organization (Bascom 1969). Within the area in which they are situated, the Yoruba have evolved a patrilineal, virilocal (though heavily patrilocal) society with an unequal socio-economic structure stratified by wealth, age, professional occupations and sex (Fadipe 1970). The economy is characterized by burn-and-slash cultivation and there is a private form of land tenure. Sense of territorial boundary is acute and a good deal of suspicion and rivalry culminates in the belief in witchcraft and, by the 19th century, in civil wars for territorial expansion and political ascendancy (Atanda 1980). Indeed, the perception of habitat diversity depends upon which resources are of interest to those using the area and on the mobility of the population (Lawuyi 1987 (a)). Thus, different groups have slightly different languages, tribal marks and customs. They also have distinctive food habits. In

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short, the Yoruba comprise several sub-groups noted for their distinctive socio-economic specializations.

Until the arrival of the missionaries and later the colonialists, the Yoruba society had three principal social strata: the elites, comprising the king and the chiefs, the commoners, and the slaves (Falola 1984). The economy of the precolonial era depended on the labour of the slaves as appropriated by the elites and commoners alike. The extent of the slaves' contributions determined individual wealth and status (Falola 1984). They indicated the prestige ranking in the society.

With the arrival of the "foreigners", the missionaries and colonialists, the structure of the local economy changed. Much emphasis was laid on production for external consumption. For most of its post-1890 history, the Yoruba economy was based on the exploitation of forest products for overseas export: timber, palmoil and cocoa. The foreign firms supplied the capital, the people, the labor. These activities were marked with boom-and-busts, by dependence on unreliable international markets and by political struggles to control labor. And, as the local economy became entrenched in the metropolitan economic order, an ever-increasing socio-political inequality developed between the traditional and modern social strata (Aina 1986). The political consciousness was then derived from oppression, control, exploitation, and paternalism exhibited by the foreign businessmen and the local middlemen alike. The resultant contradiction has become a key element in political activism.

The middlemen then, as now, represented an agri-business elite; but they, paradoxically, devoted little of their time to farming. Farming was an essentially rural concern, but the middlemen preferred to maintain strong links with the urban society, the world of multinational enterprises and bureaucratic demands. Their links with the rural areas were usually weak and exploitative. For they got cheap labor and used their bonds of kinship, neighborhood, and friendship more effectively in the rural areas, in spite of the people's complaints, to ensure a steady supply of export products.

In the seventies the economic structure changed slightly. That was with the discovery of oil. The nation found itself suddenly wealthy. There was diversification of business concerns—although

most remained export-oriented. There were then new constructions: it was a time for urban high-risers, for expansion of the network of roads, for an increase in educational infrastructures and health service.

These developments occurred because there was an unprecedented rise in the Gross National Product from 4% *per annum* during the 1950s to 8% *per annum* between 1966 and 1975 (Togonu-Bickersteth 1986). The oil production contributed much to the growth. And although the Yoruba territory is not an oil-producing area, nevertheless individuals benefited from the oil boom by virtue of their roles as middlemen in international trade and from the corruption which attended the sudden national wealth.

The symbolic manifestations of wealth are expensive cars, the construction of housing estates, provision of foreign education for children, frequent overseas travels, and the practice of concubinage. The number of automobiles on the road, and the carelessness of the drivers, accentuated the frequency of road accidents and of death resulting from them. Funmi Togonu-Bickersteth reports:

Those who travel often by roads are confronted by decomposed bodies of accident victims by the roadsides. The latest available figures indicate that on a 142 kilometre Ibadan-Lagos expressway alone, well over 12,000 deaths occurred in 1983 due to automobile accidents. (Togonu-Bickersteth 1986:83).

More deaths were to result from armed robberies and from the tension of coping with a materialistic society. Indeed, many of the national dailies, today, feature the death of young executives or of the fast-rising bureaucrats whose ambitions ended with “sudden death” (Togonu-Bickersteth 1986).

## STORY AND BIOGRAPHY

For whoever died, the obituary starts with a short prologue written by an observer, an “I” or “we”. These are collective representations of a social unit, the family. The “I” and “we” are affirmed



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as a power of a decision process which involves the family. But the composition of this family is never specified. It could be inferred from the list of biographers. Whatever the reason, it is obvious that when a “we” is used, several people have contributed their memories to the decision being reported. Some of them gave much, others considerably less, but they all showed a co-operation and kindness which heightened the decision makers’ understanding of the life history of the deceased as they have been preserved in the decision makers’ own time.

