

More reasons to ignore Soyinka

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By Okey Ndibe

Thank God for the wisdom and courage of Mr. Femi Fani-Kayode, the always sagacious mouthpiece of President Olusegun Obasanjo. Last week, Fani-Kayode finally unmasked Wole Soyinka, bard and Nobel laureate, for the godless cynic that he has always been. Responding to the playwright's scalding rebuke of the president and Nigeria's Information Minister, the president's well-paid and ever dependable nemesis of presidential critics announced that the administration had resolved not to pay further heed to a man who did not believe in God. As far as the president's abuse-inflictor was concerned, Soyinka had already received excessive attention from Obasanjo's God-installed regime. Now, it was time to leave the godless critic to his godless devices.

Fani-Kayode's contumely on Soyinka was not only brilliant and brave, it was for me eye-opening. As I meditated on Fani-Kayode's wisdom, my mind began to expand, recognising as well as articulating other reasons why the God-fearing government and people of Nigeria should cease listening to anything Soyinka says, good or bad. So here is a list of other reasons why Nigerians should stop bothering with Soyinka's paganistic perorations (Do you notice that, after years of reading Fani-

Kayode, his verbal virtuosity has rubbed off on me).

Reason Number One: It should strike any well-reasoning person as odd that, at his age, Soyinka remains content to be a social critic, even one who occasionally participates in street rallies and protests. If that is not a sure sign that something is wrong with the man, then I don't know what to believe. This July, the man will mark his 72nd birthday. Many Nigerians of his age, and many who are younger, have duly attained the status of "political chieftain." Better still, a few men his age and younger have gained elevation to the rarefied status of political godfather, able to collect millions in political rent from those they have installed in public office. His age mates are enlisted as "prominent stake holders" in the PDP, the greatest political party in the history of Africa. A man who at seventy has reduced himself to rudely shouting at our rulers from the streets (and in the company of touts, mere workers, market women and other ragamuffin) instead of planting himself in the corridors and parlours of power should not be heard from.

Another reason to erase Soyinka's voice and political comments from the national register has to do with the unsatisfactory manner in which his 70th birthday was

celebrated two years ago. Every Nigerian of worth knows that Ovation magazine is the publication of record for the small league of the well-heeled. When the nation's parvenu mark their birthdays, they often do so in their mansions in England or, in Terry Waya-style, in splurgy hotels in Europe or North America. They hire private jets to ferry their friends, wives, concubines and admirers to the venue of the big to-do. Cows, goats and chicken are slaughtered in great number. Rare wine, an assortment of spirits, a variety of costly liqueurs as well as all the best and most expensive beers in the world are quaffed as if there would be no tomorrow. Above all, the celebrant makes sure to buy several pages in Ovation and/or Encomium magazines where colourful photographs from the majestic event are splashed, permanently embossed for posterity.

By contrast, when Soyinka celebrated his 70th birthday in 2004, the event was marked, not in London or New York or Paris, but in dingy halls mostly in Lagos. Instead of a spectacular display of wealth befitting a man of his age, the event offered a famished menu of lectures, exhibits, drama productions and poetry readings! Rather than making it an occasion for epicurean excess, he treated his guests to long grammar and abstract disquisitions on art and politics. True, the event was written up in many foreign newspapers, including the New York Times. But it should concern us that nobody saw one picture of that birthday celebration in Ovation or Encomium, the magazines that count. I declare: a man who doesn't know that his birthday is a

nullity unless featured in Ovation does not merit our attention in the least.

Another reason we must begin to ignore Soyinka is that the man simply doesn't have the gravitas of Chris Uba, Tony Anenih, Lamidi Adedibu or Ahmadu Ali. While these four God-loving and God-beloved juggernauts are making extraordinary sacrifices and contributing their immeasurable quotas to the president's agenda of entrenching social and economic reforms as well as annihilating corruption, Soyinka has lent himself to the satanic goal of moving the nation backward. Uba is a longstanding and benevolent political godfather, a gentleman of the first order who is now poised to become an oil baron, all (of course) to the glory of God and the betterment of our great nation, especially the Niger Delta. Anenih's astuteness as the great fixer, the incomparable leader, and the one recurring decimal in every government in power is, I'm told, drawing the attention of the world's foremost political scientists. Soon tomes will be written on him to rival the best political strategists in history. Adedibu is the quintessential installer and impeacher of office holders, the grandest garrison commander in the annals of Ibadan, and a man from whose loins political miracles are sired. Ali, thanks to God, is the shepherd of the biggest party in town, a man in such good standing with God that his phone is heard to ring all day, with God on the other end. Compared to these patriotic and weighty men, Soyinka is something of a traitor, a rabble rouser, and a fluffy nobody.

We know prominent men by the manner of their appearance as well as their mode of movement. As a nation, we should listen only to men who wear designer suits or elaborately embroidered agbada. On this count, Soyinka fails disastrously. This is a man who shows up at public events sporting simple, locally designed shirts and "ordinary" pairs of trousers. Worse, he doesn't even bother to stop at a barbershop before making his entry into gatherings. A nation of well-groomed and sartorially conscious people should flatly ignore such an unserious man. What does he take us for, a nation of bohemians?

If Nigerians wish to listen to critics, they have more than enough God-fearing and constructive critics to choose from. What we don't need or want is a man so steeped in darkness that he can't see Mr. President's unprecedented achievements, how NEPA has been miraculously healed of its malady and now supplies unflinching electricity, how all the federal roads have been wonderfully constructed, how Nigerian universities have become the envy of Harvard and Oxford, how Nigerian hospitals now boast state-of-the-art equipment and are manned by the best doctors in the world. European and Asian leaders are queuing up for medical check-up at Obasanjo's exquisite clinics. If and when Soyinka repents, gives his life to God, and begins to see all the president's wondrous accomplishments, then the National Assembly should be persuaded to lift the ban on listening to him.

For now, there are simply too many reasons not to listen to Soyinka. At his

age, he doesn't have a string of chieftaincy titles. Consequently, he has not been lifted to the exalted company of those addressed as Chief Professor or Professor Chief. His prefix remains simply Professor. Why should any sane person listen to a man who doesn't own "exotic" cars and who doesn't move in a convoy of vehicles, escorted by a retinue of fierce, gun and koboko-wielding police? When the good people of Nigeria, impressed by our great president's first-year feats, re-elected him in a landslide, Mr. President promptly recognised that only God, not voters, give power. A man of impeccable piety, he glorified the god he serves for giving him a new mandate. By contrast, when the godless Soyinka won the Nobel Prize in 1986, he never once gave God credit. Instead, he behaved and spoke as if the bestowal of the prize had everything to do with his writing!

It is time we exposed Soyinka for what he is, a mere writer. When such a lowly being persists in the excoriation of our God-ordained leaders, why, we should individually and collectively disavow him. Henceforth, let us resolve to listen only to serious men such as Uba, Adedibu, Ali, Fani-Kayode and, above all, our able president. History will aver that these men worked selflessly, assiduously, day and (sleepless) nights, "to deliver the dividends of democracy" and "to move the nation forward." Let our National Assembly pass a law today banning Soyinka from distracting our hardworking political chieftains with his heathenish noise and drivel.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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