



***Igilango Geesi* in the Public Sphere: Soyinka's Intervention in Nigerian Political Discourse**

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Abstract

The Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka, is well known as a social critic and public intellectual. In his writings, which cover all genres, he has criticized all forms of misuse of power in Africa generally and his country, Nigeria, specifically. In his work, which he entitles *Interventions*, Soyinka returns again to the criticism of the misuse of power in Africa and Nigeria. What inspired these writings was the annulment of the elections of 12 June 1993 in Nigeria. Abiola. These writings cover many themes, but what come out in all these texts are Soyinka's critical views of misuse of power in all its ramifications. This article takes a critical view of Soyinka's position. It is pointed out that Soyinka does not objectively come to grips with the Nigerian political situation. There is what we can call slippage and also surplus of meaning due to his *Igilango Geesi*. Besides this, Soyinka does not come to grips with the ideological and power configurations of the Nigerian political landscape. These flaws notwithstanding, Soyinka's writings have added a new dimension to the public sphere of Nigerian political discourse.

Résumé

L'écrivain nigérian, Wole Soyinka, est bien connu comme critique social et intellectuel public. Dans ses écrits qui couvrent tous les genres, il a dénoncé toutes les formes d'abus de pouvoir en Afrique en général, et dans son pays, le Nigeria, en particulier. Dans son œuvre, intitulée *Interventions*, Soyinka revient de nouveau sur la critique de l'abus de pouvoir en Afrique et au Nigeria. Ce recueil de textes a été inspiré par l'annulation des élections au Nigeria du 12 juin 1993. Abiola. Il traite de beaucoup de thèmes, mais tous les textes mettent surtout en exergue les points de vue critiques de Soyinka sur l'abus de pouvoir dans toutes ses ramifications. Le présent article jette un regard critique sur la position de Soyinka. Il convient de rappeler que cet auteur ne s'attaque pas objectivement à la situation politique nigériane. Ses écrits sont caractérisés par ce que nous pouvons appeler un glissement et aussi un surplus

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de sens en raison de son *Igilango Geesi*. En outre, Soyinka ne s'attaque pas aux configurations idéologiques et au pouvoir dans le paysage politique nigérian. Nonobstant ces manquements, les écrits de Soyinka ont ajouté une nouvelle dimension à la sphère publique du discours politique nigérian.

No serious reflection on Soyinka's work can fail to perceive the social dimension that runs through his work. Indeed, all the genres which his work transverses – novels, poetry, music and plays – reflect a determinate historical consciousness which chronicles the immense suffering and tragedy that have characterized the space of the African continent. The affective and cognitive experience of Soyinka has, therefore, largely been conditioned by the human condition in the continent. Thus, there is a close correspondence between our collective experience and the affective and cognitive experience of Soyinka to the extent that one could claim that his work presents itself as an imagistic transposition of our collective experience. Thus, his work is a textual response to a collective experience exemplifying, in a particularly remarkable way, what Edward Said (1980: 25) calls 'the situation of writing in history'.

In this article, my intention is not to engage in any form of practical criticism of his work (to go over ground that has already been well surveyed), but to highlight his intervention in the public sphere of some of his recent writings which deal explicitly with Nigerian politics (Soyinka 2005).

First let me clarify or map out the genealogy of these words: *Igilango Geesi*, 'public sphere' and 'discourse'. These words are very important in the context of this article.

First, then, *Igilango Geesi* a Yoruba word which connotes big English words. It is used by the Yoruba people when a person uses big English words in his/her utterances or enunciation (Jeyifo 2004a). *Igilango Geesi* contains two words – *igilango* means big tree and *geesi* means English. The two words signify that the enunciation either in the form of speaking or in the form of writing is couched in big English. The appellation of *Igilango Geesi* is for a person who has mastery of the English language, and whose command of the language goes beyond the competence or ability of the 'owners' of the language, the English themselves (Jeyifo 2004a: 9). Anybody who is an *Igilango Geesi* uses the English language in such an extremely competent or superlative way that people would recognize that the person has a mastery of the English language. However, there is a sort of puzzle attached to this word. It has both positive and negative colourings. It could be applied to both persons who have an extreme mastery of the language and those who do not but try to show off by using bombastic English in order to impress people that they have the mastery of the language. These sorts of people are the ones who have given the term its bad, negative, meaning. An example

of such bombastic, inflated, verbose English is this: 'those party people are rogues. They are an amalgamated gang of robbers, legalized fools'.¹ This sentence, uttered by an *Igilango Geesi*, is verbose and inflated English, but it is uttered to impress people that s/he has a mastery of the language (Jeyifo 2004a: 11). Yet the people the *Igilango Geesi* want to impress know that s/he does not have the mastery of English claimed (*ibid.*). The *Igilango Geesi* is a butt of jest and certainly not a model to copy. This person is viewed as a crude form of the real stuff of *Igilango Geesi* only meant for jest (*ibid.*).

