

## Advance Praise for the Book

*Using a distinct and revolutionary methodology and approach, Toyin Falola employs his own original transcripts and primary texts—a series of mini biographies and poems—to generate an expansive interpretative text, a book that will surely instigate serious conversations in learned circles. Deploying unusual talents in multiple fields and disciplines, Toyin Falola is not merely genre bending and reconstructing, he pioneers a genre “marque”. This is one piece too many—a smorgasbord of homages, tributes, praises, adulations. . . . And more, recreating and reclaiming memories and histories.*

**MOBOLANLE E. SOTUNSA**, Professor of African Oral Literatures and Gender Studies, Babcock University

*To be a thinking African, Africanist or African in Diaspora, or indeed, an intellectual with any broad understanding of how moments of collective cultural productivity are formed and directed, is to appreciate how important Toyin Falola has been in facilitating the contemporary flowering of African Studies. The problem is that Falola writes too much, edits too much for any one audience to consume. So those who read his historical studies often do not know of his poetry and belles lettres, while those who celebrate the wit and pathos in his commentaries and biographical sketches are not cognizant of his forensics skill as a historical investigator. Happily, this book provides an occasion for all Falola’s gifts to be placed on display at the same time. We live in the age of Falola, and this book gives ample indication for why we are blessed for that fact.*

**ANDREW E. BARNES**, Professor of History, Arizona State University;  
author of *Global Christianity and the Black Atlantic*

*If the catfish comes from beneath the river to report that the crocodile has a cold you must not doubt the authenticity of the news. Toyin Falola, himself an African intellectual icon, poet, storyteller par excellence, stellar social and cultural historian and pater familias of Africanity, Black Studies and Africanism in this book brings to light and gives credence to some of Africa’s best pathfinders, thinkers, educators, jurists, artists, religions and religious actors, and political actors in a manner that reflects and refracts the historicity, philosophy, multiplicity of tongues, dual-genderedness of political course of action, verbiage and semiotics, spiritism and spirituality, and the power of being. This book is a masterpiece by a master craftsman who demonstrates in a crisp,*

*lucid and poetic manner, the power of the spoken word to make, praise, write histories and politics, show the intertwining nature between text, texture, context and intertext in order to give credence, show evidentiality, and originality of Africa's politics and jurisprudence as well as its tastes of the burden of empire-building and colonialism and struggle for liberty. It is a must-read historiography, ethnosemantics, ethnopoetics, philosophy and religion of a people with a past, present and an unquestionable bright future. Africa's future is pregnant with ideas and thoughts, hopes and the willingness to prosper, and most importantly, the power to be! Toyin Falola's visionary rendition of this much anticipated future that informs and is informed by the past and present is pithy, semantically dense and intellectually superior.*

**SAMUEL G. OBENG**, Professor of Linguistics, Former Director of African Studies (Indiana University) and author of *Conflict Resolution in Africa: Language, Law and Politeness in Ghanaian (Akan) Jurisprudence*.

*There is always something that remains mysterious and elusive about true greatness. It provokes our wonderment to witness what we never imagined was humanly possible; it compels our deep appreciation and gratitude; and it inspires and challenges us to revisit our own focus and purpose. We can witness and we can celebrate, but how can we understand what allows some individuals to rise so far above the ordinary in the course of fulfilling their daily professional, personal, and communal responsibilities? Toyin Falola, whose own preeminent and invincible rank in the most exalted halls of greatness was ensured long ago, has taken it upon himself over the years to recognize and proclaim the greatness of those highly deserving intellectuals, artists, and public servants who have devoted themselves to strengthening and enriching the past, present, and future of Africa and its diaspora. On multiple occasions, and even on non-occasions that took the celebrants completely by surprise, Falola has sung their praises by detailing their unique and sustained achievements, while carefully reflecting upon the particularities of locale, personality, and institution, among other variables. In *Praise of Greatness* collects Falola's songs, poems, essays, letters, messages, and lectures of praise. He has further theorized and historicized the poetics of praise and biography within a comparative framework to allow for the potency of these exemplary lives to travel beyond their local contexts. May the profundity, beauty, and necessity of the great work of these great individuals spread far and wide and be amplified on behalf of Africa's development and the globe's transformation. May the stream of praiseworthy individuals become a roaring river!*

**VIK BAHL**, Professor of English, Green River College; author of *Scoundrels of Deferral: Poems to Redeem Reflection*.

*Toyin Falola's In Praise of Greatness Africanizes the biographical genre through the use of poetry and prose, and imagery and imagination, to show how ideas of greatness are portrayed in an African culture. The words and idioms of popular and political heroes, traditional leaders and scholars, elucidate and enliven both the rhetoric and reality of individual and collective stories. These stories urge readers to reinterpret our understanding of the past, redefine group identities in the present, and reconceptualize our actions in the future.*

