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AKÉ: WOLE SOYINKA'S FIRST AUTOBIOGRAPHIC WORK

Iva Gilbertová

The Nigerian writer Wole Soyinke was 47 years old when he published, in 1981, his first autobiographic work, *Aké, The Years of Childhood*.¹ He had, by then, a vast literary output and had acquired a rich experience as a university teacher, actor and theatre director, translator, essayist, and political prisoner. Five years later, he was to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature and the Order of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and in 1989, the French Légion d'honneur. Relatively young, he has known the deepest humiliation and the greatest honours. We can only try to guess why, somewhere between the two poles, at the turn of the 1980's, he was looking for a way back to childhood, why, after both intellectually and formally complex and often gloomy reflections of reality in his preceding writing, he created a work that speaks in a rich but accessible way about basic values in life, about the art of living joys and sadnesses to the full, about respect for others and for oneself. *Aké* may be the same search for pure water in the uneasy time of adulthood as many of Nĕmcová's or Pavel's books were in Czech literature; it may also be an attempt to find the roots of the adult author's qualities and attitudes. In any case, it is a work as sensitive and charming as the stories of Ota Pavel's father or of the heroes of Marcel Pagnol's books *My Father's Glory* and *My Mother's Castle*. Like all these books, written in different times and in different countries, *Aké* is a work of its author's maturity and perhaps also a product of a painfully acquired equanimity in life.

The action is set at Aké, a small town near the West Nigerian town of Abeokuta, in Egbaland, the Yoruba part of Nigeria. The Anglican parish here forms a self-contained, in a way enclosed world, with its church and parsonage, the school, and the houses, in one of which Wole, his elder sister Tinu, and their little brother Dipo live. There is, moreover, a quantity of cousins and of acquaintances' children, taken over for a time

¹ Wole Soyinka, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, first published in Great Britain by Rex Collins in 1981, this is the first Minerva edition (London: Minerva, 1991). The second of the two autobiographic prose works published by Soyinka so far, *Isarà: A Voyage Around 'Essay'* (London: Methuen, 1990), is not dealt with in the present study.

by Wole's parents, there are maids and household helps moving around, who seem to act as family members, too, aunts and uncles, neighbours and colleagues who come to pay visits or to chat. The father, Ayo, also called Essay, is headmaster of the primary school and the soul of Aké's intellectual life. The mother, Eniola, also called Wild Christian, Moroun, Mama Wole or Mama Tinu, controls the household and her shop. His father's parents are of the Ijebo tribe and live at Ísarà; his grandfather is one of the elders of the place, a wise observer of 'modern' life, yet still preferring the Yoruba god of iron and war, Ogun, to Christ. The Reverend J. J. Ransome-Kuti, called Daodu, headmaster of Abeokuta grammar school, where his wife Beere teaches, too, is his mother's uncle. Even the Alake or Alafin, the local king, tolerated within the 'indirect' British rule, is a relative on his mother's side. It is clear, then, that the future exceptional personality is growing up in a milieu that is, to a certain extent, exceptional, a mixture of traditional power, faith and wisdom with Western culture and Western life style.

In his book, Soyinka describes the period of childhood between the ages of two-and-a-half and eleven. We follow his very early longing for education, his arrival at school, first primary, then secondary, his preparation for entering the Government College at Ibadan. Around this basic programme revolve an immense number of experiences – adventures, meetings, feelings – that accompany the growth of a child, as do customs and ceremonies proper to every family. There is the little boy's first trip to the big world, following a police band on its tour round the town, the ceremony of the bath, the discovery of great and important words like *temperature*, the symbol of illness, or *birthday*, which cannot, as he has to learn, be eaten, but offers an occasion to eat. There is a little playmate, a girl suffering probably from epilepsy, which means that from time to time she leaves the children to see her friends in another world, because she is, in fact, an *ábikù*, a child that is born, dies, then is reborn, and so on. There are also books, singing in the church choir, and scouting, which stopped at the Wolf Cub stage. Later come the experience of killing and eating a big snake at his grandfather's place, offences and punishments, the parent's original methods of upbringing and their wise messages, and finally the dramatic experience of the formation and the struggle of a women's union, led, among other women, by Wole's mother and especially by his aunt Beere, and encouraged by their educated husbands. Not older than eleven, Wole teaches ordinary women to write and read, acts as a go-between for the movement and witnesses its open conflict with both the local and the white man's authority. During a women's strike against unjust and cruelly exacted taxes, he learns about the pathos of such a fight, about the feeling of solidarity, but also about the moments when justified anger turns into blind violence. This experience is the climax and the end both of the first period of his growing up and of the book.

