F. ABIOLA IRELE: In Memoriam

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"**Abiola Irele** is a philosopher, critic and theorist of literature, music and culture, an educator whose writing is remarkable for its elegance, ...[1]" The list of Abiola Irele's areas of accomplishment could have gone on. But above all, many of us remember him as the humanist who refuses to settle for a life measured in small gestures. The elegance noted above in his writing flows naturally from a life always boldly lived and in style, but with no traces of posturing, let alone minor symbolic gestures. See below the last email I received from Irele on December 27, 2016:

> Dear Kofi,
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> Long time. I hope you had a good Christmas and that the new year
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> will bring joy and fulfilment.
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> I'm writing to ask if you'd be willing to contribute to a project I'm doing for Cambridge University Press. It involves the publication in five volumes of a series of studies on the evolution of African literature from the origins in orality to the present post-colonial and cosmopolitan orientation. I'm dedicating a volume to literature in the African languages, and would be very happy if you could contribute a chapter on the written literature in Ewe. This is a subject that I'm aware is very much in your territory and I hope you'll agree to take this on. Please let me hear from you on this as soon as possible.
>
> Very best wishes.
>
> Abiola

At the time I received this email, I was aware that Professor Irele had returned to the US from Kwara State University, mainly for health reasons. But he was not a man who would stop dreaming the future and dreaming it big and into practical details, even as he looked over his shoulder to the past. I smiled, as I recalled Hebert Aptheker's question to Dr. WEB Dubois, just before DuBois boarded his plane at the Kennedy Airport on his way to Accra, to begin the Encyclopeadia African Project: "How long do you think it will take for this project to be realized?" With a smile, "A hundred years." Great minds like DuBois and Irele understand that landmark intellectual projects may not be accomplished in any one individual's life time, but they often must be tackled by individual ready to bring on board others who can take them into the future.

It must have been this same sense of vision and mission, driven by a pathfinder spirit, that made it easy for him, at a time some thought he should have been thinking of a quiet, well-deserved retirement, to leave his very high profile position at Harvard University to return to Nigeria in the position of Provost for the Humanities, Management and Social Sciences at the newly established Kwara State University. Soon after he had settled into his new challenge, I had the privilege of visiting Kwara State as a guest artist, at Professor Irele's invitation, I was inspired by what I saw, how he was totally devoted to the pioneering task of playing a lead role in building a new and rapidly expanding university from the scratch, including presiding over the construction of new infrastructure but more importantly, laying a sound foundation for the academic structures and general intellectual direction. He spoke of and worked tirelessly for a research driven agenda in the humanities for the new university, with space and resources provided for the arts, especially the creative and performing arts. Another area of preoccupation for him was publications, so it was no surprise that he played a lead role establishing the journal *The Savannah Review* and was instrumental in working for the establishment of a press for the university, for which he eventually became director.

We must also speak of Abiola Irele's outstanding record as editor of various major anthologies of African Literatures and especially of *Research in African Literatures*, acknowledged as "the premier journal of African literary studies – a stimulating vehicle in English for research on the oral and written literatures of Africa." RAL was established in 1970 at the University of Texas, Austin and published by

the University of Texas Press.. After over twenty years under its founding editor Bernth Lindfors, by which time it had become the official journal of the African Literature Association, its publication was taken over by Indiana University Press and the editorial offices moved to Ohio State University, where Abiola Irele was a faculty member. Following the sudden death in quick succession of its next editors Richard Bjornson and Josaphat Kubayanda, it fell to Irele to take over editorial responsibilities for the journal, and at short notice. I recall that when the news went round at one of the Annual Meetings of the ALA, a few colleagues expressed some worry for the future of the journal. Not because they doubted Irele's competence, but they feared that he was probably too busy with so many things to devote the kind of focused attention the journal demanded. In no time at all, Irele took full control and gave the journal a new look and indeed higher prestige.

The field of African literary studies in particular and of African studies in general can easily boast of many outstanding scholars. Unfortunately, only a of these eminent scholars are generous enough in sharing their time, knowledge and influence on projects that provide mentorship to younger colleagues. Abiola Irele was one such eminent scholar and constant mentor. Tejumola Olaniyan of the University of Wisconsin-Madison says it all: Irele "was an accomplished scholar. For me in particular, his biggest accomplishment was a careful cultivation of junior scholars, he respected them, he would reach out to them. He challenged them because he took them seriously. He was welcoming, very open to juniors in the field. As an institutional builder in the field, he edited journals and anthologies."

