

Abstract of "Wole Soyinka Talking Through His Hat," a paper to be presented at the African Studies Association conference in Chicago by Bernth Lindfors, Depts. of English and DOALL

The paper examines Soyinka's role in Nigerian radio and television in 1960-61, the years following his return to Nigeria after six years of residence in England. Research for this paper was carried out in Nigeria in 1972-73 on a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship.

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THE EARLY WRITINGS OF WOLE SOYINKA

Bernth Lindfors

Wole Soyinka's first books appeared only eleven years ago, in 1963. Since that time he has earned an international reputation as one of Africa's most abundantly gifted writers. Prolific and versatile, he has published eleven plays, a collection of satirical dramatic sketches, two volumes of poetry, two novels, a translation of D.O. Fagunwa's first fictional narrative, an autobiographical work based on his experiences in prison during the Nigerian civil war, and numerous essays on literary, social and political matters. What is most impressive about this extraordinary output is not its gross quantity but its fine quality; Soyinka is the only highly productive African author writing in English whose works do not reek of stale journalistic sweat. He is neither an inveterate autobiographer like Ezekiel Mphahlele nor a compulsive hack like Cyprian Ekwensi nor an incontinent clown like Taban lo Liyong. His imagination, vision and craft distinguish him as a creative artist of the very first rank, as a writer of world stature. Some would say he is the only truly original literary genius that Africa has yet produced.

His prodigious talent has not gone unrecognized by scholars and critics. Three critical books and one study guide on his writings have recently been published,<sup>1</sup> and he is featured prominently in nearly every serious appraisal of modern African drama, poetry and fiction. Indeed, no survey of contemporary African literature would be complete without at least one chapter devoted to Soyinka's writings. He is already a classic, already a monument in the pantheon of African letters.

But though his life and works have been subjected to careful academic scrutiny, no one has given much attention to his early formative period as a writer. Little is known about his literary activities prior to 1960, when he returned to Nigeria after completing a B.A. in English at the University of Leeds and working for three years in London as a bartender, bouncer, substitute high school English teacher, and script-reader at the Royal Court Theatre. Even less is known about the writing he did before leaving for England in 1954, and not much has been said about how he spent his year in Ibadan as a Rockefeller Research Fellow in 1960-61. This <sup>essay</sup> ~~work~~ will attempt to fill in a few of these large lacunae in Soyinka's literary career by examining some of his unknown writings.<sup>2</sup>

Soyinka's first published works probably appeared in annuals or literary magazines at Government College Ibadan, the elite secondary school he attended before enrolling in 1952 in a preliminary course necessary for entry into University College Ibadan. It is known that he contributed <sup>to</sup> "house" magazines at Government College,<sup>3</sup> but his contributions have never been exhumed and discussed, probably because copies of these publications are now extremely hard to find. In an interview recorded in August 1962, Soyinka said:

I would say I began writing seriously, or rather taking myself seriously, taking my writing seriously about three, four years ago, but I can only presume that I have always been interested in writing. In school I wrote the usual little sketches for production, the occasional verse, you know, the short story, etc., and I think about 1951 I

had the great excitement, of having a short story of mine broadcast on the Nigerian Broadcasting Service and that was sort of my first public performance.<sup>4</sup>

One wonders if the story Soyinka remembers as his "first public performance" was "Keffi's Birthday Treat," a brief narrative broadcast on the Children's Programme of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service's National Programme and published in one of the earliest issues of the Nigerian Radio Times in July 1954.<sup>5</sup> Even if "Keffi's Birthday Treat" is a later radio contribution, it may be significant as Soyinka's first short story to be published in a national magazine. Earlier stories may have appeared in high school and university publications, but these would not have been available to the general public. "Keffi's Birthday Treat" was very likely Soyinka's first public performance in print, if not on the air.

The story is a charming vignette telling of a young boy's attempt to treat himself to a visit to the University College Zoo in Ibadan on his tenth birthday. Here is the entire 850 word text, which must have taken about five minutes to read on the Children's Programme:

"KEFFI'S BIRTHDAY TREAT"

"I'll be ten tomorrow," said Keffi to himself as he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling of his home in Yaba. Yes, Keffi would indeed become a ten-year old boy the following day. He had received some presents already, he was sure he would receive some more the next day, and finally, there was going to be a birthday party for him at seven o'clock in the evening. But, of all the presents he had received, there was

not one which attracted him more than the book which had been sent to him by his big brother in England. And of the treats which he had been promised, the most exciting was the one which he had promised himself. The book contained beautifully coloured pictures of the animals in the London Zoo, and the treat was a trip to Ibadan to see the animals in the University College Zoo.

As far as Keffi was concerned, Ibadan was merely a street in Lagos! So, after breakfast the following day, he went to the nearest bus stop, taking with him his week's pocket money, leaving a note on his mother's bed telling her where he was going, and promising to be back before the party. Keffi had no idea that Ibadan was a huge town and was over a hundred miles from Lagos; he had read of the University College Zoo in the Children's Newspaper, and had determined that some day, he would go and see it for himself.

Luck seemed to be with Keffi: for, as he stood waiting for the bus, he saw a kit-car pull up outside a petrol station, and--was he dreaming?--on its doors was written, "UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, IBADAN." Keffi at once ran towards the driver, begging him for a lift. But when he got to the car, he saw that the driver's back was turned, and--his heart began to beat very fast--the door at the back was open! How very exciting to climb in, remain very quiet, and surprise the driver by coming out of the car when they got to the college! And this was just what Keffi did. He lay flat on the floor of the car, and waited for the driver to start it. Very soon, he

heard the driver's voice. There was also another man, and they seemed to be coming to the back of the car, carrying something rather heavy! Keffi dared not look up, for fear he would be caught. He heard the driver say,

"Must lift it up and throw it inside."

What would they throw inside? Was it a box, and would they throw it right on him? Suppose it was a very heavy object and it was thrown on him; would it break his bones? Or was it a new animal for the zoo? Suppose it was a tiger, fresh from the jungle. Poor Keffi's knees were knocking and he began to be sorry that he ever started on this adventure. Should he scream? But before he could make up his mind, the two men threw the object into the car. It was a motor car wheel, and luckily, only a little part of it caught Keffi on the back. The driver did not even look inside the car, but shut the door, went to his seat and drove off.

Half an hour later, the car pulled up inside a place which looked like a big plantation. Keffi watched the driver get out of the car and after a while, he too crept out. He saw cows grazing in the fields, and a lot of fowls in the special little houses which had been made for them. This amused him a great deal, for the houses even had steps leading from them to the ground! And then Keffi grew very much interested in some vehicles called tractors. These had large iron spades, large iron wheels, large iron teeth and claws, all of which were used in uprooting the ground and felling trees. But he had not yet seen any wild animals, and it was while looking for them

that a kind-looking official saw him, enquired where he lived and what he wanted. When Keffi told him, he burst out laughing. After laughing very heartily for a long time, he told Keffi,

"You are a little unfortunate, my boy. The lions and leopards and gorillas have all been taken away for a holiday. They will return after a week. Will you come back then?" Keffi promised to return after a week, and thereupon the kind gentleman took him home and put him right on his doorstep.

He had spent only two hours away, and when, feeling sure that he had been to the University College Zoo, he told his mother his adventures, he was surprised to see her burst out laughing. When he asked why she laughed, she replied,

"You were very lucky that the driver did not go straight to Ibadan. That was not the University College Zoo, it was Agege Agricultural Station!" "Next time," Keffi promised himself, "I really shall go to the Zoo."

What is most appealing about this story is the delightful combination of gentle humor, suspense and drama Soyinka manages to achieve in less than a thousand words. He is essentially telling a joke or humorous anecdote but he never allows the comedy to get out of control. He deftly builds up an air of excitement around the boy's escapade, inserts a few good laughs toward the end, and finishes with a punch line which Lagos and Ibadan listeners would especially appreciate. The University College Zoo at Ibadan, which was opened in the early 1950's, has always been a favorite tourist attraction for Nigerians, so Soyinka's story about a young boy's curiosity to see wild animals would have appealed to a wide radio audience, not just to children. "Keffi's Birthday Treat" was topical and

entertaining, a harbinger of the creative harvest to come.

Soyinka's first contribution to campus publications at University College Ibadan<sup>6</sup> appears to have been a poem entitled "Thunder to Storm" published in the second issue of The University Voice, the official organ of the Student's Union, in January 1953.<sup>7</sup> (Soyinka would have been 18 years old at this time.) Written in rather jerky iambic tetrameter couplets with occasional slant rhymes and awkward syntax, the poem describes the impact of a brief but devastating tropical storm on a seaside community somewhere in Africa. One could say that "Thunder to Storm" bears a vague resemblance in narrative strategy to eighteenth and nineteenth century English meditative verse devoted to pondering man's relationship with his natural environment, but specific comparisons would be ludicrous because Soyinka's poem lacks art. Indeed, his craftsmanship is so crude and his tone so uncertain that one frequently cannot tell <sup>whether</sup> some of the comical side-effects are accidental or deliberate. One imagines Soyinka's puckish grin somewhere beneath the fractured surface, but it is conceivable that this 98-line jingle was actually intended as a serious poem. Certainly it is the most juvenile of his juvenilia. To prove the point, here is the whole catastrophic cloudburst, with every minor typographical disaster preserved:

#### Thunder to Storm

A low, long rumble from the sky,  
 That dwindled off into a sigh.  
 Querying eyes looked up. The sky was clear.  
 And this of course soon quelled all<sup>\*</sup>fear.  
 No heavy cloud, the day was bright,  
 So thought they all. but none was right.

Said two young boys, "we'll go for wood,  
When we return, we'll have some food"  
"I'll hurry home," a woman said,  
"I've got to put my babe to bed".  
Boasted one man, "I'll win this game,  
In chess I have a lot of fame".  
The homeless tramp, he laughed and shrugged  
He'd had no luck, and on he jogged.  
The fishermen upon the sea,  
They hauled their nets for all to see.  
The rich old man watched them at work,  
From his near home, he mused, "what luck!"  
About their daily tasks they went  
All were happy, all content.  
  
Then hell broke loose; the bright clear sky  
Was covered up, dense clouds rolled by.  
Quite soon their heavy tears they'd shed  
And down below the humans fled.  
Huge streaks of lightning flashed about  
As if the whole world they would rout.  
And down to earth, a march with the wind  
'Twas all-destroying, nowhere kind.  
This tree was stubborn, down it went  
Poles and cables, them it bent.  
This house stood firm, it soon crashed in;  
And with the wind went the dust-bin.

Some roofs were slack and off they went  
To some far place by the wind sent  
Electric wires soon were cut  
They'd stood for years, their pride was hurt.  
The dead alone were free from this,  
But wait! They would not have this bliss.  
Into the graveyard the wind marched  
And for a mighty tree it searched.  
It soon found one -- its great shadow  
Had sheltered graves - but no ado.  
A deafening crash and down it fell.  
The ghosts cried out, "This's worse than hell."  
Its long stout roots all gave a tug  
Up came the graves without a clog.  
Its mighty trunk on others crashed  
And round the wreckage the wind lashed.  
  
Then came a lull - nerves were on edge  
The wind seemed shamed of its sacrilege.  
All things stood still, all places quiet;  
Was that the end - none could say yet.  
But when the people's hopes had soared,  
The winds unfurled, the thunder roared,  
"We do but rest and muster strength  
You'll fell our mighty arm at length."  
And so again the elements marched  
The ground was sodden where once was parched.

