Deconstructing Historical Knowledge in Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*

Azeez Akinwumi Sesan
Osun State University

Introduction

History has become a popular subject for playwrights in making their plays and performances on stage and on the screen. The use of history by these playwrights ambivalently constructs or deconstructs memory of particular incidences in the past thereby establishing particular traditions of historical narratives. In light of this argument, Jan Vansina states that "traditions are memories of memories."[1] Vansina suggests that tradition offers dynamic representation and interpretation of [cultural] memory as evident in most of the historical plays written by different authors.[2]

The history of the fall of Àfọ̀njá (the war Generalissimo) of Yorùbá land has become one of the important subjects of Yorùbá historical plays in the medium of Yorùbá and English languages. Toyin Abiodun presents this version of the history creating tension and forming lineage between the Àfọ̀njá dynasty and the Álímì dynasty. Surreptitiously, Abiodun makes efforts to question the Yorùbá ontological thoughts that the Fúlàní[3] have no rights to be the traditional rulers of Ilorin. I critique the historical play, *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*, to underline the nuances of fact and fiction in the dramatic representation of the history of Àfọ̀njá's fall and the emergence of the Fúlàní reign in Ilorin (the present capital of Kwara State in Nigeria). How Toyin Abiodun has treated the history of Àfọ̀njá in his play aligns with the position of Abiola Irele that "history, in the secondary sense of story, as much as fiction, can be considered a necessary function of the imagination in its organizing relation to the actualities of existence."[4] The mode of representation of the plot of Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá* aligns with Irele's view of history as a sociological and cultural text. Similarly, the presentation of Àfọ̀njá's history is consistent with the view of Roland Barthes that "narration can indeed receive its meaning only from the world which makes use of it: beyond the narrational level begins the external world…"[5]

[1] Jan Vansina, *The Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1985), 160.
[2] Vansina, *The Oral Tradition as History*, 160.
[3] Fúlàní is a sub-tribe of Hausa people that come from the Northern part of Nigeria and some parts of Africa.
[4] Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2001), 102.
[5] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (London: Longman, 1970), 264 – 265.

Abiodun's play starts with the genesis of Àfọ̀njá and Aláàfin Áólẹ̀'s relationship. Áólẹ̀ confronts Àfọ̀njá for his inability to win the Bàmbàrá's war in the customary three months timeframe. Abiodun establishes the filial relationship between Áólẹ̀ and Àfọ̀njá by presenting the fact that Àfọ̀njá is an in-law to Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ (Àfọ̀njá is married to Aláàfin Áólẹ̀'s daughter). With the failure at the Bàmbàrá War, Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ sends Àfọ̀njá to attack Apomu, a town under the protection of Ile-Ife. Àfọ̀njá succeeds with relative ease but to the dissatisfaction of Aláàfin Áólẹ̀. Àfọ̀njá returns to Ilorin with acrimony between him and Aláàfin Áólẹ̀. Providence makes Àfọ̀njá cross paths with Álímì (a wandering Fúlàní man who later wages a war against Àfọ̀njá and his people). As the friendship between Álímì and Àfọ̀njá grows, Àfọ̀njá invites Álímì and all his people to move to the town of Ilorin as permanent residents. While Álímì and his people live in Ilorin, Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ wages war against the town. With the support from Álímì and his warriors, Àfọ̀njá wins the battle. After the war, Àfọ̀njá is encouraged to marry Hàlímà, Álímì's niece. Àfọ̀njá also has an illicit affair with Kaosara (Álímì's wife) and the two have a son, Abdulsalami (*the proper spelling and pronunciation in standard Yoruba language*). During a reprisal war against the town of Oyo, Áólẹ̀ is forced to commit suicide by Àfọ̀njá and the Oyo Mesi (the council of chiefs and kingmakers). After the death of Áólẹ̀, Álímì and his warriors kill Àfọ̀njá on the soil of Oyo with the expectation of taking over his reign in Ilorin.

The play was first performed in the Arts Theatre (now Wole Soyinka Theatre), University of Ibadan in 2012, the same year that the play was published. It was directed by Yemi Akintokun. Some of the scenes such as market center and the coven of the witches that require aesthetic and cultural representations without losing the thematic focus and subject matter of the play were properly presented on the stage. During the performance, the play was well received for its blocking, stage movements, aesthetics, spectacles, and topicality of its subject matter. The topicality of the play's subject matter, perhaps, makes it record success as the runner-up in the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. Apart from the stage performance, the play has been read to audiences at different centers, among which was *Artmosphere*, Nustreams Conference Centre, Iyaganku Ibadan Nigeria on July 19, 2014.

The chronology of the play and the depth of its subject matter/ thematic focus transcends the configuration of historical narrations by non-literary historians or historians who strictly follow conventional historiography. Abiodun re-interrogates history with a view to probing our critical interpretation of history within specific epistemological frameworks. One of the important tasks of historians and literary writers in the mining of historical knowledge in cultural discourses is the distinction between *a priori* and *posteriori* knowledge. A *priori* knowledge is non-empirical knowledge acquired without experiencing the events/actions[6] while *posteriori* knowledge is empirical knowledge acquired via experience.[7] Since historians and literary writers produce their respective texts from the available information about past events and incidences,

[6] Albert Cassulo, *A Priori Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 18.
[7] Christopher Peacocke, *The Realm of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 32.

