

WOLE

SOYINKA

IN THE

NAME OF

SHAKESPEARE!

HAMLET

**LIVING
SHAKESPEARE**

A collection of essays.

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FOREWORD

CIARÁN

DEVANE

A time of great economic and social change, in a world dominated by clashing politicians and shifting ideologies. Yes, the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras have surprising similarities with our own turbulent times.

William Shakespeare is the most eloquent chronicler of his age. He circumvented censorship by using historical sources and well-known stories to comment on political events and social issues in England in the 16th century. Extraordinarily, his voice is just as potent and relevant today.

In this essay, Nigeria's Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, reflects on the response to Daesh through *Hamlet*. His essay, *In the Name of Shakespeare!*, is a courageous and soul searching challenge to us all to face the consequences of inaction.

This essay is part of a collection, for which we asked some exceptional public figures – Nobel Laureates and best-selling authors, musicians and politicians, actors and activists – to reflect on Shakespeare's continuing relevance to today's burning issues. The collection is part of *Shakespeare Lives*, our extensive, year-long programme marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

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INTRODUCTION

SHAKESPEARE

IN NIGERIA

It is thought that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was performed for the first time in West Africa on 5 September 1607. Staged aboard the English merchant ship the *Red Dragon* off modern-day Freetown in Sierra Leone, the performance was attended by four Africans, a Portuguese interpreter, and 150 English sailors. It was only in the 19th century that Shakespeare returned to West Africa, as Britain consolidated its four colonies in the region – Nigeria, the Gold Coast (Ghana after independence), Sierra Leone and the Gambia – and set up schools teaching Christianity, the English language and Shakespeare.

Since the end of British colonial rule in West Africa between 1957 and 1965, Shakespeare has remained on literature syllabuses, and Nigerian playwrights have continued to engage with Shakespeare in creating dramas addressing the economic and political concerns of Nigerian audiences: both Wale Ogunyemi's *A'are Akogun* (1968) and Chuck Mike's *Makbutu* (2000) adapt *Macbeth* in order to dramatise the dangers of post-colonial despotism, and Femi Osofisan's *Wêsóó, Hamlet!* (2003) and *Love's Unlike Lading* (2011) adapt *Hamlet* and *Love's Labour's Lost* respectively in order to confront social tensions in contemporary Nigeria.

Wole Soyinka's essay *In the Name of Shakespeare!* is within this rich tradition, locating in *Hamlet* among other plays, the means to address the most pressing and immediate issues of our time.

IN THE NAME OF SHAKESPEARE!

by Wole Soyinka

'What's in a name?' protested Juliet.¹

Sometimes however, for better or worse, a name may command pause. Reconsideration. For the writer, the seemingly minor task of assigning names to characters may actually inhibit the narrative flow or action for a while. Most of the time, the eventual name emerges 'neutral', so the name is not the entire story. Often however, it forms part of it, and a well-considered – even inventive – choice becomes significant. There are instances when the name does not even operate on reader or audience through association, evocation, or shared history, but simply through – sound.

In the home of the Yoruba, tonal exploitation is routine, but this applies even to the non-tonal languages. For instance, Trinculo (*The Tempest*), is not what we would call a 'serious' name, is it? By contrast, Coriolanus – Caius Martius Coriolanus in full – is one name with a martial, authoritative ring. Enobarbus (*Antony and Cleopatra*) is a curious case – but then, some of these responses are undoubtedly subjective. I find, for instance, that the name Enobarbus conjures up the figure of a hirsute warrior and matchless carouser, whereas Shakespeare depicts him as a voice of rationality, with a poetic heart. Hotspur (*Henry IV, Part I*) is unambiguous – don't ever cross him in a quarrel!

From the cast list of villainy, we encounter the likes of Malvolio (*Twelfth Night*), which requires no further commentary. Gonerill (*King Lear*) is in an implacable class of her own – which compensates for the name-shy Lady Macbeth – of whom more, in our summative treatise on the gender-free absolutism of evil. Caliban is certainly one of the most trenchant, especially for those of us from a continent that European lore has decreed the home of black medieval bestiary. And to think that the Caliban/Cannibal linkage comes courtesy of – unkindest cut of all! – supposedly one of us – Othello:

... the cannibals that each other eat -

The *Anthropophagi* - and men whose heads

Grew beneath their shoulders...²

Liar! And Caliban was probably a vegetarian!