By our conceptualization, the representative(s) of the decision makers who put up the advertisement in the newspaper is the biographer(s). The status of the biographer could vary from that of a son, a husband/wife, to that of a nephew or cousin. What is written is usually in English, Nigeria’s commercial language and importantly the means of communication within and between the upper classes. The story is introduced with phrases such as “In memory of our dear...”, “I remember today...” and “The family announce with regret...”. The biographer(s) has two choices in presenting the story: that between remembering and forgetting, and that between regret and happiness. Rarely is death a happy thing. But the Yoruba feel a greater sense of loss when somebody of less than 50 years of age dies. It is unusual for survivors to express happiness or joy while announcing the death of anyone, however old. At best they start with “with gratitude to God...” and go on to express regret in announcing the death.

The characters of those who are regretting are not mentioned. However, in the form of a collectivized “I” or “we”, attention is drawn by the implication “listen to us because we are related to someone important enough not to be ignored”. In this way, the biographer attempts to appropriate some of the importance of the deceased by implicitly or explicitly alluding to his/her position in the family and in the society. Hence, this short recollection in an obituary:

We remember today as every day with profound gratitude to Allah and with affection, our most revered and beloved husband, father, grandfather, brother and uncle...

(*Daily Times*, February 22, 1986, 19.)

Starting from the social periphery of genealogies, the usual thing is for the story to move gradually into the personal center, first with the naming of the deceased and later with the identification of his academic and social distinctions. Usually the lifespan of the deceased is stated in categorical or durational form, more in terms of the former than of the latter. The deceased was either 60 years old or, put differently, lived between 1900 and 1960. When formulated as categorical expression, the age condenses information and permits a restricted discourse of events and characters. Which probably explains why, with time as condensed value, several aspects of “career path”, “selfhood scheduling” (Plath 1982), “timetable” (Roth 1963), “succession” (Mandelbaum 1973), or “cultural phenomenology” (Levine 1978) are missing. That is, in practically all of the obituaries, the deceased’s schooling experiences are not mentioned. The marital bliss or problems are ignored. There is no indication of what the deceased’s religious practices were—although the religious identification is substantiated by the name or nature of the burial ceremony. Furthermore, there is no description of the structure of opportunities given to different-aged cohorts. Generally, the socio-political climate in which the deceased grew up is not mentioned. The entire life history is condensed to a highlight of specific achievements, the academic ones especially. Even the picture which accompanies the publication is testimony to a concern for social status, and indirectly for achievement.

The picture is that of a middle-aged person. Rarely is there a picture of an aged person even if the person died at an old age. The picture, like age, restricts a discussion of time in that it condenses information. On one hand, it condenses so many values and attitudes into a symbolic expression of grief. In other words, it alludes to age, sex, mood and socio-economic status. On the other hand, it is rendered in a categorical form which is not governed by any time span. The appeal of the picture is the smile on the face, the exhibition of expensive jewellery, and the directed gaze or focus of the celebrant. The picture reveals nothing of the anxieties and of the insecurities in the struggle to become an important personality.

We like to think that the way in which individuals relate to the middle-age opportunities is given expression in the photographs.

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The pictures, as we have said, are usually of those in middle age. The central location of the pictures, in the middle of the advertisements, would again seem to reinforce the emphasis on middle age—which is symbolically between childhood and old age. People relate to this age in various ways. Some of the dead are remembered for a few years. Others for as long as sixty years (Lawuyi 1987 (b)).

The story told about each individual points to the differences in the length of remembrance. Most of the stories are of the problem-solving type: dealing with absence of a dear one, with vagaries of life, with indeterminacies and with insecurity. They are basically informed by a concept where morality and meaning are inextricably linked in actions:

Exactly a year ago we lost  
A mother in Israel  
A mother who would starve that we might eat!  
A mother who would deny herself of earthly things that we might have  
enough!  
A mother who was ever ready to lay down her life to spare ours!  
A mother whose sterling qualities stand out among a million mothers!  
A mother who lived and died for us!  
A rare Gem!  
This then was our mother  
Who was mowed down by those who should protect her against all ills.  
Oh God, help us that those who should cultivate do not lay waste,  
those who should harvest do not destroy,  
those who should guard do not plunder,  
those who should gather do not scatter.

