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CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE NOBEL PRIZE

OCTOBER 16, 1986 dawned with the announcement of Wole Soyinka as the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature. In contemporary world literature, this Nigerian writer's stature is highly significant both as a creative artist with a fierce sense of social responsibility, and as a human being whose "one abiding religion," in his own words, is "human liberty." Since the late 1950's, Soyinka has shown himself to be a man of vast creative energy. A prolific writer, best known as a dramatist—master of satire, comedy, tragedy, political revue—he is equally important in contemporary world literature as poet, essayist, autobiographer, editor, literary critic, commentator on the African world-view, actor-manager, and director. In its citation, the 18-member Nobel Committee described the creator of more than twenty major works as "one of the finest poetical playwrights that have written in English," and also remarked that his writing was "full of life and urgency."

Given Soyinka's creative output, particularly his unique infusion of African folk traditions and mythology into his English language work, and equally important, his bringing in new life-blood into the language itself, the Nobel Prize was long overdue. In fact, Soyinka has been on the "short list" of candidates for several years. However, given the familiar history of predominantly Western recipients for the Nobel Prize in Literature over the past 85 years, the Nobel Committee has been lethargic in acknowledging a major writer from the African continent. (Some non-Western recipients of the Prize were India's Rabindranath Tagore in 1913, Chile's Pablo Neruda in 1971, Colombia's Gabriel García Márquez in 1982.) One recognizes, of course, that the Nobel Prize in Literature has as much to do with politics as it does with literature. And, the history of European colonialism, the economic exploitation of African countries, the propagation of racist stereotypes which not only denied the worth of, but the very existence of African cultures and civilizations over almost two hundred years is often conveniently obliterated. As Soyinka himself remarked on hearing about the Prize: "African culture and creativity have not always been properly perceived by other cultures, Europe for example. But this award is a recognition which will mean much . . . I do not, for a minute, consider that the Prize is just for me. It's for what I represent; I see it more as a historical gesture. I'm a part of the whole

literary tradition of Africa. I see myself as part of a collective reality.”

A biographical overview of this manifold artist must begin with his Yoruba heritage, his rootedness in Yoruba culture and world-view. Soyinka, a Yoruba, belongs to one of the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria which are Ibo, Yoruba, and Hausa. Born in 1934 in Abeokuta, he was the son of Ayo and Eniola who were Christian converts. In his autobiography, *Ake: the Years of Childhood*, which charmingly depicts the first eleven years of his life, Soyinka describes his mother as “the Wild Christian” because she had the kind of faith which enabled her to pour groundnut oil into a narrow-spouted bottle without spilling a drop! His father, who was the head of the local missionary school which young Wole attended, is described as a man who could be on “first-name basis with God.” Thus, from his childhood he was exposed to Christian ideas. Nonetheless, Soyinka himself never embraced the Christian religion; he feels more at home with traditional Yoruba religion and is a personal devotee of the Yoruba god Ogun who also figures prominently in his writings. Ogun is described by Soyinka as “god of creativity, guardian of the road, god of metallic lore and artistry. Explorer, hunter, god of war . . . custodian of the sacred oath.”

In addition to having had a Yoruba-Christian upbringing, Soyinka received a Western academic education. The latter began in pre-independent Nigeria of the 1930's and 1940's ruled by British colonizers; next, two years at the newly established University College, Ibadan (1952-54), where his classmates included Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, all of whom made their mark later in Nigerian literature; then, a B.A. degree from the University of Leeds (1954-57); followed by a year as Play Reader at the Royal Court Theatre in London (1958-59); and a return to Nigeria in 1960 on a Rockefeller Fellowship for a study of Nigerian traditions and culture. Since 1960, Soyinka has stayed in Nigeria except for some time spent in voluntary exile during troubled periods in his country. He has served as Visiting Professor at the University of Cambridge, and more recently at Yale and Cornell universities. At the University of Cambridge in 1973, Soyinka gave a series of lectures on Literature and Society which, he remarked, “took place entirely in the Department of Social Anthropology.” As he explains with biting humor in his Preface to *Myth, Literature and the African World*: “Casual probing after it was all over indicated that the Department of English (or perhaps some key individual) did not believe in any such mythical beast as ‘African literature’.”