Imams called 'Allah', Christians, 'Lord';

On blew the wind by their stouts bored,

Twisting, felling, crashing, breaking,

Tearing, smashing - all destroying.

"Forgive our sins", they cried with tears

They had not called on God for years.

Spent and weary the wind retired,

So did the rain; the clouds were tired.

Behold the sky - already bright

Could one believe it spelt such plight?

But look below - this is no fun,

But scene of sorrow, sight for mourn.

Dead bodies - torn and mangled

'Neath the cables bent and fangled.

The woman who some time before

Had hurried - making for her door;

The two chess-players who'd been so well

They reached home safe but their home fell;

Two little boys who went for wood

They too were in a happy mood:

The merry tramp for shelter fled

The friendly tree his body bled:

The fisherman who'd worked all day

He did not see the sun's next ray:

The rich old man who'd loved the sea

The sea grew rough and claimed him fee:

- Why people say, "I'm on the level" -- as if a level-crossing is not the same as a double-crossing.
- Why we no longer have poached eggs in the mornings. Or have the game-keepers grown too vigilant?
- If the average 'Dynamic' councillor was drunk when he stood elections. Or have students not heard of the Dynamite, who when reminded that a council meeting was in progress said, "Get away! Do you think I have time for nothing else?" -- very illustrative of the 'Dynamic' sense of duty.
- Whether every student knows he is first a student before being a noisemaker and when we will save lecturer's the energy expended in begging for silence.
- Whether the use of pyjamas on the Bar Beach was that its variegated colours attracted sea-anemones and agamemones from their beds into the research nets.
- Whether students know it is hitting below the belt to refer disparagingly to a stewards's office when he is getting the better of you in an affably begun argument over the evil effects or otherwise of drinking ice-cold water after hot tea.
- Whether there is not a great gap between a "gentleman" and a gentle man.
- How many students make one Union and how many Unions make one University College.
- How much you enjoy reading the "Eagle".

Soyinka also wrote an editorial column on page two in which he com-

mented on campus affairs. In his first issue he used some of this space to welcome incoming freshmen and to outline the editorial policy of The Eagle, which he called "the cleanest paper for reading in this college":

The policy of the paper differs from the others in this, that we believe more in attacking general faults than in putting individuals to ridicule. This does not mean that we never attack individuals; we do this when it is necessary, but never vilely or with personal animosity showing in every line of it. We concentrate on trying to raise the general standard of behaviour among students, and at the same time, give them the most interesting articles to read.<sup>9</sup>

In the first two issues he edited, Soyinka remained true to this policy by using his editorial column to scold fellow students for failing to turn up at meetings on time, to thank faculty and staff for giving student hitchhikers lifts to and from campus, to congratulate the Dynamic Party for its decisive students' council election victory, and to reprimand The Sword, another campus publication, for indulging in smear tactics against its critics. However, by the time the third issue of The Eagle materialized, Soyinka's patience with the antics of some of his peers had been exhausted by a personal incident which he took very seriously and which prompted him to let loose the full fury of his tongue in an editorial entitled "Reptiles." The piece is worth quoting in toto, for it reveals the impassioned rhetoric of which the 19-year-old Soyinka was capable:

#### REPTILES

I hate snakes. I hate all reptiles with a hatred that is born

of fear. That is why I'm writing this. That, in fact, is why I have stayed on this term merely to write this Editorial, which is about the only thing I have done in the production of this issue.

I'd rather face an infuriated bull -- then, at least, I can see what's coming to me. But a snake, a vile venomous, slimy, disgusting creature who will strike and disappear before you can say "Jumping Rattlesnakes"...

Some days ago, a student killed two snakes and a scorpion-- all in one night! He was quite amazed, for he hadn't believed that there were so many reptiles in the Campus. How many people think the same way! And that is precisely what makes reptiles so dangerous. Until the last holidays I, too, did not realize that the college had so many of them. But we do! They exist in shirts and trousers, they browse in the library and behave like gentlemen.

When the BISI TAIWO --BOZO gang, hiding under the cloak of anonymity, scored personal hits off the "Embassy" members, several students said it was "Fair Comments". I ask such students if they will still make the same defence for them when they learn that these cowardly creatures, or members of the same 'genus', wrote letters to friends of the Embassy maligning the members most callously, and concocting stories, compared with which Russian propaganda is child's play. These letters, I may add, were written mostly to girl-friends of the Embassy Clubmembers.

I called them snakes. Yes, only a snake's brain could have thought of a description like "wriggling her waist like a

wounded snake". I know that BISI TAIWO is a jilted aspirant, as were many of the horrified "Puritans". But surely it was carrying vindictiveness too far, TO WRITE AN ANONYMOUS LETTER to that girl's principal, embellishing and painting luridly an incident at which civilized people would not have batted an eyelid. What did you hope to gain? The credit of having ruined a girl's career by engineering her dismissal from her school?

Contemptible creatures--too mean to be noticed, too dangerous to be ignored! The fountain-heads of morals, uprightness and virtues. Self-imposed judges, most competent, since, being master of all vices, you can smell a little fault one mile off and, what's better, placard it 120 miles towards the Coast. Your cowardice threw the former Editor of "Bug" into disrepute; for a long time he was thought to be the writer of the anonymous letter. Rather than correct the opinion, you encouraged it, because it put you above suspicion.

But I warn you, stop playing with poison gas. We have enough snakes in this college without your belly-crawlers who fawn in public and strike behind.<sup>10</sup>

Vituperation of this sort, however, was rare in The Eagle. Most contributions were light-hearted and amusing, even when they were jabs at the absurdities and bad manners of fellow students. Since many of these pieces were anonymous or signed with pseudonyms, it is possible that a good number were written by Soyinka's friends and acquaintances, but he himself set the dominant tone with his editorials, regular columns and numerous witty

vignettes and fillers. One can use his signed contributions as a guide to identification of the articles he wrote incognito. Here, for example, is an unsigned anecdote which is characteristic of his playful style:

#### SORRY PARTNER

Once upon a time, I went to play tennis on the tennis court (some play it on the table, you know.) Well, my partner was just as good a player as I -- that is, the very worst. He wielded his racket like a blunderbuss and once or twice sent his racket into the football field. That didn't worry me. It was when I saw that he was a confirmed die-hard sorry-partnerer that sweat began to stand out on my forehead like icicles.

I was embarrassed. Why? Because I was playing just as badly as he and there he was, apologising for every bad stroke he played. In vain I assured him that the essence of tennis is not in apologies, but he insisted, and poured out his Sorrrys as if he had all the sorrows of Satan in his pocket.

The short of it was that, in the long run, he became so effusive that I took the offensive. Boy oh Boy! Did I sorry-partner him or did I? When, (he standing at the net) I hit the ball into his rudder, I porry-sartnered him. When, attempting to take a fast one, I skated, jitter-burged and eventually landed on my cusher, I torry-parsnered him before he could open his mouth. When, (a liver fluke it was), he hit a super-tonic one that took our

opponent on the kisser, I Tory-gardenered him. (You see, by this time I didn't know what I was talking again.)

Even when he groaned (as he always did when hitting a ball), I sorry-partnered him. I'm telling you that I very-pestered him so ruthlessly that he capitulated and took refuge in a passing car.

That's what to do to them! <sup>!!</sup>

Also, as far as anonymous poetry is concerned, one would be willing to swear, based on <sup>the</sup> copious evidence in "Thunder to Storm," that the following rhymed lines bear all the earmarks of the wild and Wole idiom:

#### THE BANJO'S BROKEN STRING

A Hall Three disaster  
 Hapt after siesta.  
 Ukelele Banjo  
 Woke with the cry, "My Joe!  
 I'll betcha my last dime  
 For high tea it's high time."  
 He went for a quick bath  
 Gave his tooth a quick bruth --  
 That is how he said 'brush'  
 When his tooth had -- but s-sh!  
 His brush played a bad joke  
 His false tooth in two broke.  
 The poor lad his tooth eyed,  
 Said, "Thou wasth my greath pride."  
 He fixed back the top half

To tea went with a loud laugh.

But worse hapt at tea quaff,

The top part too came off.

My lad thought 'twas sugar

Or hardened vinegar,

And being a good Christian,

He swallowed his pride. When

this Banjo was ex-rayed,

This was the report made:--

"Long after a ray-look

Up and down his stommick,

We found his false fungus

In his oesophagus."

Signed -- X-Ray Man, Tagus. <sup>12</sup>

Even if these two attributions are incorrect, even if Soyinka never wrote inspired trivia about tennis or teeth, he must be given credit for having encouraged such nonsense in The Eagle. The quality of the humor in the three issues he edited was far higher than that in any of the rival campus publications of his day and infinitely superior to what can be found in similar academic publications in Nigeria today. Soyinka was one of the quickest of the campus wits at University College Ibadan in the early fifties, and he earned his reputation as a clever word-monger by making people laugh. He had an antic imagination.

If one wishes to seek clues to his literary opinions at this period, The Eagle provides a few rewarding hints, especially in an article on the

"Ten Most Boring Books," which Soyinka had culled from an American magazine. After reporting that a poll of hundreds of editors, booksellers, authors and librarians in America had revealed that Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, Melville's Moby Dick, Milton's Paradise Lost, Spenser's The Faerie Queene, Boswell's The Life of Samuel Johnson, Richardson's Pamela, Eliot's Silas Marner, Scott's Ivanhoe, Cervantes' Don Quixote and Goethe's Faust were regarded as the ten most boring classics of literature, Soyinka added:

A good choice I would say, except in Scott's Ivanhoe and Cervantes' Don Quixote. How the latter in particular was included in the list beats me completely. And evidently those lucky people have never read Newman's Idea of a University -- oh, maybe it isn't a classic. <sup>13</sup>

It is perhaps significant that Soyinka, as a young student, was turned off by all but the prose chivalric romances on the list. In the following issue of The Eagle he wrote, under the pseudonym "The Gallant Captain", a mock-heroic poem which spoke of longing for the old days of King Arthur when it was possible to rescue damsels in distress with romantic flair. <sup>14</sup> Soyinka, who had written many gallant articles in defense of "ladies" maligned, heckled or in some way abused by his peers at the university, may have responded to the ideals and courtesies of courtly love, even while perhaps adopting a more down-to-earth approach in his own personal entanglements. As well as being a humorist, the teen-aged Soyinka appears to have <sup>been</sup> a pragmatic romantic.

The importance of The Eagle in Soyinka studies is that it gives us a bird's-eye view of the vitality, exuberance and intellectual energy that

animated this extraordinary young man long before he developed into a full-fledged writer. We can see a sample of what he thought, what he did and what he wrote at this very formative period in his life. He once invented this motto for his contributors:

A plateful of criticism  
 With a spice of witticism  
 Makes the correct article  
 of food for the "Eagle".<sup>15</sup>

One could say that all of Soyinka's creative concoctions have been a blend of witticism and criticism, but it is clear from reading his earliest writings that over the years the emphasis has gradually shifted from light witticism to heavy criticism. In his youth he could still indulge in innocent laughter.