Since a distinction has been made between a counterfeit '*Igilango Geesi*' and an original one, between one who is a pretender and one who imitates the original stuff. It should be pointed out that it is difficult to make a rigid distinction between the two, because the one is melded with the other. In his discussion of this aspect, Jeyifo points out that the reason for this is because of the 'enigmatic feature of language, not just English, but all languages' (Jeyifo 2004a). Jeyifo contends that those who have the mastery of language have the impulse 'to display that mastery, to play with all the potentialities of language, and more than this, to stretch these potentialities well beyond their limits' (2004: 12). He goes on to say that it is 'this aspect of masterful use of language which, in the case of "*Igilango Geesi*", brought the fake, exhibitionist variety close to the genuine, original stuff, to the point where to some people the two [cannot] be differentiated' (*ibid.*). He claims that in the specific case of Soyinka, we are in the presence of an original mind in the masterful use of the language. He contends that what is interesting about Soyinka's *Igilango Geesi* is that in some of his writings, he subjects the puzzlement between the original *Igilango Geesi* and the fake one to satire and parody (Jeyifo 2004a).

Jeyifo goes on to say that the impulse to stretch language by the masters of word (or Griots in the traditional setting) is the fact that language, following Martin Heidegger, is the house of being (*ibid.*). In the house of being, according to Jeyifo, there are many mansions, and language is the means through which one can get access into any of them. The wordsmith can enter any of these mansions or all of the mansions. The mastery of language gives a writer access to areas of Being which are only available to others in a limited form (*ibid.*).

Now, I shall explicate what I mean by 'public sphere'. I want to discuss this term from a Habermasian perspective, though I am conscious of the fact that some African writers and critics are suspicious of Eurocentric theories. Yet Habermas's notion of the public sphere offers a place to begin discussing the notion and then relate it to the intervention of Soyinka in the public sphere of Nigeria (Habermas 1989).

Habermas enunciates his notion of the public sphere in his text, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. According to Habermas, a critical public sphere sprang up in the eighteenth century with the rise of the independent area of society which mediated between the absolutist and the *bourgeois* class (Habermas 1989: 150). Habermas claimed that, though the public/private distinction could be traced to classical Greece, it was during the rise of the *bourgeoisie* that this distinction assumed a new dimension (Habermas 1989). The public sphere, according to Habermas, was clearly distinguished from the state and from private life (ibid.). Thus the public sphere inhabited the space between the realm of public authority on the one hand, and the domain of civil society and the intimate sphere of family relations on the other hand. It was the *bourgeois* public sphere comprising private individuals who had come together to debate among themselves the rules which should inform the conduct of the state and society at large (ibid.). The medium through which this debate was conducted was by the use of reason, articulated by private individuals engaged in a discussion which was open and unconstrained. The *bourgeois* public sphere, according to Habermas, initially came into being in the realm of literature and was subsequently supplanted by discussions that took place in the open terrain dealing directly with political issues (Eagleton 1978: 7). The salons, coffee houses and pubs of Paris and London all served as the centres where issues of general interests were discussed and debated.

An independent press also helped tremendously in intensifying the public discussion that took place in the public sphere (Downing 1990: 50–51). Whereas the early print media only disseminated information of various kinds, in the course of the eighteenth century they became actively engaged in the expression of political views. The print media became an avenue of critical political debates offering an ongoing commentary on, and criticism of, action of the authorities and putting forward alternative ideas in terms of the conduct of state authorities and mobilizing public opinion. Habermas put his point succinctly:

The bourgeois public sphere (can) be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body, which almost immediately laid down claim to ... 'intellectual news – papers' for use against the public authority itself. In those newspapers, and in moralistic and critical journals, they debated that public authority on the general rules of social intercourse in their fundamentally privatized yet publicly relevant sphere of labour and commodity exchange (Habermas 1989: 142).

Thus the print media helped the development of ideological politics, nurtured the revolutionary ferment in eighteenth century Europe, as well as helping the self-conscious rise of the *bourgeoisie* (Gouldner 1976).

The *bourgeois* public sphere, according to Habermas, fizzled out in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to certain developments in Europe. The interventionist state, which increasingly assumed a wide range of welfare functions, and the growth of massive industrial organizations, which increasingly assumed a semi-public character, destroyed the bourgeois public sphere. Coupled with these two developments was the eclipse of the coffee houses and salons which provided the fora for critical debates of the state as well as civil society. The commercialization of the print media also contributed to the demise of the bourgeois public sphere since these media promoted the interests of certain groups rather than encouraged rational-critical debate, as was the case before. Thus commercialization of the mass media became another form of consumer good. As Habermas remarks:

When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labour also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individual reception, however uniform in mode (Habermas 1989: 161).

Habermas claims as well that the commercialization of the mass media gave rise to the technique of 'opinion management'. The mass media moulded the opinion of the public in favour of certain interest groups rather than promoting the public interest. The mass media promoted public authorities and parties, and this resembled, according to Habermas, the publicity given to feudal lords. Thus, there was a sort of refeudalization of the public spheres where private individuals were excluded from public discussions and decision-making processes. The critical principle of the bourgeois public sphere was completely eroded and what obtained was simply opinion management.

