

life. While many Americans may feel disappointed by the results, remarkable progress in race relations has been made since the beginning of the civil rights era. Affirmative action has not done much for the poor, but it has greatly helped to expand and integrate the black middle class. Obviously, much remains to be done. But if the effort to achieve racial integration is to be judged a failure, then it is a failure not only of liberalism but of republicanism in our day and nation.

On this crucial point, regrettably, Sandel is evasive. For him, the public philosophy of republicanism was already moribund when the Great Society was launched. Looking back at the New Nationalism of Teddy Roosevelt, which “unfolded from the Progressive era to the New Deal and the Great Society,” he concludes that it “failed to cultivate a shared national identity.” Without the moral cohesion that goes with such a shared national identity, Sandel fears that even the worthiest goals (he has expressed approval of programs such as affirmative action) are doomed. “The American welfare state,” he writes, “is vulnerable because it does not rest on a sense of national community adequate to its purpose.”

Does Sandel have a solution? Yes, and it is one that has great resonance these days. Since the “sense of a national community” has failed, he finds “a more promising basis for a democratic politics” in “a revitalized civic life nour-

ished in the more particular communities we inhabit.” Small local communities, whether governments or private associations, can indeed serve as wellsprings of reform and civic virtue. They cannot, however, cope with the forces of a complex and interdependent modern economy unless they act within a national framework of policy and power. As revealed by the few, thin examples in his concluding pages, Sandel’s localistic hope is virtually a counsel of despair.

Under British rule, the American Founders learned to be wary of concentrated power. But under the Articles of Confederation, they saw what happened when power was too widely dispersed. In response, they drew up a constitution that would unite the American people in what George Washington in his Farewell Address termed “an indissoluble community of interest *as one nation*.” Republicanism in this *national* mode inspired the leading minds among the Founders, and it has continued to be the dominant theme in our political culture to this day. Individualistic liberalism is no substitute, as Sandel so persuasively demonstrates. But far less persuasive is his faint hope that the small community will somehow rescue us. There is no cure for our present discontent without a renewal of republican purpose on the national scale.

> SAMUEL H. BEER is the Eaton Professor of the Science of Government, emeritus, at Harvard University.

## *Can Nigeria Be One?*

*THE OPEN SORE OF A CONTINENT:  
A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis.*

By Wole Soyinka. Oxford University Press. 176 pp. \$19.95

by Makau wa Mutua

When Wole Soyinka all but pronounces the death of his native Nigeria, the world should listen. Not only is Soyinka Africa’s best-known writer; Nigeria is in many ways the epitome of the modern African state—rich in people

and resources, yet devastated by political misrule and ethnic divisiveness.

Born in 1934 and educated in Nigeria and England, Soyinka became in 1986 the first African to win the Nobel Prize in literature. He is best known for such plays as

*The Lion and the Jewel* (1959) and *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1961), which combine elements of Yoruba ritual with Western stagecraft. His fictionalized portraits of Nigerian society in transition are both tragic and satirical, with many of his barbs aimed at the villainies of despots. But this nonfictional narrative of political repression in contemporary Nigeria is his most anguished polemic to date. To be sure, Soyinka hopes that Nigeria can be saved from the predations of the present military dictator, General Sani Abacha. But he is at best ambivalent about his country's future. Without saying so, he seems to conclude that Nigeria is doomed.

Soyinka's despair is understandable. Nigeria's political history since independence from Britain in 1960 has been for the most part a nightmarish succession of corrupt and brutal tyrants propped up by the international oil industry. But the real problem, persisting from colonial times to the present, is Nigeria's fragmented ethnic composition. The British attempted to deal with this problem on the eve of their departure. As a condition of independence, they made the three dominant ethnic groups accept a complex power-sharing federal system. Those groups were the Yoruba in the west (20 percent of the total population), the Igbo in the south (17 percent), and the Hausa and Fulani in the north (21 and 9 percent, respectively).

Reasonable as it might have seemed, the design proved flawed. Compared with the oil-rich south and the industrialized west, the predominantly Muslim north is an economic wasteland. Yet the north controls the military and is the most populous region; by 1966, its refusal to share power prompted an Igbo coup, followed by a massacre of Igbos living in the north. The result was the break-away state of Biafra—reincorporated into Nigeria in 1970 after a four-year civil war that left more than 250,000 civilians dead. Since then, a close-knit syndicate of northern military leaders has jealously held power. It is almost impossible to conceive of any circumstances under which this clique would cede control to civilians from the south or west or, for that matter, to any democratically elected leaders.

