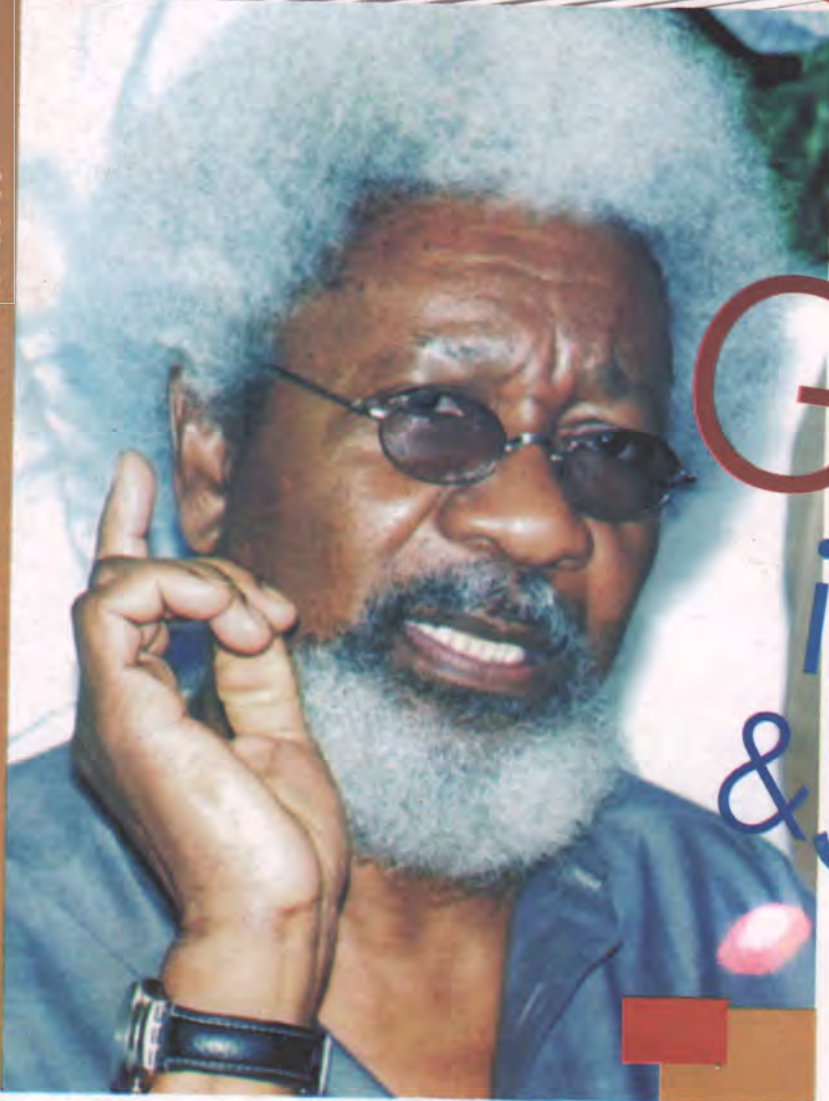


WOLE SOYINKA IN IBADAN



WOLE
WS
SOYINKA



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Genius in Time & Space

In commemoration of his **80th Birthday**
and award of **Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters (D. Litt.)**
University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

WOLE SOYINKA IN IBADAN:

GENIUS IN TIME & SPACE

In commemoration of his 80th birthday and award of Honorary Degree of
Doctor of Letters (D. Litt.), University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

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WOLE SOYINKA AND IBADAN

A Voyage around WS: The History

By Charles Akinsete

Prelude

The level of importance attached to the personality of Professor Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka, one of Africa's greatest literary minds, cannot be overemphasised. For more than half a century now, the country has been positioned on a positive limelight through the achievements of *Kongi*, who did the nation proud by becoming the first African to win the Nobel Laureate Award in 1986. While Soyinka's creative works remain a vast canvass explored by scholars and institutions across the world, he himself has portrayed his relentless interest in writing and scholarship, geared to the growth and development of his nation. No African author, living or dead, has shown the same tenacity, courage and produced so much as Wole Soyinka. He is certainly an unparalleled literary enigma.