After leaving for England in 1954, Soyinka appears to have settled down to his studies for a year or two. At least there is no extant published evidence from mid-1954 until 1956 to show that he continued to engage in such extra-curricular activities as creative writing and campus polemics while making the initial adjustment to undergraduate life at the University of Leeds.<sup>16</sup> He occasionally composed humorous "Epistles of Cap'n Blood to the Abadinians" which he sent to his friends Pius Oleghe and Ralph Opara, the new editors of The Eagle and The Criterion, where at least one of these letters was published in 1955; <sup>from this sample it</sup> is clear that he enjoyed regaling his friends with tall tales about life in the British Isles:

Hallo Ed.,

I'm sure you must be hoping that I'm dead -- and when I say you I mean of course your readers (usually

no more than six or seven) who must be glad that I no longer smear the pages of the "Eagle" with my nib. No such luck, I'm afraid. You ought to know I'm pretty hard to kill. Why, only yesterday a car bumped into me and had to be taken to the Scrap-Iron Dealer, while I walked home with no worse damage than some engine-oil on my trousers.

Well, I suppose that story is as good as any to begin with but I'm sure you never believe it -- just because you fellows never believe me when I'm telling you the truth. You'll want to know what I think of England, no doubt. Well, it's a wonderful place to live in. Even the climate is not unbearable. The only thing I quarrel with in the climate is the frequent gales. These gales, you'd better know, don't come once in a grey sun; they come without warning (except when B.B.C. Weather forecast has remarkable luck) and they are strong enough to blow your teeth into your throat. But I must admit to myself that it does me a world of good to watch men and women (the fatter the better) chasing their hats or shawls for a couple of thousand of yards.

Only yesterday I stood at the bus-stop and one of these gales was fooling around just then. Well, a friend of mine came along, and he stretched out his hand for a handshake. D'you know what happened? The wind bent his hand gradually backwards, and before he knew where he was, he was shaking hands with the person standing behind him.

If that doesn't give you an idea of the strength of these "breezes", nothing ever will.<sup>17</sup>

Though Soyinka did not start writing for the stage while he was at Leeds, Gerald Moore states that some of his early satirical poetry, such as "The Other Immigrant," was written there before he obtained his B.A. in 1957.<sup>18</sup> What is not generally known is that Soyinka also wrote a good deal of fiction in his late undergraduate years. In 1956, for example, he was awarded second prize in the Margaret Wrong Memorial Fund writing competition for a fiction entry entitled "Oji River."<sup>19</sup> He also published at least two short stories in a University of Leeds magazine called The Gryphon and contributed another to New Nigeria Forum, a Nigerian students' journal based in London. Since it would take too much space to reproduce these stories in full, here is a brief synopsis of each.

"Madame Etienne's Establishment," which appeared in the March 1957 issue of The Gryphon,<sup>20</sup> is a hilarious Chaucerian tale of sexual duplicity. Told in the leisurely, familiar style of a witty confidante, it describes how a clever Parisian madam contrives to marry a foolish provincial barber in order to convert his barber shop into a prosperous rural bordello. This is accomplished without the husband ever realizing what is going on. Persuaded to believe that she has merely changed the place into a high-class hair dressing salon, he goes off to his farm each day, leaving all the hairy details of the new business to his wife and her numerous buxom assistants from the metropole. The establishment thrives and becomes a major French tourist attraction. Only toward the end of the story does a crisis threaten. Monsieur Etienne returns home early one ~~day~~ day and finds Petjones, the ex-Mayor of the town, in the waiting room.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Etienne.

"I came for a hair-cut of course", replied the miscreant.

"A hair-cut?" laughed Etienne. "Why, you haven't a hair on your head!"

It was true indeed. Petjones's head shone with the bald brilliance of fifty years' careless living. But at that moment, it also housed a measure of active matter, which was now working furiously, and eventually succeeded in producing the outrageous lie that,

"It was a mere slip of the tongue. I really come here every week for a scalp massage. It is meant to make my hair grow again".

Etienne looked at the man and he pitied him. Then he looked at the terrified girls, and he despised them. He looked all round the room, at the expensive furniture, and the plush-carpeted floor. And he smiled bitterly. For he knew at last what vile methods had been used to pay for the luxury.

He had always considered his business and his name impeccable. But now a huge light shone on the rottenness, and he realised at last the dishonesty of the foundation on which his reputation as a hair-dresser had been built. This was what Valeise had meant by her Parisian methods.

He felt disgraced and polluted for ever, and the veins of anger swelled in the muscles of his bull neck.

"Send Madame to me at once", he snapped at the girls. "I shall be waiting for her in her private room".

Soyinka then allows suspense to build up for a few paragraphs while Pet-

jones tries to take French leave of the establishment. Finally there is the climactic confrontation scene:

Monsieur Etienne wasted no time at all when he stood face to face with his wife. He seized her by the shoulders, and the scared and guilty look on her face confirmed the very worst of his suspicions. Valeise gasped with pain and terror as his powerful fingers dug into her flesh and brought her mercenary face within an inch of his own livid countenance:

"Madame", he spat, "Have you thought of what will happen to us when Monsieur Petjones, and the others you have swindled, discover that you have no means of making their hair grow!?"

It was marvellously orchestrated scenes such as this, scenes which swell up magnificently until Soyinka suddenly deflate<sup>S</sup><sub>A</sub> the melodrama by letting it burst into comedy, that gave evidence of Soyinka's maturing theatrical instincts. He obviously knew how to keep an audience entertained.

Soyinka's next story for The Gryphon was a mock-fable set in Africa in the early nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Entitled "A Tale of Two Cities," it told of court intrigues and missionary conspiracies in the palace of King Kupamiti of Abeolumo. This young king, an early convert to Christianity, had been persuaded by the missionaries to give up four of his five wives and to take on a private tutor named Oddy Summers so future princes and princesses could be instructed in the ways of Western life. One of the first services Summers is called upon to perform for the royal household is to provide secret assistance for Kupamiti's queen who discovers she is barren. Both are aware that this news must be kept from the king lest the queen and Christianity be expelled from the king-

dom. Summers carefully arranges for a twin baby discarded by a pagan village to be retrieved from the forest and pronounced the queen's miraculously-conceived son. The strategem works, the bastard heir is christened Prince James, the kingdom rejoices and celebrates the immunity from British taxation that this continuation of the royal line ensures, and King Kupamiti and his queen are presented with a special gift from the British crown to commemorate the historic event and to create an indissoluble link between the dynasties of the two nations. The gift is a bed-warming pan.

Soyinka tells this zany tale with characteristic wit and ebullient imagination. Again he opts for amusing rather than instructing his audience.

The third story from this period, published in the New Nigeria Forum in May 1958, also had the somewhat incongruous title "A Tale of Two Cities."<sup>22</sup> It recounts a harrowing episode in the life of Raymond C. Pinkerton Esq., a young British civil servant assigned to a colonial post in Lagos. To prepare for his stint in Africa, Pinkerton had heated his London apartment to a super-tropical temperature, had borrowed all the books on African travel and adventure from the municipal library, and had put in long hours at local cinemas watching Tarzan films. After three strenuous weeks of sweating and swotting, he boards the plane exhausted and soon falls asleep while reading yet another true-life adventure about a "mammoth spider which swallowed a whole cow alive and crushed wooden huts with its tentacles." When the plane arrives in Lagos, Pinkerton is still sleeping, and the official who has come to welcome him, thinking he has been overpowered by the heat, quickly conveys him to his flat and puts him to bed. Pinkerton awakes the next

morning puzzled, then alarmed, then terrified and panic-stricken to discover that he and his bed are completely surrounded by a gauzy film tapering to a point directly above him.

...his mind went back to the book which he had read on his plane journey. Spiders! African spiders! A spider which would swallow a cow, and crush wooden huts could surely spin such a web as that. Pinkerton began to sweat. His imagination was fired. He could see it all ..... The dead of night, and the spider stalks into his room, and finds him lying helpless in his bed. Perhaps the monster had just dined and finds a juicy morsel like Pinkerton too large for dessert. So he spins a web round him, intending to return after he has digested his last meal. That could be any moment now!

In a blind and desperate fury Pinkerton flings himself at the web, finds he can't break through, and struggles frantically to disentangle himself from its clinging folds. When he screams for help, an African steward rushes to his aid and quickly extricates him from the spider's terrifying white shroud, which of course turns out to be nothing more than a mosquito net.

Given this evidence of Soyinka's pronounced predilection for marriage, it is not surprising that three of his earliest plays, all of which date from his London years, were comedies--The Lion and the Jewel, "The Invention" (an extravagant political satire), and The Trials of Brother Jero.<sup>23</sup> Since his career as a neophyte dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre

has already been traced by a number of commentators,<sup>24</sup> let us now turn our attention to his activities in the months following his return to Nigeria early in 1960.

Soyinka leapt back into Nigerian life with gusto. Awarded a fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation for research into African drama,<sup>25</sup> he was able to buy a Landrover and travel about Western Nigeria with ease. However, he appears to have spent most of his time in Ibadan where he held a position at the University as Research Fellow in African drama.<sup>26</sup> From this base he made frequent jaunts to Lagos, at times commuting between the two cities almost daily in order to rehearse with those members of his newly-formed acting company (The 1960 Masks) who lived in the capital. Gerald Moore and others have sketched in the outlines of this very busy period in Soyinka's life.<sup>27</sup>

What has not been discussed or even mentioned in the literature on Soyinka is his work in Nigerian radio and television in 1960 and 1961. The Nigerian Radio Times (later called the Radio-TV Times), a programme journal of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, provides a goldmine of information on his performances and productions for the electronic media during this period. As early as March 6, 1960, he was on the air participating in a dramatic reading of his first one-act play "The Swamp Dwellers," which had been performed in London and Ibadan the year before. His program notes for the occasion yield interesting theatrical data. After giving a brief synopsis of the plot and warning listeners that it would be "futile to seek a central character or action" in this "play of mood," Soyinka describes the earlier performances as follows:

"The Swamp Dwellers" was first produced in London

at the Annual Drama Festival of the National Union of Students on New Year's Eve, 1958. It turned out that there was nothing significant about the date. We called ourselves the Nigeria Drama Group, but this included a Ceylonese (Tamil), two West Indians, an American with a jaw breaking German name, and three Britishers.

We also had some Nigerians. Miss Francesca Pereira was our First Lady of the Stage -- listeners here are already acquainted with her talents.

Mr. Jide Ajayi provided unexpected comic inventions with his creation of the part of a goofy drummer, and Banjo Solaru -- of "Calling Nigeria" fame -- paralysed the audience for five minutes, during our second performance, by giving vent to a subterranean<sup>ly</sup>, earthy, odorombustious belch after the the cane-brew swilling scene of the play.

It was the briefest but windiest ad-libbing  
 I was ever privileged<sup>(sic)</sup> to hear on any stage. 28

Five months later, in the TV Times and Radio News, an entertainment publication spawned by the Daily Times of Lagos, there is a report on Soyinka's first television play, which was broadcast on August 6, 1960. This may be the only account available of this still unpublished play:

The Western Nigeria Television organisation reaches a significant milestone on Saturday August 6. On that day (at 8.45 p.m.) WNTV will screen

the first full length play produced in their studios in Ibadan. The play entitled "MY FATHER'S BURDEN" was written by the Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka and has been produced and directed for television by Segun Olusola, WNTV Producer.

"MY FATHER'S BURDEN" is a human interest drama about the struggle between an idealistic young man and his father whose philosophy of life, in an age where every man tries to grab the most he can, is "live and let others live".

