

Encounters with Wole Soyinka

Richard Joseph

Part I

On October 2nd, an [online conversation](#) was conducted by the Program of African Studies of Northwestern University between Professor Chris Abani and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka.¹ It was the resumption of a conversation between the two writers and scholars at the New York Public Library in November 2019.

In response to a request from Prof. Abani, I agreed to prepare remarks on my “relationship to Soyinka and his work from any angle: personal, academic, or a mix of both.” The composition of this narrative involved more than I anticipated. Moreover, a technical problem prevented it from being posted prior to the event. The initial essay follows a summary of the online conversation.



Profs. Chris Abani and Wole Soyinka. Photo credits: Northwestern University and Nobelprize.org

The ancestral world - more Soyinka’s realm than mine - perhaps intervened to reverse the order of events. The conversation was a display of critical inquiry at a high level. The repartee was multilayered. A question or remark would lead

¹Professor of English, Prof. Abani holds various positions at Northwestern including Director of the Program of African Studies. He is multi-talented and a distinguished writer in several genres.

the speakers into new forests of controversy. Topics ranged from issues close to home (Nigeria), to the global context, and to the current travails of America and Donald Trump.

The composition of my essay convinced me of the need to re-immense myself in Soyinka's *oeuvre* and other wonders of African literature. There is a striking discordance, I have previously noted, between the extraordinary creativity and productivity of this world and the shortcomings in governance and socio-economic development.

The Abani-Soyinka dialogue merits special attention from persons who are dismayed by the dismal tunnels into which "leaders" and "elite cartels" have steered the citizenry.² A transcript of the conversation would be an important resource for discussions of critical issues.³

I Human Dignity & Ethnicity

A question from Abani about Soyinka's concerns for human dignity elicited a disquisition by the latter on his attempts to avert the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70). A human force, he felt, could neutralize the two sides. War would be an injustice added to the injustices already suffered by civilians divided by ethnicity.

II Religion & Dominance

Abani prodded Soyinka to share his views on the urge to dominate. He replied by connecting conflicts, defined by religious affiliations, to the "instinct to dominate" among world religions. What is lost in the process are higher instincts, such as innovation and creativity. The urge to dominate, destabilize, and make others submit to a particular religion becomes "pass-ports" to atrocities. Soyinka proposed a World Assembly of Secularists and others to counter these trends.

III Indigeneity & Democracy

The discussion of domination via religious ideologies segued into an exchange on Africa's failing democracies. In Nigeria, the privileged seek to control "the dividends of power". Privilege, domination, and bullying interweave. What the system is really about is getting "to sit at the top of the pile."⁴

Abani returned to the issues of indigeneity and traditional belief practices

²On "elite cartels", see discussion in Part II regarding a forthcoming book by Ambassador John Campbell.

³Some of the comments would benefit from annotation about historical events – the Nigerian Civil War; Soyinka's acts of defiance, detention, and exile; Nigeria's complex ethnic and religious dynamics; and so on.

⁴This comment echoes remarks made decades ago by the late Professor Claude Ake.

such as Ifa among the Yoruba. Indigenous systems of thought, culture, and beliefs do not inspire wars. Soyinka spoke about the differences between spirituality and religion. Religions have much to learn from systems they don't understand. Spiritualism seeks balance with the world, and with nature - to commune with nature. Abani mentioned the political dilemmas of Nigeria and "the need to look towards more traditional ways of thinking about democracy."

IV Sani Abacha & Donald Trump

The discussion moved to reflections on politics, to threats to American democracy, and Nigerian experiences, especially during the reign of General Sani Abacha (1993-1998). Soyinka described concerns he shared publicly before the U.S. presidential elections in 2016. He warned about the prospect of Donald Trump winning. Trump was appealing, he thought, to a raw, crude, and populist nerve of the American psyche.

There was complacency, he felt, regarding the danger Trump represented. Americans needed to "wake up" about what he could let loose. Today, Americans should be aware that the same could happen again. Trump could be returned to the White House. Those taking his side are not cognizant of the dangers to democracy, of wars, and the encouragement of racist violence.

We saw the same phenomena in Nigeria. Some Nigerians praised Sani Abacha for "mending the roads", for closing [fraudulent] banks". Echoed are the slave plantations. From morning to night, Trump tweets lies. The international unpopularity of the U.S. has increased. America can implode if he returns to office. He has brushed off impeachment, the failure to pay taxes, and other blows and still has a sizeable following. Americans must get out and mobilize.

