Launched in March 2012, the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) supports independent African research on conflict-affected countries and neighboring regions of the continent, as well as the integration of high-quality African research-based knowledge into global policy communities. In order to advance African debates on peacebuilding and promote African perspectives, the APN offers competitive research grants and fellowships, and it funds other forms of targeted support, including strategy meetings, seminars, grantee workshops, commissioned studies, and the publication and dissemination of research findings. In doing so, the APN also promotes the visibility of African peacebuilding knowledge among global and regional centers of scholarly analysis and practical action and makes it accessible to key policymakers at the United Nations and other multilateral, regional, and national policymaking institutions.

“African solutions to African problems” is a favorite mantra of the African Union, but since the 2002 establishment of the African Peace and Security Architecture, the continent has continued to face political, material, and knowledge-related challenges to building sustainable peace. Peacebuilding in Africa has sometimes been characterized by interventions by international actors who lack the local knowledge and lived experience needed to fully address complex conflict-related issues on the continent. And researchers living and working in Africa need additional resources and platforms to shape global debates on peacebuilding as well as influence regional and international policy and practitioner audiences. The APN Working Papers series seeks to address these knowledge gaps and needs by publishing independent research that provides critical overviews and reflections on the state of the field, stimulates new thinking on overlooked or emerging areas of African peacebuilding, and engages scholarly and policy communities with a vested interest in building peace on the continent.
Wole Soyinka is one of the most significant writers to emerge out of Africa. His creative repertoire includes drama, poetry, fiction, memoir, criticism, music, film, journalism, and translation. In 1986, he became the first African to win a Nobel Prize for intellectual achievement. Despite his extraordinary output as an author, an area where he is equaled by no other African writer and few writers anywhere, it is the humanistic energy in Soyinka’s works and his decisively political acts that render him a fascinating subject in the project of conflict resolution and peace. Indeed, he has earned serious consideration of his role as an advocate for peace in Nigeria, Africa, and beyond. This paper, conceived as a sort of homage to a writer who has been a major ethical inspiration to me, depends largely on an analysis of Soyinka’s texts and actions and, to a lesser degree, on my extensive interview with him in May 2018.

From the outset, we must underscore the paradoxical—controversial even—nature of Soyinka’s peace project. Bearing in mind the nature of the Nobel laureate’s activist interventions, especially within Nigeria’s political space, it would amount to oversimplification to declare him an agent of peace. Soyinka’s stature as a veritable social conscience within and outside Nigeria is fairly incontestable, but he poses an undeniable problem to a certain con-
ception of peace. The heart of the conceptual conundrum is that Soyinka’s rhetoric and acts often leave the impression of an explosive agenda. In an interview with John Agetua, for example, he lamented, “We haven’t begun actually using words to punch holes inside people. But let’s do our best to use words and style when we have the opportunity—to arrest the ears of normally complacent people; we must make sure we explode something inside them which is a parallel of the sordidness which they ignore outside.”

This language hints at the nature of Soyinka’s critique of peace. His is a prophetic voice that demands not peace at all costs but a peace founded on justice. And therein lies what gives him the appearance of reveler in conflict and the particular quality of his peace advocacy. If he is an espouser of peace, he reveals that compulsion most eloquently in his famously truculent rhetoric against injustice. For example, he discounts dialogue as a response to the scourge of violent attacks by the Islamist insurgent group Boko Haram, and to coordinated murderous sieges perpetrated by herdsmen. “The rampaging herdsmen have got to be neutralized,” he said during our interview. He added, “They do not understand dialogue. Boko Haram has got to be neutralized militarily.” His rationale was that it was unproductive to invoke dialogue with a group that “does not recognize dialogue” or to deploy rationality in addressing “those festering but peripheral issues which do not subject themselves to the rational process, to dialogue, to even the offering of alternative options.” Still, Soyinka made it clear that, in addressing other disaffected groups amenable to dialogue, a model of negotiation ought to be brought to bear. “We need a genuine, authentic, inclusive national conference,” he emphasized to me.

There is another reason why it seems contentious to declare Soyinka a champion of peace. His everyday public image is often that of a man who craves self-directed drama. He appears to seize many an opportunity to declare war on a steady parade of foes: some, powerful figures, others more or less inconsequential. He has railed against President Donald Trump’s xenophobic utterances with the same acid tongue he has visited on nameless social media trolls.

How do we account for this seemingly contradictory quality in a man who, arguably more than any other African writer in over five decades, has come to embody both a combative spirit and a quest for justice? Only a handful of African writers and intellectuals, among them Wangari Maathai, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Robert Serumaga, Micere Mugo, Dennis Brutus, Jack Mapan-
je, Chenjerai Hove, and Ken Saro-Wiwa have the activist credentials to be grouped with Soyinka in several key regards. One factor is their commitment to a social cause; the other is the price they paid—often detention and exile. As the South African writer and fellow Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer argued in an essay honoring Soyinka, “We have had many writers in Africa who have been moved to act physically as well as write, but Soyinka is the supreme and splendid example of the writer meeting the demands of his time beyond intellectual obligations as they are generally understood.”

Soyinka stands out among activist intellectuals in at least two important ways. One is the sustained quality—which is to say, the enduring character—of his engagement in social struggles. For comparative illustration, let us compare Soyinka’s activist arc to Saro-Wiwa’s, another writer-turned activist. The latter gained international attention by highlighting the environmental blight suffered by his fellow Ogoni in Nigeria’s oil-rich delta. In late 1995, a military tribunal convicted Saro-Wiwa and his co-defendants of murder charges many considered trumped up. The tribunal sentenced the defendants to death by hanging. The outcome was widely viewed as fixed, an obvious scheme to silence Saro-Wiwa’s effective campaign for Ogoni statehood, his case for local control of oil resources, and his exposure of the predatory collaboration between Nigeria’s military despots and oil corporations.

His martyrdom notwithstanding, Saro-Wiwa’s activism would pale beside Soyinka’s. For more than five decades, Soyinka has been identified with numerous causes. These include efforts to redress electoral fraud, ecological degradation, police and military abuse of civilians, and various forms of human rights abuses. The other distinguishing aspect of Soyinka’s work is the expansive geographic breadth of his activism. Peter Benson captures the dynamic nature of Soyinka’s activism. In *Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa*, Benson notes that during his time as editor of Transition, Soyinka’s “militancy was to be international in its scope, Pan-African in its sympathies, and absolute in its racial identity.” It is a point that the Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare takes up in “Wole Soyinka and the Atunda Ideal: a Reading of Soyinka’s Poetry.” According to Osundare, “The more Soyinka got absorbed by African history, with its unending saga of humiliation, dispossession, and impoverishment, the wider the geography of commitment became.” He adds: “The more [Soyinka] watched the hopes and promises of independence flagrantly squandered by a treacherous African power elite and their foreign backers, the more vociferous,
more articulate his voice of courageous dissent; the more desperate his search for a strategy of transformation."\(^5\)

The Kenyan writers Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Mugo are known for the courage with which they fought a repressive regime in their country. Uganda’s Serumaga used the tool of veiled art before ultimately taking up arms against the brutal General Idi Amin. Where Soyinka excels is in deploying his art and galvanizing other resources in a crusade-like struggle against injustice, especially dehumanizing acts, in different parts of the world.

