

Read the biographical information about Wole Soyinka and think of some questions you would like to ask him. **For example:** Why do you call your mum "Wild Christian"? or Being born, raised and educated in a former British colony, how do you think this "informed" your life as an intellectual?

Wole Soyinka (1934-) - in full Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka

Nigerian playwright, poet, novelist, and critic, first black African who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986¹. Soyinka has been imprisoned several times for his criticism of the government. From the 1970s he has lived long periods in exile. Soyinka's plays range from comedy to tragedy, and from political satire to **the theatre of the absurd**. He has combined influences from Western traditions with African myth, legends and folklore, and such techniques as singing and drumming.

"Soyinka probably would like to be recognized most especially as a dramatist and man of the theatre. He implied that much at the opening of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (dedicated to Nelson Mandela) as he related back to a moment in the past, in his theatrical beginnings, to inform the crucial political situations of the present world order. This recognition would seem to be justified, considering his gamut² of plays, but more especially so because in his drama can be located elements of his equally important literary forms..." (Femi Euba in *Postcolonial African Writers*, ed. by Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne, 1998)

Wole Soyinka was born in Abeokuta, southwestern Nigeria, which was then a British colony. The Soyinkas were members of the Yoruba tribe. His father, Samuel Ayodele Soyinka, was the headmaster of St. Peter's Primary School. Soyinka's mother, Grace Eniola Soyinka, whom the author calls "Wild Christian", was a shopkeeper and respected political figure in the community.

Like many other major Nigerian writers, including Elechi Amadi, Chinua Achebe, John Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, and Cole Omotso, Soyinka was educated at the University College of Ibadan. In 1954 he moved to England, where he studied English literature at the University of Leeds, receiving his B.A. in 1959. During this period he started study of the work of Eugene O'Neill and wrote two plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, a story of a floppish school teacher and an old African chief competing for a young village woman. Both of the plays were staged in London.

While in England, Soyinka married Barbara Skeath, a fellow student at Leeds; the marriage was brief. In 1960 Soyinka returned to Nigeria, and established an amateur ensemble acting company. He also wrote scripts for radio and television. Soyinka's first important play, *A dance of the forest* (publ. 1963), was written for Nigeria's independence celebration.

Soyinka was appointed in 1962 a lecturer in English at the University of Ife and in 1965 he became senior lecturer at the University of Lagos. Like many writers and intellectuals, Soyinka rejected Christianity, the religion of the colonizers, declaring in 1963 that he is neither a Christian nor a Moslem. Challenging the unquestioned position of Christian churches on the campus, he co-authored in the seventies an unpublished document entitled 'An Appeal for the Re-establishment of

I have not been able to accept the prize on a personal level . . . I accept it as a tribute to the heritage of African literature which is very little known in the West. I regard it as a statement of respect and acknowledgement of the long years and centuries of denigration and ignorance of the heritage which all of us have been trying to build . . . I'm part of the whole literary tradition of Africa. The prize is for all my colleagues who are just as qualified to win it as I. I see myself as part of their collective reality. [*New York Times*, 17 October 1986]

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African Religions on the University of Ife Campus'. However, Soyinka has also interpreted Christian themes, motifs and symbols in many different ways, such as the water symbolism, the figure of the archetypal Savior, and the idea of the sacrificed God. There are also Buddhist's reference points and mythologies in his poetry, too.

Although Soyinka used in his plays traditional African forms of expression, he also drew from Western avant-garde techniques. *The Strong breed* (1963), a play, was based on the Yoruba festival of the new year and the ritual of sacrificing a "carrier" of the previous year's evil. Eman is a stranger who has found peace in his village, he has no desire to go away. Sunma, a teacher, wants to spend with him the new year, far from the festival. The villagers want to sacrifice Ifada, a helpless and unwilling boy. Omae, Eman's betrothed, who has died giving birth to his child, appears to him, and Eman finally fulfills his task and dies a carrier. "Those who have much to give fulfil themselves only in total loneliness." *The Interpreters* (1965), Soyinka's first novel, focused on a group of intellectuals who meet at bars and nightclubs and other social "watering holes" in Ibadan and Lagos and interpret the Nigerian reality. One of the characters is named Lazarus; he is a prophet who claims to have risen from the dead. Opening with the sentence "Metal on concrete jars my drink lobes," this complex novel has been compared with the works of James Joyce and William Faulkner. Soyinka's long-awaited second novel, *Season of Anomy* (1973), disappointed critics. "I'm not really a keen novelist," Soyinka once said. "And I don't consider myself a novelist. The first novel happened purely by accident."

