



personality

Soyinka Returns Home, But Not Quietly

by Cameron Duodo

FOR four years, Nigeria's Nobel Prize-winning author Wole Soyinka roamed Western capitals, seeking support against military rule in Nigeria.

His life has been in danger several times, as agents of the late dictator, General Sani Abacha, tracked his footsteps in London, Rome and New York.

So Abacha's death in June lifted a weight off his shoulders. The new military ruler, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, appeared to be a man of liberal principles, who would not allow the machinery of the state to target such a gifted individual.

Sure enough, on a visit to the United Nations in New York last month, General Abubakar invited Soyinka and several other opposition leaders to meet with him. At the meeting, Abubakar personally asked Soyinka to return home. He did not need much prodding, and has just spent a fortnight in Nigeria.

Those who know Wole Soyinka would not have expected him to return

to Nigeria with his political opinions sheathed in kid gloves. He did not disapprove them.

His first port of call was the home of Chief Moshhood Abiola, winner of the 1993 presidential election, who died in detention in July this year. Both Abiola and his wife, Kudirat (who was murdered by Abacha agents in 1995) are buried in Abiola's home, and in visiting their graves, Soyinka made a political statement.

He was, in effect, criticising Abubakar for failing to release Abiola — who had not been allowed proper medical treatment in detention — and allowing him to die.

But Soyinka's coup de grace was delivered elsewhere: at a lecture he gave at the Nigerian Law School in Lagos. He told his audience: "There is a raging fire in the minds of many of our citizens, and we had better put it out before it leaps forth and consumes the nation." So sick is the body politic that even "fanatics of unity" have now been driven to a point where they "virtually spit on the name, Nigeria."

Likening the current state of Nigeria

to an edifice that is falling apart, Soyinka said the dilapidation is not being caused merely because the roof is faulty or there are cracks in the wall. He blamed its very foundations, primarily because the British, who "cobbled" the nation together, "falsified" the results of the census they took before granting Nigeria its independence in 1960. This falsification, Soyinka implied, enabled one region, the North, to monopolise power.

With such a foundation, Soyinka asked, "Do we express astonishment when the building crumbles gradually or implodes suddenly on itself?"

Nigeria can only be salvaged by calling its people together to a national conference, where they would discuss their future interrelationships, said Soyinka. He said the North is behaving like the "stomach" in a fable, which does no work itself yet sits the "centre" of the body and consumes everything that the other parts produce. He argued that Nigeria's government is over-centralised, causing widespread demands for the creating of new states and new local government areas.



WOLE SOYINKA: Writer returns after years of exile

"Some [demands] have been inscribed in blood and destruction," Soyinka pointed out, "while others merely fester, erupting from time to time like neglected boils on the hidden parts of the body. Is it, or is it not time for a concerted project that re-designs both the geographical and internal relation-

ships of such contested spaces?"

Speaking afterwards to the Lagos Guardian newspaper, Soyinka was asked whether the national conference he advocates would impede the programme by which the Abubakar government intends to hand over power to a democratically elected civilian government in May 1999.

He replied that the national conference and the transitional programme could run "side by side". The decisions taken at the national conference would be made available to the political parties that took part in the transitional programme. In any case, he added, nothing should prohibit the citizens of a country aspiring to democracy from sitting together at any time to discuss their political relationships.

Soyinka's proposal is certainly a challenge to the Abubakar government. Even as he spoke, agitation for a more equitable sharing of the proceeds from the country's oil resources rule took a violent turn in the oil-producing areas of the Niger delta.

In the oil town of Warri, for example, groups of Ijaw youths have armed

themselves and are fighting battles with their neighbours, the Itsekiris, over disputed, oil-rich lands. In the latest clashes between the two, several people were killed and scores of houses burnt down.

The Ijaw fighters are also targeting the operations of large oil companies, such as Shell and Chevron, whom they regard as the fellow conspirators of a federal government that cheats the people of a fair share of the resources from their lands, while ruining their environment.

The government has sent troops to Warri, and has made it clear that it will not allow the operations of the oil companies to be impeded by violent mobs. But the knee-jerk reaction of sending in the troops and jack-booting everyone into submission, may not work in this instance, due to the widespread nature of the discontent.

Abubakar may therefore have no option but to listen to his Nobel Laureate, after all. Certainly, he has nothing to lose if he decides that, as Soyinka passionately believes, "jaw-jaw is better than war-war". — Gemini News

fiction

The Abandonment

by Saef Morshed

Continued from last week

WITH the door shut, the room had become a fortress where a teenager lay beyond despair and in the plight of fading away to obscurity. Opening the door would make the walls translucent and let outside's surroundings and emanations infiltrate her room. More importantly though it gave Susan the opportunity to escape this void, this room full of teenager's woes and regret for talking an animated being so pleasing to the eye and so facetious to the mouth, but alas with a deleterious punch to end this falseness of opinion.