The timing of Soyinka’s skewering of Idi Amin was instructive. It came at a time when many African intellectuals were still open to courting Amin, underestimating or misapprehending the dictator’s devastation of Ugandans. While some Africans romanticized the buffoonish general as a much-needed antidote to Euro-American exploitation, Soyinka saw through the despot’s gimmicks. In the play *A Play of Giants*, as well as several essays and talks, Soyinka denounced Amin’s bloody reign of terror and reproved his fellow Africans’ silence in the face of Amin’s gallery of horrors, deprecating what he aptly called “Africa’s sleepy conscience.”\(^6\) In the pages of *Transition* magazine, the future Nobel laureate dismissed the canard that Amin was a victim of the international media, “a misunderstood hero of the African peoples, a rough diamond whose unusual style has earned him the disapproval of a few bourgeois-mannered co-heads of state.” He further declaimed: “Amin is *not* a man of the people; he is a man against the people; he is not so much human as anti-man.”\(^7\)

There is now no doubt about the prophetic accuracy of his judgment of Amin. In fact, the directness of his indictment and the unsparing tone of its delivery underlined the clarity of his diagnosis and his principled opposition to the Amin phenomenon. The relative geographic remoteness of the arena—Uganda, in this case—did not make a difference to Soyinka. What stood out was his readiness to combat cruelty and other species of evil wherever they manifest themselves. It was as if he ripped away the mask Amin used to beguile, mislead, and rationalize the gruesome nature of his politics.

The absence of an ideological litmus test is a facet of Soyinka’s indignation at the callous exercise of power. On the roster of despots he has denounced can be found the one-time avowed Marxist dictator of Ethiopia, Mengistu Haile Mariam, a mass murderer; Zaire’s Mobutu Sese Seko, a stooge of Western powers whose self-aggrandizing taste for European castles, exotic
automobiles, and other ostentatious objects cost his country billions of dollars; the ill-fated Master-Sergeant Doe of Liberia; a populist regime led by Captain Jerry Rawlings in Ghana; the grandly deluded Jean Bedel Bokassa of Central African Republic; Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea; and even the once admired—but all-too fallible—Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

What should be clear from this account is how Soyinka’s conception of peace is always built on the solid foundation of justice. Owing to this commitment, he has negated peace-seeking initiatives that dispense with some measure of requisite restitution. In *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, he insists that it “is mandatory that we learn of the contents of Mobutu’s Swiss vaults, but even more essential to national well-being and its capacity for transformation must be considered an exposition of the contents of Idi Amin’s refrigerator.” The reference was to the Ugandan despot reportedly storing the body parts of some of his victims in his freezer. Soyinka’s book also mounts an unsparing criticism of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which offered immunity to South Africans who committed acts of torture during the apartheid-era in exchange for their free confession and expression of remorse. Even as he concedes some value in confessions, Soyinka finds the policy wanting in a critical respect—the absence of restitution. He wonders whether the open admission of what was already known would suffice to “truly heal society?” After asking whether the undertaking could truly reconcile the warring parties within South Africa, he responds in the negative. “An ingredient is missing in this crucible of harmonization and that ingredient is both material and moral,” he argues. The material element corresponds to restitution, or reparation; the moral dimension is profoundly demonstrated in remorse, repentance, and acceptance of responsibility.

Soyinka’s passionate involvement in advancing the cause of justice and peace on the African continent is, one must emphasize, one aspect of a broader, more global concern. He never hesitated to engage when, in 1989, Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced a fatwa—a death sentence—on the Indo-British author Salman Rushdie. Rushdie’s crime was that he wrote *The Satanic Verses*, a novel that some Muslims felt blasphemed Prophet Muhammad. The fatwa sparked a tension that affected the literary, religious, and political realms. Outraged by the Ayatollah’s assault on the freedom to write, Soyinka called the Iranian cleric “a sick and dangerous man who has long forgotten the fundamental tenets of Islam.” He warned, “If Salman Rushdie dies, then his work must be unleashed upon an expand-
ing readership by every available means.” He also recommended that the Ayatollah “be punished for his arrogance, for his hubris and for the implicit blasphemy in his arrogation of a supreme will.”

That straightforward condemnation of the fatwa at a time many other African writers chose to remain timorous, silent, or too guarded, testified to Soyinka’s steely resolve to combat forces determined to curtail freedom, cheapen lives, or otherwise imperil human dignity. His boldness in speaking out was a defiance with potentially grave dangers. Indeed, following widespread publication of Soyinka’s denunciation, Islamic protesters within Nigeria called for his death.

Such threats never deterred Soyinka although he has sometimes tempered his rhetoric, and, on occasion, announced his decision to retire from public battles. Even so, he remains a major scourge of dehumanizing forces—at the national, continental and global levels. He has located his adversaries within the formal political economy of nation-states. In recent years, however, Soyinka has voiced increasing concern over a different kind of foe: those whose identity, for strategic and other reasons, is amorphous, shadowy, or even invisible. These secretive vectors of fear and violence are the militant groups fueled by an agenda of religious domination, ethnic triumphalism, caste superiority, or geopolitical separatism. In Climate of Fear, Soyinka characterizes these shadowy forces, whose visible mark is rendered in the horrific signature of their acts of terror, as “the quasi-state.”

Soyinka specifies that the formal state, “in its dictatorial or belligerent mutation, represents power at its crudest.” He realizes, however, that the grotesque violations wrought by quasi-state militants frequently strike a deeper, more unsettling fear in humanity’s collective psyche. In Climate of Fear he makes that argument with characteristic aplomb:

Gruesome as we may find the histories of formal dictatorships both of the left and of the right, however, it is to be doubted that the fear engendered by such regimes ever succeeded in percolating through to a visceral level as the totally unpredictable state-in-waiting, one that repudiates even the minimal codes of accountability that are, admittedly, often breached by the formal states.

Clearly, Soyinka’s contention is borne out by deadly attacks launched by members of the Islamist group, Boko Haram, who often detonate explo-
sives in public places, including churches and mosques. More recently, in what Soyinka has described as acts of ethnic cleansing, heavily armed Fulani herdsmen have launched murderous nighttime attacks on sleeping communities across several states. Beyond Nigeria, Soyinka’s argument is also validated by the darkening climate in Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Kenya, and Yemen—countries beset by indiscriminate deadly attacks that often target civilians.

Soyinka’s decades-long career as a crusader for justice began in his undergraduate days at University College, Ibadan. In 1952, he co-founded an anti-elitist fraternal organization known variously as Pyrates Confraternity or National Association of Seadogs. The group’s quasi-idealistic agenda included the “eradication of...various forms of institutional decadence that pervaded the students’ environment at the time.”

The evolution of Soyinka’s irreverent ethos and his subsequent dramatic acts in pursuit of justice have often put him at odds with all manner of “anti-humans” [to adapt a term from his inventive repertoire]. His readiness to combat injustice has sometimes left the impression that he is a conflict-monger, not a peace agent. Yet, this paper makes the case that his concern for peace is best demonstrated by the fervency of his quest for justice, because he recognizes that the espousal of justice is an inescapable expression of a commitment to peace. Far from representing a split in his ethical practice, the two concerns—justice and peace—are harmoniously fused and form an organic, integrated worldview. What matters to Soyinka most is to safeguard the human, wherever s/he is located, from undue depredation.

This commitment shows up as a recurrent trope in the author’s prodigious output of essays. In his formal Nobel lecture, intriguingly titled “This Past Must Address Its Present,” Soyinka dwells on the racist blight that still held Southern Africa in thrall. That particular blight produced a pathological creed that justified discounting black humanity. Soyinka’s lecture contrasts Africans’ much vaunted capacity for forgetting and foregoing historical atrocities against Europeans’ unyielding and exacting retentiveness of historical wrongs. He warns:

On that testing ground which, for us, is Southern Africa, that medieval camp of biblical terrors and primitive suspicions, a choice must be made by all lovers of peace: either to bring it into the modern world, into a rational state of
being within that spirit of human partnership—a capacity for which has been so amply demonstrated by every liberated black nation on our continent—or to bring it abjectly to its knees by ejecting it, in every aspect, from humane recognition, so that it caves in internally, through the strategies of its embattled majority. Whatever the choice, this inhuman affront cannot be allowed to pursue our twentieth-century conscience into the twenty-first, that symbolic coming-of-age which peoples of all cultures appear to celebrate with rites of passage...The Prize is the consequent enthronement of its complement: universal suffrage, and peace.¹⁵

Encapsulated in that concluding paragraph of his Nobel lecture is a defining strand of Soyinka’s ethical stance. As a combatant for policies and acts that enhance humane values, a man whose voice is often incisive, courageous, and prophetic, he anticipates and proclaims peace. Yet, it is always a peace contingent upon—and built on the solid foundation of—justice. In the absence of a shared desire for and commitment to justice, peace can only be, at best, illusory. With this fact foregrounded, it becomes clear that Soyinka’s interwoven roles as writer, intellectual and activist highlight his deployment of art, mobilization of philosophical insight, and expenditure of time and energy in pursuit of a just—and therefore peaceful—world.

