

Wole Soyinka, Leo Frobenius, and the *Ori Olokun*



The Nobel Prize in Literature 1986 was awarded, according to the official statement, to Wole Soyinka, “who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence.” I remember listening to the live reporting from the Stockholm ceremony on my car radio, including the fact that the awardee, on stage, just after receiving the prize in his hands from the Swedish king, had made a symbolic gesture, an unusual departure from the conventional ritual, as if pouring libation.

Some years later, he was back for the Nobel Prize festivities again, this time as a guest when his friend, the African American novelist Toni Morrison, was the prize winner. I was also at the prize banquet that year, and after the dinner I noticed him standing alone on the sideline (easily recognizable, with what has been described as his “snow-white Afro”), watching the Europeans dancing. I approached him, and we had a brief chat—he might not have expected on this occasion to run into somebody reminiscing about Kafanchan.

Then several years later again, after the 2016 American presidential election, I could see in the papers that to protest the Trump presidency, he had cut up his “green card,” the document for his permanent residence in the United States (not that he appeared to have really lived there for some time, but that is perhaps not so unusual for green card holders).¹

In his brief after-dinner speech at the 1986 festivities, Wole Soyinka noted that the Yoruba god Ogun, “the god of creativity and destruction, of the lyric and metallurgy,” and his own creative muse, had anticipated Alfred Nobel, that inventor of dynamite, “by clearing a path through primordial chaos, dynamiting his way through the core of earth to open a route for his fellow deities who sought to be reunited with

us mortals.” He wondered aloud why Ogun had passed his secret to Nobel, rather than to his Yoruba descendants. Ogun might have drunk some of the local *akvavit* to take him through the harsh, dark Swedish winter, although he would certainly have preferred palm wine.

A couple of days earlier, Soyinka had given his longer and more serious Nobel lecture. This was a lecture by a Pan-African nationalist: it had a focused attack on what was still the apartheid regime in South Africa, but there was also a more general reminder of a past of domination, discrimination, and prejudice. Later, in his account of his Stockholm journey in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (Soyinka 2006: 323–334), he would devote little space to the official events, and more to a couple of bizarre local events behind the scenes, and to his travel. There had been half a jumbo jet of compatriots flying with him to Stockholm, and so “the Nigerian contingent was enlivening the staid streets with colors, textures, and exotic sounds.” But he had wanted no official participation by the Nigerian government. These were the days of the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, relatively benign although nonetheless corrupt, and not entirely nonviolent either. Soyinka suspected strongly that it had been behind the recent murder by bombing of his friend the journalist Dele Giwa.²

In a long career, Wole Soyinka has been a strikingly versatile writer, a public figure, and an intellectual gadfly. Perhaps it is possible to suggest a periodization of his main contributions and activities, even with some imprecision, and back-and-forth movements. In rather early adulthood, in large part his student days in the United Kingdom, there was Soyinka the dramatist, writing plays and also active on stage and backstage himself.³ That continued in Ibadan, and with his part in the circle around Mbari Club (see chapter 6). Then in the late 1960s, in the period of major Nigerian upheaval, there was the political activist, at one point hijacking a radio station, but also spending time in prison under one early military regime. These were the times of his nonfiction narrative of imprisonment in *The Man Died* (1972) and the novel *Season of Anomy* (1973). Later, there would be Soyinka the memoirist, with the account of his childhood, *Aké* (1983), and a dramatic variety of adult activities in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, mentioned just before. In the essays in *Of Africa* (2012), he is again the Pan-African and global, cultural and political commentator. Yet such a summary of a path through life can still leave out a great deal.

In *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, apropos his 1960s political engagements, he reflects that “I am always amused—or irritated, depending on my mood—by much that has been written about my so-called loner mentality” (Soyinka 2006: 82). “Loner” does not really

seem such an appropriate description, if by that one would mean someone turning away from the world. There is, rather, in many of Wole Soyinka's activities a rebellious streak. The identification with Ogun, the Yoruba deity of war, hunting, and blacksmithing, guardian of the road, "creative-combative," seems quite revealing.⁴ He is comfortable as an adversary, engaging in debate on many stages, local or wider. He has also taken extraordinary political action on his own. This, however, is not just a matter of temperament; it is a temperament responding to kinds of situations.