their knowledge of the story predetermines the validation of the historical texts in written modes. This is exactly what has happened to the story of Àfọ̀njá and Áólẹ̀ and the towns of Oyo and Ilorin. This is due to the historical tensions in *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá* and other historical books that have given factual accounts of these situations. Despite the fact that the story reproduced in the play text is within the epistemological framework of a *priori* knowledge, there is not much visible irreconcilable difference in the story of the play and the story presented in history textbooks of Yorùbá historians such as Samuel Johnson[8] and Toye Ogunyemi[9]. This situation of priori knowledge, therefore, upholds David Henige's view that "literary texts are sometimes treated as historical sources on the grounds that they contain information known from other sources."[10] Although Henige is silent about other sources, what he means may be historical and anthropological sources with empirical approaches to historical collection, documentation, and preservation. One cannot, however, ignore the fact that history is history and literature is literature in the exploitation of historical sources for communicative and ideological purposes. Since the emergence of Emirate system[11] in Ilorin, historians and literary writers have been presenting the story of Oyo and Ilorin's relationship, as well as the death of Àfọ̀njá, in different perspectives thereby maintaining or deconstructing a particular historical knowledge. This article explores how Toyin Abiodun uses the history of the Oyo-Ilorin relationship in a manner that re-interrogates the popular historical knowledge of the Fúlàní usurpation of the town.

The Trials of Àfọ̀njá in Historical Perspectives

The subject and the plot of the play are on the towns of Oyo and Ilorin and their relationship in context of the two protagonists, Áólẹ̀ (the Aláàfin[12] of Oyo) and Àfọ̀njá (the war Generalissimo) of the period. Ilorin is in the Northern part of Oyo kingdom before the encounters between Áólẹ̀ and Àfọ̀njá and before the eventual takeover of Ilorin by Fúlàní Jihadists led by Álímì. The historical account of the encounter between Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ and Àfọ̀njá has been discussed by historians such as Ade J. F. Ajayi and Robert Smith[13], Joseph Adebowale Atanda [14], Samuel Johnson and Toye Ogunyemi[15]. The following map shows the historical and geographical proximity between Oyo and Ilorin.

[8] Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (Lagos: CMS Bookshops, 2008), 77.

[9] Toye Ogunyemi, *Ibadan Empire: Republicanism in a Pre-colonial African Nation* (Ibadan: Rasmed Publications Limited, 2015), 38.

[10] David Henige, *Historical Evidence and Argument* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 109.

[11] Emirate system is a form of traditional administration in the northern Nigeria with Emir as the head of the traditional institution.

[12] The traditional title of the king of Oyo town.

[13] Ade J. F. Ajayi and Robert Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the 19th Century* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1971), 56.

[14] Joseph Adebowale Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1980), 96.

[15] Ogunyemi, *Ibadan Empire*, 87.

Figure 1, *Ilorin: The Port of Arabic and Islamic Erudition*. This map shows the geographical and historical proximity of the towns of Oyo and Ilorin (image by The Barometer, 2016).

Áólẹ̀ became Aláàfin of Oyo (the paramount king of Oyo) from 1789 to 1796. At the installation of Aláàfin Áólẹ̀, Àfọ̀njá had become a powerful warrior and also the Aare Ona Kakanfo (i.e. the war Generalissimo) of the whole of Yorùbá land. By Yorùbá cultural code, Aláàfin and Aare Ona Kakanfo should not live in the same town. Àfọ̀njá is expected to live on the outskirt of the town for the overall security of its people while the Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ lives in the town. Based on this, Àfọ̀njá was living in Ilorin but he was taking orders from Oyo. In the historical accounts, Áólẹ̀ and Àfọ̀njá were suspicious of each other and this suspicion degenerated into civil strives and their eventual deaths.

At his installation as Oyo king, Áólẹ̀ gives an order that Àfọ̀njá should attack Iwere-Ile, a town that was forbidden of any Yorùbá warrior, most especially the Aare One Kakanfo, to attack because of its status as the maternal home town of the late Aláàfin Abiodun. Àfọ̀njá refused to wage war against Iwere-Ile and quickly discerned a plot by Áólẹ̀ to kill him. This further fueled the cold war between them. Similarly, Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ orders Àfọ̀njá to wage a war against Apomu, a town which was under the protection of Ile-Ife. Eventually, Àfọ̀njá compels King Áólẹ̀ to commit suicide and he succeeded in this attempt, especially with the support of several Oyo chiefs. Before Áólẹ̀'s suicide, he places a curse on the Yorùbá race that they will never be united in whatever they do and that strangers/foreigners will always take them away as slaves. It is still the belief today that Yorùbá people of Southwestern Nigeria are suffering from Áólẹ̀'s curse

because of their demonstrated disunity in national issues of common interests to the existence and well-being of the entire Yorùbá race.