The part of Chief Nwane, the sixty-year-old father, is played <sup>by</sup> Nigeria's stage and screen star Orlando Martins.

This will be Orlando's first public appearance on the stage since he returned to this country about a year ago after nearly forty-five years abroad.

Chief Nwane is an aristocrat. He is enlightened, influential <sup>(sic)</sup> and a former minister of state. He loves his son, Onya, and sees to it that he is well provided for to enter the world. But Chief Nwane is also pompous, proud, authoritative and blunt...

Wole Soyinka, author of the script, assumes, perhaps, the most burdensome role -- that of Chuks, ostensibly Onya's friend. Chuks does not know a thing about Onya's character neither are they of the same temperament. He is no more than Onya's drinking companion. <sup>29</sup>

Soyinka wrote at least one other script which has never been printed. This was a play called "The Tortoise" which was broadcast on NBC radio in mid-December 1960 and again in late January 1961. It appears to have been a rather unusual Anansi story. The first account of it in the Radio Times states:

The Tortoise in Wole Soyinka's play is different. This Tortoise is in business--big business. In actual fact, this story is about the days of prospecting. I know nobody will believe that the Tortoise can ever have any saving grace, but this play is about one Tortoise who turned out to have a heart of Gold. 30

A later account gives more details:

In Wole Soyinka's play, the Tortoise appears under the name of Anansi. The change in name or rather the adoption of a pseudonym has not effected any change in character. The Tortoise is always the Tortoise. One would have expected Anansi (The Tortoise) to be a little bit out of his depth with so much (shoot'n) going on. But no sir! Anansi had his own "one shooters" even if he did not use it too often. He did not have to, you see. After all he had got himself interested in research work and by diligently experimenting with all sorts of home-brewed wine, he had discovered the most lethal weapons of all--the Anansi Milk-Shake. You may well ask "what on earth is that"? My answer will be "The first ever invented homemade bomb", and

the recipe is very very simple!

In all his exploits, the Tortoise has always had one family or the other as his target. In this play, it is the unfortunate Ajantala family. Yes, the Ajantalas and the Anansi were perpetually feuding... "You can take all your Western badmen and put them together -- the Kelly's, Bill and Kid, Cimarron Kid, Jesse James and all other what-nots -- and I tell you that none of their exploits will come near the havoc which the Ajantalas and the Anansi reaked (sic) on one another. Two out of every three murders which were committed in Plateau Dry-Gulch Saloon could be notched on the one-shooters of these two clans."

That was a long time ago. It all happened in Plateau Mining Town in the days when stories were not stories but part of every-day life. In other words, it happened ONCE UPON A TIME". <sup>31</sup>

Soyinka's first TV drama, "My Father's Burden," may have been intended as a serious work or a "play of mood" similar to "The Swamp Dwellers," but this mock "Tortoise" from the Wild West obviously was meant as a free-wheeling farce. Soyinka was back to his old antics again, trying to corral bellylaughs.

The Radio Times also makes mention of one other unknown Soyinka play entitled "The Roots" which was "played during the British Drama League" in 1959, presumably in London. <sup>32</sup> No further details are given but one

imagines Soyinka must have been active in the production since he was still in England at that time. Later, on September 25, 1960, just one week before the ceremonies marking Nigeria's full political independence, the Radio Times announces a forthcoming radio production of Soyinka's "Camwood on the Leaves," which had been "specially commissioned by Radio Nigeria for INDEPENDENCE."<sup>33</sup> This play, broadcast five years later on the BBC's "African Theatre" programme and finally published in 1973,<sup>34</sup> was introduced in programme notes by Abiola Irele as having been inspired by some traditional Yoruba songs," especially "one of the best known traditional songs of the Yorubas, 'Agbe'," which concerns "Camwood (Osun), a bright red dye with which the new child is bathed."<sup>35</sup> These traditional songs apparently were incorporated in the play without substantial textual modification by Soyinka.

In addition to writing radio and television playscripts, Soyinka was quite active in 1960 in developing a new series of radio talks called "Talking Through Your Hat."<sup>36</sup> Several of his light-hearted contributions to this series were later published in the Radio Times: first a hilarious medley of parodies on after-dinner speeches as delivered by a patronizing American, a pompous Government Minister, a long-winded "small-fry" master of ceremonies, and the oldest alumnus in attendance at the Sir Milton Mackenzie Grammar School Eve of Independence Old Boys' Dinner;<sup>37</sup> then an amusing glance at the lives of lorry drivers and their scrapes with the law (a theme to which Soyinka returned in his play The Road);<sup>38</sup> next a personal travelogue telling of the wonders of Paris, "land of flesh and bread";<sup>39</sup> and finally an attack on the concept of the "African Personality" which Soyinka found as demeaning to Africans as previous stereotyped notions

of the "African mentality."<sup>40</sup> All these topics, even his <sup>\*</sup>serious indictment of the shortcomings of the Negritude ideology, were treated comically.

Although writing for radio and television must have kept him quite busy, Soyinka also managed to find sufficient time in his first months home to play a leading role in a University of Ibadan production of Brecht's Caucasian Chalk Circle;<sup>41</sup> to complete the manuscript of The Trials of Brother which had its premiere performance in Ibadan that same year;<sup>42</sup> to script, produce, direct and act in his most ambitious play A Dance of the Forests which had been commissioned for the Nigerian Independence Celebrations;<sup>43</sup> and to publish a number of poems and critical essays in The Horn, a University of Ibadan poetry magazine founded a few years earlier by J.P. Clark and Martin Banham.<sup>44</sup>

Soyinka was a regular contributor to The Horn between 1960 and 1962. Among his poems dating from this period are two dealing with aspects of the theater -- "Stage" and "Audience to Performer," one written in pidgin English -- "Okonjo de Hunter," one entitled "epitaph for Say Tokyo Kid" (a driver and captain of thugs who reappears later as a character in The Road), as well as the earliest printed versions of his now-famous "Season" and "Death <sup>in the</sup> Dawn."<sup>45</sup> His major critical contribution to The Horn was a 1960 essay on "The Future of West African Writing"<sup>46</sup> in which he argued that the real mark of authenticity in African writing was indifferent self-acceptance rather than energetic racial self-assertion. Early African writing, he claimed, was dishonest because it either imitated literary fashions in Europe or pandered to European demands and expectations for the exotic and primitive. The first West African writer to produce truly African literature was not Léopold Senghor but

## FOOTNOTES

1. Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka (London: Evans, 1971); Alain Ricard, Théâtre et nationalisme: Wole Soyinka et LeRoi Jones (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972); Eldred Durosimi Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka (London: Heinemann, 1973); James Gibbs, Study Aid to Kongi's Harvest (London: Rex Collings, 1973).
2. Research for this essay was done in Nigeria in 1972-73 on a Younger Humanist Fellowship awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I wish to thank NEH and the University Research Institute at the University of Texas at Austin for their support.
3. Information supplied by Dapo Adelugba, Theatre Arts Department, University of Ibadan. See Soyinka's comment below.
4. Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, eds. African Writers Talking: A Collection of Radio Interviews (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1972), pp. 171-72.
5. Nigerian Radio Times, (July 1954), pp. 15-16. Chinua Achebe, who was working for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service at this time, may have edited this story for publication.
6. The following poem is the earliest I have been able to trace. It was published six years before than the poem Moore cites as "the first of Soyinka's work to appear in Nigeria"; see Moore, p. 6.
7. The University Voice, 2 (Jan. 1953), 21.
8. I wish to thank the librarians at the University of Ibadan, particularly Mr. S.O. Oderinde, for assisting me to locate materials

in this collection.

9. The Eagle, 3, 1 (1953), 2.
10. The Eagle, 3, 3 (1954), 2.
11. The Eagle, 3, 1 (1953), 4-5.
12. Ibid., p. 6.
13. The Eagle, 3, 2 (1954), 5.
14. The Eagle, 3, 3 (1954), 6. This poem is quoted in full in my "Popular Literature for an African Elite," Journal of Modern African Studies, 12 (1974).
15. The Eagle, 3, 2 (1954), 8.
16. The record, of course, may be incomplete. It would be interesting to examine student publications from the University of Leeds to see if any contributions by Soyinka can be found there.
17. The Eagle, 4, 2 (1955), 4.
18. Moore, p. 6.
19. West Africa, 13 July 1957, p. 670. Manuscripts submitted for this competition were to be "not less than 7,500 and not more than 15,000 words," according to Universitas, II, 1 (December 1955), 3.
20. The Gryphon, (March 1957), 11-22. I am grateful to Tony Harrison for bringing this and the following story to my attention.
21. The Gryphon, (Autumn 1957), 16-22.
22. New Nigeria Forum, 2 (May 1958), 26-30.
23. Pieterse and Duerden, pp. 170-74; Moore, pp. 7-15; Ricard, p. 228; Jones, p. xiii. For a description of "The Invention," see Charles R. Larson, "Soyinka's First Play: 'The Invention'," Africa Today, 18, 4 (1971), 80-83.

- 24. See especially Moore, pp. 7-9, and James Gibbs, "Wole Soyinka: Bio-bibliography," Africana Library Journal, 3, 1 (1972), 15-22.
- 25. Moore, p. 9. Moore says Soyinka was awarded a "research fellowship which would enable him to travel widely in Nigeria, studying and recording traditional festivals, rituals and masquerades rich in dramatic content," but an account in Nigeria's Radio Times (3 July 1960) says, "A grant was made recently by the Rockefeller Foundation to enable 'Wole to make a survey of Nigerian drama in its modern development." It appears that he was studying modern developments in traditional theatre.
- 26. Gibbs, p. 16.
- 27. Moore, pp. 14-15; Gibbs, pp. 15-16.
- 28. Radio Times (March 1960), p. 5.
- 29. TV Times and Radio News, 28 July 1960, pp. 12-13.
- 30. Radio Times, 18 December 1960, p. 3.
- 31. Radio Times, 22 January 1961, p. 7.
- 32. Radio Times, 3 July 1960, p. 6.
- 33. Radio Times, 25 September 1960, p. 6. Soyinka mentions this fact in an interview in Pieterse and Duerden, p. 171.
- 34. See Shirley Cordeaux, "The BBC African Service's Involvement in African Theatre," Research in African Literatures, 1 (1970), 153; Camwood on the Leaves (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973).
- 35. Radio Times, 25 September 1960, p. 6.
- 36. Radio Times, 3 July 1960, p. 6.
- 37. Radio Times, 11 September 1960, p. 7.
- 38. Radio Times, 18 September 1960, p. 7.
- 39. Radio Times, 4 December 1960, pp. 6-7.
- 40. Radio Times, 22 January 1961, pp. 6-7.

- 41. Ibadan, 9 (1960), 20; Moore; p. 15. *The play was performed on Feb '8, 1960.*
- 42. Ibid.
- 43. Moore, p. 15; Gibbs, pp. 16-17. Reviews of the performance can be found in Ibadan, 10 (1960), 30-32, and African Horizon, 2 (January 1961), ~~2~~ 8-11.
- 44. For a history of this magazine, see W.H. Stevenson's article in a forthcoming issue of Research in African Literatures.
- 45. "Stage," The Horn, 4, 1 (1960), 1; "Audience to Performer," The Horn, 4, 1 (1960), 4; "Proverb: Okonjo de Hunter," The Horn, 3, 3 (1960), 6-7; "epitaph for Say Tokyo Kid," The Horn, 4, 5 (1962), 10-11; "Season," The Horn, 4, 2 (1961), 2; "death in the dawn," The Horn, 4, 6 (1962), 2-3. Other poems of his in this magazine are "Poisoners of the World, Unite," The Horn, 3, 3 (1960), 4-5, 9, and "Committee Man," The Horn, 4, 3 (1961), 10-11.
- 46. The Horn, 4, 1 (1960), 10-16.
- 47. Janheinz Jahn quotes Soyinka's later elaboration of this concept at a conference in Berlin in 1964 in his A History of Neo-African Literature: Writing in Two Continents (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 265-66.
- 48. Drum, (March 1961), 27.