Although the ideas and principles embodied in the bourgeois public sphere were completely eroded by certain developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Habermas believes that these ideas and principles could still be recreated on a different basis. However, he does not spell this out in detail.

Habermas's notion of the public sphere has been criticized for presenting an inaccurate picture of that space of communication (Calhoun 1992). I cannot go over all of the critiques here but suffice to note that a number of critics have pointed out that participation in the public sphere did not occur on a universal basis, but was restricted to adult male members of the bourgeoisie; in other words, the public sphere was sexist and class-based in nature. Furthermore, doubts are raised concerning the actual extent and effectiveness of the public sphere, and the apparently idealized form in

which the notion is presented. Critics have also pointed out that the public sphere did not further the interest of the working class, but rather promoted the interest of the rising bourgeois class (Frazer 1989; 1995; Curran 1991).

In the foregoing, I have given something of the flavour of Habermas's notion of the public sphere, though my presentation of his idea is sketchy and in the process I have sacrificed much of the detailed analysis and profusion of illustration which characterizes his discussion of the bourgeois public sphere. However, what is of significance in his discussion of the notion is that it is a dialogical space characterized by discussion of issues that are of collective interest.

Now, what about discourse? How are we going to map it? What is implied by the word discourse in this article? Does it indicate that we shall be dealing with a particular discursive practice? Or does it mean that Soyinka's discursive practice or enunciations would be inscribed in a particular discursive practice in the public sphere? Discourse is a widely used term, but it is a vague term. However, it is still an important term in any discussion of modern political theory.

In order to have a proper understanding of how discourse would be put to use in this article, I intend to use it to emphasise the structures of Nigeria's political discourse, in all its ramifications, as well as the manifestations and Soyinka's relationship to this political discursive practice or formation. My own take on discourse analysis has been influenced by Foucault, Bakhtin, Laclau and Mouffe. Although their discourse analyses are in some points different, nonetheless they are ontologically and epistemologically compatible. Their methods in terms of discourse analysis lay emphasis on power in any political system. Although there are other secondary non-discursive realms, in the final analysis these collapse into the discursive realm, as Foucault reminds us. Following Sudipta Kaviraj, discourse means all that is uttered in the actual political world by people – the mere words, ideas and concepts in all their entirety, and the more multifarious mixture of these: speeches, official documents, ideologies, political rhetoric, political programmes (Kaviraj 1997). All these constitute political discourse, and they are what can be called discursive practice or formation in any political system. Politics is a public activity and is about power, and the discursive practice of politics is anchored on words, hence discourse analysis.

The analysis of discourse has been undertaken from many perspectives. The curiosities of these perspectives or traditions go in different directions. The first of these perspectives is the tradition of structuralism of various stripes with its origin in Saussurian structural linguistics (Saussure 1959; Laclau 1993; Howarth 2000). The basic idea behind structuralism is

that language constitutes a system anchored on relational and differential identities. The other vital aspect of structuralism is that language is a form and not a substance – that is, each unit of the system is exclusively defined by the rules of its combinations and substitutions with the other units. In this regard, language is concerned in a relational sense governed by formal rules underlying linguistic activity. Speakers of any language implicitly obey its grammatical rules without being aware of its formal rules and exact restrictions. These rules form a structure, and they restrain and regulate what can be said in any language without the speaker being aware of them. However, there is a Cartesian assertion of the omnipotence of the subject (Laclau 1993). I need not dwell on the difficulties of Saussurian structuralism here, but what I want to point out is that language is a system governed by certain formal rules. Derrida and Foucault critique Saussurian structuralism and go beyond it (Derrida 1976; Foucault 1972; 1973; 1980; 1984). I will briefly comment on their ideas on discourse. For Derrida, there is nothing outside the text. What he means by this is that nothing exists or is independent of the verbal signs of the language system that constitute the text. There is no meaning outside the texts or signs. Since meaning can be generated in multiple ways, because there is no independent objective world as a reference for it, it can never be fixed. The upshot of this is that meaning is inherently unstable, so that it constantly slides away. In other words, it is undecidable. Thus, there is what Derrida calls *différance*; that is, fixed meaning is constantly deferred and thus meaning is not stable.

For Foucault, discursive formation occurs within a particular historical condition and language develops and generates meanings under a specific material and historical condition. Any discursive formation is therefore conditioned by certain specific rules allowed by the dominant discourse of that historical epoch. The discursive practice regulates not only what can be said under determinate social and cultural conditions but also who can speak, what can be uttered and where. In other words, discourse is a matter of inclusion, exclusion, silence, and of what is utterable and also unutterable.

Another strand of study of discourse is that of Bakhtin (Volosinou) (Bakhtin 1981). In Bakhtin's analysis of discourse, language is a dialogical activity. Bakhtin also insists that language does not have a fixed meaning, but that meaning/sense is generated in a dialogical engagement between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. Meaning becomes a site of contestation and is constantly wrenched in different directions under different social conditions in different social groups. The various groups negotiate their meanings in relation to the dominant ideology. Meaning is

therefore polysemic to some extent because the structured heterogeneity of the various groups requires a structured heterogeneity of meanings.