V Black Lives Matter

The issue of armed resistance was gently broached. With regard to Abacha, Soyinka admitted that this was an option, if the international community was not willing to "take him down". Should we push harder, Abani asked, regarding BLM? "How far should one go to restore one's dignity? "How far to go when you're being brutalized?"

It's an individual decision, Soyinka responded. In the case of Abacha, he backed preparing to remove him if necessary by force. People were being tortured, parents taken hostage to get information about their children branded as "dissidents". Murders were committed; our people were living under terror; we were being reduced to a slave plantation, controlled by guns and uniforms.

In the case of the U.S., the system, though degraded, still works. But the threats mount. We see this regarding the appointment of a new justice to the Supreme Court; in the refusal to guarantee handing over power if he loses the election; the threats to rights of association. In the U.S., the [legal and constitutional] system is still there. Americans do not have to go back to the days of the Weathermen and Black Panthers, that is, to more militant responses to repression and killings.

The American structure and its system can deal with the Donald Trumps. A marginalized section of society has been getting organized. There is a chance the U.S. can implode. However, the vote still counts. If the vote doesn't count, then the people become voiceless. In the case of Abacha, violent action was justified. BLM, however, could move to militancy without adopting violence.

VI Africa & the Diaspora

Fresh insights were brought to a well-trodden topic. Following a prompt from Abani about Caribbean-African artistic influences - and the Blues being brought to America from Africa and returned and adapted in the continent - the conversation turned to the impact of the Diaspora on the continent. Soyinka reprised his strongly-held views on the subject.

The African Diaspora should be considered a continuation of the African continent. Africa doesn't have to be defined by its sea-line borders.⁵ A large percentage of its population now lives outside that land area. The history of this dispersal is important. There have been ideological misconceptions regarding the Pan-African Movement. A critical dimension involved reaching out to the Diaspora. The emphasis, however, shifted to a continental view. But culture is not defined by continental borders. Such a shift did not coincide with our interests.

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) was given a continental form. Pan-Africanism became watered down by catering to the northern part of the continent. This issue came up during the planning of the Festival of African & Black Arts (FESTAC) in 1977. The depopulation of our lands was caused by enslavement of Africans by Arabs as well as Europeans. They both degraded us.

Soyinka stated that he considers the Diaspora a part of the African continent, "whatever the ideologues think". I made it a point to tour the Black areas of the U.S. and meet playwrights, poets, and novelists. The same is true in Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean. A famous cas-

⁵Soyinka's views are reminiscent of those of Prof. Orlando Patterson of Harvard University. He once contended that "Jamaica", of which he is an indigene, is no longer only in Jamaica, in view of its large diaspora.

tle in Haiti I regarded as part of our history. It is our people who built it. I don't feel the same sense of ownership in the North (of Africa).

That is why the politics of the U.S. is so important to me. We, the black people, built this country too. We must have a voice.

VII African Artworks & Europe

The discussion of African artworks overseas, especially in Europe, began with a reference to the famous bronze heads taken from western Nigeria. They embody African intellectual creativity. The demand for their return to Africa has been met by questioning the suitability of the spaces to which they would be returned.⁶

Soyinka responded that his relationship with African art is mixed. Beauty is defined differently by different peoples. Our artistic treasures were plundered, such as those of Benin by the British. We have been assaulted by "religious storm-troopers", burning our artworks. Churches have rampaged, destroying shrines. This is a political issue for me. It is my heritage. Whenever the opportunity presents itself, I take it (artwork) back peacefully, or corruptly.

Art is the precipitate of any people. Robbing people of that means taking away their humanity. They should return the stolen artworks. There can be a "Truth and Reconciliation Panel" with representatives from Europe and the African world. They are keeping our art locked up in galleries. Abani asked about Soyinka's "impulse to collect". He had seen some of Soyinka's collection which seemed to represent the "vastness of Nigeria". The works appear to be drawn from every Nigerian ethnic group.

Soyinka responded that "beauty is not ethnically defined". I purchase when I see items that interest me, sometimes from itinerant vendors. When I see an object that I feel would "annoy the religionists", I get it. "I'll take this one," I say, "It looks wicked!" The religionists, whether Christian or Islamic, have a nerve to denigrate our precipitate and tell us "God wouldn't like this".

