Rant of a Coconut: What Chigumadzi Doesn’t Get about Nigerians

By Sanya Osha

Panashe Chigumadzi’s long, digressive article, “Black Skins White Masks Revisited: Why I am No Longer Talking to Nigerians about Race”, on the necessity of Nigerians to engage with the question of race is purposely provocative. It also serves to mislead and misinform. For someone who obviously considers herself eminently qualified to speak in defense of “a radical anti-racist politics”, it would be appropriate to dwell a bit on what precisely are her credentials.

Admittedly, she has confessed to being schooled in white establishments virtually from kindergarten until her current base at Harvard University. In the essay where she makes this confession (“Of Coconuts, Consciousness and Cecil John Rhodes: Disillusionment and Disavowals of the Rainbow Nation”) she also admits to being a “coconut” (black on the outside, white on the inside, the perennial Fanonian quandary), what conscious African-Americans would call a “coon”, or in earlier times, an “Uncle Tom”. And so on the basis of this “impressive” set of accomplishments, she feels, still under the age of thirty, qualified to challenge a nation of almost 200 million souls to engage with the problem of race in globally explicit ways.

Her other accomplishments include her role at the height of the #FeesMustFall campaign when she was invited to Rhodes University, South Africa, to launch her novel, Sweet Medicine, in 2016. There had been a schism within the black students’ movement between purveyors of radical black thought
and “integrationists” of the coconut stripe. White liberals were in full support of the integrationists who had been indoctrinated to misread and misapply the radical teachings of theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko. Chigumadzi had appeared on the platform of the integrationists, obviously at her “coconutic” best.

It really does take some nerve to castigate an entire nation with such incredible blitheness and glibness. It is even more difficult to assimilate when one reviews her “lofty” credentials. Her “coon” education obviously did not prepare her to appreciate the canonical import of works such as Chinua Achebe’s majestic *Things Fall Apart* whose setting is in faraway Nigeria, and not nearby within the southern tip of Africa, as she points out in her characteristically digressive essay, “Rights of Conquest, Rights of Desire”, which casually glosses over perhaps the most powerful as well as the most insightful exploration of the colonial encounter in all of literature. Instead she smuggles unwanted black bodies in the midst of racist white angst as if that in itself constitutes a gesture of racial reconciliation. And just like a true coconut, she had to find a place for the swart gevaar (the black threat) by means of the most remarkable kind of Conradian literary inversion.

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Wole Soyinka, the icon of African literary creativity and redoubtable social activism, is briskly dismissed in the following manner; “Soyinka […] had been so unimpressed and impatient with the Negritude movement spearheaded by the Francophone writers of African descent”. To bolster her point, she cites the now tired and lame quip, “A tiger does not proclaim its tigritude.”

After the usual interminable digressions, she makes a case for “redeeming Nigerian Tigritude” by concluding that Nigerians lack the qualities of empathy and humility to truly become the giants of Africa. You really must possess considerable reserves of patience to isolate her central arguments, namely, Soyinka’s, and by extension, all Nigerians’, appalling unfamiliarity with global race dynamics. Ultimately, this debilitating unawareness precludes Nigerians from being suitable to be at the forefront of African political struggles.

Curiously, she lists the impressive achievements of Nigeria in combating apartheid in South Africa through the national levies it imposed on school children, the numerous diplomatic initiatives it launched or participated in, the net donation of 61 billion dollars to the anti-apartheid struggle, and yet she cannot seem to think this is a most empathetic contribution.

Again, strangely, she fails to reflect on the scourge of Afrophobia plaguing South Africa, in which the business enterprises and bodies of foreign nationals – particularly, Somalis, Ethiopians, Pakistanis, Zimbabweans and Nigerians – are razed almost weekly in exuberant public bouts of xenophobic rage. Of course, it is almost impossible to forge any kind of alliance or solidarity amid such constant orgies of rage, violence and destruction aimed at hapless foreigners. Rather than expect more empathy from Nigerians, it would be more logical to expect more gratitude from the proponents and culprits of Afrophobia.

Let us examine the myth that Nigerians have not been able to formulate the kind of emancipatory race politics Chigumadzi approves. Here, Soyinka immediately comes to mind. When he was eighteen years of age at the then University College Ibadan, Soyinka formed the first campus confraternity along with the likes of renowned Cambridge trained physicist, Muyiwa Awe and others, such as the broadcaster, Ralph Okpara. Their confraternity was established to serve as a bulwark against undue colonial indoctrination on their white-dominated campus. So rather than uncritically
accepting the acquiescence and complicity of the coconut, there was already an awareness to question and resist racial oppression and injustice even before he had attained full maturity.

