

THE MISINTERPRETATION OF AFRICAN THOUGHT AND AN IL- LEGITIMATE APPEAL TO “AFRICAN CULTURE”

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Gani Fawehinmi, a respected Nigerian activist-lawyer and Senior Advocate of Nigeria, used the death of Mrs. Stella Obasanjo, the wife of the Nigerian head of state, as an occasion to evaluate the political health of Nigeria. He drew an important connection between the circumstances of the death of Mrs. Obasanjo and the immorality and irresponsibility of the Nigerian ruling elite and the middle class. My understanding of Fawehinmi's position is that it is morally unacceptable for the wife of a head of state to die in a foreign hospital after 46 years of independence. In his view, such a death is not only a damning judgment on the country's medical infrastructure, the sad state of its hospitals, and the pathetic state of the country's medical policies, it is also an indictment on the Nigerian ruling class.

Mr. Reuben Abati, a well-known columnist of *The Guardian* (Nigerian) news daily, takes issue with Fawehinmi. He believes that Fawehinmi spoke ill of the dead and of those still grieving the loss of Mrs. Obasanjo. According to him, Fawehinmi's assessment is ethically wrong as it unfairly hits President Obasanjo, who is mourning the death of his wife, below the belt. Abati justifies his views by appealing to “African culture,” suggesting by this appeal that there is a consensus on what Africans collectively mean by “African culture.” at least his version of it. I want to quickly state that there is no such consensus, precisely because there is no intellectual tradition or argument that relies on an unexamined, uncritical sense of collectivity.

Thus, I disagree wholeheartedly with Abati's misguided chastisement of Fawehinmi for the following reasons. The African culture that I know has a philosophically coherent, plausible, and sophisticated account of death, the public and moral life. Given that one of the strongest points of this culture, before it was appropriated, disrupted and abused by Africa's ruling elites, is ethics, it is important to quickly review its philosophical paradigm without boring the reader with unnecessary details. This review is crucial for the collective health of the Nigerian public, which is in danger of being irreparably damaged by its irresponsible ruling elites. We, the citizens, should always critique our public health and accept our

shortcomings without passing the blame to others.

The Yoruba intellectual tradition, as an aspect of the larger body of African intellectual tradition, places great import on "*Iwa*." Literally "*Iwa*" is character. Hence the notion of "*Iwa pele*" which is a positive representation and attribution of goodness of character, is also a moral requirement of "*Omoluwabi*." *Omoluwabi* is one in whom the goodness of *Iwa* is privileged. But more substantively, "*Iwa*" is the metaphysical Being of a human; the way one is metaphysically, such that *Iwa* as character is the outward representation of one's Being, that is, one's metaphysical Being. The notion of "*Iwa ni ewa omo eniyan*," that is, a person's Being is her *beauty*, or the Being of a person is her beauty. In this case, beauty is not physical beauty but an internal beauty that fits one for the ethical life. This internal beauty is eternal hence its moral requirement for a public life because death is a tax every mortal must pay. Because the Yoruba intellectual tradition connects the material with the immaterial world, there is a moral imperative for a good *Iwa* given the eternity of *Iwa* and the eternity of the connection of the material and immaterial world. The moral injunction is for the "evil or wicked person to remember tomorrow" ("*Osika ranti Ola*"), because *Ola*, which is tomorrow or the future, is pregnant with today and the present.

Before the misadventure of slavery and colonialism and the inheritance of colonial scholarship by our so-called middle class who prefer to look "sophisticated" in alien intellectual garment, and before the corruption of the African (my reference point is the Yoruba intellectual tradition with which I am familiar) intellectual life by colonial scholarship, there is nowhere in the body of Yoruba intellectual life that we glamorize "*Osika*" (the wicked one) or, are morally bound to not "speak evil" of the wicked person who has passed on. I challenge any of our writers to produce the intellectual reflection in Yoruba tradition where it is claimed that we have the moral imperative not to subject to public scrutiny the evil acts of a dead wicked person. What we will find after interrogation of this intellectual tradition is that we should not uncritically take on the dead, out of moral deference to the dead person who cannot defend herself or himself. It is not the case that we should not speak evil of the dead, neither is it the case that we should not speak evil of the dead person who was evil when she or he was alive. If the dead is evil when she or he was alive, we are morally bound to inspect her or his legacy for the sake of the health of the community.

The suggestion here is not about a particular person, neither is it being suggested that Mrs. Stella Obasanjo was evil or wicked. For good reasons I refuse to participate in the debate about the goodness or otherwise of Mrs. Stella Obasanjo. For me, the challenge is the more demanding one, which is about defining the moral

requirement of our public sphere within the context of a correct interpretation of African intellectual life and tradition. There is nothing in Yoruba intellectual tradition that says we should not speak evil about a dead person who is evil. On the contrary the moral requirement of *Iwa* and *Omoluwabi* puts a moral imperative on us to live a good life and, cultivate and exhibit proper *Iwa*. This inclines us to be aware of what will happen to us when we are dead. This further gives the ethical license to the living to discuss the evil acts of the evil if she or he dies. The challenge to our so-called ruling elites is this: How many of them are *Omoluwabi*, that is the one in whom the goodness of *Iwa* is privileged? That the number will be small is damning for the country. We do not have *Omoluwabi* among our political elites; and in my view, this is the morale of Fawehinmi's comments.

Therefore Abati's reference to "an age-old tradition about human conduct in the face of grief", as an aspect of "African age-old culture," misses the point. He could disagree with Fawehinmi as he deems fit. But his appeal to an "African culture" is flawed because African culture is not some unreflective body of thought that hamstring us from looking critically at ourselves, or that compels us not to conclude that we are wrong even in the face of grief. This is the final point: if Abati is right all Nigerians should stop the public examination and condemnation of General Sani Abacha's public and private life in the name of that same "age-old tradition about human conduct in the face of grief." If we are to be consistent, we ought to refrain from critically condemning Abacha's looting of Nigeria's treasury.

My intervention is borne out of an intellectual need to defend what I believe is the correct and more morally plausible account of Yoruba intellectual life and tradition. One is also using this opportunity to remind Africa's ruling class that our hands and tongues shall not be tied by so-called African tradition and their misinterpretation. If that is the only public weapon we have when they pass on, no one and, no uncritical and unreflective interpretation of that culture will stop us from using it. And it is the same African intellectual tradition -which when it is misinterpreted is used to arrest discourse and our development- that we shall correctly interpret and rely on in setting the records straight. To do otherwise is to arrest our thought. And that is morally unacceptable.