



Speech of Prof. Wole Soyinka during the Opening Ceremony of the Lebanese Emigrants Economic Conference

Sweet Are the Uses of Diversity

Many here will have recognized that title as being adapted from none other than the bard himself, William Shakespeare, whose actual words are: “Sweet are the uses of adversity.”

Shakespeare’s lines can be read as a poetic rendition of the inscription – **No Condition is Permanent** – that is often found painted on Nigerian public transport known a bolekaaja, a reminder if the vicissitudes of human existence. Taken in the context of the epidemic of abrupt migrations currently sweeping the world, we could do worse than absorb such lines as imperatives for an open door policy for nations, as opposed to the driven impulses of fear, suspicion and the laager mentality.

The immediate, obvious virtue – and benefit – of an open society is of course largely cultural, which happens to be my preoccupation. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that a hermetic consciousness operates on many levels. Some are actually harmless, more or less; others are decidedly hostile, xenophobic, violent and dangerous. Even the former, the seemingly harmless, may intensify into the latter. This process is very often easily rationalized. From expressions such as: “They are coming to take our jobs”, or “their influx will put a strain on our welfare spending”, we may slide into “they will lower our standard of living”, “they are bound to erase our identity”, “they will pollute our culture” etc. That is the beginning of a career of demonization of the incoming migrants, the building of walls around them, and a policy of exclusion that results in xenophobic violence and other expressions of ultra-nationalism.

My intention is not to expand the moralistic slant on the ever-present warning of a possible change in the human condition and thus, the need to respond to the misfortunes of others. Despite that, I am compelled to acknowledge that adversity may also be an accurate substitute for reversal, or to put it in a more common parlance – ‘falling from grace to grass’. And what does this mean in practical terms? Simply that the welcoming, reluctant, or outright hostile host may become tomorrow’s migrant, knocking at the nearest doors of admittance. That, surely, must be lurking within the consciousness of someone, somewhere on this globe, at any time, far more frequently than ever before, and with intensity that the world has not known since World War 2. Indeed it sometimes strikes me that blind forces are mustering to annunciate our present as the era of migration for one half of the nations of the world, while the other half is put to the test of choice – whether to shut their gates against the throng,



or to decide how to manage a diversity that now threatens to become the only authentic identity, and the yet unacknowledged destiny of the world.

It is not a new prospect. It has merely become accentuated in recent times, that a rampage across the globe that gathers strength every day, disrupting, uprooting, destroying and devastating human existence. And the world seems powerless to stop it. More and more nations will put to the test whether to see themselves as pragmatic, accommodating hosts or rejectionists. For some of us there is no dilemma. The choice seems obvious enough, and one basic, practical rationale will be found in those very Shakespearian lines of admonition which translate simply as: make the best of your circumstances. Or, if we may call to mind yet another poet, John Donne, whose lines are ever ready on the lips of political leaders, but without the slightest genuflection to its inspirational intent:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were.

Substitute 'nation' for man and consider how literally those lines express the world's migrant dilemma, and we find that there is in fact no dilemma whatsoever. Only a question of how to manage those moments of adversity, one in which positions are so easily reversed, how to turn them into advantage, into a situation of mutual benefit where neither host nor guest is imperiled. Such benefits are not immediately quantifiable, but then, neither is commerce, easily one of the oldest examples of occupational nomadism that the history of society offers us. Indeed, even till today, some nations are identified – at least in the concept of others – with virtually nothing except trade. Buying and selling. Don't take my word for it. Travel the length and breadth of West Africa and ask the average local – in Nigeria most notoriously – not what is the main occupation, but what is the nationality of the Lebanese and you'll receive the answer – Business. Matters have improved somewhat, I admit, in the past few decades, maybe one or two, but until recently, the average man in the street did not know that there was a nation called Lebanon. They thought Lebanon existed only in the Bible. But they knew that there were people around called Lebanese, but could not conceive them as having migrated from any land of the living.

You could hardly blame them. The Lebanese were not integrated. They made no attempt to promote an identifiable culture. They were simply not interested. They lived in pockets of Lebanese community and that was it. Not that Nigerians were critical – on the contrary. Nigerians tend to accept strangers as they



are, as they choose to be. Today's picture is of course remarkably different. To walk into a hotel run by a Lebanese Businessman and find on its reception desk a calendar dedicated to Nigerian literature, is a sign of transformation in cultural sensibilities that could not have been imagined even ten years ago. And of course only two years ago, I attended an event here, in Beirut, in which a number of scholars and critics from far and wide, participated, in honor of my illustrious late compatriot, the novelist Chinua Achebe. On that visit, I was hosted by a Lebanese businessman, ex-Nigerian, who had specifically re-designed a wall in his house for the commissioning of a masterpiece by the Ghanaian-Nigerian artist, El Anatsui. And there are other examples.

Would these interactions have taken place however, without the influx of the self-repatriated Lebanese who were forced out of their Nigerian bases by depredations wreaked by those theocratic extremists, Boko Haram, and who then returned to Beirut with their Nigerian spouses, instigating a putative Nigeria-Lebanon culture right here? Would such developments have taken place, one sometimes wonders ruefully, without the life-changing exploits of Boko Haram and allied global afflictions? It does not matter –Shakespeare was right after all, at least qualifiably: Sweet indeed are the uses of diversity.

I shall end on that note of sweetness and light, in furtherance of which I shall now reveal then nomination of Lebanon by the Lagos State Government in Nigeria as one of the four guest nations invited to the 50th Anniversary Celebrations of the creation of Lagos state in May 2017.

The main motivation? Business or Culture? Or both, since Culture hardly ever walks alone? What does it matter? We look forward to a return of the double migrants, optimistically in the spirit of a nation freed of that sanguinary pestilence, Boko Haram, and its siblings, the misbegotten freaks who speak neither the language of Business nor Culture, detest diversity and convulse over the symptoms of creativity.

We look forward to your participation.

Wole Soyinka