VIII Gerontocracy & Electoral Democracy

Some of the questions posed by Abani were submitted by listeners. The final one was about an "older generation" that had been in power for years. Should they cede to a younger generation or should power be wrested from them? Soyinka missed the thrust of the question. Although it was repeated,

⁶The arrest of the Congolese activist, Mwazulu Diyabanza, and four associates for trying to "recuperate" an African funeral staff from the Musée Branly in Paris in June 2020 has added a militant dimension to this campaign. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/21/arts/design/france-museum-quai-branly.html>.

he still did not get the gist. This slip-up might have been technical in nature, or because he was still mentally immersed in the previous discussion. After a pause, he responded to the question as if it concerned African artworks. The younger generation, he said, placed a high value on traditional art. They appreciated the cultural festivals and works associated with them. They do not regard the practitioners as “fetishists” and these events as “worshipping the Devil”.⁷



Soyinka at NED Democracy Conference, 1994⁸

Part II

Recently, a few students helped me transfer a score of file boxes from storage. As I peered into one, I noticed a slim file marked “Soyinka”. It contained documents and notes pertaining to his visit to Northwestern University on October 31–November 4, 2006. A few weeks earlier, another fortuitous encounter occurred. I had agreed to write an essay for Nigerian colleagues to mark my 75th birthday on September 16, 2020.⁹ To begin that exercise, I read letters written during the first days of my arrival at the University of Ibadan.

On March 7, 1976, a week after arriving on campus, I wrote the following: “The performance of ‘Sizwe Bansi is Dead’ was quite enjoyable... Wole Soyinka is back in Nigeria, at the University of Ife.” These sentences, in the midst of miscellanea about housing, the transporting of personal effects, etc., were perplexing. What was the connection between the two sentences? Again fortuitously, I have also been in communication with Prof. Biodun Jeyifo, the formidable literary scholar

⁷I will take up the actual question in Part III.

⁸Unless stated differently, all photographs are from my archival collection. The latter’s permanent disposition will be arranged in 2020–2021.

⁹<https://doi.org/10.21985/n2-5ghd-bj64>

and public intellectual. BJ, as he is fondly known, wrote an elegant essay for my birthday.¹⁰ He promptly solved the mystery. *He* had directed that performance of “Sizwe Bansi is Dead” in 1976.¹¹ Moreover, just a year ago he had published an article about this play, placing it in the context of the intellectual and cultural cosmopolitanism of Nigeria during that period.

It is not surprising that Wole Soyinka is mentioned in one of my first letters home. He had already emerged as a towering writer and political figure. I fell into an outer orbit of his world soon after arriving at Ibadan, although he had relocated to the University of Ife a few years earlier. As far as I can remember, we never interacted in a significant way during my Ibadan years, 1976-1979. I read many of his published works and attended performances of his plays.¹² Most importantly, however, I was connected to Soyinka via friendships with the “literary Turks” of Ibadan and Ife, especially Jeyifo, Femi Osofisan, and Kole Omotoso.

This circle of “acolytes” has played a major role in the study and promotion of Soyinka’s *oeuvre*. Its members greatly admire him, have been profoundly influenced by him, but have also heatedly debated certain issues with him. I have never probed into this dispute. It concerned their discomfort with his use of “myth, ritual, and other expressive forms which come from the African precolonial past”, the opacity of some of his writing (especially in the poems), and the radical (Marxist-influenced) ideologies and analyses they espoused.¹³ I will not say more here about this important topic. It is a critical dimension of Soyinka’s World. These acolytes, however much they debated with “Kongi” - as they referred to him - were unstinting in their high regard for him and continued their literary collaborations. My friendship with them, and participation in some of their projects, made me something of “a fellow traveler”, as Ofeimun referred to me in one of his poems. In later years, this connection made it possible for me to engage directly with Soyinka, especially on shared political commitments.

¹⁰“A Nigerian Scholarly Luminary from the Diaspora... for Richard Joseph’s 75,” published in *The Nation and Talkawa Liberation Herald* (September 2020)

¹¹“Sizwe Bansi”, by Athol Fugard, written in collaboration with the black South African actors John Saul and Winston Ntshona, played a significant role in raising global consciousness of the restrictions on residence, employment, and movement for Black South Africans under apartheid. Prof. Jeyifo pays fulsome credit to the assistance he received on staging the play from Dr. Sam Nolutshungu, a South African exile and our fellow faculty member at the University of Ibadan. Dr. Nolutshungu died prematurely in 1997. He was a brilliant scholar and teacher – to this day, an unfathomable loss.

¹²Among my favorites are his plays “The Road”, “Lion and the Jewel”, and “Death and the King’s Horseman”. ¹³ There were other authors and literary scholars I knew well, such as Isidore Okpewho and Abiola Irele. Within this galaxy, I have been closest to the poet, journalist, and popular public speaker, Odia Ofeimun.

