

INDEX on CENSORSHIP

Profile by James Gibbs Wole Soyinka

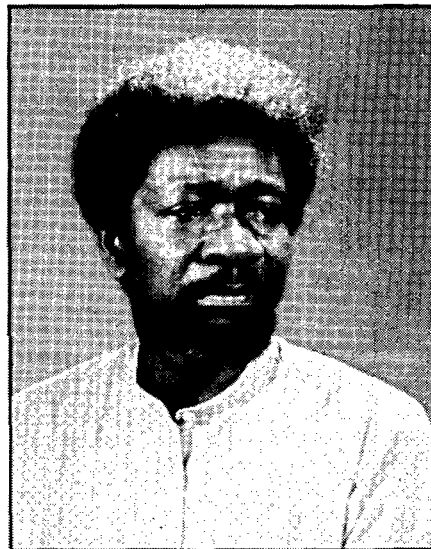
'I have one abiding religion — human liberty'

In the period of agitation for independence, Nigerian journalists were severely critical of manifestations of censorship by British colonial officers. Within a few years of achieving independence, however, some of those same journalists were advocating or implementing censorship of the press, radio and stage (*Index on Censorship* 3/1980, pp 9-11). The irony of this was not lost on Nigeria's major playwright, Wole Soyinka. Indeed, he predicted the development.

Soyinka is a writer and an activist who is acutely sensitive to tendencies towards totalitarianism and who has a passionate concern for human rights. In an autobiographical statement published in 1975, he wrote: 'I have one abiding religion — human liberty. It works in me as a raging, insurgent force against the inescapable propensity of human beings towards the enslavement of others. And especially here in the new African society, where the insistence on this liberty is often regarded as some strange subversive fungus, the position of the writer has begun to follow the world-weary pattern of one-sided conflicts.'

The pieces he wrote as an undergraduate at University College, Ibadan, during the early fifties reveal that he campaigned vigorously against intolerance, elitism, tribalism and injustice in the student community. At the University of Leeds and while attached to the Royal Court Theatre in London during the mid- and late fifties, he wrote songs, stories, poems and plays in which he attacked colonial oppression, racial prejudice and apartheid.

After his return to Nigeria in January 1960, he won the Independence Playwriting Competition with an ambitious drama which contained warnings about the threats to individual liberty in a society undergoing major changes. In producing this play, *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka received less official support than he might reasonably have expected and was obliged to draw on his own financial resources to meet



production costs.

The twenty-three years since independence have been turbulent ones for Nigeria. The tensions present in the federation at independence led to the declaration of a State of Emergency in the Western Region, Soyinka's home area (1962), constant challenges to human rights (1962 onwards), the breakdown of democratic processes (1965), a constitutional crisis (1965-6), a coup (January 1966), a counter-coup (July 1966), massacres of Igbos in the Northern Region (October 1966, etc), secession by the Eastern Region-Biafra and Civil War (1967-9). Since the Civil War, there has been a third coup (December 1975), which was followed by an attempted coup (1976), an 'oil-boom' economy, juggling with the balance of power within the federation and a return to civilian rule. During President Shehu Shagari's first term in office (1979-83), there were demonstrations, uprisings and brutal police-army attacks on civilians. During August 1983, hotly disputed results of a second round of post-Civil War elections were produced which returned Shagari for a second term in office and briefly strengthened the position of his party in the country. At the end of December, a

fourth coup removed Shagari and brought Mohammed Buhari to power

These events have provided part of the context for Soyinka's political activities, his creative writing and his public statements. A wider context has long been provided by events and conditions in other parts of Africa. Soyinka has written about or commented on the threats to human rights and freedom of speech posed by Kwame Nkrumah's use of preventive detention, Kamuzu Banda's dictatorial rule, Idi Amin's reign of terror, and Jean-Bedel Bokassa's murderous tyranny.

In the years since the official cold-shouldering of *A Dance*, Soyinka has been confronted by censorship in many forms; he has challenged the attempts to restrict his freedom of expression with inventiveness, versatility and, on one occasion at least, with reckless daring. During 1962 he became Secretary General of a group of progressive and public spirited Nigerians, the Committee of Writers for Individual Liberty (CWIL). As Secretary General of CWIL, he issued at least two press statements drawing attention to the growing threats to freedom of speech and these statements were published in Nigerian newspapers. At the end of 1962, however, he complained in the following terms after a book review he had submitted had been 'edited': 'It has always been... a frustrating experience to write honestly and intelligently for any of our newspapers.' His next piece for the press was a heavily ironic comment on the 'edifying aspect' of flogging women for insulting behaviour towards political opponents. The Swiftian manner bewildered editors/censors and communicated Soyinka's rage to alert readers.

The problems Soyinka experienced in getting his text into the newspapers were paralleled by the restrictions imposed on him by the broadcasting authorities. During the first months of 1960 he broadcast frequently and wrote plays for both radio and television. During 1961 he began writing scripts for a weekly situation-

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Africa

Wole Soyinka

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comedy, *Broke-Time Bar*, and, as tension increased in the country, he endeavoured to use the series to make social and political comments. When the authorities resisted this development, Soyinka turned to writing for a form over which he had greater control and which was particularly suited to making political points, the satirical revue. In 1963/4 he was involved with the *The (New) Republican* and in 1964/5 with *Before the Blackout*. These revues were put on by members of two acting groups Soyinka had founded, '1960 Masks' and 'Orisun Theatre', and were presented at the J K Randle Hall in Lagos and the Arts Theatre at the University of Ibadan. The critically acclaimed productions contained songs and sketches in Yoruba and English which made effective use of music, mime, gesture and dialogue to pillory particular individuals and to comment on developments in the country. Some of the politicians who were attacked in the sketches retaliated with threats to the performers and Soyinka took steps to anticipate and repel back-stage break-ins.