Another noteworthy entity which also exudes unprecedented magnificence among its contemporaries is the University of Ibadan. Today, this unique institution has produced hundreds of thousands of graduates across several disciplines of life. Many of these have become reputable leaders and icons in their respective fields of endeavour. Examples of these legendary figures include Adiele Afigbo, first Nigerian historian to receive a doctoral degree in History; Claude Ake, Erudite Professor of Political Economy; Emeka Anyaoku, former Commonwealth Secretary-General; Christopher Okigbo, one of Nigeria's foremost poets. Others include Gamaliel Onosode,

William Kumuyi, Ken Saro-Wiwa, to mention a few. Founded on November 17, 1948 as University College of Ibadan, it remains the oldest and most prestigious university in the country.

Just as the formation of life requires the interaction between two reproductive gametes, the combination of Soyinka and the University of Ibadan has birthed untold products with significant outcomes, especially in relation to the fields of Literary Studies and Theatre Arts. Soyinka's protégées are no doubt numerous today and are still growing. Therefore, these two literary entities stand tall, with a mutually profound history and unquantifiable contribution to the literary sector of the nation. Truly, the successful fusion of these cells translates to the origin of life. Similarly, this allegory depicts the literary soul of Nigeria in relation to the noteworthy contributions of Soyinka and his reputable alma mater. The poser here is, when and how was their mutual association initiated?

In the beginning...

It all began in January 1960. In fact, that Soyinka's connection with the University of Ibadan began approximately nine months to Nigeria's independence as a sovereign nation is aptly significant to the hitherto biological allegory of Nigeria's scholarly existence. Fresh, young and full of life, Soyinka returned to Nigeria after six years in England. Having been awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship, he was appointed as a Research Fellow in Drama at the University of Ibadan. It is on this platform that Soyinka cut his teeth and foregrounded his academic interest in African theatre/drama. With his vast experience as a dramaturgist at the Royal Court Theatre in London, Soyinka was poised to achieve greatness. And he did! The

imminent sign became more convincing when his play, *A Dance of the Forests*, won the contest as the official play for Nigerian Independence day and was premiered on October 1, 1960.

According to reports gathered, Wole Soyinka, age 26, secured accommodation at Chalet10A, Amina Way, University of Ibadan, on December 23, 1960, having reportedly obtained the keys from the previous occupant, Dr Weckselmann. Nevertheless, he was accused by the Chairman of the Housing Allocation Committee of moving in “without the usual procedure being followed whereby the furniture is checked in the presence of the outgoing and incoming tenants, the Chief Accountant for Calculation of Rent and the Electricity Engineer for Electricity Meter-Reading and Billing”. The matter was later resolved in a memo dated on February 7, 1961 by the Registrar, Mr. N. K. Ademolekun, and the case was laid to rest. But by December 1961, Wole Soyinka bade farewell to the University of Ibadan, on the premise that his scholarship was scheduled to last for just a year. But that was definitely not the end.

Soyinka’s sojourn away from Ibadan extended to six years. In February, 1962, a year after he left Ibadan, he took up an appointment as a Lecturer in English at the University of Ife. By April 1963, having spent a year and two months, he resigned and then proceeded to the University of Lagos in August 1965, where he took up an appointment as a Senior Lecturer in English and subsequently, Acting Head of Department. Soyinka spent two years in Lagos before the ‘hunter’s whistle’ brought him back to the place where his literary umbilical cord was buried, the University of Ibadan.

This time round, it was the beginning of a different phase of experience for the young playwright.

1967 was indeed an indelible year for Wole Soyinka. It was a year that tested his resolve as a human that is mostly vulnerable at the ever changing wind of fate. He was among those that responded to the advertised post of Director, School of Drama, University of Ibadan. This advert was dated January 27, 1967. Perhaps it was more than fate that again brought a more illustrious Soyinka and the University of Ibadan together on June 23, 1967. With his experience at other two budding federal universities, together with his rising literary works, he remained the right candidate to be offered an appointment as Director, School of Drama at the University of Ibadan. Some of Wole Soyinka's plays, as contained in his curriculum vitae, included *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958; 1963), *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959; 1963), *The Strong Breed* (1963) and *The Trials of Brother Jero*. He had also published his most controversial novel, *The Interpreters* (1965). Therefore, the stage was indeed set.