Through his education Soyinka imbibed the Western intellectual tradition, but in his writing he comes across first and foremost as an African and as a Yoruba, and it is from the base of Yoruba culture, his inspiration, that he responds to other literary and cultural traditions. His art is eclectic, a successful blend of African themes and traditional forms, and Western techniques. In his hands, African traditions assume meanings which are much wider than the ones

accepted within their geographical location. "We must not think that traditionalism means raffia skirts," Soyinka once remarked in an interview, "It's no longer possible for a purist literature for the simple reason that even our most traditional literature has never been purist."

Just as Soyinka confronts African "traditionalism" in the narrow sense, he also recognizes the irony of using the English language—a lingering legacy of colonialism. However, he is never apologetic about this matter; rather, he proudly accepts the challenge of making the English language "carry the weight" as his contemporary Chinua Achebe puts it, "of [his] African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings . . . The price a world language [which history has forced down our throats] must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use." The role of English as a link language among people with various indigenous languages is certainly a historical reality in post-colonial societies. Language itself becomes a weapon for writers like Achebe, Soyinka, and others from the Third World, to confront the disruptive remnants of colonialism and the negative continuation of neo-colonial tendencies in our contemporary lives.

Along with adapting the English language for his African experience, an artist like Soyinka successfully reinterprets literary forms, particularly drama. Radical revisions of traditional Western literary forms reflect significant changes in ideology, new ways of perceiving social reality, and new sets of relationships between the artist and his audience. Soyinka's artistic creativity enables him to question certain rigid parameters of Eurocentric literary forms (which are usually considered to be the "universal" norm), and to optimally use his Western education to transform, transmute, even to distort European forms to suit his own cultural reality. In dramas such as *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka presents a new form: Yoruba tragedy which departs in significant ways from Western tragic drama. In this form, ritual, masquerade, dance, music, mythopoeic language all work together towards the very purpose of Yoruba tragedy which is communal benefit.

Soyinka's contribution to Nigerian drama has gone beyond his achievement as a playwright, from the printed page to the boards of a stage, as actor-manager, and director. He has played a key role in professionalizing the English-language theater in Nigeria. When Soyinka returned to Nigeria in 1960 for the Nigerian Independence celebrations, he recognized that theater companies in existence were mainly amateurish and imitative of Western drama, using conventional stagecraft and acting techniques. Since *A Dance of the Forests* was a new kind of play, Soyinka needed actors who were equally at home with Yoruba culture and fluent in the English language. So he formed "The 1960 Masks." Later, in

1963, he established "The Orisun Theater," the first English-language professional theater company in Nigeria.

The history of English-language professional theater in Nigeria is integrally related to Soyinka's dramatic career. There is a clear correspondence between the timing of his plays, the prevalent political climate, and his choice of writing satirical comedies such as *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1963); *Opera Wonyosi* (1981); biting political revues such as *Before the Blackout* (1965); political satires such as *Kongi's Harvest* (1967); and his latest drama, *A Play of Giants* (A fantasia on Idi Amin, 1984).

Soyinka has the unique capacity not simply to write about social injustice in his creative work, but whenever necessary, to meet the challenge and be an activist. There is no contradiction between Soyinka the man actively involved in Nigerian socio-political issues, and Soyinka the artist, imaginatively exploring metaphysical matters in his creative work. Soyinka's active involvement in Nigerian social and political life both in his theatrical work and in his personal life is a facet of the man indispensable to an understanding of his creative work. He is concerned with the quality of public life, and he speaks openly as the conscience of his nation. His open involvement leading to his incarceration during the Nigerian Civil War was a painful manifestation of his single-handed attempt to fight "the colossal moral failure" in the nation. Since he lived up to his belief stated in his prison notes, *The Man Died*, that "the man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny," the military government placed him in solitary confinement for eighteen months (1967-69). It is a testimony to the tenacity of the human mind that he endured this severe trial though every attempt was made by the "little mind-butchers" to liquidate him.