The radio station affair is a major example, recounted in detail in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006: 80 ff.). In what was then the Western Region, with Ibadan as its capital, a breakaway group from the older Yoruba-dominated party had formed its own party, which, with the support of the dominant Northern party, had somehow taken over the regional government. In 1965 there would be regional elections. The election campaign turned very violent—this was the campaign that Ryszard Kapuscinski (1990) reported on in a chapter of *The Soccer War* (see chapter 8 in this volume). At the end, that new governing faction claimed to have won, but the vote count was most likely fraudulent, and Wole Soyinka determined that it must not be allowed to be announced without challenge. He made his way into the broadcasting building, past what happened to be Amos Tutuola's cubicle and past the director's office, to the studio, where he could place his own message on the air: "Drop your stolen mandate, leave town, and take your reprobates with you."

Soyinka then escaped to the Eastern Region but was seized there, and eventually appeared in court on a charge of "armed robbery." The judge, sticking to the rule of law, threw that out. Yet it would not be so long before Soyinka would be in jail again, after he had made his very own attempt to avert the secession of what would become Biafra. (The head of the breakaway state had been his affluent acquaintance in the 1950s, when they were both spending youth years in Lagos.) He was hunted down, once more in Ibadan. More than two years later he would emerge from prison, in Kaduna. Soyinka offers his view of that period in *The Man Died*.

Soyinka's life and his location on the map of the world clearly again and again placed him in situations where the inclination to seize the day may have seemed rather natural. In Nigeria around 1960, there were the years of regime change, from colonial to postcolonial. Then there would be the disorders and rebellions of the later 1960s, and later yet the difficult years of military dictatorships. His country had areas of recurrent unrest: the Niger Delta again and again, parts of the

North. Moreover, this was a country with a history of blurred borders, and where the forces of global interconnectedness made such blurring, as well as border transgressions, more common yet. Weak structures may leave room for, even seem to demand, individual agency.

In his Nobel after-dinner speech in Stockholm, Soyinka referred to the Yoruba god Ogun as his own muse. What has been his relationship to Nigerian, and specifically Yoruba, cultural tradition? In a roundabout way, that will be the question for the remainder of this chapter.

We can only see that reference to Ogun, in the Swedish winter and trying *akvavit*, as rather playful. In that Soyinka seems rather consistent. The Yoruba pantheon and Yoruba mythology is a significant resource for his creativity, but he does not allow himself to be confined by it. In an early, oft-quoted critical response to the Négritude concept of Francophone African intellectuals, he found it too defensive: “A tiger does not proclaim its Tigritude, it jumps on its prey.” And later, when the prominent Nigerian literary critic Chinweizu argued that African writers should stick to their precolonial roots, treating all ideas, experiences, and practices dating from later periods as alien (perhaps in a way a surprising proposition, considering that Chinweizu had American academic degrees in his own cultural baggage), Soyinka (1993: 294) would respond that his own African world was “a little more intricate,” embracing “precision machinery, oil rigs, hydro-electricity, my typewriter, railway trains (not ‘iron snakes!’), machine guns, bronze sculpture, etc.” And he concluded that Chinweizu’s literary program amounted to “neo-Tarzanism.”⁵

Not so much later, in the digital era of the twenty-first century, that typewriter may already seem a bit quaint.

