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Ojemba as Metaphor: The West African Students' Union in Context¹

A few weeks ago a prominent Nigerian literary humanist, 'biodun Jeyifo, delivered a key-note address at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of Wole Soyinka's winning of the Nobel Prize for literature. The title of his lecture, "The Unfortunate Children of Fortunate Parents"—apparently his reflections on "African literature in the Wake of 1986 and the Age of Neoliberal Globalization"²—immediately struck me as a site for re-examination, particularly with respect to delineating the *temporal moment(s)* in the struggle to liberate the African people, and what has become of Africa and her children ever since. The struggle for the emancipation of Africans from physical, psychological or mental slavery imposed on them by Europe over the centuries is one that dates back as far as the human race itself. The legacy of history and the empirical verifiability of such struggles are clearly apparent in the immense population of diasporic Africans. The sheer size of the black communities in the Caribbean nations, the fact that, except perhaps for Nigeria, there are more blacks in Brazil and the United States of America than one finds in most African countries, the astounding presence of black communities in countries as expansive as Jamaica, Haiti, Ecuador,

Cuba, Mexico, Argentina, to mention just a few, are some of the constant reminders of the many injustices of history, which in our peculiar circumstances, we simply have to confront head-on, whatever the consequences. At another level, however, they affirm continuities that have finally emerged in the fanciful idiom of “globalization.”

I am supposed to be speaking this day on the historical and contemporary dimensions of the West African Students’ Union, often simply referred to as WASU. I have taken the liberty to modify the title of the original topic assigned me, partly to escape from the anticipated tautologies implicit in such a rehash of assigned topics, but more fundamentally, to locate our present dilemma within the general background of its founding fathers in the mid-1920s. My choice of title, “*Ojemba* as Metaphor,” easily captures the peculiar circumstances of every member of WASU here present. In the first instance, we are all united by the singular fact that we are *sojourners* on these shores. Ideally, South Africa *is* our “home,” *should* be our “home,” *must* be our “home,” and *shall* always remain our “home.” So saying, I am almost certain that not a few of you have been identified somewhere in South Africa as *Makwerekwere*, a pejorative way of identifying “foreigners,” especially Africans from north of the Limpopo. Let me state from the outset, here, that each and every one of us belongs more to these shores than do so many of the people who have consistently referred to us as “foreigners.” *Ojemba*—Igbo word for “the sojourner” or “the traveller”—is a reminder, then, that we are like water, and do not have enemies; we are like the day-old chicks: we pursue none, and he who pursues us will have to stumble endlessly. *Ojemba* is that man or woman who cherishes his/her friendship with people s/he encounters wherever s/he finds him-/herself; *Ojemba* holds no malice because s/he is constantly aware that the goodness s/he leaves behind is one that will forever be remembered; *Ojemba*, the sojourner, is the person of humility who is better defined

by a sense of adventure and industry which, in the final analysis, are markers for the selfless human being whose personal self-abandonment often results in communal salvation—in whatever form it comes. Every WASU member is *Ojemba*, because many of us here could have been elsewhere acquiring resources for our personal aggrandizement. To this end, we remain, as the late musician, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, sang, essentially what we are: “*water no get enemy.*”

I have just mentioned the injustices of history. Was the West African passive in the midst of those moments of lunacy in the history of the black’s humanity? You all know the answer to this question. I do not want to embark on the populist mission of recounting the place of West Africans in the overthrow of apartheid: this would amount to nothing less than unbridled garrulousness. We do know, at least, that as early as 1921, one of the most influential sons of West Africa, Dr J. E. K. Aggrey of the then Gold Coast, had arrived in South Africa, during which period he gave some of the sanest propositions ever made for racial harmony on this side of the planet. Dr Aggrey at this time already had two doctoral degrees, after having studied and taught in universities in the United States of America for over twenty years. He was a darling of many black South Africans at the time, and we find evidence of this in the prodigious documentations of some black South African contemporaries, such as T. D. Mveli Skota, Sol. T. Plaatje, and much later in the work of the Dhlomo brothers.³ It is remarkable that when Dr Aggrey originally made attempts to secure a teaching position in South Africa, the then government of the “Union of South Africa” turned down his request. When he was later invited for the position, he politely declined the offer. Dr Aggrey returned to the United States of America, and was later to serve as Deputy Principal of Achimota College in the Gold Coast. He died in 1927.