After the suicide death of Aláàfin Áólẹ̀, Àfọ̀njá becomes too powerful and uncontrollable to the extent that he does not show respect for other kings such as Adebo and Maku that rule after Aláàfin Áólẹ̀. He makes himself the sole ruler of Ilorin thereby neglecting his constitutional role as the war Generalissimo of the Yorùbá people. While in Ilorin, Àfọ̀njá plays host to Salih Jinta also known as Sheik Álímì who eventually settles in Ilorin with Àfọ̀njá. Sheik Álímì is versed in Islamic Talisman and Àfọ̀njá is impressed by this. In a bid to be more powerful and invincible, Àfọ̀njá pleads with Álímì to make him some Islamic Talismans. In furtherance to his bid to become indomitable, Àfọ̀njá disbands all the Yorùbá warriors in his camp claiming that they have grown weak and ineffective. Consequently, Àfọ̀njá replaces all the Yorùbá warriors with Fúlàní warriors who have become uncontrollable by engaging in so many anti-social behaviors such as stealing, arson, and raping. Àfọ̀njá becomes angry at the persistence of the crimes committed by Fúlàní warriors and thereby threatens to expel them from Ilorin. This threat does not go well with Álímì and his Fúlàní warriors and they waged war against the household of Àfọ̀njá, the whole of Ilorin, and the entire Yorùbá race. Despite the close relationship between Àfọ̀njá and Álímì in Ilorin, there was no marriage relationship between Àfọ̀njá and any of Fúlàní women. Owing to a lack of military cooperation among Yorùbá towns at the time, Álímì wins the battle and installs his son AbdulSalami as the first Emir of Ilorin. Since then, Ilorin has been under the emirate system as we have in other northern Nigerian states today. Several attempts to retake Ilorin from the Fúlàní and to revert to the old system of Obaship have failed.

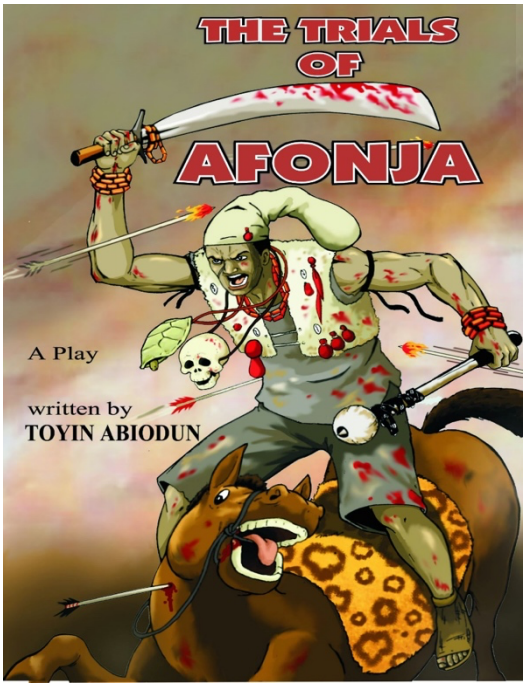

Figure 2, The cover of the play, *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá* by Toyin Abiodun, 2012 (image by Toyin Abiodun).

History and the Question of Representation in the Play

One of the cultural values attached to historical narration is representation, which often reveals the dynamism of perception and reception of "historical facts" (this is inverted because there is no absolute fact in the historical representation of the past). This is because according to Jay Winter, "we bias our memories of the past by attributing to them the emotions or knowledge that we acquired after the event."[16] Consequently, this cultural expectation places some burden of objectivity on historians and, by extension, literary writers who are mining from the historical past. These historians are thereby expected to be proactive in their use of history in drama and prose with a view to streamlining facts and fiction in their literary creativity and imaginative re-presentation of the past. This is not to say that literary writers should underplay creative ingenuity in the representation of history. They should only present themselves as interpreters of history with possibilities of meta-narratives (a form of narrative that includes other fictional elements most especially in the historical presentation of the past) that will precipitate further interpretations. This position still leads us to the significance of memory in conventional historical writing and creative history (as opined by the present writer, creative history is used to make reference to the mining of history in the writing of prose fiction and dramatic texts/plays). This differentiation follows the line of Pierre Nora's thought:

> In fact, memory has never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary. These have run parallel to each other but until now always separately. At present the boundary between the two is blurring; following closely upon the successive deaths of memory-history and memory-fiction, a new kind of history has been born, which owes its prestige and legitimacy to the new relation it maintains to the past. History has become our replaceable imagination. Hence the last stand of faltering fiction in the renaissance of the literary revitalization of historical drama, the success of the oral historical tale.[17]

With Nora's submission, literary writers have been transcending the constraints of historical fixations and cultural imaginaries in the making of their literary texts. Similarly, the concern of historians, literary writers and critics, therefore, is the legitimacy of the narration with the blend of fact and fiction within the limits of collective memory.

Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of* Àfọ̀njá re-interrogates the historical understanding of the ethno-religious and filial relationship between the towns of Oyo and Ilorin. With deconstructive passion, Abiodun offers some possible conjectures on the emergence of Fúlàní hegemony in

[16] Jay Winter, *Remembering War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 4.

[17] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," *Representations* (26), 24. Nora is a French historian who was elected to Académie française on June 2001.

Ilorin, thereby, usurping the dynasty reign of Àfọ̀njá in the town. Àfọ̀njá's heroism as a Yorùbá warlord is indisputable and the play upholds this general cultural knowledge with creative representation of his personality in characterization and language. It is, however, noted that Abiodun has re-engaged the informing text (history) creatively in a manner that reveals a re-writing of history within the theoretical context of deconstruction. In this direction, Nelson Olabanji Fashina's view is apt that:

> Toyin Abiodun's experiment in his play is not just an addition to the tradition of African historical drama. It is rather a dramatic mediation of the theoretical arguments that trail the development, teaching and interpretation of the context, nature and meaning in historical drama, history and society. This dimension of interrogating the capability of history to introject true poetics and hermeneutics of social history becomes a centre and circumference of the self-integrated theory in Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja*. I suggest that the ironic title of the play is evidently the Trials of History![18]

With a deconstructive theoretical temper, Abiodun has re-read Oyo-Ilorin's relationship with ontological consciousness thereby unearthing some deep-structure marginal facts and fictions based on the principles of causality, convergences and divergences.

