

## **N65<sup>1</sup> and the rise of “Hitlerism”<sup>2</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Nothing shocks more than the insensitivity and insincerity of successive leadership of most African nations to the plight and pitiable conditions of living by the people they rule over. In some quarters, the masses wonder about these kinds of leadership they have been blessed (?) with. It is understandable then when they resort to violent demonstrations which, rather than help, only worsen their situation. The 2012 Masses demonstration in Nigeria over Fuel Subsidy Removal, remains a significant point of reference in this direction. The intensity of the images of the protests in Lagos captured by a Lagos-based photo-journalist and the inherent clarity of the message contained therein form the background of this paper, which looks at the conditions that stimulated the protest. The paper uses Aime Cesaire’s postcolonial essay, *Discourse on Colonialism* as a canvas to examine the conditions that often lead to such violent demonstrations.

**[Keywords : corruption, insensitivity, photography, mass demonstration, (post)colonialism]**

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<sup>1</sup> N65 was the title of the 2012 Photography Exhibition by Aderemi Adegbite (a Lagos based photographer, film maker, culture activist and poet), with support from the German Cultural Centre, Goethe Institut, Lagos. The image of the boy ringing a bell and on whose forehead was written N65, was the front advert for the exhibition. The picture later won the 1<sup>st</sup> Prize in the Photography competition organized by the World Youth Movement for Democracy the same year.

<sup>2</sup> “Hitlerism” is credited to Aime Cesaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955;1972).



Images are used, especially at their fullest, to intensify and enrich the subject of attention. Coombes (1976) writes that images help us to grasp the object or situation being dealt with, by giving it vividness and impact, within the scope of our experience.<sup>3</sup> Comrade Mzala would allude to this same assertion, especially when we consider that such images as discussed here are suddenly transformed and given unusual vitality and “voice” as a weapon of discourse as well as intellectual and psychological engagement. In fact, the way “angry” Aderemi Adegbite (a fitting label by Marc-Andre Schmactel, the Director of the Goethe Institut, when the exhibition of the photos opened in Lagos) deploys them during the infamous Nigeria’s version of the Egyptian Mass Protest, over Fuel Subsidy removal by the government in January 2012 was nothing but as a heroic and palpable art. As a potent form, Comrade Mzala (1988) argues that “art is an important weapon in struggle; it either reinforces or undermines the powers of the oppressor.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout history, mass protests have come at a time when enough of the population has been affected by policies of the rulers and elite. Karl Marx (1973) argues that “a people that oppress

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<sup>3</sup> H. Coombes (1963) *Literature and Criticism*. Penguin Books.

<sup>4</sup> Comrade Jabulani Nobleman ‘Mzala’ Nxumalo (1988) *Gatsha Buthelezi: Chief with Double Agenda*. London: Zed Books.

other people cannot itself be free.”<sup>5</sup> This holds true for most demonstrations and agitation, brought about by people’s disenchantment and discontent with policies of government, which have failed to serve the interest of the populace. In most cases, the mass reactions have often been met with brutal, efficient crackdown by the guardians of the elite, usually as local police, militias, national militaries, or even another nation’s military forces. However, history has shown that such brutal response has not only aggravated frayed nerves, but also driven home the point that instead of understanding and possible alleviation of the sordid condition which stimulated the expression of dissent from the populace, the government has chosen the path of suppression. As a result, even if such protests are controlled at that time by the machinery of state, it often turns out to be for a short while before counter reactions that are more violent, protracted and destructive usually break out at the slightest hint of abuse and provocation. Unless the right steps are taken the incidence of demonstrations, often politically motivated, such as in the history of the Arab world become a serious nut for the government of the day to crack. That in itself does not often mean the end of such rebellion, for, in most cases, a certain reaction often stimulates another that might be more volatile than the previous.

Most insurrection that degenerated into brutal skirmishes usually begin in the form of angry protests about the inadequacies of the government. Non-admittance of guilt and hasty retrace of steps that could save lives are most often not taken, either by the guilty or the perceived innocents. Besides, in a country where injustice reigns supreme, where workers’ salaries are not paid on time, where taxes imposed do not correspond to their income and social amenities such as electricity supply, good roads, health care facilities and pipe-borne water for which they are heavily taxed are not available, it becomes obvious that reactions to force a change would be inevitable. While discussing superstructure, especially with regard to economic base, social relation and consciousness, which stimulates the awareness that often times engender demonstrations, Karl Marx writes that:

In the social production of their life, men [people generally] enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1969) *Selected Works I*. USSR, Moscow: Progress Publishers.

production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum totals of these relations constitute the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.<sup>6</sup>