Let me, at this point, take another little backward leap into the past. One recalls the immense efforts of African-American freedom fighters prior to, and since, the “Abolition” of slavery and the slave trade; the memories we have of names like Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. du Bois, Marcus Garvey, etc., the immeasurable contributions of Africans in the continent since the mid-nineteenth century, especially those with whom we have come to identify as our nationalists—all their efforts point to that sense of struggle—of beginning to cry—a very difficult task, and yet a very simple one, since the difficulties of beginning to cry simply evaporate once the initial hurdle is crossed.

WASU, the West African Students’ Union, had emerged in the mid-1920s, specifically in 1925—like the proverbial early “tear-droplets.” It emerged following a number of agitations all over West Africa against colonialist misrule. It emerged essentially as a preparatory ground for a number of West Africans who were later to play significant roles in the political emancipation of Africans from the shackles of Europe’s systematic strangulation of Africa’s political, economic and socio-cultural sensibilities. In spite of the initial problems it encountered, it left some enduring legacies. Its impact several years later took the form of the September rain: ferocious in its speed, magnificent in intent, bountiful in nature, and silent as the night. The West African Students’ Union, although preceded by a number of resistance movements all over West Africa, was a prelude to many more agitations, the formation of youth organisations, political parties, anti-colonialist “riots” and the consequent “liberation” that came to many parts of the sub-region during the course of the twentieth century. WASU was a training ground for the pioneer African nationalists, many of whom were confronted with the denigrating profiling of the black’s humanity in the Western imagination.

The founding president of WASU in 1925, Ladepo Solanke, a Nigerian law student at the time, embraced the union with the utmost passion. Not only did he travel through West Africa to generate funds for the success of the organisation, he successfully mobilised West Africans at London University into cultural debates that anticipated the many transformations that were later witnessed in West Africa.

The nationalist and patriotic ethos of WASU is perceivable in its guiding philosophy. A member of the organisation at the time, another West African from Ghana, J. W. de Graft-Johnson, later published a book, *The Vanished Glory*, which highlights the romanticised nature of its conception of Africa. Ladepo Solanke and his colleagues had eulogised Africa, and it is instructive that the philosophy of “blackism” which Senghor later developed as Negritude in the 1930s pointed to the common frustration of young Africans then studying abroad, be they of Anglophone or Francophone origin. Solanke and his team eloquently reminded all West Africans at the time of their desire to transform Africa in a manner never before accomplished by other human communities outside Africa. I invite them, here, to speak for themselves:

It took the white race a thousand years to arrive at their present level of advance; it took the Japanese, a Mongol race, fifty years to catch up;... There is no reason why we West Africans should not catch up with the Aryans and the Mongols in one-quarter of a century.⁴

So saying, it needs to be observed here that within West Africa itself, a number of agitations against British and French rule were noted as early as the late nineteenth century. In 1897, for instance, the elite in the Gold Coast had formed the Aborigines Rights Protection Society (A.R.P.S.), an initiative that frowned very seriously on colonial policy on land. In 1908, Herbert Macauley (the grand son of Samuel Adjai Crowther) had led a revolt against the imposition of a water-rate on Lagos residents; a

number of African church leaders had resisted European priests in their territories; a number of newspapers helped in this regard in projecting the vision of the nationalists toward a more participatory leadership, rather than colonialist autocracy. One recalls, for instance, the immense contributions of such newspapers as *The Gold Coast Leader*, *The Lagos Weekly Record*, and *the Sierra Leone Weekly News* in boosting the confidence of the earliest elite. In 1913, the National Council of British West Africa was formed, and at its inaugural meeting in Accra, six Nigerians, forty Gold Coasters, three Sierra Leoneans and one Gambian were in attendance.

