

A PLACE WHERE  
THREE ROADS MEET:  
LITERATURE, CULTURE  
AND SOCIETY

AN INAUGURAL LECTURE,  
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DELE LAYIWOLA



UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

**A PLACE WHERE THREE ROADS MEET:  
LITERATURE, CULTURE AND SOCIETY**

*An inaugural lecture delivered  
at the University of Ibadan*

*on Thursday, 19 August, 2010*

By

**DELE LAYIWOLA**

*Professor of Performance & Cultural Studies*

*Institute of African Studies*

*University of Ibadan,*

*Ibadan, Nigeria.*

**UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN**

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### **Preamble**

I believe that I am extremely privileged to be offered the podium to give the lecture of today for several reasons. Though it is the fourth inaugural lecture to be given from the Institute of African Studies, it is the first to be given in the university by a chair of Performance and Cultural Studies. In contextualising cultural studies as a phenomenon in the teaching and research curriculum, I crave your indulgence to describe, in an anecdote, how my initial interest in Literature and Drama has embraced the 'Pan' discipline of cultural studies in the context of my research and university career.

Early in my undergraduate years at the University of Ife, the biography of Edson Avantes do Nascimento, the gentleman more famously known and addressed as Pelé of Brazil emerged with the subtitle – *My Life and the Beautiful Game* (1977, 1978). The book was not only prefaced with a poem:

This is not our life  
Everything here is a game  
A passing thing...

It also has in the foreword, by Robert Fish, superlatives in behest of Pelé that more people have seen him play football than any other athlete in any sport at any time; that people know his name and face than that of any other person who has ever lived; and that he has been photographed more than any other person in history. He has visited one hundred and twenty-five heads of state including two popes. The foreword climaxes this with something nearer home:

In Nigeria a two-day truce was declared in the tragic war with Biafra so that both sides would see him play;

Further,

the Shah of Iran waited three hours at an international airport just to be able to speak to Pelé and be photographed with him. (1978, 7)

Pelé's stature was not only synonymous with that of a literary hero or protagonist; he was a legend and a universal star, if not an extra-terrestrial constellation. All these predicated on the game of football; a particular field of cultural play!

The appearance of Pelé's autobiography brought me remorse and a measure of Aristotelian purgation in the mild melodrama I had just enacted. Was it not only the previous week I had fuelled an argument with my teacher, the erudite R.D. Taylor that I had the least respect for footballers and the game of soccer itself? My spirited explanation to him was that I saw no reason why twenty-two healthy men or women would abandon all reason on a proposed pitch to run after a piece of leather. What a waste of time, I lamented. If they were not truly idle, of what value was it to labour and enact a mock struggle in a ritual which could be concluded within minutes by simply grabbing the bloated leather and shoving it into a wide post at least twelve feet in width!

There was no love lost between Richard Taylor and my humble self when he remonstrated patronisingly with me at our common rendezvous that Pelé's 'beautiful game' is like the business of literary theory and criticism which I had arrived all the way to learn at the University of Ife as much as he had arrived from Brown University to teach the same. This leads steeply to the question of knowledge production in response to tradition or the art of knowledge capitalization. This is a question of method, of know-how, of what to do and how it is done. Two earlier examples in the history of

Literature come to mind – Sophocles (496-406 BC) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616). This will preoccupy us in a subsequent part of this lecture.

### **On Method and Methodologies**

In regard to method, both in the process of literary creation and in terms of its assessment, as well as in the making of culture, the task of literary criticism is clear. Here, I agree with Elizabeth and Tom Burns (1973) in their re-phrasing of Frank Kermode's classic assertion that literature, with a capital 'L', is an attempt to make sense of our lives and sociology is an attempt to make sense of the methods by which we live our lives. What they have done is to conflate the disciplines of literature and sociology which are distinctly implied in the statement of Kermode that:

It is not expected of critics as it is of poets that they should help us make sense of our lives; they are bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives. (Kermode 1967, 3)

Kermode succinctly refers to methods that are explicatory rather than prescriptive in that society is almost, always a complex cultural whole, with humanity being always the driving force of its epicentre. Literature is, therefore, the starting point of both man's attempt at the intellectual apprehension of his world, and the practical attempts to invent, modify or change that world. In understanding the traditions of our world, we are invited to make sense out of it, and positively influence it without passing judgement on it. But is it actually true that in reliving and re-inventing it, we do not pass actual judgements on it? We do pass actual judgements on aspects of culture but it is perhaps difficult to pass absolute judgements on them as in the example that Lloyd Thompson recalls in the following statement:

Herodotus (The father of History and Anthropology) made the point in a discussion of the modes of corpse-disposal in two different cultures. In one case the bereaved cremated the corpse, and in the other they ate it. As Herodotus argued, any attempt to adjudge the one method as 'better' or 'worse' in any absolute sense is a waste of time. (1991, 9)

The reassessment of customs, of traditions and of life is always relative and moderated by objective or subjective experience as much as it is in the craft of literary criticism. In a book dedicated to Norman (Derry) Jeffares, Robert Welch had included in the introduction that

literature and creativity are closely related... Literary criticism which studies the works and achievements of language in literature should be tactful, but it should be conscious too of the dignity of its calling. It is no mean thing to be an interpreter. It is a delightful and proud thing to make clear the relationship between a writer's life and his work, between the traditions a writer inherits and his own individual character and temperament, between imaginative work and its social context. (1983, 2)

The concept of fact can only be linked to empathy and objectivity and the intuitive sympathy that both the writer and critic must possess in abundance. In subtly separating critical temperaments from value judgement, the perception is granted that society is sustained by tastes which will recognise it, refine or purify it and thereby ensure that society survives for generations to trail behind it. This is eminently implied in the assertion of Northrop Frye that the literary critic must develop a taste that is tolerant and panoramically catholic; there is a nuanced divide between critical knowledge and the value judgement instructed by taste (Polemical Introduction 1973, 28). The fact that we must create layers

between the modes of perception and their collegial and magisterial applications continue to inform the development of definitions, traditions and the implications and consequences of the novel or the avant-garde. There is no reason why, in the establishment of traditions and canons, we cannot invent alternative canons or anti-traditions as well. After all, in the art of playwriting, the protagonist, the antagonist and the deuteragonist may exist side by side in any one play.

