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The Struggle, Their Life: African Public Intellectuals and the Crisis of Representation

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“Academic intellectuals are ardently confused about their social roles in advanced capitalist societies”

— Michael Berube (2003: 169)

“The intellectual’s role generally is to uncover and elucidate the contest, to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power, wherever and whenever possible. For there is a social and intellectual equivalence between this mass of overbearing collective interests and the discourse used to justify, disguise or mystify its workings while at the same time preventing objections or challenges to it.”

— Edward W. Said (2002: 31)

“I have devoted my intellectual and material resources, my very life, to a cause in which I have total belief and from which I cannot be blackmailed or intimidated.”

— Ken Saro-Wiwa (1995: 173)

The controversial role of intellectuals in society has engaged public culture and caught the attention of cultural history scholars. The discourse is “epitomized by the debate around disciplinarity” (Mamdani 2016: 68), professionalization, labour and corporatization of universities. Contradictions and apprehension underline several texts by some North American scholars (John Michaels, 2000; Bill Readings, 1996; Linda Martin Alcoff 1995; Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt, 2004; Randy Martin, 1998; Michael Berube, 1994, 1998) addressing various aspects of the subject. Three sore sub-topics call for further inquiry, and can be framed in the following questions: Firstly, “Does any specific practical politics or political position necessarily follow from one’s

professional practice as an academic cultural critic?” (Michael 2000: 57) Secondly, “Can the public intellectual successfully represent the people outside of his/her own social class? Thirdly, what are the implications of universalizing the discourses of the North American scholars? This paper seeks to answer these questions by investigating how issues of specificity and context disturb the logics of a universalizing discourse on the role of public intellectuals. I use as case studies, outstanding Nigerian public intellectuals whose creative output and activism demonstrate the precarious nature of the African public intellectual’s work. It is this precarity that spurred the great Nelson Mandela to issue his popular declaration of June 26, 1961 – “The struggle is my life. I will continue fighting for freedom until the end of my days” – which inspired the title of this essay.

Keywords: public intellectual, activism, professionalization, agency, politics, dictatorship

Introduction

The controversial role of intellectuals in society has engaged public culture and caught the attention of cultural history scholars. The discourse is “epitomized by the debate around disciplinarity” (Mamdani 2016), professionalization, labour and corporatization of universities. Contradictions and apprehension underline several texts by some North American scholars (John Michaels, 2000; Bill Readings, 1996; Linda Martin Alcoff 1995; Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt, 2004; Randy Martin, 1998; Michael Berube, 1994, 1998) addressing various aspects of the subject. Three sore sub-topics call for further inquiry, and can be framed in the following questions: Firstly, “Does any specific practical politics or political position necessarily follow from one’s professional practice as an academic cultural critic?” (Michael 2000: 57) Secondly, “Can the public intellectual successfully represent the people outside of his/her own social class? Thirdly, what are the implications of universalizing the discourses of the North American scholars?

By limiting their discourse essentially to the North American context without comparative analysis of international experience, the dominant scholars in the field shrink our grasp of the role of intellectuals in other climes, especially in developing countries. This has created a lacuna which this paper seeks to fill. I propose to investigate how issues of specificity and context disturb the logics of a universalizing discourse on the role of public intellectuals. Using Nigeria as a case study, I will show examples of public intellectuals and activists whose mode of practice risk their lives. These intellectuals not only write and talk, they walk the talk as the cliché goes, by working with civil society groups to speak truth to empower the people, and to challenge regressive political hegemony. Beyond the experience of their western peers, the experience of the postcolonial African public intellectual will demonstrate the perils of being a public intellectual especially in totalitarian regimes. It should also reflect, as leading Africanist scholar Mudimbe (1988) has argued, that in Africa “[t]oday...journals [newspapers too] and university departments have become the loci not only for academic exercise, but also for questioning the meaning of political power and interrogating all power-knowledge system” (40).

To buttress the point, I will sketch a brief contemporary history of the tradition of such intellectuals. Then I will focus on Africa’s first Nobel laureate for literature,

Wole Soyinka, as a political activist and the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, whose celebrated work as an environmental rights activist and public intellectual remind us of D'Souza's (2014) insightful definition of "activist scholars" as those who "affirm human emancipation as the goal of scholarship and set themselves the task of building bridges between theory and practice" (n.p.).¹ While Saro-Wiwa was martyred because of his work in Nigeria, Soyinka suffered imprisonment and was hounded into exile for his political activism. I shall also revisit the experience of a group of academics now sympathetically referred to as the UNILORIN 44 who were sacked for activism by the establishment. Given the public orientation of the work of these intellectuals, I will highlight the role of the media in the pursuit of their objectives as critical intellectuals and academic professionals, in the sense of Jean Baudrillard's concept of "ecstasy of communication" and its amplification by Angela McRobbie (213). This should prove useful for evaluating their performance against the backdrop of arguments that as "progressive intellectuals" they cannot really be spokespersons for the oppressed for whom they "purport to act" (Michael 1). In the end, the study will expectedly put us in a better position to appreciate the "crisis of representation"—to appropriate Fredric Jameson's (1984: viii) fine expression—and to answer "the question of intellectual responsibility and intellectual agency in communities" (Michael 26).

The above epigraphs to this essay encourage a contrastive analysis of the role of public intellectuals in "the advanced capitalist societies" represented by Michael Berube and those from developing political economies. For this paper, I am conducting my comparative analysis by focusing more on American "public intellectuals" and cultural critics who have essentially concentrated on professional and institutional issues. These include Evan Watkins; Stephano Harney and Frederick Morten; Stanley Aronowitz; Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt; Lorraine Daston and Michael Berube. But beyond the professional and institutional preoccupation of these public intellectuals, Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, John Michael, Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, and others align with the public concerns of organic intellectuals in society, for which their African counterparts are more actively entrenched.