Soyinka was first time imprisoned after elections in Western Nigeria, charged for illegal broadcast criticizing fraud of the results. After S.L. Akintola was elected premier of the Western Region, Soyinka, armed with a gun, had entered the broadcasting studios in Ibadan, and played his own tape instead of Akintola's victory speech. During the rule of Yakubu Gowon, Soyinka was jailed in 1967-69 for conspiring to aid Biafra's independence movement. Several American and British writers, among them Lillian Hellman and Robert Lowell, protested to the Nigerian government, and Soyinka was released. His poem, 'Live Burial,' appeared in *The New Statesmen* on the 23rd of May, 1969. It was sent to an English critic from the prison. "Sixteen paces / By twenty-three. They hold / Siege against humanity / And Truth / Employing time to drill through to his sanity." Soyinka's collection of poems, *The Man Died* (1972), describes his time in jail. The book was banned in Nigeria. *Madmen and Specialists*, written in 1970, is Soyinka's most pessimistic play. It deals with man's inhumanity and pervasive corruption in structures of power.

"There is a deep lesson for the world in the black races' capacity to forgive, one which, I often think, has much to do with ethical precepts which spring from their world view and authentic religions, none of which is ever totally eradicated by the accretions of foreign faiths and their implicit ethnocentrism." (in Nobel Lecture, 1986)

After release Soyinka worked as a teacher, but went in 1972 into voluntary exile. He worked as a lecturer, held a fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge, and wrote three important plays: *Jero's Metamorphosis*, *The Bacchae*, and *Death and the King's Horsemen*. In 1975 Soyinka moved to Accra, Ghana, becoming an editor of Africa's leading intellectual journal *Transition*. After a coup deposed President Gowon in 1975, Soyinka returned to Nigeria and was appointed professor of English at the University of Ife. Soyinka's childhood memoirs, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, appeared 1981. It depicted vividly the village where he grew up, his parents, and his education in Yoruba traditions and mysteries. *You must set forth at Dawn: A memoir* (2006) is a follow-up to *Aké*, which also gives insight into the history of Nigeria under military rule.

In 1988 Soyinka became a professor of African studies and theatre at Cornell University. Despite government pressure, Soyinka was active in the Nigerian theater. Like the writer and human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995), who was hanged despite of international protests, Soyinka

criticized the corruption brought to Nigeria by the oil industry. Soyinka's cousin, Fela Kuri, a charismatic musician, was imprisoned in 1984 due to his criticism of the military government.

Soyinka's best-known essays *Myth, Literature, and the African World* were published in 1976. He has been one of the most outspoken critics of the concept on *négritude*, which have been associated with Léopold Senghor, the writer and former President of Senegal.³ Soyinka sees that *négritude* encourages into self-absorption and affirms one of the central Eurocentric prejudices against Africans, namely the dichotomy between European rationalism and African emotionalism. "A tiger does not shout its tigrity," Soyinka said, "it acts." In his essay 'Reparations, Truth and Reconciliation' (in *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, 1999) Soyinka defends the idea, that the West should pay reparations for crimes committed against African people. "Reparations... serve as a cogent⁴ critique of history and thus a potent restraint on its repetition." Soyinka points out that this discussion is not new, but Pan-African organizations talked about compensation in the beginning of the 20th century. Soyinka has also defended African democracy. In the mid-1970s he campaigned for Idi Amin's overthrow⁵. Following the spread of religious fundamentalism, Soyinka has considered his duty to "fight those who have chosen to belong to the party of death, those who say they receive their orders from God somewhere and believe they have a duty to set the world on fire to achieve their own salvation, whether they are in the warrens⁶ of Iraq, or in the White House."

Soyinka lived in exile in the US and France after leaving Nigeria in 1994. He had participated in 1993 on a protest march against the military regime and also witnessed on another occasion the killings of peaceful demonstrators. In 1997 he was tried in absentia with 14 other opposition members for bomb attacks against army between the years 1996-97. The military regime of General Sani sentenced Soyinka to death. "Some people think the Nobel Prize makes you bulletproof. I never had that illusion," Soyinka once said. After the death of military dictator Sani Abacha on June 1998, Soyinka demanded democracy to Nigeria. In an interview in *Newsweek* on August 10, 1998 Soyinka stated that to further the transition to Nigerian democracy "the United States must not give any ground to the regime until democracy has been restored."

