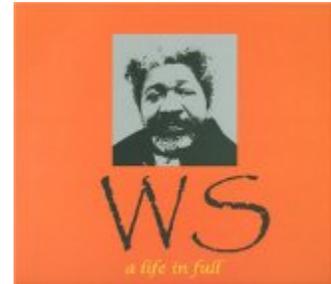


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bankole Olayebi, ed. *WS: A Life in Full*. Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2004. 269 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-978-2030-42-9.

Reviewed by Sola Adeyemi (School of English, University of Leeds)  
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## A Montage of Memories

We had just reached the summit and were standing on a wide flat area of the rocky hill. “That is one of the mysteries of this place,” the man said, pointing at a huge depression that closely resembled a footprint. “Prehistoric,” he muttered. And with that, he set off along a path. I followed, through bushes, under heavily overhanging aged trees and under (and around) jutting rocks. After a while, we reached a hamlet of about four huts. The man shouted a greeting and another man, a very elderly specimen, came out of one of the huts. They conversed briefly. The man chuckled. “I am sure if I were to come back in twenty years, everything will still remain as it is, including that man. To my fascination, it has never changed in the thirty-odd years that I have been coming here,” the man said as we departed. Soon, we were back at our starting point to meet the rest of the team.

That place was Idanre Hill in 1991, during the shooting of *Ogun, un Dieu de la Houte*, a documentary on the relationship of Wole Soyinka and Ogun, the Yoruba deity of creativity and war, loosely based on *The Road*. The man was Wole Soyinka.

Wole Soyinka is a man influenced by many things, and whose influence in turn has affected many people as well as the world’s literature, culture, and politics. It is a tall order to cover all facets of this man in a book, as critics like Biodun Jeyifo, Derek Wright, and James Gibbs have found out.[1] Nevertheless, this new attempt at capturing the many faces of the man in a book of pictures provides a valuable montage of Wole Soyinka, his works, his passions, and his ideology.

Starting with an updated version of Wole Soyinka’s chronology, the book contains more than 400 pictures divided into six sections—“The Man,” “Creative Genius,” “Activist,” “Celebrity,” “Citizen of the World,” and “The Many Laurels”—with insightful essays, reminiscences, and tributes interspersing or providing refueling stops in the journey to discovering—or re-discovering, for the cognoscenti—the man. Thus, this book sets out to be a fitting tribute to a man who is not only a man of letters, but a complete human being—a humorous person, a son, a father, a renegade, a hunter, a political activist, an actor, a designer, a nonconformist, in short, a man of many facets.

The pictures that fill this coffee-table book of photos and personal tributes present, in guarded and unguarded poses, snapshots of the people and influences in Soyinka’s life. The pictures show Soyinka as a four-month-old baby being “watched over” by his older sister, and range from childhood scenes to images of Soyinka as a silvery hirsute man who has become the toast of the literary world. Mixed with family (and familiar) pictures are pictures of friends, associates, colleagues, students, scenes from his work, and acts of tribute in various climes and times. Perhaps the most interesting pictures are those of Soyinka in his many guises—choirboy, pupil, hunter, teacher, wine-maker, ambassador, etc.

The essays are divided into three types. The first are his own, drawn from two autobiographical works, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981) and *Isara: A Voyage Round Essay* (1989). They introduce Soyinka’s childhood

influences—his mission-house environment; his parents, Essay and Wild Christian; his uncle and auntie, the Rev. I O Ransome-Kuti (Daodu) and Daodu’s activist wife, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti; and his secondary school. Anybody who is familiar with Soyinka’s work would be familiar with this section of the book; however, the really interesting bits are found in the other essays included here.