Àfọ̀njá's heroic epithets and temperament in the play are consistent with the cultural knowledge of his heroism and valor within the contexts of his life and time. Abiodun's representations of Àfọ̀njá's epithets and temperament have semantic pacts with the historical records of his valor and temperament. His temperament is equated with storm that blows away anything or anybody that comes his way. Abiodun also echoes the myth of Àfọ̀njá's invincibility as given by the words of an Ifa oracle. Abiodun mythologizes Àfọ̀njá's invincibility with the deconstructive fervor of structural anthropology which interrogates grand narratives as constructed in the people's collective consciousness. The mysticism of Àfọ̀njá's power is traced to his pacts with the witches. These pacts are totemic as represented by burning traditional lamps and grindstone that hang in the air. The following excerpts reveal the pact and the breach of these pacts that eventually lead to Àfọ̀njá's death in the hands of Fúlàní warriors.

> **YOUNG WITCH**: You mean before defying you, Yeye. Think!... Think!... Think of Oyo. Think of your children. Think of their children. Think of their children's children. Let it not be said that it is in your own time that the world begins to walk with its head. Do not drag down the

[18] Fashina, , Introduction". *The Trials of Afonja*, v.

grindstone. Let the Aare-Ona kakanfo retain his pride and live the span of his destiny. There are many destinies that are tied to his own.

ÌYÁ MỌDỆ̀ [YÈYÉ ẸIẸYẸ]: *laughs scornfully for a long while, then suddenly pauses to think; she sighs. [appeased]* I… I… I buy your wisdom. *[she looks at the extinguished lamp]* But what is done is done…. Leave.

Exit YOUNG WITCH.

[ÌYÁ MỌDỆ̀ [YÈYÉ ẸlẸYẸ] hands off the grindstone where it hangs in the air, suspends from above by some invisible force.]

Total Darkness…

Exeunt.[19]

Ìyá Mọdẹ̀/Yèyé Éléyẹ's action of extinguishing Àfọ̀njá's lamp is irreversible. This eventually translates into the reality of the tragic end of Àfọ̀njá. What this suggests is that Àfọ̀njá's fate is pre-destined in the metaphysical realm and this translates to his death in the physical realm. The inability of Ìyá Mọdẹ̀/Yèyé Éléyẹ to cut Àfọ̀njá's grindstone also has a manifestation in the physical reality of his death. In the play, it is given that Àfọ̀njá dies while standing. This is an indication that the grindstone of Àfọ̀njá is still intact in the coven of the witches. The nature and circumstance of Àfọ̀njá's death uphold the myth that Àfọ̀njá will not fall at the feet of any human being. To this end, this article maintains that the text upholds the myth of Àfọ̀njá's power. This is because "to be known, myth has to be told: it is a part of human's speech."[20]

The pacts between Àfọ̀njá and the witches also foreground the ethereal relationship in the physical and metaphysical space of human relationship. In Yoruba cultural episteme, for instance, market is configured as a space for the convocation of the witches, humans, and the ancestors. This metaphysical space is physically/visibly represented or imaginatively constructed in the collective consciousness of Yoruba people. Thus, in traditional Yoruba cultures, there is a logic of representation and a manifestation of metaphysical space in the cultural discourses in plastic or representational arts, architectural designs, symbols, and totems. The ethereal relationship between the physical and metaphysical space, which is collapsible, contractible, and mutable also reveals the cognitive relationship between memory and historical narratives. These

[19] Toyin Abiodun, *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*. (Lagos: Blackhouse Worldwide, 2012), 94.
[20] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 209.

characteristics are possible because the metaphysical space is manifested in the visible representation of the physical space as evident in the creative narration of the past. In Yorùbá cultural episteme, the "market square/center" is a physical space that coheres with the metaphysical space. "Market", in Yorùbá cosmology, is an abode of humans, demons, and ghosts that relate and interact with or without one another's knowledge. The *Trials of Àfọ̀njá* emphasizes that Àfọ̀njá's fate is sealed at the market center. Abiodun carefully crafts the market in the play as a collapsible and mutable space that determines the fate of humans. In the play, the market is a transitional gulf that mediates between the present and future of human experiences. On the nature of the market in African cosmology, I, therefore, corroborate Fashina's view that:

> The market, in Yoruba cosmic imagination, is a spiritual space, a meeting point between the maverick ghosts of the dead ancestors, embodied spirits of the trees, rocks, rivers and the living – women, men, children and other merchants as well as witches, wizards, thieves, cheats, layabouts, etc. Thus, the Yoruba "*Oja*" (market) is a metaphysical space, which dissolves the gap between the terrestrial and ethereal beings.[21]

