

Morning yet on Another Day of Indaba

Reading Panashe Chigumadzi's "[Why I'm No Longer Talking To Nigerians About Race](#)," was quite a trip. Halfway through the essay, I was certain that I would join issues with it. Bold, piquant, exacting, yet strangely endearing, the writing staked out a particular challenge to Nigerians who, it seems, have a reputation on social media for not fighting shy of hot-and-heavy gauntlets. Most people have opinions about Nigerians, who have opinions about nearly everything on earth and in outer space, so Chigumadzi's pinpoint digital pre-indaba was a lucky strike. It immediately elicited [a flurry of tweets, replies, and counterreplies](#), most of them approving. Typically, the impulse-engineered attention did not last.

It is true that a couple of other Nigerians came up for sharp censure in the essay, but none had Şóyínká's standing, or provided enough straw on which to hang the argument.

For me, though, two things stood out in that altogether necessary challenge, and they were obvious in the two tweets I sent in sharing the hot link. First, I felt that the claim that Nigerians lacked sufficient political solidarity with (southern) Africans on the basis of race was debatable (a good thing), and that, second, placing the writer Wolé Şóyínká as the exemplary figure of that national lack of empathy could use a more considered appreciation of the writer's involvements as a political personality.

It is true that a couple of other Nigerians came up for sharp censure in the essay, but none had Şóyínká's standing, or provided enough straw on which to hang the argument. The first issue was the authors' main beef, and she marshaled many points, some relying on personal observations and others distilled from quite impressive reading. "If it is true," she wrote, "that we of African descent have grown up in different households, that shape our experiences of the world differently, how do we respond to the pain and yearnings of our sisters?" I imagined addressing this question with a combination of historical details and actual examples of Nigerians' commitment to racial solidarity that Chigumadzi might have missed. Then, parenthetically, I would add a long paragraph to offer a

complex picture of Şóyínká's racial politics, in art and in life.

In the meantime, I hoped someone else, another Nigerian or anyone from anywhere informed about Şóyínká's work, would pick this gauntlet ...

Reflecting further on the task, however, it seems to me that building an argument around Şóyínká's politics in relation to the black world, and to southern Africa in particular, is the more productive way to address my two quibbles with the essay. It presents an opportunity to put on record information about African literary culture that is not well-known, much less treasured. The prevalent attitudes among African creative artists, especially those who are socialized in digital culture, do not seem to sufficiently encourage habits that make confident creatures of sensibilities—curiosity, criticism and the eschewal of easy answers. It is to the benefit of Chigumadzi's readers that they are made aware of the political exactions of writers like Şóyínká and others, whether or not such readers are inclined to take literature as vocation. Writers also make our history, after all, and they do so in ways that give us cause for hope, for the most part. And who knows but that refreshing relevant parts of this history can foster (actually rekindle!) the solidarity that the author felt to be lacking.

Writing with Attitude

Chigumadzi wrote that Şóyínká “had been so unimpressed and impatient with the Negritude movement spearheaded by the Francophone writers of African descent that he famously dismissed them at the 1962 African Writers' Conference held at Makerere University, quipping: “A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces.” At a conference in Berlin two years later, Şóyínká elaborated this: “a tiger does not stand in the forest and say: ‘I am a tiger.’ When you pass where the tiger has walked before, you see the skeleton of the duiker, you know that some tigritude has been emanated there.”” She added, subsequently, that “Şóyínká was [not] the only one to critique the Negritude movement. It was just that he was the loudest, and perhaps the most flippant, in his response.”

Readers of Myth, Literature and the African World might recall that Şóyínká actually turned to endorsing certain of the principles of Negritude in the following decades, and he is known to have declared that Abibiman, the world of black peoples, was his primary sphere of artistic and political interest.

With the right context, Şóyínká's attitude toward Negritude and toward racial politics in Africa and the world appears as two different, clearly justified, things. Yes, a lot has been written about that "tigritude" statement, and Chigumadzi's summary was largely accurate. However, her interpretation of that statement as a "flippant" dismissal of Negritude, and thus of racial solidarity, was mistaken.

What Şóyínká intended with the statement in Kampala was clear, and as soon as an opportunity for clarification appeared, (during the Berlin conference mentioned in Chigumadzi's essay), he seized it: "To quote what I said fully, I said 'A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces ... The distinction which I was making at this conference (in Kampala, Uganda, 1962) was purely a literary one: I was trying to distinguish between propaganda and true poetic creativity. I was saying in other words that what one expected from poetry was an intrinsic poetic quality, not a mere name-dropping."