Olaokun, Soyinka’s first son, remembers his father fondly as unconventional and individualist—traits he expected in his son—and famous, “but was never totally sure why” (p. 37). Other tributes here include those from Soyinka’s late friend, Bola Ige, who asked the writer to be his son’s godfather, and Abiola Irele who, as a student at the University of Ibadan in the 1950s, was one of the first Nigerians to act in Soyinka’s plays. As he recalls, Soyinka was not “overly impressed by [the performances], perhaps because they presented to him an image of his plays quite at variance with his own conceptions of them,” a point every Soyinka critic and admirer has continually argued, and an issue that has often provided fuel to criticism of his work as obscure, especially by those like the “Bolekaja” trio of Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie (p. 53).[2]

Elsewhere, Femi Johnson recalls a hunting scene while Okey Ndibe recounts how Soyinka saved his Christmas. The section ends with a pictorial sketch of the writers’ retreat that Kongi, as he is familiarly called, built and lives in.

The second section, “Creative Genius”, contains essays by Ulli Beier on how Soyinka’s plight as a detainee in the late 1960s inspired school children in far away Papua New Guinea, an insight into his theater by Martin Banham, and a revealing article on the formation of his early theater groups—the 1960 Masks and Orisun Theater—in Ibadan. The third part details Soyinka’s role as an activist, with most of the section taken up by his trial as the “Mystery Gunman” who held up a radio station and broadcast a political denunciation of an allegedly rigged election in the early 1960s. The section also touches on Soyinka’s founding of the non-conformist, non-conventional “social” club, the Pyrates Confraternity, as well as his travails with the erstwhile military dictator of Nigeria, Sani Abacha. The section ends with a piece by the trial judge in the Mystery Gunman case, whose first legal encounter with Soyinka was actually a few years earlier when he investigated a breach of contract by Soyinka. Soyinka had gone to university on a government scholarship on the condition that, after graduating, he would join the

civil service. But Soyinka was not a man cut out to be a civil servant and joined the university as a lecturer instead. So, Soyinka was liable for his years and schooling abroad, but Justice Esho found a way to release him from obligation, as he was a few years later to find a way of proving—at least in the eyes of the law—that Soyinka was not the Mystery Gunman.

The third set of essays includes those by writers Femi Osofisan, Gerald Moore, Ben Okri, and Nadine Gordimer, the latter declaring that, “where it ends for most people marks the beginning for Wole Soyinka” (p. 219). Niyi Osundare writes, unarguably, that “Soyinka is to Africa’s literature what Mandela is to its politics” (p. 249).

The last part of the book is on the many laurels Soyinka has garnered all over the world, from secondary school awards through to the first Nobel Prize for Literature to go to a writer of African extraction, in 1986.

I have dwelt more on the essays and tributes in this book than on the pictures. This should in no way detract from the importance of the photographs. In fact, the book would be just another collection of words in honor of Soyinka on his seventieth birthday without the pictures. The photos are rare portraits of the life and times of our writer and they provide a fitting tribute to a man whose entire tapestry is a conscience to humanity. The pictures present a man of contradictions, ever courting controversy, though not always for its own sake, and yet maintaining a private, perhaps even mysterious, lifestyle that builds fences against incursions of inquisitive eyes. They present a man who could afford to be aloof—and in many ways is—yet also might go to the ends of the earth to assist a total stranger. But did not Bertolt Brecht write that contradictions are man’s only hope?

This is an endlessly fascinating montage of a man who is many different things to many different people, known and unknown to him. In the end, I suspect, he will always be known as a man of literature, as he himself writes in an epithet concluding the book: “Where would I be without Literature? How else can I feel ... A sense of purpose? I feel pleasure in the consuming as well as the producing of Literature” (p. 266).

#### Notes

[1]. Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Derek Wright, *Wole Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993); James Gibbs, *Critical Perspective on Wole Soyinka* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980).

[2]. Chinweizu et al., *Towards The Decolonization of African Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983). “Bolekaja” literally means “Come-down-let’s-fight” and designates the aggressive nature of the type of literary criticism practised by the school of Chinweizu et al.

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