One of Soyinka’s most anthologized claims, taken from his prison memoir, _The Man Died_, asserts, “The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny.”¹⁶ It is a clear articulation of the writer-activist’s ethical compass and practice. In fact, the mantra-like statement neatly sums up Soyinka’s visceral reaction to oppressive acts. In my view, there is a greater moment in a kindred testament that appears later in the same memoir. First, Soyinka invokes Adolf Joffe’s note to Trotsky just before committing suicide: “Human life has meaning only to that degree and as long as it is lived in the service of humanity. For me humanity is infinite.” Afterward, he offers a signal elaboration: “For me, justice is the first condition of humanity.”¹⁷

That statement appears to function as Soyinka’s navigational tool, shaping his local and global interventions in solidarity with victims of injustice. In an interview with the Italian scholar and translator Alessandra Di Maio, Soyinka mapped the broad arc of his quest for justice. Di Maio asked:

Your works convey your awareness of being not only Nigerian, but also African. Your references to South Africa, for instance, recur in your essays but also in your poetry—_Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems_ is one example, but I’m
also thinking about Mozambique, which you evoke in the longer poem *Ogun Abibimañ*. Have you acquired this ‘African’ awareness or were you born with it?

Soyinka responded:

I have acquired it, of course, and early on, through exposure. But Africa is only a logically closer zone of identification with humanity than elsewhere. I tend to intervene literarily and actively with victims of the anti-human scourge no matter where, and with the same measure of indignation and commitment—former Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Palestine, the Caribbean, North Korea (the largest slave encampment in world’s history) and in the current slaughter house called Syria. My work in the creation of *Cities of Asylum*, a global network for persecuted writers, is only a physical expression of my remedial interventions.18

Soyinka’s activist inspiration has a long, familial pedigree. His parents, as well as his famous aunt Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, were active in Nigeria’s anti-colonial struggle. We may fairly speculate that Soyinka’s deep-rooted hatred of injustice owes its roots to his childhood in the 1940s, a time of awakening revolutionary ferment in a colonized Nigeria. Growing up in the hilly town of Abeokuta, he had the fortune of being a witness to the dramatic resistance against the extortionist taxation and other strictures of British colonial power. One of the most poignant and emotionally resonant passages in his childhood memoir, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, recounts how irate Egba women stormed the palace of the Alake, the area’s traditional ruler, to revolt over the abusive tax burden imposed on them. He portrays himself as an often curious, if unobtrusive, eavesdropper on the women’s weekly meetings. In fact, he served as the restive women’s “young teacher”, courier extraordinary, scout, and general factotum.”19 He happened to be in the vital center of action as the clash played out between the women on the one hand, and the Alake, the Alake’s council, and the British district officer on the other. At his young, impressionable age, the precocious Soyinka saw modeled for him the necessity of rejecting the predations of power, the imperative of raising one’s voice against injustice, and, the reality that a resolute and organized resistance could catalyze resistance to a ruthless power.

In his mature years Soyinka has consistently projected the same fearlessness displayed by the untrammeled women of Egbaland. But there is an instructive difference. The women fought to ward off a colonial policy—name-
ly taxation—that directly impinged on their lives, pauperizing them and their families. On his part, Soyinka has often demanded justice—or the redress of injustice—in situations where he was not personally affected. A clarification should be made here: in rejecting the seduction of silence and celebrating justice, Soyinka redefines injustice as an objective affront to each human, wherever it surfaces.

Implicitly, then, national boundaries, like ethnic and religious affiliations, have little import for Soyinka. Instead, such boundaries merely represent undue encroachments on the essential humanistic plane on which the case for justice—the condition for peace—must rest. In numerous lectures and interviews, he has disavowed any affection for the “nation,” be it his native Nigeria or any other. Instead, he trains his eye on “humanity” as the site and focus of moral action, including every struggle for liberation and enlargement. He elucidates this point in The Man Died: “Partly because the human factor is the most demonstrable determinant, I caution myself and try substituting peoples for nations. It is better to believe in people than in nations. In moments of grave doubts it is essential to cling to the reality of peoples; these cannot vanish, they have no questionable a priori—they exist.”

In “Climates of Art,” published in Art, Dialogue, and Outrage, he refuses to acknowledge any grounds for moral indifference in a world beset by terrors. He argues, “And what is truly painful...is that the moral right of indifference—even if it were possible still to be immune from the effects—these moral rights are being eroded by a common climate of fear which is engendered by internal acts of states against the humanity of their citizens.” He then poses the question: “In short—have I a moral right today, being the citizen I am of present-day Nigeria, do I have the moral right to write verses condemning atomic tests in the South Pacific?” Part of his answer, predicted by the trajectory of his impressive credentials in activism, is that the so-called “outside world” is “not that much outside.” He pursues this line of inquiry at a more abstract level in the essay, “The Credo of Being and Nothingness,” also included in Art, Dialogue, and Outrage. He asserts: “I accept, indeed, I insist that the question ‘What am I?’ was, in fact, a quest for the totality of the species. In short, it stood for: What are we? Who are we? Why are we?—not ‘What is the otherness of—that one?’”

In an interview to mark his 60th birthday, Soyinka confided in the Nigerian writer, Biyi Bandele: “Nigeria was an artificial creation, and it was a creation which did not take into consideration either the wishes or the will or the in-
terests of the people who were enclosed within that boundary.” When the Italian scholar Di Maio wondered that Soyinka “can still be so much in love with a country that has caused you so much trouble—jail, solitary confinement, death sentence, property violation, personal and family attacks, you name it,” Soyinka’s renunciation was swift and vehement:

Here is the truth: no, I am not in love with Nigeria…I accept that entity as one to which I belong, that’s all. It is not even a love-hate relationship. I am not sentimental about nations. Indeed, I believe that nations constitute the worst single crime against humanity of which humanity is guilty, fortunately only against itself. Don’t ask me what should exist in its place, because I don’t know. I am only convinced that, given the total intelligence that has taken us to outer space and back, humanity could have done better for itself in terms of its societal formulations. One of my favorite slogans: Let nations die, that humanity may exist. That crime, called Nation, is outclassed only by Religion—as distinct from spirituality, please note!

However, to return to Nigeria, it is the humanity of which I am a part that informs my continuing allegiance. And that goes with criticism and even occasional downright hostility. It is difficult, very difficult not to hate, even despise parts of what names itself ‘Nigerian’. But that is true of every nation of the world. There are times when I wish the space that calls itself by that name would evaporate…”

Embedded in Soyinka’s denouncement of the nation is the conundrum he has identified: What is to be done with the artifice, the human-made organism called nation? History is replete with a litany of devastations wrought by contrapptions named nations. In their name, much havoc and yokes have been fastened on Indeed, one of the tragic realities of human history is the frequency with which horrendous wars have been waged and sundry acts of violence committed on the warrant of the collectivity called nation. Yet, as much as he deplores that exclusionary category known as nation, to the point of fantasies about its evaporation, Soyinka concedes to possessing no conception about its replacement. It follows, then, that even as the nation represents for him little more than an irritant, he has reconciled himself, if not to the inevitability of the nation, to the immediate and ongoing necessity of engaging with it on multiple levels. Sometimes, what is required of him is to negotiate with the nation. At other times, it is to duel with the nation in the name of that irreducible humanity at the heart of his incessant human rights struggles.
Soyinka’s unease about the nation takes on an even more acerbic tone in the context of Africa, where European colonial powers determined national boundaries with no reference to the constituent humanity. Soyinka is particularly piqued by the irony that some African leaders have gone to great lengths, including recourse to wars costly in human lives and physical devastation, to uphold the sanctity of Europe’s cartographic fiat in Africa. In *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*, Soyinka mentions Bakassi, an oil-rich peninsula in Nigeria’s southeast zone that was for a time the cause of “a military standoff between Nigeria and the Cameroon.” The terrible example of that once-contested peninsula illustrates for him the fact that neither Nigeria nor Cameroon “ever stopped to savor the supreme irony of behaving like the European imperialist powers who parceled out the African territories among themselves, separating ancient communities and yoking others together without so much as a look at the humanity that actually peopled and cultivated the contested land!”