### **In Praise of Concepts**

It is agreed that all works of literature in most cultures of the world have the motive of communication and, in performative cases, of representation. It is in Wellek and Warren (1978) that I have found one of the most satisfying expositions on the use of theoretical concepts in cosmopolitan oral and written literatures. Most theorists of western extraction have always presumed that since the etymological term *litera* denotes written literature, their theories are necessarily at home with cultures which have a long history of written tradition. In our peculiar experience in Africa and some other cultures of the south and the pacific rim which have developed traditions of oral 'literatures', our critical faculty would require a more robust, accommodating and cosmopolitan conception of knowledge and cultural application.

The general claim can be made that underlying most literary productivity of anthropocentric culture, the traditional genres of the lyric, the epic and the drama are fairly representative. The rest would be sub-classifications which could be grouped under the major sub-headings. The statements found in works of art are not literally true; they cannot be presented in a court of law as literal, municipal statements as in local government or county account books. They are also not journalistic statements. They are philosophical but are not necessarily logical propositions. They are factual or fictional thoughts on a higher pedestal. They are representational and the heroes/heroines in fiction are not political or soccer heroes of the physical world. The Kongi in Wole



Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (1974) can never be the equivalent of his creator, nor could he correspond to Kwame Nkrumah as is often suggested. Even the town crier, Christopher Okigbo, so closely associated with his name in the first person singular is a fictional personage (1971, 67). The two passages could not be physically conflated as a legal entity. When artists and writers 'speak' or write, they choose to elect narrators or voices in the first or the third person singular.

In the scope of concepts which goes beyond the divided personality of the artist, a parallel may also be drawn in regard to the differentiation between linguistic systems and individual speech acts. The French, Germans and Russians would seem to have developed this concept ahead of others. Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) in a structuralist sense, and with the Prague linguistic circle, had made the clear distinction between the two concepts of *langue* and *parole*. In ordinary or artistic expression, *Langue* is the system of language whilst *parole* is the individual speech act. Roland Barthes (1964; 1967) Wellek and Warren (1978, 152), as well as Beninson Gray (1975, 1 - 3) have faithfully represented Saussure and his theory that a linguistic system (*langue*) is the collective, institutional and cultural representation of language or a mother tongue whilst *parole* is the individual use of, or apprehension of language. I can safely extrapolate that one is a corpus and the other an ideology. This is so because the system of language, even as a collective cultural identity is a social and value system. It is a set of mutually recognizable convention, which is immune from a selective, incomplete and (perhaps) imperfect use of an individual speaker or writer. I have implied, later in this lecture, that the degree of competence of any individual writer is the extent to which he/she could appropriate the gap or the scale between *parole* and *langue* as an expressible, creative concept. Over the ages, the scale of performance in the literary or dramatic rendition of artistic talent is the range of individual competence within a collective corpus, a field of cultural

play, a collective imaginative enterprise. To this turf, we shall return shortly.

In the preoccupation of cultural studies as a discipline, in regard to works of imaginative literature and the field of performance and media studies, sufficient differentiation must be made that each time the term 'literature' is described in Africa, it evokes both the written, printed, the declaimed and the performative modes (cf: Finnegan 1970; Herskovits 1958; Clark 1977). This is why in the field of cultural studies, literature and performance are homologous and homotypic referents where one corresponds to, or takes off from the other. If we pay attention to the coherence of cultural correspondence in regard to the concept and terminology of imaginative literature, then the term, 'orature' is equally invoked. In addition to the ramifying concepts of *langue* and *parole*, the German term *wortkunst* and the Russian equivalent of *slovesnost* are closer both in aspiration and in representation to the term **orature** (Wellek and Warren 22).

### **In Defence of Tradition**

In the study of classical societies, both Plato and Aristotle, in their study of classical literary criticism (Penguin 1965) agree that art can be presented in any of the forms of epic, lyric and drama (1965: 14, 15). There is an expression on the fact that art imitates ideals which are meant to impart models into the lives of men and women who consume and 'live' through them. These two philosophers show that art can engage the media of language, performance or material craft in their attempt to represent things as they are or better than they are. The sub-divisions of drama show that comedy represents men as worse, while tragedy as better. Between these sub-genres, society is encouraged to make a choice in the ability to compare models (p.33).

There is the indication that tragedy evolves from ritual and religion whilst comedy emerged when Greece became a democracy (p.34). This fact would seem to explain the growth and efflorescence of comedy and the cinema or home

videos in the lives of Africans in the last fifty years. This sub-genre of dramatic art flourishes with the advent of democracy and independence. This is not to deny the emergence or efflorescence of art in military eras, or periods under conquest, but they are often turgid, shiftless and less than robust. It is, of course, imperative that all nations should have a military or pseudo-military era as an interpolating epoch between agrarian or feudalist periods and the emergence of modern settlements and democracies. This point is crucial in that I shall return to it in my representation of the growth of cultural studies as both a discipline and a canon. The developments of artistic and dramatic forms also depend on the development of individual talents. Like the dramatic sub-genres, Aristotle bifurcates the temperament of artists as well:

The more serious-minded among them represented noble actions and the doings of noble persons, while the more trivial wrote about the meaner sort of people: thus while the one type wrote hymns and panegyric, these others began by writing invectives. (Aristotle 1965, 36)

One important point is worth making here in regard to the development of traditional travelling theatres in Nigeria. The phenomenon spread from among the Yoruba from the 14<sup>th</sup> century until its maturation through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There is already copious literature on this phenomenon—Adedeji (1978, 2000), Babayemi (1980), Babalola (1967), Johnson (1960), Jeyifo (1984), Layiwola (1995, 2000), and Ogunniran (2007). All of these writers traced the history and the origins of the actor and masque dramaturge in Yoruba historiography and culture. It is agreed that the origins of the craft, especially the ritualized aspects of it are found in the cult of ancestor worship. The methodological aspect is yet to be exhaustively elucidated in the divergence of the ritual/tragic aspect of the art from the lighter, satirical sketches which the *Alarinjo*, or travelling

troupes, then popularized. This aspect is crucial to our discussion of the development of cultural studies.

