

# Serious case of activism

Ben Naparstek | June 16, 2007

WHEN THE NIGERIAN writer Wole Soyinka was a student in Britain in the 1950s, he joined the army. The future Nobel laureate intended to exploit the colonial power's training resources to ready himself for a war of African liberation. But when the Suez crisis broke out in 1956 and he was called up to serve with the British forces, Soyinka realised his mistake. After declining the call-up, he only narrowly escaped being court-martialled. He convinced his superiors that he couldn't possibly have sworn loyalty to Her Majesty by ensuring that no intelligible English emanated from his lips.

Those years were formative for the emerging playwright, poet, essayist and activist who watched, appalled, as the first generation of African nationalists began visiting Britain regularly, more interested in bedding white women than transforming the colonial order. His anticipation of pan-African freedom dimmed as he witnessed the lavish spending of the self-preening new leaders, who spoke with vicious condescension towards the societies they claimed to represent.

"The conviction of liberation ... made some of us feel that we could entrust the future of the continent to these first generation leaders," says Soyinka, 72, on the eve of publication of his memoir, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*. "It was inconceivable that, coming out from under the yoke of external colonialism, any group of leaders would dare to treat their own people with the same contempt as the former colonial powers. Collectively we failed to take the necessary actions to stop it."

Soyinka fell out of favour with Nigeria's new political elite on his return from Britain in 1960. During a festival commemorating Nigeria's recent independence, he staged his play *A Dance of the Forests*, which cast doubt on the country's ability to shed the colonial culture of corruption. The play drew sharp criticism for metaphorically depicting Nigeria as a mythical half-child who is born old and must, therefore, die young.

He also attracted fire from intellectuals associated with the so-called Negritude movement, which endeavoured to define and promote an African spirit and took exception to his use of European literary techniques. Soyinka cautioned his Negritude critics against promoting a stereotypical dichotomy between Western rationalism and African emotionalism. "A tiger does not proclaim its tigritude," he wrote. "It acts."

Yet Soyinka later came to accept "that Negritude was an insurgent tool that was needed for the peculiar nature of French colonialism, which tried to make its colonials French and denigrated African values - unlike the British, who felt that the black man could not apprehend European civilisation, so left their colonials alone with their culture".

Protesting against a rigged election in western Nigeria in 1965, Soyinka held up a radio station at gunpoint and switched the tape playing a speech by the self-declared winner with one proclaiming his illegitimacy. He was charged with armed robbery and detained for three months, before being acquitted on a technicality.

In 1967, he was imprisoned for 27 months, mostly in solitary confinement, for allegedly assisting the Biafra breakaway movement. That Soyinka was attempting to persuade the Biafran leadership of the recklessness of separation was irrelevant, as he was never charged.

What Soyinka feared most in prison was that he'd be killed while the outside world was fed lies about his activities. "Once I was able to smuggle out the truth about my experience - once I got word back that the wrong versions of events weren't believed - suddenly I felt like I could relax. What frightened me most was that I would have been made to die a lie."

Initially, the deprivations of prison life made Soyinka hell-bent on spearheading prison reforms. He launched a hunger strike, even while he feared being blinded by the harsh desert wind that swept through his cell. Yet he came to realise the futility of seeing the prison system in isolation from the wider despotic regime. "It doesn't take long to recognise that the immediate cesspit is only another facet of society itself and you go back to what brought you there - the transformation of the entire society."

After Nigeria fell under the rule of General Sani Abacha in 1993, Soyinka called for international sanctions in an effort to end the regime. The strongman retaliated by barring him from leaving the country. After Soyinka's friend, the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, was executed in 1995, Soyinka fled, riding a motorcycle for 12 hours to get across the Benin border.

He denies that his Nobel title gave him immunity. "That concept, which especially the Western world has, is completely ill-founded. Abacha would have died a happy person if he could have put in his curriculum vitae that he hanged or shot a Nobel laureate."

In 1997, Soyinka was sentenced to death in absentia but returned to Nigeria the next year after Abacha's death. He accepted a post at Obafemi Awolowo University, after securing a guarantee that none of Abacha's former stooges would be made chancellor.

Soyinka also holds posts at the universities of Nevada and California, and in October 2005 was scheduled to come to Australia on a PEN lecture tour - but he cancelled in outrage at the visa requirements.

"Everything was set and then there was this 'Pro Forma for Offshore Applicants Aged Seventy and Over'. All my life I've fought against discrimination. So why should I accept becoming a subhuman being simply because I want to go to Australia? I don't care if I'm dying tomorrow and Australia has the cure for whatever illness afflicts me - if I have to fill out this form, I'd rather die."

His sloganeering tone doesn't lift when discussing his family. Soyinka describes himself as an absentee father. His current wife, referring to his posts as a visiting professor at various universities, calls him a visiting husband. He refuses to say how many children he's sired, telling *The Guardian* in 2002: "In our tradition we don't count our children. In my case the gods have been kind - maybe over-generous."

Unlike Nelson Mandela, who regretted that politics stripped him of his capacity to be a father, Soyinka feels no remorse about pouring his energies into activism and art. "I always tell my family, 'You have no choice. You didn't ask to be my relation. I didn't ask to be a member of your family.' They can't deny enjoying people saying, 'Oh, you're the child of Soyinka' or 'You're the brother of Soyinka'. So they have some compensations.