¹³For a brief introduction to the intellectual and ideological “quarrel”, see B. Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Poetics, Politics and Postcolonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. xiii-xvi.

The June 12 Movement

On December 31, 1983, military officers overthrew the federal and state governments of the Second Republic, which had been inaugurated on October 1, 1979. The first leader of the junta, General Muhammadu Buhari, was removed two years later by his fellow officers, and replaced by the shrewd and charismatic General Ibrahim Babangida. Like some other members of the intelligentsia, Wole Soyinka fell under the charm of Babangida, or IBB as he was called. Babangida, after replacing the dour disciplinarian Buhari, brought renewed vigor to Nigerian public life.

Inevitably, IBB launched the country on another prolonged transition to civilian rule. However, he kept changing the rules of the game: having one set of political aspirants detained; elections postponed; and budding political associations banned.¹⁴ In the foreword to a book written by the distinguished newspaper columnist, and lecturer, Olatunji Dare, I described what ensued under Babangida as “democracy as deception” and that it gave rise to a movement I called “democracy as defiance”.¹⁵¹⁶ Prof. Dare cited what I had written earlier about the IBB years: “one of the most sustained exercises in political chicanery ever visited upon a people”.

The years 1984 – 1993, in contrast to the military interregnum led by Gen. Obasanjo, 1976-1979, was one of the most wasted in Nigeria’s history. It culminated in national elections of June 12, 1993, one of the best ever conducted in the country. M.K.O. (Moshood) Abiola, an affluent businessman, philanthropist, and cultivator of ties across Nigeria’s diverse landscape, was elected president of the federation. Just days later, the election was annulled by the regime in which Babangida had become hostage to the dictates of other members of the junta. Soyinka by then had moved away from his camaraderie with Babangida. He flung back on his cape as arch critic of political mischief and misrule.

As a program officer of the Ford Foundation, 1986-1988, I traveled often from its provisional headquarters in Dakar, Senegal, to Nigeria. My connections with scholars, civic activists, and journalists deepened during this period. So did my concerns about a transition to electoral democracy under military stewardship. Of particular importance in this regard was a long friendship with Professor Omo

¹⁴Babangida’s “political dribbling” earned him the nickname, Maradona, after the Argentinian soccer player. Also pertinent, I would add, is the “hand of God” with which Maradona illegally scored a World Cup goal.

¹⁵*Diary of a Debacle: Tracking Nigeria’s Failed Democratic Transition, 1989-1994* (Ibadan: Agbo Areo Publishers, 2010).

¹⁶I had taken up this very question at the birth of the Second Republic a decade earlier: “Democratization under Military Tutelage: Crisis and Consensus in the Nigerian 1979 Elections”, *Comparative Politics*, vol. 14, no. 1 (October 1981).

Omoruyi, once a close confidant of Babangida and a key architect of the 1993 national elections.¹⁷

The repression of the Abacha regime was matched by the growth of the June 12 resistance movement from May 1994. It was coordinated by the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) in which Soyinka played a leading role. As many other prominent resisters, he was obliged to go into exile. From the Ford Foundation, I moved to the Carter Center in Atlanta and established the African Governance Program (AGP). My Carter Center stint, 1988-1994, coincided with the widening political chasm in Nigeria. During one of his trips to Africa, I arranged for President Carter to meet leading figures in the resistance to Babangida's devious rule, such as Alao Aka-Bashorun, Beko Ransome-Kuti, and Gani Fawehinmi.¹⁸

The Resistance grew exponentially after Abacha consolidated power at the end of 1993. When Moshood Abiola came to the United States to drum up support for his electoral mandate, I arranged a telephone call between him and President Carter via his intermediary, Mr. Randy Eccles. Subsequently, at a conference on human rights at the Carter Center, I brought Wole Soyinka and President and Mrs. Carter together. He made the case for stronger international support for democracy and human rights in Nigeria. President Carter, however, in line with his preference for privately coaxing autocratic leaders rather than publicly confronting them, refrained from intervening.¹⁹

Soyinka did not know me well, but he was briefed about me by his associates, some of whom are mentioned above. The connection between us would no longer be mediated by others (except for transaction purposes). The June 12 Resistance Movement was in full flow. Members who identified with it assumed roles appropriate to their capacities. I did likewise. Soyinka, by dint of being a Nobel Laureate, together with his longstanding moral and intellectual authority, was a key figure. I used whatever tools were available to me – media articles, Congressional testimony, lobbying political figures such as Rev. Andrew Young, and helping convene meetings at the Carter Center and elsewhere. Later, as Director of the Program of African Studies at Northwestern, 2003-2007, I arranged for Dr.

