D. A. Ọbasá: The Man and the Significance of his Cultural Activism

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Abstract
This essay explores Adénrelé Adéti mí kàn Ọbasá’s creative ingenuity and how he put that into use as a poet, cultural activist, journalist, printer, and publisher of a bilingual newspaper, The Yorùba News. The essay traces Ọbasá’s history; right from his birth to the period he became a renowned Yorùba intellectual. The cultural identity theory which studies a person’s sense of belonging to a particular culture and accepting the traditions, heritage, language, religion, and social structures of such culture is adopted for the analysis in this study. The study shows how Ọbasá projects himself as a unique individual who used Yorùba culture to connect people. The essay concludes that Ọbasá is a lover of his indigenous culture and language.

Introduction
A good number of scholars have written on Adénrelé Adéti mí kàn Ọbasá (1879-1945), including Babalọlá (1973), Olabímtan (1974), and Akinyemi (1987, 1994, and 2017). These researchers have discussed Ọbasá’s use of language and style, and the content of his poems. This essay will discuss Ọbasá as a poet, journalist, scribe, publisher/printer and philosopher. An overview of Ọbasá’s biography is presented, with examples drawn from some of his poems to consolidate our arguments. The approach adopted in this study is multidisciplinary.

Ọbasá was born in the year 1879 in Lagos to the family of Prince Awolé and Ọlawiyọ Ọbasá of Giṣẹ ruling family in Ile-Ife. He had his elementary (primary) education between 1886 and 1890 in Lagos. He later attended Baptist Academy in Lagos between 1891 and 1896 for his secondary education. After secondary school, Ọbasá could not continue his education because there
were fewer post-secondary institutions in Nigeria as at the time. Therefore, he became an apprentice in furniture making and the art of printing from 1896-1899; but he loved printing more than furniture making.

Obasa joined the services of Paterson Zochonis (PZ), a British-owned company and manufacturer of health-care products and consumer goods in Lagos as sales manager in 1899. He was later transferred to Ibadan in 1901 to oversee the new branch of the company. Obasa managed the company until 1919 when he resigned his appointment to start his own printing press. Thus, Ilare Press was established in 1919 in Ibadan.

D.A. Obasa (sitting in the middle) and his apprentices at Ilare Press

Obasa joined a Yoruba socio-cultural group in Ibadan called “Ègbè-Àgbà-Ọ̀-Tán” because of his love for the Yoruba language and culture. According to Akinyemi (2017), the group “played a major role in establishing in the collective psyche of the (Yoruba) people a sense of their own importance in the colonial system, (assuming) the role of community leaders or elders who acted as cultural brokers between indigenous socio-political paradigms and the novel creations of the colonial state” (7-8). Obasa gained a lot of knowledge from the seminars and meetings organized by the group. He learned

1 I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Akintunde Akinyemi for providing this and other 11 photographs included in this article.
about different aspects of the Yorùbá culture and philosophy during those seminars and meetings.

D.A. Obasa (sitting in the middle) and other culture activists in Ibadan

Ọbasá as a Publisher, Editor, and Printer

As stated earlier, Ọbasá established the Ìlàrẹ Press in Ibadan in 1919 after his resignation from Paterson Zochonis. There were no other printing facilities in Ibadan until that year. This gave Ọbasá an opportunity to earn more patronage from a larger portion of Yoruba cities in the southwestern part of Nigeria. Ọbasá, in one of the poems in his first book of poetry, alludes to Mr. G.A. Williams, a Sierra Leonean returnee who taught him the art of editing, printing, and publishing in Lagos:

Ìbà tí mo jú un tógáà mi ni,
Ọgbẹ̀ni G.A. Williams, oní nùùre!
Editor agba ní lè Èkò...
Oun ló kọ mi ní sé,
Tí mo fi n'jèn,
Ni mo fi joyé Editor,
Sí lè Ìbádàn mesì ọ̀gò̀ (Obasa 1927: 3).
That homage is for my boss,
Mr. G.A. Williams, a kind-hearted man!
A renowned editor in Lagos…
He taught me (the art printing press)
That I live on today.
In my present position as the editor
In the great city of Ibadan