This polysemy is never a free floating thing but is confined and shaped, for it always exists against the dominant ideology which tries to shut off alternate meanings, and it weaves the preferred ones around its own ideological interests. Bakhtin analyses this phenomenon through his theory of heteroglossia. Heteroglossia or multi-tongued contains the many voices of the subaltern groups, and monoglossia carries the voice of the dominant group. An earlier version of this theory is that of Valentin N. Volosinov's multi-accentuality which claims that what determines meaning is the social context of its use and not, as structuralism argues, its relationship with other signs in the structure of a sign system (Volosinov 1973). In other words, structuralism cannot explain the social and historical dimension of meaning.

What emerges from the discussion of discourse is that despite the differences in the various analyses of discourse, there is a theme that consistently recurs in these discussions. This allows us to outline one characteristic topographical feature of the various discussions of discourse on which these otherwise disparate discussions stand. Perhaps the most obvious and important trope that recurs in these discussions is the stress on certain internal structures in any form of discourse which constrain what can be uttered and what cannot be uttered. In other words, there are certain internal rules which inform the discourse. 'Discourses', according to Howarth, 'constitute symbolic systems' and they function in any political system shaping the social and political world (Howarth 2000: 2, 5).

In political analysis, we can discern three strands in which the term discourse is used. The first is a broad use of the term which points to the fact that a body of ideas has internal coherence due to their linguistic and structural meaning and their correlation to external political events so that they are grouped together in history. These two strands of conferring coherence to ideas have two dimensions, internal and external. The first, the conceptual grid, gives meaning to the political discourse as a whole, and the second, gives meaning (or force, to use Austin's 1975 phrase) to the act. All these aspects have their discursive practices which are tainted by ideology rooted in the concept of hegemony (Laclau 1993), which I will not dwell here since it is beyond the purview of this text.

In the context of Nigerian political discourse, there are four major phases of political discursive practice. We have the nationalist discursive practice. The narrative of this discursive practice is rooted in the nationalist struggle

against colonialist ideology. The second political discursive practice is the post-independence one where the practice is weaved around the three major political groups with attachment to the three major ethnic groups. The next phase is the civil war discourse, and the unity of the country was the focus of this discursive practice; the last phase is the 12 June 1993 presidential election which was won by Chief M.K. Abiola but which was annulled by General Babangida. This last phase of discursive formation or practice is still very much alive today, though it has become extended in some forms and directions.

In recent years, Soyinka has written on Nigerian politics. His essays range over many areas, but the focal trope is the Nigerian political crisis. These essays have been triggered by the events of 12 June 1993 which led to the death of Chief M.K.O. Abiola and the murder of Chief Bola Ige, the then Attorney General of the Federation and Minister of Justice. There are five collected essays. They consist of enunciations – speeches in some gatherings and newspapers articles and also papers written specifically for the collections. They are collectively entitled Interventions. The objective of these Interventions, as Soyinka states, is to raise the tone of public discourse about the problems or predicament of the Nigerian nation. According to him,

The themes of these series vary literally from the sublime to the ridiculous, from national foibles to the tragic face of nations existence, from citizen derelictions and delinquencies to government criminalities and betrayals of trust, from celebration of life and other enigmas to lamentations. Failed projects. Occasional triumphs (Soyinka 2005a: xiv).

He continues,

They are narratives of the 'bad, the good, and the ugly' in encounters high and low. National questions, the quest for genuine federalism, the theocratic menace and the quest for parity in resources, and attachment to identity. The series are intended, basically, 'for the Records', handy reference pamphlets of what has been said in the past. Some will be relevant only to that very moment and place of delivery, and thus of value only as a piece of recollection and invitation to reflection.... While one cannot pretend that they will not reopen past debates – since this is totally beyond my polemicist's control – I would like to emphasise that the initiating purpose of the series is certainly not, in itself, to resurrect those debates. Indeed, the very opposite is the case. They are intended to act as triggers of memory.... (ibid.).

The series, according to Soyinka, may open up 'a new pamphletteering era, a resurrection of the "Onitsha Market literature" this time devoted essentially to current affairs' (ibid.).

The ideal to which Soyinka aspires for the series is that they should be affordable so that anybody can purchase any of the monographs in the series. In other words, he wants the monograph to reach as many people as possible.

One consistent thread runs through all these enunciations or tergiversations – Soyinka’s abiding interest in justice. The first text in the series is an oration he delivered at the burial ceremony of Chief Bola Ige, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of the Nigerian Federation who was murdered by unknown people. He was Soyinka’s friend. Soyinka’s oration alludes to the fact that political assassinations have become an established norm of the Nigerian political terrain perpetrated by people who are immune to the politics of dialogue. The next enunciation is still on Chief Bola Ige where Soyinka laments the fact that the perpetrators of this crime are still free and that justice has not been done. In the next writing, Soyinka comments on electoral frauds that have become a normal phenomenon in Nigeria’s political history. In these writings, Soyinka brings to the fore Nigerian national character whose psyche has been bruised. The negativities of this bruised psyche are revealed, according to him,

In an ethical abandonment that trickles down from leadership, leading to the decay of social values and responsibility, and an embrace of the predatory ethic (Soyinka 2005a: 61).