**STEVEN J. SALM**, Alumni Class of 1958 Endowed Professor of History,  
Chair, Division of Fine Arts and Humanities,  
Xavier University of Louisiana

*In Praise of Greatness provides a novel approach to the understanding of the great ideas and invaluable legacies of distinguished Africans in the motherland and abroad. The volume advances, broadens and deepens our knowledge of Africa and its diaspora as a flourishing community in which we appreciate individuals and their ideas in new light. By opening a window into the ideas and unique perspectives of the human experience of praise, Toyin Falola presents a new genre that explores admiration within an African cultural universe where individuals are at the same time performer and audience participating in the creation and living of life. At a time when some may increasingly find themselves further and further away from societal forms of storytelling, proverbs and metaphors, rituals and symbols of admiration, this beautifully organized and written book is an immense resource for understanding the past and present contributions of Africa and its diaspora to human civilization.*

**FONKEM ACHANKENG I**, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh



IN PRAISE OF GREATNESS



Toyin Falola, ink on paper, Dr. Kazeem Ekeolu

# IN PRAISE OF GREATNESS

THE POETICS OF AFRICAN ADULATION

Toyin Falola

JACOB AND FRANCES SANGER MOSSIKER

CHAIR IN THE HUMANITIES AT

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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To  
Olámidé Leonidas Falola  
Our grandson





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K'ówó, k'ówó.

Àràbà ò wó mọ, ojú t'irókò.

K'ówó, k'ówó.

The wish is that the imposing àràbà tree should fall

But the àràbà tree has survived

The wish that the imposing àràbà tree should fall has failed

[A Yoruba jubilatory statement for overcoming enmities]

“Have mercy on me, my God,  
have mercy on me, for in you I take refuge.  
I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster  
has passed.  
I cry out to God Most High,  
to God, who vindicates me.  
He sends from heaven and saves me,  
rebuking those who hotly pursue me –  
God sends forth his love and his faithfulness.  
I am in the midst of lions;  
I am forced to dwell among ravenous beasts –  
men whose teeth are spears and arrows,  
whose tongues are sharp swords.  
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;  
let your glory be over all the earth.  
They spread a net for my feet –  
I was bowed down in distress.  
They dug a pit in my path –  
but they have fallen into it themselves.  
My heart, O God, is steadfast,  
my heart is steadfast;  
I will sing and make music.  
Awake, my soul!  
Awake, harp and lyre!  
I will awaken the dawn.  
I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;  
I will sing of you among the peoples.  
For great is your love, reaching to the heavens;  
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.  
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;  
let your glory be over all the earth.”

Psalm 57:1–11 NIVUK

[A Biblical jubilatory statement for overcoming enmities]

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The words in my grateful heart  
The words in my thank-widened mouth  
Are too hypertrophic for my pen  
Are inordinately immense for my tongue

Three invaluable generations all around me:  
From the vibrant and industrious younger ones  
To the supportive and reliable contemporaries  
And older ones; ever giving moral support

Neither my pen nor tongue  
Can express your worth to me  
With a full prostration chest down,  
Take this token as sincere appreciation

Èni a ẹ lóòrè tí ò dúpẹ  
Ó dà bí ọlọsà kóni lẹrù lọ ni  
Onírú, oníyò òun elépo  
Gbogbo yín pátá lẹ ẹ  
Bíi bá ẹ tẹyin  
Ọbẹ yí íbá má dùn

I cannot remember when the idea of this book first occurred to me. Its gestation period has been long: The writing, in bits and pieces, has taken place over many years. And the numerous conversations around the various chapters in this book are also too great in number for me to recall. There must always be an end to a project, as our fate is to strive, keep on striving, even until death:

Èşin ta ta ta ó kú	A horse kicks and kicks and kicks and dies
Èniyàn rín rín rín ó sonù	A person walks and walks and walks and gets lost.



Esu, the Yoruba god of the crossroads. He is associated with the sacrifice and eulogy to begin an enterprise so that the journey and the mission are not derailed.

spirits remain connected.

To those on the USA-Africa Dialogue alternative media site that I manage every day, the knowledge I have gained from you is deep and long. I express my gratitude to you for continuing to be my teachers. The arguments and debates on the site can be enriching and overwhelming. The desire among some on the list-serve to win arguments goes against my own mindset that there is never a “winner” because conversations have no beginning or end. As Esu, the Yoruba god, warns us: what you see as an outcome is the beginning of a new event. Alas! No matter how contentious an issue may be, it eventually gets resolved, if not by superior arguments then by fatigue.