(*Daily Times*, December 1, 1985: 19)

In many of the obituaries, people died a “mysterious death” or had an “abrupt end”. They were “mowed down by those who should protect”. These expressions go into the constitution of the world as “wicked”. It is a world where friends cannot be trusted. A world where relatives can become enemies. Nothing is stable. Precisely because the world is unstable, fortunes change abruptly and the “evil eye” pries into one’s personal concerns and achievements.

In the obituaries there is no “good” world. Rather, there is a “sinful” world, a world that is popular among the Christians. The wicked and sinful worlds belong to two different, though conceptually related, themes; they belong to two different spheres of social knowledge.

The wicked world arises from

1. lack of opportunities which has caused the biographer to want to remember the deceased;
2. better exposure to opportunities which has caused the biographer to feel the impact of the loss of a friend or relative.

The sinful world entails these roots and more. It is a world in which actions follow from the act of a significant other, the Christian Satan, who destroyed the human world of opportunities. This concept stretches the ethnography of the wicked world into the realm of the supernatural involvement in that Satan is appropriated as a human symbol: Satan can tempt, can deceive, can lie, and can destroy opportunities. In the notion of the wicked world Satan is culturally, situationally, and individually useful; his usefulness “comes not exclusively from any of the specific functions attributed to it in various cases but rather from its flexibility of significance” (Galt 1982: 664). It is a wicked world when, for instance, as in the popular Yoruba concept,

only yesterday evening the witch made her presence felt through her cries; this morning the child died; who does not know that the witch caused the death of the child.

In Yoruba culture, the witch makes her presence felt in conflict, in denial of opportunities, in fatal predictions, in rivalry and competition for a resource, in issuance of a threat and in unmet promises. The cause-effect relationship implicit within this concept is one which involves two opposite poles: one towards symmetry and balance and the other towards asymmetry and imbalance (Sodipo 1973).

For the Yoruba, the potential strain between symmetry and asymmetry is based on the fact that chance of symmetry is great-

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er than that of asymmetry. The Yoruba expect a good life, a good wife, brilliant children, financial successes, etc. And they are absolutely sure that these will materialize not only because they are God-ordained but also because the necessary rituals for their materialization will be carried out. Consequently, the prime focus of a personal reflexivity is not the symmetric relationship but the problematics posed by the asymmetries of say power and status. These problematics enter into the concept of the wicked world in such forms as sudden death, unpredicted accidents, loss of status and prolonged ill-health.

Whichever way one looks at these asymmetries, particularly in the construction of life history, a relationship is established between conceptions of personal identity, conceptions of temporal order, and the conception of opportunities (cf. Geertz 1973).

### CONSTRUCTION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

Life, within the obituary, is treated as a monad entity. The variables of age, name, sex, marital status, academic achievements, and place of birth, which are mentioned in the obituary, define the unique individual. Such an individual has no counterpart in history. It is simply inconceivable that there could be any other individual with the same social characteristics. Even identical twins would differ in terms of name.

A further authentication of difference is *Oriki*, personal praise name.<sup>4</sup> Not every obituary contains the *Oriki* of the dead.<sup>5</sup> Usually, the *Oriki* is mentioned in obituaries of the aged; most often when over 50 years of age. The *Oriki* is a symbolic construct that is both a means of retrieving or salvaging vanishing historical information and a way to spark community identity (Barber 1981).

<sup>4</sup> There are various types of *Oriki*. In the obituaries the most common is *Orii borokini*, the praise name of the wealthy.

<sup>5</sup> The Ekiti-Yoruba, one of the various sub-ethnic groups among the Yoruba, do not have *Oriki*. In understanding changes in the obituary construction however, it would be significant to know if the Ekiti-Yoruba have started using *Oriki*.