Soyinka reaffirmed his outrage in the interview he granted me. “I believe in self-constituted organic nations more than nations which were donated by external forces. The idea of killing and dying to preserve those boundaries, for me, is one of the grossest acts of leadership stupidity that I’ve ever witnessed anywhere,” he told me. At the heart of Soyinka’s ruminations in *The Open Sore* are questions that have preoccupied him for a while: *What is a nation? When is a nation? Where lies a nation?* These questions are provoked by the laureate’s vast knowledge of world history and increasingly by the specific events of Nigeria’s geopolitical realities. The book enunciates the landmines around the questions he raises and the thorniness of the questions themselves.

As inscrutable as the questions may be, Soyinka’s humanist conscience persists in cautioning against settling for inaction or indifference. For him, enlightened citizens cannot afford to excuse themselves from acting in an ethically mandated fashion. It is therefore untenable to plead that the entity within which one must act, say a nation—or the space within which some morally abhorrent action has occurred—remains vapid, impossible to define, or otherwise deformed. The enlightened citizen ought to act whenever prompted by an occasion of injustice, in the name of that unquestionable and universally legitimate quantity called humanity. Moreover, s/he ought to be actuated by that peace-enhancing principle known as justice.
Even as he clearly identifies humanity and justice as the fulcrum and end of social action, Soyinka never abandons the necessity to examine what constitutes the nation. Indeed, much of his intellectual work—memoirs, plays, fiction, lectures, etc.—is concerned with explicating both the nation and the state. The latter represents the coercive mechanism within a nation. In addition, he is a curious student of the myriad actors and forces—ideological, religious, ethnic, and class—that either lend vitality, dynamism and cohesion to a nation or else render it violent, repressive, and underdeveloped.

Nigeria, Soyinka’s birth space, has been his most complex and comprehensively explored laboratory. The writer-activist’s attempt to capture the drama of Nigeria’s problematic evolution as a “nation” is a pertinent exercise. This undertaking is germane to understanding the nature of Soyinka’s uneasy relationship with his native country.

Nigerian officials, including President Muhammadu Buhari, often assert that Nigeria’s current map is immutable. They insist that Nigeria’s continued corporate existence is non-negotiable. On numerous occasions, Soyinka has rebutted that Nigeria is entirely negotiable. As he argues in The Open Sore, a book written in the shadow of the brutal dictator, Sani Abacha, Nigeria as a nation may be “on the verge of extinction.” In the book, he declares, “The inviolability principle of national boundaries is...a fictitious concept, born out of nothing more substantial than faith, and therefore every bit as questionable for those of the rational world.” Speaking to me, he echoed that critique, stating, “It’s a lack of pride even to say that [a nation] is sacred, untouchable, which is a product of external domination. I find it unconscionable, but shortsighted.”

As Soyinka recognizes, Nigeria, which came into being as a product of British imperial decree, is a relatively new and fragile nation, one whose national identity remains shaky. The country’s name owes its inspiration to the Niger River, Nigeria’s most remarkable physical feature. But the space called Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa, did not even have a name before the late 19th century. Flora Louise Shaw, a journalist with the British newspaper The Times, an enthusiast for British colonialism and future wife of Lord Frederick Lugard, the first British Governor-General of an amalgamated Nigeria, is often credited with proposing Nigeria’s name in a column she wrote in 1897. Shaw deemed Nigeria, derived from the name for a great river, as an appropriate descriptor for the swath of territory acquired by the Royal Niger Company through a combination of violence and guile.
I owe much of this insight to Thomas Pakenham’s *The Scramble for Africa: The White Man’s Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876-1912*. It is also worth noting that until the latter part of the 19th century, the delineated space known today as Nigeria had no national identity to speak of.

British imperialists cobbled together three vast and culturally distinctive regions—north, southeast, and southwest—containing at least two hundred and fifty language groups, into what became Nigeria. The area happened to be generously endowed with natural resources, including crude oil, gas, coal, iron, tin, limestone, and columbite. There had been varying degrees of economic, social, and cultural intercourse between some of the language groups prior to colonial rule. Yet, it was not a given that left to their own designs, the various parts would have coalesced into a shared community. It is safe to speculate that, absent the compulsion of imperial intervention, many—perhaps most—of the disparate cultures within Nigeria would have continued to exist as discrete sociopolitical entities.

In some profound sense, the history of Nigeria testifies to the disastrous aftermath of Europe’s bold but wrong-minded attempt to create modern nation-states in Africa. In what is now known as the Scramble for Africa, Britain and several other European powers, chiefly France, Belgium, Portugal and Spain, carved up Africa among themselves in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was a decidedly mindless exercise. The European powers paid little or no heed to principles that might have preserved the organic lineaments of African societies. They did not ensure, for example, that communities bound by ethnic, religious, and other cultural commonalities were kept within the same national boundaries. In short, they made no effort to redraw the map of Africa along lines that could sustain a sense of community among subjects of the new nations. Nor did the colonizing powers pay much attention to the infusion of national consciousness in the newfangled countries. For Britain, France, and other imperialist adventurers, the overriding objective was economic. Their aim was to secure exclusive territories on the African continent for the promotion of the economic interests of individual imperialist nations.

It is hardly surprising that Nigeria exemplifies the tragic results of a cavalier, arbitrary, and profit-driven colonial policy. At birth, Nigeria was hardly more than an incoherent behemoth. In order to grasp the chaos existent within the Nigerian polity, it is sufficient to imagine a scenario whereby a few countries in Western and Eastern Europe were compelled to become a
single nation.

By its very nature, the colonial project entailed the interruption of the organic development of numerous complex societies. This was followed by the erasure—or masking—of the histories of discrete communities. Let us begin with northern Nigeria, a region with astounding evidence of early civilization. Some of that strong evidence was found in the Nok terracotta heads, named after a settlement of Jaba people. The highly stylized figurines are at least 2500 years old and point to a thriving Iron Age culture across a wide swath of northern Nigeria.28

The Hausa, a dominant ethnic group in the north, played a major role in establishing some of the northern region’s largest and most enduring states. During the first millennium CE, the Hausa were village-dwelling cultivators and artisans. They made their homes on the belt of open woodland and grass savannah known as the Sahel, on the southern edge of the Sahara. After about 1000 CE, the rise of Hausa statehood coincided with the building of walled cities known as Birane. The kings who resided within the Birane had the primary task of warding off external aggression. In return for fulfilling this burden, they collected taxes from commoners.

Economic and cultural life in the early Hausa states was deeply shaped by trade. Hausa farmers and artisans—weavers and dyers, smiths, and leather workers—produced goods for local markets as well as long-distance caravans. From forested areas in southern regions, these caravans brought ivory, gold, and slaves. From the north they brought desert salt, goods from the Mediterranean, and—beginning around the nineteenth century—the religion of Islam.