¹⁷Omoruyi established, with the government's assistance, a Centre for Democratic Studies in Abuja. He subsequently wrote the most detailed report, as an insider, of the electoral catastrophe of 1993: *The Tale of June 12: The Betrayal of the Democratic Rights of Nigerians* (Press Alliance Network Ltd, 1990).

¹⁸The first two were presidents, respectively, of the Nigerian Bar and Medical Associations, and the third, a prominent human rights lawyer. This private meeting (in a bedroom!) took place in Lagos during a reception at the residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria. Cover for it was provided by a reception for Pres. Carter with the usual invitees to diplomatic events. Even the then Federal Minister for Justice and Attorney-General was present.

¹⁹As the repression in Nigeria deepened, and after the former military Head-of-State, Olusegun Obasanjo and others were detained on trumped-up charges, Pres. Carter acted more vigorously including exploring a plan to spring Obasanjo from detention.

Kayode Fayemi to spend several months on campus where he wrote a memoir on the June 12 Movement.²⁰ Dr. Fayemi was subsequently a key contact in arranging Soyinka's visit to Northwestern in autumn 2006.



Wole Soyinka with Pres. Carter, Mrs. Carter, and human rights leaders at The Carter Center, Atlanta, December 1994²¹



W. Soyinka and R. Joseph, The Carter Center, December 1994

²⁰*Out of the Shadows: Exile and the Struggle for Freedom & Democracy in Nigeria* (Centre for Democracy & Development, 2005). In exchanges that took place following the death of former U.S. Ambassador Walter C. Carrington on August 11, 2020, the suggestion was made of creating a repository of print, audio, and other materials on this movement. Amb. Carrington played a significant role in supporting the resistance to Abacha's tyranny. A Learning and Resource Center is being contemplated at a private university in southwest Nigeria. It could facilitate such an initiative.



Meeting on Nigeria, National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Washington DC, 1994
Top: L. Diamond, M. Plattner, R. LaGamma Bottom: Gay MacDougall, W. Soyinka, C. Gershman (NED president), R. Joseph

The Evanston and Chicago Visits, 2006

William Shakespeare and Wole Soyinka share the same initials and much more. This linkage was furthered during Soyinka's five-day visit to Evanston and Chicago, October 31-November 4, 2006. The English Department, in collaboration with Theatre and Performance Studies, had proposed "Othello" for the inaugural "One Book One Northwestern" program. The proposal envisioned an exciting series of events whose purview would extend "outside Renaissance England". Wole Soyinka was the top choice among the scholars recommended to give a keynote lecture.²² I was subsequently asked, in my capacity as PAS director, if I would convey the invitation to Soyinka and also have PAS join as one of the program's co-sponsors.

The text of the formal proposal, written by Prof. Wendy Wall, also of the English Department, could have been composed in 2020. Among the themes were Othello's "sense of himself as a racial outsider" and "self-alienation, interracial marriage, and jealousy". Though "a military hero, he is seen as 'different' by everyone around him". Participating students would discuss: "How does the play's treatment of religious and cultural assimilation reveal issues important in American politics today?" and "How is racism presented?" Advanced undergraduate seminars would take up "Western Blackness", "Tragedy, Race, and Community", and "Race and Western Modernity".

Soyinka promptly accepted the invitation. Arrangements to get him to Evanston were predictably complicated. His eventual flight itinerary took him from London via Paris to Chicago. The Office of Professor Henry S. Bienen, then president

²²A leading participant in making that decision was Professor Evan Mwangi of the English Department.

of Northwestern, and an Africanist and Asianist scholar, helped cover the additional costs.²³

Soon after agreeing to assist the Othello program, my thoughts turned to the alarming Nigerian political situation. Elections were increasingly shambolic.²⁴ After serving two terms as an elected president since 1999, former General Obasanjo pursued a third term by inducing the legislature to alter the constitution. Although much money changed hands, the gambit failed. Nigeria was tossed again into a political quandary.²⁵

My letter to Soyinka of May 30, 2006 began with mentioning the recent failure of the third-term gambit. A PAS “Colloquium on Nigeria 2007” was proposed. “As far as we know”, I wrote, “the great danger is that political promises will be broken again and Nigerians will continue to pay a price for these betrayals. We hope to initiate a program during the academic year, 2006-2007, on the Nigerian Experience. I would like to invite you to lead off these reflections....I regret that I will not be present [in Nigeria] for the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of Kudirat’s murder.”²⁶