Because I shared segments of book chapters with several people, I can no longer fully remember all of my readers and critics and the various comments they offered. Many read the initial essays as very rough drafts. I will remain grateful for the comments of Professors Michael Afolayan, A. B. Assensoh,

I have been walking and kicking, getting lost and becoming found. It is time to stop walking and kicking before I lose my legs. In the process of this long, kicking walk, I have incurred serious debts of gratitude to many people along the way.

Without a doubt, the completion of this book would not have been possible without the support and assistance of many people: family members, friends, colleagues, informants, and strangers in near and far-flung places. I have travelled so much that I have even lost count of many of my contacts, not to mention the wealth of ideas incubated in each of the destinations I have travelled. It is risky for me to compile a list of people, as I would end up leaving out many names.

*A single hand does not lift a calabash to the head.*

Yorùbá proverb

I have so many people to thank for supplying me with data for this book, answering my questions, allowing me to enter their private homes, and even sleep there after enjoying the hospitality of their lavish food and drink. Some names have entered the pages of this book, but many have not. To those that are omitted, it is not an intentional slight. Our



Bridget Teboh, Bola Dauda, Emmanuel Mbah, Bode Ibironke, Aderonke Adesanya, Adeshina Afolayan, and Ademola Dasylva on the initial draft of some essays. Dr. Bola Dauda read all the chapters of this book in manuscript stage, coming a close second to Dr. Vik Bahl who read a few more. Dr. Michael Afolayan read many parts of the book, and was always full of praise. Dr. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso raised important questions that reshaped the book; with additional queries from Professor Fallou Ngom of Boston University. Professor Ademola Dasylva, when moved by the spirit, supplied words of wisdom. Various ideas in the chapters were shifted, adorned, and commented upon by Anna Lee Carothers, Ibrahim Odugbemi, and Dr. Abimbola Adelakun. Professors Akintunde Akinyemi, Gabriel Ayoola, Kazeem Sanuth, Oluwafunke Ogunya, and Bayo Omolola assisted with the Yoruba tonal markers in some chapters. Dr. Kazeem Ekeolu provided the complementary sketches.

For two years, I taught a senior undergraduate level course on “memoirs and memories” and another on “films and history,” both of which enabled me to discuss different parts of this book with several talented students, including Steven Cote, Anna Lee Carothers, Jack Hawkins, Itohan Osagie, Shannon Doyle, Simi Hassam, and Nicole Griffin. I appreciate the intellectual conversations and comments from these students, and their tremendous contributions on various ideas in the book. The students also assisted with library research, fact checking, proofreading, cross-cultural readings and interpretations, bibliographic compilations, and much more. I cannot thank them enough. The students directed me to films that I had never seen, and more so to books that I did not know existed. Further, they exposed me to intergenerational thinking and even ridiculed some of my ideas as too anachronistic. Their intellectual disobedience is the source of my strength.

It was through a mutual friend, Dr. Doyin Aguru, that I met Ibrahim Odugbemi. It was through the USA-Africa Dialogue group that I met Dr. Adeshina Afolayan. And I became acquainted with Dr. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso through my affiliation with TOFAC. I cannot remember how or when I first met the indefatigable Dr. Samuel Oloruntoba. These friendships generated the foundation for my book in its current form. Its central theme of highlighting achievements and practicing gratitude derive from various aspects of our encounters and interactions. They are all my teachers: Sam has taught me the values of compassion; Adeshina has exposed me to alternative ways of seeing society; Olajumoke has inspired me with the need for service without compensation; and Ibrahim has transferred his youthful energy to me, providing humility and grace. I have devoted spaces to all of them but one in the various chapters in this book. Not to slight Ibrahim Odugbemi, let me pay my tribute here:



Ibrahim Odugbemi,  
ink on paper,  
Dr. Kazeem Ekeolu

Alákétu in the house of Orijājuwo  
Son of Èyò, eater of shea butter  
Only the bushman will belittle you;  
The Òyó shall always pay for your performance

You have set out at daybreak  
With the unequalled strength of Èdun;  
In vein the elephant looks down on the monkey

The monkey never begs to feed itself Alákétu, the  
growth of òpékètè  
Disheartens the children of Adamo  
But do not mind those stings and bites;  
Take every next step with a stronger valour

Alákétu, son of Oláewé  
Egúnjòbí Àkànbi, custodian of Èyò  
One leaf is one charm; two is two charms  
Cut and burn more leaves, Abíólá Àkànó  
For two hundred leaves make two hundred charms

I have to reiterate my gratitude to Anna Lee Carothers, my most able and competent Research Assistant. Abikal Borah, my graduate student, was able to organize my teaching schedule, and to give his support and loyalty when needed. Let me restate my mantra for this book: I bear the sole responsibility for the conceptual and empirical errors and faults in the pages that follow.