The accusations have been canceled and general Abdulsalami Abubakar have granted amnesty for several political prisoners. Soyinka returned in October 1998 to his home country, and received a hero's welcome. Moreover, he was urged to run for the presidency by his faithful supporters. In his play *King Baabu* (2001) Soyinka parodied past and present African dictators. The title refers to Alfred Jarry's classic absurdist play, *Ubu Roi* (1896). "Look at Mugabe stifling the opposition under the pretence of repossessing alienated land. He's one of these dictators who want to die in office and will crush all dissenting views...in the crudest manner -- killing his opponents, torturing them, burning their houses." (Soyinka in a CNN interview, August 1, 2001) After decades of struggle for

³ Senegalese poet and statesman, founder of the Senegalese Democratic Bloc. Senghor was elected president of Senegal in the 1960s. He retired from office in 1980. Senghor was one of the originators of the concept of *Négritude*, defined as the literary and artistic expression of the black African experience. In historical context the term has been seen as an ideological reaction against French colonialism and a defense of African culture. It has deeply influenced the strengthening of African identity in the French-speaking black world.

"L'émotion est nègre, la raison est hellène." (emotion is Negro, reason is Greek) "Negritude is the totality of the cultural values of the Black world."

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democracy and freedom of expression, Soyinka announced in 2010 that he has decided to retire from public life. Soyinka has been married three times. In 1989 he married his third wife, Doherty Folake, also a Nigerian. His second wife, Laide Idowu, whom he met while studying at the University College, Ibadan, worked before her retirement as Librarian of Olabisi Onabanjo University. Following President Bashar Assad's brutal crackdown on the country's uprising, Soyinka and other writers, such as Umberto Eco, David Grossman, Amos Oz, Orhan Pamuk and Salman Rushdie, urged in June 2011 the United Nations to condemn the repression in Syria as a crime against humanity.

Conversations with Wole Soyinka, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (2001)

Soyinka's writings, especially the dramas for which he is best known, are at once deeply rooted in traditional African expressive and performance forms like myths and rituals, dance and mime, music and masquerade and are also greatly influenced by such diverse Western dramatic and theatrical models as classical Greek drama, Shakespearean and Jacobean theatre, and modern European and American antirealist and avant-garde forms and techniques.

Read what follows and think of at least three questions that you would ask Soyinka were you sitting at a dinner table with him.

Soyinka is known as **an outspoken critic of many Nigerian military dictators and of political tyrannies worldwide**. In 1967, at the beginning of the Nigerian civil war, he was unjustly accused of assisting rebels in the breakaway republic of Biafra to purchase jet fighters. Soyinka was arrested but never formally charged and spent most of the next twenty-seven months in solitary confinement in a cell that measured only four feet by eight feet. During his imprisonment, Soyinka surreptitiously composed on discarded cigarette packages, toilet paper, and between the lines of books he secretly managed to acquire. Many of those scribbles were later compiled in his 1972 book, *The Man Died: The Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*. Gerald Weales of the *New York Times* wrote that "A few of the notes in this book are among the best things that Soyinka has done." However, the journalist asserted that "the real subject matter of the book [is] the author's attempt to survive as a man, as a mind." Soyinka readily admits that being able to write while in prison was essential for his survival. "It was crucial," he says. "That saved my sanity, just to be able to scribble some things from time to time. And I think that would be true of most writers."

In October 1969, Soyinka was released from prison and became chair of the Department of Theater Arts at the University of Ibadan. The following year he left Nigeria and went into **voluntary exile** in Europe for the next five years. During that time, he served as editor of *Transition*, Africa's leading intellectual journal.

In 1975, Soyinka traveled back to Nigeria and the following year became a professor of English at the University of Ife. During the 1970s and throughout the next decade, he was a force in local and national politics in his homeland and also served as a visiting professor at numerous universities, including Harvard, Yale, Cornell, and Cambridge.

These personal and national hardships have been at the heart of Soyinka's work, which includes a sequence of remarkable plays, novels, poetry, polemical writings, critical essays, and memoirs. **Soyinka is involved in numerous international artistic and human rights organizations**, including the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the International Parliament of Writers. In 1994, he was named UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for the promotion of African culture, human rights, freedom of expression, media and communication.

Useful Quotes:

- "Under a dictatorship, a nation ceases to exist," Soyinka rails in *The Open Sore*. "All that remains is a fiefdom, a planet of slaves regimented by aliens from outer space."

- But when times are at their worst, Soyinka says, the successful defeat of apartheid in South Africa serves as an inspiring example to his people. "It was a triumph of the human will and a triumph of racial will for black peoples all over the world. If anything, it is a challenge to Nigeria. Compared to the gap between the self-imposed ruling caste in Nigeria and the populous, the gap between the white minority and the blacks in South Africa is a difference of several light years."