The configuration of the market in *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá* presents it as a liminal space – the abode of the humans and witches. Yorùbá cultural episteme holds that there is an interrelationship between the physical and metaphysical space. Thus, the interplay of the metaphysical space and the liminal space influences how realities are constructed for historical narration and documentation. In *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá,* the interplay of the metaphysical and the liminal spaces inform the deconstructive interpretation of the history about the fall of Àfọ̀njá and the rise of Fúlàní Emirate system in Ilorin. The liminal space of the historical narration offers the possibility for the multiple representation of the historical accounts of the fall of Àfọ̀njá in various literary and non-literary texts. One important point to be noted is that each of the historical accounts of the fall of Àfọ̀njá often makes reference to the significance of the metaphysical space as found in the play. The fate of humans is predetermined and influenced by the power-play in the metaphysical space. Àfọ̀njá becomes conceited with his invincible power (literally known as *páàgùn* in Yoruba cultural episteme) that he underrates the significance of the metaphysical space. The configuration of metaphysical space in Yorùbá cosmos clearly shows the ability of individuals to transform from the physical space to the metaphysical space. This argument is similar to Fashina's interpretation of Akẹ̀sán (or market) and the dual roles of Ìyá Mọdẹ̀ as one of the chieftains in Aláàfin Áólẹ̀'s palace and a head of the witches. In his interpretation of the use of the market in *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*, Fashina avers that "there is a nascent theory in the way the playwright or director converges the market scene and space with the space of the witches, a

[21] Nelson Olabanji Fashina, "'African Writers' Pathogenesis and the Paradox of Imagination," in *Language, Literature and Criticism: Essays in Honour of Professor Aduke Adebayo*, eds. Emmanuel N. Kwofie and Babatunde Ayeleru (Ibadan: Zenith Book House, 2010), 254.

seeming magical switch from the real situation of old Yorùbá market ruptures to a transcendent space or covens of the witches."[22]

There is a belief in Yorùbá cultural episteme that the events/actions in the physical realm are pre-destined in the liminal/metaphysical space. In the play, the fall of Àfọ̀njá begins in the metaphysical space of the witches headed by Ìyá Mọdẹ̀/Yèyé Ẹlẹyẹ What prompts the steps towards the destruction of Àfọ̀njá by the witches is the humiliation that Ìyá Mọdẹ̀/Yèyé Ẹlẹyẹ suffered in the hands of Àfọ̀njá when the latter returns from a battle with the Bàmbàrá. Before the war, Àfọ̀njá has consulted with the witches to bless him with victory in the battle with the adversary (Bàmbàrás). Àfọ̀njá's wish is granted but in his opinion, not in totality. This is because the final outcome of the war is not in his favor. At the meeting with the witches, Àfọ̀njá registers his annoyance and refuses to honor his pledge. He complains:

> **ÀFỌ̀NJÁ**: What do you mean what have I brought? Were your wings too feeble to flap to have followed me to Bambara? ... to have seen things for yourselves! Your promise to me was victory. We lost the war! You deserve no gift![23]

Although Àfọ̀njá is a reputable warrior, he fails to understand the ways of the witches or he chooses to ignore the fact that at times the witches speak in parables. The witches may promise Àfọ̀njá victory but at what cost and under what condition? He might be too restive to interrogate the ifs and the buts that are attached to his conditions of victory at the battle with the Bàmbàrá. This may account for the ephemerality of his victory. After the short-lived victory over the Bàmbàrá, there is confusion among Àfọ̀njá's warriors which might be crafted by the witches just to punish him or to force him to do their bidding on his return from the war. Àfọ̀njá is not proactive in his dealing with the witches. He is not expected to argue with the witches because the secrets of his invincibility (the eternal and ever-burning lamp and the grindstone) are in their custody. Àfọ̀njá's haughtiness earns him their wrath. Ìyá Mọdẹ̀/Yèyé Ẹlẹyẹ, as a way of punishing Àfọ̀njá, requests Démọ̀kẹ́ (the favorite wife of Àfọ̀njá) as a pledge and atonement for his (Àfọ̀njá's) "sins". Ìyá Mọdẹ̀/ Yèyé Ẹlẹyẹ retorts:

> **ÌYÁ MỌDẸ̀ [YÈYÉ ẸIẸYẸ]**: No!... No! Afonja is a naughty child. He has no respect for his elders. This time… this time… this time, we want no more goats, no more rams, no more cows. We want…. We want…. We want…. Demoke.[24]

The demand of the witches is a further attempt to punish Àfọ̀njá for his haughtiness and lack of respect for their superior authority. They know quite well that they have asked for the impossible

[22] Fashina, "Introduction", v.
[23] Abiodun, *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*, 50.
[24] Abiodun, *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*, 51.

from Àfọ̀njá. He will not be willing and ready to offer Démọ̀kẹ́, his favorite wife, as a pledge to the witches. They make Àfọ̀njá realize that his invincibility relies so much on their support for him. The conversation, thereafter, between Ìyá Mọdẹ̀/Yèyé Ẹlẹyẹ and Àfọ̀njá reveals the fact that they, the witches have the power to do and undo whatever they so desired.

> **ÌYÁ MỌDẸ̀ [YÈYÉ ẸIẸYẸ]**: Yes, We need to teach you a lesson. You give us Demoke before the full moon appears or we pull down this grindstone and quench this lamp.
>
> **ÀFỌ̀NJÁ**: No! You can't do that?!
>
> **ÌYÁ MỌDẸ̀ [YÈYÉ ẸIẸYẸ]**: Yes, we can…. Oh! You think because the Ifa Oracle says, "Afonja will never fall at the feet of any man", it includes us?[25]

Àfọ̀njá refuses to offer Démọ̀kẹ́ as a sacrifice to the witches. As a reaction to his haughtiness, Ìyá Mọdẹ̀/Yèyé Ẹlẹyẹ carries out her threat by extinguishing the lamp. Démọ̀kẹ́ also dies by drinking from the part of poison that her father (Aláàfin Áólẹ̀) drinks. This may be a device of the witches to ensure that they take their pledge from Àfọ̀njá. There is an instance of historical deconstruction in this event of the play because there is no point in the Yoruba historical consciousness that Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ and Àfọ̀njá are in-laws to each other. No historical account has it that Àfọ̀njá married a daughter of Aláàfin Áólẹ̀. Abiodun may include this in the play for the purpose of aesthetic and ethical values to re-construct history that Àfọ̀njá and Áólẹ̀ had no cause to be at war with each other.