Indeed, the well-established tradition can be traced from the works of the pioneering generation of anti-colonization nationalists including Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sedar Senghor (poet-President of Senegal), Augustinho Neto (poet-President of Angola), Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dennis Osadebay, Robert Mugabe, and Nelson Mandela, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the works of their Black Diaspora liberation kinsmen W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon and others. Beyond a common African ancestry, the two groups are united by their shared experience of slavery and colonization. The more modern figures include Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ali Mazrui, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Samir Amin, P.L.O. Lumumba, George Ayittey, Claude Akeh, and Nadine Gordimer. More recently, a contemporary generation has bloomed by leveraging the millennial digital revolution, youth agency, and social activism, with Binyanvanga Wainana and Pius Adesanmi among the notable figures of the generation².

1 Importantly, D'Souza rightly observes that: "There is a spectrum of views on the theory-practice nexus. Regardless, they all share certain common grounds that affirm (1) a nexus between theory and practice; (2) a relationship between knowledge and action; (3) knowledge as a condition for emancipation and freedom; (4) the affirmation of love and solidarity for social change; (5) the importance of everyday life; and (6) the role of the activist scholar in social change" (n.p.).

2 Both authors represent a younger generation of African public intellectuals whose outBoth

Cultural Intellectuals, Public Intellectuals, and Practical Politics

Revisiting Michael Berube's, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics*, where he asks the poignant question: Does any specific practical politics or political position necessarily follow from one's professional practice as an academic cultural critic? To foreground the question implicit in Berube's own subtitle is there any specific relationship between "literary theory and cultural politics?" His answer is "No" (56).

To fully appreciate the implications of the above question and answer, we may need to ask the seemingly innocuous question: What/who is a public intellectual? Remarkably, it is not easy to define, even if most people appear to "know" what the term means. To understand the term and its meaning potentialities we shall turn to the composite conceptualization of the term by Edward Said in his works, *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994) and "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals" (2002). Together, the two texts provide, perhaps, the most coherent review of the evolution of the term from Gramsci's division into "traditional intellectual" and "organic intellectual," through Julien Benda's "real intellectuals" or "clerisy," and Michel Foucault's distinction between the "universal intellectual" and the "specific intellectual," to Isaiah Berlin's idea of the "testifying" intellectual. As Said succinctly encapsulates it in *Representations*:

in the end it is the intellectual as a representative figure that matters—someone who visibly represents a standpoint of some kind, and someone who makes articulate representations to his or her public despite all sorts of barriers... And the vocation is important to the extent that it involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability (12-13).

For our purposes in this paper, it is pertinent to clarify the choice as case studies, two writers whom some would rather refer to as "cultural producers" than "critical intellectuals"—Wole Soyinka, who makes the list of the 100 outstanding intellectuals of the world and the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was executed in 1995 for his activism. The temptation to identify the two writers more as "cultural producers" than "critical intellectuals" arise from the fact that their primary vocation is the production of cultural artefacts. Again, Said's reflections on the subject provide an excellent guide here. In "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals," he cautions against such differentiation when certain writers—such as Soyinka and Saro-Wiwa—are involved. Alluding to their kind of work in terms of "the technical characteristics of intellectual intervention today," Said contends that:

In that wider setting, then, the basic distinction between writers and intellectuals need not be made. Insofar as they both act in the new public sphere dominated by globalization (and assumed to exist even by adherents of the Khomeini fatwa), their public role as writers and intellectuals can be discussed and analyzed together. Another way of putting it is

authors represent a younger generation of African public intellectuals whose outstanding work fall outside of the focus of this paper. Their work marks a shift from the traditional public sphere of intellectual discourses to hybrid formations that include digital or social media activism involving youthful "netizens." For more on this, see Adesanmi's posthumous book, *Who Owns the Problem?: Africa and the Struggle for Agency*. Michigan State University Press, 2020. Also see my essay which explores African netizens' social struggles using social media and digital tools titled "Dream Delayed or Dream Betrayed: Politics, Youth Agency, and the Mobile Revolution in Africa" and published in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/00083968.2020.1798258.

to say that we should concentrate on what writers and intellectuals have in common as they intervene in the public sphere. (26)

It is in the above context that our Nigerian experience challenges Berube's statement.³ Bearing the dynamic nature of our terms of reference in the discourse—traditional intellectual, organic intellectual, specific intellectual, public intellectual, critical intellectual, progressive intellectual—there appears to be no confusion in the ranks of the intellectuals for our case study concerning their roles in society; that indeed there is a specifiable relationship between literary theory and cultural politics. This is the guiding principle that guides my position in this essay.

An indication of the dangerous choice African intellectuals need to make is the sacking of 49 academics from a Nigerian university on May 22, 2001 for activism under the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Media reports stated that three of the unjustly disengaged academics died possibly due to stress and other challenges associated with their unfortunate ordeal. Reacting to the news at the time, Taiwo Oloruntoba-Ojo, chairman of the University's branch of ASUU, said: "They have become heroes and martyrs of the struggle. Another way of looking at their death is that the stress of the struggle may also have taken its toll them."⁴ For the activists, the media is a very important site for the struggle. Hence, many of them are freelance journalists who have written popular columns in newspapers, and host or featured on notable television and radio programs. This reminds us of Jean Baudrillard's concept of the "ecstasy of communication" which Angela McRobbie further develops in her book, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994). The idea, McRobbie explains, applies:

to the sheer speed, intensity and extensiveness of the media as they effortlessly create a web of interconnecting meanings each of which has its own momentum, its own pacing, its own narrative structures, its own accompanying images, its own experts and witnesses and victims and when appropriate, its own parliamentary spokespersons, according to the story or issue of the day (213).