So far, what I have been trying to highlight is that the history of WASU is implicitly tied to the history of African nationalism. But I would like to go a little further to establish the genesis of the struggles. It is commonly accepted that many of the earliest African nationalists were greatly influenced by African-American freedom fighters. By 1900, Sylvester Williams, a West Indian from Trinidad, had called for the first Pan-African congress and, at its first meeting, only three West Africans were present. The concern of the association was basically how to improve the status of the coloured peoples in America. W. E. B. du Bois who was little known at the time was to emerge as “the father of Pan-Africanism.” The meeting he organised later in Paris, however, in 1919, saw the attendance of many West Africans. Other congresses that followed were those of 1921, 1923, and 1927. Consistently, though, they called for black solidarity and the rejection of “inferiority” in their relationships with persons of other races. Another major influence on many West Africans in the 1920s was Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born, American-based businessman who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.) in New York in 1920. Garvey consistently called for the establishment of the Republic of Africa “for the Negroes of

this World.” Other influences include the thriving independent states of Liberia and Ethiopia, and much later, the Indian independence of 1947.

One observes, here, that there were little variations in the nature of the struggles between British and French West African colonies. In Senegal, for a very long time, Africans were never allowed to represent themselves. Instead, a number of French men and some “mulattoes” represented them. In 1914, however, there was a major development. Blaise Diagne won the election into the French chamber of deputies, defeating six white French men and Francois Carpot, a mulatto. Diagne was re-elected in 1919 after helping to boost the French army in 1916. He remained in parliament until his death in the early 1930s. In Dahomey, revolts against colonialism were even more manifest than in a number of other French West African territories. There was for instance, the Borgu revolution that insisted on Borgu independence from colonial rule between 1915 and 1916. There were also riots in Porto-Norvo in 1923. Other revolts against European colonialism in French West Africa include the many migrations into British West Africa, violent tax riots, and strikes by workers in Guinea, Senegal, Sudan, and Dahomey.

It is significant to remember that at the time, the French government detested all forms of protest, and did every thing within its power to frustrate any myth-maker who might be tempted to dream of the kind of heroism that in any way antagonises French colonial domination. To this end, then, many Africans were arrested and detained for a long time without trial. Some others were deported to places as distant as the desert sections of Mauritania, which in colonial parlance was regarded as “the dry guillotine.” Only those Africans who were lucky enough to be in France at the time enjoyed the further privilege of participating in active political discussions without fear of being arrested under the *Indigénat*. Once again, we recall in particular

the single most important name at the time, Leopold Sedar Senghor, who served in the French army during the Second World War, was a war prisoner, and later became an influential academic and thinker on blackism.

Of the many influences on the emerging elite in French West Africa, the strategic position of the Dakar teachers' institute, the *Ecole Normale William Ponty*, is worthy of note. The institute's liberal tendencies allowed for debates on politics, culture, and allied matters, and it is little wonder that it produced a number of leaders such as Madibo Keta who became President of Mali, Mamadou Dia who assumed office as Prime Minister of Senegal, Hubert Maga who presided over Dahomey, and Quezzin-Coulibaly who emerged as Prime Minister of Upper Volta. In spite of the vibrancy of many of the nationalists, though, politics in French West Africa suffered immensely in 1940 when France fell to the German Army. The Vichy Government that banned all forms of political activity ruled French West Africa, and the colonies had to wait until after the Second World War for the ban to be lifted.⁵

Whether we are talking, then, of British or French West Africa, there is a sense in which it could be argued that the young people of yesteryear who found themselves as members of several unions in France, Britain, and the United States took on the challenge of expunging the oddities of French and British colonialism in the only way they could. Of course, the full impact of WASU could not be ascertained until about ten years later when many of the former students had returned to their countries to play significant roles. As early as 1925, Michael Crowther writes, WASU had "criticised British policy on many issues and demanded radical reforms in the colonial administration."⁶ By 1930, J. B. Danquah had formed the Gold Coast Youth Conference which, although it never graduated into becoming a fully fledged political party, still succeeded in mobilising the citizenry into fuller political consciousness

through organising cultural and socio-political debates. In Nigeria, former WASU members, especially H. O. Davies—who, while in London, was roommate to Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya—as well as Obafemi Awolowo, and Ernest Ikoli of Nigeria, had founded the Nigeria Youth Movement (N.Y.M.).