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Eventually, Soyinka attended Leeds University to complete his undergraduate course but whilst abroad, he was thinking of returning home once his studies were over. For further personal studies, he sought to recuperate orders of knowledge that had been demonised, suppressed and erased by the agents and machinations of colonialism. It was not long before he adopted Ogun, the Yoruba deity of war, iron and justice, as his special guardian spirit contrary to the Western education he had received and the Christian background of the home in which his parents had raised him.

Soyinka’s inquiry into his beloved ancient Yoruba cosmogony led him to forge lifelong links with other Yoruba-affiliated descendants of the African diaspora based in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, other places in the Caribbean and of course, the United States. Undoubtedly, when he visited those countries, he never failed to promote the tigritude of his Yoruba ancestry and cosmogony. Such was the case when he met Henry Louis Gates Jr., the founder and director of the African and African American Studies Center at Harvard where Chigumadzi is currently a PhD student.

At Cambridge, Gates, in various instances, admits that Soyinka had led him on a continuing journey to discover the truths about Africa that had been occluded by racist prevarication and indoctrination. Indeed since then, they have continued to enjoy close and productive collaborations in developing and strengthening the discipline of Africana studies. Gates would also go on to popularise the figure of Esu, the Yoruba deity of the crossroads, wit and intelligence, in his landmark work, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). In this work, Gates explores the various appropriations and survivals of Esu within the context of African American culture and literature.

Soyinka’s transcontinental exertions did not end here. He has undertaken missions at his own personal expense to attempt to retrieve invaluable artworks looted from Africa by European colonialists. He was immensely active during FESTAC 1977, the global black festival that brought together artists and intellectuals of all persuasions to Lagos to celebrate and promote black cultures the world over. Indeed his efforts and initiatives at seeking and cementing Africana ethics and poetics of solidarity are too numerous to mention and cannot be over-emphasised. In a context when the notion of black excellence is increasingly becoming trite and perhaps meaningless, he remains a lodestar upon which we can begin a proper conversation.

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti is another exemplary figure who contributed enormously to black pride, agency and resurgence in incomparable ways. Incidentally, Anikulapo-Kuti and Soyinka are cousins and so it isn’t a surprise that they share and practise similar kinds of global black solidarity. Anikulapo-Kuti’s radicalism made him adversaries amongst the elite political classes in his native Nigeria and Ghana after he was hounded out of his country on account of his vociferous activism and oppositional poetics.

Due to his uncompromising radicalism, doors closed on Anikulapo-Kuti everywhere; the foreign-owned record companies at home and abroad shunned him, and the international music industry
cartels made it difficult for him to have significant breakthroughs. Radio stations wouldn’t feature his compositions because he would not sing three-minute hits as opposed to the half-hour long tunes of great complexity and ingenuity he favoured.

When established record labels refused to release and market his music, he set up his own channels and platforms. His compositions, in the global era of disco, vacuous entertainment and feel-good funk seemed out of time by virtue of his trenchant ideological vision, his strident critiques of racism, imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism and international finance capitalism that impoverished and immiserated more or less all of Africa and much of what was then called the Third World.

During his lifetime, all the wealth Anikulapo-Kuti made was showered on the ill, needy and homeless, and when he passed away in 1997, he had almost nothing to his name, except perhaps, the ever-green radiance and energy of his astonishing compositions.

His work was not confined to the west coast of Africa and its multiple diasporas. When Hugh Masekela visited Lagos in the early 1970s seeking fresh sources of inspiration, Anikulapo-Kuti hooked him up with the inimitable Ghanaian back-up combo that propelled him to greater musical horizons. Miriam Makeba, Stevie Wonder, Kiki Gyan, Lester Bowie, Gilberto Gil, Sandra Izidore, Roy Ayers and Randy Weston, at various times, sought his unparalleled musical artistry and guidance in advancing their own projects. And just like his cousin Soyinka, Anikulapo-Kuti vigorously re-established connections that existed in Africa before the advent of colonialism.

After having studied European classical music and compositional techniques in London during the 1950s, he returned to Nigeria to study the indigenous methods of his ancestral forebears, paying particular attention to the spiritual aspects and trance forms.

Anikulapo-Kuti had every opportunity to be a certified coconut. His mother, Olufunmilayo, is widely regarded as Nigeria’s first modern feminist who visited the socialist countries of Eastern Europe and China on questions of mutual interest. She was also a friend and collaborator of the great exemplar of Pan-Africanist epistemology and praxis, Kwame Nkrumah, when he was the President of Ghana.

Anikulapo-Kuti could have led a comfortably sequestrated existence filled with the cheap glories of being a coconut but he chose to align himself with the lowly lot of economic and political outcasts, cultural renegades and oppositional figures of all stripes who naturally irritated the custodians of worldly power. But like a true Pan-Africanist fighter, he elected to remain a thorn in the flesh of decadent and corpulent power until his inevitably tragic end. He excoriated figures, such as P.W. Botha, the Prime Minister of apartheid South Africa, Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, Ronald Reagan of the United States, and not least of all, Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria.

