

## They Sang with a Thousand Tongues by Bayo Akomolafe

Published Fall/Winter 2015

Let me tell you a story about how the world began. I promise you the story is not completely untrue.

Yoruba elders say that when the world began, there was only sky and water. The Supreme Being, Olórun, ruled the firmaments, while the Divine Feminine, Olokun, was master of the raging seas. One day, Obatala, a son of Olórun, grew restless and sought to create a world between primal sea and silent sky. A world of forests, of greens and mountains. He consulted his older brother, Orunmila, god of prophecy—the wisest of gods: “Make a golden chain,” Orunmila the seer said. “And with it, find a black cat, a white hen, and a palm nut. Then fill a snail’s shell with sand and descend to the watery depths.” Obatala obeyed, climbing down, down, down the golden chain that hung from a corner of the sky.

When Obatala was a short distance from the shifting surface of the ocean, Orunmila whispered to him what he was next to do. From a bag he had wrapped around his chest, Obatala poured out the sand from the snail’s shell and the sand became large tracts of flatlands. When the white hen was dispatched, it pecked here and there, scattering the pile of sand, distributing it with its wings, and forming mountains and valleys and continents in its wake. With the palm nut, Obatala then planted forests, which bore pleasant fruit that nourished the humans he later created. Pleased with this, the heavenly visitor took the black cat—his first earthly companion—and settled on a nameless piece of land, calling it ‘Ile Ife’—the home of the Yoruba people to this day.

I first heard this story when I was a schoolchild — my nose still wet with the dew of innocence, my eyes not yet raped by the cynic despair that now haunts my people. When our teacher told us the story, however, he did so with the kind of double-mouthed treachery that made us understand that we were not to believe a word of it. After all, Obatala’s alchemical journey into the heart of things was just an old story our fathers, groping in the thicket of their own obliviousness, told their children to get them to sit still. Now, we had fire—we had the tale of an uneasy tryst between a man, a woman, and an apple to help us understand our unflattering origins. Thanks to science, to true knowledge, we had the account of an inexplicable explosion at the beginning of time, the explosion that began this feverish rush of madness we call life. In the grand scheme of things, there was no room for Obatala and his golden rope. There was no room for my people. There was no room for me.

I must have understood my teachers supremely well for I grew up with a nagging sense of inadequacy and inferiority, not unlike other members of my generation. My teachers told me what their own teachers had told them, so it wasn’t their fault—that we were wrong, that our sense of the sacred and the ways of life were sincere exertions of a deluded

people, a blemish awaiting the antiseptic doses of a more refined culture.

“You see this car? Do you hear the humming of its engine?” one of my teachers might very well have asked. “It is not our calabashes and songs that made them. The white man has brought us school, technology, development, and true religion. All we need do is listen intently at the feet of our messiahs.”

I never questioned this story. I took it and made it my own. I was fascinated with this doctrine of a distant truth, one so powerful that it made ours of no consequence. Without realizing it, I started to distance myself from my people—of course, I was aided by my own people, themselves lost in the rat race for independence that interrupted their calabashes and songs.

I grew up learning that to speak like an American was to be privileged and superior. So I worked hard at disciplining the natural unwieldiness of my lips by using the ‘schwa’ sound—to pronounce a word like ‘father’ with the grace and poise becoming of a New Yorker, not with the ‘thickness’ of my own tongue.

I sat in the front of every class, desperate to please my teachers, raising my hand at the slightest suggestion of a question. You see, I was convinced in ways that needed little or no articulation that if I got myself educated, I could rise above the debris of my own bells-and-whistles culture and take my place in the constellation of the worthy... and that if I understood the irrefutable nature of things, I could find unmovable ground upon which I could build a real future for myself.

I remember responding to our pastor’s salvation call three times on a single Sunday. It was a pretty large church—so he wouldn’t have noticed the kid that waited behind for the subsequent services in order to be ‘thoroughly saved’ from his sins. Later, in the university, I would translate my hyper-religiosity into an ascetic quest for absolute certainty. My pursuit of absolute truth was so relentless that, as a psychology major, I read the Bhagavad Gita, the Quran, tens of Bible concordances, books on quantum physics, chemistry, systematic theology, history, and Darwinian evolutionary theory. My goal was nothing less than claiming the final point of view—a truth so absolute that it shut the mouths of naysayers.

Of course, I need hardly mention that my experiments with discovering absolute truth failed—not because I did not try hard enough. It was a certain lust for life that did me in. It was an orphaned sunray that fell on my eyes; it was a moment by the seashore when the ingress of water leaves one grappling for words; it was the tears of a friend; it was love at first sight. It is in these moments that one realizes that the world is too large to be condensed to one language convention, too promiscuous to abide faithful to any one conception of it. For years I had frantically pursued the one perfect and coherent worldview, the correct answer, the final plot. Instead, I stumbled upon story and the quiet realization that truth is not enough. In the face of an incalculable diversity of cosmologies, knowledge, and realities, epistemic monism was no longer an option.

Today, I see that the people of the Global South are still imprisoned in a single ideology that devalues the tales of Obatala — a stern monologue that has conditioned us to see ourselves as units of a machine, our lives as instantiations of the modern urge to consume indefinitely, our cultures as cosmetic deviations from the really real, our wisdoms and rituals as subservient to a logical-empirical reality, and the earth as fodder for economic growth.