The form corresponds, at least at first sight, to the multiplicity of experiences. The book is divided into fifteen chapters, each of which is graph-

ically subdivided into smaller sections. This division, however, does not seem to have much sense, as *Aké* resembles a stream of oral narration with its typical features. Soyinka does stick to the time line, but follows it at an irregular speed and not systematically. The first memories are connected with a specific age, but the great number of experiences, feelings, and domestic features that follow are brought to life without any real relation to the hero's age. The age is only mentioned a few times, and as if by chance, to explain things, like the way in which, only progressively and without any apparent system, the roles of people in the story are made clear, faces are attached to names, and nicknames explained. Quite early we meet, for example, Wild Christian, but it is only after a certain time that we learn that she is the mother, and it is not until towards the end of the book that we know her real name and the other names she is called. Soyinka's liking for the flashback technique is of a similar kind. He may use it, as is typical in modern literature, to make his text more dynamic and to give it more tension, but the return to the past and the retrospective explanation of something new in the story are common features of oral narration, too, as are extensive diversions from the main line of the story. In them, Soyinka often leaves a concrete situation for a more general reflection or for a description of a wider phenomenon to which the concrete situation is connected. In other places, one concrete situation provokes an association with another, similar one, exactly in the way in which this happens in oral narration.

The whole text seems then to be based on the principle of memories and related associations, which enable the author to create a very lively picture of the child's world. He seems to prefer dwelling in the preschool period, when the unusually inquisitive and intelligent child still keeps a marvellous capacity to experience intensively the present with its immediate sensual perceptions, and to mix reality with the world of imagination:

The bookseller's wife was one of our many mothers; if we had taken a vote on the question, she would be in the forefront of the others, including our real one. With a bovine beauty, jet-black skin and inexhaustible goodness, she nevertheless put disquieting thoughts in my head, and all because of her husband. By contrast to him, she was ample, and sometimes, when the bookseller disappeared for days, I felt certain she had just swallowed him up.²

This period is captured in a large number of details. The description of acts, feelings and perceptions, the dialogues, all are so concrete as to provoke a question, common both with autobiographic prose and with our grandmothers' recollections, the question of to what extent reality is mixed with fiction.

The period of the first school years that follows is pictured with a cer-

² Soyinka, *Aké*, p. 15.

tain soberness. A complex description is replaced by some typical experiences, such as the burlesque scene of the investigation and trial of pupils who have stolen and are ready to consume the grammar school headmaster's chickens, and by events particularly important for shaping the hero's personality, like the women's uprising at Abeokuta. Personal feelings and everyday ritual seem to have receded slightly, perhaps because the author is tired of them, perhaps because much has already been said, or perhaps simply because this is the age when the child looks more and more for relations between things, is more critical, lives and feels much, but says less.

Soyinka's book seems, then, to be closer to the looseness and spontaneity of oral narration than to the perfect composition of some of his plays or to the complex construction of his novel *The Interpreters*. An attentive reading of the individual chapters and of the book as a whole suggests, however, the possibility that the composition of *Aké* has been well thought out. Though the chapters look at first sight like a loose sequence of motifs and of sharp jumps from one to another, we often find a certain order in this seeming chaos. One of the best examples is offered by the chapter in which recollections and present perceptions accompany the guitar player's route round the Aké of the past. At the beginning of another section, Soyinka mentions the numerous passers-by to whom his parents used to offer shelter. The stories of two of them are so detailed that, by the time we are approaching the end of the second one, we no longer remember why they have both been placed in this particular chapter. But Soyinka reminds us explicitly at the end that it is the story of one of those 'strays' whom he was speaking about at the beginning.³ If he passes from a concrete situation to a general reflection or to a characterization, once he has finished these, he goes back to the starting situation. There is, then, behind the seemingly chaotic character of the narration, a sense of a whole, of closing what has been opened, of connections both in life and in a work of literature. Even the one or two views of the present face of Aké – where, instead of traditional Yoruba dishes, the young consume Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald's hamburgers, and rock, funk and punk (sights that I consider less organic parts of the narration) – may have their logic. The nostalgia of these views is a stronger echo of the trees that have diminished since the writer's childhood, of the soil that seems to be more arid, of the houses and streets from which mysteries and secrets have disappeared. Finally, the composition of the whole of the book suggests that Soyinka did not work haphazardly. It has been mentioned that he goes from the very personal, intimate tone of the preschool age, captured in details of everyday life, to a more condensed style, burlesque or tragicomic sometimes, dynamic and sober elsewhere, when depicting the later years, in which the public seems to have, to a certain extent, overshadowed