It is quite logical to begin critical cultural analysis from the great tradition which was begun with the Greeks, since those Greek city states were themselves like many traditional African states of the 15<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These societies were hierarchical and structured such that religious and secular guilds had their assigned places in the lives of the citizenry.

The need for the establishment of traditions and canons has always been incontrovertible because as F.R. Leavis observes for the field of imaginative literature, there is the need for challenging discrimination. This is the only way to forestall intellectual ferment because

the field is so large and offers such insidious temptations to complacent confusion of judgement and to critical indolence. (1966, 10)

This is even more important because, as I observed earlier, the field of literature has, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, given way to that all-encompassing field of cultural studies. There is the need and the call for a method of establishing discrete and evident patterns for the generation of meaning, even divergent ideologies. This is the only way by which we can create the awareness of *différance* in the corpus that may emerge, either by the force of circumstance or by the force of history. In this way, they promote awareness and transform the potentials and possibility for the art. There is, equally, the nuance that silence denies difference since ‘to be of historical importance is not to be significant in any way’ (1966, 11).

I am constantly reminded that the invention of literature in any of its forms is analogous to the proliferation of a linguistic system, which in turn, is the cultural reification of existence, a way of life, a pattern of conceptualisation, and a mode of thinking or knowing. This, inadvertently or otherwise, reinforces what I affirmed earlier in the appropriation of a linguistic system, *le langue*, whether it is conceived as literature or orature and its corollary as used by a speaking

subject, *parole*. There is thus a dialogic apprehension of existence in the creation of tradition, a coherent system of associative reference; a manner or nature of knowing, if indeed anything could be known, that is not already known or apprehended as in the original word: 'Let there be light, and there was light'. The indwelling word, itself, is the light. In the realisation of a world, speech is performance at its best. The best of dramatic literature as in the enunciation of the word is, therefore, the dramatisation of the frontiers of language, the conjoint of *langue* and *parole*. A furtherance of this is the beginning of tradition and the eventual birth of a canon. (Izerbaye 1976; Layiwola 1996)

The compelling imperative of tradition has been highlighted by T.S. Eliot as comparable to the ancient science of archaeology. Here he aims at something reassuring, coherent, authentic and permanent; a factor of stability. He affirms that 'every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind' (1980, 13). In the establishment of tradition, he magisterially underscores the point:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. (1980, 15)

In a following essay, he re-affirms that the function of literary appreciation is to impose order, or a sense of tradition, on the theory of literature.

I was dealing then with the artist, and the sense of tradition which, it seemed to me, the artist should have, but it was generally a problem of order; and

the function of criticism seems to be essentially a problem of order too... There is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position. (1980, 24)

I affirm that if there must be a great tradition, there must be counter-traditions as well.

### **The Challenge of Post-Colonialism**

There is always the daunting task of establishing whether a post-colonial writer or artist could ever re-establish his/her allegiance with a tradition or canon since his continent and his world has been so terribly balkanized by the intrusion of an imposing 'other'. His language is ruthlessly mediated and his land is violently appropriated and chequered by a force from without. The question of the language for national provenance and determination has raged between African writers since the Makerere conference of 1952 where African writers gathered at a conference titled: "A conference of African writers of English Expression." The conference could not define what African literature was, neither could it delimit its language of expression. A subsequent conference at Fourah Bay defined it as 'creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral' (Achebe 1982, 55). The language of expression seems to be at the heart of it all and Achebe ruminates aloud thus:

What are the factors which have conspired to place English in the position of national language in many parts of Africa: Quite simply the reason is that these nations were created in the first place by the intervention of the British which, I hasten to add, is not saying that the peoples comprising these nations were invented by the British. (1982, 57)

If nation states in Africa have been reconstituted into new linguistic groups, super-imposed over their original histories and geographies; then it could be unthinkable that thinking in those languages meant first going to Whitehall to obtain a license. It just means that there has to be a new modality under which what you thought meant the same thing as what your kith and kin understood as what you spoke. Both the spoken and the written component of the new language must be broad enough to adapt to new worlds and successfully bear the concepts of the new cultures it had embraced or subjugated.

In compiling a text on post-colonial studies a little over a decade ago (Layiwola 2001), I had compared and contrasted the post colonial situation of the African continent with those of Ireland and places like Australia. Essentially, is the context of post-coloniality the same amongst 'black' and 'white' post-colonials? In Ireland, for instance, could a poet/playwright like W.B. Yeats, or even Samuel Beckett be put on the same literary canon as Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Lewis Nkosi, Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Adebayo Faleti, Akinwumi Isola, Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare or Bode Sowande? Is the whole process of literary or dramatic production in the twentieth century territoriality as diverse as peoples, history or geography? Or could we radically say as Francis Fukuyama (2002) or Richard O'Brien (1992) and others have observed that globalization has truly put an end to the traditional concepts of history and geography? This is a vexed phenomenon. For instance, at the Armagh post-colonial conference of 1996, Declan Kiberd, a key delegate to the conference, believes that colonialism and its aftermath has created its own diversity (Layiwola 2001). In an intellectual as well as an emotive outburst, he declared:

Apart from the mutual experience of a temperate climate, Ireland shares nothing else with Western Europe! (2001, xii)

I believe that any African writer or literary critic could replicate this passionate outburst that, in spite of the extraordinary use of the English or French language, the continent of Africa shares very little cultural or economic affinity with Europe, America or countries of the Pacific rim. This, in spite of our expertise on the English language both as *langage*, *langue* or *parole*.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century post-colony, the Irish writers, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) and Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906-1989) have broken new ice in terms of trans-territoriality and the avant-garde. Yeats tried to reproduce society in the creation of a new symbolism distilled from a panoramic understanding of his native mythologies and folklore in the context of an expansive global culture (Layiwola 1998, 69-85). Beckett has been a maverick and an existentialist philosopher and playwright who believed that there is no prerequisite or absolute order in the universe and that the only reality is that of the absurdist, discrete, fragmentary and unpredictable (Layiwola 1992, 81). For Beckett, the fate of humanity is as unpredictable as the outcome in a game of chess (Bair 1980, 191).