In the Yoruba culture, it functions to provide pedigree and legitimization for personal status, claims for property, inheritance, or access to skills or political positions (Barber 1981). It encourages individuals to locate their own life histories in the context of activities and historical settings of family membership in earlier generations. Rather than concentrating on lineages as such, *Oriki* encourages detailed knowledge of the achievements of the forebears. The self and others are inextricably linked, showing how each contributes to the understanding of a complex life history. In the following *Oriki*, the relationship between self and society is evidently governed by notions of prestige and power:

*Omo Aperin ni Ibadan;  
Omo Asunmo ore Egab.  
Animashaun Ore enia rere  
Omo Animashaun orun rere*

[The son of the elephant hunter in Ibadan; The son of Asunmo (personal name), the friend of Egbas (a community of Yoruba). Animashaun, the friends of generous people, Rest in peace, the son of Animashaun].

(*Daily Times*, November, 29, 1985: 22)

What the *Oriki* reveals is the social roots of the deceased. It presents him as the son of a hunter of elephants. Symbolically, he is a formidable personality, a significant social being. This linkage with a world of achievement is considered as legitimate as that of the biographer seeking an identification with the deceased. Significant here are both the process of the historical search itself and its successful outcome, which offers the biographer the opportunity of a linkage with the historical group experience. By its very nature such a search determines what is going to be recalled and how it is recalled. The biographer's publication then serves as a medium, a forum whose own presence, interests, and questions conjure up issues of the individual's relation to the society. Even if the biographer tries to remain inconspicuous, the very process is intrusive.

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### CONCEPTION OF THE TEMPORAL ORDER

The Yoruba presupposition is that only the old, the elderly, live their full life course. Those who die before fifty never become ancestors. They are a wasted generation. The wasted generation dies of sickness, of accident, or at the hand of a malignant power called “*aye*” (the world). These forces bring time— of opportunities—to a stand still, albeit temporarily since there is a “world beyond” into which individuals pass. Even those who die young can come back to the human world and live their full life course (Abimbola 1975).

The Yoruba objectify *aye* as witches/sorcerers, as enemies, as unexplained mysteries. On the most abstract level, *aye* is a transcendental locus of meaning, and is “typified by social roles, conventionalized perceptions, culturally determined styles, and a whole array of idiosyncratic associations which may be less than conscious” (Crapanzano 1977: 4). It is to be noted that *aye* never destroys the aged who, themselves, in Yoruba cosmology, can be regarded as *aye* in that they have a knowledge of the world’s mysteries. What *aye* can do is to destroy the successes of the old (*i.e.*, children, vehicles and properties); on the other hand, *aye* can destroy the young, the middle aged, and those in the process of becoming. Consequently, as one obituary publication puts it:

We weep for what was  
We mourn for what would have been  
We thank God for giving  
We submit to Him for taking away!  
The enemies of faith will fain put out  
God’s light, but God’s light will shine more glorious than ever  
*Teni begi loju* [Those who cut the tree ignore its potential for fruition].

(*Daily Times*, January 10, 1986: 18).

The tree metaphor reflects the mental health across the life cycle. It expresses a cognitive variability—spatial variation and culture change. It embodies a notion of time, a temporal situation of birth, growth, and decay. God’s influence on this process is that He is a transcendental Being. The identification with God is affirmed with earnestness precisely because social divisions cre-

ate tension that needs to be removed by a transcendental Being. Therefore the identification is a figurative situating of self in the domain of power that is essential to the activities of the individuals.

The various parts of the tree represent the various stages of human growth: the root (childhood), the trunk (middle age), and the leaves (old age). The roots provide the support for growth. In fact, the tree would lose its identity should any of the other stages be ignored. For these other stages provide knowledge of self and organize direct action in line with that knowledge.

*Aye*, within the Yoruba concept, is not part of one's roots. It is attracted to the self as it develops its potentials. *Aye* is dangerous because it changes the symmetry of social relations. As such, it belongs to that broad spectrum of supposedly maladaptive forces that are ranged against the benefits of individual and collective progress. In this view, the symbolic universe constitutes a barrier to the practical.

But what really interests us is that by the nature of temporal order, there is less concern about the past and much concern about the future. The past is well known; in genealogies or *Oriki*. The future is unknown, it is uncertain. As they say, "*aimasiko ni ndamu eda*" (not knowing the time, [future] causes man to worry). The uncertainty applies to whether one is concerned about death or is anxious about tomorrow or is anticipating a change. The future is problematic because human relations make it so.

