

# Introduction: Rethinking Wole Soyinka: 81 Years of Protracted Engagement

by

guest editor

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Last year Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka (“Wole Soyinka”) celebrated his eightieth birthday. Soyinka is a Nigerian writer, playwright, poet, human rights activist, cultural critic, and public intellectual who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, becoming the first person in Africa to receive the award.<sup>1</sup> An activist in Nigeria’s fight for independence, Soyinka was imprisoned in solitary confinement from 1967 to 1969 for writing an article that called for a cease-fire. To this day, he is involved in the politics of Nigeria. As a prolific writer and a man of extraordinary talents and skills, Soyinka has published and produced plays, poetry collections, essays, novels, memoirs, short stories, and film projects; academic and historical books. He has three honorary doctorates (University of Leeds, Harvard, and Princeton); taught at universities in Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States, and he is presently Professor in Residence at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California.

Born in July 13, 1934 in Abeokuta, Nigeria, Soyinka was raised in a religious environment by Christian parents: Samuel Ayodele (father) and Grace Eniola Soyinka (mother). Soyinka in his important work *Of Africa* describes the religious tolerance and interfaith understanding between Nigerian Christians and Muslims in his hometown: “My Christian family lived just next door to Muslims. We celebrated Ramadan with Muslims; they celebrated Christmas with Christians. This is how I grew up.”<sup>2</sup> As a child in Ake, and all the way through secondary school and beyond, he remembers having witnessed and enjoyed “the harmonious cohabitation of diverse religious beliefs, the reign of religious zealotry, enveloping and consuming entire communities, has become a way of life.”<sup>3</sup> While Soyinka’s milieu was very religious and culturally accommodative, he was inquisitive about the meaning of religion, and its role in both political and civil society.

Soyinka's father was the Headmaster of a local school in Ake and a devoted religious man. His mother, whom he affectionately called "Wild Christian," in his second autobiography *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, because of her religious piety and unrelenting commitment to Christianity, "came from one of the most distinguished Anglican families in western Nigeria; his maternal grandfather was a minister in the local Anglican church."<sup>4</sup> Anglicanism penetrated the African soil in Nigeria by coercion when British colonizers used the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes and to subjugate the Africans, resulting in the alteration of African traditional life, cultures, and religious practices. Originated from British colonial rule at the beginning in the nineteenth century, the modern state of Nigeria became formally postcolonial and independent in 1960. Unfortunately, Nigeria would plunge into a devastated civil war that lasted for three years (1967–1970).

For his secondary education, Soyinka attended the local Abeokuta Grammar School, from 1944 to 1954. He studied literature and languages (French and Greek) at University College in Ibadan, from 1952 to 1954. After fulfilling his preparatory university studies at Government College in Ibadan in 1954, Soyinka moved to England to pursue academic studies in drama and English literature at the University of Leeds. He worked in British theatre while living away from his native land, serving as a dramaturgist at the Royal Court Theater in London (1958-1959).

Soyinka graduated with a B.A. in English Honors in 1957. Granted "a Rockefeller fellowship on New Year's Day of 1960 to research traditional dramatic forms,"<sup>5</sup> Soyinka returned to Nigeria the same year. Soyinka has written some of the most politically-and socially-engaged plays in the history of African drama. While the Nigerian playwright and actor Oloye Hubert Adedeji Ogunde (1916 –1990) is traditionally called the "Father of Nigerian the father of Nigerian theatre, or the father of contemporary Yoruba theatre,"<sup>6</sup> Wole Soyinka has labored tirelessly to develop and give it an international space. Through the art of performance theatre, and the writing of acclaimed plays such as *Death and the King's Horseman*, and *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka engaged African traditional life, cultures, politics, worldviews, and exposed the Continent's religious life. More particularly, Soyinka explored the cosmology and moral vision of the Yoruba people, and the politics of the newly-founded postcolonial state of Nigeria. As he observes in fourth memoir *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*:

It was good fortune that I could return home—where the gods were still only in a state of hibernation... I penetrated east, north, south at will and toured the entire West African coast on the trail of festivals and performing companies, keeping touch with gods and goddesses everywhere and celebrating their seasons... Like the many faces of Ogun, god of the road, the road was also a violent host. The road and I thus became partners in the quest for an extended self-discovery. I stared into the many faces of death, but most often death just taking its leave, its back indifferently turned on heartbreak and destruction... Ogun had other plans for me, however.<sup>7</sup>

Soyinka is a political writer and public activist with a postcolonial and emancipative intent. His public and intellectual activism is preoccupied with the political life and future of politics in Nigeria and other countries in Africa. Through his prolific writings and plays, he challenges and denounces totalitarian and authoritarian administrations in Nigeria, as well as other dictators in the Continent. Upon his return to Nigeria in 1960, he founded the theatre group called “The 1960 Masks,” which would serve as a vehicle of protest against oppressive regimes. After working for a year as a Lecturer in English at the University of Ife, he resigned from the position in protest of the undemocratic public policies of the Western Nigerian regional government. In 1964, Soyinka became very active in Nigerian politics, and confronted the demons of postcolonial politics of Nigeria. Serving as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Lagos, in 1965, he was briefly arrested for political protest.