No doubt, Wole Soyinka has started to carve a niche for himself as Africa's leading literary writer and it is quite evident that his role as Director would promote the ideals of learning and scholarship in the School. Although Soyinka was to officially resume on September 1, 1967, according to the university calendar, he was given his appointment three months earlier. Nonetheless, Soyinka's enthusiasm and drive for hard work and excellence did not permit him to wait, as he plunged into early preparations for the task ahead. Life, they say, is full of ironies or would one say fate again assumed control, as Soyinka never resumed in September.

In fact, he never set foot on institution's premises until after 28 months and 22 days after his release from prison. This is how it goes...

Soyinka as a nationalist

Soyinka indeed played an active role in Nigeria's political history and its struggle for independence. In 1965, he was reported to have seized the Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service studio and broadcast a demand for the annulment of the Western Nigeria Regional Elections. With the fledging nation still struggling to survive as a result of leadership factors, Soyinka's identity as nationalist was born. By 1967 during the Nigerian Civil War, he was arrested by the General Yakubu Gowon-led federal government and for two years, he was put in solitary confinement. He had bravely been an advocate of a ceasefire, but he was accused of conspiring with the Biafra rebels and therefore imprisoned.

In a letter dated October 31, 1967, Mrs. O. Soyinka defended her husband in an open letter to the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Major-General Yakubu Gowon. It was a response to the press conference which held on October 28, three days before, by the Federal Commissioner of Information, Chief Anthony Enahoro, in which it was reportedly and publicly interpreted "as a confessional statement of his (Soyinka) involvement in the rebel infiltration into the Mid-West State on August 9 and in rebel plans to overthrow the Governments of the Western and Lagos states".

Mrs Soyinka strongly denied these statements, insisting that there was a foul play in these allegations, arguing that Wole Soyinka was very much in

Ibadan on August 9, the day he was accused of conniving with Victor Banjo. She added that “and there are several witnesses to prove he was in Ibadan on that day.” Mrs Soyinka submits on her position that her husband has continually been on the vanguard of the growth and development of the nation. “My husband has been solely motivated by a deep-felt conviction that Nigeria should not go to war against itself. The announcement of war had very much shaken him, and as soon as he came back from his trip overseas, he had set about seeing what could be done to salvage the situation.” Nevertheless, Soyinka remained incarcerated for 28 months while the School of Drama was run by the Acting Director, Mr. K.W. Dexter Lyndersay, until his return. However, it was not a smooth-sail as Soyinka’s position as staff of the institution remained a subject of controversy during his years in prison.

While in prison...

The soulful slogan of “solidarity forever” chanted by stakeholders of Nigeria’s academic union attests to both the literary, spirit and soul connection among members of academic staff. One of its principal objectives is for members to stand for one another, especially in moments of oppression and despair. As it is often reiterated that “posterity will judge,” it is worth mentioning the actions of two prominent colleagues of Soyinka, who wrote in defence of the latter to the Acting Vice-Chancellor, Professor A. Brown, on December 22, 1967, barely four months after Soyinka’s incarceration. W. Feuser and A.C. Brench called attention to the reported irregularity in the new university’s calendar for that academic year, which declared “on page 161 under “School of Drama” that the post of Director of that School has been listed as being vacant...”

The duo, who were Senior Lecturers in the Department of Modern Languages, through their letter, recognised the research import of Wole Soyinka especially in relation to the development of African literature. They insisted that “the incumbent of that post (Director, School of Drama) is Mr Wole Soyinka”, who they also further described as “Africa’s leading playwright”. They further argued that it is “highly unfair and irregular that the University should delete his name from the staff list,” since Soyinka “has so far **not** been tried in a court of law and convicted for any offense, or that Council has taken any action to remove him from office.”