Rather predictably, both Soyinka and Saro-Wiwa deployed popular media platforms from print to electronic (more on this below), as part of their commitment to mass mobilization. For them, as for most other writers cum intellectuals from developing countries, the twin forces of political crises especially under General Sani Abacha's dictatorship (1993-1998) and global capitalism shape the socio-political tropes of their creative works, the medium of their struggle, and their social

3 The distinction made here with regard to the public intellectual clearly calls for a rethinking of John Michael's conflation of college professors to public intellectuals in the following words: "At the very least, as teachers and scholars, cultural intellectuals already function as public intellectuals in an important segment of the public sphere. The negative and sensationalized attention that cultural intellectuals in the university have recently received—distorted as it may be—indicates that the critical work we do still maintains a degree of ideological potency (3). Julie Rak puts it in a better perspective when she asserts during a private correspondence on November 23, 2006: "Technically speaking, everyone who would claim to be an intellectual, I believe, has a responsibility to be a public intellectual, or else he or she will risk being a structural intellectual who is just part of Coleridge's clerisy or Gramsci's traditional intellectual class."

4 Elijah Adewale Taiwo offers more details on this case as well as other instances "that the Nigerian government...dismiss[ed] academic staff on issues relating to academic freedom" (9). https://codesria.org/IMG/pdf/Taiwo_Adewale.pdf Also, in an online article entitled "NIGERIA: Academic union threatens indefinite strike" and published in *University World News*, Tunde Fatunde reveals that "Between 1993 and 2008, universities in Nigeria were closed for nearly 36 months owing to various strikes called by the ASUU" (<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20080522124752614>)

commitment in the finest tradition of the artist as l'homme engage. Saro-Wiwa powerfully foregrounds this profile of the artist in his prison memoir *A Month and a Day* as he affirms his “credo that literature in the case of Nigeria cannot be divorced from politics...and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused, critical look at society. They must play an interventionist role...Therefore, the writer must be l'homme engage: the intellectual man of action. He must take part in mass organizations” (55). Onookome Okome corroborates this view in *Before I am Hanged*, a book that probes the politics and literary oeuvre of Saro-Wiwa in the following words: “Ken Saro-Wiwa was a man who was conscious of his role in his community and in the larger political configuration called Nigeria” (xiii). Saro-Wiwa understood his communication orbit, deploying television, newspaper columns and other significant communication tools for mobilizing a mass movement under the banner of Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP).

Setting Forth at Dawn

The profiles of the Nigerian public intellectuals chosen for this study is unwittingly inspired by the French public intellectual tradition, with Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre as well-known examples. Remembered for his intellectual output as well as for his coffeehouse conversations, Sartre lives in the popular imagination more as a political figure than a writer. He was conscripted into the military and held hostage by German invaders. He advocated a form of Marxism as the best plan for human welfare without being a communist. By the 1950s, his theorizing on existentialism and other ideas earned him a cult following that included members of the Beat Generation. He rejected the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964 because, in the words of a critic, he associated it with “the bourgeois trappings of success he had long opposed.”⁵ He was quoted as telling the Nobel committee: “A writer must refuse to allow himself to be transformed into an institution” (ibid). So popular had Sartre become as a public intellectual that more than 25,000 people reportedly lined the streets of Paris for his funeral procession on April 19, 1980. That was reportedly unprecedented for such an occasion in French history. Although less celebrated, Sartre’s partner, Simone de Beauvoir, even fitted more the profile of a public intellectual. She ventured into taboo topics on feminism and gender, writing *The Second Sex* and *The Mandarins*, two books that were so controversial that the Roman Catholic Church put them on the index of Forbidden Books (Price 2008: 127). She was “an ardent women rights activist ... participating in demonstrations, as well as writing and speaking on many women’s issues” (Price 130).⁶

For his part, Michel Foucault further theorizes the tension between theory and political practice—the intellectual and the citizen—in the role of the public intellectual. Foucault argues that “[t]he role of the intellectual transcends telling others “what they have to do” or “shap[ing] others’ political will” as the intellectuals may not necessarily have the right to do so. Instead, he insists, the

5 See page 121 of Joan A. Price’s *Understanding Philosophy: Contemporary Thought*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2008.

6 The contributions of female public intellectuals have not been fully documented in scholarship. While this is not the focus of this paper, for more insight on this subject, readers may like to see Brittney C. Cooper’s award-winning book into *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press. 2017.

work of an intellectual is to deploy their intellectual resources to “question over and over again what is postulated as self evident, to disturb peoples’ mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions and on the basis of this reproblemization (in which it carries out his specific task as an intellectual) to participate in the formation of a political will (in which he carries his role as citizen to play). (1988: 265).

Beyond the French prototype signified by Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Foucault, even closer to the Nigerian public intellectual profile are the examples of their Latin American counterparts such as Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian writer, college professor journalist, and politician; Pablo Neruda (Chile); Alejo Carpentier (Cuba); and Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes (Mexico). The roles of intellectuals exemplified by these distinguished Latin American writers synchronize with the artist-activist role of the quintessential Nigerian public intellectuals. For them, the urgency of human rights, social justice and democratic governance exceed recognition as academic or literary superstars in the mold of some of their North American contemporaries.

The necessity for civic engagement, for the African public intellectual to be related but different from their western counterparts, is echoed in a rhetorical question by Mewesigire (2020): “What if Africa needs or desires a different intellectual from what the West needs?” An understanding of this question has driven African intellectuals such as Saro-Wiwa and Soyinka to extend their influence beyond the ivory tower and media punditry to mobilizations on the streets. In addition to Saro-Wiwa and Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo was another intellectual who transcended theory into praxis. Okigbo, a celebrated poet who weaponized his poetry to prophesy war finally went to war on behalf of Biafra and died a martyr; Saro-Wiwa was hanged by the military regime for his minority and environmental rights advocacy; and Soyinka the Nobel Laureate for Literature, was imprisoned for his activism during the Biafran war, an account of which he has published in his memoir *The Man Died* (1972). Thus, a combination of cultural imperative or a political exigency has led these African public intellectuals to differ from their western counterparts in their commitment to going beyond professing public awareness and institutional critique to fostering civil disobedience or armed struggle as the case might be.⁷