His prison ordeal understandably made Soyinka bitter and cynical about human nature and sceptical of the social effectiveness of the artist. On the eve of the Nigerian Civil War he had commented on "the stage of disillusionment at which the African writers found themselves." This disillusionment is darkly expressed in the creative work which grew directly out of his harrowing experience: a drama, *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) in which the tragic history of humankind is epitomized in the recurrent phenomenon of war which leads to "the spiritual, psychic, physical, and symbolic" ravage of the human spirit. The prison experience also inspired a collection of poems, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972); a novel, *Season of Anomy* (1973); and *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1972). In the very writing of his Prison Notes, Soyinka was able to move beyond personal anger and bitterness, and to recognize his ordeal as a part of what other prisoners of conscience in various parts of the world have endured. "It is necessary to keep in mind always," he remarks in *The Man Died*, "that we know only of those who have survived the inhuman passage . . . [such] testimonies should become a kind of chain-letter hung permanently on the leaden conscience

of the world.”

After his prison experience, Soyinka re-embraced his “one abiding religion—human liberty” with new fervor. In an interview soon after the publication of *The Man Died*, he remarked, “I have a special responsibility because I can smell the reactionary sperm years before the rape of the nation takes place.” He also reasserted his belief in the artist’s social function “to use words and [literary] style . . . to arrest the ears of normally complacent people. We must make sure we explode something inside them which is a parallel of the sordidness which they ignore outside . . . A book, if necessary, should be a hammer, a handgrenade which you detonate under a stagnant way of looking at the world.”

Soyinka’s deep and energetic concern for his country has remained unflagging over the past thirty years since the beginning of his literary career. He has always been a stern and uncompromising critic of social injustice whoever the perpetrators might be—Yakubu Gowon’s military government was as roundly taken to task in *The Man Died*, as was the more recent civilian government of Shehu Shagari, lambasted in Soyinka’s directly satirical agit-prop sketches entitled, *Priority Projects* (1982). The latter were produced in collaboration with the Unife [University of Ife, Nigeria] Guerilla Theater. In 1983, in timely response to the election rigging of Shagari’s “democratic” government, Soyinka brought out a record disc entitled, “Unlimited Liability Company,” featuring Tunji Oyelana and the Benders. The dramatist who once described himself as a “frustrated musician,” wrote the lyrics such as “Ethike Revolution,” “I Love My Ethike Country,” and set them to music.

In 1985, Soyinka made open statements to the press in London and in the U.S. about the horrors perpetrated by Shagari’s civilian government. “Make no mistake,” he commented in an interview with the London *Guardian* (March 30, 1985), “under Shagari, it was civil war.” Soyinka has recently completed a film entitled, “Blues for a Prodigal,” which is severely critical of the Shagari regime. “As hundreds turned up at the National Theatre in Lagos for the premiere the other day,” comments Michael Simmons of the *Guardian*, “security officers stepped in and took the reels. ‘Blues for a Prodigal,’ as it is called, depicts real events, and specifically the violent attempts to indoctrinate a naive young student. It amounts to an unambiguous indictment of what Soyinka now calls, ‘the crude hammer-blow fascists and the looters’ who made up the Shagari administration.”

Although Soyinka’s vision has fluctuated over the years from despair to hope, ultimately he always returns to an assertion of life. “I love life, and the human community is mine,” he remarked in a 1985 interview. With his passion for human liberty and a deep concern for the quality of human life in his own country and for humankind as a whole, Soyinka’s work has a profound significance in contemporary world literature.