A sharp left after leaving the bedroom would lead into her parents haven where she could confess her wrong do-

ing and be hastily lead to hospital by her half-dressed father. But what about the shame bestowed on them by this night of sheer licentiousness as played by the cherished daughter? Doctors of Saturday night fatigue-due to dealing with Saturday night alcoholics-giving their nods of disapproval at parents who should have taken more care while on a more embarrassing note, bestowing pamphlets illustrating the effects of these pernicious substances with photos of teenagers looking as though they had been hooked up to heroin with their cadaverous faces and jutting eyes.

A multiple choice scenario had now come into Susan's thoughts:

- (a) Should she make haste to her parents
- (b) Should she wait another ten minutes

(c) Should she jump out of the window and end this night of terror.

Almost immediately she latched onto as the only sane decision leading to her making a dash for their bedroom, the dash though being more like a drunken sprawl than an athletic sprint. As the bodily form reached the creaking corridor, instead of making a brisk left, an even swifter right was made to the bathroom where the door was shut and the toilet seat perched upon to enter another void from the outer world. This act of cowardice was made in a vain attempt to alert her parents that their precious daughter was still awake at four o'clock in the morning. Alas no voices were transmitted within Susan's earshot. Employment stresses of the day had left them debilitated to the point of closing their shutters and en-

tering their own voids.

How was she now to get them to notice that she was still awake. The most obvious thought was to flash the toilet and let its cascades of noise resound across the corridor. With this thought she lunged for the toilet handle. But alas, something was holding her back. The paranoia of what would be the aftermath of the confessions arose again. With this distressing vision she let go of the handle in the same hesitant manner as leaving a lover in her hour of need.

All of a sudden this despondent girl could feel the sensation of her legs submerging into the toilet seat, hallucinating that they had now blended in with the avocado coloured scheme of the bathroom. Immediately Susan arose, lurching over to place her hands on the bathroom sink, while her breakable

face with transfixed heroin eyes stared at the mirror above it with muscles clenched and skin seemingly translucent. The nostrils of this shattered portrait seemed to tighten the skin on the bridge of the nose making its profile more Roman in shape. From these enlarged nostrils, misty smoke seemed to be filtering out, not like a dragon exhausted of flame, but more like the mist that was exhale by a person's mouth in the freezing cold. Susan upon this observation began to blow frantically. What was now coming out was not this mist but instead waves of smoke that matched the fumes of a cigar.

Unable to cope with this repulsive vision she buried her head with her hands, shaking it in anger against her palms at the stupidity of what she had done.

Soon this rage would turn into grief and bewilderment, making her eyes close their shutters to let stream the tears of regret. During this sobbing process, Susan lifted her fragile head and once again gazed at the bathroom mirror expecting to see a face dampened with wetness. However, all she was able to witness were eyes of sorrow but without its eventual discharge. No visible weeping was apparent. Dehydration had occurred and thus there was no evidence to support this acquittal of guilt. The ashes of the sexually active penguin had denied her of this relief.

Susan turned to stare at the frosted bathroom window where the morning sun was coming through in a sleepy manner. The acid tab was still in her heart and mind and showed no sign of leaving that Sunday morning.

lecture

Cultural Pluralism

by Prof Anisuzzaman

Continued from last week

THIS does not undermine the achievements of the United States which has always been cited as the best example of cultural assimilation. It was no mean success that immigrants from so many European and non-European countries, with different cultures and diverse background, could accept one language and develop a keen sense of a separate social life. Most of the immigrants who landed in America left their own countries for good and voluntarily jumped into the melting pot. The sense of belonging to America was reinforced by the arts and letters produced in the States even by those who had learnt their skills in Europe. Despite the prejudice against the black, Negro spirituals and Jazz became very much a part of American culture. Restrictions imposed on immigrants from certain areas who were taken to be less assimilable also helped develop solidarity. This, however, could not totally do away with discrimination against the black and Hispanic population. One of the prices of this solidarity was paid by American Indians who were not only displaced, but relegated to reservations.

Across the northern border, Canadians did not produce the kind of fusion that USA did. They developed a bi-cultural society with the English-speaking Protestant majority and French-speaking Catholic minority. When Britain acquired the territory from France in the eighteenth century, it allowed the French population to retain their language, laws, usage and customs. Practically, no attempt was made at synthesizing and the partnership has not been an easy one. Language is an issue on which this uneasiness has often showed itself.

Belgium has also got a language problem. The country was founded a century and a half ago but a thousand-year old linguistic boundary separates Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north from French Wollonia in the south. Many scholars hold that the 1963 laws, fixing the linguistic boundary, have virtually broken up the unitary Belgian state.

