

# A Literary Understanding of Nigeria's Political Crisis: A Construction of its Past and Future

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In : Development Policy Management Network Bulletin  
Vol. VIII, N.3, September 2001  
pp. 37-39

## Introduction

The Nigerian political climate from particularly the civil war period or immediately after 1966 was characterized by lack of commitment to the virtues of honesty, equality, social justice, accountability, trust, peaceful co-existence amongst co-ethnics and respect for human rights. This is the thrust of Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*. Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* is an autobiography, which takes the form of a prison-note.

At the beginning of the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), Wole Soyinka was arrested by the Federal Authorities and imprisoned only to be released in 1969 and the same picture presented of Nigeria by Wole Soyinka in the novel still prevails in Nigerian Politics today. This article examines the political crisis as presented in Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, its bearing with present crisis and the prospects for the future.

### *The Nigerian Civil War*

P.C. Lloyd observes that "Nigeria's problems do derive in large measure from, the tensions which had arisen between the larger ethnic groups and that the hostility derives not from the ethnic differences, but from competition between peoples for wealth and power" (Lloyd, 1970: 1-13). This elite competition becomes a basis for ethnic mobilization, in which people are mobilized for political conflicts to serve personal ends.

The Constituent Assembly of September 1977 worked out a presidential constitution for the country as a result of the failure of the 1963 Republican constitution whose undue emphasis was on regional autonomy with the predictable result that at different times the various regions threatened to secede from the Federation. The Nigerian elites who took over from the British (at independence in 1960) made no serious effort to evolve any nationally shared values essential for national unity. The factors, which led to the Nigerian civil war, include North - South division and ethnic conflicts, minority group politics, the structural dilemma of the Nigerian army, the census controversy and the Federal election crisis of 1962 and 1965. All these structural problems though real, were manipulated by the political elite in their competition for power and resources, which led to the civil war (1967-1970).

The immediate background to the civil war was the January 15 1966 military coup carried out by seven army officers, six of whom were Ibos. The effect of the action was that other Nigerians particularly the Northern political elite were afraid that there was a Machiavellian plot by the Ibos to dominate the country and this led to the attack of the Ibos in Northern Nigeria. As Dudley observed, "the Ibos were attacked not because they were Ibos but because the name Ibo had become more or less synonymous with exploitation and humiliation. It was essentially an attack on a mental stereotype" (Dudley, 1973: 132). This incipient crisis precipitated a leadership question between Odumegwu Ojukwu and Yakubu Gowon. Gowon was seen as a symbol of northern domination, which was, considered a threat to the very existence of the Ibos. The rivalry between Gowon and Ojukwu, both military officers, invariably led to the war.

The questions that could be asked at this juncture are:

- a. What kind of a society is Nigeria where power and wealth play a more significant role for the leaders than the interest of the people?
- b. Is there a possibility of moving forward for a positive change?
- c. How will Nigeria be salvaged ? (Cf. Oyediran, 1980:28)

#### *The Military Regime and General Yakubu Gowon*

A military regime cannot properly be described as operating within a normal political system. All military governments come to power through illegal and unconstitutional means, particularly through coup d'etat, involving the use of violence. Also, they mostly use unconventional means to rule legislating through decrees, with a personalized rule. General Yakubu Gowon ruled for nine years, from July 1966 to July 1975. Immediately after its fall, his regime was denounced as being characterized by inefficiency, indecision and authoritarianism. Under the military, the civil service amassed enormous powers, as military rulers had to rely on the bureaucracy not only to implement policy, but also in its formulation. The ideological character of the military, the institutional form of the civil service and nature of social organization of the Nigerian society all contributed in no small way to the civil war.

Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* is situated within the context of the civil war in Nigeria and its aftermath under the Gowon regime. It is an account of his sordid experiences in detention under the Gowon regime.