I have remarked that the colonial factor in language and cultural events has been a critical factor in the intellectual and artistic output of artists from Africa, Europe, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific. It is true that in Africa and Asia, the English language has always contended with indigenous languages on the school curriculum so that the question is not so much on the absence of a (mother) tongue but on the need to discover a (father's) voice. In a place like Ireland, however, there is both the need to rediscover a tongue as well as to re-invent a voice in the effort to be heard (Layiwola 2001, xi). It is also important to note that though the discipline of English studies as a university discipline was established in 1896 as an intellectual instrument of empire building, it has become the basis of cultural studies in the British Commonwealth since the period of political independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is a matter for conjecture on how long its predominance will endure,



especially as Bill Ashcroft has predicted that the pre-eminence of English as a university discipline may not survive another century (2001, 1).

The first signs of Bill Aschroft's predictions are evident because about the time of our Northern Irish conference on Post-colonial literature and culture, a book, jointly edited by Ayo Bamgbose, Ayo Banjo and Andrew Thomas, portentously titled: *New Englishes: A West African Perspective* (1995; 1997) appeared on the scene. It is worth quoting Braj Kachru for a sense of the text:

...an African canon of the English language has been established and recognized. On the whole, it is a decolonized and demythologized canon (1977: vi)

The book also largely endorsed the comments of some of the avid users of the language as a medium of immense literary creativity—Soyinka (1993), Ngugi and Achebe. The success of the text is in its ability to reference the positions of writers from the very extremes expressed by Obi Wali (1963), and Ngugi (1986), who believe that African Literatures have no voices in Foreign tongues and corroborated by a native speaker, Enoch Powell, as referenced by Obafemi Kujore thus:

Others may speak and read English – more or less – but it is our language, not theirs. It was made in England by the English and it remains our distinctive property, however widely it is learnt or used. (1997, 368)

The point must be made that emotive claims by primordialists like Powell have bred the responses of writers and critics who have created canons, even from their vantage positions in the margins. This ingenuity has bred the more conciliatory models identified and nuanced by the arguments of Soyinka (1993), Achebe, and Izevbaye (1997). Izevbaye, in fact,

identifies that the unipolar tradition of the English English led to the crisis that forced Christopher Okigbo to treat "the European heritage of poetry, along with other poetics, in an essentialist rather than a culture-specific manner..." (1997, 317). It is clear that the empire dies and equally resurrects in the post-colony. But the crisis of determining a definition for African literature which speaks with an indigenous voice in a foreign tongue will be a rigorous and continuing debate (compare Chinweizu and Madubuike 1980: 305-308).

Whilst the arguments at definitions are raging, it would appear to me that the broad tapestry against which we could understand the quest for identity is that of the crisis of knowledge and artistic production in contemporary Africa or in other comparative post-colonial contexts. For instance, if we are unable to invent a new language owing to reasons that are obvious, are we able to create discourses that generate or articulate masterpieces and canons that are identifiably African? To borrow, Ngugi's phrase, if we are able to 'move the centre' or relocate centres in the periphery and the margins, the post-colony may, in the light of developments in Southeast Asia, generate coherent knowledge centres and enduring canons.

One great danger that we have faced as a defeated and colonized people is the loss of an authentic voice. Even if you have the greatest masterpieces of art, but expressed in the guise or image of another, there is still the hope of an unrealized ideal. The plastic arts have fared better in that the medium, for them, have always been the message. The three dimensional arts of Africa and Oceania have always been as real as any other originals. Our literatures are no less exquisite but the media, be they Anglophone, Francophone or Lusophone, have presented us as extensions of the canons of the metropolis. We, therefore, long for that near distant future when there would be such voices and languages that are fully authentic and African, and beyond the colonial outposts.

In a recent paper, Paulin Hountondji interrogates the process of knowledge appropriation in a post-colonial context and concludes that,

research in Africa and in all countries at the periphery of the world market, is as extroverted (i.e. externally oriented) as its economic activity (2002, 26).

I couldn't agree more with him. The analogy of knowledge appropriation with commodity production is illustrative. Our research activities are never autonomous or self-sustaining. In the process of scientific investigation, we have three distinct stages –

- (a) The collection of raw data/information;
- (b) The interpretation of data; and
- (c) The application of theoretical findings to practical issues.

The reason that Africa has not made major scientific breakthroughs is that the middle link is missing. Africans are used to gather data which are then exported and sent back as finished products. The real interpretation/or processing of raw information is done in the metropolis; yet this is the crucial phase of the production process. In the event of our inability to scientifically link up with the crucial process of cultural production, neo-colonialism will always keep the post-colonial state in perpetual dependence. In literary and critical theory, it is even worse because our experts now build and improve on the language of the empire to produce noble and newfangled results from our cultural raw materials. The originality which we so much possess and gloat over is used in the service of metropolitan cultures. These same centres appropriate our artists and put them into categories of merit such that our heroes are first made abroad before they are appreciated at home. The honour to our prophets, in a manner of speaking, comes from outside of their home base. This mode of colonial pact ensures that knowledge based Industries and enterprises, including economic activities are

perpetually extroverted. We look outwards rather than inwards for salvation from subjugation.

### **The Field of Cultural Studies**

Cultural studies, as a discipline, has had literature and language studies as one of its precursors. The field is dominated by theories in various disciplines including philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology and politics. It is thus a transdisciplinary field which applies the knowledge of various disciplines to the analysis and understanding of society. In the works of two influential scholars, Clifford Geertz (1973) and Chris Barker (2008), the discipline comes forth as the use of concepts for the search for meaning in society no matter the peculiarity (Geertz 1973, 5, 33 - 37) Barker 2008, 3-31, *passim*). It is automatic from the range of disciplines, as Paul Willis writes in his foreword to Barker's encyclopaedic book, that cultural studies is

a field of at times intractable complexity and perhaps the first great academic experiment in the attempted formation of a 'non-disciplinary' discipline. (2008, xxii).

The world around us is growing more complex by the day; reality is changing or mutating at an amazing speed, such that the language and images to represent that reality must continue to mutate with it. In the process, boundaries are bound to merge and re-emerge. This is not in the humanities alone because both Edwin Hubble and Stephen Hawking have reaffirmed the convincing theorem that our universe is not static. It is fast expanding in space making our planet an insignificant and unstable quantum in the evolving reality of God's universe (1959, 9, 54).

