



Original Article

## Music and the Challenges of Socio-Economic Inequalities in Nigeria: ‘The Small People’s Anthem’ By Ségun Akinlolú as a Case Study

*Oluwarotimi Oyeniyi Olaosebikan PhD.<sup>1\*</sup>, Kehinde Oluyemisi Faniyi<sup>1</sup> & Henry Muyiwa Babatunde<sup>1</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup> Department of Music Technology, The Polytechnic Ibadan. P.M.B 22, Ibadan, Nigeria.

\* Correspondence email: [bamrot2007@yahoo.com](mailto:bamrot2007@yahoo.com).

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26 July 2021 Popular music scholarship has tended towards romance, wealth accumulation. Adequate attention has not been paid to the contributions of popular music to fight against socio-economic inequalities of various forms in Nigeria. Inequalities of various forms are part of the realities of life across climes. However, challenges of socio-economic inequalities in Nigeria and other developing countries are particularly more problematic considering the ever-widening gap between the haves and have nots in these countries. While many of the advanced countries of the world have introduced several efforts to mitigate the effects of inequalities on their citizens through the introduction of social safety nets in the area of conditional cash transfer, housing and educational system, the same could not be said about Nigeria and other sub-Saharan countries. The introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programmes of 1986 and the concomitant retrenchment of welfare services in Nigeria has since, exacerbated socio-economic challenges in the country. In addition to the efforts of the constituted governments at various levels in Nigeria, several attempts are also being made between the country and the developed countries of the world both at multilateral and bilateral levels to combat the problem of socio-economic inequalities. This study, therefore, employed archival and library methods of data collection to thematically analyzed the roles of music in combating the ever-increasing socio-economic inequalities in Nigeria, using Ségun Akinlolú’s music, ‘Small Peoples’ Anthem’ as a point of reference. The study concludes that awareness of the populace about the menace of socio-economic inequalities and their various forms remains inadequate among Nigerians. Improved advocacy and deliberate government actions are viewed as a panacea to the problem of inequality in the country.

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## INTRODUCTION

Inequalities in Nigeria raise fundamental questions about interactions between human beings classified into two categories of ‘those who have’ and ‘those who do not have’, or ‘those who are economically stable’ and ‘those who are not’. This implies that some members of the society have access to the general wealth of the nation and decided to acquire as much as they can at the detriment of others. The common wealth of the nation is, thereby, shared among this set of people, even to members of their families including underage children. This menace has eaten deep into all strata of governmental activities such that only a set of children can go to school because their parents are privileged to have access to the common wealth. Many Nigerian youths do not have jobs because they do not have godfathers to influence their employment.

Finding lasting solution to socio-economic inequality has become a big challenge to the government in Nigeria as there is a wide gap between those who are comfortable financially and those that are in abject poverty. The issue of socio-inequality has led to oppression of many people by those who are financially balanced. The resultant effect of this has led many people to depression and, eventually, suicide in most cases. This quest to find a lasting solution to this treacherous menace (socio-inequality) led many to speak out and condemn it. If

solutions are not proffered on issues concerning inequalities, it may lead to agitations and if care is not taken, it could snowball into a bigtime war.

In an attempt to curb the problems associated with economic inequality in Nigeria, popular musicians are at the forefront as one of the most vocal institutions. Musicians are not silent at all in contributing their voices in exposing what could amount to socio-inequality and the need to close the gap between those who have ‘so much and those who do not have ‘at all’. One of such musicians is Ségun Akinlolú (Beautiful Nubia), who described various activities that amounted to inequality and showed how confused we are in terms of the gap created as a result of the threat. There are several studies on socio-inequality as many scholars attempted at defining, explaining and finding solutions to the problem. For example, Tilly (1998), while studying the persistence of social inequality, concentrated on those inequalities that lasted through whole careers, lifetimes and organizational histories. He, therefore traced ‘how such long-lasting, systematic inequalities arise and how do they come to distinguish members of the society into categories of persons. He concluded that since the power to solve pressing organizational problems is given to certain individuals, there is bound to be inequality. The justification for looking at Ségun Akinlolú’s ‘Small people’s Anthem’ is based on the content of the lyrics of the music which described

economic inequality from different perspectives. Up till now, scholarly attention has not been directed towards the engagement of popular music with socio-inequality in Nigeria. This paper addresses this lack and, in the process, provides an informed assessment of Yoruba popular music on socio-inequality.

