



Incorporeal Words

The Tragic Passing of Pius Adesanmi

And on the way I would say to myself:

“And above all, my body as well as my soul beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of miseries is not a proscenium, a man screaming is not a dancing bear...”

— Aimé Césaire, “Notebook of a return to the native land,” *Aimé Césaire : The Collected Poetry*, translated by Clayton Eschleman and Annette Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press), p45.

Perhaps it would be a conversation with Saint Peter, the late great Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, the late great Sénégalaise author and feminist Mariama Bâ, and the 157 newly arrived about why there are these barriers to enter the welcomed afterlife. One of those who was unexpected to be on this journey, trying to collect his thoughts about why he was there way before his time, yet still swift enough to find one of his usual incisive questions, posed eloquently and yet tinged with his well-known reticence to grant authority any respect it may not have earned. Why, he asks, can't anyone freely enter this desired afterlife? Be it the Gates to Heaven or the 8 doors of Jannah, every soul may not enter, as if paradise was one of the fortified, exclusive gated communities on Banana Island in Lagos! A city in the country of his birth and to which he was ineluctably committed, despite everything... The dialogue would be profound, on the edge of being profane, weaving in Yoruba deities, quotidian Nigerian expressions, hip hop poetry, African nationalist and Pan-Africanist dreams, searing indictments of the incompetent, the corrupt, the racist, the patriarchal, and the violent that not only tend

to overdetermine postcolonial African governments – like the colonial regimes before them – but also are widely found in the oh-so-comfortable so-called Global North, likely bringing in as a case-in-point the recent coming-to-light of the brazen attempts by the Trudeau Liberal government in Canada – where this newly arrived had lived, taught, and also was a citizen – to interfere in prosecutorial decisions to ensure that the Canadian multinational engineering giant, SNC Lavalin (already found guilty for a slew of other corruption cases, even having many of its subsidiaries being debarred by the World Bank for ten years in 2013, see, e.g., Garossino 2019) is not prosecuted for allegedly paying millions of dollars in bribes in return for billions of dollars in contracts to the murderous Gaddhafi family when they controlled Libya. It would be literate and literary, cogent and contemplative, allegorical and deeply historical, with the phatic thrust aiming to force the reader to appreciate the depthless complexities of life that marks “Africa” inside and outside the continent, to fight against the multitudes of injustices, and to empathize with the human dreams, trials, and tribulations of the living....

But this is but speculation on my part, trying to imagine how Pius Adesanmi would write about the untimely, numbing loss of his passing in the tragic crashing of the Ethiopian Airlines flight from Addis Ababa to Nairobi on March 10th, 2019. His rich and imaginative prose and poetry directed always to the many pressing topics of African Studies were unparalleled in multiple ways, as he drew on an incredible depth of knowledge of literature, literary criticism, history, cinema, politics, philosophy, the humanities writ large, mass-mediated current events, and slivers of everyday life in Nigeria, other parts of Africa, Europe and North America. From his 2002 doctoral thesis in French Studies at the University of British Columbia (Adesanmi 2002) to his award-winning book (*You're Not a Country, Africa*, see Adesanmi 2011), from his articles over a decade ago in *Pambazuka News* (founded by one of our *Nokoko* board

members, Firoze Manji) that provocatively challenged many prejudices and inequalities within African countries and beyond (including the canons of feminist literary criticism in “Disappearing Me Softly: An Open Letter to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar,” Adesanmi 2007, which was one of my favourites) to the brilliant eviscerations of Nigerian politics, economics and sociocultural dynamics as a committed, sympathetic, deeply attached but profoundly disappointed observer in important Nigerian online news outlets like *Sahara Reporters*, *Premium Times*, and long-established papers like the *Nigerian Tribune*, let alone his books published in Nigeria (like his 2001 collection of poetry *The Wayfarer and Other Poems* and his 2015 *Naija No Dey Carry Last*, see Adesanmi 2001, 2015) and innumerable social media postings engaging with tens of thousands of followers and beyond, along with endless other examples within a “from/to” rhetorical device, Pius was a public intellectual *par excellence* of African Studies, Nigeria, the world... and one that was viscerally connected to Carleton University’s Institute of African Studies and its open-access journal, *Nokoko*.