The theoretical resources and the methodological varieties in the study of culture and the humanities will continue to create mind-boggling propensities within the academy even as we contend with the global interaction of erstwhile traditional disciplines of the last century. In the observations of Willis, eclecticism will border on anarchism even as we

battle to retain a wide empirical grasp. Cultural structures are as diverse as the roots of languages themselves. This is the point which both defeats universality and re-orientates us that as we interact globally, we must, at the same time seek and locate particular peculiarities within global realities and games. I am cautious but find it convenient to adopt the wisdom of Wittgenstein that the best meaning of a word is its use in its language of origin, no matter how universal that language is (1953: § 43: 20e).

Barker rightly summarizes Wittgenstein's focus into three clear cultural referents:

- (a) the non-representational character of language;
- (b) the arbitrary relationship between signs and referents, and
- (c) the contextual nature of truth (208, 100).

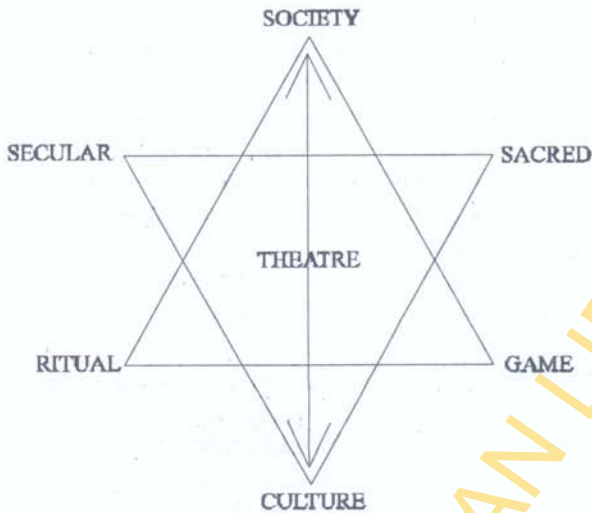
These reference points have helped me to further conceptualize the concept of cultural studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century into two major referents—that distinction between Ritual and the Game. Their referential characteristics can be categorized as shown below.

#### **Ritual**

Sacred  
 Religious  
 Constitutive  
 Engendering liberation  
 Encourages conservation  
 Encompasses rebirth  
 Convocation  
 Incorporation/Community  
 Identity  
 Fulfilment

#### **The Game (or Contest)**

Profane  
 Secular  
 Exclusionary, Disjunctive  
 Emphasising conquest and warfare  
 Indulges in branding, merchandising  
 Engenders dissolution  
 Schism  
 Hybridity/Dispersal  
 Fragmentation  
 Disillusionment



The interface between two opposing triangles form the interactive medium between culture and its over-arching society.

### **Theatre, Ritual and the Game**

The history of theatre practice in the western world is usually traced from among the Greeks as an art that grew with the evolution of Athenian city states and later through Rome. From here we go from the late antiquity through the medieval ages; Renaissance; Elizabethan and Jacobean England; Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century France; Restoration and Eighteenth-century England; Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth-century Germany; Nineteenth and twentieth-century Scandinavia; Nineteenth and Twentieth-century England and Ireland; Nineteenth and Twentieth-century United States and Canada; Nineteenth and Twentieth-century Russia and Hungary; and Twentieth-century Poland (Dukore 1974). Africa is clearly excluded but Ireland is included.

If we consider ancient Greece as a traditional community, without the concept of individual authorship, we may agree that the Dorians (12<sup>th</sup> century BC) have rights to the invention of tragedy and comedy as theatrical forms

(Aristotle, 34). If we are charitable, of course, it will be appropriate to cede the credit for epical writings to Homer who, in the eighth century, invented the writing of epics. But here, we will consider the art of drama alone. This is why my consideration here is limited to the famous triumvirate – Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles. For the art of comedy, of course, Aristophanes is the master. The four playwrights lived between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. At this time, the art of writing had grown to the point where each playwright owned his script.

The major reason why Africa was excluded from the history of dramatic theory and criticism is clearly because the question of individual authorship and authority, and the art of graphical writing, *écriture*, or the use of a comprehensive alphabet was not in vogue. The art of the alphabet only came with colonialism—Arabic or Western. This colonial instinct put paid to the indigenous development of another rival, autochthonous alphabet. This means that our own history, written in foreign alphabets could only be translated into African languages. This, however, is not so much the issue at this point; the issue is that of the origins and evolution of culture and theatre.

Since ancient Greece was as traditional as African communities of the middle ages as well as those of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, I wish to draw a comparative reference between the arts of both societies. This is legitimate in that the art of traditional drama and festivals in both societies reveal a striking, comparative affinity. I also find the comparison between Elizabethan theatre, especially in regard to Shakespeare, and classical Greek theatre illuminating, in the representation of men doing things; building empires and promoting the monarchy. Shakespeare was obviously influenced by Greek and Roman theatre. Many African writers from Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Eastern and Southern Africa have subscribed, in the same way to Greek and Shakespearean influences. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, colonialism has put Africa and Europe on a comparative cultural pedestal in the adoption of a common alphabet and the legacy of western education.

It is in this light that I shall discuss, very briefly, a few examples of those plays which have a bearing with the three distinct periods. Our focus will be limited to Nigerian theatre in the context of these three classifications:

- (a) Greek Classics and African Festivalia
- (b) Elizabethan Theatre and the Legacy of Shakespeare
- (c) Twentieth-century Radical and Avant-garde Nigerian Drama

The development of traditional theatre in Nigeria, especially among the Yoruba is fairly well chronicled in the essays of Joel Adedeji (Irele & Ogunba 1978) and the *Nigeria Magazine* compilations of Ogunbiyi (1981) and Jeyifo (1984); as well as others like Banham and Wake (1976), Beier (1967), and Barber (2000). These categories of theatre practice and practitioners often compel a comparative critical criterion which invariably shed light on modern societies of which we constitute a part.