When the Nigerian civil war broke in 1966, Soyinka published a controversial article demanding cease-fire. He was accused of conspiring with the Biafra rebels to overthrow the current administration. Consequently, he was held in prison for 22 months as a political prisoner. In January 15, 1966, the first military coup overthrew the First Republic and established the Ironsi regime. In a little over six months (July 29, 1966), the second military coup established the Gowon regime. Soyinka was not silent about the censoring of human rights and freedom of expression, and the progressive decline of human freedom and social inequities in Nigeria. Soyinka was released in prison in 1969; he became an expatriate in the neighboring country of Ghana. From 1966 to 1990, the people and country of Nigeria experienced eight military coups which had had a tremendous impact on the life, education, politics, and the economy of the country, and its relationships with other countries in the Continent, as well as with the international community. In addition, religious conflict (i.e. March 1987, April 1991, etc.) between Christians and Muslims remains an uncompleted task in the country. Soyinka’s life has been shaped by these historic events and political orders and administrations. The hopeful Wole Soyinka maintains that “Education remains a critical aspect in the development of any nation as it unlocks the thinking canals of our youth. However, a holistic education that encompasses the ability to help children appreciate their humanity and show empathy to their fellow human beings is what guarantees a prosperous nation.”<sup>8</sup>

After a period of almost six years, he returned to Nigeria in 1975. From 1975 to 1994, he was uninterruptedly involved in the cultural, literary, and political life of his country. In 1994, he fled Nigeria to save his life from the current dictator. In 1995, he protested against the cancellation by the military regime of the federal elections won by Moshood Abiola. He launched an international campaign against the Nigerian dictatorship. In March 1997, he was charged with treason and sentenced to death in *absentia* by the Nigerian military regime of Sani Abacha. Eventually, he returned to Nigeria in 1998. Soyinka systematically documents these incidents and discusses his political activism and transactions, covering the 1960s to the 1990s, in three “political memoirs:” *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (1972), *Ibadan: The Penkelmes Years: A Memoir, 1946-1965* (1994), and *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006).

In five autobiographies, ranging from 1972 to 2007,<sup>9</sup> Soyinka meticulously chronicles his life in Nigeria and beyond its borders, the plight of the African people, and his numerous encounters and interactions with family members, friends, enemies, strangers, and the cultures and peoples of the world. The passion of Soyinka is not the pursuit of personal fame but the quest for and preservation of freedom and human rights—on behalf of the African people and the human race. In *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*, published in 1999, he penned these heartrending words as he attempted to make sense of the relevance of historical memory in the time of conflict, despair, and healing:

Every landmark is a testament of history, and in our indelible instance—From Goree through the slave forts of Ghana to Zanzibar—every fort and stockade, increasingly turned into museums, is filled with grim evocations of this passage of our history. They are indices of Truth, an essence and a reality that offer any peoples, however impoverished, a value in itself, a value that, especially rooted in anguish and sacrifice, may dictate a revolve for redemption and strategies for social regeneration.<sup>10</sup>

Soyinka urged the Africans, people of African descent in the Diaspora, and friends of humanity not to demean the severity of the wounds and sufferings of the African people in postcolonial Africa. Further, he wrote these powerful words in the 1990s in the midst of conflict and antagonism that have transformed the relationships and interplays between the African people and the African countries:

It is not possible for us to ignore the actuality of brutal conflicts on our own continent—some as blatantly race derived as those between Senegal and Mauritania within this decade, and the even more intractable ongoing conflict in the Sudan, a conflict that has entailed over three decades of carnage, with the possible consequences of social disintegration of an enduring nature. The indigenous culture of Sudan is today imperiled as never before! Does this matter? Have we a duty to be concerned? Or threatened?<sup>11</sup>

In the same line of thought, Soyinka is internationally known as a humanist, a protagonist of human rights, and a champion of human dignity. At the World Humanist Congress held in 2014, Wole Soyinka was honored with the International Humanist Award from The British Humanist Association. In presenting the award to Soyinka, Patricia Rogers, the trustee of the organization, defended the organization's choice in this statement: "In the sharpest possible contrast to the terrorist Boko Haram's dichotomous disavowal of 'western education' as alien to their world, Soyinka has long been the intellectual leader of distinctively African voices within the universal Enlightenment tradition."<sup>12</sup> Soyinka is a fierce critic of religious terrorism and fundamentalism, as well as a promoter of religious tolerance and pluralism.