It was only after the thirteenth century that Hausa rulers began to convert to Islam. In the intervening centuries, cities such as Kano and Katsina became well known centers for Islamic scholarship and commerce. Even so, many Hausa commoners were hardly touched by Islamic culture until the early nineteenth century when a jihad—or crusade—led by the Fulani cleric Usman Dan Fodio, created an expansive Islamic empire headquartered in Sokoto. Triggered in 1804 by the attempts of King Yunfa of Gobir to stem the cleric’s growing popularity, the jihad succeeded in defeating most of the Hausa kings by 1810. The decisive victories put Usman Dan Fodio, and later his son Muhammed Bello, in control of the largest state in nineteenth-century West Africa. That territory spanned some 400,000 square kilometers
(154,440 square miles). The period of the jihad also marked the ascendancy of the Fulani, an otherwise numerical minority in the north.

Another important state in precolonial northern Nigeria was Kanem Borno. Founded between 700 and 800 CE, it went through several periods of growth and contraction. But at its peak under the leadership of Idris Alooma (1571-1603), the ruling Sefawa dynasty of Kanem Borno extended its control as far as the region of Fezzan in modern-day Libya.

Northern Nigeria was also home to a multitude of other ethnic groups and cultures. These included the Tiv, Jukun, the Idoma, the Igala, the Igbira, and the Nupe. Some of these groups, notably the Jukun, developed centralized forms of government, while others—like the Idoma—remained politically decentralized.

In Nigeria’s southwest, the Yoruba peoples claim a common ancestry in Ile-Ife. Ile-Ife, the spiritual epicenter of the Yoruba, was home to a magnificent tradition of bronze casting that dates back to the eleventh century. Among several highly urbanized Yoruba kingdoms that arose beginning in the fourteenth century, Oyo, on the northern fringe of the forested zone, was best suited by location for commerce with both Hausaland and coastal traders, including eventually European slavers. By the early eighteenth century the Oyo cavalry had conquered many neighboring kingdoms, including Dahomey in present-day Benin Republic.

The ancient Benin Empire of the Edo people, with its capital in a city of the same name, was already an extensive political and military force when Portuguese traders came ashore in the fifteenth century. Highly influenced by Ile-Ife’s artistic traditions, Benin architecture and court life left a deep impression on fifteenth-century Dutch traders. The long traditions of internal slavery that evolved from the kingdom’s formidable martial history enabled Benin to play an important role in the transatlantic slave trade.

In southeastern Nigeria, the Igbo maintained a largely decentralized and republican mode of political organization based on clan units. Apart from the Igbo’s philosophical disposition against absolutist powers, the dense tropical swamp covering much of Igboland acted as a natural bulwark against expansionist schemes and ultimately impeded the formation of centralized states. Instead, Igbo communities handled decision-making and judicial matters at open village forums attended by all eligible citizens. Despite the
Igbo’s political decentralization, they were united in their reverence for the powerful oracle at Arochuckwu, named the “Long Juju” by Europeans. This oracle was once the final adjudicator of legal cases in Igboland.\(^{30}\)

The precolonial Igbo thrived in farming and trade. By the fifteenth century, Igbo merchants were trading throughout southern Nigeria. Certain Igbo clans, such as the Aro, had a reputation as fierce slave raiders. The Igbo also excelled at artisanship. For example, bronze works unearthed at Igbo-Ukwu have been dated to the ninth century.\(^{31}\)

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive at the area now called Nigeria. However, it was the British—who entered the picture in 1553—that came to play a decisive role in the drama of colonization that ultimately ushered Nigeria into being as a modern nation-state. British merchants were initially interested in the region’s gold, ivory, and pepper but soon shifted their attention to the slave trade. They quickly became the dominant foreign commercial interest in Nigeria.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, as Great Britain reaped the fruits of the Industrial Revolution, the need for African slaves was trumped by a desire for African markets and raw materials. In 1808, Great Britain outlawed the Transatlantic slave trade—the decision driven less by humanitarian considerations than by economic logic. At first, the transformed nature of British economic interests translated into a vague policy of territorial acquisition. For British merchants based around the Oil Rivers on the coast, the central priority was the ability to penetrate the hinterlands and establish direct links with the primary producers of palm oil. That move was calculated to dispense with coastal African middlemen. In this design, the British faced stiff opposition from both the threatened middlemen and from nature. To cite a major example, King Jaja of Opobo deployed a number of strategic maneuvers to beat back the British incursion. His strategy included direct shipment of his oil to Europe. In 1887, Jaja was lured onto a British vessel, ostensibly “to talk,” where he was arrested, sent to the Gold Coast (now Ghana) for trial, and then sentenced to a five-year exile in the West Indies, where he died.

Malaria represented the other formidable obstacle to Great Britain’s exploration of the Nigerian interior. In 1830 the Lander brothers discovered that the Oil Rivers were in fact the mouth of the Niger River, thus the gateway to the interior. But several British expeditions that tried to ply this highway
met with many fatalities. MacGregor Laird’s 1832 expedition up the Niger claimed the lives of all but nine of the forty-eight Europeans. A major breakthrough came in 1854 when W.B. Baikie’s expedition into Fulani country in the north demonstrated the prophylactic effects of quinine. Owing to this revolutionary development, not a single Briton died during the expedition. Soon afterward, British trading companies began moving operations inland.

In 1861, Lagos became the first territory within present-day Nigeria to be annexed by the British. From then on, British colonial acquisitions followed two patterns. The first mode were so-called treaties of protection signed between British officials (or merchants acting in that de facto capacity) and local rulers; the other method was conquest. Violence and trickery were essential to both approaches. Many customary rulers were threatened with dire consequences if they refused to sign treaties. British officials often misrepresented the meaning and import of the treaties while exaggerating reports about impending threats from neighboring communities.

Trading concerns played a significant role in Britain’s formal colonization of Nigeria. Worried about the strong French competition in the north in the 1870s, a number of British trading firms, under the leadership of George Taubman Goldie, merged in 1879 to form the United Africa Company. By 1882, the company had secured enough treaties of protection to reestablish British supremacy in the disputed areas. Goldie subsequently attended the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, where he made a case that other European participants should cede control of northern Nigeria to the British. In 1886 the British government, reluctant to commit the resources needed to administer the vast region, offered a royal charter to Goldie’s company. In exchange for agreeing to fund the administration of the territory, the company—now renamed the Royal Niger Company—was granted a trade monopoly. But as the cost of administration escalated—and in the face of renewed French designs on the territory—the company’s charter was revoked in 1900. Frederick Lugard, one of the leaders of the company, was then appointed high commissioner of the Northern Nigeria Protectorate.32

That same year, Great Britain formalized its control over most of what is now Nigeria. However, it continued to administer the area as two separate units, the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria (so named in 1906 after a merger of Lagos and southern Nigeria) and the Northern Nigeria Protectorate. This administrative arrangement survived until 1914 when the two protectorates were joined. Lugard, who emerged the first governor-general
of an amalgamated Nigeria, was the architect of indirect rule—the policy of entrusting the day-to-day administration of colonies to the extant structures of customary authority. Given Nigeria’s vast size and malarial climate, indirect rule offered an innovative solution to a real problem, namely the dearth of colonial officers willing to serve there.

Lugard had successfully applied indirect rule in the north where the Sokoto Caliphate, the century-old Fulani Empire, had established a highly centralized, hierarchical administrative order. Elsewhere in Nigeria, however, the policy ran into formidable problems. Although the Yoruba had long-standing and widely venerated monarchies, they resisted the idea of turning their traditional administrative structures over to the goals of British colonialism. In Igboland, the British encountered the absence even of rudimentary states. In response to this gap, the British hatched a plan to appoint warrant chiefs. That plan was, in many instances, a misadventure. The “invented” chiefs or “contrived” rulers, who were usually men of little account within their communities, often became power-drunk and corrupt. In several cases, their abuses provoked their subjects’ revolt. One of the fiercest revolts was the Aba Women’s Tax Riots of 1929. Responding to rumors that their commerce would be taxed, Igbo market women mobilized and attacked both British officials and their appointed minions. The colonial police escalated the violence, killing 50 women and wounding many more. That fierce women-led resistance became a precursor to the equally historic Abeokuta Women’s Tax Protests. The latter resistance was a sustained mass movement led by, among others, Soyinka’s mother and his aunt, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. As the Abeokuta rebellion began to unfold in the mid-1940s, the future writer, who was about ten, was able to observe it at close quarters. The protests culminated in the abdication of the Alake of Egbaland in 1949.