He goes on to say,

Nigeria ... is yet an inchoate entity whose “national character” is at a critical stage of formation, but with a national psyche already ravaged from civil war, religious and ethnic strife and a pattern of conduct that panders to evil, encourages the cult of impunity and glorifies even potential criminality. It is a failure, at critical times, of the national character that bruises the collective psyche and may lead to an irreplaceable psychotic condition, manifesting itself in all acts - social anomie, a breakdown of law, norm and discipline (ibid.).

In his discussion of the constitution entitled, ‘We, the people.....!’ Soyinka contends that the ‘fundamental responsibility of a constitution is to ensure justice’ (Soyinka 2005a: 49). He goes on to say that ‘governance may sometimes appear to be the purpose of constitution making but, governance is only the process towards an end. And if the end of governance itself is not to establish social justice, then what on earth is its end?’ (ibid.). He claims further that ‘to deny that justice is one unavoidable answer to that question is to encourage every social unit to seek his or her own justice through whatever means, and that guarantees only one end: a state of anomie’ (ibid.). Soyinka believes that any constitution should enthrone

social justice – ‘justice as an ethical, cultural, political and economic given in society’ (Soyinka 2005a: 50). According to him, ‘Justice ... is a project that cannot be made dependant on accident of circumstance, or a combination of circumstances that defines its elected custodian’ (Soyinka 2005a: 51). He claims that no political system can be deemed to be perfect in all ramifications but the constitution must be structured in such a way that it anticipates all kinds of possibilities, ‘and thus ensure that it circumscribes the ability of an unfortunate choice to inflict irreparable damages on society as a whole, or on its individual members’ (Soyinka 2005a: 52).

He contends that the constitution of any nation should be fashioned in such a way that the tenure of representatives could be terminated before its allotted time if they constitute an ‘immediate menace of such dimensions that ‘we the people’ are imperiled by the prospect of such an individual lasting his or her full incumbency’ (Soyinka 2005a: 55–56). Soyinka believes that some moments may arise ‘when extraordinary measures must be taken, and urgently, to protect a people from an immediate peril that stems from the zone of power’ (Soyinka 2005a: 56). He says that ‘this possibility must be recognized and addressed as an act of self defense, inseparable from the very being of any constitution and thus, of national will’ (ibid.). In a continent that is coup-prone, a radical approach must be adopted to bring about ‘the collapse of the state whenever unconstitutional means are used to terminate the tenure of an elected government that is whenever a new order is forced upon the people’ (Soyinka 2005a: 61).

I cannot dwell on all the issues that Soyinka touches in this particular enunciation. However, of interest is his discourse on democracy and fundamental human rights. He claims that human rights are conferred on human beings because we are on a higher pedestal than animals and as such are a possessor of certain fundamental rights which are innate to us as human beings (ibid.). Soyinka claims that certain notions are presented as being antagonistic to fundamental human rights such as ‘people’s rights’, though the existence of such rights cannot be disputed. However, a problem arises if such rights are touted as oppositional to individual human rights by ideologues of various ideological persuasions. Soyinka’s discussion of democracy is anchored on the principle of choice. He believes that choice is a sort of consensus since it has to be exercised by many who are equal in dignity. Choice is also a sort of agreement as long as such agreement is made in complete freedom. An insertion in the provision of the constitution for alteration clearly demonstrates that the constitution is a living document, and that succeeding generations have their voices inscribed in it at the moment of its adoption. In other words, it is a social contract which is made

by all generations – past, present and future. It is an intergenerational pact. This pact if consented to by all represents our general will. Nevertheless, if this pact has not been consented to by the people or their representatives, then the people are relegated to ‘the status of slaves, of mere puppets dancing to the will of a self-elect, a minority who have set the boundaries of choice’ (Soyinka 2005b). However, our willingness to surrender some portion of our territory of choice does not diminish us.

The constitution, according to Soyinka, is an instrument of a people’s dignity. If people’s dignity is abridged, the innate response of the people is to reclaim their dignity back through resistance. Historical facts are there to corroborate this.

In the next text, *The Deceptive Silence of Stolen Voices*, Soyinka dwells on the 12 June 1993 presidential elections in Nigeria (Soyinka 2005b). He discusses the Babangida’s charade called transition to democracy and the presidential elections which Babangida annulled. Soyinka’s discussion gives us a vivid account of events before and after the 12 June 1993 presidential elections. I cannot dwell much on this, but suffice to say that 12 June remains a watershed in the political history of Nigeria. The significance and ripples of that historic event remain with us until today. Though the resistance of the people was crushed, as Soyinka rightly mentions, ‘the spirit of protest was never killed because the people had recovered their voice’ (Soyinka 2005c).

Soyinka’s discussion of the degeneration of the university system in Nigeria touches on many issues (Soyinka 2005c: 32). He discusses the university system within the context of cultism which is a violent phenomenon on many university campuses. Soyinka believes that this is a reflection of the violence in the larger Nigerian society:

In the degeneration of campus culture, the public is reaping the rewards of its own degenerate existence: the dishonesty, the political perfidities, the violence of military coup, the programs that led to the Civil War, the Civil War itself and its conduct, the marginalisation of millions both as individuals and as entities (Soyinka 2005c).