## THE EARLY WRITINGS OF WOLE SOYINKA

Bernth Lindfors

Wole Soyinka's first books appeared only eleven years ago, in 1963. Since that time he has earned an international reputation as one of Africa's most abundantly gifted writers. Prolific and versatile, he has published eleven plays, a collection of satirical dramatic sketches, two volumes of poetry, two novels, a translation of D.O. Fagunwa's first fictional narrative, an autobiographical work based on his experiences in prison during the Nigerian civil war, and numerous essays on literary, social and political matters. What is most impressive about this extraordinary output is not its gross quantity but its fine quality; Soyinka is the only highly productive African author writing in English whose works do not reek of stale journalistic sweat. He is neither an inveterate autobiographer like Ezekiel Mphahlele nor a compulsive hack like Cyprian Ekwensi nor an incontinent clown like Taban lo Liyong. His imagination, vision and craft distinguish him as a creative artist of the very first rank, as a writer of world stature. Some would say he is the only truly original literary genius that Africa has yet produced.

His prodigious talent has not gone unrecognized by scholars and critics. Three critical books and one study guide on his writings have recently been published,<sup>1</sup> and he is featured prominently in nearly every serious appraisal of modern African drama, poetry and fiction. Indeed, no survey of contemporary African literature would be complete without at least one chapter devoted to Soyinka's writings. He is already a classic, already a monument in the pantheon of African letters.

But though his life and works have been subjected to careful academic scrutiny, no one has given much attention to his early formative period as a writer. Little is known about his literary activities prior to 1960, when he returned to Nigeria after completing a B.A. in English at the University of Leeds and working for three years in London as a bartender, bouncer, substitute high school English teacher, and script-reader at the Royal Court Theatre. Even less is known about the writing he did before leaving for England in 1954, and not much has been said about how he spent his year in Ibadan as a Rockefeller Research Fellow in 1960-61. This <sup>essay</sup> ~~work~~ will attempt to fill in a few of these large lacunae in Soyinka's literary career by examining some of his unknown writings.<sup>2</sup>

Soyinka's first published works probably appeared in annuals or literary magazines at Government College Ibadan, the elite secondary school he attended before enrolling in 1952 in a preliminary course necessary for entry into University College Ibadan. It is known that he contributed <sup>to</sup> "house" magazines at Government College,<sup>3</sup> but his contributions have never been exhumed and discussed, probably because copies of these publications are now extremely hard to find. In an interview recorded in August 1962, Soyinka said:

I would say I began writing seriously, or rather taking myself seriously, taking my writing seriously about three, four years ago, but I can only presume that I have always been interested in writing. In school I wrote the usual little sketches for production, the occasional verse, you know, the short story, etc., and I think about 1951 I

had the great excitement, of having a short story of mine broadcast on the Nigerian Broadcasting Service and that was sort of my first public performance.<sup>4</sup>

One wonders if the story Soyinka remembers as his "first public performance" was "Keffi's Birthday Treat," a brief narrative broadcast on the Children's Programme of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service's National Programme and published in one of the earliest issues of the Nigerian Radio Times in July 1954.<sup>5</sup> Even if "Keffi's Birthday Treat" is a later radio contribution, it may be significant as Soyinka's first short story to be published in a national<sup>1</sup> magazine. Earlier stories may have appeared in high school and university publications, but these would not have been available to the general public. "Keffi's Birthday Treat" was very likely Soyinka's first public performance in print, if not on the air.

The story is a charming vignette telling of a young boy's attempt to treat himself to a visit to the University College Zoo in Ibadan on his tenth birthday. Here is the entire 850 word text, which must have taken about five minutes to read on the Children's Programme:

"KEFFI'S BIRTHDAY TREAT"

"I'll be ten tomorrow," said Keffi to himself as he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling of his home in Yaba. Yes, Keffi would indeed become a ten-year old boy the following day. He had received some presents already, he was sure he would receive some more the next day, and finally, there was going to be a birthday party for him at seven o'clock in the evening. But, of all the presents he had received, there was

not one which attracted him more than the book which had been sent to him by his big brother in England. And of the treats which he had been promised, the most exciting was the one which he had promised himself. The book contained beautifully coloured pictures of the animals in the London Zoo, and the treat was a trip to Ibadan to see the animals in the University College Zoo.

As far as Keffi was concerned, Ibadan was merely a street in Lagos! So, after breakfast the following day, he went to the nearest bus stop, taking with him his week's pocket money, leaving a note on his mother's bed telling her where he was going, and promising to be back before the party. Keffi had no idea that Ibadan was a huge town and was over a hundred miles from Lagos; he had read of the University College Zoo in the Children's Newspaper, and had determined that some day, he would go and see it for himself.

Luck seemed to be with Keffi: for, as he stood waiting for the bus, he saw a kit-car pull up outside a petrol station, and--was he dreaming?--on its doors was written, "UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, IBADAN." Keffi at once ran towards the driver, begging him for a lift. But when he got to the car, he saw that the driver's back was turned, and--his heart began to beat very fast--the door at the back was open! How very exciting to climb in, remain very quiet, and surprise the driver by coming out of the car when they got to the college! And this was just what Keffi did. He lay flat on the floor of the car, and waited for the driver to start it. Very soon, he

heard the driver's voice. There was also another man, and they seemed to be coming to the back of the car, carrying something rather heavy! Keffi dared not look up, for fear he would be caught. He heard the driver say,

"Just lift it up and throw it inside."

What would they throw inside? Was it a box, and would they throw it right on him? Suppose it was a very heavy object and it was thrown on him; would it break his bones? Or was it a new animal for the zoo? Suppose it was a tiger, fresh from the jungle. Poor Keffi's knees were knocking and he began to be sorry that he ever started on this adventure. Should he scream? But before he could make up his mind, the two men threw the object into the car. It was a motor car wheel, and luckily, only a little part of it caught Keffi on the back. The driver did not even look inside the car, but shut the door, went to his seat and drove off.

Half an hour later, the car pulled up inside a place which looked like a big plantation. Keffi watched the driver get out of the car and after a while, he too crept out. He saw cows grazing in the fields, and a lot of fowls in the special little houses which had been made for them. This amused him a great deal, for the houses even had steps leading from them to the <sup>r</sup>ground! And ~~then~~ Keffi grew very much interested in some vehicles called tractors. These had large iron spades, large iron wheels, large iron teeth and claws, all of which were used in up<sup>^</sup>rooting the ground and felling trees. But he had not yet seen any wild animals, and it was while looking for them

that a kind-looking official saw him, enquired where he lived and what he wanted. When Keffi told him, he burst out laughing. After laughing very heartily for a long time, he told Keffi,

"You are a little unfortunate, my boy. The lions and leopards and gorillas have all been taken away for a holiday. They will return after a week. Will you come back then?" Keffi promised to return after a week, and thereupon the kind gentleman took him home and put him right on his doorstep.

He had spent only two hours away, and when, feeling sure that he had been to the University College Zoo, he told his mother his adventures, he was surprised to see her burst out laughing. When he asked why she laughed, she replied,

"You were very lucky that the driver did not go straight to Ibadan. That was not the University College Zoo, it was Agege Agricultural Station!" "Next time," Keffi promised himself, "I really shall go to the Zoo."

What is most appealing about this story is the delightful combination of gentle humor, suspense and drama Soyinka manages to achieve in less than a thousand words. He is essentially telling a joke or humorous anecdote but he never allows the comedy to get out of control. He deftly builds up an air of excitement around the boy's escapade, inserts a few good laughs toward the end, and finishes with a punch line which Lagos and Ibadan listeners would especially appreciate. The University College Zoo at Ibadan, which was opened in the early 1950's, has always been a favorite tourist attraction for Nigerians, so Soyinka's story about a young boy's curiosity to see wild animals would have appealed to a wide radio audience, not just to children. "Keffi's Birthday Treat" was topical and

entertaining, a harbinger of the creative harvest to come.

Soyinka's first contribution to campus publications at University College Ibadan<sup>6</sup> appears to have been a poem entitled "Thunder to Storm" published in the second issue of The University Voice, the official organ of the Student's Union, in January 1953.<sup>7</sup> (Soyinka would have been 18 years old at this time.) Written in rather jerky iambic tetrameter couplets with occasional slant rhymes and awkward syntax, the poem describes the impact of a brief but devastating tropical storm on a seaside community somewhere in Africa. One could say that "Thunder to Storm" bears a vague resemblance in narrative strategy to eighteenth and nineteenth century English meditative verse devoted to pondering man's relationship with his natural environment, but specific comparisons would be ludicrous because Soyinka's poem lacks art. Indeed, his craftsmanship is so crude and his tone so uncertain that one frequently cannot tell <sup>whether</sup> some of the comical side-effects are accidental or deliberate. One imagines Soyinka's puckish grin somewhere beneath the fractured surface, but it is conceivable that this 98-line jingle was actually intended as a serious poem. Certainly it is the most juvenile of his juvenilia. To prove the point, here is the whole catastrophic cloudburst, with every minor typographical disaster preserved:

#### Thunder to Storm

A low, long rumble from the sky,  
 That dwindled off into a sigh.  
 Querying eyes looked up. The sky was clear.  
 And this of course soon quelled all ~~fear~~.  
 No heavy cloud, the day was bright,  
 So thought they all. but none was right.

Said two young boys, "we'll go for wood,  
When we return, we'll have some food"  
"I'll hurry home," a woman said,  
"I've got to put my babe to bed".  
Boasted one man, "I'll win this game,  
In chess I have a lot of fame".  
The homeless tramp, he laughed and shrugged  
He'd had no luck, and on he jogged.  
The fishermen upon the sea,  
They hauled their nets for all to see.  
The rich old man watched them at work,  
From his near home, he mused, "what luck!"  
About their daily tasks they went  
All were happy, all content.  
  