Perhaps employing the Pan-Africanist visions of Soyinka and Anikulapo-Kuti, it would be most appropriate to complexify the very notion of “the Nigerian”. Many Nigerians in their reflective moments know that it is an unfortunate and almost unbearable fabrication of the self-serving colonial enterprise. It is, in other words, a geographical entity of tragicomic proportions that was meant to frustrate and undermine its hapless inhabitants.

True, the inhabitants of Nigeria had always interacted in the precolonial days, but the modalities of interaction had been independent of arbitrary colonial interference. On the other hand, the new modalities of co-existence and co-operation had been funneled through the misshapen and counter-productive channels of colonialism. Those channels were not intended for sociopolitical success of postcolonial Nigerians, as they weren’t for most of the colonised world.

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And so the geographical entities of postcoloniality always pose questions regarding their ultimate viability as largely baseless colonial constructs. However, Chigumadzi is unable to see the incongruity and innate discomfort in saying as a Zimbabwean-born South African (or whatever identity she chooses to adopt), I am able to castigate Nigerians for their perceived lack of empathy and ethics of solidarity. Colonial African geographical constructs were basically not designed for that purpose.

Soyinka has variously denounced this untenable situation with harsh words for the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, the precursor to the present African Union [AU]), which uncritically sanctioned this gross and violent colonial misadventure that should be considered as yet another deleterious scheme to violate and undermine African communities. This is why Nigerians and Ghanaians, for instance, can needlessly squabble over seemingly meaningless and counterproductive trivia without seeing that they had once enjoyed more humane and beneficial relations in abundance before the unwholesome truncation of colonialism. Chigumadzi’s rant is merely an extension of this ahistorical postcolonial mindset, or is it myopia, namely, the inability to interrogate, negate and (re)negotiate colonial African geographical constructs as eternal givens.

If this radical questioning remains always ignored and is not approached with a healthy dose of scepticism, preposterous political scenarios and vast genocidal scenes of utter disarray come to mind that are likely to abound only because we have accepted to be the slavish “coconuts” of unsustainable postcolonial geographical dispensations.

The uncritical subscription to a colonialist project of identification in the wake of the devastation of colonialism that differentiates Zimbabweans, South Africans, Kenyans, Ghanaians or Nigerians as bearers of immutable forms of identity and subsequently pits them constantly against each other, undoubtedly bodes ill for any conception of mutuality, or indeed, solidarity.

But even if we were to subscribe to the colonial geographical markers of identity as Chigumadzi does, Nigerians have been in the forefront of practising Egyptian theorist Samir Amin’s concept of “delinking”. Employing this concept, Amin argues for the decoupling of peripheralised African economies from the invariably inequitable global monetary system that enforces a centre/periphery dichotomy that reduces Africans to suppliers of primary products while the West plays the dominant role of manufacturers as well as incubators of technological innovation and advancement.

Rather than mentioning counter-paradigmatic Nigerian social scientists, such as Ola Oni, Sam Aluko, Adebayo Adedeji, Claude Ake, Bade Onimode, Omfume Onoge, Adebayo Olukoshi and a plethora of others who have offered the most devastating critiques of the Bretton-Woods institutional order that all but crippled the growth of African educational establishments beginning in the 1970s through the toxic mantra of profits-before-people, deregulation and privatisation, Chigumadzi instead chooses to linger on the forgettable work of Chika Onyeani, a reactionary self-nullifying anti-black character, and a darling of the white liberal press in South Africa, who simply does not register in the ever-vibrant discourse of Nigerian socio-economic theory.

If Chigumadzi is really concerned about pursuing a politics of global black emancipation – as she might perhaps imagine herself to be – she ought to be critiquing the bastions of white supremacy that have provided her the leeway from which to cast aspersions on Nigerians. Attacking Nigerians is indeed diversionary as she ought to embark on a quest for reparations for the descendants of the
transatlantic slave trade, as the late Nigerian politician, business and philanthropist Moshood K.O. Abiola had with uncommon vigour, commitment and immense sacrifice before his death in 1998.

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For Chigumadzi to claim Nigerians are unaware of the problem of race is tantamount to ascribing to them an ignorance of a slave trade that wreaked extreme devastation on their territories, and across the entire West African region along with the lands of Angola and the Congo. Ancestral blood from those various territories, in spite of all protestations to the contrary, was largely responsible for creating the wealth of Europe and the Americas as we know them today. An appropriate global politics of black emancipation and inclusivity would need to calibrate these historical realities rather than being cocooned within the safe enclaves of racist power and privilege and then finding easy discursive targets amongst millions of toiling black folk.

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