Outside the confines of the world of scholarship, I must thank my wife, Bisi, and my children for their patience and acceptance of a busy academic life. The family has reproduced itself in one grandson and one granddaughter, generating tremendous excitement about future possibilities. My social network in Austin and Nigeria is extensive, contributing to my pleasure and weight gain.

This book takes an approach that has never before been attempted, and I appreciate the different voices of affirmation and difference; of support and criticism; and of endorsements and queries. I already see the book as a success because it generated such diverse reactions. A unanimous and flat response to the book is not what I pray for, but rather diversely proliferating feedback that reflects a wide spectrum of ideas.

My sincere hope is that this book will inaugurate an auspicious new destiny for African scholarship. It is difficult to believe that this is the first book of its type on the semi-biographies of African scholars and what they represent to scholarship in general. It seems odd, really, since distinguished Africans have been diligently leaving their glorious marks on humanity for so

many years now. The book's charge is to develop lasting ideas of responsibility to others and the African continent, guided by the principles of good behavior:

Èniyàn dára ó ku iwà     A person is attractive but deficient in character;  
 Ile dára ó ku igbé         A home is gorgeous but it is unlivable.

The beautiful covers of our books and our accomplished résumés, like the attractive person that lacks character or a beautiful house with conflict inside, will not transform Africa unless we rethink our paradigms and practices.

I have written about scholars greater than me, both the dead and the living. I cannot but marvel at the depth of their ideas and philosophy in terms of versatility, depth, refinement, nobility and keen sense of otherness. As I have said over and over, this quality is what sets apart the scholars that I have selected as my case studies. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of true greatness is seeing and celebrating the greatness in others. But this is easy for me to do as the characters in this book have done more for Africa than I can ever match. To say the least, the selected scholars deserve all the accolades and honors. A seed reproduces after its kind.

I am hopeful that the contents of this book will resonate with what constitutes secular and spiritual humanism and my role within it. I have written about those greater than me in the hope that others will build upon their achievements. "Wisdom," our people from Ghana say, "does not reside in one head alone." Africa needs knowledge and those who generate it. And knowledge must lead to wisdom. The world of scholarship is yet to fully tap the well of knowledge residing in many of our scholars. May those represented here, who are still living, live long so as to be of service to the continent. May the young scholars be emboldened that great scholarship is attainable and achievable, having seen others rise to shine as stars for all to see.

Motivations are hard to decipher, as the words we express may not match our intent. Let me be clear on some of my intentions. I wish the living scholars in this book to outlive me. I cannot fear death and diseases, so warns a proverb, that I would ask God to kill the younger persons before me. I want those younger than me to live long after I am dead. I do not claim better knowledge than others; and I wish that the richer knowledge(s) that I lack be better circulated and put to better use. We must continue to seek knowledge. The Creole of Sierra Leone warn us that "a twisted hand cannot grip well." We cannot function well without rich and useful knowledge. As the younger scholars outlive me, I wish that more light will enter the house of knowledge so that darkness departs. I am the messenger of the words in this book, but I plead with you to focus on the ideas and not the messenger, remembering the proverb:

*Eni tó rán ni níṣé là á bèrù, a kì í*      One fears the person who sends one to  
*bèrù eni tí a jìṣé fún*                      deliver a message and not the recipient.

You are the recipient of this message who should not be feared. Disagree with me as much as you wish, but remember not to throw stones into the market-place as one of them will certainly hit your blood relations. I wish my readers a continuous flow of knowledge and good wishes from Olodumare in good health and longevity:

Ògún á gbè yín o  
 Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ á tún tí yín ṣe  
 Àṣẹ Èdùmàrè  
 Ẹ gbéra sọ  
 Ẹ tí di àdàbà ẹyẹ—afólókè  
 Ẹ gbón gbón gbón bí agbón  
 Ẹ rẹ rẹ rẹ bí àdàbà  
 Ilé yín, ilé ire  
 Ọ̀nà yín á jásí ire  
 Ire níwájú  
 Ire léyìn  
 Ire lókè  
 Ire nísàlẹ̀  
 Àṣẹ Èdùmàrè

Truly, a new era has begun!