Yet despite his scorn for neo-Tarzanism, Soyinka’s concern for the African, Nigerian, and Yoruba heritage has also had a more serious, deeply felt dimension. To get to this, let us meet another public intellectual, from another era and another country. Sometime in the early decades of the twentieth century, in Vienna, an expectant audience is seated in front of a darkened stage. Then a strobe light comes on. There is Leo Frobenius, dressed in a leopard skin, shouting: “Africa lives!”⁶

Frobenius, explorer, scholar, and indeed public intellectual, had a showmanship side as well. It seems he performed widely in German-speaking parts of Europe. (A description like this may remind us of the Buffalo Bill show of America’s Wild West, touring in Europe a little earlier.) The son of a German lieutenant-colonel, he had developed an interest in Africa early, although it took some time before he had a

chance to go there. It was at a time when much of the continent seemed more or less up for grabs from the outside. The German empire had been a little late in this, although it had established itself with colonies of somewhat different types in the East, South, and West. When Leo Frobenius began traveling widely around the continent, his motives seem to have been a mix of scholarly and political at least some of the time. At some point rather early in World War I, he was apparently deported from Eritrea due to his subversive activities; Eritrea was an Italian possession, and not on the side of Germany. Apparently he had hoped to recruit Abyssinia, further inland (not yet known as Ethiopia), as a German ally. Indeed, Frobenius has been portrayed as a German counterpart of Lawrence of Arabia. The last German emperor, Wilhelm II, became one of his fans (although perhaps especially after the throne was lost).

But Frobenius was a scholar too.⁷ He wrote, but he also made careful drawings of people, scenes, and objects, which became important documentation of African cultures and societies as they were in his times. For one thing, Leo Frobenius was also at Ife, sacred site and major urban center of the Yoruba, and was very impressed with what he saw—particularly of the remains of the past, rather less with what it was under early twentieth-century colonialism. For a modest amount, he acquired an exquisite bronze sculpture of a head, described as the *Ori Olokun*, normally buried in the palace grounds between ritual occasions. Olokun was an ancestral goddess—or god, the gender seems a bit unclear—of the Yoruba (as the overall ethnic identity would come to be constituted), and also the goddess of the seas.

The resident, the high government officer in Ibadan, would not allow Frobenius to take the *Ori Olokun* out of British territory, so he confiscated it. From there on, the whereabouts of the ancient sculpture became a mystery. The object that later came to be exhibited in Ife itself was understood to be a mediocre copy. Frobenius, for his part, continued his journey westward. If Mariana, the heroine in Olinto's novel (see chapter 2) had been for real, she might have spotted him on his way along the coast, somewhere around Ouidah.

Then, on 30 January 1911, the *New York Times* had a report with the headline "German Discovers Atlantis in Africa." With Berlin as dateline, the news originated in Togo, a German colony at the time, stating that Leo Frobenius, who had reached there, could let the world know that he had found the site of the lost continent of Atlantis. While Ife is not explicitly mentioned, he based his assertion on his discovery of a bronze sculpture, evidently in that city.

This would go with his Big Picture of ancient African history, speculative, as much thinking about the continent's past was at the time: cultures could make their appearance, move, and then vanish. As he did not find the Ife that he had seen really worthy of ancestors capable of such creativity, the *Ori Olokun* and similar masterpieces must be somehow leftovers from an earlier civilization.

Back in Germany, now a republic, Frobenius collaborated for a while with Oswald Spengler, author of the bestselling *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. In Europe, this was a time of cultural pessimism. But Frobenius could be celebrated for his adventures and his views—"Africa lives!"—and become an ancestral figure himself for a later German anthropology.⁸ He died in 1938.

In his Nobel lecture, Soyinka referred to Frobenius and to his unwillingness to accept that bronze sculptures such as the *Ori Olokun* could have been the work of people like the Yoruba he met at Ife. Soyinka was also sharply critical of the way that the riches of non-European cultural heritages had been taken away from their origins to be exhibited in European museums. Later on, it is true, it has become a matter of international cultural policy to return at least some of those valuable or unique artifacts to their countries of origin. What Soyinka did not mention in his lecture, however, was that several years earlier, in a characteristic Soyinka activist style, he had engaged in a do-it-yourself project along such lines.⁹

This takes us back once more to Salvador, the Brazilian city from which (in chapter 2) the family of Olinto's Mariana had once departed for Lagos. Some time apparently in the late 1970s, one of Soyinka's Yoruba friends had come back, shaken, from a visit there: in a private gallery he had been shown the real *Ori Olokun*! It was there on a shelf, in a small exhibition room at the back of a local architect's home, along with diverse objects from various parts of the world, or from the artistic owner's hands. The Yoruba visitor, however, could not fail to recognize this sculpture.

