

TOYIN FALOLA

THE MAN, THE MASK, THE MUSE

EDITED BY
NIYI AFOLABI

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Dedicated to my mother: Ogboja

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PROLOGUE

NIYI AFOLABI

It must be asserted from the outset that this book is not a *festschrift* but a biographical-critical assessment of the cumulative scholarship and other intellectual engagements of Prof. Toyin Falola, a historian, poet, critic, teacher and community leader. *Toyin Falola: The Man, the Mask, the Muse* engages the life, works, and thoughts of a renowned historian and scholar of Africa and the African diaspora. In its five-part design, it assembles a formidable group of eminent and emergent scholars who pay a balanced critical homage to the accomplishments of their endeared colleague and public intellectual. The first segment echoes distinguished invocations, which sum up the enigma that Toyin Falola represents as a “poet,” “volcanic force,” “diasporic muse,” “master teacher,” and a “Neo-Renaissance man,” among other accolades. The second serves as scholarly configurations of what the contributors define as “Falolaism.” The third interrogates the contributions of Falola to Yoruba historiography and the African diaspora studies. The fourth is a more focused study of Falola’s perspectives on African historiography and development, while the final section theorizes on Falola’s creative energies. In sum, the book represents a celebration of the Africanization of knowledge, the miracle of success, and the sacrifices it entails.

The book’s conceptual miracle occurred while I was seating at the new faculty orientation at the University of Texas at Austin in the summer of 2008 and somehow traveled subconsciously down memory lane. It was a momentary flash from the inner spirit that had to be rescued from unintended oblivion. Listening to and marveling at how administrators and faculty members shared a sense of community, competitive edge, and pride in their institution, I had to reach deep down to explain the different circumstances that have propelled my path toward the gates of this university. It was less of the tropical landscape or the gallery of distinguished scholars and professors that I found alluring, but the fact of being transported across many continents as I have come to see my own professional journey in the process of becoming.

Why did I come to the University of Texas at Austin? The answer is better left to the multiplicity of divine providence. The ups and downs through the valleys of life are instructive reminders that we are all part of a cosmic miracle where those who mean us harm end up actually opening new possibilities for our renewal. I pondered how the story could have ended after many “stones in the way” of fulfillment placed by those who have arrogated to themselves the power of privilege and perception but lack the humanity to respect others whom they consider “different,” despite their puzzling iden-

tity that is nothing short of being the creation and miracle of God. I was overwhelmed at the realization that I was having a fresh start, whatever that means, that I had gone through so many challenges and obstacles that are too numerous to mention; in the strange commission of divine providence, I had entered a new gate of discovery beyond my own imagination. Chance, they say, is a conduit for great things. As much as one can never fully decipher the mysteries of nature and life, the combination of coincidences testifies that there is indeed a Higher Power. Perhaps this partly explains the manifestation of such divine intelligence as echoed by the Vice President for Diversity and Community Engagement, Prof. Gregory Vincent, who stated at the orientation that “there is nothing more competitive than higher learning.” Of course, there were many quotable quotes on those long weeks of immersion, but that phrase stuck with me.

A final memento was when as a group of new faculty members we were made to make the “long horns” sign. At that very magical-realist moment, it felt like some kind of ritualistic initiation was going on as I heard the voice: “remember that the Big Brother is watching, until Angel Gabriel sounds the horn!” Nothing could have been more mysterious but it was a signal that, even as new initiates, we had been immaculately conceived by default and were now on our way to the miracle of exponential birth into seven seasons.

In this mystery of conception and impending birth, a number of mentors have been instrumental. To all those who wrote letters of recommendation; and to those who offered words of solace, especially at such times when the crossroad moments were agonizing and tormenting, I offer my appreciation and heartfelt gratitude. For once, I will not name names, and that may be a good thing. For the magic of recommendation has its own revelation about the burden the writer carries to open the gates for someone they have come to value, admire, and trust. It is an enormous responsibility. I am deeply grateful. It is flattering and humbling indeed that testimonials were being written to ensure my continued membership in higher learning. How have I come to earn this level of reputation in the eyes of my mentors? Among this group of scholars, Prof. Falola stands out as the ultimate strategic facilitator. My gratitude has no bounds. Thus from a chance encounter at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during the conference on the “Dilemma(s) of Democracy in Nigeria” in 1995, to the memory of a public “triangular” professor whose movement was itself a structural design between his Department of History, the Ezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, and the then University of Ife Bookstore (where at least three of his books were on display to the admiration of students at a time when he was a young scholar with thick glasses), I could not predict that destiny would have us meet again on a campus away from the shores of Nigeria. As the Yoruba say, *ori lo mo ibi to n gbe ese re* (“only one’s destiny, or god-head, knows where it is leading one’s trajectory”). Even as his own professional tribulations and persecutions are yet to be written or documented, it occurs to me that we share a similar ordeal in that regard. The Yoruba also have a saying that *omi ti a maa mu ko ni san koja eni*, that is, “one’s fountain of blessings shall not be hidden from one.”

A book such as *Toyin Falola: The Man, the Mask, the Muse* could only have been divinely inspired. A scholarly venture of course, it has taken on a life of its own. From Africa to the Atlantic world, from the Atlantic world to Africa, I thank the contributors as well as the distinguished commentators who have chosen to honor Prof. Falola;

without them this book would not have seen the light of day. I wish to express my gratitude to a number of individuals. First, I thank the publisher of Carolina Academic Press, Dr. Keith Sipe for his faith in this massive volume and Tim Colton, the production editor, for his technical expertise. Second, I thank Steve Huff and Richard Foerster for reading the manuscript and the numerous anonymous readers who provided evaluative reports. Third, I thank Dr. Ted Gordon, the Director of the Office of Thematic Initiatives and Community Engagement, and Dr. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, the Director of the John L. Warfield Center for African and African American Studies of the University of Texas at Austin, for their constant support. Fourth, I thank my colleagues in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the Warfield Center of African and African American Studies for their camaraderie. Fifth, I appreciate Sam Saverance's contribution to the book design. Finally, I thank Mrs. Bisi Falola for her usual support.

In returning this biographical-critical study to Prof. Falola, we have not conspired to suggest that his mission is complete, but indeed, we have elected to express a token of appreciation for his selfless and restless undertaking in the form of what may be termed an academic labor of love. It is just a beginning of many such tributes to come. We must also thank the University of Texas at Austin, the location of his academic production, for recognizing this true son of Africa who continues to crisscross the continents in order to promote the university as well as its engraved mission: "What happens here changes the world."

Let me end this homage by invoking the regenerative spirit of carnival that an African poet, Kofi Anyidoho, captures in the following lines from his book of poetry: *A Harvest of Our Dreams*:

Somehow we know the carnival days
Cannot be gone so soon
We may gather again those
Unfinished harvests of our soul.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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