The colonial government made an early decision to exclude the largely Islamic northern region from the rapid introduction of Western education and Christianity. Part of the logic was that Islam had established a stable system that was at once universal and—if provoked by proselytizers—capable of responding with significant violence. Islam had penetrated the southwestern region but had not won over many converts among the Yoruba. Like the Igbo, the majority of Yoruba adhered to a variety of traditional religions. The effect of minimizing Westernization in the northern region—or, to some degree, preserving the north’s “cultural purity”—was to deprive most northerners of access to Western education. This proved disastrous, especially as education was the key to employment in the colony’s growing civil service.
In addition, the north’s isolation fostered a cultural and political divide that would later shape the contours of Nigerian nationalism. In the agitation for independence from British rule, some northern leaders, hardly enamored of the prospect of southern domination, took the odd position of advocating for continued colonial rule.

Colonialism dramatically altered economic and social relations in Nigeria. The installation of an internal communication system and transportation grid facilitated trade and travel. The expansion of the cash economy aided the emergence of a wider system of division of labor. Coal and tin mines, ports, and railways drew laborers from the countryside—sometimes through conscription—which fostered the development of urban working classes. Mass labor strikes in the 1940s and 1950s would force the colonial government to grant wage increases. One salutary effect of the growth of cities—or of urbanization broadly—lay in the formation of increasingly multiethnic communities.

In the rural areas, the colonial administration promoted the production of crops needed by British industries. The decades of colonial rule saw a steady rise in the volume of export crops—palm oil and other palm produce from the southeast, cocoa from the southwest, and groundnuts from the north. But there was little effort to dramatically change customary land ownership patterns and farming methods. One reason was that the British had no desire to alienate those who had traditionally exercised control over land distribution—elders, lineage heads, chiefs. Another factor was the reluctance of banks and other financial institutions to invest in commercial farms or other enterprises run by indigenes.

The British reluctance to encourage Nigerian entrepreneurship was also apparent in commerce. Initially, British traders made use of Nigerian middlemen in the export trade, enabling the growth of an already vibrant class of indigenous businesspeople. But as these firms progressively marginalized Nigerian traders, they bred resentment and contributed to the deepening of nationalist sentiments in many parts of the colony.

The early stages of nationalist revolts against British rule took the form of localized skirmishes, like the aforementioned Aba Women’s Riots, provoked by specific grievances. But an embryonic nationalist movement had in fact begun to emerge around World War I. That movement was bolstered by the first Pan-African Congress convened by W.E.B. Du Bois in Paris in 1918-
1919. British response to early nationalist agitation took two forms. On the one hand, British officials denied that the agitators for independence represented popular sentiments; on the other, they paradoxically insisted—as Sir Hugh Clifford, then governor of Nigeria, did—that the very idea of “nation” in the colonies was an absurdity.

The response to British intransigence was intensified resistance. A variety of groups within Nigeria, worthy of description as “British-made Nigerians,” commenced or ramped up localized and “nationalized” agitations for autonomy. Their demands were unambiguous: an end to colonial humiliation and the exploitation of their lives and natural resources. That agitation gathered momentum immediately after World War II, a conflict in which many Africans were conscripted to fight on the side of the Allied Forces. In a sense, these African conscripts were forced to save Europe from a cataclysmic conflict whose root cause may be traced to its fundamental and pathological creed of racial superiority.

The emergence in the 1930s of Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe, a charismatic American-educated newspaper editor, broadened and transformed the nationalist struggle. Azikiwe’s publications made him a prominent advocate for independence, and the political party he founded in 1944, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), became one of the largest nationalist organizations, albeit primarily supported by fellow Igbo from the southeast. In the southwest, nationalist support rallied around Obafemi Awolowo and his party, the Action Group.

The British meanwhile used a policy of divide and rule. Their strategy encouraged the divisions that were already apparent in the regionalist nature of early political parties. They also played on the north’s fear of domination by southern civil servants and intellectuals. Even though the main thrust of British policy was to derail and disenchant the nationalist movement, the colonial power nevertheless recognized the need to prepare for inevitable decolonization. British reforms in the late 1940s through the 1950s allowed Nigerians limited political representation, but Southerners pushed for full autonomy. Northern political leaders, under the auspices of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), opposed a motion calling for independence by 1956. The NPC agreed to support self-rule only after significant constitutional concessions were made to the north. On October 1, 1960, after years of constitutional conferences, Great Britain lowered the Union Jack, ushering in Nigerian independence.
Nigerians inherited a British-style parliamentary system with a central government formed by a coalition between the NPC and NCNC. Azikiwe became the first governor-general (president from 1963); Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of the NPC became the prime minister, exercising executive power; and Obafemi Awolowo was the opposition leader. The Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions constituted the country’s tripartite structure until the Mid-Western Region was created in 1963. Owing partly to the conservative nature of the coalition that formed the first national government, independent Nigeria proceeded cautiously. Professing nonalignment, it stayed close to Great Britain on a number of foreign policy issues, with the understandable exception of white rule in southern Africa. By its sheer population, Nigeria was expected to assume a leadership role in the black world. However, its leaders’ tame rhetoric and self-effacing stance belied such a stature. In economic policy as well, the country continued to operate as a primary commodity export economy, ensuring that Great Britain remained an important trade partner and aid donor.

After independence, efforts by the Nigerian government at modest industrial development were, like much else in the country, drowned in the din of raucous politics. The coalition government, formed in 1960 between the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), was racked by mutual distrust. Too many politicians used their offices to enrich themselves and their supporters. Electoral malpractices, especially in the 1965 Western Region parliamentary elections, unleashed widespread violence. The electoral fraud provided an occasion for one of Soyinka’s most daring moves as an activist in the public domain. He stormed a radio station and compelled the broadcaster to carry his statement denouncing massive electoral irregularities. His intervention came at a near-climactic moment. As a matter of historical reckoning, the egregiously rigged regional election, followed by the unrest it sparked, helped set the stage for the military’s intervention in Nigerian politics.

A clear lesson from Nigeria’s desultory narrative is that from the very moment of its conception as a nation, Nigeria contained the seeds of division. Soyinka has remarked on the shaky foundations on which Nigeria and many other colonially-spawned countries were erected. In The Man Died, he stresses that for “the truly independent thinker it is always easy—and often relevant—to recall the artificiality, the cavalier arrogance, the exploitative motivations which went into the disposal of African peoples into nationali-
ties.”

That reckoning is fraught with ethical implications. If the imperialist re-configuration of Africans into nations was both an artificial process and designed to undermine Africans’ interests, then it behooves, for example, the enlightened Nigerian citizen to develop and demonstrate a vision expansive enough to incorporate fellow citizens from other ethnicities, religions, and cultural experiences. In other words, such a citizen is called to cultivate what was neither a given nor bequeathed by British imperialists, namely a broad-based national ethos. This entails spurning the impulse to stigmatize members of other ethnicities and religious groups while ascribing virtue to one’s own.

Soyinka has often exemplified that ideal. In the build-up to the Nigerian Civil War, he was arguably the most prominent voice outside of the south-east—the Igbo heartland—to rail against the massacres of the Igbo in the mid-1960s. Over many years, he has consistently denounced the economic injustice against the Niger Delta zone which holds most of Nigeria’s known crude oil deposits but has received little to no developmental benefit from the country’s oil revenues. Instead, the Niger Delta has been reduced to a region of environmental devastation and economic destitution. Soyinka has spoken up against human rights abuses by the Nigerian army and police, including their extra-judicial killings and maiming of suspected Islamist insurgents.