"Of course, there are moments when I'd like to sit with my family, to talk, eat together, go to theatre or opera or take a holiday together. But just like a doctor who's on call, who can be called out in the most private moment - who's he to complain? He chose his profession. I don't see the life of the activist as different."

Source: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/news/entertainment/serious-case-of-activism/2007/06/14/1181414441507.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap2>

## Soyinka accuses West of destroying other nations

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NOBEL laureate Prof. Wole Soyinka, has accused the United States (U.S.) and other Western nations of deliberately and subtly wiping out any form of civilisation that doesn't fit theirs. According to the 1986 Nobel prize winner for Literature, the West would rather destroy any other form of civilisation than allow it to thrive parallel to it. "If you can't have it, and you don't own it," then "flood it," is the philosophy of the West", Soyinka argued, while speaking on "Civilisation, dead or alive," at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, venue of the London Literature Festival on Saturday evening.

He described the U.S. invasion of Iraq as America's way "of denying Iraqis their civilisation." Besides, he accused the Americans of imposing their form of democracy on Iraq. America wasn't the only country that came under his hammer as he condemned the attitude of the West to other cultures and civilisations, saying, the West always ensure that any civilisation that doesn't originate from it is wiped out.

The literary icon added that the West was guilty of manipulating "civilisation to suit themselves."

To buttress his claims, Soyinka pointed accusing fingers at the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which, according to him, is "guilty of not helping to preserve the civilisation of the Afghanistans," when the Taliban invaded the country a couple of years ago.

He said: "Since variety is the spice of life, other cultures and civilisations must be allowed to thrive," alongside those of the West. And more importantly, there has to be an end to the "exorcist mentality," of the West, Soyinka stated.

Turning to his own continent Soyinka, who blazed the trail as the first African to receive the Nobel prize for Literature when he won the coveted award 21 years ago, said Africa has not helped itself in proving to the world that civilisation existed among its people before the missionaries came in." The lack of African historians made the western world feel the continent wasn't civilised."

Religion, particularly Christianity and Islam, were not spared either, as the Nobel laureate vented his fury on the two foremost faiths in the world. "I'm very bitter about what religion has done to the world," he noted.

Soyinka, who according to a spokeswoman of the organisers "was given the liberty to choose the topic he wanted to speak on," after agreeing to deliver the lecture, continued: "I'm for methodology, not religion."

He also added his voice to those of many African leaders who have asked the United Nations (UN) to intervene in the Darfur crisis. "It is genocide," and therefore, the "UN must intervene in Sudan on behalf of over two million people who have been displaced."

# Racial profiling cannot curb global terrorism: Wole Soyinka

**New Delhi, Jan 22 : First African Nobel laureate Akinwande Oluwole 'Wole' Soyinka feels that racial profiling is a "complete failure" when it comes to curbing global terrorism.**

"The arrest of the Nigerian national from the flight to Detroit in December for alleged possession of explosives does not call for racial profiling of all terror suspects. The Nigerian national may have fallen into bad company. It should be inquired where he was indoctrinated. He may have been of a spiritual nature and was indoctrinated into the jihadist philosophy," Soyinka told the media at the Jaipur Literature Festival Friday.

"It is unfair to discriminate against terror suspects on racial grounds. Several Nigerian nationals lost their lives in the London underground terror attacks and in strikes elsewhere across the globe," said the 75-years-old Nigerian novelist, poet and playwright.

Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1986 for Literature as one "who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashioned the drama of existence".

Soyinka, who is also a political activist, spoke on a series of issues ranging from politics, ethnicity, literature to his childhood and journey as an author and activist.

Allowing the media a window into his views on ethnicity, Soyinka said, "There is too much of pejorative on the word tribe -- Irish tribe, Scottish tribe -- all over the globe, especially in those countries which had been colonised. These organic groups of people who are called tribes have been forced to abandon their cultural identity by colonialists.

"In West Africa, you have vertical groupings (collectives of highly independent people who are answerable to a single authority in the group) of people along the West African coast and cocktails of religious groupings of people who have their natural ethnic entities. In India, you have exactly the same situation -- bred by the education system imposed in colonial nations," he said.

Soyinka's views on ethnicity stem from his "exiles abroad".

"Circumstances forced me to go out of my country to look for new existence in England. I was forced into exiles. I called it a political sabbatical. One of the paradoxical things about exiles is that it breeds anger. You become angrier because people in other parts of the world don't have two heads. They are logical, humane and creative. Why shouldn't the same thing happen to me on the turf that I call my own," he said, referring to his own years away from home, which prompted him to "bond more strongly with his country's tradition and politics".

The writer traces his lineage to the illustrious Ransome-Kuti family, known for their contribution to Nigerian music and politics.

"The Nigerian Afro beat musician, late Fela Kuti (who was the theme of a Broadway musical) was my cousin," Soyinka said with a laugh.

Talking about the current state of African literature, Soyinka said: "Literature in Nigeria is very political, a colonial legacy, which bred an overwhelming sense of responsibility to write politically.

But the women novelists of Africa surpass men with their sensitive observations of human rights," he said.

"I am glad that I came (to the literary festival) because the atmosphere here is different. There is creative chaos, which is very similar to my temperament," he added.

According to Soyinka, India and Africa "share many threads".

"Indians are characterised by their closeness to earth like the African people. Indian cuisine is similar to that of Africa. But modernisation has uprooted both people from the earth," he said.

--IANS

Source: <http://www.newkerala.com/news/fullnews-36480.html>