October 1970: Was Soyinka really free?

Soon after his release, Wole Soyinka was haunted by a series of challenges. Therefore, his return from the prison was a temporary relief, given a number of pertinent problems he had to bravely address. Barely three months after his release, a letter, dated 16th January, 1970 and titled “Motor Vehicle Advance”, was sent to Soyinka from the University of Lagos and signed by one I.O. Soyinka (an accountant and staff of the university). Its content was principally a reminder of outstanding fees to be paid on a vehicle procured for Soyinka by the university. The letter partly reads: “I would like to remind you that an amount of £321.6s.5d., representing the balance of vehicle loan you obtained from this University, is still outstanding in our books. It was not possible for us to contact you for the past two years, owing to the fact that you were not at the University of Ibadan until late last year...”

One cannot ignore the euphemistic tone in the last sentence and it is clearly unknown how Soyinka must have felt upon reading this ‘interesting’ piece

of 'literature'. Certainly, the news of his incarceration was all about. What is however certain was Soyinka's 'silence' on the matter. It was this he was accused of in another letter dated 26th February as captured thus, "I wrote to you on the 16th of January, 1970 in connection with your outstanding car loan balance... I have not up till now received the reply to my letter..." For a man who had faced immeasurable hardship and trauma, for a man who had most likely escaped death by the whiskers, it must have been a difficult period for Soyinka. His freedom was still being haunted by emotional strains, unsuspecting financial struggles, and intellectual instability.

Subtle tones of exit

It was quite unnerving that Wole Soyinka tendered his resignation to the Registrar of the University of Ibadan on May 1, 1970. Others would not find this surprising though. His resignation became officially documented on 9 May, 1970 as confirmed by the Senior Establishments Officer, S.J. Okudu. However, the resignation was set to take effect from 30 September, 1970. It is imperative to quote Soyinka's letter at this stage for it dissipates *two* crucial messages, not one. It reads: "I regret to give notice that I shall resign my appointment as Director of the School of Drama with effect from Sept. 30, 1970. I wish to thank the university for the opportunity, and to hope that I can be of service to the interests of the university whenever possible."

Despite the Soyinka's words addressing his desire to withdraw his services from the university, the next auxiliary sentence was indeed more than a polite gesture. It was a recognition of that strong association, that umbilical

cord that, right from the start, tied Soyinka and the University of Ibadan together, like two inseparable but wrangling lovers. It was also promise... a promise by the enigma of his unwavering faithfulness to his alma mater. And it is this promise he eventually honoured even after several decades of self-imposed exit. Two days later, a rapid response ensued from the Registrar, Mr. N. K. Adamolekun, in which Soyinka's resignation was accepted. The Registrar warmly acknowledged his accomplishments and services rendered as Director of the School of Drama, stating that "on behalf of the Council of the University of Ibadan, I accept your resignation with regret..."

But Soyinka's response the following day is a proof of the enigma's unflinching support for the literary growth and intellectual stability of his Department, and the University in general. In a memo dated May 12, 1970, Soyinka's selflessness and indisputable love for the progress of his institution became evident, as he sought for enough time and space to put his house (School of Drama) in order before his exit. On this, he speaks: "Further to our brief encounter at the Staff Club, what I really wanted to request was that my resignation be kept under for as long as possible. This will make it easier for me to complete my programme for the department (Staffing, hunt for fellowships etc) while the knowledge that I won't be here may hinder these efforts..." At this level of earnest dedication and impressive altruism, Soyinka's position transcends the carefree and rebellious attitude often portrayed not just in academics but other fields of endeavour. This action further honours him today as a selfless hero and his resolute charisma and unflinching drive for societal development is worthy of emulation by all standard.