³ Soyinka, *Aké*, p. 115.

owed the private. At the end of the book, however, Wole is back in the home of his relatives, speaking about everyday things. He has never worn shoes yet, as his educated father considers them the ultimate in spoiling children. That is why he is very pleased when his aunt offers to buy him secretly a pair of shoes before he goes to the Government College at Ibadan. But Uncle Daodu has bad news for him: beside other pedagogic nonsense, the white man's school forbids its pupils to wear shoes:

'No shoes,' I sighed, feeling the oppressive weight of my years. It was time to commence the mental shifts for admittance to yet another irrational world of adults and their discipline.⁴

Uncle Daodu, whose grammar school Wole attends, reassures him:

'You'll be eleven and a half when you join them in January. And you've had two years as a Grammarian... that ought to have done it I think. Don't you think so?' Turning to Beere for confirmation. 'Oh yes, yes,' she assured him. 'Not forgetting the fact that he's been brought up by *Ayo* and *Eniola*. I think he'll be able to cope with them over there.'⁵

The circle of the naration slowly closes. Its hero is again among his people, and his parents, not mentioned much in the last chapters of the book, are recalled by one simple sentence as the central figures of his childhood. But they are no more the only ones. Wole is leaving for the world from the wider family circle, and he is a different child than the little boy wandering about Aké at the beginning of the book.

Soyinka is known as a master of a wide range of styles and means of expression. He favours satire and irony, but his language can also be poetically playful or full of complex images, and he can express the intensity of both a tragic feeling and of a sensual perception. *Aké* contains all these tones, but the author's style and language serve the positiveness of the atmosphere of the book. Instead of a corrosive satire, there is a gentle irony and a kind humour, and also wit, a sense of comedy, and descriptive realistic detail as well as richly developed, yet never inaccessible poetic images. Unlike some of Soyinka's other works and works by many African writers, this contains few places where the imagery has the qualities, almost surrealistic for a European reader, so typical of African literature. In one such place, the little Wole is observing a photo of Bishop Ajayi Crowther, who used to live at Aké:

He wore a clerical suit with waistcoat and I wondered what he really kept at the end of the silver chain that vanished into the pocket. He grinned and said, Come nearer, I'll show you. As I moved towards the porch he drew on the chain until he had lifted out a wholly round pocket-watch that gleamed of solid silver. He pressed a button and the lid opened, revealing, not the glass and the facedial but a deep cloud-filled space. Then he winked one eye, and it fell from his face into the bowl of the watch. He winked

⁴ Soyinka, *Aké*, p. 230.

⁵ Soyinka, *Aké*, p. 230 (my emphasis).

the other and this joined its partner in the watch. He snapped back the lid, nodded again and his head went bald, his teeth disappeared and the skin pulled backward till the whitened cheekbones were exposed. Then he stood up and, tucking the watch back into the waistcoat pocket, moved a step towards me. I fled homewards.⁶

How much this bishop of Soyinka resembles the 'very complete gentleman' from Tutuola's famous book *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, who, returning from the market through a magic forest, gives its strange inhabitants back, one after another, the separate parts of his body that he had hired from them before, until he becomes 'a full-bodied gentleman reduced to head'.⁷ Of the same kind are the canoes on the river, changing into floating bodies first of animals and then of people before the eyes of the child hero of Ben Okri's story 'In the Shadow of War'.⁸

Soyinka's work with the Yoruba language is another interesting feature of *Aké*. Into the main stream of English, he adds Yoruba expressions for certain elements of the local culture, such as names of spirits, titles of dignitaries, parts of clothing, or names of dishes. Songs and bits of dialogues are in Yoruba, too. Some of these expressions are freely paraphrased in the following text itself, others are described more precisely in footnotes, the meaning of yet others is made clear by the context. Dialogues and songs are translated, and finally, in several cases no explanation is offered. Here, too, the use of Yoruba seems to be spontaneous: it seems that, like different characters and stories of the book, different local words, too, are given a different importance, and the author to a different degree seeks to make them understandable to his readers. And yet the Yoruba element as a whole is not only very natural but probably also consciously created: it enables the reader to perceive at least to some degree the character of the language, its melodious quality and its playfulness, its density of meaning, shown by comparison with the English translation. Another reason for the use of Yoruba may be seen in the fact that certain words are simply untranslatable, or would, if translated into another language, lose their emotional content. Above all, however, using Yoruba, Soyinka has given a piece of their real identity to people who mostly speak English in the book, while in reality they spoke also or only another language. A perceptive non-Yoruba reader knows, by the end of the book, that *omọ* means 'child' in Yoruba. He has learnt the key word of the story in its true language.

