

CURRENT BOOKS

FELLOWS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center

**AKÉ: The Years of
Childhood**

by Wole Soyinka
Random, 1982
230 pp. \$14.95

In well over a dozen books—as a playwright, poet, novelist, and essayist—the Nigerian Wole Soyinka has decisively proved himself Africa's most demanding, and possibly most accomplished, creative thinker. But those readers who may have recoiled at the complexities of his earlier works will find in this autobiographical volume the easy, graceful, practiced glide of the homing pigeon. They

will judge it, with good reason, the best book that Soyinka has written.

At least two risks attend the writing of a memoir of childhood. One is to comment on the past with such superior wisdom (and, indeed, condescension) as to deny innocence its rude beauty—to pretend, in other words, the child had nothing to do with the shaping of the man. The other is to exaggerate the mystique of the unfamiliar ideas with which the child groped and of the equally overpowering adults before whom he grew, thus inflating the chronicle into a romantic fantasy.

Soyinka's achievement is to have successfully straddled these two territories of risk. His world as a child—a bicultural world where Western values compete with native Yoruba customs and superstitions—is very much an unfamiliar one, full of failed heroes with amulet-covered bodies, man-eating chiefs who embroil themselves in various follies, and hypocritical colonial headmasters. But that world is confronted by a child who so continually questions its mysteries that they are eventually exposed as pretenses. The child is accurately revealed for what he is: an intellectual in the making.

Soyinka's account of his first 11 years in the western Nigerian town of Abeokuta (Aké was his specific neighborhood) begs comparison with another classic of African childhood, Camara Laye's *The African Child* (first French edition, 1953). Laye, a Mandingo from Guinea, was the son of a village blacksmith, credited, as were all smiths in Mandingo society, with deep spiritual powers. So besides growing up amidst the arcane wisdom of the traditional society, Laye encountered mystery even in objects and creatures that were part of the natural environment. Soyinka, though not unaffected by traditional superstitions, was still very much the son of an argumentative, British-educated schoolmaster; thus, before the eyes of the growing child, everything stood the risk of being probed and reduced.

Consider how each of these two young artists-in-the-making responded to snakes. The one that crawled confidently into Laye's household or into his father's workshop was calmly introduced to the frightened

child as an ancestral spirit. The snake that Soyinka encountered on a relative's farm received no such greeting: It was instantly stoned and slated for dinner. Even during Soyinka's childhood, pragmatism and secular intelligence prevailed over traditional religion, just as they do in his mature fiction, where gods of the Yoruba pantheon are led out of their hallowed niches in cult shrines and set squarely in the company of fumbling men—for literary and not pious purposes.

In *Aké*, Soyinka comes through far less as a romancer than as a sweet remembrancer. His picture of the 1930s and '40s is re-created with charming vividness: sleeping children ("veteran warriors of sleep") fighting infernal battles for mat space on the floor; Hitler as a bogey man haunting the village as well as the nearby sea; the radical Kuti family championing a feminist revolt against the combined tyranny of the Alaké (the paramount chief) and the British colonial administration; the dawning of nationalist politics in the figures of Oged Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe.

Perhaps the best thing about this book is the language. Soyinka is renowned for his skillful—sometimes too skillful—manipulation of English, and his descriptions here of everything from food to manners to smells bear witness to long practice at the trade: "Even the least pleasant smell, such as the faintly nauseating smell of a smashed bedbug, tinged with the whiff of camphor that should have prevented its appearance in the first place was part of Aké's extended persona; it was of the same order as the nocturnal rumblings of Sorowanke, the madwoman who lived by the mango tree, talking in her sleep." But the real stunner here is Soyinka's frequent use of Yoruba. Western-educated Nigerians often say that, during a truly down-home conversation in an indigenous language or even pidgin, correct English is likely to spoil the fun. *Aké* shows Soyinka "going home" in a way he has never done before. I salute the genius and the man, and look forward to the inevitable sequel.

—Isidore Okpewho

HANDBOOK OF NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS, Volume 10, Southwest
edited by Alfonso Ortiz
Smithsonian, 1983
868 pp. \$25

If anyone ever runs a contest to pick the most misleading book title, then the *Handbook of North American Indians* will be one of the top contenders: Each volume is the size of a respectable dictionary, and when the series is complete, there will be 20 volumes. Together they will give an extraordinarily full and lively account of the native Americans, from the time that man first set foot on this continent down to the last quarter of this century.

The technical problems involved in a work of this scope are awesome. Transcribing words (in California alone, for example, well over 60 Indian languages were spoken), ascertaining tribal boundaries and settlement sites (particularly when the tribe is long extinct or has long since left the area), tracking down illustrations (sometimes misidentified items from European archives or museums)—all these require exact scholarship of