Soyinka underscores the peculiar context of the African public intellectual in his Introduction to Saro-Wiwa’s *A Month and a Day* (1995). In the following excerpt, Soyinka laments the international community’s misreading of the political situation that culminated in the tragic execution of the environmental rights activist by Nigeria’s maximum leader at that time, General Sani Abacha:

I was saddened, not angry, because it was clear they could not understand. They had never encountered, nor studied a creature of Sani Abacha’s cast of mind. It was my cast of mind that they found abnormal, the more I tried to wear them down with the brutality of my conviction: *If you fail to act, that man is going to hang Ken!* (ix) [Author’s emphasis]

Among the books published by Nigerians which deal with citizenship and nationhood, Soyinka’s *Open Sore of a Continent* (1996) and Saro-Wiwa’s posthumous publication, *A Month and a Day*, stand out. It is noteworthy that perhaps more than any other contemporary of theirs, both writers have demonstrated the most sustained

⁷ Ashenafi Alemu Aboye (2019) offers a fascinating study of the profile of African public intellectuals in his doctoral dissertation titled *Academic Public Intellectuals’ Lives: Negotiating the Borderlines*.

interest in the genre of autobiography/memoirs. The genre allows them to robustly share their personal struggles, social history and cultural critique, and to spur others into collective social commitment and action. In *Open Sore*, as in other books and public speeches, Soyinka identifies with a compatriot, highlighting the ripple effect of Saro-Wiwa's minority rights activism on the "public sphere" in Habermas's sense:

It is not just in the Nigerian free media that this minority tyranny is discussed... Public debate — in such places as bars, bus stops, markets, garages, staff and student clubs, government offices (largely in the South naturally) — has catapulted the activities of this minority to the heart of the national crisis, resulting in questioning the presumption... of the nation as a single entity (8).

In another context, Soyinka pays tribute to Saro-Wiwa's "talent for organization." As Soyinka tells Okome (2003), Saro-Wiwa "moved people in a way which very few people can do" (362). Deeply aware of his looming martyrdom, Saro-Wiwa declared in one of his last letters to Mandy Garner of International PEN, UK:

Whether I live or die is immaterial. It is enough to know that there are people who commit time, money and energy to fight this one evil among so many others predominating worldwide. If they do not succeed today, they will succeed tomorrow. We must keep on striving to make the world a better place for all of mankind - each one contributing his bit, in his or her own way" (1995: 179).

During his kangaroo trial at the Nigerian Military Tribunal, Saro-Wiwa offered the following allocutus before he was condemned to die by hanging:

My lord,
We all stand before history. I am a man of peace, of ideas. Appalled by the denigrating poverty of my people who live on a richly endowed land, distressed by their political marginalization and economic strangulation, angered by the devastation of their land, their ultimate heritage, anxious to preserve their right to life and to a decent living, and determined to usher to this country as a whole a fair and just democratic system which protects everyone and every ethnic group and gives us all a valid claim to human civilization, I have devoted my intellectual and material resources, my very life, to a cause in which I have total belief and from which I cannot be blackmailed or intimidated. I have no doubt at all about the ultimate success of my cause, no matter the trials and tribulations which I and those who believe with me may encounter on our journey. Nor imprisonment nor death can stop our ultimate victory" (1995: 173).

The conflict between Saro-Wiwa and his kinsmen ("the Ogoni four")⁸ which precipitated his tragic trial indicate the challenges to the public intellectual in rep-

8 The four Ogoni chiefs—Edward Kobani, Theophilus Orage, Sam Orage and Albert Badey—known to be opponents of MOSOP were murdered in May 1994 under controversial circumstances. The government of General Abacha blamed their murder on MOSOP without evidence. Then they proceeded to arrest scores of MOSOP activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa. For more on this subject see Amnesty International's report, "Nigeria: Shell complicit in the arbitrary executions of Ogoni Nine as writ served in Dutch court." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/shell-complicit-arbitrary-executions-ogoni-nine-writ-dutch-court/> Accessed July 5, 2020. The four Ogoni chiefs—Edward Kobani, Theophilus Orage, Sam Orage and Albert Badey—known to be opponents of MOSOP were murder in May 1994 under controversial circumstances. The government of General Abacha blamed their murder on MOSOP without evidence. Then they proceeded to arrest scores of MOSOP activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa. For more on this subject see Amnesty International's report, "Nigeria: Shell complicit in the arbitrary executions of Ogoni Nine as writ served in Dutch court." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/shell-complicit-arbitrary-executions-ogoni-nine-writ-dutch-court/> Accessed July 5, 2020.

resenting the people. Whereas he was convinced that his struggle was dedicated to the common good, it was indeed tough for Saro-Wiwa to stop the fractionalization of the struggle under the aegis of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni (MOSOP) which he galvanized into a potent force against Shell and its Nigerian military collaborators. For years, Saro-Wiwa used his intellectual gifts and financial resources to drive the campaign against environmental degradation in his homeland where multinational corporations chiefly Shell and Chevron exploited crude oil. He escalated his campaign for resource control in the Niger Delta region to the United Nations where he presented the Ogoni Bill of Rights, and further infuriated the military regime in Nigeria. His campaign proved hugely successful, much so that it earned Nigeria's government a pariah status especially after Saro-Wiwa's execution in 1995.

For Soyinka, working with various civil society groups has also thrown up its own challenges about the status of his representation of the people. Amongst the more recognizable groups he had co-organized are the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR) and PRONACO (Project on Sovereign National Conference). He was also actively involved with NADECO (National Democratic Coalition). Despite his outstanding credentials as an activist and public intellectual there have been questions about his peculiar grandiloquence and association with some political elements especially former Governor Rotimi Amaechi of Rivers State. Notable Soyinka scholar, Biodun Jeyifo, recognizes the Nobel laureate's idiosyncratic style and its implication for popular representation, and states that it serves as "the organizing principle for selection of material for inclusion" in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity* (2006). "Soyinka's most important works, most critics and scholars now agree, are unquestionably extensions of his often courageous and progressive political activism," writes Jeyifo, "however, at the same time, to most students of Soyinka's writings, many of these works seem to embody attitudes of language, style, communication, and artistic vision which are calculated to alienate or perplex readers and audiences, thereby often subverting, so it is thought, Soyinka's progressive, revolutionary intentions" (xii). The relative inaccessibility of Soyinka's writing to a general readership has attracted criticism from other scholars (especially Chinweizu et al 1983). However, it is crucial to note that Soyinka has calibrated his literary style and media of communication to suit his mission, subject matter and audience. Like Saro-Wiwa, his creative oeuvre includes audio-visual productions, drama, pamphlets, press releases, and op-eds.