An audit of Soyinka’s principled responses to Nigeria’s myriad crises invites the conclusion that the laureate’s identification with others transcends easy primordial categories. Instead, he is a man who feels where the proverbial shoe pinches the ethnic and religious “other.” In the capaciousness of his moral imagination, he has achieved what amounts to an “ethnicity of values,” to use a phrase I coined in a column. As mentioned earlier, the continental and global scale of Soyinka’s involvement in the fight against human rights violations reflects his sense of the artificiality of national boundaries. This sense has actuated his intervention in the “internal affairs” of other countries whenever he felt that the human spirit had been placed under siege.

There is little question that Soyinka has been one of the most persistent critics of post-independence Nigeria, a country whose volatile ethnic tensions are periodically exacerbated by irresponsible politicians and funda-
mentalist preachers. Nigeria’s divisive tendencies attained a tragic denouement in 1966 in the wake of two bloody military coups occurring six months apart. The country’s first-ever experience with military intervention was on January 15, 1966. Initially broadly popular, it was eventually recast by the northern political elite—predominantly Hausa—as a gratuitous attempt by Igbo officers to hijack political power. The second one, on July 29, 1966, was conceived as a reprisal by the north, its goal being the subversion of the inaugural putsch’s ostensible mandate. The atmosphere of mutual distrust that succeeded the two coups soon yielded a blood-soaked harvest, with mobs in northern Nigeria unleashing a series of genocidal attacks that mostly targeted Igbo civilians with ancestral roots in the southeastern zone.

The military regime led by Colonel Yakubu Gowon was, at best, half-hearted in stopping mob attacks against the Igbo. In The Man Died, Soyinka insists that “at the very least the machinery of justice existed all through and after the Northern massacres and that the lack or the prevention of their exercise was a deliberate, selective decision of Yakubu Gowon’s government.” Whether the Gowon regime was an active abettor of the crimes that targeted the Igbo or merely inept at checking its perpetrators, the pogroms provoked and fertilized Igbo demands for secession. By 1967, the country’s southeastern region—predominantly Igbo and Christian—led by Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, renamed itself “Biafra” and declared its intent to secede from Nigeria.

Soyinka became a significant figure in the unfolding secessionist drama. He tried to mobilize elements from within and outside of Nigeria to avert secession and redress the injustice that stirred it. His efforts irked the federal government, especially after his return from the southeast where he had met with Ojukwu and others. Soyinka was arrested, and detained for more than twenty months, much of that time in solitary confinement. As he recounts in his prison memoir, he was also marked for elimination. He survived incarceration and turned parts of his harrowing experience into material for several memoirs, a play, Madmen and Specialists, and a major collection of poetry, A Shuttle in the Crypt.

As a writer whose worldview has been shaped profoundly by Soyinka’s example, a defining aspect of the laureate’s career as an artist, intellectual, and activist is centered on his courageous principled posture at a critical moment when Nigeria’s post-Independence crisis reached a crescendo and exploded into full-scale war. The federal government, firmly opposed
to secession, used the propaganda line: “To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done.” Soyinka’s retort—a response implied by his words and actions—was: “To keep Nigeria one, justice must be done.” He was emphatic on this point in his interview with me. “The Biafrans had a moral right to secede. The question of political morality was very much on the side of the Biafrans,” Soyinka told me.38

Soyinka’s *The Man Died* awakened many Nigerians to the tragic dimensions of their history. His actions prior to, during and after the war most demonstrated his moral mettle and humanism. He both bore witness to the genocidal injustice done to the Igbo and rejected secession as a response. For him, the best alternative lay in a “Third Way,” a revolutionary force that would intervene to steady the floundering country. He foresaw that intervention as both a way to end the war on a note that guaranteed justice and to realize Nigeria’s long-stultified growth and promise.

For many Nigerians, the Biafran War remains the most significant traumatic event in their country’s history. The estimated death toll from the thirty-month war was over two million. Reduced to its most simple terms, the costly war represented an effort by Nigerians to defend the integrity and inviolability of a territorial entity wrought by imperial Britain. In the end, thanks to the superiority of its armory, the federal forces were able to squelch Biafran secession. Britain, the United States, and most of Europe officially backed the argument that Nigeria, regardless of its fissures and contradictions, had to be preserved as one entity. Britain, the colonial power that spun Nigeria into existence to begin with, lent its considerable diplomatic and material muscle to Nigeria, thus guaranteeing the defeat of Biafra.

Soyinka’s refusal to abide the injustice that led to Biafra caught many observers’ attention but it was by no means the first time he would act with uncommon courage, placing his freedom, if not his life, in jeopardy. His 1965 seizure of a radio station was the first time he wrote himself into Nigerian history. In *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, his most exhaustive memoir to date, Soyinka notes that his decision to invade the station ended the relative innocuousness of his role as “a truth-crier.” Before that audacious act, he had been content to use “‘weapons no more lethal than my portable typewriter and paper.” Of his daring act, he has written: “It all proceeded according to plan. The duty officers responded as any sensible persons would under the gun, removed the premier’s tape and replaced it with mine. It ran long
enough for the message to the government to be clearly transmitted—*drop your stolen mandate, leave town and take your reprobates with you etc, etc.*” 39

A manhunt for Soyinka soon ensued, the political authorities having been rattled by the writer’s use of the airwaves to subvert an electoral heist. It was a dramatic instance, as yet unparalleled in Nigeria, of Soyinka’s career as a socially engaged being. It also revealed the writer’s fidelity to an ethical premise, as the action was undertaken in pursuit of his commitment to justice. Soyinka was tried and acquitted on a technicality. His use of speech as a decisive rebuke to official impunity stands as an important moment in the annals of Nigerians’ resistance to injustice.

Few who know Soyinka would deny that he stands out as an advocate for a more just Nigeria. Along with his contemporary, the novelist Chinua Achebe, he has insisted that those who exercise political power must recognize themselves as mere custodians of that power. In addition, in words and actions, he has pursued the entrenchment and enlargement of the rights of all citizens. Even so, he has on occasion invited criticism for seeming fraternization with a despotic ruler or misreading a political moment.

In the mid-1980s, for example, he drew close to then military president, Ibrahim Babangida, a fascinating military politician. Babangida even persuaded Soyinka to serve as the chairman of the Road Safety Corps, a new body charged with regulating traffic in a country notorious for high levels of automobile accidents and road fatalities. In time, the mercurial dictator increasingly revealed his brutal side. He oversaw human rights abuses and annulled a popular election. Slowly, the relationship between the two men deteriorated, but not before Soyinka’s image had taken a hit for his failure to keep his guard up.

One of the dictator’s actions that alienated the laureate was the hasty and questionable execution of Mamman Vatsa, a general and poet convicted of plotting a coup against Babangida’s regime. Just before the execution, Soyinka, Achebe, and the poet and playwright J.P. Clarke had paid a visit to Babangida to plead for Vatsa’s life. Despite the dictator’s promise to consider the writers’ plea, his regime announced that Vatsa had been executed along with other accused coup plotters. Another event that frayed the relationship between Soyinka and Babangida was the gruesome assassination of Dele Giwa, a widely regarded journalist, via a parcel bomb. Giwa’s family and associates alleged that, the day of his death, he had received a mystery phone telling him to expect a letter from the military president. But the
decisive rupture in Soyinka’s delicate friendship with Babangida arose from the dictator’s failure to honor a commitment to return the country to an elected government.

In keeping with its promise to facilitate a transition to democratic rule, Babangida’s regime held a presidential election on June 12, 1993. However, the military ruler annulled the victory of one of the candidates, Moshood Abiola, a wealthy businessman. Soyinka was angered by Babangida’s inexorable retreat from his commitment. He rallied his local and international contacts to Abiola’s aid, determined to force the military to honor its program of disengagement from power. Instead of surrendering to pressure, Babangida announced that he was bowing out of office. In his stead, he installed a handpicked transition government led by Ernest Shonekan. That transitional government was soon ousted by the bespectacled General Sani Abacha, the defense minister in Shonekan’s cabinet.

