

CHAPTER 10

Tai Solarin

On Colonial Power, Schools, Work Ethic, Religion, and the Press



I came across *Towards Nigeria's Moral Self-Government* somewhere in Lagos in 1961, a slim paperbound book (less than a hundred pages) with an orange cover, the name of the author printed diagonally in red across it: Tai Solarin. Inside the book, I learned that it had been published by the author, at Mayflower School, Ikenne, in 1959.

The next year I met Tai Solarin when he came to Stockholm as a member of a visiting group of Nigerian educationists. He wrote a graceful dedication in my copy of his book, and I enjoyed taking him to lunch at *Gyldene Freden*, “The Golden Peace,” in the Old Town of Stockholm, a venerable place controlled by the Swedish Academy (and named after the conclusion of an eighteenth-century Swedish war). We had our meal downstairs in the ancient cellar, with candlelight. Solarin’s coat was of an interesting cut, with wide lapels of a kind not seen in recent decades. He explained that he had not had occasion to wear it since the 1940s, when he had been a student in England. During that period, for that matter, he had also made an excursion to Sweden, earning some pocket money by helping a farmer outside Stockholm with the potato harvest. Since then, the coat had been carefully stowed away with moth balls.

The next year I was back in Nigeria again and was able to visit Tai Solarin in Ikenne, where he ran the Mayflower School, his own coeducational secondary school, with the help of his British wife, Sheila. Ikenne was just off the main Lagos-Abeokuta road, so it was easy to get there. It happened to be the time when the young applicants for a place at the school for the coming year were being interviewed. Tai was perhaps inclined to be generous, but Sheila could be more

down-to-earth: one girl, she pointed out, was really too physically well-developed to be of the age she claimed. There was some other visitor to the school at the same time as I was there, and Tai reminisced about our Stockholm lunch. We had eaten in an old basement, he told his guest, and evidently there was no electricity, since we had to eat by candlelight. So much for the aura of antiquity. Tai was a modernist.

Towards Nigeria's Moral Self-Government is not a literary work, although striking formulations are scattered through it. It is a text by a social and cultural critic, and to a degree the memoir of a man in his mid-thirties, fairly recently back in Nigeria after a decade in Britain, where he had served in the British Air Force during World War II before going on to higher education. Coming off the Elder Dempster Lines ship in Lagos, he hurries to meet his mother, eightyish, small in stature, burdened by having lost a number of close relatives while he has been away. His tears can hardly stop flowing. She, for her part, is suspicious that someone among the many well-wishers showing up to greet him may actually harbor other intentions toward her *bintu* (been-to) son.

In his book, Solarin offers a late 1950s polemic against the British colonialism soon to go away, but also against the Nigerian society that it had bred. Expatriate officers were often arrogant in the top layer, and uncommitted, not particularly competent, and generally mediocre at the lower levels. But if they still came to serve as role models for incoming Nigerian bureaucrats, it was in large part by showing no inclination to do any manual work.

Solarin, appearing again and again in pictures wearing khaki shorts, preaches a work ethic. During his years in England, for sure, he saw British people not averse to doing practical work. In that overseas period, too, he once took the long train ride from Haparanda, a Swedish border town near the Arctic Circle, through Finland to Helsinki in the south. And, to his surprise, he saw only women staffing the train. Why? he wondered. Well, this was not so long after the end of World War II, where a war between Finland and the Soviet Union had been one of the outliers. Finland lost a great many men there—and then, as loser in the peace settlement, it had been saddled with a large debt to Stalin's country. Now the able-bodied men were busy with other work in order to pay that debt within the time limit set. Against all odds, it met the deadline. Solarin, reminiscing, saw that as an example of what a country can handle with a hard-working citizenry.

Closer to home, he would dwell on the problems with Nigerian schools. As he arrived back from abroad, he had taken on the job as principal of Molusi College, a school in his home area. He had been

attracted by the fact that it was a community-based institution, not affiliated with any of the Christian missions, which ran so many schools in Nigeria. So he saw a chance to run it more along his own independent mind. But soon organized Christianity moved in on him, trying, for example, to force pupils to attend religious services of one kind or other. It all ended with Tai Solarin resigning—and moving on to set up his own school, the Mayflower School. In the first issue of a school magazine produced by its students, he described what would be the religious stance at Mayflower: the library would stock the Koran, the Bible, the holy text of the Bahá'í, and books on Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

Organized Christianity, as Solarin saw it, was on the retreat in Europe. Africa seemed to be its last stronghold. (It turns out he had already discussed some of this in a pamphlet titled *Our Church in 1984*.) Now it was responsible for much of what was out of date in Nigerian schools: not only mandatory religious instruction, but also teaching Latin and Greek—not particularly useful. Solarin would look back at the life of that old mother of his, and see how Christianity had made her unfree in its own way. While he offered religious freedom of choice at Mayflower School, his own thought could perhaps best be described as agnostic. He noted that the Birom ethnic group of the Jos Plateau appeared to be the only people in Nigeria “with no obvious sacred altars,” no shrines, and so he went on an excursion to the Birom, accompanied by a Hausa interpreter. At the end of a long talk, he asked his Birom interlocutor what he thought about those world religions. “A plague upon both their houses! . . . Can people not live outside Christianity and Mohammedanism?” The Birom, Solarin concluded, were the most courageous people in Nigeria.¹