Jeyifo (2004) stoutly defends Soyinka against charges of alienating the very constituency which he deigns to represent—through what the critic appropriately terms "ritual of affirmation and negation" (127). Yet, the very idea for Jeyifo's book itself suggests that Soyinka may have a case to answer on the matter. Stanley Macebuh captures the critique of the Nobel laureate's difficult language by Nigeria's intellectual Left—represented by the troika Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuko—in the following words:

Language in Soyinka is difficult, harsh, sometimes tortured. His syntax is often archaic, his verbal structures sometimes impenetrable... There is, nevertheless, the possibility that a good many of Soyinka's critics have failed to pay sufficient attention to the internal, that is, ethnocentric compulsions in poetic dramas that render this condition nearly inevitable (203-204)

It is the delicate management of the local within a wider context that many consider one of Soyinka's greatest achievements. In his review of Soyinka's memoir *You Must set Forth at Dawn* (2006) for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, award winning writer Chris Abani highlights the Nobel laureate's significance as a public intellectual thus:

It is a rare thing in this century (early as it is), and probably will get rarer, to read the memoir of a writer and public intellectual whose life and growth as an artist and voice of conscience mirror the growth of an entire nation. It is even more rare to know that it is inconceivable to think of Nigeria as a political entity without Soyinka. This may perhaps be because his coming of age as an artist begins really at the moment of the nation's independence from England. In this way, the artist (Kongi, as he is affectionately known as) becomes inexorably interwoven with the fate and destiny of this country. Perhaps it is because, more than any other activist or political individual in Nigerian history, he is able to remain firmly committed to his Yoruba ethnicity and nationality and yet paradoxically achieve and maintain a wider and uniquely Nigerian identity" (n.p.)

Soyinka's outstanding credentials as a public intellectual dating back to the period of his coming of age at the time of Nigeria's independence which Abani emphasizes above is partly the consequence of his acute understanding of the context for his work as writer and activist. In what may be taken as response to his critics, he has consistently expressed himself in two essential voices, depending on the subject and environment in which he is functioning. As suggested above, he has a more accessible style with which he traces the contours of his political rhetoric in public speeches and journalistic spaces, and a more learned style with which he pursues his robust intellectual interests. Thus, his oft-critiqued learned style has not stopped him from effectively working with civil society. This may also explain why he has also been closely associated with the work of Saro-Wiwa—in fact, the Foreword to Saro-Wiwa's prison memoir is written by the Nobel laureate.

Soyinka's denunciation of the Darfur genocide in his 2006 lecture at Harvard University titled "Darfur, Cartoons, and Other Images of Race"⁹ points to his restless dynamism and commitment to theoretical positions he has advocated in scholarly texts, memoirs and creative writing. For his work, he shares similar suffering with Saro-Wiwa, having to endure incarceration, fleeing into exile to escape assassination, and traversing the global lecture circuit in service to community. Like Saro-Wiwa, too, Soyinka tactically abandoned the security of appointment in the ivory tower for a life in the "trenches."¹⁰ What William Boyd, the British writer and Saro-Wiwa's friend reports on this choice by the environmental rights activist thus would also have significance for Soyinka: "As I saw him over the coming years it was clear that literature, publishing, television and the rest had been pushed to one side as he began the struggle for reparations and the international recognition of the ecological disaster and 'slow genocide' that had been visited on Ogoni" (2005: 13).

9 "Soyinka decries lack of outrage over Darfur 'pogrom,'" *The Harvard Gazette*, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2006/04/soyinka-decries-lack-of-outrage-over-darfur-pogrom/> Accessed July 23, 2020.

10 In Marxian terms, Saro-Wiwa could be said to have committed class suicide. Victoria Arana (2008:390) offers more insight into Saro-Wiwa's eclectic professional life. His long resume includes appointments as a faculty member of University of Nigeria, Nsukka, a secondary school teacher, a teaching assistant at University of Lagos, the administrator of Bonny Island, Commissioner in his home state, Rivers State, before finally making a fortune as a businessman and publisher. Soyinka, for his part, gave up a secured job as a tenured professor at University of Ife to work as an independent scholar, writer and activist.

Intellectual responsibility and intellectual agency in communities

Soyinka's near omnipresence in protest marches against oppressive government policies in the past five decades speaks volumes too. Clearly, the high-profile public intellectuals are aware that only organized mass action disturbs otherwise recalcitrant and high-handed government. In fact, some colleagues during my years as a journalist in Lagos in the 1990s expressed the belief that General Abacha did not care much about public intellectuals and activists who merely articulated their discontent against government. But he moved brutally against such intellectual "dissidents" who, like Saro-Wiwa, embarked on active organization and mobilization of people to resist his dictatorial regime. It is for this reason that many activists, including Soyinka, fled into exile at the time. Saro-Wiwa undoubtedly understood the power of mobilization as he noted that his experience had been that "African governments can ignore writers, taking comfort in the fact that only few can read and write... That is why a writer who takes part in mass organizations will deliver the message more effectively than one who writes waiting for time to work its literary wonders" (55).