By a sheer twist of fate (or probably a speculated intervention of concerned authorities of the institution), a repentant 36 year-old Soyinka, on June 16, 1970, formally withdraw his resignation and further proceeded to ask for a special leave of absence of three to four months without pay. According to him, this becomes pertinent as he was "in desperate need of this minimum period in order to carry out some creative writing which I have been unable to do for a continuous period of over three years." Whatever reasons that made Soyinka to change his mind remains to be speculated on till this day. However, what is certain is that the registrar's response this time round was not as swift as before. It took about three weeks before Mr Adamolekun would issue a response, dated July 7, 1970. In an affirmative tone, Soyinka's request was granted and it was formally backed up again by a memo by Mr Okudu, Senior Establishments Officer. It appeared that the turbulent waters have finally passed under the bridge.

Soyinka's achievements in grim circumstances

Soyinka's history at the University of Ibadan was not only froth with political harassment or administrative wrangling. It was evenly characterised by outstanding literary achievements. Today, Soyinka has laid good academic precepts for budding and experienced in terms of personal development and impressive research records. With his dedication and hardwork, the School of Drama was beginning to progress and the results were so impressive that by December 1970, the Council of the University of Ibadan had concluded the process of changing the status of the School of Drama to becoming a full-fledged Department. In this vein, a memo was dispatched to the Dean of Arts, Professor A.F.C. Ryder, from the Establishments Officer, Mr M. Duku, indicating that "the post of Mr.

Wole Soyinka, who was the Director of School of Drama, is of an Associate Professor's status." Therefore, it added that "this status qualifies him (Soyinka) as an Acting Head of the present Department of Theatre Arts to which the school was changed".

How ironical then that this memo was issued only as a result of the Vice-Chancellor's intervention, given the fact that Soyinka had directly sent an initial memo, dated December 2, 1970, to the number one citizen of the University on the need to clarify "as quickly as possible" certain issues that evolved. It would appear that Soyinka's position after the change remains uncertain and the Dean of Arts, for one reason or the other, was 'indisposed' to giving considerable clarification, not to mention in the first place the fact that he ought to have initiated the process of affirming Soyinka's place in the new era of the Department of Theatre Arts. But the memo by Mr Duku concluded on asking "the Appointments & Promotions Committee meeting in January 1971 to appoint Mr Soyinka formally as the Acting Head of the Department of Theatre Arts".

The comments requested from the Dean of Arts on this matter only arrived at the Vice-Chancellor's office about a month after. In the memo dated Jan 23, 1971, the Dean affirmed that "the post of Director, to which Mr Soyinka was appointed, has carried the status of an Associate Professor which qualifies Mr. Soyinka to be Acting Head of the new department." He proposed that Soyinka should therefore be appointed as Acting Head of the department. However, he concluded that steps should be taking by the Appointments & Promotions Committee "to assess Mr Soyinka for the rank of Associate Professor/Professor so that the headship of the department

may be determined in the normal manner." On Jan 29, the Dean forwarded a memo to the Secretary, Appointments & Promotion Committee, asking that the curriculum vitae of Wole Soyinka, which he equally submitted alongside the memo, be given "to assessors to decide on his suitability for appointment for the rank of Professor/Associate Professor." On February 4, 1971, Soyinka was formally appointed as Acting Headship of the Department of Theatre Arts in a letter by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor T.A. Lambo. Again, it appears all murky waters have passed under the bridge. Until...

Imminent rupture

...Until *that* internal memo arrived at the doorstep of the Secretary, Appointments & Promotions Committee. Many will agree that the content of the memo probably was one of the principal reasons Soyinka's umbilical cord as an employee of the University was finally severed. A pragmatic analysis of this letter would reveal an unexpected degree of inconsistency which presupposes that fact that Soyinka could have *again* become a victim of insubordination.

Excerpts:

... After consideration of Mr Soyinka's curriculum vitae and publications the consensus of opinion is that he should be assessed for an Associate Professorship. All members of the sub-committee are convinced of Mr Soyinka's worth as a creative artist of international standing, and his talents in several of the Theatre arts which are taught in his department. There is

however uneasiness about the academic content of his work. As one member of the sub-committee has put it: "I would expect to see a mixture of creativity with a more thorough critical research into the traditional, modern and other forms of art as the work of an academic in Theatre arts." (sic)

One would wonder if this assessment isn't somewhat contradictory and in fact questionable, given the fact that Soyinka already has more than enough reasons to be dubbed "Africa's leading playwright". But the committee is not finished.

