

OBITUARY

Jimi Solanke: popular music and Yoruba folk traditions

Pelumi Folajimi

Department of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria / Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA
Email: oolufo1@lsu.edu

As a young lecturer at the Department of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, I had an opportunity to meet and interact with Jimi Solanke on a number of occasions. He lived between 1942 and February 2024. The sad news of his death left me devastated, despite my awareness that he was well advanced in age. He lived at Ile-Ife where I, as a young university lecturer, lived and worked. When his seventieth birthday was celebrated, in July 2012, I was busy at the university and was unable to attend the event. The morning after the celebration, I did not fail to stop by at his home, and he was glad to receive me. On that morning, Solanke gladly shared his birthday cake with me – he had always believed in sharing and fellow feeling, even as demonstrated in his song ‘Ojo Oje’. On a number of occasions, he and I met at the university’s staff club and we interacted. I have been an audience member at some of his live music performances. On certain occasions, too, he was at the Department of Dramatic Arts, where I was a lecturer, and I enjoyed meeting him while I was at work. Indeed, before his retirement, he worked not as a lecturer but as an artiste and performer at the Department of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, where he worked with both Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka, as well as Kole Omotoso and Yemi Ogunbiyi, together with Peter Fatomilola, Jimoh Fakoyejo, Kola Oyewo and other eminent scholars and dramatists. Some of his friends were Biodun Jeyifo, Niyi Osundare and Femi Osofisan.

In his lifetime, Solanke was an exceptional artiste and performer. Oluwole Coker describes him as a versatile artiste: ‘Jimi is a rounded man of the arts.’¹ Solanke was a dramatist, painter, storyteller and folk musician. His music is embedded in the cultural purview of the Yoruba people. Abiola Irele regrets that, due to colonial influences, modern African musicians endure the problem of ‘integrating art music into the modern cultural life of Africa’.² While the observation of Irele is irrefutable,

¹ Oluwole Coker (2016), ‘Jimi Solanke: towards an African folk tradition model of early childhood education’, *Revista Anglo Saxonica* 111 (11): 71–87, here p. 71.

² Abiola Irele (1993) ‘Is African music possible?’, *Transition* 61: 56–71, here p. 57.

it is hard to associate Irele's contention with Solanke's popular music. Unlike many modern African music composers whose works compel the contention of Irele, Solanke draws his musical nutrients from Yoruba oral traditions and Yoruba ritual aesthetics, as well as contemporary Yoruba literate traditions. Solanke uses his music to address the topical and social realities of the Nigerian masses, since his music belongs to the popular folk genre. Olusegun Stephen Titus and Rachel Obonose Titus observe that Solanke uses his music to engage the cultural and environmental or ecological conditions of Yoruba people.³ This assertion is irrefutable. Solanke's music, in the folk tradition, addresses the climatic and indigenous realities of the Yoruba and the Nigerian people. Diekara Oloruntoba-Oju says that music is influenced by 'social meanings'.⁴ Truly, social meanings and social contexts influence music and vice versa. Solanke's music is influenced by the events in Yoruba society. He uses his music to address Yoruba social realities. In fact, he produces many of his songs in the Yoruba language, since his music belongs to the Yoruba folk traditions. In 'Gbogbo L'Omo', for example, Solanke addresses the subject of Yoruba perception about children's gender. A song that Solanke dedicates to Bolanle Awe, a foremost Nigerian feminist theorist, 'Gbogbo L'Omo' suggests that every child, whether female or male, is important and no child should be discriminated against on the basis of gender. Indeed, Solanke engages gender matters in his popular music and, deriving materials from Yoruba folk philosophy, he celebrates Yoruba women as people who have extraordinary virtues and powers. Gbenga Omotoso, Olatunbosun Samuel Adekogbe and Olusanjo Mathew Abayomi Daramola have examined Solanke from the perspective of gender. They observe that 'Solanke reflects a supermom nature of African mothers'.⁵ Kofi Agawu says that African music is 'allusive', as it interacts with other traditions.⁶ Similarly, Tyler Fleming and Toyin Falola suggest that African music is influenced by Islam and Christianity, as well as other foreign factors.⁷ Solanke, a Christian and Methodist by upbringing, is often seen injecting some Christian worldview into his folk music.

Solanke participated in important theatre productions. He played some important roles in the plays of both Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka, both of whom he had a close professional relationship with while he was an artiste-in-residence at Ori Olokun Theatre and in the Department of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University. As a musician, Solanke produces songs that are rooted in Yoruba oral aesthetics. His music speaks to the souls of his audience. In 'Ojo Oje', for example, Solanke reflects on the communal traditions of Yoruba people. He promotes the Yoruba tradition of sharing and fellow feeling, or compassion. As a popular master storyteller, Solanke narrates

³ Olusegun Stephen Titus and Rachel Obonose Titus (2017) 'Jimi Solanke and Ebenezer Obey's music on environmental degradation and flood disaster in Ibadan, Nigeria', *Polymath: An Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Journal* 7 (2): 111–30, here p. 126.

⁴ Diekara Oloruntoba-Oju (2019) 'State power, postmodernist identities and conflict in contemporary Nigerian popular music', *Journal of the African Literature Association* 13 (1): 48–63, here p. 48.

⁵ Gbenga Omotoso, Olatunbosun Samuel Adekogbe and Olusanjo Mathew Abayomi Daramola (2020) 'Omo T'o Mo 'Ya 'Re Loju (a child that despises his mother): narratives cultural value of motherhood in Jimi Solanke's music', *Journal of Gender and Power* 13 (1): 135–50, here p. 142.

⁶ V. Kofi Agawu (2003) *Representing African Music: postcolonial notes, queries, positions*. New York NY and London: Routledge, p. 146.

⁷ Tyler Fleming and Toyin Falola (2012) 'Introduction' in Toyin Falola and Tyler Fleming (eds), *Music, Performance and African Identities*. New York NY and London: Routledge, p. 3.

Yoruba folktales to impart moral lessons to children and the youth. Highly educated and extraordinarily literate, Solanke produces music and tales that address the taste of the elite and intellectuals. As a dynamically talented and versatile artiste, he produces indigenous music that engages the comprehension and accessibility of the masses, even the common person on the street. Solanke is a popular artiste indeed. His music appeals to virtually all classes of the Yoruba and Nigerian population. While his arts benefit from Western influences, his arts remain rooted in Yoruba folk traditions.