Then hell broke loose; the bright clear sky  
Was covered up, dense clouds rolled by.  
Quite soon their heavy tears they'd shed  
And down below the humans fled.  
Huge streaks of lightning flashed about  
As if the whole world they would rout.  
And down to earth, a march with the wind  
'Twas all-destroying, nowhere kind.  
This tree was stubborn, down it went  
Poles and cables, them it bent.  
This house stood firm, it soon crashed in;  
And with the wind went the dust-bin.

mented on campus affairs. In his first issue he used some of this space to welcome incoming freshmen and to outline the editorial policy of The Eagle, which he called "the cleanest paper for reading in this college":

The policy of the paper differs from the others in this, that we believe more in attacking general faults than in putting individuals to ridicule. This does not mean that we never attack individuals; we do this when it is necessary, but never vilely or with personal animosity showing in every line of it. We concentrate on trying to raise the general standard of behaviour among students, and at the same time, give them the most interesting articles to read.<sup>9</sup>

In the first two issues he edited, Soyinka remained true to this policy by using his editorial column to scold fellow students for failing to turn up at meetings on time, to thank faculty and staff for giving student hitchhikers lifts to and from campus, to congratulate the Dynamic Party for its decisive students' council election victory, and to reprimand The Sword, another campus publication, for indulging in smear tactics against its critics. However, by the time the third issue of The Eagle materialized, Soyinka's patience with the antics of some of his peers had been exhausted by a personal incident which he took very seriously and which prompted him to let loose the full fury of his tongue in an editorial entitled "Reptiles." The piece is worth quoting in toto, for it reveals the impassioned rhetoric of which the 19-year-old Soyinka was capable:

#### REPTILES

I hate snakes. I hate all reptiles with a hatred that is born

of fear. That is why I'm writing this. That, in fact, is why I have stayed on this term merely to write this Editorial, which is about the only thing I have done in the production of this issue.

I'd rather face an infuriated bull -- then, at least, I can see what's coming to me. But a snake, a vile venomous, slimy, disgusting creature who will strike and disappear before you can say "Jumping Rattlesnakes"...

Some days ago, a student killed two snakes and a scorpion-- all in one night! He was quite amazed, for he hadn't believed that there were so many reptiles in the Campus. How many people think the same way! And that is precisely what makes reptiles so dangerous. Until the last holidays I, too, did not realize that the college had so many of them. But we do! They exist in shirts and trousers, they browse in the library and behave like gentlemen.

When the BISI TAIWO --BOZO gang, hiding under the cloak of anonymity, scored personal hits off the "Embassy" members, several students said it was "Fair Comments". I ask such students if they will still make the same defence for them when they learn that these cowardly creatures, or members of the same 'genus', wrote letters to friends of the Embassy maligning the members most callously, and concocting stories, compared with which Russian propaganda is child's play. These letters, I may add, were written mostly to girl-friends of the Embassy Clubmembers.

I called them snakes. Yes, only a snake's brain could have thought of a description like "wriggling her waist like a

wounded snake". I know that BISI TAIWO is a jilted aspirant, as were many of the horrified "Puritans". But surely it was carrying vindictiveness too far, TO WRITE AN ANONYMOUS LETTER to that girl's principal, embellishing and painting luridly an incident at which civilized people would not have batted an eyelid. What did you hope to gain? The credit of having ruined a girl's career by engineering her dismissal from her school?

Contemptible creatures--too mean to be noticed, too dangerous to be ignored! The fountain-heads of morals, uprightness and virtues. Self-imposed judges, most competent, since, being master of all vices, you can smell a little fault one mile off and, what's better, placard it 120 miles towards the Coast. Your cowardice threw the former Editor of "Bug" in- to disrepute; for a long time he was thought to be the writer of the anonymous letter. Rather than correct the opinion, you encouraged it, because it put you above suspicion.

But I warn you, stop playing with poison gas. We have enough snakes in this college without your belly-crawlers who fawn in public and strike behind.<sup>10</sup>

Vituperation of this sort, however, was rare in The Eagle. Most contributions were light-hearted and amusing, even when they were jabs at the absurdities and bad manners of fellow students. Since many of these pieces were anonymous or signed with pseudonyms, it is possible that a good number were written by Soyinka's friends and acquaintances, but he himself set the dominant tone with his editorials, regular columns and numerous witty

vignettes and fillers. One can use his signed contributions as a guide to identification of the articles he wrote incognito. Here, for example, is an unsigned anecdote which is characteristic of his playful style:

SORRY PARTNER

Once upon a time, I went to play tennis on the tennis court (some play it on the table, you know.) Well, my partner was just as good a player as I -- that is, the very worst. He wielded his racket like a blunderbuss and once or twice sent his racket into the football field. That didn't worry me. It was when I saw that he was a confirmed die-hard sorry-partnerer that sweat began to stand out on my forehead like icicles.

I was embarrassed. Why? Because I was playing just as badly as he and there he was, apologising for every bad stroke he played. In vain I assured him that the essence of tennis is not in apologies, but he insisted, and poured out his Sorrys as if he had all the sorrows of Satan in his pocket.

The short of it was that, in the long run, he became so effusive that I took the offensive. Boy oh Boy! Did I sorry-partner him or did I? When, (he standing at the net) I hit the ball into his rudder, I porry-sartnered him. When, attempting to take a fast one, I skated, jitter-burged and eventually landed on my cusher, I torry-parsnered him before he could open his mouth. When, (a liver fluke it was), he hit a super-tonic one that took our

~~opponent on the kisser, I Tory-gardenered him. (You see, by this time I didn't know what I was talking again.)~~

Even when he groaned (as he always did when hitting a ball), I sorry-portnered him. I'm telling you that I very-pestered him so ruthlessly that he capitulated and took refuge in a passing car.

That's what to do to them! ||

Also, as far as anonymous poetry is concerned, one would be willing to swear, based on <sup>the</sup> copious evidence in "Thunder to Storm," that the following rhymed lines bear all the earmarks of the wild and Wole idiom:

#### THE BANJO'S BROKEN STRING

A Hall Three disaster  
 Hapt after siesta.  
 Ukelele Banjo  
 Woke with the cry, "My Joe!  
 I'll betcha my last dime  
 For high tea it's high time."  
 He went for a quick bath  
 Gave his tooth a quick bruth --  
 That is how he said 'brush'  
 When his tooth had -- but s-sh!  
 His brush played a bad joke  
 His false tooth in two broke.  
 The poor lad his tooth eyed,  
 Said, "Thou wasth my greath pride."  
 He fixed back the top half

To tea went with a loud laugh.

But worse hapt at tea quaff,

The top part too came off.

My lad thought 'twas sugar

Or hardened vinegar,

And being a good Christian,

He swallowed his pride. When

this Banjo was ex-rayed,

This was the report made:--

"Long after a ray-look

Up and down his stommick,

We found his false fungus

In his oesophagus."

Signed -- X-Ray Man, Tagus. <sup>12</sup>

Even if these two attributions are incorrect, even if Soyinka never wrote inspired trivia about tennis or teeth, he must be given credit for having encouraged such nonsense in The Eagle. The quality of the humor in the three issues he edited was far higher than that in any of the rival campus publications of his day and infinitely superior to what can be found in similar academic publications in Nigeria today. Soyinka was one of the quickest of the campus wits at University College Ibadan in the early fifties, and he earned his reputation as a clever word-monger by making people laugh. He had an antic imagination.

If one wishes to seek clues to his literary opinions at this period, The Eagle provides a few rewarding hints, especially in an article on the

"Ten Most Boring Books," which Soyinka had culled from an American magazine. After reporting that a poll of hundreds of editors, booksellers, authors and librarians in America had revealed that Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, Melville's Moby Dick, Milton's Paradise Lost, Spenser's The Faerie Queene, Boswell's The Life of Samuel Johnson, Richardson's Pamela, Eliot's Silas Marner, Scott's Ivanhoe, Cervantes' Don Quixote and Goethe's Faust were regarded as the ten most boring classics of literature, Soyinka added:

A good choice I would say, except in Scott's Ivanhoe and Cervantes' Don Quixote. How the latter in particular was included in the list beats me completely. And evidently those lucky people have never read Newman's Idea of a University -- oh, maybe it isn't a classic.<sup>13</sup>

It is perhaps significant that Soyinka, as a young student, was turned off by all but the prose chivalric romances on the list. In the following issue of The Eagle he wrote, under the pseudonym "The Gallant Captain", a mock-heroic poem which spoke of longing for the old days of King Arthur when it was possible to rescue damsels in distress with romantic flair.<sup>14</sup> Soyinka, who had written many gallant articles in defense of "ladies" maligned, heckled or in some way abused by his peers at the university, may have responded to the ideals and courtesies of courtly love, even while perhaps adopting a more down-to-earth approach in his own personal entanglements. As well as being a humorist, the teen-aged Soyinka appears to have been a pragmatic romantic.

The importance of The Eagle in Soyinka studies is that it gives us a bird's-eye view of the vitality, exuberance and intellectual energy that

animated this extraordinary young man long before he developed into a full-fledged writer. We can see a sample of what he thought, what he did and what he wrote at this very formative period in his life. He once invented this motto for his contributors:

A plateful of criticism  
 With a spice of witticism  
 Makes the correct article  
 of food for the "Eagle".<sup>15</sup>

One could say that all of Soyinka's creative concoctions have been a blend of witticism and criticism, but it is clear from reading his earliest writings that over the years the emphasis has gradually shifted from light witticism to heavy criticism. In his youth he could still indulge in innocent laughter.

After leaving for England in 1954, Soyinka appears to have settled down to his studies for a year or two. At least there is no extant published evidence from mid-1954 until 1956 to show that he continued to engage in such extra-curricular activities as creative writing and campus polemics while making the initial adjustment to undergraduate life at the University of Leeds.<sup>16</sup> He occasionally composed humorous "Epistles of Cap'n Blood to the Abadinians" which he sent to his friends Pius Oleghe and Ralph Opara, the new editors of The Eagle and The Criterion, where at least one of these letters was published in 1955; <sup>from this sample it</sup> is clear that he enjoyed regaling his friends with tall tales about life in the British Isles:

Hallo Ed.,

I'm sure you must be hoping that I'm dead -- and  
 when I say you I mean of course your readers (usually

no more than six or seven) who must be glad that I no longer smear the pages of the "Eagle" with my nib. No such luck, I'm afraid. You ought to know I'm pretty hard to kill. Why, only yesterday a car bumped into me and had to be taken to the Scrap-Iron Dealer, while I walked home with no worse damage than some engine-oil on my trousers.

Well, I suppose that story is as good as any to begin with but I'm sure you never believe it -- just because you fellows never believe me when I'm telling you the truth. You'll want to know what I think of England, no doubt. Well, it's a wonderful place to live in. Even the climate is not unbearable. The only thing I quarrel with in the climate is the frequent gales. These gales, you'd better know, don't come once in a grey sun; they come without warning (except when B.B.C. Weather forecast has remarkable luck) and they are strong enough to blow your teeth into your throat. But I must admit to myself that it does me a world of good to watch men and women (the fatter the better) chasing their hats or shawls for a couple of thousand of yards.

Only yesterday I stood at the bus-stop and one of these gales was fooling around just then. Well, a friend of mine came along, and he stretched out his hand for a handshake. D'you know what happened? The wind bent his hand gradually backwards, and before he knew where he was, he was shaking hands with the person standing behind him.

If that doesn't give you an idea of the strength of these "breezes", nothing ever will.<sup>17</sup>

Though Soyinka did not start writing for the stage while he was at Leeds, Gerald Moore states that some of his early satirical poetry, such as "The Other Immigrant," was written there before he obtained his B.A. in 1957.<sup>18</sup> What is not generally known is that Soyinka also wrote a good deal of fiction in his late undergraduate years. In 1956, for example, he was awarded second prize in the Margaret Wrong Memorial Fund writing competition for a fiction entry entitled "Oji River."<sup>19</sup> He also published at least two short stories in a University of Leeds magazine called The Gryphon and contributed another to New Nigeria Forum, a Nigerian students' journal based in London. Since it would take too much space to reproduce these stories in full, here is a brief synopsis of each.