He goes on to say that

Campus violence echoes the epidemic assassination that has turned the nation psychotic with terror, the religious fundamentalist insanities that laid siege even to the nation’s capital, Abuja, oversaw resurgent massacres of innocent religious groups, a continuance of the politically inspired anomie that has resulted in ecumenical cities like Jos and Kaduna reduced to sacrificial altars of religious sectarianism... Campus violence is a reflection of the state implicated killings at Odi, the military massacres at Zaki Biam. The chickens have come

home to roost, and the destruction of the collegiate life, is an echo of our failures, you the larger society with all the resources and the responsibilities of leadership (ibid.).

The text on 'Cults, Counter Culture and the Perils of Ignorance' deepens the discussion on campus violence (Soyinka 2005c). In this text, Soyinka makes a subtle distinction between the earlier confraternity which he co-founded and the later violent ones which have turned the various campuses into a universe of violence. He claims that the former was a radical movement intent on changing certain norms of the society, while the latter ones descended into barbarism. He claims that some people within the university have surrendered to this evil which is destroying the system. He contends that in doing this, people have abandoned ethical values, and this reflects the mood of the society in general.

The next intervention is entitled *In a Lighter Vein*. In this text, Soyinka discusses various topics ranging from the medical profession to globalization, Nelson Mandela and Adunni (Suzanne) Wenger, an Austrian woman artist who naturalized as a Nigerian (Yoruba). Soyinka brings out the humanism in Mandela, whom he claims symbolizes the culture of dialogue (Soyinka 2005d). The last intervention is entitled *Of Power*. In this last work, Soyinka discusses power structures within the African context. In this wide-ranging work, he claims that power has always remained a dominant trope in the African context since the colonial period, and has remained an important theme in post-colonial African states. Soyinka has this to say on power:

The theme of power is one that remains all too pertinent to a continent, which, having freed itself from colonial tyranny, still finds itself obliged to contend with a renewed colonization, this time from within. Inevitably, its occupants, confronted with the bane of repetition, must take time off to ponder on the entire phenomenon of power, what it is that invests the human psyche with the need to dominate others, irrespective of race, state of development or environment, and with a continuing blindness to the lessons of history. ... What is it about power, one continues to question, and its antithesis, Freedom, that locks both in such a seemingly unending struggle, making that struggle, in my estimation, a prime candidate for the motive force of history? (Soyinka 2005e :3–4).

This quotation encapsulates his entire discussion on power. What could be pointed out in his discussion of power is that the exercise of power in its banal or evil form stifles its victims and robs them of their freedom. Power, in all its banal manifestations, is an antithesis to freedom, free-will, free agency, and self-destination. The absence of these can be visited upon the whole community – collectively or individually. Soyinka has always written

on the theme of power in the various *genres* of his works, and he returns to it again in this work.

Soyinka's work embraces in its scope the African or Nigerian condition in its full ramifications – historical, social, political, moral and even metaphysical. All his work is predicated upon what he perceives as the function of the artists in their society:

The artist has always functioned in African society (as one who) records the mores and experiences of his society and.... the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for the artists to respond to this essence of himself (Soyinka 1976: 70).

From his earlier satirical plays to the later ones, Soyinka has always been concerned with the problems of our collective existence and has remained outspoken, clear and consistent in his condemnation of evil in the continent. He has written extensively about the pervasive nature of evil as exemplified in his texts – *The Man Died* (Soyinka 1972), *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (Soyinka 1971), *Season of Anomy* (Soyinka 1973), *Madman and Specialists* (Soyinka 1971) and *A Play of Giants* (Soyinka 1984). These texts, despite their respective individual qualities, are preoccupied with the problem of evil in our continent as exemplified by the mindless authorities of unrepresentative governments. Soyinka has always been aware of man's capacity for evil, and it is this awareness that evokes, for the artist, the sense of 'the past and future evidence of the unchanging nature of humanity which sets in motion the worst moments of pessimism' (Soyinka 1971). Another dimension of his social awareness is the problem of social justice in the continent. In his commitment to the idea of a well-ordered society, Soyinka has always spoken against injustice in the African polity and the political indirection and misdirection which this has engendered.

In his book, *The Open Sore of a Continent*, Soyinka returns to the same issue of social justice (Soyinka 1995). I shall not dwell extensively on the book but suffice it to note that he believes that a nation must be predicated on the ideal of social justice. A nation, according to him, need not be a homogeneous ethnic unit, in the Herderian sense, before assuming the status of a nation but could be constituted by different ethnic units, provided that a sense of justice, to use Rawls' phrase, animates the political unit. Soyinka's social concern has the quality of an abiding, passionate commitment to the ideal of social justice. This has informed all his writings to date as well as his intervention in the public sphere. Witness what he says on this:

I accept that entity, Nigeria, as a space into which I happen to have been born, and therefore a space within which I am bound to collaborate with fellow

occupants in the pursuit of justice and ethical life, to establish a guaranteed access for all to the resources it produces, and to thwart every tendency in any group to act against that determined common denominator of a national existence (Soyinka 1996: 82).