## CONCEPTION OF OPPORTUNITIES

When people die, they are mourned for what they would have been. The middle age is important because it embodies the potentials of becoming. Within this phase—more than twenty and less than fifty years old—the individual marries, has children, possesses properties, becomes employed, and gets promotions. It is a phase in which the self is interested in the lives of a few significant others to whom it would be bound for years to come (Neugarten 1965).

The self at this stage is assessed for role performances, for responsibilities shouldered as parents or as managers of an in-



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dustrial enterprise. In none of these roles can the self function completely independently of others. Rather, the self is bound in an affective relationship with the other.

Those who are linked in reciprocity of feelings proceed to recollect that

You left us so young but just enough for us to acquire your admirable qualities of discipline, honesty, sincerity and high sense of duty.

(*Daily Times*, February 22, 1986: 21)

In a different situation, the memory selects, reshuffles and directs the attention of the readers to a symbolic “umbrella” removed by *aye*:

Fab, I shall continue to remember you because you were my umbrella which has been blown off and there has not been any and there will not be any other to replace it...

(*Daily Times*, February 27, 1986: 28)

The exchange giving rise to the recall process can be monetary and not only the intangible commodities such as esteem, liking, assistance, and approval. Thus, this remembrance:

Your 1/6d (15k) school fees loan to your needy pupil in 1935 has already yielded abundant dividends from which many scholars today draw knowledge.

(*Daily Times*, January 17, 1986: 15)

Few of those who write are childhood friends. Fewer still are friends made in old age. Biographers are likely to be relatives of the departed, most often their first child (Lawuyi 1987 (b)). The contemporaries who are competitors are not always part of the intellectual product of exchange.<sup>6</sup> As contemporaries of the de-

<sup>6</sup> Contemporaries remember the importance of the deceased when they have run some project and have both benefitted. Such remembrance lasts, at the most, only two years after the deceased's departure.

ceased, they are competitors when not linked with him in unequal socio-economic structure. The inequality meant that standard of value, accounting procedures and organization of production are bound to a decision-making process in which the deceased's authority is supreme. This inequality is remembered in the obituary publication both with respect to the position of the deceased in the family and in an appreciation column where the convoy of friends of the family are remembered for their gifts and services during the burial ceremony:

The entire... family of Ikorodu wishes to seize this opportunity to express their sincere gratitude to all our friends at home and abroad, the deacons, choirs, and the entire congregation of Ikorodu Methodist Church... The Ayangburen of Ikorodu, the Awujale of Ijebuland, the chiefs...

*(Daily Times, January 20, 1986: 17)*

The entire obituary communication is ritualistic. It brings out the public nature of social organization and of exchange. The obituary is "devised to do a whole range of things like show, report, camouflage, hide, command, beg, maintain, reason, qualify, inform, about a certain order of state" (Ben-Ari 1987:66). Those who are not linked to the dead in an unequal structure of exchange are not bound by this public acknowledgment. Indeed, rarely do successors (who marry the widow or widower and who succeed the deceased in their jobs) write.

Consequently, in the materialistic Yoruba society, it is the concept of opportunities that determines the length of remembrance. When an opportunity lost is regained in marriage or in a new social group of friends, the remembrance is for a short time. But where the deceased had children and grandchildren, the remembrance is longer because the children and grandchildren find it difficult to find another "father" like their own. This symbolic definition of economy, of polity and the like entails two major institutional implications: the transformation of needs into the basic premises of the social order, and the evaluation of performance on the basis of utilitarian ends. Of the biographers, the children are in the best position to articulate these implications

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since a sense of deprivation does not depend on the depth of generational memory but on identity and consciousness.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show how the pattern of obituary publications among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria may be seen as an effort to grapple with a biography. The publication has assumed a distinctively Yoruba form, each textuality submitting to indigenous socio-cultural paradigms while simultaneously bequeathing a cultural legacy of its own. It is clear that the Yoruba see middle age as a period of self-actualization; they see it as a phase in which the self and others are linked in structures of opportunities. Forces which destroy the structure of opportunities threaten the process of self-actualization. These forces have become an apt subject or vehicle for allegory, a form whose plurality of interpretive levels indicates that “dead” is itself a metaphor for a multiplicity of potentials or of becoming.

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