The Nigeria Youth Movement battled with Herbert Macauley’s Nigerian National Democratic Party (N.N.D.P.) for a very long time. Both “parties” were originally seen as ethnic organisations. In 1937, however, the fortunes of the N.Y.M. changed when it was joined by Nnamdi Azikiwe, one of the most important voices in the Nigerian political terrain, who had studied and taught in American universities after completing two master’s degrees, and enrolling for a doctorate in political science. N.Y.M. became more radical, and unlike N.N.D.P., which celebrated its participation in colonial leadership and was lackadaisical over the Italian occupation of Abyssinia, it was particularly furious over the occupation and challenged every colonial leadership in Africa. Given this distinctive antagonistic position, the N.Y.M. gained immense popularity and, by 1938, it confidently defeated the N.N.D.P. by winning the three Legislative Council seats in Lagos. The print media played a very important role, too, in this development. In particular, Nnamdi Azikiwe’s *The West African Pilot* and Ernest Ikoli’s *Daily Service* were largely instrumental in securing the popularity of the N.Y.M.

In Sierra Leone, too, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson founded in 1938 the West African Youth League (W.A.Y.L.), which mobilised African labour and preached unity amongst the colonised. Other major figures that played immense roles here are Bai Bureh and Sir Milton Margai.

Although there was no strong political party in the Gold Coast at the time, the Aborigines Rights Protection Society (A.R.P.S.) maintained an impressive presence,

and while Herbert Macaulay dominated Nigeria's politics till 1937, in the Gold Coast it was J. Mensah Sarbah and J. F. Casely-Hayford who were the dominant political figures until the late 1930s.⁷

There is something very interesting, though, about nationalist movements in West Africa between the 1890s and the 1930s. Except for WASU, whose membership were convinced of the need to fight for the political emancipation of Africans, and the Borgu struggle in Dahomey between 1914 and 1915, in practice, the only major struggle that specifically and unambiguously insisted on independence anywhere else in West Africa came from women. While most male "Nationalists" and "Patriots" sought for recognition and participation in the colonial regimes, available historical accounts of the many revolts, riots, and strikes throughout the region indicate that the women of Eastern Nigeria insisted on self-determination long before it found a place in the idiom of our legendary nationalists. As one account puts it, "[in] 1929-30, there were very extensive disturbances among the women of south-eastern Nigeria which tradition remembers as 'The Women's War'. Beginning as a protest against taxation, it escalated into rejection of the colonial structure and the demand '*that all white men should return to their country so that the land in this area might remain as it was many years ago before the advent of the white man.*'"⁸

Conclusion

I've been informed that somewhere in the policies of this university, students are terrorized against maintaining their privacy in fraternities designed for the contemplation of events and developments in their home countries. I've heard it mooted that to be part of the unions of this institution, all private *rappports* between such students must be scrutinised by certain organs of the university. I am yet to

ascertain the veracity of this information, given the constraints of time. It is also making the rounds that unions at Wits University, such as WASU, have no right to organise end-of-year get-togethers, and when they insist on holding one, the food, drinks, and allied matters ordered for such occasions can *only* be supplied by a certain capitalist working within the premises of the university. These are strange times! Indeed, very strange times!!

