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1

“Heaven Helps Only Those Who Help Themselves”: Ladipo Solanke and the WASU Hostels in London

Ochiai, Takehiko

Abstract

The West African Students’ Union was established in London by West African students on the initiative of Ladipo Solanke, a Nigerian law student, during the interwar years. Of the various activities in which WASU was engaged, Solanke was deeply devoted to opening and maintaining hostels for African students, which he saw as his own way of resisting imperialism, and thus attempted to achieve this goal based on the spirit of “self-help.” Solanke viewed the hostels not only as necessary for WASU’s activities, but as embodying his nationalist efforts to resisting ever-creeping imperialism.

Introduction

THE WEST AFRICAN STUDENTS’ UNION (WASU) WAS FOUNDED IN LONDON BY West African students in 1925. The historical importance of WASU is evident. The WASU has been associated with such foremost African nationalists as Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, and Pan-Africanists such as Marcus Aurelius Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, and George Padmore. The WASU has gone beyond the traditional boundaries of a student association, but played an essential historical role in cultivating ideas of decolonization in Africa as well as an awareness of unity among those of African descendants (Garigue, 1953; Carey, 1956; Coleman, 1958; Geiss, 1974; Langley, 1973; Esedebe, 1978, 1982; Olusanya, 1982; Fryer, 1984; Boahen ed., 1994; Adi, 1998; Ochiai, 2018a, 2018b, 2019).

The WASU was founded on the initiative of Ladipo Solanke, a Nigerian law student (Fig. 1). Unlike many other students who returned to Africa after completing their studies in Britain, Solanke remained in London after founding the WASU until the end of his life and provided material and moral support for the WASU’s activities. Of the various activities in which the WASU was engaged,

Solanke was deeply devoted to opening and maintaining hostels for African students. As a paid staff member of the WASU, he served as Warden and lived with his family in the hostels for a quarter of a century while managing the properties. He also twice engaged in fund-raising activities in British West Africa, collecting funds to open hostels. He took a genuinely active interest in keeping the hostels open even though he repeatedly encountered financial difficulties.

This article focuses on how Solanke devoted himself to keeping these hostels functioning as part of the various activities of the WASU and contemplate what these hostels truly represented for him.

Solanke's Early Life and the Establishment of the WASU

Solanke was born in Ofada, a village outside Abeokuta, located in present-day southwestern Nigeria.¹ Although his exact year of birth is unknown, Solanke is thought to have been born in 1884 (Geiss, 1974: 297; Oyewole & Lucas, 2000: 487; Adi & Sherwood, 2003: 174). However, records surveyed by the author at the Great Northern London Cemetery, where he was buried, indicate that he passed away Sept. 2 1958 and was buried four days later, and listed as 72 years old at the time of death.² Although these records' authenticity is uncertain, if we assume they are accurate, it would mean that Solanke was born in 1885 or 1886, which would be later than the supposed date.

Solanke was an Egba man, a subgroup of the Yoruba people, who reside in a wide area of land stretching from southwestern Nigeria to southern Benin. According to Solanke's wife, Opeolu Ogunbiyi, his family lineage could be traced back to the Ifá priests of traditional Yoruba divination and religion.³ According to Solanke's eldest daughter, Olasurubomi Kofoworola Ogedengbe, "his father was a farmer and [also]the church warden."⁴

Although Solanke lived with his parents during



Fig. 1: Ladipo Solanke. (Photo courtesy: Opeolu Ogunbiyi)

1 Oyewole and Lucas (2000: 487) and Adi and Sherwood (2003: 174) mention that Solanke was born in Abeokuta, but his real birthplace is Ofada ("W.A.S.U. Mission at Ofada (Egbaland): Birthplace of the Missioner. Hats off to the Bale, Chiefs and Inhabitants of Ofada," *The Nigerian Daily Telegraph*, Oct. 17, 1930).