My first example, the story of Oedipus the King, is considered one of the all-time masterpieces of Athenian tragedy. The simple plot is woven around the story of a man who, through human weakness and the sheer force of circumstance was destined to kill his father and later raise children by his own mother. No traditional or modern society condones incest. Through the gradual manipulation of recognition and discovery, the man who became king by acclamation found himself to be a villain who had to tear himself apart and away from the streets of Thebes, unable to return to his adopted city of Corinth but to a life of exile at Colonus. Jocasta, his mother and wife had committed suicide. I have discussed the critical details elsewhere (Layiwola 1994) and the implications of its influence on Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971). It is true that the structures of both societies appear the same and their monarchies have similar tendencies. But there are questions which remain unanswered in the transplantation of the details unto an African cultural subsoil (Layiwola 1991). In both the Greek original and the Yoruba copy, the rituals of tragic



heroism were played out logically as drama and as art, not as a real occurrence.

Wole Soyinka, in his adaptation of *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), which he sub-titled 'A Communion Rite.', represents another distinct influence. The play deals with a confrontation between King Pentheus and the same old seer in Sophocles' play, Tiresias, on account of the presence and activities of the god Dionysos, 'a younger brother of Ogun', according to Soyinka (Soyinka 1976, 12) in a correlative, comparative statement. This confrontation will later lead Pentheus to self-discovery and the conduct of ritual immolation, a *sparagmos*, which tore him apart just as it did King Oedipus. As a hero, he lived beyond the concept of a mere game and is re-united, in death, with the god he had earlier despised. He gave his life to re-invigorate his kingdom and achieves rebirth and resurrection.

African and Greek dramas have connected, in an interesting way, to Elizabethan drama in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. This play is otherwise called Shakespeare's 'resurrection play' because it is the only play where a heroine, Hermione, Queen of King Leontes of Sicilia rose from the dead and spoke. In this play, also, Perdita, a princess, a gender equivalent of Prince Oedipus, was severed from royal privileges and taken, similarly, to be abandoned on the hillsides before she was rescued by a shepherd. The reference to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, much like the West African ubiquitous oracle of *Ifa*, is also a point of comparative reference. It is clear that Shakespeare must have drawn from the same traditions as Sophocles, Euripides, Soyinka and Ola Rotimi. Comparative research has done a lot in bringing societies together across time and space, even as our planets draw apart in the same space. History and myth, ritual and the game have raised the tone of literature and culture from classical times through the medieval age unto the present day. Society spawns, and is sustained on that same web to give our humanity a cultural space and give our lives some meaning within that society.

The avant-garde theatre of Nigeria in the generation after Soyinka, Clark, and Rotimi has also tried to connect with that reality because tradition and society thrive on relative and mutual continuities. In *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1991), Femi Osofisan is able to capture the vagaries and adventures of a post-colonial society under military rule. The order and stability of traditional societies could no longer be taken for granted and the monarchies have transformed into men in uniform. There are other 'institutional' uniforms and arsenal as in the mainstream military and there are uniforms and arsenal from the parallel, cut-throat markets of thieves and pickpockets. Both authorities clash and society is once again called upon to make a choice and pass judgement upon the world. Of course, there isn't so much of a choice.

It is the same measure of disillusionment that Bode Sowande depicts in *The Night Before* (1979) when six idealistic undergraduates, on the eve of their graduation, discover that their society is not the haven they had thought it to be. The education available to youths in a post-colonial military state is extroverted and hardly able to cope with the realities of the post-independence period. Society strains between everyday ritual and political games. Between youthful, inept, philosophizing and the games of starry-eyed institutional leaders, those equally starry-eyed students lose control and their world stumbles into a void.

The tone and temper of second generation Nigerian writers is often predicated on a frantic attempt to understand a society caught between uneven modernities and the realities of everyday living. In the earlier phase, the response was largely ideological; it has now metamorphosed, somewhat, in the era subsequent to military rule. Democracy, as among the Greeks, must once again seek the mediation of culture in the tension between ritual and game for the rebirth of a society floundering in a void.

The most ancient link between the theatre and the game was about 535 B.C. when Pisistratus of Athens first invited Thespis of Icaria to participate in the dramatic contest held

biannually to mark the festival of Dionysos. Aeschylus was the first extant dramatist to win the contest in 499 B.C. The high point of the Dionysian ceremonies every January and March respectively (Hunt 1962, 12) was usually the drama contest. The latter ceremony in spring, called the Great or City Dionysia was the more interesting of the two festivals and audiences often number up to 16,000 (Hunt 1962: 13). Though an impresario or festival director (called the Archon) chose the scripts and assigned actors, the panel of judges for the contest were chosen by lot. Should the choice of the winner prove unpopular, the Archon and the panel of judges were penalized. The playwright and actors of the winning team got public recognition, honour and a little financial reward.

The contest inspired plays of great quality as well as quantity, and most probably intensified the feeling of independence among individual playwrights. To enhance the quality of performance, it increased acting capacity and a greater sense of individuality on the part of the actors. This led to a corresponding increase in dialogue rather than choral presentation. Hunt has noted that

the origins of Athenian theatre were not dramatic, but purely choral, the performances being by a chorus and a leader. Consequently, in the earliest Greek drama the chorus is the principal participant in the action. In the earliest extant tragedy of Aeschylus – *The Suppliants* – the chorus consisted of fifty members,...; later this number was reduced to twelve for tragedy and twenty-four for comedy. Dialogue alternated between chanting to the music of the pipe or the lyre, and spoken dialogue. Sometimes the whole chorus spoke or sang together... The styles were accompanied by stylized gestures and by dance (1962, 14)

Given the development of the contest, Thespis introduced a first actor, and as the spirit of contest and game flourished, Aeschylus and Sophocles introduced the second and third actors respectively.

The theoretical point I seek to make here is that there is a link between any ritual and drama whose plot and outcome is easily predictable by the community because they are aware of the story line of the play; they have as valid a patent as the playwright or the actor. Therefore, writing a ritual or traditional play is always a collaborative or collective event, the community being (even if vicariously) part of the 'writing' and the performance. On the other hand, the fact that playwrighting became the subject of a contest with some material reward and approbation gradually took it away from the public and gradually made it the property of one man. Even more important was the fact that whilst the outcome of a ritual event was almost always predictable, that of a game or contest involving two or more contenders was not.