Members of the sub-committee also have some doubts about Mr Soyinka's maturity as the head of Department and of his contribution to the University as an academic community.

If this is the case, why did the Dean initially submit a memo, agreeing to the fact that Mr Soyinka should be appointed in the first place as the Acting Head of Department? In the midst of these conflicting statements, Soyinka would probably be more appalled by the final recommendation of the sub-committee that "he should be given time to develop as an academic before he is appointed to a full chair." It can therefore be argued that Soyinka had been at the end of the line in terms of an amiable relationship with his senior colleagues.

As if this was not enough, the Senate ruling which was lettered to Soyinka on February 7, 1972, probably added salt to injury. Although this decision

is not suggestive to have been because of Soyinka, it was not good news for him that the position of Associate Professor be redesignated Reader, given the nature of odd circumstances that transpired during his assessment. But, a letter was directed to the playwright, which read in part: "...Your designation of Associate Professor has been changed to Reader with effect from 1 October, 1971." The point here is that it was at this juncture that Soyinka's interest in the University began to dwindle. Records show that the playwright took several leaves in the space of a year. It does not take a soothsayer that Soyinka was drained of strength, not just only physically, as quite a number of medical reports indicated, but sadly intellectually. It appears that the administrative policies had taken its toll and he needed to break out... permanently!

And so on March 12, 1972, Wole Soyinka tendered his final letter of resignation, which he back-dated to 30th of September, 1971. For posterity sake, it is more important to hear the facts and/or reasons from the horse's mouth, as documented in the back-dated memo. He states: "One of my most frequent criticisms of our society is this: that the average holder of a high position simply will not accept when it is time for him to resign. I must not now myself succumb to this disease. Certain differences between the university Administration and myself are so fundamental as to be, I now recognise, clearly irreconcilable. This makes my position untenable".

It must however be stated that there were several others who identified with Soyinka and disagreed intensely with the remarks of the Ryder-led committee, especially in relation to his unparalleled academic achievements. One of such is Professor O. Awe, of the Department of

Physics. He had argued his reasons in a memo sent to the Acting Vice-Chancellor on November 18, 1971, saying "I am greatly disturbed by the disagreement between the experts in the field of interest and the panel that met to consider whether a prima facie case was made for a Professorship or for an Associate Professorship. I find it difficult to see the basis on which the Deans of Arts, Science and Agriculture and Professor Ayandele, Professor of History were able to be so categorical about an assessment to such a high University appointment in a field far removed from their own..." He therefore concluded that "after having read the panel's report carefully, I wish to request that, in the interest of justice to Mr Soyinka and to the University which we are all dedicated to serve, this matter be reopened."

Prior to this, another letter had been communicated to Soyinka by the Appointments and Promotion Committee. The content of the letter read that the committee had decided to accord Soyinka the status of an Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts with effect from 1 October, 1971. However, in a brief reaction to that, Soyinka expresses his dissatisfaction at the decision in two short sentences; "I have just received your letter of 29th October. Kindly inform the Appointments and Promotion Committee that I must firmly decline the offer contained in the letter..."

Soyinka's Exit

Soyinka's exit generated quite some ripples. By then, the Dean of Arts was Professor Ayo Bamgbose. It took some time before the university would acknowledge Soyinka's request. But it appears this time round, the die is cast. On April 24, 1972, the renowned playwright's request was officially granted. Again, the university accepted Soyinka's resignation "with regret". And with the final stroke of Mr R.O. Eperokun, the Senior Establishments Officer's signature, the umbilical cord between UI and WS became officially severed.

But the name of Wole Soyinka will forever be endeared with the history of the University of Ibadan, especially the now flourishing Department of Theatre Arts. The well-being of this Department today is heavily premised on the nurturing milk of life Soyinka bravely and selflessly deposited into it, despite the severe physical, emotional and psychological strain he had to pass through. But WS would return again to Ibadan, his alma mater, in a blaze of glory.