It was in the third paragraph that I turned to what had actually prompted the outreach: the invitation from Profs. Susannah Gottlieb and Evan Mwangi of the NU English Department “to participate in the Othello Project” which I described in detail. “I was told”, I added “that you would have maximum flexibility in choosing the topic of your lecture, as long as it intersected with Shakespeare and his works.” In closing, my letter returned to the proposed colloquium on Nigeria 2007: “My aim would be to bring our most knowledgeable colleagues, from across the U.S., to reflect on the urgent challenges facing Nigeria”.

Excerpts from Soyinka’s response of June 1, 2006:

²³Prof. Bienen taught at the Universities of Dar es Salam and Ibadan during the early 1970s.

²⁴Obasanjo was essentially “shoe-horned” into the presidency in 1999 as the military leadership, in disarray after the Babangida and Abacha debacles, and growing international concern about the “tyranny-vs-democracy” struggles, were eager to cede power. The 2003 national elections were flawed. In February 2005, the Obasanjo government set up a “National Political Reform Conference” clearly to mute the demand – in which Soyinka was much involved – for a Sovereign National Conference. Hardly disguised was the plan to remove the two-term limit

²⁵Obasanjo acted essentially as the kingmaker, choosing as his party’s nominee for president the already enfeebled brother, Umaru Yar’Adua, of Obasanjo’s former deputy commander, Shehu Yar’Adua. The latter had been poisoned in prison. Obasanjo was saved by being warned through diplomatic channels. Another ill-choice made by Obasanjo was that of Goodluck Jonathan to be the vice-presidential candidate. Jonathan became president when Yar’Adua died after a long illness and treatment overseas. Both men, state governors in the northwest and “south-south” respectively, were unfit for the office, the latter also venal.

²⁶Kudirat Abiola was a wife of M.K.O. Abiola. A fervent advocate for his release from prison and the recognition of his electoral mandate, she was assassinated in the ambush of her car on June 9, 1996. “Radio Kudirat” was the name of the clandestine radio studio that made broadcasts to Nigeria on behalf of the June 12 Movement.

- *Two favorite subjects of mine – Nigeria – not by choice – and Shakespeare – definitely by inclination. The Othello Project is certainly full of possibilities.*
- *I was on my way to the airport (Paris) when I received a yodeling call from our man in the House of Reps, informing me of the vote [denying Obasanjo the chance at a third term]...Earlier I had a meeting in UNESCO ... [a] diplomat informed me of this moment, and how his face virtually collapsed...despite a steady flow of champagne, then wine, I still did not get to sleep until I reached New York.*
- *Just came in from Dakar for the inauguration of the West African Democracy Radio (WADR)...It felt strange publicly launching such an organ, backed by four – or was it five? – governments. I'm more accustomed to launching the clandestine versions, or briefly 'borrowing' the state owned facilities...²⁷*
- *It's back in the local mess, however. I got to Port Harcourt to address the Delta insurgents and their political leaders. I expect the private meeting will be more interesting than the public lecture.*

A sense of Soyinka's multiple engagements is evident in this letter. On another occasion, what transpired during this memorable visit can be reconstructed. Also pertinent is the idea of creating a Resource Center and Library at a Nigerian university and identifying a repository in the U.S. for my extensive archives.

In addition to his public lecture for the One Book-One Northwestern Project - for which Soyinka chose the title "Othello's Dominion, Immigrant's Domain" - and his presentation at the colloquium on Nigerian politics, other events facilitated by PAS included:

- A community talk at the Evanston Public Library
- A dinner at the home of Prof. Adele Simmons, co-hosted by Prof. Simmons and Ms. Margot Pritzker²⁸
- A Chicago function on behalf of Dr. Kayode Fayemi²⁹
- A dinner and talk, "Whither Nigeria?", following the lecture on Othello lecture that was hosted by President Bienen.

²⁷This is a reference to the event when Soyinka and associates, disguised, took charge of the radio station in Ibadan. They made a surreptitious broadcast regarding the 1965 regional elections. These events preceded the military's seizure of power in January 1966 and Nigeria's descent into civil war. They also catapulted Soyinka into greater notoriety and almost two years imprisonment.

²⁸Prof. Simmons is a former president of Hampshire College and of the MacArthur Foundation. Ms. Pritzker is a philanthropist and leader figure in various Chicago institutions.

