

Chapter 36 Primary Source Activity

For many readers, modern African literature opens a new world of experiences. One of the most distinguished African writers is the Nigerian playwright, poet, novelist and critic Wole Soyinka, winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature. In his book *Ake*, Soyinka looks back at his childhood in the late 1930s in western Nigeria, where his father was headmaster of a grammar school. Here the family has just gotten electricity and their first radio. ♦ *As you read, notice the events the radio reports. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Growing Up in Nigeria

Now the workmen were threading the walls again, we wondered what the new magic [electricity] would produce. This time there was no bulb, no extra switches on the wall. Instead, a large wooden box was brought into the house and installed at the very top of the tallboy, displacing the old gramophone [record-player] . . . The face of the box appeared to be made of thick plaited silk.

But the functions continued to be the same. True, there was no need to put on a black disc, no need to crank a handle or change a needle, it only required that the knob be turned for sounds to come on. Unlike the gramophone however, the box could not be made to speak or sing at any time of the day. It began its monologue early in the morning, first playing “God Save the King.” The box went silent some time in the afternoon, resumed late afternoon, then, around ten or eleven in the evening, sang “God Save the King” once more and went to sleep. . . .

At certain set hours, the box delivered THE NEWS. The News soon became an object of worship to Essay [his father] and a number of his friends. When the hour approached, something happened to this club. It did not matter what they were doing,

they rushed to our house to hear the Oracle. It was enough to watch Essay’s face to know that the skin would be peeled off the back of any child who spoke when he was listening to The News. . . .

Hitler monopolized the box. He had his own special programme and somehow, far off as this war of his whim appeared to be, we were drawn more and more into the expanding arena of menace. Hitler came nearer home every day. Before long the greeting, Win-The-War replaced some of the boisterous exchanges which took place between Essay and his friends. The local barbers invented a new style [of haircut]. . . . The women also added Winde-woh to their hair-plaits [braids], and those of them who presided over the local foodstalls used it as a standard response to complaints of a shortage in the quantity they served. . . . Windows were blacked over, leaving just tiny spots to peep through, perhaps in order to obtain an early warning when Hitler came marching up the path. . . . To reinforce the charged atmosphere of expectations, the first aeroplane flew over Abeokuta.

Source: *Ake, The Years of Childhood*, by Wole Soyinka (Random House, 1981).

Questions to Think About

1. What was the most important function of the radio for Soyinka’s father?
2. Who dominated the radio programs? How did the beginning of World War II in Europe affect the people in Soyinka’s village?
3. **Making Comparisons** Imagine when you first encountered a new technology, such as a computer or cable TV or a CD-ROM. How did this experience compare with young Wole Soyinka and the radio?
4. **Activity** The radio broadcast sign off with “God Save the King” tells you that Nigeria was a British colony at the time. Make two maps of Africa showing country outlines, one for 1938, one for the present. Use colors on the 1938 map to show what colonial nations held which countries. On the modern map, put the dates of independence.