In the deconstructive mode of Jacque Derrida's theory of *difference,* which emphasizes the presence-absence continuum in the dynamic contextualization of meaning, Abiodun probes the reader/audience imagination in the pre-figuration of the market and Àfọ̀njá's fate. Derrida explains that *differance* is writing within writing with transcends meaning beyond the ordinary.[26] In the instance of the play, the contextualization of the market and the pacts between Àfọ̀njá and the witches add up to the tragic circumstances that culminated in Àfọ̀njá's death. This power matrix between Àfọ̀njá and the witches decenters the conventional historical knowledge that connects history with scientific investigations for truth validation. Ìyá Mọdẹ̀/ Yèyé Ẹlẹyẹ's action at the witches' coven has "a historical trace or the illusory effect of meaning that is left in a signifier by other signifiers"[27] in the overall tragedy of Àfọ̀njá and his people. Thus, the power matrix and the configuration of the market (the spiritual space as noted by Fashina[28]) have

[25] Abiodun, *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*, 52.

[26] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 3.

[27] Ann Dobie, *Theory into Practice: An introduction to Literary Criticism 3rd ed.* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), 169.

[28] Fashina, "African Writers", 254.

transcended signification in the plot of the story and its text in oral and written modes. The addition of the mythical roles of the witches is a supplementation to the circumstances that catalyze Àfọ̀njá's tragedy.

Re-writing History or Re-reading History?

Roland Barthes' conceptualization of writerly and readerly texts offers some explanations of contractual relationships between a writer and a reader of literary texts. By this contractual relationship, this article refers to the reading kinesics which is involved in the production and consumption of literary texts. A writerly text presents the reader as an active consumer of literary texts thereby advancing to the state of becoming a co-producer in the generation of meaning(s) in the texts while a readerly text presents the reader as a passive consumer of literary texts with the inability to re-generate meaning(s) for further semantic inquiries. It can, therefore, be said that "Barthes in his Post Structuralist writings … celebrates pluralism, heterogeneity and the productive capacity of the text."[29]

With the understanding of the concepts of readerly and writerly texts, it can be deduced that Toyin Abiodun has been actively involved in re-reading the Oyo-Ilorin historical relationship and the history of the Old Oyo Empire. It is noteworthy to review the historical accounts of Oyo-Ilorin relationships and the Old Oyo Empire as given by conventional historians from different ideological and ethnic perspectives. Johnson gives the historical account that Àfọ̀njá's ancestors are the founders of Ilorin. He writes:

> The late Afonja was a native of Ilorin. The city was built by his great grandfather, Laderin, whose posterity rule her in succession to the fourth generation. Laderin, the founder, was succeeded by Pasin, his son, a valiant chief who opposed the renowned Gaha when he was in the zenith of his glory. Fearing his rising power, Gaha drove him out of Ilorin and he escaped to Ola. He sent an army after him there which reduced the town and Pasin was taken and slain. Alagbin the son of Pasin succeeded his father, and in turn handed the government to his valiant son Afonja with whom the rule ended.[30]

Similarly, Robin Law confirms the position of oral evidence on the invitation of Álímì to Ilorin by Àfọ̀njá when he states that:

> Afonja himself was not a Muslim. He believed, however, in the efficacy of the Muslim charms which a man like Salih could provide for success in

[29] N. Krishnaswamy, John Varghese, and Sunita Mishra, *Contemporary Literary Theory* (Bangalore: Macmillan, 2000), 41.

[30] Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, 199 – 200.

> war and he presumably knew of the military-successes of the *jihad* in the north. He invited Salih from Kuwo to Ilorin, and induced him to bring his sons and other followers with him.[31]

As a writerly text, Àfọ̀njá-Álímì and Oyo-Ilorin's oral histories provide opportunities for deep-analysis/interpretation which might be influenced by ideological differences. In light of this, Saad Murtala provides a seemingly different view on the Oyo-Ilorin ties most especially in the foundation of the town. He avers that:

> Basically, Ilorin is a Yoruba settlement. Their origin is traced to the old Oyo Empire and the founder of Ilorin was said to be one by name (Tela). He was succeeded by another Yoruba man, Ole before the arrival of Afonja in the town. However, this source was into explicit enough as to whether these men were actually rulers of Ilorin either as Oba, Bale or Magaji. Another historian of note, Samuel Johnson ascribed the foundation of Ilorin to one hunter by name (Laderin) . Be that as it may it is curtaining clear that Ilorin was founded by a Yoruba hunter. But when it was founded is a matter that could not even be well speculated. To demonstrate that Ilorin is a Yoruba town, the people of (ARE) compound (the descendants of Laderin) in Idi-Ape, Ilorin usually address their head, (ARE), as "Kabiyesi": meaning "your lordship" even though there is an emir that is ruling the town.[32]

All the above submissions on the historical records of Oyo-Ilorin's relations, in spite of their differences, provide the background for Toyin Abiodun in the re-reading of the oral history of Oyo-Ilorin's relations in comparison with the available published books on the subject matter. I, therefore, aver that deconstructive traces are found in Abiodun's establishment of filial relationship between Àfọ̀njá and the Fúlàní. The essence of this perhaps, is to offer a thesis that Yorùbá people have not lost Ilorin to the Fúlàní because Abdul Salami, as given in the play, is Àfọ̀njá's biological son.