Professor Pius Adesanmi of Carleton’s Department of English and Director of the Institute of African Studies has been, was (as it is too hard at this moment to think of him in the past tense), a founding member of the *Nokoko* editorial board. He not only provided intellectual support, editorial reviews, and boundless energy to our publication but he also is deeply implicated in some of our future endeavours. As we will be discussing shortly on our website, *Nokoko* is building on our revised Mission and Vision Statement¹ with a number of exciting initiatives to broaden our reach and our ability to provide different ways for new and novel voices concerning Africa and its diasporas to be heard. One of these initiatives is to gather some articles published in our first five issues

¹ Please see carleton.ca/africanstudies/research/nokoko

into a book, an idea that Pius came up with as a way to both mark the early, formative years of *Nokoko* as well as the tenth-year anniversary of the founding of our Institute of African Studies. While he was busy organizing a conference to mark the anniversary tentatively scheduled for October 2019 (which I strongly suspect may become one of many tributes to Professor Adesanmi), I had been writing part of our Introduction for this edited book, *Africa Matters: Cultural politics, political economies, & grammars of protest*, to be published by Daraja Press. I sent him my incomplete and quite incoherent draft by email on Thursday, March 7th to have him read, revise, and add his own words and thoughts. He soon emailed me back saying "I leave for Nairobi on Saturday. Plenty of in-flight reading and working time!" to which I replied the perfunctory "travel well"; a convention to which I say without thinking and to which I assume would happen automatically, save for this unfortold disastrous trip....

Pius's words in his innumerable writings, the recordings of his talks (some of which are found on the Institute's YouTube channel²), and the memories so many of us, from near and far, have of him will continue to inspire, to help us hone our analyses, our writings and our actions within African Studies, *Nokoko* included. But it is unfathomable to think that he will not physically be here in person or behind the keyboard or on his phone to discuss, debate, strategize, plan, commiserate, with his intense focus on the academic, the work, the serious, always leavened with his deep humour, delight, and *joie de vivre*.

Mourning practices are intensely cultural and often highly gendered, with particular bodily, sartorial and linguistic expressions of affect and practices of grief typically marked for women and men, for different family members, friends, dignitaries. Like all things

2 Please see www.youtube.com/channel/UCTuiOo9K4adr5FeyLycW77w

cultural, there is usually a great hybridity, even if (perhaps, especially if) they are said to be defined by particular religious, cultural, national traditions. The grieving is always intense for tragic deaths and for someone with Pius's great stature and regard, it has spread incredibly wide as one has been witnessing in the many digital worlds.

One practice that comes to me during this time of such numbing grief is the ChiShona expression of condolences, *kubata maoko*, to grab the arms. From my interpretation of this phrase and experiencing its use in Zimbabwe, it articulates the giving of physical support to those whose normal control of their bodies has given way in this time of intense shock. It also underscores the solidarity one has with others as we all try to work through the indescribable loss of a loved one, a friend, a colleague, an inspiration, a voice. The physical and virtual arms seeking to support each other now are innumerable, a testament to Pius's brilliance in so many ways. This is but one small expression of such solidarity of what will be many tributes we do in his honour here at *Nokoko*.

— Blair Rutherford, Editor of *Nokoko*,
Berlin, Germany
March 11, 2019

References

- Adesanmi, Pius. 2002. *Constructions of Subalternity in African Women's Writing in French*. PhD thesis. Vancouver: University of British Columbia.
- Adesanmi, Pius. 2001. *The Wayfarer and Other Poems*. Lagos: Oracle Books.
- Adesanmi, Pius. 2007. "Disappearing Me Softly: An Open Letter to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar." *Pambazuka News*, 3 October, <https://www.pambazuka.org/governance/disappearing-me-softly-open-letter-sandra-m-gilbert-and-susan-gubar>; date accessed: 11 March 2019.

Adesanmi, Pius. 2011. *You're Not a Country, Africa*. Johannesburg: Penguin Books.

Adesanmi, Pius. 2015. *Naija No Dey Carry Last*. Lagos: Parrésia Publishers.

Garossino, Sandy. 2019. "The hidden key to the SNC-Lavalin scandal." *Canada's National Observer*, 8 March, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/03/08/analysis/hidden-kesnc-lavalin-scandal>; date accessed: 11 March 2019.