Although this bears repetition, nonetheless it needs to be stressed that Soyinka has always been concerned with the idea of social justice and has always written and commented on the direction of our collective existence based on this ideal. Thus, he has forced this issue onto our collective consciousness in the public sphere.

These five texts range over many issues: the issues of power, constitution, the evil perpetrated by people in power, and the like. But the common thread that binds all these issues together is the notion of social justice. Again and again, Soyinka returns to this issue of justice. He believes that justice should animate any social community. Soyinka sees himself as a radical public intellectual who should be the conscience of the society. In his interesting book on intellectuals, Edward Said contends that the intellectual should be an agent of independent social criticism in society (Said 1994). An interpretation of Said's position on this is that the job of the intellectual is to combat dogma and delimit a space that does not answer to power. What Said's perspective points up is that the intellectual should intervene in the public sphere enunciating issues of public conscience, injustice and the misuse of power. Said does not agree with the traditional conservative notion of the intellectual as avatar of taste, standing aloof from the public because of his or her superior knowledge and greater cultural capital. On the contrary, Said conceives the independent intellectual as the highest public form, ready to articulate truths and positions which disrupt convention and intimidate power. Soyinka would recognize his reflection in Said's description of the public intellectual. Soyinka has been a scourge of those who misuse power to suppress the people. He has played a vital role in the public sphere by raising issues that have to do with the health of the community. He remains 'incorrigibly independent, answering to no one', an attribute which Russell Jacoby identified as the *sine qua non* of the intellectual (Jacoby 1987). Soyinka does not believe that intellectual labour can be divorced from politics. His oeuvre attests to this fact. His work has always been an engagement with the predicament that confronts his society.

Soyinka's recent intervention in the Nigerian public sphere has again confirmed him as the conscience of the society. He has raised some pertinent questions about the Nigerian project. These texts have veered from purely literary work to a more nuanced political enunciation. However, they do not strike us as providing a concrete analysis of the Nigerian situation.

Soyinka's interventions are free-floating without any footing in any of the four phases of the Nigerian discursive practices that I have identified. There is no reference to any body of ideas in the four phases of Nigerian political discourse except for an occasional fleeting reference to them. This reference is just alluded to without a solid analysis of the books he has referred to. In other words, certain bodies of ideas are ignored which would have deepened his analysis of the Nigerian situation he is dealing with. What this means is that Soyinka's texts stand as a lone voice, but the notion of text entails consideration of intertextuality. To use Julia Kristeva's words, 'text is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text' (quoted in Allen 2000: 35). A text should be inscribed within other texts – it should be an intertext that refers to other texts within the discursive practice. Soyinka's texts are free-floating works without any footing in any of the discursive practice of Nigerian politics.

There is also the issue of slippage in these texts. His discussions of the issues are not clear enough to make one know where he stands. In other words, there are conceptual imprecision and analytical inconsistencies. This problem arises because Soyinka's narratives in these texts are over-poeticized to the extent that it is impossible to get the main message he is conveying to the reader. To put it in another way, the over-poeticized nature of the discourse blurs the ideas that the texts convey. The language or style in these texts draws 'attention to itself as *énoncé* or to its very process of enunciation' (Jeyifo 2004b). This also makes the texts obscure, and it difficult to extract a serviceable form of politics from them. Moreover, the style in these texts is very esoteric, and portrays an abstract, polysyllabic complicated language which is beyond the grasp of most readers to whom the texts are primarily addressed. In other words, the charge of making a fetish of abstract criticism could be levelled against Soyinka. There is, therefore, what one could call over-surplus meanings in these texts due to his *igilango geesi*.²

Moreover, Soyinka does not fully come to grips with the concrete issues of the Nigerian crisis. There is no systematic analysis of the issues involved in the Nigerian political crisis. The issues are discussed in a perfunctory way, and he does not think that his elusiveness on these issues could be a source of dissatisfaction on the part of some of the readers of these texts. Soyinka assumes that the readers of his texts would have the same viewpoint as his own. Soyinka does not analyse the various social forces in the Nigerian political landscape. The hegemonic social group which has held the reins of power in Nigeria is not fully analysed. What we have in the narratives of these texts are not close consideration of the crises which have engulfed Nigeria.³ In other words, his analysis of the Nigerian crisis rests on an

insufficient historical-material basis. Put differently, Soyinka does not pay sufficient attention to the concrete framework of events. '[H]is refusal of a clear sociological or ideological conception of the forces present in the Nigerian (crises) leaves one with the impression of insubstantiality' (Irele 1981: 205). This is clearly exemplified in his treatment of power structures in Nigeria, which is perfunctory. Power is an important concept in politics as it is everywhere in any political system. Any signifying practice involving relations of power, as Foucault reminds us, is 'a productive network which runs through the whole social body' (Foucault 1980: 109).