In an unpublished text tracing the history of the tigritude jive, the critic James Gibbs has observed that both the initial statement in Kampala and the clarification in Berlin "did not come out of the blue. Şóyínká had toyed with similar ideas and kindred images before. In 'The Future of West African Writing' published in *The Horn* [a magazine at the University of Ibadan], he wrote: 'The duiker does not paint 'duiker' on his beautiful back to proclaim his duikeritude'. [Y]ou'll know him by his elegant leap.'" That essay came out in June 1960, two clear years before the Kampala meeting.

Şóyínká clearly wanted to take a stand. Here was a young writer taking it to the elders, Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire in the main, eager to clear for himself a space from which to speak as an artist with his own mind. And he was hardly the only one. Kampala also provided the stage for the late Christopher Okigbo's unforgettable declaration that he wrote his poetry only for poets. Such statements are prone to quotations, misquotations, paraphrases and outright decontextualization. These are understandable reactions; they come with the territory, and Şóyínká must have issued enough rebuttals to bore himself to exasperated silence, the fate of the verbal magician trying to control the motions of a genie he'd not expected to grow legs as it slid out of the bottle. But silence is not his inclination. On the contrary, he is likelier to downplay his exactions. At another conference in Sweden in 1967, Şóyínká's self-ironizing remarks about "writers holding up radio stations" elicited criticisms from Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Dennis Brutus, neither of whom was aware that the speaker had recently suffered

detention and trial in Nigeria for such daring.

Claims of a lack of racial solidarity are hardly tenable, then, in so far as Şóyínká is concerned. In his work and activism, he has one of the strongest records among black writers of the modern era in taking on the racial question.

Readers of [Myth, Literature and the African World](#) might recall that Şóyínká actually turned to endorsing certain of the principles of Negritude in the following decades, and he is known to have declared that Abibiman, the world of black peoples, was his primary sphere of artistic and political interest. As a work of intellectual accounting, that monograph offered much that Şóyínká needed to put before the world concerning his views of the continent's cultural unity, agreeing with the likes of Cheik Anta Diop and Chancellor Williams where evidence required it, and parting ways with them where necessary. No one who has carefully read the final chapter, "Ideology and the Social Vision," can pretend to any doubts about where the writer stood on the issues. Ironically, in that book he made such a strong case against racist denigration of African experiences that, in mistaken appraisal of his premise, critics like Kwame Appiah took him to task for daring to speak of an African world!

Claims of a lack of racial solidarity are hardly tenable, then, in so far as Şóyínká is concerned. In his work and activism, he has one of the strongest records among black writers of the modern era in taking on the racial question. As the Nigerian poet, Peter Akinlabi tweeted in response to AIAC's post of Chigumadzi's essay, *The Invention*, one of Şóyínká's earliest plays written while he was still a student at Leeds University, was his first foray into the political and human costs of apartheid in South Africa. Around this time, he also joined a cadet corps in Leeds in preparation for a planned invasion of the apartheid enclave, and had close contacts with South African exiles in London (Gibbs, pers. comm.).

His collection of poems, *Ogun Abibiman*, is a creative deployment of the martial ethos of the deity Ogun in confronting racial subjection on the continent. It made its way into the world in the context of the military alliance against apartheid, spearheaded by the late Samora Machel, the founding president of Mozambique, and was subtitled "an epic poem dedicated to the Fallen of Soweto." In 1975, with fellow writers Kofi Awonoor and Brutus, he founded the Union of Writers of the African Peoples, UWAP, and used that platform for his literary and political

activities for several years. (In Los Angeles in the late 1990s, I hung out with the South African poet, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile (“Bra Willie”), whom Chigumadzi quoted in her essay. He spoke often and lovingly about the letters Şóyínká wrote to him inquiring of the activities of South African exiles across the world, and of ways to be of help. Later, in the company of another South African, the writer and political activist Nomboniso Gasa, I tried to tease out further information from Şóyínká about that episode, but he demurred, obviously unwilling to overemphasize his roles. At any rate, there are other records of this kind of commitment, including an important disclosure by Ngugi in *Detained*, his prison memoirs.)

Nigerians Making African History

All of this might come across as so much background information concerning an issue that Chigumadzi proffered only as an example of a contemporary trend among Nigerians who show scant attention to the racial complexities that black people in and outside the continent have to deal with. But it is necessary to know these things to better understand why some or even most Nigerians do not relate to racism the way a South African or a Namibian might do. Against the background of Şóyínká’s exemplary championing of the cause of black people everywhere (and he was not the only one to do this even in Nigeria), Nigeria’s own efforts in the political arena appear exceptional but evolving, and the reasons for the trend that Chigumadzi attacked are easier to appreciate.