According to Akinyemi (2017), Ìlùrẹ Press flourished and became well known in the Yorubaland because of Òbasa’s multidisciplinary qualities as a creative writer, public intellectual, business owner, news editor, advertiser, and above all, his craftsmanship. All these influenced his popularity as a successful publisher and writer of great repute. Apart from publishing his creative works, Òbasa also published other people’s works. At the same time, he ventured into fulltime publishing of a weekly local newspaper, The Yorùbá News. Òbasa published the first issue of The Yorùbá News on January 15, 1924. The main focus of the newspaper was to report on local issues and developments in Yorubaland. His poems started appearing on the pages of the newspaper, regularly, as from February 12, 1924.

D.A. Òbasà’s first published poem “Ikú” (Death) in The Yoruba news on 12 February 1924
As Akinyemi’s (1987) research revealed, Obasa pre-published excerpts of nearly all of the poems in his trilogy in *The Yoruba News* before the eventual publication of the books in 1927, 1934, and 1945.

Obasa’s love for the Yoruba language and cultural practices prompted him to write in the language instead of English language. He wanted to promote his indigenous language and address his local audience. Nnodim (2006:158) as cited in Akinyemi (2017) observed that Obasa perceives his task as that of “writing culture”; that is, writing the oral traditions and language of his people to recover an art and knowledge that he perceived to be endangered. This shows Obasa as a man of cultural conviction. He wanted to be identified with the cultural heritage, norms, and values of the Yoruba. It is a fact that Obasa was a lover of his heritage as he named his printing press after his family compound in Ile-Ife, Ogbun-Ilaré.

Obasa promoted Yoruba language in the publication of his weekly bi-lingual newspaper, *The Yoruba News*, which he printed in his Ilaré Press. *The Yoruba News* was in circulation from 1924 until 1940 when Obasa became ill and could not continue to oversee its publication. According to Akinyemi (1987), Obasa sold the newspaper to a famous Yoruba politician, the Late Chief S. L. Akintólá in 1945.
As noted by Akínwumi (2013:3), the “real” literary activities in Yorùbá language began with Adéjumọ̀kàn Òbasa’s Ìwé Kìíní Ti Àwọn Akéwí in 1927. Using his status as an editor of a weekly newspaper, Òbasa was able to win the patronage of Yorùbá audience who were looking for secular texts written in their language. Àkinwumi argues that Òbasa’s trilogy focused on how to uphold moral values among the Yorùbá.

Òbasa’s Ilàrẹ Press recorded a huge success not only with the publication of The Yorùbá News, but also because of the publication of books such as Ìwé Kìíní Ti Àwọn Akéwí (Yorùbá Philosophy), 1927; Ìwé Kejì Ti Àwọn Akéwí (Yorùbá Philosophy) 1934; Ìwé Kẹta Ti Àwọn Akéwí (Yorùbá Philosophy) 1945; and Ìwé Ori ki Ti Àwọn Orílẹ̀ èdè Yorùbá, 1945, all written by Òbasa himself. He also published other books such as Ìtàn Àti Ìṣẹ̀ Wọ́lì́ì Joseph Babalojá and Àwọn Ôrọ̀ Èì́jìnli̇tì Wọ́lì́ì Joseph Babalojá – Ará Ìlòfà (O jìjìqọ́ Ojóru) in 1931. Òbasa also published books for other authors in his Ilàrẹ Press. These are: Ìwé Àdúrà Mímá tábí Èsinmi Ònìgbágbọ̀ written by J.A. Alábi and Ìwé Àdúrà Gbogboníse (Kókóró Ìwòsàn) written by J.P.O. Babafẹmí. Both titles were printed and published at Ilàrẹ Press. These historical records confirmed that Òbasa was a man of culture whose quest for the promotion of Yorùbá language in general was endless. He was among the first local intelligentsia of his time.