Thus, admitted as a factor in the creative process in fiction and drama, is it really implausible that 'naming' often owes its significance to lived, believed, or conditioned reality? The likelihood should not be dismissed, especially in confronting real challenges of human survival. All humanity is involved in the usage and abuse of language, in its shaping, language being not merely a means of plain communication, but the vehicle of thought and sensibility. Language conditions us, including the choices we make in naming others

¹ *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, Scene 1

² *Othello*, Act 1, Scene 3

– and ourselves. The act of naming may reveal the nature and aspirations of the name-givers more than observations of, expectations from, or predictions for, the named. It may indeed be regarded as an embedded social agenda.

I belong to one of those cultures where a child's 'naming' is more than simply according a new, yet amorphous entity, a convenient handle for reference and identification. Maybe that is why a lot of thought goes into this process in such societies, involving extravagant, child naming rituals – with feasting, lineage recitals, and even ancestral masquerades. Not just the parents, but the extended family; sometimes the entire community is implicated, as members may donate their own preferences. Thereafter they continue to apply that choice – directly or indirectly – in relating to the offspring. Family and communal histories are recalled through naming, and expectations for the future influence such choices. Naming – to some degree – reveals even more the nature and aspirations of the name-givers, and may be regarded as an embedded social agenda.

And thus we are brought to our pressing question:

What exactly is ISIS? I mean – I-S-I-S. – what is it? No matter how often I hear that word, or encounter its ubiquitous notices of atrocity in both local, and even prestigious, international media, print and electronic, I continue to insist on my question – yes, what is this thing called – ISIS?

The literal answer is of course one that is designed to 'rub salt in the wound', to 'stick it to you', shove it 'in your face!' etc., in whatever language or cultural usage. That answer constitutes the critical, fatal moment of Hamlet's 'The point evenenomed too?'³ that finally nerved the wounded prince to stop prevaricating and – act! He truly, near literally, 'answered his father's name.' Too late to save himself of course, but perhaps not too late to initiate the recovery or establishment of a moral order. There had been many such moments both before and after the self-coronation of this expanding entity, ISIS, but just as the rot in the state of Denmark had eaten deep, so has it within the state of the world today. That global unit carries the fatal venom in its body and perhaps its vital organs are now deteriorated beyond reprieve, especially as, again and yet again, the poisoned rapier is withdrawn and plunged in, thus reversing any motion towards recovery.

'The point evenenomed too?' defines the terminal point for toleration of the intolerable, the 'insult on injury', the *Measure for Measure*, (and in full measure!), the 'so far, no further'...all amounting to – the moment of truth! The world has endured uncountable moments of the 'evenenomed point', and Shakespeare's 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'⁴ continually shifts location, with studied contempt – today Chechnya, next Nigeria. France, Somalia or Mali follows at will, leaving only the question: where next?

Before that humiliating impact of 'point evenenomed too' on our humane sensibilities was administered through the mass kidnapping of the Chibok school

³ *Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 2

⁴ *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 4

pupils, the abducting fanatics had cut a bloody swathe through north-eastern Nigeria, hoisted their black flag over towns, emplaced their own emirs, and decreed their own psychopathic version of the Islamic code – the Sharia. They had carried out arbitrary executions of heads of families, enslaved women, slit throats, burnt down villages and even threatened the capital of the most brutalised state of Borno – Maiduguri.

This deadly precursor of Daesh declared itself a caliphate. Was the United Nations thereby constrained to acknowledge thereafter a substantive caliphate? Or *The New York Times* to salute, by its promiscuous policy, the birth of the ISSF – the Islamic State of Sambisa Forest? Sambisa is the stronghold of our own nest of psychopaths, a once impregnable fastness, into which nearly 300 abducted school children vanished from human sight, nearly two years ago. Let Tamora of *Titus Andronicus* set the template for this abode – after all, it is twin to her selected theatre of operations:

'A barren detested vale you see it is: ...

Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds'⁵

except, by now, the sex slaves from the village of Chibok, turned involuntary breeders. There roam the Lavinias, amputees. These – from the testimonies of a handful of escapees – had resisted rape, and/or refused to bear the names imposed by their captors.

The Nigerian populace labeled this band of marauders Boko Haram, meaning, 'The book is forbidden'. They refused to countenance, even in shortened form, the compulsively long-winded, vainglorious formulation that the sect had accorded itself – the Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad'. It went beyond mere verbal convenience. Small consolation, some might think, but language remains eternally a primary weapon of resistance and self-validation. The leader, Muhammed Yusuf, went to his grave detesting the name. His followers carried on the fight, not only to destroy the Word in every form – except theirs – but to accredit their existence through public acceptance of a dictated nominal identity. Blown out of home, farm, schools, marketplace, media, houses, etc., an outgunned public took the side of Aufidius against the bullying Coriolanus:

'Ay, Martius, Caius Martius. Dost thou think

I'll grace thee with that robbery, thy stol'n name,

"Coriolanus", in Corioles?'⁶

ISIS, or ISIL – to revert to our question – is the self-declared state of a group of religious fundamentalists. Spelt out fully, it reads – The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and sometimes, The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Either way, it is a gauntlet thrown down in disdain at the feet of the world, or perhaps we should say – used to slap the world on both complacent cheeks. Where exactly is it located? Objectively, yes, we know where it is supposed to be – apart from

⁵ *Titus Andronicus*, Act 2, Scene 3

⁶ *Coriolanus*, Act 5, Scene 6

the precincts of Hell, in the embittered minds of the displaced, disfigured and traumatised. We cannot blame them. We know what geographical space on earth it claims for itself – excised from existing Islamic states – but does claim, even occupation, bestow the coveted statehood status and all that this implies?

These are collateral provocations that interrogate the nature of the world we inhabit. A world of submission to whatever has attached itself to a name? A world whose organs of information and thought ‘influence’ have become collaborators and promoters of the overweening claims of any entity whose blood-stained banner reads: Death to the Book! Death to Khalil Gibran! Death to Rabindranath Tagore! Death to Shakespeare!

Prestigious, globally influential outposts strangely persist – as policy – in gratifying the jihadists’ conceit by the use of their coveted name – ‘Islamic State’. Once, buffeted by what had become an intolerable barrage of indoctrination, I did a count. In a brief reportage on the ordeal of a populace overrun by the jihadists, after 14 gratuitous bestowals of ‘Islamic State’, there came finally *one* concession to the fact that this name is not universally accepted. Further, that the rejectionists are those to whom a choice primarily belongs – as members of the same cultural family and, morally, as first-line victims of the jihadists’ inhuman assaults:

‘But the freedom Mr Jibouri now enjoys is shrouded with sadness that his family remains in Hawija, which is firmly in the grip of the ISLAMIC STATE, which is also known by the Arabic pejorative Daesh.’⁷

Timorously, near apogetically conceded – ‘also known by the Arabic pejorative – Daesh!’ Are we being overly pedantic here? One wishes this were so. We are, however, considering a spreading affliction that glories in the avocation of a consuming will to evil, so chillingly captured in Lady Macbeth’s occult invocation:

“... Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,

Stop up th’access and passage to remorse,

That no compunctious visitings of nature

Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between

Th’effect and it. Come to my woman’s breasts

And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,

Wherever in your sightless substances

You wait on nature’s mischief. Come, thick night,

And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark

To cry, “Hold, hold!”⁸

Shakespeare has summed it all up for all, and for all eternity. Cloned from

⁷ Michael R. Gordon, *The New York Times*,
27 October 2015, author’s capitals

⁸ *Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 5

Lady Macbeth, grounded equally in religious perversion, is that entity deservedly known as Daesh. Others from within the same religious realm repudiate it in its entirety. Conversely, 'enlightened' outsiders, fully acquainted with its manifesto of domination by terror, but mainly safe from the daily edge of Lady Macbeth's keen knife, respond with massaging its egotistical claims. These nations appear to be schizophrenic. Their governments send in soldiers to kill and be killed, but their opinion makers and intellectual coterie promote the perverse agenda of their violators. We have much to learn from Caliban:

'You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is I know how to curse.'⁹

Psychological warfare is real, and its base in language is, needless to say, primary. Shakespeare was the master of psychological manipulation, even through the conscious act of naming. If he had made Lady Macbeth sign off a letter to Banquo's survivors as, 'Most Pious and Dutiful Lady', the response would be couched in anything but a similar salutation, except as deep sarcasm. Alas, the enervating serum in 'the point envenomed too', courses unchecked through the blood stream of even that global adjudicator, the United Nations – to judge by the nominal concessions it makes in its resolutions on Daesh. Could this aberration be, yet again, one of the infectious diseases from that creed of moral flaccidity known as 'Political Correctness'?

That qualifying word especially, so egregiously appropriated – Islamic! Till today, not one accredited member of the world body, the UN, has endorsed the existence of this anti-Islamic Murder Incorporated. Covertly, there will be some who even back the group with military hardware and hard cash. What we observe near universally, however, is open repudiation, statement after statement, that there is nothing Islamic about this obscene cover. King Abdullah of Jordan declared: 'We, in the Arab world, call them by the derogatory word – Daesh.' Yet the trend continues, with a few laudable exceptions, and we are moved to marvel, with Hamlet:

'What's Hecuba to him or he to her
That he should weep for her?'¹⁰

Or, in Yoruba phrasing: 'Why does the outsider dye his clothing a deeper indigo than the weeds of the bereaved?'

Some of us still recall a famous (or infamous) Muhammad Ali fight with an American opponent. In the pre-fight exchanges, shortly after that terpsichorean pugilist had converted to Islam, the rash opponent insisted on referring to Ali by his rejected name – Cassius Clay – a conscious psychological tactic. Then came the fight and Ali punished him for the disrespect. As he snapped back his opponent's head at rapier speed, his tongue also snapped 'What's my name?' He did not really expect his opponent to grovel and provide him satisfaction but Ali fought that fight as if that was the only prize he craved: What's my name? – *Snap!* What's my name – *Snap! Snap!* His ill-matched victim lost the fight, but all saluted

⁹ *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2

¹⁰ *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2

Ali's refusal to bow to humiliation. By contrast, without even stepping into the ring, the jihadists are being accorded a badly craved nominal respect. They snap back the head of the world with one jab after the other, leaving us literally punch-drunk, reeling helplessly while handlers at the ring side throw in the towel, screaming out, on our behalf, the name that signifies surrender.

Now, here is an even more serious matter, requiring objectivity and sobriety.

Several nations, both Islamic and non-Islamic, now openly express alarm at the swell of recruitment of their citizens to the neo-jihadist ranks in recent times. The causes of this attraction are multiple but, basic to them all is the lure of being a pioneering part in the parturition of a new entity, no matter what. We tend to underestimate the drawing power of such participation, that sense of co-ownership. And we forget also the fragility of expatriate youth, even after generations of settlement within a new culture, and the dangers of partial integration that creates an identity crisis. To hundreds and thousands of such insecure personalities, the glamour of being warriors in the birth of a state, the romance of being part owner of an organism under formation, cannot be quantified.

Lucifer's choice in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that deems it 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven',¹¹ is too readily dismissed. Some crave no more than their Forest of Arden/Eden, simply to thrive in a resort of ethical values that modern existence has abandoned for new gods – consumerism, acquisitiveness, the so-called permissive society and other 'deadly sins'. We tend to neglect some of the causes that motivated the very phenomenon of migration – to Australia, the Americas, even to the volunteer avant-garde of colonialism on the Indian and African continents, seducing scions of noble houses desperate for glory, wherever the search happened to lead. It was not only felons or their descendants who populated colonies – many were victims of social *ennui*, or simply adventure seekers. They needed outlets. Today's discontented youths see a putative nation, accorded reality by the very naming – the result is predictable.