It is good to inform the reader that the message of Soyinka's acceptance speech should be understood within the cultural backdrop and historical violence of the Nigerian Islamist extremist group known as Boko Haram. In April 2014, the religious fanatics of Boko Haram abducted 276 school girls from a learning center in Chibok, Borno. Hence, we can anticipate Soyinka to denounce the crime of these rebels in his speech:

We are not yet speaking our own truths to Religion or else, are failing to find a language that penetrates, in an effective way, the hearing of that minority that needs to hear them, those whose mission is to set this palpable world on fire, through adherence to a vaporous hereafter where their incendiary mission in the substantive here and now will be rewarded. Humanism requires a new tactical language, and what that language expresses requires a drastic shift in emphasis. We must take on the duty of telling the enemy openly: it is not spiritual fulfillment that you seek but – Power. Control. Power in its crudest form. Humanism requires to develop a distinct philosophy of transformative aggression. At this moment in the lives of communities across the globe, taking note of the havoc wreaked daily by the doctrine of religious impunity, there is far too much appeasement and toleration in the language we bring to each confrontation. There comes a time when our humanity accepts that there must be an end to an attitude that is best captured in that Yoruba expression: *F'itiju k'arun*. Literally that means -contracting a disease through politeness. Translated yet again, this time into the fashionable language of social morbidity that mistakes sophistry for sophistication, it reads simply: *Political Correctness*.”

What is then the proposed solution to the problem of religious violence in the world? Or how now shall we live in a world characterized by despair and uncertainty? What does Soyinka have to say about this violent world and disheartening humanity?

Because of its open-mindedness and tolerant nature to accommodate alien faiths and foreign ideologies, Soyinka proposes African indigenous spirituality and African humanism as a liberative presence in the modern world against the arrogance of faith and religious imperialism, and for a world that is progressively digressing and evolving meaninglessly. In the chapter entitled “Spirituality of a Continent” in *Of Africa*, Soyinka praises the irenic nature of African traditional religions and spirituality:

Religions that lay claim to world stature on certificates of ultimate truth and universality should pause and demand of themselves: Why is it that the worship of Orisa has never, in all these centuries, and even on hostile foreign soil, spawned an irredentist strain? The answer lies of course in the fundamental, accommodative intelligence of the Orisa. We need only contrast this with the catechism of submission that is the pillar of faith in other religions, such as Islam or Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Soyinka calls for ecumenical dialogue and accentuates the value of generous tolerance, which African spirituality promotes, and that which the religions, peoples, and nations of the world desperately need in order to build stronger societies, create a more perfect international relationships among the nations, and to foster a democratic life and radical new humanism in this present time:

Tolerance is perhaps the most relevant, the most sorely in demand in our global dilemma...Tolerance, in its own right, is at the heart of Ifa, a virtue worth cultivating as a foundational principle of humanistic faith—the catechism of the secular deities, a spirit of accommodativeness...

Thus, for all seekers after the peace and security of true community, and the space of serenity that enables the quest after truth, pleading for understanding from the Orisa for this transgression of their timeless scorn of proselytizing, we urge yet again the simple path that was travelled from the soil of the Yoruba across the African landmass to contiguous nations, across the hostile oceans to the edge of the world in the Americas—*Go to the Orisa, learn from the Orisa, and be wise.*<sup>14</sup>

The collective corpus of Wole Soyinka reveals the soul of the African continent, and embodies what the father of Negritude and Senegalese theorist and poet Leopold Sedar Senghor called “The sum total of the values of the civilization of the African World.” On the other hand, the writings of Soyinka expose the fear, disappointments, shortcomings, and hopes of the African people, the African Diaspora, and the plight of humanity at large. James Gibbs has observed that “Much of his work is linked to Yoruba culture and Yoruba concepts. Some of the most obvious examples of the use of Yoruba material and the presence of Yoruba influence show his abiding concern with the Yoruba worldview.”<sup>15</sup> Simon Gikandi, in his insightful introduction to the 2003 Norton Critical Edition of Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, writes informatively:

