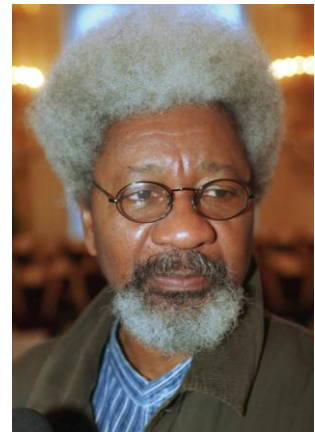


# Wole Soyinka

## (Born July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1934)

**Wole Soyinka**, in full Akinwande Olu Wole Soyinka, was born on July 13, 1934, in Abeokuta, Nigeria. A member of the Yoruba people, Soyinka attended Government College and University College in Ibadan before graduating in 1958 with a degree in English from the University of Leeds in England.

Upon his return to Nigeria, he founded an acting company and wrote his first important play, *A Dance of the Forests* (produced 1960; published 1963), for the Nigerian independence celebrations. The play satirizes the fledgling nation by stripping it of romantic legend and by showing that the present is no more a golden age than was the past.



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He wrote several plays in a lighter vein, making fun of pompous, westernized schoolteachers in *The Lion and the Jewel* (first performed in Ibadan, 1959; published 1963) and mocking the clever preachers of upstart prayer-churches who grow fat on the credulity of their parishioners in *The Trials of Brother Jero* (performed 1960; published 1963) and *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973). But his more serious plays, such as *The Strong Breed* (1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (opened the first Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, 1966; published 1967), *The Road* (1965), *From Zia, with Love* (1992), and even the parody *King Baabu* (performed 2001; published 2002), reveal his disregard for African authoritarian leadership and his disillusionment with Nigerian society as a whole.

Other notable plays include *Madmen and Specialists* (performed 1970; published 1971), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995). In these and Soyinka's other dramas, western elements are skillfully fused with subject matter and dramatic techniques deeply rooted in Yoruba folklore and religion. Symbolism, flashback, and ingenious plotting contribute to a rich dramatic structure. His best works exhibit humour and fine poetic style as well as a gift for irony and satire and for accurately matching the language of his complex characters to their social position and moral qualities.

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<sup>1</sup> "Soyinka, Wole", **Encyclopædia Britannica Online**, academic ed.,  
[www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/74911/Wole-Soyinka-2000](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/74911/Wole-Soyinka-2000)

From 1960 to 1964, Soyinka was coeditor of *Black Orpheus*, an important literary journal. From 1960 onward, he taught literature and drama, and headed theatre groups at various Nigerian universities, including those of Ibadan, Ife, and Lagos.

Soyinka was the first black African to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. After winning the Nobel Prize, Soyinka also was sought after as a lecturer, and many of his lectures were published – notably the Reith Lectures of 2004, as *Climate of Fear* (2004).

Though he considered himself primarily a playwright, Soyinka also wrote novels – *The Interpreters* (1965) and *Season of Anomy* (1973) – and several volumes of poetry. The latter include *Idanre, and Other Poems* (1967) and *Poems from Prison* (1969, republished as *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, 1972), published together as *Early Poems* (1998); *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988); and *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002).

His verse is characterized by a precise command of language and a mastery of lyric, dramatic, and meditative poetic forms. He wrote a good deal of *Poems from Prison* while he was jailed in 1967–69 for speaking out against the war brought on by the attempted secession of Biafra from Nigeria. *The Man Died* (1972) is his prose account of his arrest and 22-month imprisonment. Soyinka's principal critical work is *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976), a collection of essays in which he examines the role of the artist in the light of Yoruba mythology and symbolism. *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage* (1988) is a work on similar themes of art, culture, and society. He continued to address Africa's ills and western responsibility in *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996) and *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (1999).

An autobiography, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, was published in 1981 and followed by the companion pieces *Ìsarà: A Voyage Around Essay* (1989) and *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years: A Memoir, 1946–1965* (1994). In 2006, he published another memoir, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*. In 2005–06, Soyinka served on the Encyclopædia Britannica Editorial Board of Advisors.

Soyinka has long been a proponent of Nigerian democracy. His decades of political activism included periods of imprisonment and exile, and he has founded, headed, or participated in several political groups, including the National Democratic Organization, the National Liberation Council of Nigeria, and Pro-National Conference Organizations (PRONACO). In 2010, Soyinka founded the Democratic Front for a People's Federation and served as chairman of the party.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Wole Soyinka", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/557228/Wole-Soyinka](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/557228/Wole-Soyinka)

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