## PROFILE OF SÉGUN AKINLOLÚ

### Plate 1: Ségún Akinlolú (Beautiful Nubia) Copied from Sweetafrique



Ségún Akinlolú was born at Sacred Hearts, Oluyoro in Ibadan in the very early hour of Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1968. During his birth, he was named Olusegun Akinsete Jacobs. His surname ‘Jacobs’ was later changed to Akinlolú. His father's business then was electronics and music retail ‘Akins Radio’ which later became ‘Sound of Joy’. Ségún started his formal education at a neighbourhood nursery school at Oke Bola, run by one ‘Baba Ghana’. It was one of the informal schools that were nicknamed ‘Jé ‘lé ó sinmi (let the house have some peace) by parents because he gave them (parents) some hours to be free of a troublesome older child so they could do important housework. However, when he was five (5) years 10 months, he got enrolled at St. James’ Cathedral, Oke Bola. It was at this very

young age Ségún started writing songs. He drew his early influence from the traditional culture which was prevalent in the form of oral poetry, theatre, music and folklore. Ségún Akinlolú later got admitted and graduated in 1992 from the University of Ibadan having obtained a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) degree. He worked as a veterinarian for about 8 years. He also studied journalism and obtained a Post-Graduate Diploma from the Nigeria Institute of Journalism.

In 1997, he established EniObanke, a music production and marketing company, under which his first album was released in the same year (1997). All his recordings are released on this label. EniObanke company organized the first-ever folk and roots music festival in Nigeria, the EniObanke Music Festival (EMUfest). In 1998, the artist invited several young musicians in Lagos to form a backing band to which he gave the name The Roots Renaissance Band. ‘Beautiful Nubia’ is the performing name for Ségún Akinlolú, a Nigerian-born songwriter, music composer and bandleader. He is naturally endowed musically and this has been helping him to forge ahead in his chosen career. The importance of natural talent was stressed by both Jones (1959) and Nketia (1973). Jones stated that ‘regardless of teaching and exposure unless a child is naturally endowed, he cannot grow to become a good artist’. Nketia complimented Jones's statement by explaining that ‘the first prerequisite for becoming a musician is a natural endowment and the interest and ability to develop on one’s own. In line with the foregoing, Segun relied on his talent on the style of music compositions, which is unique and distinct.

Throughout the years, Beautiful Nubia has remained the songwriter, arranger and bandleader contributing acoustic/rhythm guitar, lead vocals and percussion. The release of ‘Jangbalajugbu’, his third album became a positive turning point for him as people listened to ‘Owuro L'Ojo (How D'You Do?)’, one of the hit tracks in the album. Close observation of events in the Nigerian music public space shows that ‘Jangbalajugbu’ has sold in excess of a million copies excluding the large numbers sold in the open market by pirates. Since then, the band has released 13 more studio albums, all of which confirm what can be described as the Beautiful Nubia style and his stubborn refusal to be pigeon-

holed. The over 200 original songs - didactic, philosophical and deeply moving - have cemented his reputation in Nigeria and beyond as an advocate for employing traditional wisdom in achieving personal and community development and social justice. It is the combination of enjoyable entertainment and provocative thoughtfulness that has come to define Beautiful Nubia's style. The music has garnered excellent reviews in leading African/world music publications. It has been nominated for music awards and topped international/world charts on community, grassroots and campus radio stations. In October 2016, Beautiful Nubia was conferred with the award of 'Doctorate in Science (Honoris Causa) in Art' by ESEP Le Berger University, the Republic of Benin for his body of work.