**Òbasa as a Scribe**

Earlier, we described Òbasa as editor, publisher, and journalist. Òbasa can also be called a scribe. A scribe is a person who serves as a professional copyist, especially, one who makes copies of manuscript before the invention of automatic printing. Òbasa was a man of great wisdom. He collected and collated Yorùbá traditional sayings and made use of them in a creative way while writing his poems. However, Olábímtan (1974) averred that Òbasa’s greatness as a poet did not consist only in his mere assemblage of Yorùbá traditional sayings. Òbasa himself declared that his role was more than that of a scribe recording traditional sayings. He says in the poem “Ìkíní” that,

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Èmi l’Akòwé Akéwí
Èmi l’Akwé wí Akòwé
Bí mo ti n kẹ kí ké
Bẹ̀è nàà ni mo n kọ̀ ki kọ̀
Èmi a si má a ìjè̀ ló tì tè̀” (Obasa 1927: 3)
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I am the poet’s scribe
I am the literate poet
As I chant what is to be chanted
I also write what is to be written
And I print what is to be printed

As a lover of his culture, Obasa chose to write all his poems in Yorùbá language at a time when most of his contemporaries were being influenced by English poetic styles (Akinyemi 2017; Olabimtan 1974).

D.A. Obasa (sitting 5th from right) with other members of elitist class in Ibadan

Obasa’s creative ingenuity in the artistic propagation of Yorùbá culture shows in the composition of his published poems. He was one of the foremost Yorùbá culture activists of his time and he took advantage of the opportunities provided by the socio-cultural group, “Egbé-Ágbá-O-Táń”, formed in 1909 to protect the Yoruba language. The socio-cultural group, drew attention of the Yorùbá indigenes to the promotion of their language and culture during the colonial period. Members of the group combined western values and norms with the Yoruba local cultural heritage to develop their society/community.
D.A. Obasa, Akọwé Akéwì (The Poets’ Scribe & Culture Activist)

D.A. Obasa, Akéwì Akọwé (The Literate Poet & Philosopher)
Babalola and Gerard (1971) as cited in Akiñyemí (2017) pointed out that it was Ọbasá who provided the “link between traditional beliefs and writing in modern vein.” This portrayed him as a local intellectual who identified with his culture. Ọbasá had been a member of the Ègbè-Agbà-O-Tán from its inception, and he used to read excerpts of his poems to members of the group. The publication committee of the socio-cultural group later encouraged him to publish the poems. Ọbasá chose first to publish some excerpts of the poem in the weekly newspaper *The Yorùbá News* before publishing them as Ìwé Kí ínì Ti Àwọn Akéwí (Yorùbá Philosophy) in 1927 Ìwé Keji Ti Àwọn Akéwí (Yorùbá Philosophy) in 1934 Ìwe Kěta Ti Àwọn Akéwí (Yorùbá Philosophy) in 1945 and Ìwé Òrí kì Ti Àwọn Òrí lè è dë Yorùbá also in 1945.

*Obasa (sitting 3rd from right) with other members of Ibadan Tennis (Elitist) Club*

**Ọbasá as a Philosophical Poet**

Ọbasá was a renowned poet of his time and his greatness as a poet is not restricted to the collection and publication of traditional sayings, which Akiñyemí (2017) says embodied the traditional wisdom of the Yorùbá people; though, this would have stood as a singular achievement on its own for Ọbasá. He also specialized in presenting Yorùbá philosophical views in his poems. Some of the Yoruba thoughts and philosophical views in Obasa’s poems are on Olóduámare (the Supreme Being), Omo (The Child), Ikú (Death), Àyanmọ̀ (Destiny), Ìwà Òmọ̀luábí (Good character) and Òbìnrin (Women). The
Egbé- Ágbà-O-Tán socio-cultural group’s agenda was based on Yorùbá concept of good characters, norms, and values of the Yoruba. Obasá made use of these philosophical views in his poems.