Although he is proud of his African heritage and has been one of the staunchest defenders of African cultural interests, Soyinka has resisted identification with one singular tradition; in both their content and form, his works reflect the multiplicity of sources and references that are very much part of his background and education. In spite of this, Soyinka’s works are solidly located in the cosmic systems of the Yoruba people of western Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. Of all modern African writers, Soyinka is the one whose works derive their power from the essential forces of an African culture; it is impossible to conceive of his work outside Yoruba religious beliefs and systems of thought. At the same time, however, Soyinka is the most cosmopolitan and avant-garde of African playwrights.<sup>16</sup>

The collective work of Wole Soyinka should be interpreted as a poignant and impassioned commentary on the human condition, from the time he published his first short story, “Keffi’s Birthday Treat,” in 1957 to his continuous engagement in the craft and art of writing.<sup>17</sup> In his insightful text, *Climate of Fear: The Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanized World*, Soyinka expresses his longing and passion for freedom, democracy, and generous tolerance among the peoples of the world. He envisions a new world, new cultures and societies, and new human narratives in which the peoples and nations of the world could flourish and express their self-agency and determination:

We consider also a dispensation that enables all humanity to breathe freely, to associate freely, to think freely, and to believe or not to believe without a threat to their existence and without discrimination in their social rights. Implicit in that freedom of association is, difficult as it may be to accept, the right of collective dissociation.<sup>18</sup>

In his quest for human dignity and incisive commentary on the so-called “The Middle East conflict,” the Israelite-Palestine conundrum, he penned these provocative words as a clarion call to both countries and the international community to become protagonists of peace and agents of human rights and global transformation:

It is becoming impossible to recall a time when death visited this field of incompatibilities in single digits. Let us bear that in mind as we recall the response of Israel’s main backer, the United States, to the escalation of this belligerence, so rooted in disdain that it literally bared an opponent, a beleaguered leader of his people, of all the rags of authority—reverting to our language of conflict bargaining—and left him not a stitch to cover his nudity. Madeleine Albright, then secretary of state, read a statement on behalf of the U.S. government that failed to recall the deaths of Palestinians, failed to share with the world any thought of regret for their death, even as she mourned and commiserated with the Israeli government on the death of two of its soldiers. Such unstatesmanlike and insensitivity, such a crass lacuna in the history of global relationships, which was justly and bitterly seized upon by the secretary-general of the Arab League, reinforced the glaring question on the chains of the United States to be an evenhanded partner for peace with the rest of the world.<sup>19</sup>

For Soyinka, the historic antagonism between the two countries can be explained in terms of lack of respect for human life and human dignity. As he explains with clarity and precision:

Dignity is simply another face of freedom, and thus the observe of power and domination, that axis of human relationship that is equally sustained by fear—its poles doomed to remain in permanent conflict, yet complement each other... I offered a contrast in the feeling of helplessness that one obtains when Nature itself is the force of domination, as opposed to when any human, an equal of others in most ways, takes on the role of dominator or dispenser of life and death, and robs one of the faculty of volition. We need such reminders from time to time to ward off the supercilious cant of those—mostly the purveyors of terror, state or quasi-state, and the vicarious undertakers of human wastage—who wave off human trauma with some profound logic that is presumably embedded in comments such as “After all, one sudden earthquake or flood kills more people than even a yearlong civil conflict in Liberia or Chechnya.” *Neither death nor suffering* is at issue.<sup>20</sup>

The represented essays in this volume—the *JPAS* special edition on Wole Soyinka—reassess the life, ideas, writings, and legacy of Wole Soyinka from multiple perspectives and across disciplines. In his essay, Joseph presents Soyinka as a religious critic and transnational public intellectual whose main concerns entail the promotion of public peace, mutual tolerance, and human dignity through a careful examination of his religious writings. Joseph investigates Soyinka’s response to religious violence, terror, and imperialism in his non-fiction writings. He advances the argument that in response to religious imperialism and absolutism in the world, Soyinka relies heavily on the wisdom and principles of two worldviews and ideologies: African indigenous humanism and African traditional religion and spirituality.

Joseph suggests that the theoretical notions of radical theistic humanism and generous tolerance best summarize Soyinka’s ideals and systems of thought on this matter. Unlike Western humanism that is antisupernaturalistic, African indigenous humanism is informed by religious metaphysics—the religious value, thought, and life of the African people. Soyinka’s humanism is trapped within the religious ethos and sensibility and moral vision of the Yoruba people. The second essay by O. A. Adekoya is a close reading of various poems of Soyinka’s fifth book of poetry, *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*. Through a careful examination of the language of those poems, the author examines how Soyinka challenges political tyranny and religious fundamentalism in the collection. The author argues that in the poems, Soyinka rejects all claims of absolutes and emphasizes the importance of freedom and broadmindedness in both political and religious spheres. Secondly, Soyinka’s poetic corpus celebrates “the unity, indeed, the indivisibility of the human community,” and self and collective agency and determination. Adekoya’s essay, which focuses on Soyinka’s creative writings, complements Joseph’s study, which explores Soyinka’s response to religious zealotry and fanaticism in his non-creative works.