"Madame Etienne's Establishment," which appeared in the March 1957 issue of The Gryphon,<sup>20</sup> is a hilarious Chaucerian tale of sexual duplicity. Told in the leisurely, familiar style of a witty confidante, it describes how a clever Parisian madam contrives to marry a foolish provincial barber in order to convert his barber shop into a prosperous rural bordello. This is accomplished without the husband ever realizing what is going on. Persuaded to believe that she has merely changed the place into a high-class hair dressing salon, he goes off to his farm each day, leaving all the hairy details of the new business to his wife and her numerous buxom assistants from the metropole. The establishment thrives and becomes a major French tourist attraction. Only toward the end of the story does a crisis threaten. Monsieur Etienne returns home early one ~~day~~ day and finds Petjones, the ex-Mayor of the town, in the waiting room.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Etienne.

"I came for a hair-cut of course", replied the miscreant.

"A hair-cut?" laughed Etienne. "Why, you haven't a hair on your head!"

It was true indeed. Petjones's head shone with the bald brilliance of fifty years' careless living. But at that moment, it also housed a measure of active matter, which was now working furiously, and eventually succeeded in producing the outrageous lie that,

"It was a mere slip of the tongue. I really come here every week for a scalp massage. It is meant to make my hair grow again".

Etienne looked at the man and he pitied him. Then he looked at the terrified girls, and he despised them. He looked all round the room, at the expensive furniture, and the plush-carpeted floor. And he smiled bitterly. For he knew at last what vile methods had been used to pay for the luxury.

He had always considered his business and his name impeccable. But now a huge light shone on the rottenness, and he realised at last the dishonesty of the foundation on which his reputation as a hair-dresser had been built. This was what Valeise had meant by her Parisian methods.

He felt disgraced and polluted for ever, and the veins of anger swelled in the muscles of his bull neck.

"Send Madame to me at once", he snapped at the girls. "I shall be waiting for her in her private room".

Soyinka then allows suspense to build up for a few paragraphs while Pet-

jones tries to take French leave of the establishment. Finally there is the climactic confrontation scene:

Monsieur Etienne wasted no time at all when he stood face to face with his wife. He seized her by the shoulders, and the scared and guilty look on her face confirmed the very worst of his suspicions. Valeise gasped with pain and terror as his powerful fingers dug into her flesh and brought her mercenary face within an inch of his own livid countenance:

"Madame", he spat, "Have you thought of what will happen to us when Monsieur Petjones, and the others you have swindled, discover that you have no means of making their hair grow!?"

It was marvellously orchestrated scenes such as this, scenes which swell up magnificently until Soyinka suddenly deflate<sup>s</sup><sub>A</sub> the melodrama by letting it burst into comedy, that gave evidence of Soyinka's maturing theatrical instincts. He obviously knew how to keep an audience entertained.

Soyinka's next story for The Gryphon was a mock-fable set in Africa in the early nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Entitled "A Tale of Two Cities," it told of court intrigues and missionary conspiracies in the palace of King Kupamiti of Abeolumo. This young king, an early convert to Christianity, had been persuaded by the missionaries to give up four of his five wives and to take on a private tutor named Oddy Summers so future princes and princesses could be instructed in the ways of Western life. One of the first services Summers is called upon to perform for the royal household is to provide secret assistance for Kupamiti's queen who discovers she is barren. Both are aware that this news must be kept from the king lest the queen and Christianity be expelled from the king-

dom. Summers carefully arranges for a twin baby discarded by a pagan village to be retrieved from the forest and pronounced the queen's miraculously-conceived son. The strategem works, the bastard heir is christened Prince James, the kingdom rejoices and celebrates the immunity from British taxation that this continuation of the royal line ensures, and King Kupamiti and his queen are presented with a special gift from the British crown to commemorate the historic event and to create an indissoluble link between the dynasties of the two nations. The gift is a bed-warming pan.

Soyinka tells this zany tale with characteristic wit and ebullient imagination. Again he opts for amusing rather than instructing his audience.

The third story from this period, published in the New Nigeria Forum in May 1958, also had the somewhat incongruous title "A Tale of Two Cities."<sup>22</sup> It recounts a harrowing episode in the life of Raymond C. Pinkerton Esq., a young British civil servant assigned to a colonial post in Lagos. To prepare for his stint in Africa, Pinkerton had heated his London apartment to a super-tropical temperature, had borrowed all the books on African travel and adventure from the municipal library, and had put in long hours at local cinemas watching Tarzan films. After three strenuous weeks of sweating and swotting, he boards the plane exhausted and soon falls asleep while reading yet another true-life adventure about a "mammoth spider which swallowed a whole cow alive and crushed wooden huts with its tentacles." When the plane arrives in Lagos, Pinkerton is still sleeping, and the official who has come to welcome him, thinking he has been overpowered by the heat, quickly conveys him to his flat and puts him to bed. Pinkerton awakes the next

morning puzzled, then alarmed, then terrified and panic-stricken to discover that he and his bed are completely surrounded by a gauzy film tapering to a point directly above him.

...his mind went back to the book which he had read on his plane journey. Spiders! African spiders! A spider which would swallow a cow, and crush wooden huts could surely spin such a web as that. Pinkerton began to sweat. His imagination was fired. He could see it all ..... The dead of night, and the spider stalks into his room, and finds him lying helpless in his bed. Perhaps the monster had just dined and finds a juicy morsel like Pinkerton too large for dessert. So he spins a web round him, intending to return after he has digested his last meal. That could be any moment now!

In a blind and desperate fury Pinkerton flings himself at the web, finds he can't break through, and struggles frantically to disentangle himself from its clinging folds. When he screams for help, an African steward rushes to his aid and quickly extricates him from the spider's terrifying white shroud, which of course turns out to be nothing more than a mosquito net.

Given this evidence of Soyinka's pronounced predilection for marriage, it is not surprising that three of his earliest plays, all of which date from his London years, were comedies--The Lion and the Jewel, "The Invention" (an extravagant political satire), and The Trials of Brother Jero.<sup>23</sup> Since his career as a neophyte dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre

has already been traced by a number of commentators,<sup>24</sup> let us now turn our attention to his activities in the months following his return to Nigeria early in 1960.

Soyinka leapt back into Nigerian life with gusto. Awarded a fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation for research into African drama,<sup>25</sup> he was able to buy a Landrover and travel about Western Nigeria with ease. However, he appears to have spent most of his time in Ibadan where he held a position at the University as Research Fellow in African drama.<sup>26</sup> From this base he made frequent jaunts to Lagos, at times commuting between the two cities almost daily in order to rehearse with those members of his newly-formed acting company (The 1960 Masks) who lived in the capital. Gerald Moore and others have sketched in the outlines of this very busy period in Soyinka's life.<sup>27</sup>

What has not been discussed or even mentioned in the literature on Soyinka is his work in Nigerian radio and television in 1960 and 1961. The Nigerian Radio Times (later called the Radio-TV Times), a programme journal of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, provides a goldmine of information on his performances and productions for the electronic media during this period. As early as March 6, 1960, he was on the air participating in a dramatic reading of his first one-act play "The Swamp Dwellers," which had been performed in London and Ibadan the year before. His program notes for the occasion yield interesting theatrical data. After giving a brief synopsis of the plot and warning listeners that it would be "futile to seek a central character or action" in this "play of mood," Soyinka describes the earlier performances as follows:

"The Swamp Dwellers" was first produced in London

at the Annual Drama Festival of the National Union of Students on New Year's Eve, 1958. It turned out that there was nothing significant about the date. We called ourselves the Nigeria Drama Group, but this included a Ceylonese (Tamil), two West Indians, an American with a jaw breaking German name, and three Britishers.

We also had some Nigerians. Miss Francesca Pereira was our First Lady of the Stage -- listeners here are already acquainted with her talents.

Mr. Jide Ajayi provided unexpected comic inventions with his creation of the part of a goofy drummer, and Banjo Solaru -- of "Calling Nigeria" fame -- paralysed the audience for five minutes, during our second performance, by giving vent to a subterranean<sup>fy</sup>, earthy, odorombustious belch after the the cane-brew swilling scene of the play.

It was the briefest but windiest ad-libbing  
 I was ever privileged<sup>(sic)</sup> to hear on any stage. 28

Five months later, in the TV Times and Radio News, an entertainment publication spawned by the Daily Times of Lagos, there is a report on Soyinka's first television play, which was broadcast on August 6, 1960. This may be the only account available of this still unpublished play:

The Western Nigeria Television organisation reaches a significant milestone on Saturday August 6. On that day (at 8.45 p.m.) WNTV will screen

the first full length play produced in their studios in Ibadan. The play entitled "MY FATHER'S BURDEN" was written by the Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka and has been produced and directed for television by Segun Olusola, WNTV Producer.

"MY FATHER'S BURDEN" is a human interest drama about the struggle between an idealistic young man and his father whose philosophy of life, in an age where every man tries to grab the most he can, is "live and let others live".

The part of Chief Nwane, the sixty-year-old father, is played <sup>by</sup> Nigeria's stage and screen star Orlando Martins.

This will be Orlando's first public appearance on the stage since he returned to this country about a year ago after nearly forty-five years abroad.

Chief Nwane is an aristocrat. He is enlightened, <sup>(sic)</sup> influential and a former minister of state. He loves his son, Onya, and sees to it that he is well provided for to enter the world. But Chief Nwane is also pompous, proud, authoritative and blunt...

Wole Soyinka, author of the script, assumes, perhaps, the most burdensome role -- that of Chuks, ostensibly Onya's friend. Chuks does not know a thing about Onya's character neither are they of the same temperament. He is no more than Onya's drinking companion. <sup>29</sup>

30

Soyinka wrote at least one other script which has never been printed. This was a play called "The Tortoise" which was broadcast on NBC radio in mid-December 1960 and again in late January 1961. It appears to have been a rather unusual Anansi story. The first account of it in the Radio Times states:

The Tortoise in Wole Soyinka's play is different. This Tortoise is in business--big business. In actual fact, this story is about the days of prospecting. I know nobody will believe that the Tortoise can ever have any saving grace, but this play is about one Tortoise who turned out to have a heart of Gold. <sup>30</sup>

A later account gives more details:

In Wole Soyinka's play, the Tortoise appears under the name of Anansi. The change in name or rather the adoption of a pseudonym has not effected any change in character. The Tortoise is always the Tortoise. One would have expected Anansi (The Tortoise) to be a little bit out of his depth with so much (shoot'n) going on. But no sir! Anansi had his own "one shooters" even if he did not use it too often. He did not have to, you see. After all he had got himself interested in research work and by diligently experimenting with all sorts of home-brewed wine, he had discovered the most lethal weapons of all--the Anansi Milk-Shake. You may well ask "what on earth is that"? My answer will be "The first ever invented homemade bomb", and

the recipe is very very simple!

In all his exploits, the Tortoise has always had one family or the other as his target. In this play, it is the unfortunate Ajantala family. Yes, the Ajantalas and the Anansi were perpetually feuding... "You can take all your Western badmen and put them together -- the Kelly's, Bill and Kid, Cimarron Kid, Jesse James and all other what-nots -- and I tell you that none of their exploits will come near the havoc which the Ajantalas and the Anansi reaked (sic) on one another. **TWO** out of every three murders which were committed in Plateau Dry-Gulch Saloon could be notched on the one-shooters of these two clans."