²⁹Dr. Fayemi launched a campaign, ultimately successful, to become governor of Ekiti state in southwest Nigeria.

Nigeria 1976, 2006, 2020

October 1, 2020, the day preceding the Abani-Soyinka online conversation, was a sober occasion for Nigerians. There was more to bemoan than celebrate on their country's sixtieth anniversary. Even the two-time former Head-of-State, Olusegun Obasanjo, described it as a "basket case" and "heading towards 'a failed state'".

At the outset of this essay, I mentioned that Prof. Biodun Jeyifo clarified that he was the director of 'Sizwe Bansi' in 1976. He sent, as also stated, a fascinating article published in September 2019 in which he reminisced about the intellectual, cultural, and political life of Nigeria four decades earlier. Although the documents on Soyinka's presentations in Evanston and Chicago in autumn 2006 would require more time to locate, the file mentioned above included (surprisingly) notes of a talk he had given earlier that *same year* - April 20, 2006 - at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

Here are excerpts:

- *Soyinka spoke on behalf of ProNaco (Pro National Conference) which advocated an "authentic constitution".*
- *Such a development would bring about a reconstitution of relations between the parts and the whole of Nigeria.*
- *Under Obasanjo [since 1999] there had been a centralization of government.*
- *A sovereign national conference would produce a constitution "rewritten by the people and approved by the people". It would be a document "in which they had a voice".*
- *Control of the oil resources of the Delta had led to a subverting of the constitution through bribery and blackmail.*
- *Two-thirds of the members of both houses (of the National Assembly) can enable the Obasanjo government to stay in power.*
- *What is happening in Nigeria today [via the Political Reform Conference] is not only a charade but also a tragedy. Each state should be allowed to generate its own revenues.*
- *As a consequence of petroleum, Nigeria has a mono-economy with many earnings going towards imports. A different constitutional framework would "boost the creative productivity of Nigerians".*

In 2020, we have returned full circle to the ideas advanced by Soyinka in 2006. Hafsat Abiola posted a remarkable statement on August 23, 2020 about the country's impasse.³⁰ It concluded that the way forward for Nigeria's should begin with

³⁰She is the daughter of Moshood and Kudirat Abiola and an influential civic leader, state government adviser, and public commentator.

its “design”. A forthcoming book by former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell, argues for “rethinking” Nigeria.³¹ Campbell does not call for “restructuring” - as do advocates for shifting power and responsibilities to sub-regional entities (states or regions) - but recognition that Nigeria as a federal nation-state has become an illusion. A veil has been cast over an entity that benefits mainly “an elite cartel” that controls access to oil revenues.

When Soyinka twice visited Chicagoland in 2006, he was again at the forefront of speaking truth to power. The notes quoted above show that his summons then - as Hafsat Abiola’s and others now - is that the redesign, or reconfiguring, of Nigeria’s governing institutions is again at the forefront of the “Nigeria Project”. Soyinka contended in his Chicago Council address that this process should genuinely involve the Nigerian people, and not be the outcome of another conclave of elites. As he stated that year: “The Nigerian people have always approached democracy and the elites have always pushed them back.”

Conceptualizing how a different process, and different outcome, could be engineered, is the central theme of my essay on “The Dismal Tunnel”. Pathways to peace, democracy, better governance, and equitable development are currently obscured. We have entered a period that requires truly innovative thinking that taps multiple – and especially indigenous - sources of knowledge. Past and recent encounters with Soyinka illustrate how such a process can unfold.

Part III

Lights Flickering in the Present Darkness³²

*“Authority stealing pass armed robbery,
We African we must do something about this nonsense”.*

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti³³

³¹*Nigeria and the Nation-State: Rethinking Diplomacy with the Postcolonial World* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2020).

³²Dedicated to the memory of Stephen Ellis (1953-2015). A longtime reporter of the underside of African politics and economies, including a long stint at Africa Confidential, Stephen Ellis was the author and co-author of important books. They include *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*, co-authored with Gerrie Ter Haar, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime* (Oxford University Press, 2016). In his position as a professor at the Center for African Studies, University of Leiden, where he complemented his in-house activities with important contributions to policy initiatives concerning Africa. One of the latter was the Consortium on Governance and Development (CGD) for which he acted as a key intermediary with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

³³Quoted in Wale Adebani, *Authority Stealing: Anti-Corruption War and Democratic Politics in Post-Military Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2012).

“We must try our best to fulfill our responsibilities without being attached to success and failure”.