Yet rather than rest blame on the flawed federal design, Soyinka argues that the artificiality of Nigeria, and of other modern African states, is no greater than that created in the formation of many nations outside Africa. He suggests that the African nations are passing through a kind of purgatory, waiting to attain the "status of irreversibility—either as paradise or hell." To Soyinka, Nigeria's birthday should have been June 12, 1993, the day when the will of the people, freely expressed through the secret ballot, should have sent the military back to the barracks and ushered in democracy.

Instead, the 1993 election saw the culmination and, finally, the frustration of a devious strategy engineered by General I. B. Babangida, the military ruler since 1985. Through "physical and moneyed thuggery," Babangida made sure that only two parties, and two presidential candidates, would be able to compete for power. At the same time, many suspected that only one outcome would be tolerated by the military: victory by the candidate from the north, Bashir Tofa. Soyinka calls Tofa "a straw figure specifically set up by the perpetuation machinery of I. B. Babangida."

As it turned out, most of Nigeria, including the north, voted for the Yoruba businessman Moshood Abiola. In response, Babangida and a coterie of officers led by fellow northerner Sani Abacha annulled the election, plunging the country into chaos. Abacha then forced Babangida to step down, setting up an interim government that he himself overthrew a few months later. Having declared himself supreme ruler, Abacha has since ruled by ruthlessly suppressing any opponents, real or imagined.

This tale of tin despots with huge egos is enlivened by Soyinka's seductive style. Describing Abacha's phony "transition" program, he writes, "It is a fair assessment of the IQ of Abacha that he actually imagines that this transparent ploy for self-perpetuation would fool the market woman, the roadside mechanic, the student, factory worker, or religious leader of whatever persuasion. Even the village idiot must marvel at such banal attempts to rival a disgraced predecessor."

As persuasive as Soyinka is, however, one might question the faith he invests in the 1993 election. According to one expert observer, Omo Omoruyi, a respected political scientist who was forced to flee for his life after the annulment of the election, the “democratization” process was compromised every step of the way by excessive state interference. Why, then, is the election so important in Soyinka’s eyes?

The answer, I believe, lies in the ethnicity of the winning candidate. Abiola’s presidential ambitions go back at least two decades; after being thwarted once in 1983, he used his enormous wealth to bribe his way back into power. Like a West African Ross Perot, he financed his own party in order to secure a place at the top of its ticket. But Soyinka barely touches upon Abiola’s corrupt practices, treating him throughout as a hero. The only explanation is that Abiola, like Soyinka, is a Yoruba.

And therein lies one of the weaknesses of this book. Soyinka is a distinguished champion of democracy. His many writings expose and attack despotic rule, and his activism has forced him into exile, where he has formed an opposition movement called the United Democratic Front of Nigeria. Yet in the passion of his protest, Soyinka reveals his own ethnic bias. His lionizing of a fellow Yoruba, and his belittling of northerners in general (as opposed to the leaders), threaten to undermine his larger purpose.

*The Open Sore of a Continent* is replete with accounts of brutal acts by the military. But few are as poignant as the persecution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the writer and defender of one of Nigeria’s many minority ethnic groups, the Ogoni. (Together, minority groups comprise 33 percent of the total population.) The Ogoni, who occupy one of the richest oil-producing regions, have suffered the consequences of ecological devastation,

seeing their once-lush farmlands turned into an inferno of burning oil swamps. Hence the Movement for the Salvation of the Ogoni People, a civil organization seeking better conditions or, failing that, secession. In 1994, Saro-Wiwa and several other Ogonis were arrested and charged with the murder of four pro-government Ogoni leaders.

In a trial that was universally viewed as a mockery of the most basic human rights and legal guarantees, Saro-Wiwa and his colleagues were convicted and sentenced to die. In November 1995, they were hanged in a show of what

Soyinka calls “shabby cruelty.” In the case of Saro-Wiwa, a man in his fifties, it took five attempts to kill him. This incident, more than anything else the Abacha regime has done, has relegated it to pariah status in the eyes of the world. Yet the regime cares little for international public opinion as long as the world’s largest oil purchasers, including the United States, continue to buy Nigerian oil.

What the death of Saro-Wiwa demonstrates was the determination of the Abacha regime to crush any credible threat to its control of the country’s main industry. The incident further proves that the northern military clique is not about to share power with non-northerners. What, then, are the Yoruba, Igbo, and other minorities supposed to do? How long are they supposed to wait before they receive their due as fellow Nigerians? It seems only a matter of time before a three-state partition becomes the sole viable option. But will the north ever allow separation? These are questions for which Soyinka has no answers. For now, Nigeria seems headed toward the apocalypse. That is why this book is a requiem.



Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1993

> MAKAU WA MUTUA is associate professor of law at the State University of New York at Buffalo.