How Marx's ideas influences the reaction of the people, and stimulate extreme reaction in some cases is better explained by Femi Osofisan who laments:

Take a look at our salary structures, at our sprawling slums and ghettos, our congested hospitals and crowded schools, our impossible markets [...] and then take another look at the proliferation of motor-cars, insurance agencies, supermarkets, chemist shops, boutiques, etc. [And] the callous contradictions of our oil-doomed fantasies of rapid modernization (Production Notes, iii).<sup>7</sup>

For one thing, the images from Aderemi's photographic lens actually function in the same manner, bringing out in stark reality the agony of the collective and, at the same time, exposing the sheer insensitivity, level of political depravity and absolute indifference of the political class (the so-called "cabals" and their puppets in power) to social welfare. These pictures are not only persuasive in their appeal. They are compelling, descriptive in their telling details and show how negative government policies affect the populace and how they, in turn, respond to such inhuman treatment. The pictures also underline the power of digital media technology as a complementary device to literature, better known to have functioned effectively in social discourse of such importance and magnitude.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*.

<sup>7</sup> Femi Osofisan (1980) *Once Upon Four Robbers*. Ibadan: BIO Educational Publications.

<sup>8</sup> Playwrights such as Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotoso, Bode Sowande, Bode Osanyin, Ben Tomolaju etc, have yielded their craft in that direction, in tune with masters like Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi.



Political independence has not turned to true social and economic “independence” for the populace. Political office-holders have not only taken over the roles and positions evacuated by colonial imperialists, they have also brought to their offices what Osundare (2007) describes as “aspects of African tradition [with] its rigid oligarchic and feudalistic political structure dominated by kings and queens and emirs and chiefs [...] all feeding upon the sweat and spirit of the common man.”<sup>9</sup> While like vampires, they suck the nation dry of the fruits produced from the sweats of the downtrodden masses, they also wallow in the false sense of their elevated positions with “all fatuous hyperboles for bloated majesty.”<sup>10</sup> Aderemi’s “images” are thus a very profound statement of the anger that swells, uncontrolled, yet, manageably suppressed by a populace being callously driven, like goats, to the abattoirs for slaughtering.

One good example of government’s insensitivity and insincerity in its affairs and dealings with the populace that readily comes to mind was the recent ASUU<sup>11</sup> nationwide strike. For nearly a year, the entire universities in the country were closed down and academic activities suspended over government’s persistent failure to court reason and meet the demands of the academic, who also had the folly that runs deep in their file and rank exposed. That the government resolved to playing pranks with signing an agreement reached in supposed good faith was not enough insult to an already sore and painfully gruesome decision that could eternally bury the very little that is left of our claim to “sound” education, the singing of discordant tune by the side by a section of

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<sup>9</sup> Niyi Osundare (2007) *The Writer as Righter: The African Literature Artist and His Social Obligations*. Ibadan: Hope Publications.

<sup>10</sup> Niyi Osundare; *The Writer as Righter...*

<sup>11</sup> The Academic Staff Union of Universities in Nigeria. It is the umbrella body of the academic in the country.

the same ASUU calling for “total” reform of educational policies (and of course demand for better pay) added a new gash to our collective wound. Or else how can one explain the shameless denunciation of the demands and struggle of the umbrella body by some of its members, “a motley of trousered and frocked burlesques with a veneer of Western culture” and a small group whose “importance outweighs their number”<sup>12</sup>, while the nation looked on with stupefied melancholy, especially at the manner in which the future of a whole generation was being gambled with?



The ASUU strike places a lid on the kind of psyche, which governs the nation. Shamefully enough, a certain clergy even called the striking lecturers “thieves”, a reckless statement which by every standard can be construed as an exposure of how deep the nation has sunk into the cesspit of religious bigotry and parody of the divine. It was a succinct exposure of the control and influence government has over religious apparatus in the country and how same has been manipulated over and again to suppress the populace. Perhaps it was people like that clergy Cheney-Coker had in mind while composing his poem as he wrote “But [it seems] Christ you lied to me at Calvary; you did not die to save the world but to make it a plantation where my people sweat.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ayandele (1974) quoted from Niyi Osundare; *The Writer as Righter...*

<sup>13</sup> Syl, Cheney-Coker (1980) *The Graveyard Also Has Teeth*. London: Heinemann.