Historians, anthropologists, literary critics and economic historians have pointed to the roles that different colonial models in west and southern Africa played in fostering ambiguous attitudes toward race or racial issues in the post-independence era. Wild conquest (to use the title of [Peter Abrahams’](#) novel) of broad swathes of eastern and southern African societies brought about material dispossession of land and customary property in Rhodesia in a manner that could not be achieved in, say, Nigeria. Additional environmental factors such as climate and vegetation prevented the establishment of settler colonialism in West Africa, and the creation of apartheid as state policy in South Africa was the culmination of European racist ideologies for which the age of capital was suitable, give or take a few accidents of geography. But as Chigumadzi observed, the fact that Nigerians did not live in a country where racism was state policy does not mean that they cannot relate to the experience of those who did, and still do. That is empathy, a sentiment that humans are expected to extend to others.

She also does the important, detailed job of documenting Nigeria's role in supporting anti-apartheid movements, groups, and initiatives during the long, dark night of that racist madness. Nigerian school children of my generation not only made monetary contributions to anti-apartheid relief funds, we were also taught something unforgettable: the left-hand corner of the blackboard in classrooms in Western Nigeria remained sacrosanct with the declaration: "Apartheid is a crime against humanity." This message should not be wiped off the blackboard, under any circumstance. As recently as 2002, there were schools in Ibadan where the legend still spoke clearly, white chalk on a black background. In all likelihood, former pupils who took this message to heart also paid the ultimate price during the xenophobic violence exploding across South African cities in 2008, and reigniting periodically. What Nigerians viewed as a national duty with respect to the struggles against apartheid also existed in their music, from reggae, pop, to fuji, best exemplified in the career of the late Sonny Okosuns. This duty doubled in importance for the so-called "frontline states" in the mid-1970s, including Angola, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Mozambique, and Namibia. Support for liberation movements in the region became the centerpiece of Nigeria's foreign policy, starting with the formal recognition and declaration of support for the MPLA, the anti-colonial party in Angola.

While different high-level political maneuverings shaped that diplomatic outcome, it is important to add that UWAP, the writers group coordinated by Şóyínká, played a major role in making the support for Angola count as more than a choice by the Nigerian government. At a symposium organized by President Senghor of Senegal, in 1976, all the writers and scholars, including the Trinidadian political thinker C. L. R. James, who gathered in the National Assembly in Dakar used the occasion of a plenary session to vote—unanimously—in support of the MPLA. Şóyínká and Senghor had since mended fences over the "tigritude" diss, assuming any were considered broken, but he made UWAP stand on principle while Senghor, the generous host, had stated his preference for MPLA's rivals.



Read also: Black Skins White Masks
Revisited: Why I Am No Longer
Talking to Nigerians About Race

To understand the evolving history of this political solidarity, readers need to appreciate the progressive character of the political society in Nigeria, a character that does not always coincide with the forms and practices of the Nigerian state or the habits of its citizens, whether highly placed or not. This means that the principal impulse in the nation that Nigerians worked to build, even long before they came to be identified as Nigerians, was for the betterment of human values, and that a primary identity as Africans was fundamental to stabilizing this impulse. There is no space here to explain these claims in detail, or discuss how this progressive politics developed. It should suffice to note, however, that Nigeria came into existence as a modern, black, African nation at a time when the intellectual values of the black world were coming together, from such unusual places as the writings and activities of Edward Blyden, James Johnson, and other forerunners of the nationalists of the 1920s and the 1930s, as well as the contradictions built into the economic antics of Pax Britannica.

At some point in her essay, Chigumadzi quotes Kwame Appiah to the effect that what “race meant to the ‘New Africans’ -the generation of African intellectuals of the 1960s educated in the West such as Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, Kenneth Kaunda and Julius Nyerere - was different to what race meant to “educated blacks in the New World” such as African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Black British people.”

The fact is that between the Pan-Africanist origins of modern Nigerian nationalism and the radical overtures to political struggles in southern Africa, a great variety of symptoms appeared in the body politic that entrenched bourgeois liberalism as the default social mode in the population’s self-apprehension, even though the political outlook could still remain largely progressive

Appiah arrived at this conclusion only in analysis, and a partial one at that. In practice, generations of political activists before Şóyínká such as Hezekiah Davies, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Margaret Ekpo, Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kútì, and Nkrumah posed the question of anti-colonialism as *Africans* partly due to their experience of living and

studying in the US and England, and partly because even in countries without policies of racial segregation, colonial prejudice often manifested itself in terms of racial hierarchies. Whites got paid more than their African counterparts who held the same or more demanding jobs, and Africans were unable to rise in the professions unless they obtained expensive degrees that were not available in the colonies. What these political figures did when or if they got into power might run counter to those principles, but it would be ahistorical to ignore the situations which shaped their radical politics and the courage with which they responded to those situations.

“At the End of the Small Hours...”