He was always planning for programmes and projects under which others could benefit from his leadership role. One such project was a 1996 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute awarded to The Ohio State University based on a proposal he developed with other colleagues, including Dr. Isaac Mowoe, Vice-President, under the theme "Literature and Modern Experience in Africa". The institute, hosted by the University of Ghana, was for the benefit of fellows, almost all of them younger scholars and teachers of African Literatures/Studies. Working closely with Irele and his team for those eight weeks as a local consultant was a particularly enriching intellectual experience for me personally. The many hours of travel across Ghana interspersed with even more hours of seminar sessions devoted to critical debate offered us all ample opportunity to appreciate the depth and breathe of Abiola Irele's knowledge and understanding of the complexities of the interconnections between African intellectual traditions and the wider world of European and other knowledge systems and traditions. It gave you a basis for appreciating Irele's constant return to the theme of modernity in many his literary and philosophical scholarship. And it offered you a rare opportunity to come to know Abiola Irele as a man whose personality is constantly bubbling with the joy of life even amidst our many challenges. He would recall with a hint of mischief, some of his adventures in his early career as a faculty member of the newly established Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana – Legon, an institute alive with optimism in those heady days of the independence dream. He always remembered to add how that phase of his career earned him his first wife.

On the occasion of his inaugural as the first Nigerian Professor of French at the University of Ibadan, Abiola Irele makes one of the most eloquently argued cases "In Praise of Alienation":

> The colonial experience was not an interlude in our history, a storm that broke upon us, causing damage here and there but leaving us the possibility, after its passing, to pick up the pieces. It marked a sea-change of the historical process in Africa; it effected a qualitative re-ordering of life. It has rendered the traditional way of life no longer a viable option for our continued existence and apprehension of the world.

We cannot but agree with Irele's view that the colonial experience was more than a passing storm, that the historical process it unleashed on the continent and her people cannot be wished away. We may query his claim that "the traditional way of life (is) no longer a viable option for our continued existence and apprehension of the world", especially given the fact that Africa has spent much of her time, energy, and resources trying to work her way into a productive existence not only after the manner of her colonizers, but by adopting wholesale, solutions that seem to have worked for her imperial masters. However, few scholars have made a more compelling and yet critical case for the need for African intellectual work to be grounded on a more open engagement with what has been called modernity and the post-modern in their many forms and disguises. We need such an understanding to fully appreciate Irele's early and still foremost work on Senghor and the Negritude intellectual and artistic tradition. And we need it also to come to terms with the case he makes for African philosophy, its proponents and critics in his Introduction to Paulin Houtounji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* ….

It should not come to us a surprise that the Abiola Irele we have heard so often speak Yoruba with impeccable tonal inflexions and lilting rhythmic flows, is the same Irele we have head speak the French language with polished grace, is the very same Irele, native of Ora in Edo State, Nigeria, who first learned to speak Igbo, we would hear, on privileged occasions, compel a rowdy and slightly drunken crowd to sudden and absolute silence as his voice rises into the midnight air singing a classical Italian opera in the manner of the grand masters. And yet, as Odia Ofeimum reminds us. "Alone or in good company, Irele sang better than Tunde Nightingale, the highlife maestro, reminding all of us of the tale told by Wole Soyinka, one of the singers of that night of revels, of how, in their days of holding the night to ransom at Bobby Benson's Caban Bamboo in Lagos of the fifties, Irele would take over the night when it was time to welcome the dawn." And this is no ordinary clowning. Irele was holding out for our consideration and appreciation, the possibility of an Africa that has the capacity to reach out to the intellectual and cultural heritage of global civilization, embracing the finest in other traditions even us she offers in return some of the best in her own traditions.

Those of us who may have been bothered by aspects of the fundamental thrust of his arguments in his Inaugural at Ibadan "In Praise of Alienation" must find ample reassurance in the views and forceful arguments of a more mature and self-confident Irele in his "The African Scholar", delivered several years later as the Inaugural on his appointment as Professor of African Literature, French and Comparative Literature at The Ohio State University. As we put the two Inaugurals side=by-side, the twist of irony must not be lost on us: In the earlier one, Irele, fully grounded in his home soil, is reaching out, perhaps with a bit of yearning, to embrace the wealth of knowledge available out there in a world that is often disdainful of what Africa has to offer. In the latter case, here was Irele standing tall and dignified, assuring the wider world that there is indeed a wealth of knowledge embedded in African systems and traditions and practices that could bring fresh insights into the intellectual traditions of the global north, east and west, and that a new, reawakened African Scholar, is in the best, indeed privileged position to deliver this knowledge to his/her own credit and profit, and for the benefit of humanity at large.

Regrettably, Nigeria, Global Africa and the World at large, lost Chinua Achebe, the Master Storyteller only to be followed soon afterwards by Isidore Okpewho, another major voice in African Literature. And now, Abiola Irele, to whom also we must forever remain grateful for a life fully committed to an exemplary and path-breaking tradition in African scholarship in the human and social sciences.

Note

1. *abiolairele.blogspot.com/ [*Jun 29, 2010]