

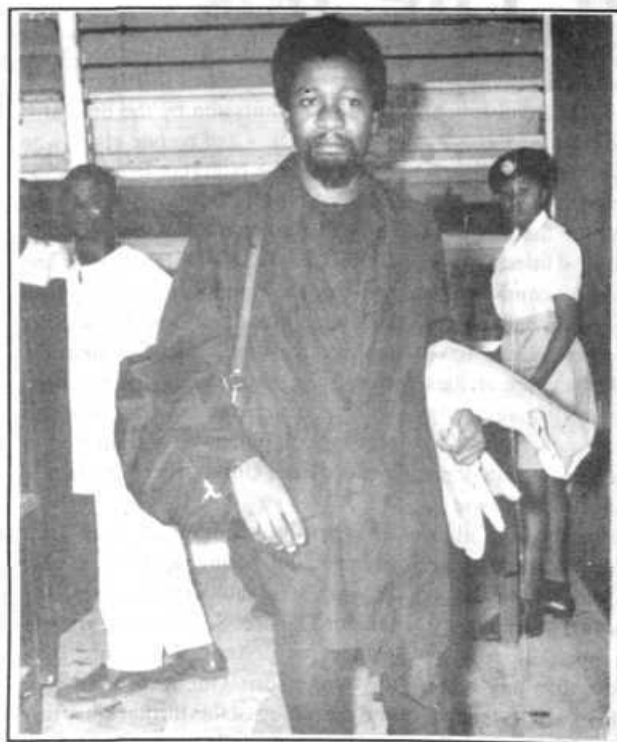
IBADAN

a review JAMES GIBBS

Wole Soyinka; *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years, a memoir 1946-1965*. Spectrum Books, Ibadan; N405.00.



Being accused



Discharged and acquitted

After *Ake*, his volume of childhood memories was published in 1983, Soyinka maintained that he would not attempt to give an account of his life beyond 'the age of innocence.' He then wrote *Isara* (1989), 'a voyage around' his father, in which he reinvented the world of an earlier generation. In February 1994, the prize-winning author completed *Ibadan* which he subtitled *The Penkelemes Years, a Memoir 1946-1965* - penkelemes being a rendition of 'peculiar mess'. From it he emerges having fathered four children by three women (of different nationalities) and having had, by his admission, affairs in the Isle of Man, Cuba and Nigeria. By the end of 1965, he had had confrontations with a variety of

politicians and policemen, and was awaiting trial on charge of holding-up a radio station. So much for innocence.

Soyinka begins his Foreword: '*Ibadan* does not pretend to be anything but faction,' and he goes on to indicate how he has 'fictionalised facts.' An example of his method is the creation of Maren, the protagonist of the book who, he said in a BBC interview, 'is

undisguisedly me.' This is autobiography masquerading as biography, and since it opens at the beginning of 1960 with Soyinka's return to Nigeria after five years in Europe, it is, at first sight, somewhat confusing. However, critics of Nigerian writing have admonished to let the mask complete its dance before they pass judgement, so....

The memoir is highly selective: Soyinka has dipped his hand into the bulging bag of his life and pulled out just a few of the extraordinary episodes he has been involved in. Many events which loom through the harmattan dust hanging over the volume have been selected because they reveal his sense of destiny, his narrow escapes from death, or his experience of meeting 'fire with fire.' But there are also other principles at work in organizing the material.

Each page of the book testifies to the skill of the storyteller, and fascinating tales, told with wit, energy and a good deal of special pleading unfold within a complex structure. Context is only vaguely established and factual information is thrown out in an apparently haphazard manner. As often as not, narratives are cut short and issues are not resolved, leaving readers intrigued and only partly satisfied. Those looking for a chronicle of Soyinka's life will be disappointed: as will those who want a page by page account of his creative writing. In 1965 Soyinka published *The Interpreters* but there is no reference to it, or the writing of it in *Ibadan*. Readers will be surprised that the professional Nigerian who emerges from these pages had time to write anything longer than rallying cries or a speech to deliver over usurped radio

waves.

However, those interested in his time 'down and out' in Paris or in his visit to Cuba will find plenty to mull over. This *Memoir* - one of several that could have been written, places Soyinka as playwright, theatre director and teacher on one side - and we hear nothing about his lectures, seminars or tutorials. Instead we are pulled through key encounters, rites of passage, learning experiences; we are tugged into abysses and taken on hunting expeditions through bushes of ghosts.

The narrative technique employed means that readers have to abandon themselves to the flow and pick up such clues as are offered. The author expects his reader to look between the lines, to see, for example, the passion for justice which is present in the diminutive Maren facing the bullies at Government College, and to detect the quickening of interest in the boy seeking new Religion of Human Rights when he encounters Blake's *Jerusalem* and Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*. Those who ask such questions as 'Where did he get the Land Rover he travels here, there and everywhere in?' will be repeatedly frustrated: it is not that sort of a memoir.

The abuse of power and the ways in which language can be used to attack, transform, and ridicule are other recurring and organizing concerns: apparently in the confrontations with pompous seniors, con-men, pick-pockets, administrators and with politicians who want to hijack an election and with it a country. Notoriously Soyinka often acts alone against injustice and this book does nothing to dent the impression that has been created of, essentially, a single-minded and often lone crusader. With him the description 'writer - freelance' takes on a new significance. However, he does have people - some of whom he treats disgracefully - and he does need people - to act in sketches, drive getaway cars and keep him informed.