That was a long time ago. It all happened in Plateau Mining Town in the days when stories were not stories but part of every-day life. In other words, it happened ONCE UPON A TIME". <sup>31</sup>

Soyinka's first TV drama, "My Father's Burden," may have been intended as a serious work or a "play of mood" similar to "The Swamp Dwellers," but this mock "Tortoise" from the Wild West obviously was meant as a free-wheeling farce. Soyinka was back to his old antics again, trying to corral bellylaughs.

The Radio Times also makes mention of one other unknown Soyinka play entitled "The Roots" which was "played during the British Drama League" in 1959, presumably in London. <sup>32</sup> No further details are given but one

imagines Soyinka must have been active in the production since he was still in England at that time. Later, on September 25, 1960, just one week before the ceremonies marking Nigeria's full political independence, the Radio Times announces a forthcoming radio production of Soyinka's "Camwood on the Leaves," which had been "specially commissioned by Radio Nigeria for INDEPENDENCE."<sup>33</sup> This play, broadcast five years later on the BBC's "African Theatre" programme and finally published in 1973,<sup>34</sup> was introduced in programme notes by Abiola Irele as having been inspired by some traditional Yoruba songs," especially "one of the best known traditional songs of the Yorubas, 'Agbe'," which concerns "Camwood (Osun), a bright red dye with which the new child is bathed."<sup>35</sup> These traditional songs apparently were incorporated in the play without substantial textual modification by Soyinka.

In addition to writing radio and television playscripts, Soyinka was quite active in 1960 in developing a new series of radio talks called "Talking Through Your Hat."<sup>36</sup> Several of his light-hearted contributions to this series were later published in the Radio Times: first a hilarious medley of parodies on after-dinner speeches as delivered by a patronizing American, a pompous Government Minister, a long-winded "small-fry" master of ceremonies, and the oldest alumnus in attendance at the Sir Milton Mackenzie Grammar School Eve of Independence Old Boys' Dinner;<sup>37</sup> then an amusing glance at the lives of lorry drivers and their scrapes with the law (a theme to which Soyinka returned in his play The Road);<sup>38</sup> next a personal travelogue telling of the wonders of Paris, "land of flesh and bread";<sup>39</sup> and finally an attack on the concept of the "African Personality" which Soyinka found as demeaning to Africans as previous stereotyped notions

of the "African mentality."<sup>40</sup> All these topics, even his ~~serious~~<sup>#</sup> indictment of the shortcomings of the Negritude ideology, were treated comically.

Although writing for radio and television must have kept him quite busy, Soyinka also managed to find sufficient time in his first months home to play a leading role in a university of Ibadan production of Brecht's Caucasian Chalk Circle;<sup>41</sup> to complete the manuscript of The Trials of Brother which had its premiere performance in Ibadan that same year;<sup>42</sup> to script, produce, direct and act in his most ambitious play A Dance of the Forests which had been commissioned for the Nigerian Independence Celebrations;<sup>43</sup> and to publish a number of poems and critical essays in The Horn, a University of Ibadan poetry magazine founded a few years earlier by J.P. Clark and Martin Banham.<sup>44</sup>

Soyinka was a regular contributor to The Horn between 1960 and 1962. Among his poems dating from this period are two dealing with aspects of the theater -- "Stage" and "Audience to Performer," one written in pidgin English -- "Okonjo de Hunter," one entitled "epitaph for Say Tokyo Kid" (a driver and captain of thugs who reappears later as a character in The Road), as well as the earliest printed versions of his now-famous "Season" and "Death <sup>in the</sup> Dawn."<sup>45</sup> His major critical contribution to The Horn was a 1960 essay on "The Future of West African Writing"<sup>46</sup> in which he argued that the real mark of authenticity in African writing was indifferent self-acceptance rather than energetic racial self-assertion. Early African writing, he claimed, was dishonest because it either imitated literary fashions in Europe or pandered to European demands and expectations for the exotic and primitive. The first West African writer to produce truly African literature was not Léopold Senghor but

Chinua Achebe.

The significance of Chinua Achebe is the evolvment, in West African writing, of the seemingly indifferent acceptance. And this, I believe is the turning point in our literary development. It is also a fortunate accident of timing, because of the inherently invalid doctrine of 'negritude.' Leopold Senghor, to name a blatant example. And if we would speak of 'negritude' in a more acceptable broader sense, Chinua Achebe is a more 'African' writer than Senghor. The duiker will not paint 'duiker' on his beautiful back to proclaim his duikeritude; you'll know him by his elegant leap. The less self-conscious the African is, and the more innately his individual qualities appear as an artist of exciting dignity.

in his writing, the more seriously he will be taken

Soyinka's famous put-down of Negritude ("a tiger does not have to proclaim his tigritude") apparently originated in this remark on the duiker and duikeritude, of which it must have been a perversion, tigers being no more indigenous to Africa than surrealist French poetry.<sup>47</sup> In any case, this early articulation of Soyinka's artistic credo is interesting when placed beside the creative writing he was doing at this period in his career. In his serious works Soyinka evidently aspired to create authentic African art of "exciting dignity." His aesthetic philosophy was based on total acceptance of his Africanness.

Soyinka's impressive literary and dramatic accomplishments in London and Ibadan soon won him a measure of recognition in Nigeria. In March 1961, after he had been back home only a year, the twenty-six year old author was made the subject of an illustrated feature article in Drum, probably the leading African popular magazine in Nigeria in those days. The headline read "Young Dramatist is Earning the Title of Nigeria's Bernard Shaw."<sup>48</sup> The comparison was apt, probably more apt and more prophetic than the journalist who made it could have realized, for Soyinka

hadn't yet displayed some of his most Shavian qualities. He was known primarily as a humorist, a public entertainer, a campus wit, a high-spirited clown. And he was known almost exclusively in his homeland, where he addressed his own people through the most popular of the public media -- theatre, radio, television and, much less often, print. It was not until 1963, when his first three books were published (two of them in England) that he became -- instantly and forever -- one of the most important writers in the English-speaking world.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka (London: Evans, 1971); Alain Ricard, Théâtre et nationalisme: Wole Soyinka et LeRoi Jones (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972); Eldred Durosimi Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka (London: Heinemann, 1973); James Gibbs, Study Aid to Kongi's Harvest (London: Rex Collings, 1973).
2. Research for this essay was done in Nigeria in 1972-73 on a Younger Humanist Fellowship awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I wish to thank NEH and the University Research Institute at the University of Texas at Austin for their support.
3. Information supplied by Dapo Adelugba, Theatre Arts Department, University of Ibadan. See Soyinka's comment below.
4. Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, eds. African Writers Talking: A Collection of Radio Interviews (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1972), pp. 171-72.
5. Nigerian Radio Times, (July 1954), pp. 15-16. Chinua Achebe, who was working for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service at this time, may have edited this story for publication.
6. The following poem is the earliest I have been able to trace. It was published six years before than the poem Moore cites as "the first of Soyinka's work to appear in Nigeria"; see Moore, p. 6.
7. The University Voice, 2 (Jan. 1953), 21.
8. I wish to thank the librarians at the University of Ibadan, particularly Mr. S.O. Oderinde, for assisting me to locate materials

in this collection.

9. The Eagle, 3, 1 (1953), 2.
10. The Eagle, 3, 3 (1954), 2.
11. The Eagle, 3, 1 (1953), 4-5.
12. Ibid., p. 6.
13. The Eagle, 3, 2 (1954), 5.
14. The Eagle, 3, 3 (1954), 6. This poem is quoted in full in my "Popular Literature for an African Elite," Journal of Modern African Studies, 12 (1974).
15. The Eagle, 3, 2 (1954), 8.
16. The record, of course, may be incomplete. It would be interesting to examine student publications from the University of Leeds to see if any contributions by Soyinka can be found there.
17. The Eagle, 4, 2 (1955), 4.
18. Moore, p. 6.
19. West Africa, 13 July 1957, p. 670. Manuscripts submitted for this competition were to be "not less than 7,500 and not more than 15,000 words," according to Universitas, II, 1 (December 1955), 3.
20. The Gryphon, (March 1957), 11-22. I am grateful to Tony Harrison for bringing this and the following story to my attention.
21. The Gryphon, (Autumn 1957), 16-22.
22. New Nigeria Forum, 2 (May 1958), 26-30.
23. Pieterse and Duerden, pp. 170-74; Moore, pp. 7-15; Ricard, p. 228; Jones, p. xiii. For a description of "The Invention," see Charles R. Larson, "Soyinka's First Play: 'The Invention'," Africa Today, 18, 4 (1971), 80-83.

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24. See especially Moore, pp. 7-9, and James Gibbs, "Wole Soyinka: Bio-bibliography," Africana Library Journal, 3, 1 (1972), 15-22.
  25. Moore, p. 9. Moore says Soyinka was awarded a "research fellowship which would enable him to travel widely in Nigeria, studying and recording traditional festivals, rituals and masquerades rich in dramatic content," but an account in Nigeria's Radio Times (3 July 1960) says, "A grant was made recently by the Rockefeller Foundation to enable 'Wole to make a survey of Nigerian drama in its modern development." It appears that he was studying modern developments in traditional theatre.
  26. Gibbs, p. 16.
  27. Moore, pp. 14-15; Gibbs, pp. 15-16.
  28. Radio Times (March 1960), p. 5.
  29. TV Times and Radio News, 28 July 1960, pp. 12-13.
  30. Radio Times, 18 December 1960, p. 3.
  31. Radio Times, 22 January 1961, p. 7.
  32. Radio Times, 3 July 1960, p. 6.
  33. Radio Times, 25 September 1960, p. 6. Soyinka mentions this fact in an interview in Pieterse and Duerden, p. 171.
  34. See Shirley Cordeaux, "The BBC African Service's Involvement in African Theatre," Research in African Literatures, 1 (1970), 153; Camwood on the Leaves (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973).
  35. Radio Times, 25 September 1960, p. 6.
  36. Radio Times, 3 July 1960, p. 6.
  37. Radio Times, 11 September 1960, p. 7.
  38. Radio Times, 18 September 1960, p. 7.
  39. Radio Times, 4 December 1960, pp. 6-7.
  40. Radio Times, 22 January 1961, pp. 6-7.

41. Ibadan, 9 (1960), 20; Moore; p. 15.
42. Ibid.
43. Moore, p. 15; Gibbs, pp. 16-17. Reviews of the performance can be found in Ibadan, 10 (1960), 30-32, and African Horizon, 2 (January 1961), 8-11.
44. For a history of this magazine, see W.H. Stevenson's article in a forthcoming issue of Research in African Literatures.
45. "Stage," The Horn, 4, 1 (1960), 1; "Audience to Performer," The Horn, 4, 1 (1960), 4; "Proverb: Okonjo de Hunter," The Horn, 3, 3 (1960), 6-7; "epitaph for Say Tokyo Kid," The Horn, 4, 5 (1962), 10-11; "Season," The Horn, 4, 2 (1961), 2; "death in the dawn," The Horn, 4, 6 (1962), 2-3. Other poems of his in this magazine are "Poisoners of the World, Unite," The Horn, 3, 3 (1960), 4-5, 9, and "Committee Man," The Horn, 4, 3 (1961), 10-11.
46. The Horn, 4, 1 (1960), 10-16.
47. Janheinz Jahn quotes Soyinka's later elaboration of this concept at a conference in Berlin in 1964 in his A History of Neo-African Literature: Writing in Two Continents (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 265-66.
48. Drum, (March 1961), 27.