Aké is then a book about childhood, powerful and understandable anywhere in the world. It is about the great and admired, beloved and frightening, ridiculous and bizarre figures that a child meets on the way. It speaks about houses and rocks, about a thousand smells and tastes, about adventure, about lies and sincerity, about pain, hope and disap-

⁶ Soyinka, *Aké*, p. 5.

⁷ Anos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, 2nd ed., 8th reprint (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 21.

⁸ The story is contained in Okri's collection of short stories *Stars of the New Cusfew* (London: Penguin, 1987).

pointment, about friendship. It is also a book about the world of adults perceived through a child's eyes, about acts and words of theirs that influence a child for his whole life. When Soyinka's grandfather learns that the boy is supposed to go to a boarding school in some time, he has a ritual performed on the eight-year-old child hardening him to pain. After the skin and muscles around his ankles and at his wrists have been incised and magic powders put into the wounds, he says to his grandson:

'Whoever offers you food, take it. Eat it. Don't be afraid, as long as your heart says, Eat. If your mind misgives, even for a moment, don't take it, and never step in that house again... Next, don't ever take your back on a fight... Your adversary will probably be bigger, he will trounce you the first time. Next time you meet him, challenge him again. He will beat you all over again. The third time, I promise you this, you will either defeat him, or he will run away. Are you listening to what I am telling you?'⁹

Soyinka's life and work prove that he did listen to his grandfather and that his personality was shaped by more than the general milieu in which he grew up: the educated environment of his childhood, the mixture of cultures, the events he witnessed. It seems that, first of all, it was the qualities of those close to him that shaped him, their intelligence and critical spirit, their determination, sense of justice and refusal of violence, their bravery of heart. For the literary historian, for the critic and for the reader of Soyinka's work, *Aké* is also a precious biographical source enabling a better understanding of much in his life and work.

The book could, moreover, be read with great success as one of the possible introductions to the history and culture of Africa, as reportage about the life of a certain part of African, and more precisely Nigerian, society in the years 1936-1945, about what Soyinka himself calls 'the uneasy love-hate relationship with colonial presence, and its own ambiguous attitudes to the Western-educated elite of the Nigerian protectorate.'¹⁰ It is a world where poor women from his grandparents' *Ìsarà* must walk sixty kilometres on every market day to sell their goods at Abeokuta, where Uncle Daodu, school headmaster, owner of a motorbike, later of a car, and finally of one of the four telephones in the town, refuses to send his own children to a white man's school, while Essay, the father, grows roses, reads the same newspaper as the white police chief and plays Paul Robeson's records to his children. Eniola, his wife, prepares him good Yoruba dishes for breakfast, zealously converts pagans to Christianity and protects her family against the evil charms of her country relatives. And the confused Paa Adatan, armed with amulets and war slogans, throws himself into a fight against a group of strange black soldiers, persuaded that he is defending the town against Hitler.

⁹ Soyinka, *Aké*, p. 147.

¹⁰ Soyinka, *Ìsarà*, p. v (author's note).

When the name of Africa is pronounced in this country, the most frequently occurring associations still are: desert, wild nature, pyramids; more perceptive individuals may speak of music and dance, famine and wars, problems of development and great contrasts. This only proves how simple, limited and often naive are the commonly held ideas of life in Africa not only fifty years ago, but even now, and confirms the importance of books like *Aké* for readers of all generations. For also most of those born in Central Europe in the 1930's, hardly guessed and guess even now that along with them, a boy was growing up in the land of jungle and of elephants, who had a gramophone at home, wanted to become a doctor and believed in forest spirits, who hated washing and loved reading, and who, like them, was listening to echoes of the war on the radio:

Hitler monopolized the box. He had his own special programme and somehow, far off as this war of his appeared to be, we were drawn more and more into the expanding area of menace. Hitler came nearer home every day... Essay and his correspondents vied with one another to see how many times the same envelope could be used between them. Windows were blacked over, leaving just tiny spots to peep through, perhaps to obtain an early warning when Hitler came marching up the path. ... To reinforce the charged atmosphere of expectations, the first aeroplane flew over Abcokuta; it had a heavy drone which spoke of Armageddon and sent Christians fleeing into churches to pray and stay the wrath of God. Others simply locked their doors and windows and waited for the end of the world. Only those who had heard about these things, and flocks of children watched in fascination, ran about the fields and the streets, following the flying miracle as far as they could, shouting greetings, waving to it long after it had gone and returning home to await its next advent.¹¹

¹¹ Soyinka, *Aké*, p. 109.