The next essay by Nagueyalti Warren examines the religious tone and sensibility of Soyinka’s poem “Idam.” The author analyzes the poem from three broad angles or perspectives: metaphysical, metaphorical, and feminist. Warren has not only explored the religious language of the poem, but also its political message. Emphasis is given to the feminist reading of the poem.



Moses Adebayo's essay investigates the linguistic style of Soyinka's acclaim play *Death and the King's Horseman*. The author excavates the drama's deepest meaning through a pragmatic reading of Nigerianisms. This current study departs from the traditional literary and stylistic explorations of the play. The study reveals that "Nigerianisms in the play are employed in the contexts of language transfer, lexical borrowing, proverbs metaphors, pidgin, symbolism, reference; inference, shared situational knowledge and shared cultural knowledge."

The second essay by Moses Adebayo Aremu studies the cultural semiotics in Soyinka's drama *Death and the King's Horseman*. The goal of this inquiry is to fill the intellectual gap between both semiotic and linguistic studies. The author argues that without a proper understanding of the symbols, icons and indices used in the text of proverbs in "DKH", the reader will not grasp the significations of the play. In his essay, Omolara Owoeye provides a comparative analysis of two of Soyinka's earlier plays: *Madmen and Specialists*, and *The Beatification of Area Boy*. The attention is given to the linguistic, thematic, and structural factors in both plays within the backdrop of the socio and political milieu of their production. James Gibbs's informative essay provides a rich and detailed annotated bibliography of secondary sources written on Wole Soyinka, from 1988 to 1990. Gibbs's research complements Henry Louis Gates's helpful book, *Wole Soyinka: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (1986), which offers a chronological order of the scholarship produced on Soyinka, from 1953 to 1985.

Finally, Joseph's entry lists the most important works by Soyinka. The list is structured in chronological order and according to the genre of the work. Next, he offers a general sketch of the most important and historical events in the life and career of Wole Soyinka, from the time of his birth in 1934 to his eightieth birthday.

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<sup>1</sup> For important studies on Soyinka, see, Ivor Agyznan-duah, and Ogochukwu Promise (eds), *Essays in Honour of Wole Soyinka at 80* (2014); Biodun Jeyifo (ed), *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity* (2006); Onookme Okome (ed), *Ogun's Children: The Literature and Politics of Wole Soyinka Since the Nobel* (2003); Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism* (2009); Biodun Jefio, *Conversations with Wole Soyinka* (2001); James Gibbs (ed), *Critical Perspective on Wole Soyinka* (1980); Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, *Wole Soyinka* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> “Wole Soyinka: 'If religion was taken away I'd be happy.'” *The Telegraph*. 12 Oct 2012. Accessed July 6, 2012. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/9600954/Wole-Soyinka-If-religion-was-taken-away-Id-be-happy.html>. Wole Soyinka was the invited speaker to the Hay Festival in Mexico, which occurred in October 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 185.

<sup>4</sup> Gikandi, “Introduction,” in Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, xi.

<sup>5</sup> Soyinka, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, 46.

<sup>6</sup> Banham and Hill (eds), *The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Soyinka, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir*, 46, 49, 112.

<sup>8</sup> “Access Bank hosts Professor Wole Soyinka in Ghana.” *Ghana Business News*. 3 July 2015. <https://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2015/07/03/access-bank-hosts-professor-wole-soyinka-in-ghana/>

<sup>9</sup> Soyinka's five autobiographies include the following: *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (1972), *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981), *Isara: A Voyage Around “Essay”* (1989), *Ibadan: The Penkelses Years: A Memoir, 1946-1965* (1994), and *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*, 59-60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

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<sup>12</sup> For the interested reader, we reproduce Soyinka's Humanist Acceptance Speech in the Appendix.

<sup>13</sup> Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 164-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 165, 168.

<sup>15</sup> Gibbs, "Introduction," in James Gibbs, *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>17</sup> For a brief chronology of the most important events in Soyinka's life, see "Brief Chronology of Wole Soyinka, 1935-Present." To learn more about his writings and play productions see "A Selected Bibliography: Works by Wole Soyinka."

<sup>18</sup> Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent*, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 103.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.