Here another remarkable transnational scholar-adventurer enters the story: Pierre Verger.¹⁰ Born early in the twentieth century, Verger was a child of a prosperous French family, and had taken a liking to photography. He moved about in the world, mostly within his country's empire as it was between the world wars. But then he happened to visit the Bal Nègre, a celebrated midcentury Paris nightspot, and saw a ballet performance that impressed him greatly: African Americans dancing. Off he went to the Caribbean and to Latin America, and ended up in Salvador, where he would then spend most of his life, dying at age 94.

He was fascinated by the ubiquitous survivals of African religion, was initiated into a cult community, and became as much an ethnographer as a photographer.

Verger has been seen as an exemplar of the possibility, and perhaps sometimes intellectual risks, of “going native,” assimilating into a host culture. Yet it may well be that he was never quite a true believer in his Afro-Brazilian cult community. He may rather have appreciated its world view and its rituals intellectually and aesthetically, in a way that went with his photographic artistry.

Starting out from Salvador, he also made excursions to West Africa, mapping in writing and with his camera the striking similarities between Afro-Brazilian and Yoruba religious life. Without much in the way of formal academic training, he learned about this from local cult practitioners, and became a *babalawo*, a diviner. Belatedly, his French mother country offered him a doctoral degree at Sorbonne, and he held sometime professorships in Salvador as well as Nigeria—at the university in Ife.

So now Pierre Verger had been among the other guests at that architect’s home in Salvador, and when the Nigerian visitor saw the sculpture he thought he recognized, he asked Verger whether that was not *Ori Olokun*. And, very authoritatively, Verger confirmed that it was. When Soyinka’s friend asked how the world-famous, lost sculpture had ended up there, Verger placed his finger over his mouth, and whispered that he had brought it himself.

Ori Olokun had to be brought back to Nigeria, to Yorubaland—that was the shared opinion of Wole Soyinka and a small group of friends and co-conspirators. They met with General Obasanjo, military head of state at the time and, like Soyinka, an Abeokuta native, although at the time based at headquarters, Dodan Barracks, Lagos. He seemed to favor their plans, while remaining (as so often, according to Soyinka) rather enigmatic.

Their conclusion was that Soyinka, together with the friend who had first discovered the sculpture in its Salvador hiding place, would go there again, and at some moment, preferably unobserved, kidnap the ancestral goddess. As it happened, Pierre Verger would be in Nigeria at the time, on scholarly business. Arrangements were made to delay his return to Brazil—he was one of very few people who might see through the plans of the Nigerians, and who could disrupt them.

Soyinka and his helper arrived in Salvador, and Soyinka was fascinated by finding himself in something like another Yorubaland, at shrines and in cuisine. As it was some kind of holiday, the townspeople

seemed like lemmings to have left for the Atlantic beaches, and the architect-owner of the gallery was apparently among them. When he returned, however, he invited the Nigerian visitors for dinner, after showing them his collections. At some point, Soyinka managed to sneak back there and lift the *Ori Olokun* from the shelf into his camera bag.

On their way back to the hotel, he revealed what he had done to his surprised companion. Yet then almost immediately the triumph turned into puzzlement. That was not some heavy bronze sculpture he had seized. It was light, probably in clay. On their return journey to Africa they made a stopover in Senegal to have the object examined at a renowned research institute. It was confirmed that the appearance of the sculpture, and its measurements, were exactly those of the *Ori Olokun* (according to Frobenius's detailed field notes). What Soyinka also discovered at this examination, however, were two small, thin letters carved into the sculpture's neck: *BM*. British Museum. Apparently this was a well-done museum copy, perhaps sold at some time in the museum gift shop.

