



## Messi overtakes Salah

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## Soyinka's provocative convocation lecture at Elizade University

*Thinking with You* ■ Niyi Akinnaso  
niyi.tlc@gmail.com

JUST last Sunday, April 29, 2018, I encountered three different bands of them on my usual trail, moving in and out of farmlands along the roadside, mowing down crops and all, and dumping their dung on the roadway. On all three occasions, traffic came to a standstill on a normally light-traffic roadway. Who dare move, when their guards looked stern with AK-47 ominously poised dangerously across their shoulders?

They were the herdsmen and their cattle, the joint entity that Prof Wole Soyinka referenced in his lecture as the now "familiar fixture on our national landscape" (in the forests; on farmlands; in villages; on school and university land, including their experimental farms; in urban spaces; and even on personal lawns and orchards). The occasion was Elizade University's second Convocation Ceremony, heralded on Thursday, April 26, 2018, by Soyinka's convocation lecture, titled, "Tending the Tree of Commencement." True, the tree is the leitmotif of the lecture, herdsmen and their any-plant-for-consumption cattle formed a complementary refrain.

The tree, as we shall see, was used as a symbolic representation of "life", which cattle, their herders (possibly fronting for unknown cattle owners) and Boko Haram terrorists wish to destroy, much like ruthless dictators, destroying or seeking to destroy human life in their desperate bid to hold on to power.

For the immediate community of Elizade University, the lecture was memorable in more ways than one. First, it was yet another indication of the young university's drive for excellence. Soyinka's presence was a symbolic endorsement of the achievements to date of the university's Founder and Visitor, Chief Michael Ade-Ojo, OON; the Chancellor, Gbenga Oyeode, SAN; the Chairman of the Governing Council, Aigboje Aig-Imoukhuede; the Acting Vice-Chancellor, Prof Yemi Fadayomi; the indefatigable Registrar, Omololu Adegbenro; the Deans of the various Faculties, including Prof Kola Omotoso of the Humanities; and the graduating

surrounding the EU campus, Soyinka wants the herdsmen to leave tree and plants alone so that farmers can plant and hunters can hunt without fear of AK47 killers. It was in this vein that he recalled BISROD's painful experience of losing over a million young shoots of commercial trees on his farm to cattle, of course, with the herdsmen looking on. The experience reminded me of the mowing down of Adekunle Ajasin University's experimental farm, not once but twice, by cattle.

Soyinka also wants dictators in the mould of Arap Moi to leave environmentalists like the late Wangari Maathai, Nobel laureate for Peace, to plant their trees without intimidation. He wants power mongers in the mould of Idi Amin to leave the universities alone to award their degrees according to established principles and procedures. He wants freedom fighters and social justice advocates like the late Winnie Mandela to be free of suffocation by tyrannical overlords. Soyinka's roving mind again showed up as he cast a number of other African leaders in the tyrannical mould, including Muammar Gaddafi Robert

trees are both utilitarian and symbolic objects, especially in our part of the world. Listen to him: "A tree is a tree is a tree is ancestor is deity is pointer is sanctuary is market is human destiny...long before the birth of ideologies sacred or profane, humanising or dehumanising ... the tree has stood as a protean symbol for community and spirit ... It is that tree of vast, near comprehensive identification with the humanity that atavistic forces are seeking to destroy."

To drive home his point about the ritual significance of trees, Soyinka cited the felling of the tree of Emotan in colonial Benin, which nearly caused a revolt, until the colonial government replaced it with a befitting statute. We all recognise the economic value of trees, shrubs, and grass as timber, shade, food, etc.

Of particular relevance to his lecture is the instinctive appropriation of trees also as a metaphor for exceptionally courageous, rock-steady individuals-sticklers of principle who would never waiver under threat, even to their own lives. Such is the case with the three women in his illustration.

The need to learn from these historical cases led Soyinka to castigate policymakers who foolishly expunged history from the curriculum. More or less in the manner of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe to Chuba Okadigbo, Soyinka had a potent warning, if not a curse, for the offenders: "Those who wish to mortgage the historic sensibility of future generations, their ability to contextualise as well as understand their present and recast their future, feel free to earn the malediction of their misaligned offspring".

So, against the above backgrounds, Soyinka commended the graduating class of 2017 at Elizade University to the generational tree of commencement, as they completed their course of studies only to commence another set of tasks, another course of studies, a job, or whatever.

In the final analysis, there is a lot to learn from Soyinka's lecture, not just by the graduating class but also by politicians, policymakers, social activists, and more.

On my part, I cannot but reflect further on Soyinka's account of the transformation of nomadic herdsmen, which