Commenting on Soyinka's protean profile as a public intellectual, South Africa-based philosopher, Sanya Osha (2011), writes:

Soyinka's creative and intellectual itinerary has for decades been marked by an astonishing combination of political and cultural concerns: a leading figure of African letters, an indefatigable champion of African culture, an analyst of the politics of identity, a political commentator and social activist among other things. Very few other African writers have this range of gifts... Soyinka has had to contemplate the conditions of possibility of the concepts of justice, truth and reconciliation. These concepts are issues that demand a considerable degree of theoretical systematicity and perhaps also, conceptual distance and Soyinka being such a formidable social activist has probably not had the time to cultivate these qualities. His writings on politics are urgent, visceral, vitriolic and often impatient. Thus, in a way, the distinctions between theory and praxis often become blurred. Perhaps this is one of the reasons he has not made the impact in the social sciences even though he addresses concerns that are so central to them. (96)

It is not surprising, therefore, that Soyinka was nominated as one of the top one hundred outstanding public intellectuals in the world.¹¹ Osha's mention of Soyinka's limited impact in the social sciences is worth reflecting upon to highlight the often ignored disciplinary undertone in our appreciation of the profile of public intellectuals. The question may be asked: What distinguishes a social scientist and public intellectual such as Ali Mazrui or Claude Akeh from humanistic public intellectuals such as Okigbo, Soyinka, Achebe, or Chinweizu? To answer the question, it is necessary to consider Mazrui's definition of a political scientist in his personal essay "Growing up in a Shrinking World." According to Mazrui (2010), "a political scientist combines the personal experience of political consciousness, the general ethos of scholarship, and the specialized skills of interpreting political phenomena" (1). He further states that "[t]he ethos of scholarship is rooted in adherence to the rules of evidence, documentation, and logic. *But the discipline of political science itself requires additional specialized skills concerned with handling data or effectively using the discipline's conceptual tools*" (1. my emphasis).

11 See "The Prospect/FP Top 100 Public Intellectuals" survey published in <https://www.in-foplease.com/culture-entertainment/prospectfp-top-100-public-intellectuals#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20public%20intellectual,influence%20debate%20outside%20of%20it>.

Thus, the *handling of data or an effective use of the conceptual tools* of political science differentiates the political scientist and the humanistic public intellectual. Yet, it needs to be noted that in everyday business of public intellection, this methodological difference is often a moot point. This is particularly exemplified by the fiery debate between Mazrui and Soyinka over Henry Louis Gates' controversial TV documentary, *The Wonders of the African World with Henry Louis Gates Jr.* (1999). No one seems to adjudicate the exchanges on the disciplinary bias of the two great scholars or their recourse to the data or conceptual tools employed. Indeed, the public engagement consumption of the ideas popularized by public intellectuals has no bearing on the methodological protocols adopted by the public intellectuals. However, it is worth acknowledging that while political scientists may use the protocols identified by Mazrui, the humanistic public intellectuals depend on what Houston Baker Jr. (2008) describes as "hermeneutical and poetically interpretive protocols" modelled by the great Du Bois (xvii). These, partly entail, as Baker Jr. further frames it, buttressing one's "arguments with ample references to and citations from the best sociological, historical, political science, and economics scholarship" (xvii) as well as everyday life. Baker Jr. urges black intellectuals to forge both sacred and secular connections with local communities and rededicate themselves to social responsibility. He poignantly notes that "[t]he ubiquity and accrued cultural currency of black public intellectuals in our era has helped foster a myth of racial progress" (xii) and asserts that while we recognize Du Bois' "empirical research, he is equally cherished for his skillful, analytical, creative, interpretive brilliance with respect to the sung, written, chanted, preached, moaned, and orated textual records of Afro-American life and culture".

Baker Jr's book is an unpretentious critique of the disingenuous posturing of some Western Black public intellectuals whose "intellectual charisma, financial success, media revelry, and celebrity book sales of an elite black few does virtually nothing to feed the desires and needs of the black majority" (xiii). Implicated in this critique therefore is what Mamdani (2016) has identified as "the role and tension between the public intellectual and the scholar" in his brilliant paper "Between the public intellectual and the scholar: decolonization and some Post-independence initiatives." I would argue that data-driven and empirically heavy scholarly public discourse sometimes alienates ordinary people in the public sphere whom the public intellectual purports to represent. So, too, does the focus of the activist scholars of the Western academy represented by Sartre, Michael and his American contemporaries identified in the opening section of this essay elide the context specific experience of the African public intellectuals used as case study in this article. Interestingly, in one of his most lucid and persuasive passages, Michael echoes Said's view on the intellectual's "personal inflection and the private sensibility" (*Representations* 12) as Michael argues:

Teaching and intellectual work generally cannot always be popular. Good teachers and responsible intellectuals do not necessarily make their constituents comfortable or happy, especially if one of their important functions is to engage students and the public in the painful practice of interrogating their own prejudices and assumptions. . . . Professors, unlike other purveyors of services, cannot always be judged on the basis of customer satisfaction. Their relation to the popular is and must remain vexed (171).

The commodification of intellectual engagement and the equation of the intellectual's work to "customer service" has partly fueled some of the anxieties evident in North American 'public' intellectuals and advocates of academic professionalism which lead us to classify them into a different sub-group. While recognizing their

advocacy for the decorporatization of the academy as a form of public intellection, their work is different from those of some of their Black contemporaries such as Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Susan Sontag, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Amiri Baraka (who was stripped of his Poet Laureateship of New Jersey city when he mocked America after 9/11 in his controversial poem, “Who Blew Up America?”), and a few others. The latter sub-group understandably focus more on the crusade for racial equity and social justice than on decorporatization of the academy.