To make a long story short, Soyinka continued his quest. He was back in Nigeria for a while, and then went to London, to the storage rooms of the Museum of Mankind, the West End museum that had become the heir to the more exotic collections of the British Museum. Indeed, he was allowed to examine what was understood to be the real *Ori Olokun*. In a momentary fantasy, he thought of seizing the sculpture, escaping into the bustling street life outside, followed by white-coated museum staff. The "Stop the thief!" shouts would soon have the support of "the phlegmatic London bobbies on the beat blowing their whistles . . ."

But that was only a fantasy. Wole Soyinka's conclusion was that when his good Yoruba friend had first seen the *Ori Olokun* at the home of the Brazilian architect, Pierre Verger was a bit tipsy, in the party atmosphere, when he hinted that this was the original from Ife. If he had not done so, the story would have ended right there, hardly even becoming a story. As it was, Verger perhaps seemed less like a follower of Ogun, and more of Eshu, the Yoruba trickster figure.

After Soyinka recounted his adventure too, the authenticity of the sculpture in the Museum of Mankind was later certified, as far as is possible, by museum expertise. So the *Ori Olokun* is still in London.

Notes

1. Yet later, I could get a sense of Wole Soyinka's continued opinionated view of the contemporary world in David Pilling's (2017) lunch interview with him for the *Financial Times*—portraying him as “the Bohemian man of letters who doesn't give a damn.”
2. Dele Giwa was the editor of the *Newswatch* magazine, and had been investigating a case of drug dealing that possibly reached into high government circles. Soyinka's discussion of the events involved are in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006: 314–321).
3. Well-known plays like *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963) and *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) are from this period.
4. Part I of *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* is titled “Ogun and I.”
5. For Chinweizu's overall critical stance see Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike 1985. This author trio, for their part, in their preface launched a label for themselves as “*bolekaja* critics”—“outraged touts for the passenger lorries of African literature.” *Bolekaja* is a Yoruba expression for “Come down, let's fight!” shouted by mammy-wagon conductors at dissatisfied passengers already seated and protesting crowded seating or delayed departure. As the notion earned a certain popularity, it is a noteworthy case of cultural transfer from lorry park to literary debate. See on this also Appiah 1992: 56–60; Kanneh 1998: 38–42; and an editorial by Anyaegbunam (1993) in *Journal of Communication Inquiry*.
6. I have the description of a Frobenius performance from my friend and colleague Thomas Fillitz, of Vienna; he had not witnessed it himself but had it from oral tradition. For an account of the *Ori Olokun* affair with an emphasis on the Frobenius phase, see Fillitz 2011.
7. Frobenius's publications were mostly in German; but see the translated *The Childhood of Man*, first published in 1909 and then again in 1960 (in paperback, by a reputable publisher), described on the front cover as “A popular account of the Lives, Customs and Thoughts of the Primitive Races.” For a rather favorable account of his work and influence, including his later significance for the mid-twentieth century Presence Africaine circle of Francophone intellectuals, see Marchand 1997.
8. As German academic life reconstituted itself after World War II, Leo Frobenius was seen as a reasonably uncontroversial symbolic figure, so what he had started in Munich as the Research Institute for Cultural Morphology was now in Frankfurt am Main as the Frobenius Institute, which has remained a center of German anthropology.
9. Soyinka's account of this adventure is in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006: 190–221).
10. On Pierre Verger, see for example the obituary in the *New York Times*, 20 February 1996. For one thing, Verger (1960) had an article on the connections between Nigeria, Brazil, and Cuba in the very large, rich, special Independence issue of the government-sponsored journal *Nigeria* in 1960 (also including contributions by, among others, Cyprian Ekwensi, Onuora Nzekwu, and Ulli Beier).

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