Abacha’s rise to power forced Soyinka to step up his resistance. The writer-activist traversed the world, galvanizing the international community to isolate the dictator’s regime and treat Abacha and his cohorts as pariahs. In response, the regime plotted to arrest and frame Soyinka, perhaps as a prelude to his permanent elimination. Despite the regime’s seizure of his passport and travel documents, Soyinka was able to escape from Nigeria. He began life a second time as an exile—the first being a voluntary exile, following his release from war-time detention. In exile, he remained a peripatetic warrior against the Abacha regime. He was one of the most visible leaders of a group of exiled pro-democracy activists who met in the UK, Canada, and the United States. Their goals were to sack the Abacha regime and restore Abiola’s mandate.

In the face of mounting international criticism, Abacha proved as repressive as any of his predecessors. In 1994, after Abiola returned to Nigeria to assert his claim to the presidency, the brutal dictator jailed him. In late 1995, the regime hanged Ken Saro-Wiwa, the writer cum environmental and human rights activist, along with eight Ogoni colleagues.

Like Babangida before him, Abacha had, on taking office, announced an elaborate democratic transition program, but his regime repeatedly delayed elections. Many critics doubted his pledge to hand over power to an elected government by October 1998, especially after all five registered political parties invited Abacha to continue in office as their consensus can-
On June 7, 1998, death vetoed Abacha’s self-succession bid. Some Nigerians saw a divine design in his demise even as others conjectured that he had been poisoned. To the relief of many observers, Abacha’s successor, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, consulted with opposition elements and foreign diplomats and released many political prisoners. He also promised to respect the electoral timetable.

Even though the Abubakar regime kept its pledge to disengage from power, one shocking development cast shadows on the government’s actions. It had been anticipated that Abiola would be released, a prospect that raised hopes across the country. The prospect prompted a meeting on July 7, 1998 between Abiola, Nigerian government officials, and representatives of the US State Department. Abiola, who was believed to be in poor health, fell gravely ill during the meeting. He died within hours—like Abacha, of apparent cardiac arrest. However, in another bizarre twist that would further link Abiola with his despotic nemesis, many Nigerians believed that he was poisoned. His supporters alleged that he was deliberately eliminated in order to forestall the possibility that he would reclaim his presidential mandate. At least fifty people died in riots that occurred after his death. That tragedy further illustrated a lesson that could have come straight from Soyinka’s mouth: that injustice, left to fester, exacts an intolerable toll.

The Abubakar regime left the stage after handing over power to Olusegun Obasanjo, an erstwhile military dictator. Obasanjo was seen as the anointed choice of the military henchmen who had ruled—truth be told, misruled—Nigeria for decades. Some more generous pundits regarded Obasanjo as a necessary transitional figure, one able to hold hawkish military officers at bay to enable democratic values to take root.

Whether Obasanjo fulfilled that role is open to debate. Soyinka would certainly demur. Under Obasanjo’s watch, Nigerians had their first glimpse of the president as emperor. His critics believe he systematically weakened and undermined the legislative and judicial arms of the government. During his presidency, too many rogue characters, boasting unfettered access to the seat of power, strutted the stage as self-styled godfathers and sometimes acted with shocking impunity. In Oyo and Anambra states, to take two examples, two such godfathers commandeered hordes of police officers to aid in their armed attacks against sitting governors. Obasanjo’s government oversaw the military’s murderous assaults on unarmed civilians in Odi in Bayelsa State and Zaki Biam in Benue State. President Obasanjo and his
ruling party declared elections “do-or-die” affairs and turned them into conquests of the electorate’s will. His government’s ostensible war against corruption became a tool for hounding opposition opponents and deceiving the public.40

Somewhat predictably, Soyinka emerged as a major critic of the Obasanjo administration. He continued to play the role of vociferous critic of successive administrations, including those of Musa Yar’Adua—who succeeded Obasanjo—Goodluck Jonathan, and Muhammadu Buhari. The fact that, in his mid-80s, Soyinka continues to intervene on public issues in Nigeria indicates the unyielding character of the country’s political woes. On occasion, Soyinka’s voice as a social conscience—his solicitude for justice, the gateway to peace—remains as strident as ever.

The tense relationship between power and freedom is a major trope in Soyinka’s critique of state power. That theme was evident in my long interview with him. “Many people tend to underestimate the toxin of power,” he said, pointing to his personal horror of “the sheer toxicity of power.” He elaborated: “And of course power cannot stand freedom. I sometimes say that the axis of world history is actually at one end power, at the other end, freedom. And very often, that is a deciding factor.”41

That context was powerfully illuminated in my interview with him. The first part of the conversation took place at his country home in Abeokuta, the second part on the road, as he and I traveled from Makurdi to Enugu. Two demands took him to Makurdi, the capital of Benue State. The first was the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of a Tiv language novel, Adan-Wade Kohol Ga, authored by Suemo Chia. Part of what necessitated the celebration was the release of an English language translation of the novel. The second reason for Soyinka’s presence in Makurdi was his desire to speak from the bloodied soil of Benue where, two weeks earlier, Fulani herdsmen had slaughtered scores of Christian worshipers, including two priests.

The state, one of Nigeria’s major agricultural hubs, has experienced incessant attacks by herdsmen ostensibly seeking grazing grounds for their cattle. At a crowded early-morning meeting with the state governor, Samuel Ortom, reporters and members of civil society groups, Soyinka spoke with his signature directness.42 He not only pronounced the killings by the herdsmen an act of ethnic cleansing, he also accused President Muhammadu Buhari of abdicating his responsibility to act. And he contended that
the time had come to invite the international community to intervene in the festering crisis. He was clear what the international mandate ought to be: to reverse the forcible removal of farmers from their land and end the occupation by the invading herdsmen. The vehemence of his criticism of Buhari’s administration was significant. Although grudging, Soyinka’s support of Buhari as a candidate in the 2015 presidential election had scandalized many of the laureate’s fans.

For me, the trip to Makurdi was a fitting finale. It showcased Soyinka in his vocation and constituency as both an artist-intellectual and a voice of conscience—a tireless advocate for the restorative balm of justice. As Soyinka told me, in what seemed like a parting shot, “When a community is careless and doesn’t nip in the bud, in time, those with [a] power obsession, with that need to dominate, then they find themselves enslaved. Belatedly they realize it, and then they try to struggle out of the net that has been spun around them.” At its best, his work has been to urge us all to vigilance, resistance, and a commitment to justice.
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41. Wole Soyinka, interviewed by Okey Ndibe, May, 2018.


43. Wole Soyinka, interviewed by Okey Ndibe, May, 2018.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Okey Ndibe is the author of the novels Never look an American in the eye: A Memoir of Flying Turtles, Colonial Ghosts, and the Making of a Nigerian American; Foreign Gods, Inc.; and Arrows of Rain, and co-editor (with Zimbabwean writer Chenjerai Hove) of Writers Writing on Conflicts and Wars in Africa.

Ndibe earned MFA and PhD degrees from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and has taught at Brown University in Providence, RI, Trinity College in Hartford, CT, Simon’s Rock College in Great Barrington, MA, Connecticut College in New London, CT, and the University of Lagos.

He first came to the US to be the founding editor of African Commentary, a US-based international magazine published by the late great novelist Chinua Achebe. Among the magazine’s columnists were Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, Kofi Awoonor, Ben Okri, Michael Ekwueme Thelwell, John Edgar Wideman, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, and Johnetta Cole. Ndibe later served as an editorial writer for Hartford Courant, the oldest continuously published newspaper in the US.

His opinion pieces have been published by numerous publications, including The New York Times, BBC online, Al Jazeera online, Financial Times, Fabian Society Journal, and the [Nigerian] Daily Sun, where his widely syndicated weekly column appears. He is currently working on a novel titled Return Flights as well as a non-fiction book, Going Dutch and other American Mis/Adventures, a series of essay vignettes based on his immigrant experiences.