That brings us to the language issue throughout the world. Many countries have heterogeneity of languages and this has given rise to problems some of which have been solved in a number of ways while some others have remained unsolved. As in Mexico, Spanish re-

mains dominant in Peru while Portuguese occupies the same position in Brazil. Paraguay practises bilingualism (Guarani and Spanish). So does Kenya (Swahili and English) while Senegal practises trilingualism (French, Wolof which is the *lingua franca*, and a mother-tongue). 124 African languages and dialects are spoken in Cameroon and Arabic is held in high esteem, but education is given in English because there is no common vernacular. Similarly, mother tongues in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) greatly vary in terms of standardization which complicate the problem of imparting education. Only ten per cent Tanzanians speak Swahili which is the national language and, as a result, English has continued to be important. In Singapore, a small minority speak Mandarin which is being officially promoted at the cost of Hokkien, a major *lingua franca*, and Malay, and the assignment of mother tongues has complicated matters a great deal. Mandarin is also being promoted in Taiwan where it is the language of the minority and Fukiense and Hakka are threatened with extinction. Basque and Catalan have been suppressed in Spain for a long time, which contributed to the rise of Basque separatism and the movement for political and cultural autonomy for the Catalonians. Recent concessions given to the autonomy movements have satisfied the Catalonians but not the Basques.

These examples are perhaps adequate to bring home the question of accommodation of and prejudice against other cultures and the possibilities and problems of practising genuine pluralism within the given system of nation-state.

Let us now take a look at the cultural situation obtaining at home and nearer — in the South Asian area. People here and also outsiders have, time and again, referred to the unique feature in the cultural life of the subcontinent — unity in diversity. Sometimes however the wood is lost for the trees — diversity becomes so obvious as to obstruct the view of unity.

The sense of unity was inspired by the political union forced under the British rule, by the perception of a geographical unit lying between the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean, and by the consciousness of a continuum in history. Many would attribute the unity to Hinduism, others to the similarity in the manner in which the truth was sought after by votaries, from the

Vedantic visionary down to the Baul mendicant, while some recount the fact, for whatever its worth, that the frontiers of the Mughal empire were, most of the time, either defended or extended by Rajput generals. There was also the realization that the mingling of different peoples and interaction of diverse cultures had set in a process of assimilation which led to syncretism such as one finds in the *Bhakti* movement or in the Sufi-Yoga tradition. The process resulted in the creation of a mosaic of composition culture. If the foundation of Hinduism was laid by the Vedic people, many of the sacred animals and trees and the Mother goddess came from the Harappans. The Mauryans developed stupa, the Mughals architecture and miniature painting. The Muslims introduced many musical instruments and paper while the Europeans gave the steam-engine and the printing press. Rice and cotton were the gifts of the pre-Aryans, and the Portuguese brought in potato, pineapple and tobacco. It was because of the materialization of a composite culture that disparate objects and ideas can still be identified as Indian. Over everything else, Indian unity was a shared feeling, a lofty vision and a fond dream.

The spirit of this unity, however, was far from a mono-cultural one. Pluralism existed and was encouraged. Viewing from another point, one realizes that India, before the advent of the British, came to be nearly united only under Chandragupta Maurya, Muhammad bin Tughlaq and Aurangzeb. During the rest of her history she remained fragmented: Megasthenes came to know of the existence of 118 kingdoms in the fourth century B.C. Even the great mass of land and waterways may be divided into three distinct geographical areas: the northern plains, the Deccan and the far south. The people came from different races and stocks. Many cultural trends, from far and near, confluenced. Several faiths were developed and even each of these appears to be pluralistic. Hindu religion and philosophy have so many doctrines and systems, Buddhism has its vehicles (*yanas*), Islam has several sects, different schools of jurisprudence and multiple Sufi-orders; Sikhism is open to several interpretations; and Christianity had many churches. Different social groups still follow a variety of social practices and life-cycle ceremonies.

While pluralism was considered valid and diversity respected, conflicts

and polarizations were not unknown. It was on the basis of one of the diversities — religion — that the demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent was made and realized in the foundation of Pakistan. But once Pakistan was established, the unity forged in the new state on the basis of religion was proved to be ephemeral. The rulers of Pakistan tried to impose monoculturalism in a situation of cultural plurality. The Bengali-speaking majority of Pakistan did everything in their power to meet this onslaught on their culture: sacrificing lives to make Bengali a state language, resisting the bid to introduce Arabic script for Bengali, protesting an attempt to divide their cultural heritage on religious lines, and reviving traditional cultural events and festivities. As they stressed upon their Bengali identity, they also developed a secular attitude which they were bound to do in the circumstances. Political frustrations and economic grievances came to be added to the reawakened sense of cultural identity and finally led to the birth of Bangladesh.