#### *Wole Soyinka and the Prison Experience*

The Prose work *The Man Died* could be referred to as some form of prison notes. It does not only discuss Wole Soyinka's prison experience, but also those he came across whose lives and their manner of arrest and treatment as detainees also interested him. Dr. Seinde Arigbede, for instance, in the course of his duties as a medical doctor was caught up in the violence unleashed on the citizens of Ondo by the Nigerian State after the disputed 1963 elections. Dr. Arigbede was taken to an empty cell, where he was hung up by the wrists and left dangling, his feet were away from the ground while he underwent serious beating and torture. He heard the cries

of other inmates who were subjected to even worse treatment. Some of the detainees even went through the agony of having broomstick switches driven up their penis.

Others who were tortured include Gogo Chu Nzeribe whose offence was undisclosed during the Gowon regime and imprisoned in Dodan Barracks where he died. Dr. Adeyemi Ademola was another victim who was mysteriously gunned to death and at this time, he was conducting a sensitive autopsy on a highly placed military brass (the head of one of the armed forces division). Wole Soyinka was moved from one prison to another and queried on so many issues. He was taken away from Ibadan to Lagos under the pretence that Gowon wanted to ask him some questions. He never saw Gowon, he was rather questioned with a view to knowing his political stand. The major question they asked him or their major comment was:

*"But what gives people like you and Tai Solarin the right to think that you know everything ? What makes you think from your Ivory Towers that you have solutions to the problems of the country ? When the government has already laid down a policy what makes you think you know better ? You are intellectuals living in a dream world Yet you think , you know better than men who have weighed out so many factors and come to a decision" (Soyinka, 1972: 34 -35).*

When Wole Soyinka did not cooperate with them, they ordered that he should be handcuffed. As a result he went on hunger strike. He was later moved from the maximum to the medium security prison. He lived under unhygienic condition and when he fell sick they never wanted him to be treated by his personal doctor, it was only when his wife came to see him that they made some provision for his needs. However, immediately his wife left, they took away all that was given to him under the pretence of living well in detention. Soyinka puts it thus:

*"You staged a farce! You wanted my wife to leave satisfied that I was now receiving humane treatment at your hands. You went through a performance, which lasted nearly two hours. You made sure that she saw me off to my cell laden with books and paper, even a radio. Then your goons come here and sweep it all off. I want to know Mallam A, if these were part of your instructions" (Soyinka, 1972: 285).*

Wole Soyinka was put under severe pressure to confess and co-operate at all times. When a note was smuggled out on behalf of Wole Soyinka, he was threatened to mention the name; of the man that helped him to smuggle the note out but he insisted he did not know (Soyinka, 1972: 79). All the other answers he gave were not encouraging, he neither co-operated with them nor did he tell them the truth throughout his prison life. He was later released. That was how Wole Soyinka suffered in detention for an offence that was not committed except the state's impression of Soyinka (Soyinka, 1972: 24 - 35). So many Nigerians suffered from the period after 1966 to date, especially under repressive and brutal military regimes, which have ruled the country for the larger part of its post-colonial history. Military rule and militarism have in no small way contributed to the agonising social and political crises in Nigeria.

The same situation that prevailed then also persists till the present, with a high level of corruption, unlawful arrest, lack of commitment to the values of honesty, social justice, equality, fairness, accountability, and the rule of law. Nigerian prisons are still in the worst shape. With the situation presented above the question that may be asked is; which way forward for Nigeria?

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### *Policy Options*

Policy Options should address:

- a. long standing issue of military intervention and militarism
- b. human rights violation
- c. appalling prison conditions

Literary writers must show optimism for the future of the country. As such, they should reflect this in their writings and the way they shape discourses and consciousness through their writings. Literary writing should cover the issues of good governance, accountability, transparency and due process.

Literary writers should lament the happenings of the past and think of a better future. This may also help to reform our leadership for a positive future. The criticism of the Nigerian state under military dictatorship by Wole Soyinka in *Open Sore of the Continent* (1996) is quite healthy. In the work there was a strident attack on the military, how they undermined democratic rule, the social and political costs of the annulled June 12, 1993 presidential election and the forces that have tried to build democracy in Nigeria and how military rule threatened the nation-state project in Nigeria and shook the patriotic ideals people shared.

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