Philosophy plays important role in the day-to-day activities of human beings. It monitors and examines everything that has to do with culture, norms, and beliefs. Qlá´dípò (2007) averred that Yorùbá philosophy should be understood to mean not simply a body of ideas, collective and individual in terms of which the world and the twist and turn of human experience are explained, but also a system of values and attitudes which guides lifestyles and conduct. He reiterates that Yorùbá philosophy not only includes the ideas of the Yorùbá on life, it also encapsulates existence, reason, knowledge, and so on, as embodied, and as exhibited in their social practice. We can infer from the above assertion that each individual has his or her own philosophy and that the Yorùbá people in general manifest it in their thoughts, words, and actions. The most important thing to Obasá in his creative writing, especially in his three books of poetry is the title given to the books in English language ‘Yorùbá Philosophy’. In his thinking, the collected poems are all about thoughts and beliefs that are gradually going into extinction, which should be protected for the coming generations. He alluded to this fact in the maiden edition of the newspaper, The Yorùbá News:

\[Ilòsí \text{ àti } i\text{́huwàsì } ìnià \text{ wa ti ó n yípàdà lójòojúmọ́ n fé́ ̀ábójútò àtì tífọ́ sónà rere fun ire i-lú wa. Àwọn i mà́ àti ọgbón ì jìnlè́ ti àwọn baba wa ní parun lò fírífrí́, a ní láti ̀s̀à wón jì́ kí a sì tun wò́n se.}\]

The acts and deeds of human beings that are changing by the day need to be taken care of and protected for the benefits of our land. Our forefathers’ traditional wisdom and lore are gradually going into extinction, we need to collate and preserve them.

Excerpts of Obasá’s poem based on Yoruba philosophical will be examined in the remaining part of this essay.

**Yorùbá thoughts on the importance of Children**

The importance of children to the Yorùbá people cannot be overemphasized. The people believe that children cannot be bought with money and anyone who gives birth to children is considered lucky. This excerpt below corroborates that thinking:
Children, Oh precious gift
Children are precious gold, they are precious brass
Children cannot be bought in the market
Wealthy people cannot buy children
A child bought with money
Is is a slave
Slave can be destructive
One’s biological children will not destroy one’s property

In the above excerpt, a child is likened to *iyùn* (expensive golden bead) and *ide* (brass). These are costly ornaments cherished by the Yorùbá. Òbasá established the philosophy of the Yorùbá that a precious child cannot be bought with money.
Another philosophy of the Yorùba is that one’s biological children would take care of whatever is left behind after the demise of the parents. Therefore, it is necessary for parents to train their children:

\[ Qmọ \ duⁿ ní ́kẹ̀yì́n \]
\[ Ju ká mù́řu ́ṣélę: \]
\[ Ìbí ́to mọ̀ ní ́jé ́ọmọ́ \]
\[ Qmọ̀ ko làyọ́lè \]
\[ Èni ọmọ́ sin \]
\[ Ìn lọ́ bí́mọ́, tó bí́ rere (Obase 1927:34). \]

Children are pleasure to have in one’s old age
Than slave
The importance of children is indescribable
But, it is not enough to have children
Only those who are fortunate to be buried by their children
Are considered to have given birth to good children

Yoruba philosophical belief is that children are like cloth with which God covers the nakedness of parents because children cover the nakedness of their parents upon their death.

**Yorùbá thoughts on Olóđùmarè (Supreme Being), Ikú (Death) and Ayànmọ̀ (Destiny)**

The Yoruba believe that the Supreme Being (Olóđùmarè) has the ability to do the impossible. Nothing is too hard for Him. He knows how to pay back all human beings in their own coins. He can do and undo. This is the thought expressed by Obase in the excerpt below:

\[ Òlórún kókó-yí bí́rí \]
\[ Ìn ná ní fójú áláṣejú \]
\[ Bomi gbígbóná \]
\[ Èni to ba wú kókó-yí-bí́rí \]
\[ Òun ní fọ́rẹ́ áláṣejú le lówò́ \]
\[ A ní kẹ́rú kó ́na érú \]
\[ Kó́mọ̀ ko nómọ̀ \]
\[ Kí tálákà kó ́na tálákà \]
\[ Kółówò ko nólówò (Obase 1982: 72). \]

An unsearchable God
Who dipped an extremist’s face-
Into hot water
Whoever the Unsearchable God likes
He uses to bless the extremists
He asks one slave to beat another
One child to beat another
One pauper to beat another
And one wealthy individual to beat yet another

Ọbasá presents Olódùmaré (God / the Supreme Being) as an Unsearchable Being whom no one can question. This is a strong belief of the Yorùbá. No one dare ask the Supreme Being why He chose to do some things. The Yoruba believe that God who created the earth has made humans realize that death is inevitable. Therefore, the Yorùbá would argue that humans are on a journey on this earth, and they will surely go back ‘home’ one day. They also believe that no one knows where, when, and how he or she will die.