We have labored under the notion that we are not enough, that when we speak of subtle worlds, invisible landscapes, and a sacred activism, we speak nonsense. We have assumed that there is only one way to be in the world, and that way is certain, self-evident, and without alternatives—at least to sane, healthy people. We have tried to adopt the language and assumptions of development and progress; to force our eyes to see food as product of the marketplace instead of gift; to devalue our dreams for meaningful work as empty if not bottom-lined by the motivation to make money. But there are rumors of ancient futures and we are beginning to see how this monoculture of mind no longer serves the diversity and expansiveness of human and other-than-human beings; we are seeing how the one usurped the many. We are seeing—like you are—that growth is not enough.

Because of a cockeyed model of life, we live in a generic culture that rewards the fast, the narrow, the devious, and the man that leaves his fellow on the wayside to die. A culture that punishes compassion, smallness, uncertainty, and intimacy. For growth, for this rush for supremacy, we are mortgaging the very things that make us attractive. We are trading away the genius of being alive, our profound diversity. This singular truth, this certainty with its claims to universal validity, this one way of knowing, promised us wealth and peace. The profits grew, but our trees, homes, and lands were disrespected; we became more efficient, but our efficiencies crowded out our cultures and languages.

Now we can no longer abide economic structure and ideological monologue that considers our wellbeing an afterthought, our lands a lifeless mass of dirt awaiting capitalist redemption, and our cultures a cosmetic distraction from the more serious business of making more money. We cannot listen for too long to the boastings of a pixel pretending to be the entire picture.

Bayo, Ej, and Alethea Akomolafe. photography | James River Richmond

Let me say that the crisis we face as a species is not merely economic, it is epistemic: we are confronted with a paralyzing loss of certainty, the eradication of the mythological grounds upon which we slowly invented modern culture. We are faced with the end of truth. These are perilous times. But therein lies the brilliance of our moment, a beauty I suspect the techne of decentralization serves: the truth is broken, wrinkled, and in his place are a thousand splinters of story. That's the power of today. That's hope of a different persuasion, that in pulsating fractals of the whole, in puddles of renewal and resistance, people everywhere can recognize that behind the sheen of global gigantism, behind the blitz of ads, and behind the certainty of numbers is an institutionalized reluctance for people to live their own lives. In this system, we are hardly the social actors; we are the social outcomes—puppets attached to the strings of a hidden ventriloquist. This is the economic arrangement we call 'normal.'

Wade Davis said, "There is, indeed, a fire burning over the earth, taking with it plants and animals, cultures, languages, ancient skills and visionary wisdom. Quelling this flame, and re-inventing the poetry of diversity is perhaps the most important challenge of our times."

The call to localize is a response to the poetry of diversity and coincides with this end of truth, with the refutation of the 'complete dictionary'—that system of creeds that once roped us in and in whose tight wager a beautiful plurality of worlds still struggles for breath. Economic decentralization, driven by the realization that there are many ways of knowing and being in the world, coincides with this planetary urge to play with new forms,

to revive the messiness of being alive, to leave the corrupt security of a monologue and venture out into the wildness we once called home. It implies that we are learning to come home to ourselves. The building of a temple without steeples. We are regaining our power, once invested in intergovernmental agencies, trade treaties, nations states and trickle-down policies.

Might I venture to say that our most compelling imperative today—if one is permitted to speak in those ways—is to reclaim the thickness of our tongues and learn the names and faces of our neighbours; it is to realize that our worldview is just a tittle in a never-ending sentence; it is to see that there are more ways to learn than school and polished degrees could ever accommodate and more ways to live than could be captured in a Facebook post. The imperative is to recognize that our theories of change have to change and that urgency is not always a function of increased effort and logical coherence. We must reacquaint ourselves with allies that cannot be seen, too subtle for the modern eye, and forgotten human capacities that are wondrous beyond compare, too outrageous for rational thought. We must recognize that our crises emerge from clinging too tightly to a single story, from drinking out of a single drying wellspring while others flow unattended. This recognition also implies that there are no convenient ‘others,’ no convenient enemies, and that we are the systems we oppose. It means admitting that we don’t know the answers, talk less of the questions — and that’s okay.

The new politics of hope we imagine is not so much about the correct answers. It’s about us—us as aspects of our ecosystems, our cultures, and our relationships. That’s the poetic hope my life force, Ej, our daughter, Alethea, and I hold as we embark on a quest to live and thrive in a wider spectrum of values, to trust that there is more to life than the urge to consume, to rest in the knowing that we are never ever alone and couldn’t possibly be. That’s why I’m excited to work for a more just world, a coming together to insist on the insidiousness of corporate monoculture and the promise of community.

And Obatala? Well, he went back up that golden rope that still hangs in the corner of the sky—if you only try to notice it. I reckon he was given a hero’s welcome and treated to a large feast. I like to think that Orunmila, his elder brother god, pressured him to regale the pantheon with stories of the first humans he created, what they did with their time, and, more especially, if he had faithfully taught them the song of the gods. And in a ponderous moment of gratitude, with a smile that stretches into our time and soothes our longing for a more beautiful world, he would have said: “Yes. They sang beautifully—for they sang with a thousand tongues.”