

## BOOK REVIEW

### Reaching for the stars:

**the Autobiography of Chief Folake Solanke, SAN. 483 + 21pp.**

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Review by Professor Bimpe Aboyade

*Reaching for the Stars*, the autobiography of Chief Folake Solanke, SAN, comprises 23 chapters in 252 pages. Sometimes events are arranged in chronological order, and at times according to interwoven topics. The 23 chapters can be grouped into three broad areas: first the beginnings—the period from birth through primary and secondary school; second, adulthood, education in England, marital circumstances and life with her husband, children and family; and the third, what one may describe as the blossoming of the Amazon—her legal practice, her exploits within the country and on the international scene. In all, this is the moving story of an unusual life.

The first part traces the author's pedigree. Now this is not a "from rags to riches" story, or what the Yoruba would term "*atapata dide*" (one who has risen from hard ground). The author is from an élite family, the product of a union between an Ijebu father of Ikorodu origin, Chief Jacob Odulate, alias "The Blessed Jacob" and an Egba mother. The product of such a union is jokingly referred to as "Ijegba" by an illustrious member of that small, unknown sub-ethnic Yoruba group! The products of such unions often turn out to be prodigies! The picture here is of a happy childhood, even though the author lost her mother at the tender age of two. She had a privileged upbringing in the famous Alabukun family in Abeokuta. This is a woman who undoubtedly can boast of a goodly heritage. The rest of the book tells us what she herself has made of this heritage.

Although the author had a blissful childhood, and grew up in a serene environment, the first part of the book takes the reader literally "through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy", including what was to grow up motherless in a polygamous setting. She gives us details of her famous father's creative genius (especially as exhibited in the Alabukun medications), their interesting neighbours like Baba Lamidi and Mama Olojo, and the coconut tree that turned neighbourhood children in to instant sprinters. Folake Solanke's picture of life in the urban centre of Abeokuta and in the village of Sidipon makes one yearn for the good old days. You can imagine the Lady SAN ever grinding pepper? Read the book and you will see!

The reader is then taken from the height of euphoria in a picture of perfect life to the abysmal depth of sorrow and anguish, as death, in the words of the author, "changed the course of her family's history forever". One reads how a thanksgiving service arranged by a proud father for his newly qualified doctor son turned before his very eyes into a funeral



service, which evokes the pathos of the verse in the book of Isaiah: "All you who pass by, was there a sorrow like unto mine?" The trauma of a family enduring unspeakable horror, seen through the eyes of the author as a 15 year old girl in the midst of it all, is heart rending.

By the time the reader gets to the second part, the author is already proving her mettle in several areas. With the sound education she received at the Ago-Oko primary school in Abeokuta, the Methodist Girls' High School, Lagos, culminating with the one and only Queen's College, Lagos, her first class performance in the Cambridge School Certificate Examination claimed media attention in the *Daily Times*. She also proved herself a high flier as a graduate of King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where the fame of her family had preceded here. She was an all-rounder, excelling not only in academics but also in athletics and drama. Later, her excellent performance as a teacher of English, Mathematics and Latin, where she was the only black teacher in two English schools, makes the reader feel very proud of this budding Amazon. This part also is replete with human angle stories, the colleague at Saint Monica's school who had a Matador boyfriend, and the author's life-long friendship with one of her young students called Ann Lay.

It also presents the high drama of a rejected but unrelenting suitor who became a life-long tormentor. This period of the author's life was a nightmare, what with the media frenzy it generated at home and abroad and the ordeal at the famous Old Bailey court in London where the author experienced the undpeakable anguish caused by a loving father having to testify as a witness against his daughter in a foreign court. Thankfully this part of the book also gives the reader a glimpse into the marital bliss she shared with her husband, Torioloa Solanke, who became a famous surgeon and her loving companion for almost fifty years. Just as marrying the man of her choice did not come easy, so giving birth to her children was not easy either. Her first delivery brought her close to death. Nor does the author spare the reader from sharing the anguish of losing such a loving husband.

The third part of the book shows the blossoming of an Amazon. Having returned to England to study Law with distinction, the incredible Amazon emerges as it were from a cocoon to become the Lady SAN we know today. We read with relish of her distinguished performance as a legal advocate which led to her becoming the first female Senior Advocate of Nigeria in 1981. Before then, while still a law student, she combined her brilliant performance at Gray's Inn with employment as a Student Officer in the Nigerian High Commission in London. After reading about her achievements in this position, one could only wish that the powers-that-be had consulted her in their present day "The Heart of Africa" project.

Then there are details of her public service, as a Commissioner in the Western Regional government of Brigadier Oluwole Rotimi, as a member of a National Judicial Commission of Enquiry, as Chairman of the Board of WNTV/WNBS and so on. Further ahead is the



account of the author's incredible tenacity and self-confidence that make her the first non-Caucasian woman to become President of Zonta International after three nerve-racking attempts. There and then she is brought to the world stage, advancing the cause of women nationally and internationally, promoting humanitarian causes and meeting with world leaders and Heads of State. It is a dizzying experience that only a few could handle with such aplomb.

Again, as in other parts of the book, the author is not one to overlook human angle stories. How did a pupil lawyer feel cross examining the legendary Chief T.A. Odutola, the Ogbeni Oja of Ijebu-Ode? How could the author defend a client successfully against the plaintiff who happened to be the mother of her best friend? When the author as Zonta President had dinner in Manila with the one and only Imelda Marcos, what did they talk about?

This brief review can only give a glimpse of what a great life this book portrays. However, the reader is not presented with a mere narrative of events, but is also able to share the author's feelings, joy and sorrow, excitement, elation, stress and trauma. Her rich sense of humour shines through, sometimes while describing an appalling situation. Her life is illuminated by her love of music and the therapy it provides, and her deep religious faith.

Chief Solanke's life has not been a bed of roses, though she herself has all the beauty and delicacy of a rose. In spite of the many setbacks in her life, she has become successful and a high achiever. She is more than a survivalist, as she calls herself. In her life, the impossible often becomes possible. She is adept at fostering good human relationships, be it with family members, friends, colleagues or employees. Talk of an indomitable spirit, the Lady SAN exhibits it through and through. Talk of grace under fire, femininity and elegance (as shown in her unique wardrobe for the Zonta Installation) sheer intellectual prowess and professional proficiency, the Lady SAN stands tall. No wonder she is honoured anywhere she goes. The book is replete with encomiums showered on her both in the country and on the international scene. How many people could boast of attracting the attention of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope who once cordially invoked upon her God's gift of peace and joy?

Although this book is long, like all books that aim at an in-depth treatment, the style of the narrative makes for easy reading and enjoyment. The author's simple diction and delightful turns of phrase make reading this autobiography a sheer pleasure. This is a book which every Nigerian should read, and be thankful there are Nigerians like Chief Folake Solanke. Women especially should make this book a must-read, not just for the account of one woman's struggle for gender equality and justice for herself and other women, but as an example of a cultured personality who, in spite of the rough and tumble of life and discrimination because of her gender, did not compromise on her femininity and elegance, poise and dignity. As for the younger generation, the author serves as a role model if ever there was one. The girl-child and many younger woman who wants to be like the Lady SAN should read this book to know what it takes to reach for the stars.