For the period covered by this book Soyinka had both his parents: Essay and Wild Christain who dominated *Ake* are both presences. However, fearing they will restrict his ability to act freely, Soyinka keeps them at a distance: his attitude to them often offhand and deeply wounding. Clearly, it is a terrible burden to have a political idealist who is also a womanizer for a son - or a husband.

When he starts his own families, it is not clear what Soyinka expects or what commitment, if any, he gives: there is one exchange with his first wife which suggests a meeting of minds, but there is not a single scene with his second wife, 'Laide, which gives any indication why he married her. In order to give some balance to the portrait of her which emerges from *Ibadan*, it should be remembered that she fought tenaciously for him during the Nigerian Civil War. As a result, he wrote as follows in *The Man Died*: 'This book is deservedly dedicated to 'Laide who rejected compromise and demanded justice.'

Since then, and it should be remembered that the couple had a fourth child in 1971, family lines have been redrawn. In *Ibadan* 'Laide is presented as a materialistic harridan, heartlessly dumping her children on her detained husband and driving so recklessly as to endanger the life of one of her daughters. It is necessary to read closely to see what prompted her decision to 'abandon' the children with their father at the police station. The reference to 'repatriating' (page 373) his eldest child holds a clue: Soyinka had returned from London and the Commonwealth Arts Festival with his six year-old first born in tow. He added the boy to his daughters by 'Laide, and within weeks had gone on the run from the police. The sort of woman capable of rejecting compromise and demanding justice took action when the errant husband could eventually be located.

While distancing himself from his

parents and untouched by a sense of equality within his marriages, Soyinka has people: his 'crops,' his special breed of followers, to borrow a term from *Season of Anomy*, the men - almost invariably men - of Aiyero. At school there was, on the evidence of *Ibadan*, a camaraderie which united the small and virtuous behind Soyinka and against the bullies ('One for all and all for one' - to sound a familiar note); later there was the Credo Group, and various associates, including members of Orisun Theatre and the Mbari Club, whom he could call on for support.

The book provides numerous insights, pen portraits, parodies, and accounts. For example, it is fascinating to learn of Soyinka's contact with the Akintola family while in Lagos, of his involvement with the Officers' Training Corps in Leeds, and of his commitment to the University Idea. It is amusing to read the words he puts into the mouths of Harold Hobson and Joan Littlewood, and to get his observations on dozens of topics.

But there is also much here that all observers, however much they admire his writing or sympathize with his stand against corruption and for democracy will regard as hostages to fortune. For example, Maren is variously described as a walking catastrophe, a runt, a trouble-maker, a bohemian, and a ne're do well. Joan Littlewood, coming from a different angle, strikes a note which the Chinweizu faction will delight in when she describes him as 'too much of a po faced Britisher.' There are many occasions when, on the evidence presented here, Soyinka is arrogant and selfish, inconsiderate and reckless, melodramatic and unnecessarily apocalyptic. Occasions when he is quite simply wrong; he sometimes acts from ignorance and finds himself involved in farce.

Given the 'factional' character of the book, it is difficult to know at what point to draw attention to inaccuracies.

But it seems to me there is no point in the repeated misquotation of the opening of Lincoln's address - it does not begin 'Four score and twenty years ago....' and I see no reason why Gerd Meuer appears as Gerd Mayer or David Piper as John Piper. However, it should be mentioned that he does not dress himself in an *agbada* of infallibility and is quite prepared to tell stories 'against himself': in Paris he is not sure who he is going to meet - Prime Minister or Sardauna, or, indeed, who he has met.

Soyinka can certainly be infuriating, and one is constantly balancing his manifest vices against possibly redeeming virtues. It is particularly encouraging that in this book he acknowledges faults, mistakes and weaknesses, and refreshing that, after years of coy denials, he now

acknowledges his role in the radio station hold-up. Note, however, that, terrifyingly and at about the same time, he had contemplated setting fire to the *Sketch* building in Ibadan or killing S. L. Akintola, and that he doesn't complete the story of the trial. Those who followed events will know that he got off on a technicality and was carried shoulder-high from the court. His political judgement is fallible, but in this instance he certainly succeeded in keeping important issues before the Western Region: the trial was front page news for days.

Soyinka's books about his life and his family have purposes beyond the obvious concern to capture a period of time and reduce it to writing. *Ake* was part of an exchange with critics who

called into question Soyinka's Africanness, and *Isara* used the achievements of an earlier generation as a standard by which to judge the present. Perhaps because he wants to justify the 'self-indulgence' of autobiography, Soyinka has suggested that *Ibadan* is relevant because in 1993 and 1994 Nigeria relived some of the nightmares of the sixties. Soyinka has sometimes spoken as if drawing this parallel were the main purpose of the book: such a statement should not make us insensitive to the pleasure of taking in the crafting, telling and self-projection that has gone into the writing. Despite immediate reactions to the way it opens in media reviews and the apparently rambling construction, there is, as one would expect from Soyinka the poet, playwright and raconteur, a strong sense of shape: it is not a *penkele*. [GR]

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