When you ask a woman to provide details of her husband's penis as a condition for recognising her marriage, you are asking for trouble; when you ask a man to provide details of his wife's sexual expertise as a means to judge her character, you are asking for some bigger trouble; when you ask WASU to provide minutes of its deliberations as a condition of recognising the integrity and humanity of West African students, you are carelessly invoking the wrath of our ancestors. As West Africans, we do know what the reactions of our forebears would have been to such unprovoked sacrilege. For sure, Nnamdi Azikiwe would never have accepted it; Abyssinia Nwafor Orizu would never have taken it; J. B. Danquah would never have swallowed it. So also the names you all remember with pride: Kwame Nkrumah, K. O. Mbadiwe, Leopold Sedar Senghor, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, J. E. K. Aggrey, Milton Margai, Bai Bureh, Ladepo Solanke, Ernest Ikoli, Louis Hunkarin, H. O. Davies, J. Mensah Sarbah, J. F. Casely-Hayford, J. W. de Graft-Johnson, among others.

Only an institution that regales in the massive production of morons would want such an invasion of privacy to thrive in any unit of its community. Wits University has produced some of the finest minds on the planet, including an impressive number of Nobel laureates. I cannot imagine this great institution having or wanting anything to do with any organisation that insists on *eavesdropping* on the

private deliberations of “couples” within its homestead. I also hope that no leader of any students’ body has opted to abuse his/her privilege. My advice, should it ever be solicited, given any such unpleasant circumstance, is simply that the monkey’s fingers be quickly withdrawn from the boiling soup-pot, before it transforms into human fingers.

WASU has come to stay, and it is prepared to continue the battles of our forebears. Accepted, the challenges are immense: our forebears had the honour of fighting the strangers from abroad; today we are confronted with the unhealthy task of fighting our own relatives. Our forebears were united by a humanistic value system attuned to psychological and political freedom; ours is consistently oscillating between annihilation and survival. The successes of our forebears have been resurrected in our time, but this time, too, it has been complicated by a total loss of values and the idolisation of material acquisition. Our forebears had the mission of leaving positive legacies to their descendants; today, our cherished mission is to have these legacies consumed in the avarice of our new leadership who plunder the available resources, and stash away available funds into Western banks. Do we still wonder why we are “Unfortunate Children of Fortunate Parents” as ‘biodun Jeyifo recently argued? In simple terms, our problems are far more complex than those of our forebears.

But we should not capitulate to despondency. As WASU members, let’s continue to provide to our traditional and diasporic “homes” the necessary mobilisation that our people need in the face of tyranny, and further contribute to restoring confidence to the larger masses of our people. We must not allow, in the process, petty-minded gossips to disrupt our mission with their provocative insults on

our collective mentality, especially with such idiotic “requests” calling for the minutes of our private deliberations. It’s not done!

I suggest, however, that as a matter of urgency, we should immediately start the production of our journal, to be tentatively titled *Ojemba: The WASU Journal*, which will pursue our mission with marked doggedness. I suggest further, that we pursue our aspirations through this journal with the carriage of the triumphant sojourner—*Ojemba*—who, like water, has no enemy.

Notes:

¹ This is the text of a talk delivered at a symposium of West African students at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, on 10 June 2006.

² ‘biodun Jeyifo, “‘The Unfortunate Children of Fortunate Parents’: Reflections on African Literature in the Wake of 1986 and the Age of Neoliberal Globalization,” a keynote paper at ANA twenty years after the Nobel Colloquium (Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 25 August 2006). Downloaded from the Internet on 18 September 2006, @ <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/josana/message/3958?viscount=100>.

³ For a more elaborate discussion on the visit and impact of Dr J. E. K. Aggrey to South Africa in the early 1920s, see Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H. I. E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

⁴ See Elizabeth Isichei, *History of West Africa since 1800* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 170. It is important to observe, however, that literature on nationalism in West Africa is quite vast. The scholar or independent reader who is fascinated with this field can creatively engage in selective reading.

⁵ See in particular Michael Crowther, “The Growth of African nationalism,” in *West Africa: An Introduction to its History* (London: Longman, 1977), 168-174.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁸ Isichei, 266; my emphasis.