This history does not always inform the way that contemporary Nigerians relate to issues of racism on the continent and in the world at large. The fact is that between the Pan-Africanist origins of modern Nigerian nationalism and the radical overtures to political struggles in southern Africa, a great variety of symptoms appeared in the body politic that entrenched bourgeois liberalism as the default social mode in the population's self-apprehension, even though the political outlook could still remain largely progressive. Among these symptoms was the fact that the party which came to power after the 1959 elections intensely distrusted radical politics, and exacted heavy penalties from those who professed even a mild form of it within three years of self-government. Moreover, and perhaps as a consequence of the first symptom, a combination of ethnic, religious, class and linguistic differences catalyzed a climate of opportunism that made a fair game of needs considered extraneous in political terms. As examples of Pan-African solidarity, the support for the frontline states in 1975 and the establishment of the Technical Aids Corps (through which Nigerian professional expertise was distributed to African, Caribbean and Pacific countries) both occurred, irony of ironies, under military regimes.

Much later in the essay, Chigumadzi posed another question: “Why are so many of these [Nigerian] writers seemingly so apolitical around race politics and deliberately refuse to understand these basic ethics of solidarity and instead bask in the glory of individuated reward of model minority?” The question became necessary because of the ‘blame-the-victim’ standpoint of a Nigerian entrepreneur like Chika Onyeani, author of a bestselling book in South Africa (Capitalist Nigger), and other newly emergent writers. This question may be related to the main one about lack of empathy, but it is in fact different. It speaks

to a particular condition among colonial and postcolonial intellectuals, especially those of African descent everywhere. It is informed, I think, by the opportunisms that go with pursuing an artistic/intellectual career in a world that is run by mostly white capitalists and that rewards those who are unwilling to ask difficult questions about economic and social injustices, or prefer to ask them only of Africans, the way an Onyeani would. It is a form of power grab; the Indian writer Arundhati Roy addresses an aspect of it in her book, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*. Whether things would change if that world were to be run by black or brown capitalists is an open question, but we have provisional answers from the way the affairs of Nigeria and South Africa have been managed in the last two decades. Neither country, as far as I can see, places any real worth on the lives of its citizens. Chigumadzi shows a keen awareness of this problem when she writes of “white racial capitalism and coloniality which is sophisticated enough not to need the presence of white bodies to function.” We can be mindful of the records of British colonialism in Nigeria without thinking to hold Theresa May accountable for the genocidal level of poverty in Nigeria today.

The two questions are ever necessary, and we should be grateful to Chigumadzi for the courage and imagination to raise them. She speaks in a register that is familiar to those who are inclined to form their opinions through soundbites and short reads. Praises on social media of the brilliance of her analyses arrived in lockstep with complaints about the length of the essay. (There are other waters that the essay could have troubled. For example, do contemporary Ghanaians practice a better form of racial solidarity than Nigerians? When prominent politicians such as Ignatius Kutu Acheampong (Ghana), Frederick Chiluba (Zambia) and Alassane Ouattara (Ivory Coast) became victims of the nationality test, any surprises that Zimbabweans living bare lives in South Africa, or Nigerians in Libya, should suffer the fate of blacks in segregation-era Mississippi? But we can hope that such impressions are not lost on informed readers of the essay.) The passion with which Chigumadzi has connected a variety of global-black experiences, through literary and musical references, points to an intellectual sensibility that those interested in their place in the world would do well to cultivate. Chinua Achebe is right: to partisans of African occasions, it is morning yet on creation day.

I suspect that the title of the essay is used tongue-in-cheek. Even with the disposition toward “stanning” “famzing” and surface “bants” among folks on

social media there are many people who may be prepared to work their way to genuine awareness if provided with information. This is a responsibility that falls to artists and writers, and they should do it wherever and whenever possible, in spite of the tendency among people on social media to take offense when corrected on points of fact, style or logic. Once at the University of Ibadan, I listened with horror as a student responded to a lecture by a visiting African American professor by dismissing him as a 'Negro', not an African! The professor didn't expect this, in Ibadan of all places, and so did not know how to respond. I issued a quick rejoinder, and after the lecture the person who'd made the offensive comment came up to me to apologize which, I sensed, was genuine.

These attitudes always have to be cultivated, lifelong, vigilant, unapologetic. Like Lewis Nkosi, Maryse Conde, Mongo Beti and Bessie Head, Şóyínká appeared early to observers as an unusually gifted writer who displayed these qualities, but always in the guise of a citizen, and of a country that only happened to be Nigeria. A wonderful accident of birth, the gift of history as citizen of two countries scarred by racism, we hope, makes Chigumadzi another exemplary figure. Her essay is a strong sign of that irrevocable commitment to asking difficult questions, without which silence might be taken, falsely, scandalously again, as the response of sentient black people to the manifold conundrums of the world.

Editors Note: *This essay was originally published in [Africa as a Country](#)*