From the foregoing, Aime Cesaire's work, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955)<sup>14</sup>, comes to mind. For those who still think colonialism has ended, perhaps there is the urgent need for a rethink. We walk on, trudge on actually, in perpetual process of stagnation; shout our voices hoarse in a society where silence in the face of the most heinous and inhuman conducts are given a religious interpretation as if God is some actor in a movie the casting of which was improperly done, the script badly written and both technical cum directorial concept/entire production ill-determined. *Discourse on Colonialism* has been hailed by postcolonial theorists as one of the most insightful critiques of Western hegemony over Blacks and as a succinct, yet bold expression of opinion by the marginalized about the colonial encounter in terms leaving no area to ambiguity. Was he not, by engaging colonialism, its clutching tenets and champions, saying something very true of the Nigerian situation in its stark reality? Cesaire writes

Between colonizer and the colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses.<sup>15</sup>

While Blacks like Cesaire and his highly iconoclastic student, Frantz Fanon among several others such as Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, read the cruel domination of the natives, in terms like those above, colonial apologists such as Carl Siger would rather choose to see nothing other than an "opportunity" in the encounter, particularly for a "civilized" world like Europe on expansionist campaign, driven by the urge for economic emancipation.

Rather than domination, oppression and rape that Cesaire mentions, Siger couches the encounter in glorifying terms, after all what better justification does he or his compatriots need than what Cesaire terms "Christian pedantry which laid down the dishonest equations; Christianity=civilization, paganism=savagery."<sup>16</sup> In our own part of the world, the same Christianity (now joined by its twin brother, Islam, in an unholy alliance) is certainly veritable, "holy" so to speak, in its utilization toward subjugation. It functions perfectly on a "trinity" of

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<sup>14</sup> Aime Cesaire (1955) *Discours sur le colonialism*. Edition Presence Africaine. Trans. Joan Pinkham (1972) *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York and London: Monthly Review Press.

<sup>15</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (6).

<sup>16</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (2)

some sort Fafunwa describes as “Bible, Business and Bullet.”<sup>17</sup> Shades of Christianity, imposed as it were along the line of well-articulated colonial agenda, reinforce the many dimensions of control and subjugation, depending on the European power “fortunate” to have established its hegemony over a territory and its people---exactly the way Bismarck and his comrade-at-arms saw it---and by territory is meant the totality of life, including how the natives think and their perception of the Creator. Some examples will suffice. Frederick Lord Lugard (remember him?) comes across as a good example. His reaction to the S.I.M missionaries’ industrial aim disguised in religious tenets in Nigeria provides a window of understanding. As he retorts:

I am informed that they preach the equality of Europeans and natives, which, however true from a doctrinal point of view, is apt to be misapplied by people in a low stage of development, and interpreted as abolition of class [and race] distinction.<sup>18</sup>

If Lugard can be pardoned—just that because the colonial brutality runs painfully deep and so can hardly ever be—certainly not Reverend Barde and his fellow Christian brother, the Reverend Muller. Cesaire like any other natives, whose lives were traded away on such demeaning altar of greed and brutality, cannot comprehend the shameless audacity of both clergies’ spurious attempts at giving a Christ-like face to such a dehumanizing perpetration. While Rev. Barde perceives abject waste of resources if wealth “remained divided up indefinitely, as they would be without colonization, they would answer neither the purposes of God nor the just demands of the human collectivity”<sup>19</sup>, Muller on his part begs for understanding because, “Humanity must not, cannot allow the incompetence, negligence, and laziness of the uncivilized peoples to leave idle indefinitely the wealth which God has confided to them, charging them to make it serve the good of all.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps these are thoughts, not just meant as they sounded, but, what about Siger who, through a bold and unrepentant statement that reeks of arrogance, makes Cesaire’s heart and of

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<sup>17</sup> Babs, A. Fafunwa (1974) *History of Education in Nigeria*. London: George, Allen and Unwin.

<sup>18</sup> See; Afigbo, A.E “The Colonial Phase in British West Africa: A Reassessment of the Historiography of the Period”, In Ade Ajayi, J.F & Ian Espie (1965) *A Thousand Years of West African History*. Ibadan: University Press & Nelson; see also Ward, W.E.F “The Colonial Phase in West Africa: Political Development” In Ade Ajayi, J.F & Ian Espie (1965) *A Thousand Years of West African History*. Ibadan: University Press & Nelson.

<sup>19</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (4).