The preoccupation with the intellectual’s fate as an academic professional by Michael and his cohort then is indeed a true reflection of Berube’s viewpoint in the epigraph. The specific reference to advanced capitalist societies needs to be underscored. For this group, Michael appropriates Carl Boggs’ expression, “technocratic intellectuals” (1993: 2) to deride champions of the retreat into the ivory tower. They are “university-based technocrats operating in a moral vacuum, lost without a political compass or a popular agenda.”¹²

Generally, the key aspect of public intellectual work that Michael beautifully refers to as “question of intellectual responsibility and intellectual agency in communities” (26) resonates more like an adjunct to the larger concerns with labour issues and “professional obligations,” to borrow from Berube. This is understandable considering the differences in racial and socio-political experience. It also accounts for the ideological dichotomy between the African Americans in the United States and other non BIPOC¹³ intellectuals, which comes to the fore in Michael’s critique of the works of ‘superstar’ Black scholars represented by Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West. Their work provides the leitmotif for Michael’s declamation of the public intellectual as a “purported” spokesperson for community in the first chapter of his book unpretentiously entitled “Publicity: Black Intellectuals as Inorganic Representatives.” To better appreciate Michael’s critique of the ‘cultural elites,’ we may invoke William Maxwell’s mockery of the “populist masquerade of contemporary humanist intellectuals” (n.p.) in his supportive albeit witty review of *Anxious Intellects*.

As Dumain (2004) observes in his acerbic review of Michael’s book, Michael “tellingly fails to go far enough in analyzing the problem, thus remaining as gullible as the rest of the cultural left.” He labels Michael “the Cultural Studies parasite” (n.p.). From the first page of Michael’s *Anxious Intellects*, the “fundamental confusion” is evident for the critical reader:

All these dithyrambs (from Greek I believe) and diatribes share a fundamental confusion about the character and role of intellectuals in contemporary society. Are intellectuals an empowered elite, or are they a vestigial organ of modernity with no function in a commodity-driven social order that no longer requires the regulative work of representation and legitimation that intellectuals once performed? Can progressive intellectuals speak for the oppressed, or does their intervention inevitably reproduce the silencing and marginalization of the oppressed for whom they purport to act? Can conservative intellectuals preserve the common grounds of a democratic social order, or can they only reproduce structures of privilege and exclusion that the status of intellectuals, an issue fundamental to our work as intellectuals, remains confused? (1)

The word “confusion” and its modifiers are so emphasized that one begins to wonder about the author’s obsession with it. However, it reveals Michael’s contempt

12 For more on Boggs’ authoritative theorizing on technocratic intellectuals/ technocratic intelligentsia see his book *Intellectuals and the Crisis of Modernity*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

13 Black Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC). It should be noted that of course the politics of race plays differently across the world, including some African countries, especially South Africa.

for the contradictions and pretensions in the work of several intellectuals, public or 'private,' and how that coheres with the theme of corporatization of universities. It also redirects us to transformations taking place in the politics of the academy which Mudimbe (1988) partly envisions within journals and university departments as platforms for "questioning the meaning of political power" in the early part of this paper.

Some contradictions and crises of representation—the idea of the intellectual representing those on behalf of who they claim to be speaking for—which Michael deals with are also identifiable in the works of some Nigerian intellectuals as stated above. One of the most vitriolic attacks against such Nigerian public intellectuals complicit in the crises of representation emanates from an American-based journalist and writer, Rudolph Okonkwo. Chiding the public intellectuals who betrayed the masses they purported to serve, Okonkwo (2000) rages, and I quote at length:

There are two things that are very abundant in Nigeria. One is crude oil and the other is public intellectual. And both are curses to Nigeria ... The world of the Nigerian public intellectuals is a zoo. It is a zoo full of nihilists. Some are sectarian in their outlook and others are humorless. Some are eccentric while others are comical. But one thing they all have in common is an over-inflated ego of their importance in the scheme of things. This is more glaring in those who managed to escape the academic environment where they are buried in obscurity. Out in the real world, they confuse abstract reflection with critical intelligence. When they look at vanity, they see a gallant struggle. From some outdated textbooks, they borrow paradigms, which they will tout around as messianic sacrament. They distance themselves from the mainstream whenever it would convey an air of superiority. They embrace arrogant group solidarity when it would extol their ingenuity. They confuse pomposity with enthusiasm. They assumed the role of the temporal as well as the eternal. When they are not trapped in one form of dogmatic hole, they are prone to premature closures. When they are not practicing the religion of formulaic Babalawo [traditional doctor] they are chained by rigid conclusions (n.p.).

Okonkwo's disillusionment with some Nigerian public intellectuals, though reductionist in its scathing generalization, aligns with a recurrent theme in the criticism of certain public intellectuals: that they do not practice what they preach. However, there is unusual expectation of sainthood from these intellectuals who sacrifice so much to the struggle, indeed sometimes martyred in the process as was the case with Saro-Wiwa. This sense of sacrifice is highlighted by Michael who sketches the dangers in public intellectuals speaking truth to power while making even their own constituencies uncomfortable or happy (171), and in some cases, having their own popular works suffer discrimination from colleagues as a result.¹⁴ The danger in Okonkwo's generalization is implicated in the apposite reflections of Edward Said (1996) in his chapter on Professionals and Amateurs when he posits: "We come back once again to [the] main theme, the representation of the intellectual. When we think of an individual intellectual...do we accentuate the individuality of the person in drawing his or her portrait, or do we rather make our focus the group or class of which the individual is a member" (68).

The dilemma of the public intellectual with regard to representation is deepened

14 An interesting case in point is discussed by Rosemary Cowan in her article, "Cornel West and the Tempest in the Ivory Tower." Here, she explores the 2002 dispute between Lawrence Summers, Harvard University President, and superstar scholar, Cornel West. The focus of the article is the controversy around the quality of West's scholarship, and a consideration of "whether his commitments to publics outside the classroom detract from his scholarly work." It also confronts the critical question, "Is the release of a hip-hop CD an appropriate form of intellectual activity for a senior Ivy League professor?" (2004: 72).

in Alcoffs (2002) fascinating examination of “the devaluation of the work of public intellectuals within the academic community” and promotion of the “intellectual integrity of the public intellectual,” and the idea “that both independent thought and original scholarship are possible within work that is engaged with nonacademic publics” (521). Implied in the argument are the reasons Michael considers the disquieting paradox of the intellectual and why he cannot easily be a spokesperson for the people. He references Gates Jr. and Cornel West’s declaration that being an intellectual “Does not necessarily mean being loved; loving one’s community means daring to risk estrangement and alienation from that very community, in the short run, in order to break the cycle of poverty, despair, and hopelessness that we are in, in the long run” (171) Michael tellingly surmises that “[p]rofessors, unlike other purveyors of services, cannot always be judged on the basis of customer satisfaction” (ibid).