One play from this period, *Kongi's Harvest* (August 1965), sought to combine assaults on specific targets with a more general statement about moves towards absolutism in Africa, but with only partial success. After the first production of *Kongi*, Soyinka flew to London for the Commonwealth Arts Festival, where he read his poetry and where a major new play, *The Road*, established him as a significant contemporary, English-language dramatist. He also acted in a radio play which he had written for the BBC's African Theatre series, *The Detainee*. This examined the forces working against a dictatorial ruler in a newly independent African state and it was broadcast to the whole of Africa. Soyinka took the role of a political detainee.

Towards the end of 1965, elections, characterised by malpractices, were held in the Western Region of Nigeria and S. L. Akintola was declared the winner. There were protests and demonstrations at this announcement and Soyinka, fresh from his triumph in London, intervened in a highly dramatic manner to delay the broadcast of Akintola's victory address. Shortly before the taped message was due to go out, it is believed by some people that Soyinka entered the play-back studio at the radio-

station in Ibadan and, at gun-point, ordered the engineers to replace Akintola's taped address with a tape which he had brought. The opening sentences of Soyinka's tape, which advised Akintola and his crew of renegades to quit the country, were broadcast. Soyinka was subsequently charged with the serious offence of holding-up the radio station and with the less serious offence of stealing two tapes; he pleaded 'Not Guilty'. At the end of the trial which followed, he was acquitted on a technicality and, leaving a number of issues unresolved, was carried shoulder high from the court by his supporters.

During 1966 and 1967, as Nigeria moved through coup, counter-coup and massacres towards secession and Civil War, Soyinka continued to try to influence events. The January 1966 coup brought some progressive soldiers into positions of power and Soyinka appears to have been close to the Military Commissioner for the Western Region, Adekunle Fajuyi, and to have made recommendations on certain matters, including the relaxation of restrictions on the stage. After Fajuyi and other leaders of the January coup were killed in the July counter-coup which brought Yakubu Gowon to power, Soyinka turned to the press to communicate with his fellow-countrymen. For instance, in August 1967, after Biafra had seceded and after the Federal Government had begun military actions to end the secession, Soyinka published a highly controversial article, 'Let's Think of the Aftermath of the War', in the *Daily Sketch*. In the article he combined a plea for a cease-fire with a swingeing attack on the 'velvet cushion commandos, cheer leaders of national disaster'. This publication, together with Soyinka's visit to Biafra and Federal reverses in the Mid-West, prompted Gowon's regime to detain the playwright-journalist-activist.

Detention and exile

Soyinka was not formally charged, nor was he tried during the 27 months he spent in 'Gowon's Detention'. For that period he provided a focus for Nigerian and international concern about the justification for the Civil War and about the manner in which Gowon was conducting hostilities. On his release, Soyinka defiantly directed a new production of *Kongi's Harvest*, giving it a strongly anti-military slant. Long aware of the advantages of film as a means of communication in Nigeria, he became involved in the making of a feature film based on *Kongi*, only to find that the final version approved by the director, Ossie Davis, was quite unsatisfactory. In the same period, he wrote and directed a bitter study of the mutilation caused by civil war, *Madmen and Specialists*, a porcupine of a

play in which a 'chorus' of mendicants provides an almost non-stop satirical cabaret.

Profoundly uneasy in post-Civil War Nigeria, Soyinka went in 1971 into what he intended should be a 'brief exile'. In the event, however, he was away from Nigeria for nearly five years, during which time he worked in France, Britain, and Ghana, travelled widely, and wrote a great deal. One of his first works was, probably, *Jero's Metamorphosis*, a subtle combination of a trickster comedy with a subversive attack on Nigeria's military regime and its brutalising methods of punishing suspected armed robbers. Though Soyinka sent copies of this play to a number of directors in Nigeria; none of them, I gather, was bold enough to produce it so long as a military regime remained in power. Cut off from access to his countrymen through the theatre, Soyinka wrote a novel, *Season of Anomy*, in which he explored possible responses to repression, and *The Man Died*, a 'document' which contains, among a great deal else, an account of his detention. Although *The Man Died*, which was severely critical of Gowon and several civilian politicians, was not officially banned in Nigeria, its distribution was discouraged by the army and only a limited number of copies circulated.

Soyinka spent the last years of this 'brief exile' in Accra, where he edited the leading African intellectual journal, *Transition*. During his editorship, the title of the publication was changed to *Ch'Indaba* ('Let the great palaver begin') and the editorial policy became fiercely libertarian. Despite

Biographical details

Born in Abeokuta, Nigeria, 13 July 1934; educated at Abeokuta Grammar School, Government College, Ibadan; University College, Ibadan; University of Leeds; attached to the Royal Court Theatre, London, 1958-9; Rockefeller Research Fellow, University College, Ibadan, 1960-1; lecturer, University College, Ife, 1962-3; Senior Lecturer, University of Lagos, 1965-7; Director, School of Drama, University of Ibadan, 1967-71; political detainee August 1967-October 1971; Professor, University of Ife, 1972 to date; Fellow Churchill College, Cambridge, 1973-4; founder of acting companies '1960 Masks' and 'Orisun Theatre'; recipient of the Drama Prize at the Dakar Negro Arts Festival 1966, John Whiting Award 1966, Jock Campbell Award 1967, Amnesty International Award 1969, Third World Literature Prize awarded by the American branch of the English Speaking Union 1983, D. Litt (University of Leeds) 1973, and University of Yale 1981.