<sup>20</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (4).



those who still experience colonialism afresh in its various contemporary manifestations bleed with resigned shame and painful shudder? He boldly says:

The new countries offer a vast field for individual, violent activities which, in the metropolitan countries, would run up against certain prejudices, against a sober and orderly conception of life, and which, in the colonies, have greater freedom to develop and, consequently, to affirm their worth. Thus to a certain extent the colonies can serve as a safety valve for modern society. Even if these were their only value, it would be immense.<sup>21</sup>

Siger's real intentions are subsumed in the deceptive language through which they are conveyed, even if other apologists, like Lord Frederick Lugard, though shameless in their own perception too were not so obscure. Renan comes to mind here. Renan symbolizes for Cesaire that "very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois European colonizer"<sup>22</sup> with his pseudo-humanism and pretentious civilizing campaign to win souls for the greater glory of God. If it appears that Cesaire abhors Renan's suggestion, his declaration most certainly calls for a sober reflection. If you wonder what kind of human being will say of his/her fellow human beings; "the regeneration of the inferior [...] by the superior [...] is part of the providential order of things for humanity. *Let each one do what he is made for, and all will be well*<sup>23</sup> [emphasis added], then consider the arrogance and a sense of pride that underlines his declaration, which confirms his own special brand of humanity, derived outside of the circle of sane people. While a section of the world only wanted to live their lives within the borders of their territorial frontiers, making enough progress as their intellectual, spiritual and cultural ontology permits, others there are who took it upon themselves to subjugate, and dehumanize those they can. It is these sets of people that Renan the "venerable advocate" defends their mission, but crudely and in the most disingenuous manner. He says this to the chagrin of Cesaire:

We aspire not to equality, but to dominate. The country of a foreign race must become once again a country of serfs, of agricultural laborers, or industrial

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<sup>21</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (6).

<sup>22</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (3).

<sup>23</sup> Ernest Renan (1929) *La Reforme intellectuelle et morale*. Paris: Calmann-Levy.

workers. *It is not a question of eliminating the inequalities among men, but of widening them and making them into law*<sup>24</sup> [emphasis added].

Cesaire actually makes it an imperative to catalogue these biased, dark and arrogant opinions, placing them at the court of reason. But, it is not these people who really make Cesaire's heart bleed. Cesaire neither really thinks much of men playing God, nor of politicians (such as Albert Sarraut, a former governor-general of Indochina, whose teaching that the natives' challenge of colonial intrusion posed the danger of "leaving unutilized resources to lie forever in the hands of incompetents"<sup>25</sup>) who, in their myopic perception cannot differentiate between natural rights and colonial imposition. After all, as he writes rather too well, "no one colonizes innocently" and certainly too "a civilization, which justifies colonization and therefore forces it, is already a sick civilization."<sup>26</sup> To that, one can add that in the Nigerian and African contexts a minority, a select few which denigrates the collective, and appropriates the wealth of the land for its own selfish ends is certainly a perverse group and its act the most inhuman conduct of the highest order.



However, I think Cesaire is much more disturbed by something quite perpetual in nature, but very subtle in appearance. European conquest and partition of Africa and subsequent dehumanization of the rest of Third world through the (in) famous transatlantic Slave Trade are a known history. What many people did not know, but which came at its "appointed time" was the

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<sup>24</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (4).

<sup>25</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (4).

<sup>26</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1).

rise to power of the conqueror's own alter-ego, that is, Adolf Hitler, the German war monger. That there is a distance between colonization and civilization as suggested by Césaire and one that was quickly bridged by the sudden overpowering influence of the Nazi under Hitler, over the rest of the world and specifically Europe, is a profound statement which underlines Césaire's argument that "colonization works [also] to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred and moral relativism."<sup>27</sup> With Hitler's rise to power and fame against the background of Europe's fear and trepidation, and the resulting annihilation of incalculable number of citizens all over Europe, one truth stands out---the painful anguish of realization for a "Civilization" that came face to face with its demon, that must be exterminated by any means necessary because it is, according to Césaire, "not the humiliation of man as such, it is a crime against the White man, the humiliation of the White man, and the fact that he (Hitler) applied to Europe, colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa."<sup>28</sup> For the first time, Europe tasted of its own gall and poison of violence, of blatant arrogance and abuse of power, terrifying and demeaning processes of mass assassination and racial genocide, all within a few years that nearly surpassed the over four hundred years of its own unleashing of same on people through the Slave Trade. What goes around certainly comes around.



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<sup>27</sup> Aime Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (2).

<sup>28</sup> Aime Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (3).