Master Sheng-Yen, Chan Buddhist Teacher³⁴

Service-oriented minds scattered like flickering lights

Luminary

Illuminate, Illuminati

Skillful Action

Uncertainty to Hope

Islands of Integrity

Trust Networks

*Forging Beams of Transformative Light.*³⁵

“Africa’s Predicament”, caused primarily by “state capture” and non-developmental governance, has deepened.³⁶ Kleptocracy has been bolstered by gerontocracy and dynasty. Muhammadu Buhari, the current president of Nigeria, is 77 years old. He has served as a military Head-of- State, 1984-85, competed electorally for president on several occasions, and helped forge a coalition with regional bosses - such as Ahmed Bola Tinubu in the southwest - to procure the votes needed to secure two terms. The second will end in 2023.

Buhari suffers from an undisclosed medical condition that requires extended periods of treatment abroad. His counterpart, Paul Biya, in Cameroon, is (at 87 years) his elder by a full decade. Biya, after serving as Prime Minister (1975-1982), succeeded the country’s first president, Ahmadu Ahidjo, in 1982. The list of gerontocrats, and/or beneficiaries of political dynasties, is extensive: Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Kenya, Republic of the Congo, Togo, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Abdoulaye Wade was stopped by popular action from extending his presidency in Senegal (2000-2012), and also from bequeathing it to his son, Karim, who had already been given control of a few government departments. José Eduardo dos Santos, when he finally stepped aside from the presidency of Angola in 2017, could not stop his son, José Filomeno dos Santos, from being removed from his government positions and convicted of financial crimes.³⁷ Meanwhile, his

³⁴“The Wanderer”, *Tricycle.org* (Winter 2008)

³⁵Yoga Instructor. Having read my article “Dismal Tunnel”, tributes from Nigerian colleagues for my 75th birthday on September 16, 2020, and listened to my thoughts, she composed these lines of affirmation. I added the last. They draw on the exchange with Hafsat Abiola that can be read in “The Dismal Tunnel”.

³⁶See references in Part II.

³⁷There are striking parallels in this regard between the sons of Wade and Dos Santos, both prosecuted for fraud and corruption.

daughter, Isabel dos Santos, acquired the reputation of being the richest woman in Africa while becoming the poster-person for grand corruption.

The melding of gerontocracy and kleptocracy has ensured that representatives of two or more generations have been bypassed for political leadership in their countries. Some have gone on to distinguished careers in international organizations.³⁸ The consequence is that electoral democracy has often come to be seen as a rigged system. It is depressing to read, for example, accounts of gubernatorial and senatorial races in Nigeria, and the frequent use of terms such as “political godfathers”. Perhaps it is well that Soyinka misunderstood the final question on October 2nd. He responded about African artworks being hostages in European collections rather than to an issue perhaps more dismaying: the capture of the birthright of African citizens to have governments of their own choosing, that primarily serve the public interest, and are revocable by them.

We readily encounter Soyinka in his large and beguiling literary *oeuvre*. We also do so when he chooses to amplify the voices of persons too marginalized and downtrodden to be heard. In the African countries in which I have worked, studied, and followed closely, I would estimate that a few hundred million persons are mired in lives of poverty, uncertainty, and substantial deprivation. Exit is often a harrowing option, especially when it involves traversing arid lands and major sea-lanes. When refugees do succeed in reaching foreign shores, awaiting them could be outright rejection, discrimination, and even forced repatriation.

We are thankful for the extraordinary intellectual and creative gifts that were bestowed on Wole Soyinka, and for the generosity with which he has shared them. I did not remember, before this exercise, how early I had entered an outer orbit of his World.

Here are key takeaways from the exercise:

- - *rethinking Africa and the Diaspora*
- *having a new word, “predicate”, to guide my re-immersion in the study of African art and literature*
- *a heightening of my Pan-African identities and commitments*
- *re-affirmation that African creativity in the Arts and traditional institutions must be tapped for the redesign of postcolonies*
- *connecting African spiritualism with my personal beliefs*
- *deepening awareness of wars as injustices for many citizens*
- *seeing how the rescue of the United States from the current political maelstrom can benefit from experiences elsewhere, including Nigeria*

³⁸A few have been fortunate to return to their countries to assume leadership positions, such as Alassane Ouattara in Côte d’Ivoire and Nicéphore Soglo in the Republic of Benin.

- *and advancing “Access to Knowledge” by installing my personal library in Africa, and arranging a permanent repository for my archives.*

While there are “many rivers to cross”, we also have much that is needed to build firm bridges.