Aiyé lojà, Ṙrun nilé,
Bí a bá kú láyé,
A ó rọrun réé simi
Aṣì kò la á sọ
Àtài rí mobúsün (Ọbasá 1934:61).

The world is like a market place, heaven is home
If one dies in this world
We would go and rest in heaven
We talk of seasons
No one knows where he or she will die

Ọbasá also wrote on the Yorùbá concept of destiny (àyànmò). The Yorùbá believe that whatever situation that befalls a man or woman must has been predestined. So, the best approach to life, according to the Yoruba, is to accept such as fate and not to be discouraged. Ọbasá brings this thinking to the fore in the following poetic lines:

Ákúnlẹ́ yàn
Un la dáí yè rí
A kúnlẹ́, a yàn ẹ̀ dà
A dáyé tán, ojú ní yán ní
Ìṣẹ̀bọ̀ ṣòògùn
Ba ti wayé wà rí,
What we ask while kneeling in heaven
Is what we achieve on earth
We knelt down to ask for our lots
We came into the world and became impatient
No sacrifice
Will change what we are destined to be
Destiny will surely come to pass
Whatever our fate may be
We should accept it.

Other philosophical poems of Obasá focused on women and good character, as advanced by the Yorùbá in their thinking. It is our opinion that the presentation of the above philosophical views is enough to present Obasá as a philosopher.

**Obasá's Love for Politics and Christianity**

Obasá was a lover of politics of his time. He was always chosen as a representative of his people. As a matter of fact, the colonial masters provided opportunities for him to participate in politics. Akinyemi (1987:47) records that one of Obasa’a apprentices, elder E.O. Amusan confirmed that, *Bi ò (Obasá) se je eni tí won kà sì ologbón atí onímò èdá tó, bí won bá yan ‘councilor’ ní Ibadan lati jíròrò nípa ilu, ó (Obasá) maa n wa ni bẹ̀ ní gbogbo ́gbà. Bi won jé mérin perè Obasá yoò wà nínú won* (Obasá was regarded as an intelligent man. Therefore, if councilor were to be chosen to represent Ibadan in political discussion, Obasá will always be there. Even if they are just four in number, he would be one of them).

Obasá was also well known in the religious sphere. He was a member of the Baptist Mission in Nigeria.
D.A. Obasa (sitting 2nd from right) with other leaders of the Baptist Church Mission in Ibadan

He had been a member of Baptist church since he was in Lagos. He brought the Baptist Church Mission to Ibadan. The church mission was established at Ìdí-Ikan, on the same street where Obasa had his house and printing press. He also established the First Baptist church in Ile-Ife, his home town at his family compound in Ìlărẹ. In addition, he published the Nigerian Baptist monthly bulletin in his Ìlărẹ Press. In recognition of Obasa’s commitment to the service of God, the First Baptist Church, Ìdí-Ìkan, Ibadan, convinced his family to inter his remains in the church premises upon his death in 1945. This is in recognition of his pioneering role in the church’s establishment.
Conclusion

This essay has revealed that D.A. Obasa was a man whose love for his indigenous language and culture made him to exalt the virtues, values, and norms of the Yoruba. The underlying factor for his excellence as a local intelligentsia was the promotion of the Yoruba language and its culture. Ultimately, the
study of Qbasá under the cultural identity theory has offered us a rich understanding of his persona. He was able to identify himself with the Yorùbá socio-cultural group “Egbẹ-Agba-Ọ-Tàn” whose major aim was to promote Yorùbá indigenous language and culture. This assisted Qbasá to succeed as a journalist, publisher, printer, scribe, poet, philosopher, politician, and a religious man.

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