Then, rather far from the Birom, Solarin devotes a chapter to his vision of the press. All things considered, among the Nigerian newspapers he favored the *Daily Times*, despite the fact that it was British-owned and hardly independent of British interests. But its local competitors—the *West African Pilot*, the *Daily Service*, the *Nigerian Tribune*—were all so slavishly aligned with political parties that there was little of independent journalism. The *Daily Times* at least stood a little bit above all that infighting. Yet what he would really like to see would be a paper he imagined as *The Nation*—perhaps inevitably owned by the government, but run independently much like University College Ibadan. (We might now describe it as “public service.”) It would do its own impartial reporting, and at the same time be open to contributions and letters to the editor from all points of view. There would be articles by well-known scholars. It would cover foreign news.

Hardly any existing Nigerian newspaper did that in any serious way. *The Nation* would be the house organ for readers in Kaura Namoda, in Maiduguri, in Yola—everywhere in the country.

Towards Nigeria's Moral Self-Government ends referring to a statement by Obafemi Awolowo, premier of the Western Region, at a constitutional conference in London just before the coming of national independence, forecasting continued close, friendly links with the empire-turning-commonwealth.² Solarin, somewhat disapproving, notes that Awolowo conformed diplomatically to the occasion, but as for himself, he says, “People of my sort are not diplomatic. They speak with all fire and gusto, the throb of their hearts, and let diplomacy go hang.”

So much for the book—but Tai Solarin would continue undiplomatic, in varied ways. He could offer his opinions as a columnist in “Thinking with You” pieces in the *Daily Times*. One may want to describe him as one of Nigeria’s leading public intellectuals, although Wole Soyinka—as he reminisces in *The Man Dies* about being under arrest in Lagos in 1966, after the second military coup, and being questioned about his contacts—cites this exchange between his interrogator and himself:

“I see. So who are the intellectuals you approve of? People like Tai Solarin I suppose?”

“Tai does not claim to be an intellectual. He is a dedicated and selfless social reformer whose thinking is original but sometimes confused. The country could do with a lot more confused but original thinkers like Tai.” (Soyinka 1972: 35)

Then in Soyinka’s (2006: 223) *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, Tai Solarin appears again, as one of the activists pursuing a scandal in the federal Ministry of Petroleum, occurring when one Muhammadu Buhari had been the responsible minister. It was officially declared that nothing untoward had happened, no funds had disappeared. But a little later, after General Buhari staged his New Year 1984 coup d’état, he promptly had Solarin arrested—“for distributing leaflets calling for a return to democracy.” This time, writes Soyinka, Solarin was for a time in a Northern prison, denied access even to his special asthma medicine.

In his *Who’s Afraid of Wole Soyinka?*, a wide-ranging set of reports drawing on his work on African human rights issues for the journal *Index on Censorship*, Adewale Maja-Pearce (1991: 45–54)—more about him in chapter 18—mentions in passing a 1989 Lagos conference critiquing the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund, with Tai Solarin as one of the speakers; this was during the period with Ibrahim Babangida as military head of state. Together

with a veteran trade unionist, Solarin was seized by soldiers sent by the government, who wanted no such conference. He was released later in the day. A radical lawyer also involved in organizing the meeting was taken away in a military aircraft. Once more, these were times when activists could have some bad experiences.

Teju Cole (2014: 53–54) has a favorable couple of pages about Solarin in *Everyday Is for the Thief*, as a bright Lagosian boy turns out to be attending Mayflower School: “Solarin was a maverick . . . [and] many Nigerians continue to hold him in highest esteem.”

Tai Solarin died in 1994, during the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha. There were obituaries in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. In 2005, the Tai Solarin University of Education in Ijebu-Ode (not so far from Ikenne) became the seventy-sixth officially recognized university in Nigeria. In 2007, Queen Elizabeth awarded Sheila Solarin an MBE, a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. Still residing in Nigeria with her family, Sheila died in 2012.

Recalling my long-ago lunch with Tai Solarin, as I took Lorand Matory, the American anthropologist, and his Nigerian wife, Bunmi, on a walking tour of Stockholm’s Old Town about a half century later, I pointed to the restaurant *Gyldene Freden* and asked if they knew of Tai Solarin. “An icon!” they exclaimed.

Notes

1. In the long run, it is true, like most of the sedentary, mostly farming minority peoples in the middle regions of Nigeria, the Birom tended to turn to Christianity. They show up again briefly in chapter 18. For an anthropological study of the Birom based on field research in the early 1960s, see Smedley 2004.
2. It so happens that Obafemi Awolowo was himself born in Ikenne, later to become the site of Tai Solarin’s school, in 1909. His autobiography *Awo*, published in the year of Nigeria’s achievement of independence, offers glimpses of growing up and becoming an adult in colonial Nigeria, and detailed coverage of political struggles, with strong ethnic components, in the late colonial period (Awolowo 1960).

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