### Small Peoples' Anthem and Inequalities

Small Peoples' Anthem is a musical composition by Ségun Akinlolú, an African contemporary musician. The title of this song 'Small Peoples' Anthem' shows that the anthem is that of a certain set of people in the society which he referred to as 'small people'. There cannot be 'small people' if there are no 'big people'. In other words, Ségun Akinlolú is referring to the less economically privileged people of the society as 'small people' in contrast to those that are economically stable. Ségun is, therefore, representing the 'small people' in this instance to show the negative experience of the 'small people' as against their rich counterparts.

### ANALYSIS OF SMALL PEOPLES' ANTHEM

#### The Lyrics and English interpretations

*Oro aye soro o, oro aye soro, oro aye soro* (Life is a mystery)

*Oro aye ma le o, oro aye male ko ma ye wa o* (a puzzle so hard to understand)

*Oro aye gb'eye o, oro aye gb'eye, oro aye gb'eye* (Life is a delicate matter)

*Oro aye soro o, oro aye soro ko ma ye wa o* (a puzzle so hard to understand)

*Awon kan le je, awon kan o ri,* (Some have plenty to eat, others have none)

*Awon kan nwo'so asiko* (Some show off in trending fashion)

*Awon kan nsun s'abe 'gada'* (Some sleep under the bridge)

*Awon kan nto 'le jo bi isu* (Some stack up houses like heap of yam)

*Awon kan nj'oba, awon kan ns'eru* (Some rule; others are slaves)

*Awon kan nse bi Olodumare* (Some act like the Supreme being)

*Omode oojo ns'alaisi* (Newborn children die)

*Awon kan s'aye d'awa-ma-lo* (while the aged ones cling desperately to life)

*Awon kan ns'odun, awon kan nsun'kun* (Some celebrate lavishly while others wail)

*Awon kan nwo'ju Olodumare* (Some can only look up unto the Creator)

*Eniyan rere won 'i pe lo* (Good people never seem to last long)

*Eni buruku won npe ni'le o* (while the evil ones live on endlessly)

Some people can't find a way

Some people live by the day

Some people have all the fun

When will it be our turn?

Few people take all the wealth

Poor people bear all the pain

Small people look to the skies

When will it be our turn?

*Aye bi e ba d'Agbon e ma ta mi* (If the world turns to a bee, I should not be biting)

*Aye bi e ba d'Odo e ma gbe mi lo* (If the world turns to a river, I should not be swept away)

*Oro aye soro o, oro aye soro, oro aye soro*

*Oro aye ma le o, oro aye male ko ma ye wa o*

*Oro aye gb'ege o, oro aye gb'ege, oro aye gb'ege*

*Oro aye gb'ege o, oro aye gb'ege ko ma ye wa o*  
(it requires calm and careful study)

*Awon kan le je, awon kan o ri, awon kan nwo'so asiko*

*Awon kan nsun s'abe 'gada', awon kan nto 'le jo bi isu*

*Awon kan nj'oba, awon kan ns'eru,*

*Awon kan nse bi Olodumare*

*Omode oojo ns'alaisi, awon kan s'aye d'awa-ma-lo*

*Awon kan ns'odun, awon kan nsun'kun,*

*Awon kan nwo'ju Olodumare*

*Eniyan rere won 'i pe lo, eni buruku won npe ni'le o*

*Oro aye soro o, oro aye soro, oro aye soro*

*Oro aye ma le o, oro aye male ko ma ye wa o*

*Oro aye gb'ege o, oro aye gb'ege, oro aye gb'ege*

*Oro aye soro o, oro aye soro ko ma ye wa o*

*Oro aye soro ko ma ye wa o*

*Oro aye soro ko ma ye wa o*

*Oro aye soro ko ma ye wa o*

*Oro aye soro ko ma ye wa o*

*Oro aye soro ko ma ye wa o*

*Oro aye soro ko ma ye wa o*

Writer(s): OluSégun Akinsete Akinlolú. Lyrics powered by [www.musixmatch.com](http://www.musixmatch.com)

### Textual Analysis

The text of the music shows how difficult it is to understand the world as a whole and the fact that the

riddle of the world is too cumbersome to be unfolded:

*Oro aye soro o, oro aye soro, oro aye soro* (All about the world is hard)

*Oro aye ma le o, oro aye male ko ma ye wa o* (So hard I cannot understand why)