There is no form of social imaginary or 'narratives for a new beginning' in these texts. Or, to put it differently, a vision of an enriched social order (Taylor 2000). The texts do not give us any affirmative humane vision of social order. Besides this, his over-poeticized discursive strategy is 'in great tension with the theorist of radical democratic politics' since this discursive strategy does not give us any conception of a truly democratic polis (Jeyifo 2004b: 218).

Soyinka's attachment to the individuals he discusses in these texts is not based on any ideological ground, rather it is mostly a personalized, private one. Soyinka swings between the two ideological spectrums without any footing in either. If he has any ideological attachment, it seems this could be called radical romantic libertarianism which he has clothed in an *Ogun* form – the Yoruba god of iron. *Ogun* embodies both good and evil, creativity and destruction, and it is hard to see how this image of *Ogun* could be reconciled with his radical humanist politics.

To have pointed out these flaws in Soyinka's interventions is to acknowledge his importance as a radical public intellectual and as the conscience of the Nigerian nation. In the darkest moments of Nigerian history, Soyinka has stood up as a shining example whose activism bolsters the flagging spirit of the people. He has never 'abandoned his consuming need to expose and debunk the reactionary, self-serving terror and violence of corrupt tyrannical despots' (Jeyifo 2004b: 283). Soyinka's whole oeuvre stands out, according to Abiola Irele, 'as the most comprehensive exploration of the contemporary African situation and draws its overall meaning from the sustained application of a sensitive intelligence upon the African experience' (Irele 1981: 201). Soyinka is a strong poet who gives us a 'picture' of a new 'world' in an unfamiliar vocabulary (Bloom 1973; Rorty 1989). In this regard, he favours a rhetorical and aesthetically discursive strategy to push his ideas rather than the normal discursive strategy deployed by social theorists. His texts address issues about Nigeria's collective experience. He has pushed these issues for discussion in the Nigerian public sphere. He does not engage

these issues in a solipsist, privatized monological discourse, though he could be charged of this because of the over-literariness of his text, but, to use the Bakhtian phrase, in a dialogical way; in other words, his texts invite us into a conversation about Nigeria's predicament. If therefore Soyinka is a creator of the conversation of disquietude in our public sphere, this is as a means of arousing our collective sensibility to the paradise of misery in Nigeria. To the extent that this is the case, he is, to use a Rortyan phrase, an ironist and a strong-poet, in the sense that he opens up an edifying discourse in the Nigerian public sphere (Rorty 1989).

The difficulty that is encountered in these and his other texts in all the genres is because Soyinka is an avant-garde, modernist writer. He is like all modernist writers whose texts are always difficult to read because as T.S. Eliot puts it, 'poets in [this present civilization], as it exists at present, must be difficult. [This present civilization] comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results' (quoted in Dieperveen 2003: xi). The present situation in Africa, especially in Nigeria, has thrown up complex problems, and Soyinka's style of writing reflects this complexity. Modernist writers, as Dieperveen has put it, are difficult because 'difficulty [has] a social function as a cultural gatekeeper' (2003: xv). This social function reveals to us 'how we got where we are today and where that "where we are" actually is' (ibid.).

Soyinka's works also reflect the tensions and confusions pervading Africa, especially Nigeria. In any age literary and artistic figures have always carried the burden of articulating these problematic issues of their societies. This is what Soyinka has done for his society. Hacker has put this succinctly, though in another context which nevertheless applies to Soyinka:

The lives of literary and artistic figures ... are held to be of deeper significance than the mere fascination of their biography. Their travails and their intellectual and spiritual strivings are ... sensed to incorporate and to represent the deepest tensions and conflicts within the culture of their times (Hacker quoted in Kanterian 2007: 204).

This is the case with Soyinka. The style of his writing springs from these tensions and conflicts which are expressed in a heightened form. We find this in some important writers and thinkers such as Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, James Joyce, Marcel Proust or Andre Gide (Kanterian 2007: 202). Besides, Soyinka traverses two traditions: Yoruba tradition and Western tradition (Irele 1981; Appiah 1992). Soyinka's consciousness in the philosophical sense has been shaped by his Yoruba culture; his mind has been moulded by his culture, and his thinking reflects this. But this thinking

has to be expressed in another linguistic framework, which is English. These two cultural backgrounds make his works interesting, as well as extremely difficult for readers to comprehend and interpret.

Let me conclude by saying that Soyinka has enriched and enlarged the Nigerian as well as the African public sphere through the ideas embedded in his texts. He has contributed to the formation of a new mood as well as a new distinctive constellation of ideas. This constellation of ideas has put ethical, political and economic issues on agenda of the Nigerian public sphere, forcing us to reflect on Nigeria's collective existence.⁴

Notes

1. This sentence is from an old man who resided in Ijebu-Jesha, Osun State, Nigeria, who liked to impress people with verbose English.
2. See Interventions I, II, III, IV and V for this point.
3. 12 June 1993 was not fully discussed from an ideological point of view by Soyinka.
4. This paper is dedicated to Professor Wole Soyinka on his eightieth birthday. I wish to thank the anonymous reader for comments and suggestions which have greatly improved the article.

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