Fortunately, it seems to me, Said resolves the inherent contradiction for us, and humanizes the public intellectual in a most memorable passage hinged on Sartre and his foibles. He argues that when we read about Sartre’s controversial “involvement with Simone de Beauvoir, his dispute with Camus, his remarkable association with Jean Genet,” we do not condemn him but “situate him in his circumstances” and recognize that “Sartre was Sartre, the same person who also opposed France in Algeria and Vietnam.” Then Said delivers an interesting defense of the public intellectual: “Far from disabling or disqualifying him as an intellectual, these complications give texture and tension to what he said, expose him as fallible human being [not superman], not a dreary moralistic preacher” (1996: 14). Coincidentally, this somewhat controversial statement—some would argue that great public intellectuals should be held accountable for their foibles—serves as the template for the memoir of Soro-Wiwa’s son, Ken Wiwa, ironically entitled *In the Shadow of a Saint* and provides a fitting conclusion to this discourse. The irony in the title and in the book is Ken Wiwa’s robust portraiture of his father’s heroic stature as well as his shortcomings.

Conclusion

As noted earlier in this essay, D’Souza (2014) rightly observes that “[t]here is a spectrum of views on the theory-practice nexus” of the public intellectual. This study explores this “spectrum” and identifies some sub-categories of public intellectuals across the world, especially from North America, Europe, Latin America, and our principal focus: Africa. While there are context-specific variations in the profile and work of public intellectuals, a common denominator is a commitment to social change. Still, it would appear that the sub-category that Michael recognizes in North American as ‘public intellectuals’ in their polemics are better understood as ‘intellectuals’ concerned with the politics of institutional building and knowledge production. However, it is pertinent to highlight the association between the African public intellectuals that I focus on and “the origins of modern black intellectual traditions and those of Pan-Africanism” (Mazrui 2005: 203).¹⁵ Like their historical predecessors mentioned above, these progressive intellectuals occasionally suffer crisis of representation due to the complex nature of the publics which they serve and the political (or corporate or ideological) hegemonies which they confront.¹⁶

15 Quoted in *Public Intellectuals and the Politics of Global Africa*, edited by Seifudein Adem (2010).

16 Pierre Phillip Fraiture (2013) offers more insight into the point being made here in his discussion of the reasons, that Mudimbe (and his associates including Pius Ngandu Nkashama in East Africa) for example, “opted for a more abstruse form of writing...out of self-preservation in the face of political oppression” (79) from the brutal dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, former President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and later Zaire.

Nevertheless, those who disqualify public intellectuals from representing the people for whom they speak because of their imperfections may have to look to another planet for the ideal public intellectual. As I have tried to show in this essay, there are intellectuals and there are ‘public’ intellectuals. While the former may be content with professional polemics and labour issues (which are useful too), the latter immerse themselves in social movements and struggles for civil liberties, often at great personal costs. It is for this reason that Funke Michaels (2020) responding to a draft of this paper states in a private correspondence: “When younger intellectuals look at the fate of the heroes that walked before them, the African examples seem to take on personas of tragic superheroes. It makes it easy to surmise that one must be ready for bodily harm, exile, imprisonment, and even death in pursuit of ideals that are taken for granted in other places.”

Saro-Wiwa understood the precarious nature of the African public intellectual’s work which inspired the great Nelson Mandela to issue his popular press statement of 26th June 1961 from which inspired title of this essay. In Mandela’s words, “The struggle is my life. I will continue fighting for freedom until the end of my days.” These words encapsulate a recognition of the difficulty, the risk, and the hardship in choosing *not* “to remain silent and neutral in a matter of life and death” to the people, as Mandela declared. Insights from Mandela’s life as well as a realization that “we write best of the things we directly experience,” as Saro-Wiwa acknowledges in *A Month*, “is probably the reason the best Nigerian writers have involved themselves actively in ‘politics’” (56). Saro-Wiwa cites the examples of his contemporaries: Soyinka, Chinua Achebe (who was literally “forced to work with one of the political parties to buttress his call to ‘proselytise’ for civilized values,” Chris Okigbo, and Festus Iyayi, who was “involved in labour unions” and “in the Campaign for Democracy organization” (56).

The model of Wole Soyinka and Ken Saro-Wiwa, as well as the lives of some other significant public intellectuals across the world—especially under totalitarian regimes—lend credence to my thesis in this essay. We do not need to wait until such public intellectuals pay the supreme price as Saro-Wiwa did before recognizing them as representatives of the people and canonizing them for making the struggle their lives. Indeed, Saro-Wiwa’s epitaph leaves us with an unsettling quatrain that forever reminds us about the perils of being a public intellectual especially in the so-called Third World: “Here stands the funny little sweet/ The Nigerians loved to cheat / So much that e ‘en in death/ They denied him six feet of earth.”¹⁷ Perhaps more than any other public intellectual of our time, Saro-Wiwa’s experience underscores the fact that it is high time that (non-African) people looked to the quintessential African public intellectual to see how they negotiate the crises of representation, how sacrificing for ideals actually works, and how it is possible for public intellectual to truly give a voice to the voiceless, and to pay for equity in blood, if necessary.

17 It was believed that Saro-Wiwa's epitaph became prophetic because rumours had it that he was ‘buried’ standing in a shallow grave and acid poured on his remains. Owens Wiwa, brother of the executed activist, reflects this narrative in his biography written by Timothy Hunt titled *The Politics of Bones: Dr. Owens Wiwa and the Struggle for Nigeria's Oil*, McClelland & Stewart, 2006.

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