S.J. Tambiah (1979), in a profound attempt to identify ritual performance and contextualize it followed the theories of many social anthropologists, including Levi-Strauss and Radcliffe-Brown. He posited, and quite rightly, that ritual, festival and play belong to one paradigmatic set. A play, like ritual, constitutes a stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own (limitation of time); it also takes place in a marked off space, the playground and ritual stage sharing this 'limitation of space'; it assumes a fixed, culturally ordained form, constituted of 'elements of repetition and alternation (as in a refrain) which are like the warp and woof of a fabric'; it is a 'contest for something' as well as a 'representation' of something... it 'creates order and is order,' and in an imperfect world, it brings temporary perfection.'

However, Tambiah, after Levi-Strauss (1966) advances the argument a step further, saying that there is far more tension and uncertainty inherent in the outcome of a play or contest than in a ritual event. This, for him and Levi-Strauss,

constitutes the major difference between a ritual and a game. The rule in all games often allows for unlimited number of matches and any side could win in a game. It means that, often, results are far from apparent, and there are possibilities and chances. It is therefore a fluid system which gives room for entropy and disequilibrium. Whereas a ritual is like a favoured instance of a game whereby the resolution is directed towards a certain degree of equilibrium:

Games thus appear to have a disjunctive effect; they end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality. And at the end of the game they are distinguished into winners and losers. Ritual, on the other hand, is the exact inverse; it conjoins for it brings about a union... or in any case an organic relation between two initially separate groups, one ideally merging with the person of the officiant and the other with the collectivity of the faithful. (Levi-Strauss 1966, 32)

In ritual dramas, the plot and structure development are geared towards the attainment of a certain sense of well-being. Even if the deployment of ideas and episodes do not pre-empt the denouement of a performance, the ordering is such that a particular outcome is re-assured. There is a longing towards a resolution of chaos, be it personal, communal or cosmic. This is the preferred basis for some intensity of performance as described by Verger. A certain degree of self-dismemberment or *sparagmos* is, in the same vein, almost always visible in the ceremonies and religious observances of many indigenous African churches or traditional festivals. The actor, 'officiant', or dramatic vessel lends his/herself to a certain welling up of forces from the solar plexus and whirls in the ring of illusion into which (s)he has submerged him/herself. In the assumed sequence of ritual, no harm can come to him/her even if wounds were inflicted

on him/her in this trance-like state (Compare Beier 1959; Verger 1969, 53; Layiwola 2000).

One factor that cannot always be rationalized or gainsaid is the fact that all overt dramas of this kind, by mere predilection or prompt to action; whether in gesture, speech or dance possess an implicit social process. There is therefore a certain level of equilibrium generated in performances of play and of ritual as the recent collaborative works of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner reveal (Turner 1982, 73-74). It is equally interesting to note that events in ritual theatre, much like the classical definition of a dramatic event often have a visible beginning, middle and end; what Arnold Van Gennep would symbolically term 'preliminal, 'liminal' and 'post-liminal' (Gennep 1960). Like actual drama, therefore, ritual is imbued with an irreversible sequence, a plot and a generative structure associated with all performance genres. Turner represents the point unequivocally thus:

Ritual is, in its most typical cross-cultural expression, a synchronization of many performative genres, and is often ordered by dramatic structure, a plot, frequently involving sacrifice or self-sacrifice, which energizes and gives emotional coloring to the interdependent communicative codes which express in manifold ways the meaning inherent in the dramatic *leitmotiv*. In so far as it is "dramatic", ritual contains a distanced and generalized re-duplication of the agonistic process of the social drama. Ritual, therefore, is not "threadbare" but "richly textured" by virtue of its varied interweavings of the productions of mind and senses. (1982, 81)

### **The Future of Ritual; the Future of Society**

Richard Schechner (1993) speculates broadly and profoundly on the future of ritual as a 'theatrical', performative event. He grasps with a definition as such:

Rituals have been considered (1) as part of the evolutionary development of animals; (2) as structures with formal qualities and definable relationships; (3) as symbolic systems of meaning; (4) as performative actions or processes; (5) as experiences. These categories overlap. It is also clear that rituals are not safe deposit vaults of accepted ideas but in many cases dynamic performative systems generating new materials and recombining traditional actions in new ways. (Schechner 1993, 228)

Tambiah (1979), in an attempt that predates both Turner (1979, 1982) and Schechner (1993) had remarkably arrived at a working definition of ritual which sums up the perceptions of both his contemporaries like this:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the third sense of indexical values – I derive this concept from Pierce – being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance. (Tambiah 1979, 119)

It is an easy derivative from all I have quoted above that Tambiah, Turner and Schechner consider ritual to be a specialized form of theatre seeing that 'in theatre too, behaviour is

rearranged, condensed, exaggerated, and made rhythmic. Theatre employs colorful costumes and masks as well as face and body painting, every bit as impressive as a peacock's tail or a moose's antlers' (Schechner 1993, 231). The violence or self-dismemberment of ritual is equally displayed in theatre even when it is deferred for the purposes of illusion and suspense. The stage metaphors in which events are concealed or substituted with contingent items are both present in ritual and in theatre. Hence, it is no less theatre than it is ritual when there is a sacerdotal substitution of bread and wine for the flesh and blood of Christ (Schechner, 231); the purpose of any ritual or theatre is after all not to create transfixed, material events but an imitation of the same in a manner that elicits pathos as Aristotle elucidates.

The discussion of violence and eroticism as a recurring characteristic of theatre and ritual are well-known. It can be patently argued that without a conflict-generating circumstance there can be no theatre since, as we indicated earlier, ritual must aim to resolve some tension and substitute a situation of equilibrium. Though the resolution of chaos or attendant equilibrium may be delayed or deferred, there is an abiding reassurance that it is man's last hope. Violent, bloody and erotically charged as Sophocles presented the tale of Oedipus, the audience and the supplicant chorus do not lose sight of the fact that the tearing apart of Jocasta and Oedipus will reset a balance in the rhythm of their cosmos. It is only in this way that ritual helps to transcend the banal in everyday life, raising it to the status of archetypes and banalising it again by mere repetition or redundancy.