With a deconstructionist temper, Abiodun harmonizes the differing positions on Àfọ̀njá-Ilorin relations with creative impulse and artistry. Through the language and plot of the play, Abiodun establishes the filial bond between Àfọ̀njá and Álímì through marriage. Similarly, Abiodun deconstructs oral history that lays a claim to Àfọ̀njá's right to the Oyo throne. In oral history, it is given that Àfọ̀njá has indirect access to the Oyo throne through his maternal link. In

[31] Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire: C. 1600 – C. 1836 – A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Hampshire: Gregg Revivals, 1991), 72.

[32] Saad Murtala, The Impact of Islam and Shariah on the Culture of Ilorin Emirate, *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies* 8 no. 8 (August, 2021), 13.

the play, Abiodun establishes the filial link between Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ and Àfọ̀njá through the marriage of the latter with Démọkẹ́ (Aláàfin's daughter).

The Trials of Àfọ̀njá extends the frontiers of kinship between Àfọ̀njá and Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ and between Àfọ̀njá and Álímì. Kinship, in this regard, is by marriage and parentage. In the Àfọ̀njá-Áólẹ̀ kinship relationship, Àfọ̀njá is an in-law to Aláàfin Áólẹ̀: Démọkẹ́, the daughter of Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ is a wife of Àfọ̀njá. Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ marries his daughter to Àfọ̀njá in order to ensure respect and loyalty from the latter to him. The action and decision of Aláàfin Áólẹ̀ has been explained in Levi-Strauss' *Elementary Structures of Kinship* where he argues that in primitive cultures, women are used as tokens to ensure inter-tribal and inter-group harmonious relationship.[33] It is believed in primitive cultures that marriage ensures filial bond among people of heterogeneous religious and cultural groups. For this reason, the primitive cultures respect the sanctity of marriage. Julie Rivkin and Michael Riyan review the kernel of Levi-Strauss' position on the significance of marriage in primitive cultures. They write:

> In his analysis of kinship systems, *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), Levi-Strauss argued that primitive cultures maintain peace between social groups by using women as tokens in marriage. Such inter-familial and inter- tribal marriages function as a form of communication and create personal or family relations that work to diminish the possibility of conflict.[34]

Abiodun also suggests a Yorùbá-Fúlàní kinship relationship through marriage. He does this by making Àfọ̀njá marry Hàlímà on the advice of Álímì. After the death of Hafiz, Álímì's brother, the latter advises thus:

> **ÁLÍMÌ**:You need to marry Halima. That is what I advise. I have the loyalty of only half of my men. The other half worshipped whatever ground Hafiz stood on because he was brave, fearless and free to speak the truth that he saw at any time. Marry his daughter and you have the support and goodwill of all my people to death.[35]

With the marriage between Àfọ̀njá and Hàlímà (the niece of Àfọ̀njá), Álímì envisages peace and unflinching loyalty to Àfọ̀njá. The situation becomes startling when the table of friendship is turned against Àfọ̀njá. With deconstructionist concept of traces, it is inherent in the play that Álímì is motivated by revenge and inordinate ambition to usurp Àfọ̀njá's hegemonic power in Ilorin. Apart from the marriage between Àfọ̀njá and Hàlímà, Abiodun further

[33] Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

[34] Julie Rivkin and Michael Riyan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), 53.

[35] Abiodun, *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*, 81.

establishes an illicit affair between Àfọ̀njá and Kaosarat (Álímì's wife). Fourteen years into their marriage, Álímì and Kaosarat have not given birth to a child. The childlessness of Kaosarat is no longer bearable and this may have pushed her into an extramarital affair with Àfọ̀njá. In her feminine tricks, she seduces Àfọ̀njá into a sexual relationship that results in the birth of Abdulsalim (as spelled and used in the play by Abiodun). The inordinate ambition to usurp Àfọ̀njá's hegemonic rule in Ilorin and environs is seen in Álímì's statement after Àfọ̀njá's death. This inordinate ambition for the usurpation of Àfọ̀njá's hegemonic power, perhaps, is informed by Álímì's treachery and limitations of Àfọ̀njá's power – the unbridled interest in Islamic amulets for protection and untamed trust in Álímì. The play's characterization of Àfọ̀njá and Álímì relationship, therefore, echoes Atanda's view that:

> Afonja's intention was that Alimi should equip him with supernatural powers with the aid of muslim charms, But Alimi had a different plan from Afonja's. Alimi shared the ideals of the muslim reformists, led by Uthman dan Fodio, who had started a *jihad* or holy war against the Habe rulers of Hausaland as early as 1804. It was the intention of Alimi, like other muslim leaders elsewhere in Hausaland and Nupe territory, to carry this *jihad* to Yorubaland…. Within a short time, Afonja was murdered and the Jihadists, first under Alimi and later under his son Abd Salaam, seized power in Ilorin.[36]