We were so happy and contented at the near homogeneity of our linguistic and cultural milieu that most of us were completely taken by surprise when fellow citizens from the hill areas claimed that they were different from the Bengalees. In order to achieve their demands for political autonomy and for recognition of separate cultural identity, the hillsmen of Bangladesh, who belong to at least 13 tribes having distinct ways of life, now claim themselves to be a nation. In the event of their success, the possibility of which seems to be remote at the moment, the separateness of each of the ethnic groups, I am sure, will surface.

The other unpredictable development in Bangladesh has been the surreptitious return of religion in politics which cannot but work as a divisive factor. The people never asked for it, but the rulers, for their political gains, first, deleted the principle of secularism from the Constitution and, then, introduced in it a provision making Islam the State religion. These measures have not only demolished one of the pillars on which the State of Bangladesh was founded, but they have also divided the people along religious line and, that too, on an unequal basis.

Undoubtedly, the hillsmen belong to a different culture from the Bangalees, whereas the religious factor is but only one element of Bengali culture. Cultural

pluralism demands that we accord an equal place to the cultures of the ethnic groups along with the mainstream culture; it also demands that one religious group does not dominate the others. Our experience in the last half a century has been this that it is easier to forge unity against a common enemy — say, during the nationalist movements of one kind or another — than to maintain it afterwards — say, for the purpose of nation-building or constructing a multinational state.

Pakistan cannot afford to be happy at the discomfiture of Bangladesh, for she has her share of the problem even after having got rid of the irritants in the east. She still tends to practise monoculturalism which faces challenge from Sind. The relegation of Ahmadis to the position of non-Muslims, the conflict between Shias and Sunnis and the fundamentalist demand to also declare the Shias as non-Muslims point out to the danger of primacy of religion in culture and in the making of a nation or a state. Many in Pakistan and their fellow thinkers in Bangladesh and elsewhere could take a lesson from the movement for Arab nationalism which not only ignored the boundaries of the State but also transcended loyalty to Islam and led to the demise of the Pan-Islam movement.

Cultural pluralism seems also to have failed in Sri Lanka where the Buddhist Sinhalese majority is locked in an armed conflict with Hindu Tamil minority whose ethnic separatism has taken the shape of a violent demand for Tamil *Elam*.

Scholars cannot decide whether India should be seen as a multilingual nation or a multinational state. There are nearly a thousand languages, dialects and mother-tongue varieties in India while her Constitution schedules fifteen major languages, accounting for speeches of nearly 90 per cent of the population, to which the Sahitya Akademi has added, for its own purpose, English and four other Indian languages. There is a great divide between the Indo-Aryan languages in the north and the Dravidian languages in the south and a common language for all-Indian communication, a position for which Hindi has been marked, has not yet developed successfully. The borders of the states in India were drawn on Linguistic consideration and a three language formula (Hindi, English and mother-tongue or, for the Hindi-speak-

ers, another Indian language) was introduced both for practical purpose and to ease the tension on the language issue.

For a country like India which is made of people belonging to many language, different faiths, various ethnic groups and diverse social practices, cultural pluralism is the most natural course to pursue. Unfortunately, India has been plagued by communal conflicts (involving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs), caste violence (Bihar and elsewhere), and separatist movements with violent overtones (Assam, Nagaland, Punjab and Kashmir). The causes of these developments are many in which concern for perceived loss of cultural identity has played a significant role. For instance, in Punjab, the Sikh-Punjabi-Gurumukhi combine was pitted against the Hindu-Hindi-Devanagari association.

Just as I am grieved at the loss of secularism in my country, I find the rise of *Hindutva*, as explained and practised by certain quarters in India, as a frightening threat to her secularism. In this view, Hinduism is a monolithic and militant faith, which, perhaps, is not quite the perception of others, and it is equated with India, which, perhaps, is the last thing expected in a culturally plural society. But India is, and has been for centuries, a plural society in more ways than one, and when one boasts of a long cultural continuity in India, unparalleled in history, he speaks of a culture which originated in pre-Vedic times, which was shaped by many peoples and diverse influences, including those seen by the exponents of *Hindutva* as outsiders or others, and which, one hopes is not going to disintegrate under any pressure in the near future. Secularism, as Amartya Sen rightly points out, is an inseparable part of a more comprehensive idea of an integrally pluralist society, and a very important aspect of the recognition of the larger idea of a heterogeneous identity.

I have said more than enough on secularism. It was not to you alone that I was addressing, I was also taking to myself and my countrymen for whom, I believe, secularism is equally indispensable for building up a humane society. Looking at South Asia and beyond today, I cannot get rid of a lingering suspicion, which I hate to admit, that, as we understand cultural pluralism or the norms of a plural society more and more, we tend to value it less and less.