Nowhere is the life of modern man more ritualized than in the theatre where he surrenders at the box office beside the theatre entrance, his prejudices, doctrines and beliefs thereafter to encounter a new image fired and mediated by others. At one level, the audience representing society at large is challenged across the gulf by an actor or body of actors who are victims in a rite. Though he claims to represent the events by acting, the audience cast their judgment on him as they experience that other world through him, and dump him



thereafter as an impostor. After each performance or episode, the actor is a spent salvo, like the ritual vessel used and drained like the god at a possession rite.

Enactment or re-enactment as it appears in modern dramaturgy has driven scores of producers, among them Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, Felicitas Goodman, Antonin Artaud, Augusto Boal, Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, Ebrahim Hussein, Akinwumi Isola, Femi Osofisan, and Bode Sowande to the brink of that pristine violence in the search for new forms of theatre. For this reason, the new theatre is ritual and the embodiment thereof to retrieve the spent force that is modern man. To do this, I confidently project that the drama and the home videos of the present age will continually seek to create a man-centred, actor-oriented stage where paraphernalia and stage properties are decentred and the depths of the human persona dug out and revealed as moments of truth from a forgotten past. At that point theatrical experiments will regain what it lost since the time of the Greeks and since Shakespeare. It will reinstate that imaginative connectedness to its past and to its glories. We must also note that an actor or actress in a play acts out his or her roles and interprets them to an audience who stand in opposition and in judgement to him or her. Ritual takes the play a step further. The actor in a ritual play is a performer, a priest(ess), mediator and dancer; a magician and a warrior. He is a privileged incarnate in a concept or a cult of ideas. This exactly is what Grotowski strains to recapture in these lines:

The performer, with a capital letter, is a man of action. He is not a man who plays another. He is a dancer, a priest, a warrior: he is outside aesthetic genres. Ritual is performance, an accomplished action, an act. Degenerated ritual is a spectacle. I don't want to discover something new but something forgotten. Something which is so old that all distinctions between aesthetic genres are no longer of use.... Essence interests me because in

it nothing is sociological. It is what you did not receive from others, what did not come from outside, what is not learned.... One access to the creative way consists of discovering in yourself an ancient corporality to which you are bound by a strong ancestral relation... Starting from details you can discover in you or somebody other – your grandfather, your mother. A photo, a memory of wrinkles, the distant echo of a color of the voice enables you to reconstruct a corporality. First, the corporality of somebody known, and then more and more distant, the corporality of the unknown one, the ancestor. Is this corporality literally as it was? May be not literally – but yet as it might have been. You can arrive very far back, as if your memory awoke ..., as if you recall Performer of the primal ritual.... With the breakthrough – as in the return of an exile – can one touch something which is no longer linked to origins but – if I dare say – to the origin? I believe so. (Grotowski 1988, 36-40)

In conclusion, it might just be logical to conflate the aspirations of cultural studies to that of modern theatre and to say that the concept of ritual theatre and its new methodology has fore-grounded and re-defined the mission of the actor on the post-modern stage. Given the zeal and depth of its new practitioners, the conservative conception of ritual as an enigmatic, primitive accretion of religion has freed itself from the confines of a stereotypical course. What remains for the audience of the theatre is to aggregate the potentials of this new form and consolidate its rigours for the reformulation of society at large. Thereafter, literature and the dramatisation of language, in *tongue* and as a collective *voice* will seek to take us beyond the post-colony and back again from the past to the future.

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## BIODATA OF PROFESSOR DELE LAYIWOLA

The sixteenth in the series of the University Inaugural Lectures for 2009/2010 session will be delivered by Professor O. O. Layiwola of the Institute of African Studies.

Professor Oladele Olatunde Layiwola was born in Western Nigeria on the 26<sup>th</sup> day of July, 1958. He attended Abadina Primary School, University of Ibadan from 1965 to 1970. He attended Fiditi Grammar School, Fiditi from 1971 to 1975. He gained admission to the University of Ife to study English in September 1977 and graduated in June 1981 with a Second Class Upper Honours degree. He served his National Youth Service Corps year in Niger State as a lecturer at the Zungeru College of Advanced Studies, Bida from 1981 to 1982.

Professor O. O. Layiwola won a Commonwealth Scholarship to study in the United Kingdom at the famous School of English, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, England in October, 1983 completing his Ph.D in record time of three years in October, 1986. He joined the Institute of African Studies in February 1987 as Research Fellow II. He was promoted Research Fellow I in 1990; Senior Research Fellow in 1993 and Professor on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1998. During the period, Professor Layiwola has taught across four departments – African Studies, English, Communication and Language Arts, and Theatre Arts.

Professor Layiwola has served the university in various capacities as Director of the University Media Centre from 2001 to 2003 and as Director of African Studies from 2007 to 2010. He had served on most major committees of Senate and on the Governing Council from 2003 to 2007. He has also served on international academic bodies and learned societies. In 1995, he was awarded an Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) Development Fellowship to visit the University of Ulster at Coleraine in Northern Ireland. As a visiting scholar to the Queens University of Belfast, Armagh

Campus, he organised the first International Post Colonial Conference in the university which was declared open by the Professor of Law and later President of Ireland, Mary Macalese. He is a member of the African Literature Association.

In 1999, Professor Layiwola was visiting Fellow at the African Humanities Institute, University of Ghana, Legon and at the Center for the Advanced Study of African Societies, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA. From 1984 to 2001, he was Executive Committee member and the Nigerian Representative, International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature (IASAIL). He edited *African Notes*, the journal of the Institute of African Studies for 12 years from 1989 to 2001; he served as Judge for the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Book Awards in 1991 and 1992.

Professor Layiwola engages in public service and charities. He was an Editorial Board Member of *The News*, Lagos, from 1993 to 1995; he served as the Honorary Secretary of the Nigerian Field Society (Founded in 1930) from 1997 to 2001; he is Chairman, Management Committee of Oluyole Cheshire Home, Ibadan; he is President and Chairman of Council, Leonard Cheshire Foundation, Nigeria; he is a member of the Board of Trustees, Centre for African Culture and International Understanding, Osogbo, Osun State. He is also an honorary member, Yeats Society of New York.

Professor Layiwola is married to Dr Adepeju Layiwola and the union is blessed with children.

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