Álímì's hidden intention of power usurpation is revealed at the end of the play, particularly with the confirmation of Àfọ̀njá's death on the soil of Oyo town as against the historical evidence of oral tradition that Àfọ̀njá was killed on the soil of Ilorin in a battle. At the death of Àfọ̀njá, Álímì states that:

> **ALIMI**: *[after much fear and hesitation, he takes up AFONJA's arm and drops it to confirm that AFONJA is dead]* Da inska! I thought he will rule here and leave Ilorin for me. I can't stay here. I don't understand all these people of Oyo who speak in roundabout ways. I take over his palace in Ilorin where I understand them; and my own blood, starting from Abdulsalim will rule Ilorin from generation to generation. *[he laughs]* Shikena![37]

Abiodun's focus on the Yorùbá-Fúlàní filial relationship with the illicit sexual affairs between Àfọ̀njá and Kaosarat (Álímì's wife) deconstructs popular historical knowledge that Fúlàní usurped power in Ilorin and instituted Fúlàní Emirate system in the town. Alternatively, Abiodun

[36] Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History*, 32.
[37] Abiodun, *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*, 121-122.

surreptitiously maintains that Abdulsalim has the right to the throne of Ìlọrin. This is because of his mixed ancestry of Yorùbá-Fúlàní extraction, especially from the paternal link.

Àfọ̀njá's fatalistic fate, as represented in the play, and the historical evidence of oral tradition, offer "double logic" as given in Krishnaswamy, Varghese and Mishra's view that:

> The two contradictory readings or the 'double logic' shows the incompatible and yet mutually dependent interweaving of pluralistic perspectives as the basis of meaning and interpretation; it can also show the critical nature of literary texts and the literary nature of critical texts.[38]

Krishnaswamy, Varghese and Mishra's view silently present the interplay of fact and fiction in the analysis of historical texts with the theoretical orientation of deconstruction.

Àfọ̀njá's death is a manifestation of the actions of the witches in the manipulation of his fate. His fate would have been averted if he had sustained his pact with the witches. The witches confused his thoughts and pushed him to the point of attaining his fatalistic fate. He died while standing and this confirms that the witches upheld their pledge that Àfọ̀njá would not fall at the feet of any man.

Conclusion

Since history is a popular subject that can be mined by literary and non-literary writers, there is no absolute representation of history in written modes or the pristine oral modes of representation. This is premised on the understanding that ideological differences often impinge on the interpretation and representation of historical texts. It is, therefore, expected that there are versions and variations in the representation and narration of history in literary and non-literary texts. The evidence of these variations and versions has been found in the history of Àfọ̀njá-Álímì as well as Oyo-Ilorin relations. This history has been documented in conventional historical texts and dramatic literature with specific reference to Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*. Through characterization of plot and language, Abiodun has demonstrated deconstruction fervor in the interpretation of this history. Consequently, the informing history of Àfọ̀njá-Álímì relations and Oyo-Ilorin relations has become a metanarrative with peculiar features of writerly texts.

Bibliography

[38] N. Krishnaswamy, J. Varghese and S. Mishra, *Contemporary Literary Theory* (India: Macmillan, 2005), 43.

Abiodun, Toyin. *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*. Lagos: Blackhouse Worldwide, 2012.

Ajayi, Ade J. F. and Robert Smith. *Yoruba Warfare in the 19th Century*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1971.

Atanda, Joseph Adebowale. *An Introduction to Yoruba History*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1980.

Barthes Roland. *Mythologies*. London: Paladin, 1972.

—— *S/Z*. London: Longman, 1970.

—— *The Pleasure of Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

Casullo, Albert. *A Priori Justification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Dasylva, Ademola Omobewaji. "The Archivist as Muse: Toyin Falola's Experimentation with Alternative History in *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt*". In *Toyin Falola: The Man, the Mask, the Muse*, edited by Niyi Afolabi, 735-753. North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2010.

Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982.

Dobie, Ann. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism.* 3rd ed. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009.

Fashina, Nelson Olabanji. "Introduction". *The Trials of Afonja*. Lagos: Black House, 2011.

—— "'African Writers' Pathogenesis and the Paradox of Imagination". In *Language, Literature and Criticism: Essays in Honour of Professor Aduke Adebayo*, edited by Emmanuel N. Kwofie & Babatunde Ayeleru, 239 – 271. Ibadan: Zenith Book House, 2010.

Henige, David. *Historical Evidence and Argument*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

Irele, Abiola. *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Johnson, Samuel. *The History of the Yorubas*. Lagos: CMS Bookshops, 2008.

Krishnaswamy, N., John Varghese, and Sunita Mishra. *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Student's Companion*. Bangalore: Macmillan India Limited, 2000.

Law, Robin. *The Oyo Empire: C. 1600 – C. 1836 – A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Hampshire: Gregg Revivals, 1991.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

——. *Structural Anthropology*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.

Loewenberg, Peter. *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick: The University Press, 1996.

Murtala, Saad. "The Impact of Islam and Shariah on the Culture of Ilorin Emirate." *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies* 8, no. 8 (August 2021): 13-17.

Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520.

Ogunyemi, Toye. *Ibadan Empire: Republicanism in a Pre-colonial African Nation*. Ibadan: Rasmed Publications Limited, 2015.

Peacocke, Christopher. *The Realm of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2004.

Vansina, Jan. *The Oral Tradition As History*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Winter, Jay. *Remembering War.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.