They will however seek new credentials – the more extreme or bizarre, the more virtuous – for naming themselves the purest of the pure, to whom the current holiest of the holy are worse than infidels. For instance, while their preceptors merely forbade conceiving and expressing the image of the prophet, they may deem it a long festering act of the grossest impiety and disrespect to aspire to the very name Mohammed, and decree a universal orgy of renunciation. Then, these scattered soulmates of Daesh such as Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, Ansar Dine and company, increasingly in need of a blood infusion through loss of physical territory, will not even await orders. They will proceed immediately on suicidal missions against Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, Nigeria, and allied misnamed sites of human concourse.

¹¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, Line 263

What's in a name? In a time of war and hate, alas, the answer cannot emerge from the tongue of a love struck waif. And thus, we turn instructively to Aufidius:

‘...Dost thou think
I'll grace thee with that robbery, thy stol'n name’¹²

Epilogue (Stop Press!)

Shakespeare's immortal love for Italy – Venice, Mantova, Verona, Padua, etc. – appears unrequited, even betrayed by that peninsula in recent times – if indeed the name of a name is Culture, History, Identity. Pace Juliet, but ‘What's in a name?’¹³ often demands the response – ‘Answering the name of your ancestors.’

We refer here to a recent passage of the Iranian president through Italy. To earn his good graces, descendants of the Bard's Italian worthies ordered the boarding up of their ‘explicit’ sculptural heritage so as give no offence to a prudish bird of passage, even before the demand was made! As for that timeless, universal bequest of Nature and Humanity – wine – that same landscape of historic vineyards acquiesced to their guest's impolitic demand, for the banishment of wine from the nation's welcome feast. Another ‘point envenomed too’, thrust through the world's protective armour, portentous because abjectly self-inflicted! Would that Shakespeare's love had been lavished on the more deserving France! She cancelled her banquet rather than countenance the pharisaic demand of her Iranian guest, even as the indignant ghost of Shakespeare intoned:

‘Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?’¹⁴

Even thus, does a nation truly answer the name of her ancestors.

¹² *Coriolanus*, Act 5 Scene 6

¹³ *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, Scene 2

¹⁴ *Twelfth Night*, Act 2, Scene 3

ABOUT THE WRITER WOLE SOYINKA



Wole Soyinka is a playwright and poet, working in Nigeria. He has published hundreds of works including novels, poems, and plays. He has worked with the Royal Court Theatre in London as well as being a visiting professor at universities around the world, including Oxford, Harvard and Yale.

Wole Soyinka took an active role in Nigeria's political history and its struggle for independence. During the Nigerian Civil War, he was accused of conspiring with the Biafran rebels and was imprisoned for 27 months, 22 of which were in solitary confinement. While in prison he produced the poetry collection *Poems from Prison*, and recounted his experiences in *The Man Died: Prison Notes*. Soyinka has been a strong critic of successive Nigerian governments as well as other political tyrannies in Africa.

He was forced to flee Nigeria during the rule of General Sani Abacha in the 1990s, and lived mainly in the USA. His biography, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, was published in 2005, and a new collection of essays *Of Africa* in 2013.

He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, the first African to be honoured in the category.

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The British Council has commissioned a collection of essays by eminent thinkers around the world, from politicians to Nobel Prize-winning writers, interpreting themes in Shakespeare's work for today.

Living Shakespeare is a dialogue between exceptional public figures and Shakespeare's works in relation to the burning questions which each writer faces. The collection demonstrates Shakespeare's relevance, from the stage, to our homes, to the staterooms of power.

The issues raised include optimism in diplomacy, female empowerment, listening, racial integration, and a response to extremism.

The essays are part of *Shakespeare Lives*, a global celebration of the influence of William Shakespeare on culture, language, education and society.

The British Council, the GREAT Britain campaign and an unprecedented number of partners are commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death with a series of initiatives including a unique online collaboration, performances on stage and film, exhibitions, public readings, conversations, debates and educational resources for people all around the world in 2016.



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