

# AFRICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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## The African Nonfiction/Memoir Tradition

Critics continue to struggle with defining what constitutes autobiography, the form that James Olney calls “the most elusive of literary documents” (*Autobiography* 3). One of the primary sources of this elusiveness is the blurring of distinctions between autobiography and fiction. Using some nonfictional narratives by Africans, we shall therefore attempt to study how private stories become national ones. We will consider a range of texts from the African continent that can be categorized under the broad label of ‘life-writing’: all those linked and complex genres that seek to represent actual lives, from ‘definitive’ biographies of public figures to intensely private modes like correspondence or the diary. We will be asking questions like: how can we approach a work like Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* as a literary text (and not just a historical document)? Why does J. M. Coetzee write his (not quite) memoirs in the third person? What does it mean to read the literary-critical (or political) essay as a mode of autobiography? Can a life just be life, without becoming a national allegory for a Western audience? How do writers represent childhood and nostalgia in troubled times? What are the ethics of telling other people’s stories across social, cultural and linguistic divides? And what exactly is literary about (so-called) ‘literary non-fiction’?

### Primary text:

Wole Soyinka, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*. New York: Vantage, 1981.

### Other Readings:

Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom* (1954).

Ivan Vladislavić, *Portrait with Keys* (2006).

Jacob Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia* (2009).

Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995).

J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood* (1997).

Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country* (2012).

Ken Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and A Day* (1995) and *On A Darkling Plane* (1989).

McAdams, D.P., Josselson, R. & Lieblich, A. *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*. Washington, DC : American Psychological Association, 2006.

Nicolson, Harold, *The Development of English Biography*, The Hogarth Press, 1928. |||

Nuttall, Sarah. ‘Autobiographical Acts’, in *Senses of Culture*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael. Oxford University Press, 2000.

**Discussion Questions:** How does the memoirist’s growth reflect an individual as well as a societal coming of age? What are the lasting impressions of Wole as a child in a society in transition?

### ***Wole Soyinka's Ake: The Years of Childhood***

**THE MEMOIR GENRE TRADITION:** The genre is relatively new in Africa. Since the postcolonial period, many autobiographies have been written in Africa by those who feel that their lives have something significant to share with fellow human beings. Wole Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood* reflects the socio-cultural background, politico-economic and other features that form the backdrop of experience of the memoirist. The book explores the extent to which the major character bears testimony to the culture and events of his time and the values that come out of a specific life. This memoir also shows an African culture in transition with the coming of modernity.

**THE AFRICAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE** is covered in the life of Wole. He has his parents, both his mother called "Wild Christian" and his father called "Essay", his grandfather, as well as his uncle Daodu (the Principal of Abeokuta Grammar School), and a host of relatives. Thus, the immediate and extended families are part of the life of young Wole. It is interesting that relatives bring their children to his parents to take care of so as to go to school to ensure future wellbeing. His mother's bedroom is like a dormitory with many cousins sharing the same sleeping mat. Despite modernity and the stresses involved, the African family appears strong as reflected in Soyinka's memoir.

**GROWING UP AND EDUCATION** is covered in this text. Schooling has become part of the life of Africans who send their children to school. Wole's elementary school and his attempts to enter Government College, Ibadan, are described. Parents send their children to stay with educated people so that their children could go to school for a better life in the new dispensation of modern Africa.

**YORUBA TRADITIONAL POLITICAL STRUCTURE** is shown here with the Alake as the traditional ruler (Oba) with a council of chiefs, the *ogbonis*. The ruler is advised by his council of chiefs and he deals with issues that affect his subjects.

**YORUBA WOMEN** are portrayed here in their mass movement. Headed by Mrs. Kuti, these women activists educate others through literacy programs, mass mobilization, and protest against unfair laws of the colonialists and the traditional ruler. Wole's mother was a trader and had her shop where she made some money to supplement her husband's pay as a teacher.

**OTHER CULTURAL ASPECTS** are shown in the memoir. The *oro* and *egungun* masqueraders show African performance tradition still thriving.

**MODERNITY, POSTCOLONIALISM, AND AFRICAN CULTURE** continue to have a challenging relationship. Since culture is dynamic, it absorbs elements of modernity as increasingly hybridity has become the reality of Africa today.

### **Study Questions and Activities**

1. In what ways will you say that the African family represented in the text is vibrant and healthy?
2. What traditional socio-cultural and political aspects appear to be working in tandem with modern ones in the text? Are there tensions and how are they resolved?
3. How is Wole raised as a child?
4. Pick another African memoir and show how the writer's life has been shaped by his or her culture and historical events of the time.

### **Required Text**

Wole Soyinka. *Ake: The Years of Childhood*. New York: Arrow Books, 1983.

### **Other Readings**

Toyin Falola. *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt: An African Memoir*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004.  
Aminatta Forna. *The Devil that Danced on the Water: A Daughter's Memoir*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002  
Tanure Ojaide. *Great Boys: An African Childhood*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998.