Thus far, I have examined Césaire's perception of the colonial enterprise but the question that may have come up is this: how do this colonial attitude very well portrayed relate to the Nigerian experience and in what context? In so many ways, and I will attempt to explain. But we need a premise which is that colonialism is renewed in the relationship between the Nigerian masses and the rich and highly placed in the society. One pathetic story of terror and anguish such as being experienced in Nigeria (in the form of three related situations provided by Césaire) will help to highlight the similarities shared between now and then. While recounting the Algerian conquest, Colonel de Montagnac opens up that; "in order to banish the thoughts that sometimes besiege me, I have some heads cut off, not the heads of antichokes but the heads of men"<sup>29</sup>; in Saint-Arnaud's words "we lay waste, we burn, we plunder, we destroy the houses and the trees"<sup>30</sup> and most pathetically the barbarity that characterized the city of Ambike, which General Gerard also "proudly" recounts; "the native riflemen had orders to kill only the men, but no one restrained them; intoxicated by the smell of blood, they spared not one woman, not one child [and] at the end of the afternoon, the heat caused a light mist to arise: it was the blood of the five thousand victims, the ghost of the city, evaporating in the setting sun."<sup>31</sup>



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<sup>29</sup> Aime Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (5).

<sup>30</sup> Aime Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (5).

<sup>31</sup> Aime Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (6).

How does one classify the Nigerian political class, aided by the several Obas, Emirs, Obis, Reverends, Pastors, General Overseers, Imams and Islamic clerics (Oh, don't forget the demented academic class as well) and the way they go about destroying the very essence of our being as a sad massive throng of stupendously poor people, in an equally stupendously rich nation that is literally swimming in wealth, affluence and an equally imposing arrogance and vain military machismo? "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars/ But in ourselves, that we are underling", says Cassius to Brutus.<sup>32</sup> The hurried manner in which the Fuel Subsidy demonstration was quickly nipped in the bud (albeit through military threat) brings up a number of questions that remain unanswered. How come life has not improved in any way for the populace, considering the fact that it was the reason for government removal of the oil subsidy in the first place? Considering that some families whose members were victims were not compensated as far as any one knows (the grandmother of the slain boy; see picture of old woman being consoled) and many that media were unable to beam to the world remain a telling testimony to insensitivity at the highest level? And, above all else, social insecurity and threat to life and properties constituted by Boko Haram, itself an after-effect of the entire socio-economic and political mess that reigns supreme in the corridors of power?<sup>33</sup>



<sup>32</sup> William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (1599), Norman Sanders (ed) *Julius Caesar* (1967) Penguin Books.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of Boko Haram, see; Balogun, Lekan "Boko Haram: The Nation as Terrorist" In *ScholarsWorld, International Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research, vol. II, Issue II* (April 2014):7-17.



Aderemi's pictures are products of a watershed in the nation's political history. They capture the very anguish that runs through the entire strata of the society, and show how government's policies affect the whole generation from children, to teenagers, adults and the very old. The pictures remain a vivid record of events that will continue to bear testimony to how a people, despite being nearly emasculated with hunger and want, can boldly express their "anguish of severance" Wole Soyinka (1975)<sup>34</sup> from the wealth that was supposed to be common, but arrogated by a cabal which swims in apparent opulence in contrast to their (people) marginalization and riveting squalor, their endemic bottom space in an oily trash of mountainous rubbish that is soiling their garment, while they have willfully courted silence and rather looking up to providence for survival and succor.

Most certainly, the present state of limbo, of forced silence was not just out of fear (though that is there in abundance even) but, more because no one learns better what devastating havoc fire can wreak than the one who had been rendered homeless by one gruesome experience. What does one expect from people who have watched with stupefied wonder the successive assassination of a minister and high-placed members of a government cabinet without anything coming out of it, either by prosecution of the offenders or the exposure of the guilt itself? Instances of such murderous whims of this arrogant class calls for silence, which certainly is golden, if the spate of assassination and cold-blooded murder that have gone unresolved are anything to go by. After all, if fire can consume the tortoise with iron shell, what guarantee of safety does a fowl with mere fluttering feathers can boast of?<sup>35</sup> But, the silence of the oppressed is never a dead one, like of the graveyard, but one which has an eternal soul. Jean Paul Sartre (1976) makes this very clear:

Silence itself is defined in relationship to words, as the pause in music receives its meaning from the group of notes round it. *This silence is a moment of language,*

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<sup>34</sup> Wole Soyinka (1975) *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>35</sup> Ola Rotimi (1971) *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation & London: Oxford University Press.



*being silent is not being dumb, it is to refuse to speak, and therefore to keep on speaking*<sup>36</sup> [emphasis added].

There is always the notion of justice being a divine essence and which comes at its own appointed time. In a situation where the masses can only opt for silence (demonstrations, either peaceful or violent, neither win nor provide a meaningful alternative from global experiences) at least, for now, and continue to hope in the words of Sartre that such silence says more than their words or actions could possibly have. It is indeed golden.

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<sup>36</sup> Jean Paul Sartre (1976) *What is Literature?* Trans. Bernard Frechtman. London: Methuen.

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