*Oro aye gb'ege o, oro aye gb'ege, oro aye gb'ege* (All about the world is delicate)

*Oro aye soro o, oro aye soro ko ma ye wa o* (So delicate I cannot understand why)

The text of the song also describes different situations showing sharp contrast between the experience of 'those who have so much' and those 'who do not have at all', thereby showing the level of inequalities witnessed in the world as a whole and in Nigeria in particular:

*Awon kan le je, awon kan o ri,* (Some people could eat, some do not find)

*Awon kan nwo'so asiko* (Some people dress in vogue)

*Awon kan nsun s'abe 'gada'* (Some people sleep under the bridge)

*Awon kan nto 'le jo bi isu* (Some people acquired houses like a heap of yam)

*Awon kan nj'oba, awon kan ns'eru* (Some people become King, some are slaves)

*Awon kan ns'odun, awon kan nsun'kun* (Some people are merrying, some people are crying)

*Awon kan nwo'ju Olodumare* (Some people are looking unto God)

He also described the attitude of the people at the top of the ladder of socio-economy and their various behavior:

*Awon kan nse bi Olodumare* (Some people behave like God)

*Omode oojo ns'alaisi* (A Day-old baby dies)

*Awon kan s'aye d'awa-ma-lo* (Some people preferred not to die)

He, therefore, observed that nature makes it such that the good people of the world are the ones dying prematurely while the bad ones are getting old:

*Eniyan rere won 'i pe lo* (The good ones are dying young)

*Eni buruku won npe ni'le o* (The bad ones are getting very old)

Segun, thereafter, concluded by the following words in the English language.

Some people can't find a way

Some people live by the day

Some people have all the fun

He ended by asking a pertinent question, on behalf of the 'small'(poor) people:

When will it be our turn?

He then prayed for a better experience in the world thus:

*Aye bi e ba d'Agbon e ma ta mi* (If the world turns to a bee, I should not be biting)

*Aye bi e ba d'Odo e ma gbe mi lo* (If the world turns to a river, I should not be swept away)

### Language

Small Peoples' Anthem is presented in Yoruba and English languages in succession, thereby resulting in code-switching. The song started with Yoruba language 'Oro aye soro...' in which Segun described the socio-economic inequalities and dovetailed into a kind of interpretations of the Yoruba words 'Some people can't find a way ... when will it be our turn?'

### Musical Style and Instrumentation

Like all his music, Segun presented Small Peoples' Anthem in highlife style. Therefore, elements of highlife music were felt throughout the song. Such elements include common time, wind instruments, such as trumpet and saxophone, African percussive instruments such as gangan, omele-ako and omele-abo, agogo, guitar and keyboard.

### CONCLUSION

All these examples show that there is the high level of inequality in Nigeria and this has arrested the attention of many Nigerians who are trying to speak out their minds against it and try to find solutions to the problem. Musicians are in the forefront of people who are not happy with the economic inequalities in Nigeria. This is not strange as music the role of music in society including but is not limited to exposing bad attitudes amongst people living together. Therefore, as a mouthpiece of the populace like other musicians, Ségun Akinlolú cries out on the level of economic inequalities in Nigeria and on behalf of the teeming Nigerians 'who do not have', asked a resounding question 'when will it be our turn'.

When will it be the turn of the poor masses to have a share of the goodies of our land?

When will it be the turn of the poor people to have access to social amenities?

When do we have equal rights as citizens of the same country?

When and when and when?

Too many questions begging for answers and the absence of answers to the aforementioned questions and the likes leave a big vacuum that needs urgent attention in order to have a better Nigeria in particular and a better world in general. The government and its agents should make policies that will close the gap of socio-inequalities as failure to do this may lead to agitations by the 'small people' who will always see the well-to-do members of their communities as their enemies. Failure to act fast by all agencies of government at national, state and local government levels may lead to protest by the 'small people' and if care is not taken, it can lead to a full-blown war. If, truly, we desire a good country, Nigeria and indeed a better world at large, issues on socio-inequalities should be the focus at this crucial period of our existence.

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