2 Great Northern London Cemetery, *Register of Burials Consecrated Ground*, No. 37, no. 156155.

3 Author's interview with Opeolu Ogunbiyi, London (March 25, 1996).

4 A letter from Olasurubomi Kofoworola Ogedengbe to the author (Jan. 11, 1996). A Nigerian newspaper article describes that Solanke's parents were devout Christians ("Ebute Metta and the W.A.S.U. Movement," *Daily Times*, Jan. 15, 1930).

his early childhood, he was ultimately raised in the custody of the Rev. Paley, a white missionary serving the Anglican Church in Abeokuta, who named him Ladipo Paley. Following his elementary and secondary education in Ofada and Abeokuta, Solanke studied at St. Andrews College, a teacher-training school in Oyo, a Yoruba town. Very little is known of his life in Oyo. However, it is known that Solanke, while in Oyo, changed his family name from Paley back to Solanke.⁵

During the latter half of the 1910s, Solanke made his way to Freetown, Sierra Leone, then a British colony, where he enrolled at Fourah Bay College, the only institution of higher education in all of British West Africa. The college was founded in 1827 by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), affiliated to the Anglican Church, to mainly educate African evangelists and educators. In 1876, it became an affiliate college of Durham University, England. Solanke was able to attend Fourah Bay due to the support of the CMS.

Solanke's journal provides a glimpse of his days as a student at Fourah Bay College. For example, his entry dated Feb. 11, 1918, states, "Passed Junior Class in shorthand + typewriting + was 1st candidate in this particular class. 'Bless the Lord, O my Spirit and all that is within me bless his holy name.'"⁶ In an interview with the author, his wife Opeolu described him as "studious,"⁷ depicting the young Solanke in Freetown as a diligent student.

Solanke worked as a teacher at several schools while studying in Freetown, and in March 1921, finally received his long-sought bachelor's degree from Durham University. In 1922, Solanke moved to the UK to read law and enrolled in University College London. Although a student, he was approaching his late 30s.

As a self-supporting student, university life was not easy. He often lived in poverty under increasing debt. It is especially true that from 1924 to 1925 when he struggled with a challenging financial situation, it was likely caused by an interruption in remittance from Nigeria. He noted the following in his journal at the time, under the heading of "My Hardship in London." This entry reveals the miserable grief under which Solanke struggled to secure living expenses.

- a. The whole of Summer 1924 I had to teach Yoruba in U.C. to get my daily bread.
- b. Borrowed here + there.
- c. My trinkets given to land ldy for guarantee of debts.
- d. Provost of our College (Sir GF) lent me £5 for Xmas living.
- e. No more food but bare room.⁸

5 Interview with Opeolu Ogunbiyi, London (March 25, 1996).

6 Solanke, Ladipo, *Diary 1918-July 1920*, SOL Box 34. SOL stands for the Solanke Collection (the Gandhi Library, the University of Lagos Library), which comprises Solanke's personal correspondence, diaries, photos, books, and miscellaneous items like newspaper cuttings relating to the WASU.

7 Interview with Opeolu Ogunbiyi, London (March 25, 1996).

8 Solanke, Ladipo, *Diary, Notes, Memo etc.: Private and Confidential* (1920), SOL Box 34.

Under the recommendation of university staff, Solanke began teaching the Yoruba language at University College London while continuing his studies. However, this journal entry suggests that even this was not enough to cover his living expenses. Solanke continued to borrow money from acquaintances and even borrowed a sum of £5 during his Christmas break from Sir Gregory Foster, a well-known scholar of literature and the Provost of University College London. He was also forced to hand over “trinkets” (gold) to his landlady to guarantee unpaid rent debts. Of course, such financial difficulties would likely be encountered to some degree by any self-supporting African student at the time. Even so, living in poverty to such a degree that he daily lacked money for food must have left an impression on Solanke.

However, although financial difficulties marked his student days, it was also a significant time during which Solanke developed his own ideology. He began to favor the use of the term “self-help” and insisted on the importance of self-help for Africans. Some examples of this include a hastily written note in his journal at the time (“Advice to Africans for Self-Help + to give up Race of Beggars”⁹) and a letter written to the April 1925 edition of *West Africa* magazine stating that, “Our duty is to work out our own salvation through self-help.”¹⁰ Finally, the concept of “self-help” that took root in Solanke also served as an emotional pillar supporting activities later in his life, such as establishing organizations and hostels for African students in London and devoting the latter half of his life to developing them.

It is difficult to precisely identify when Solanke began searching to establish an association for African students living in Great Britain. However, a note written by Solanke on March 13, 1923, reveals that he had already become interested in establishing an organization of some kind for Africans in Great Britain. In this note, he writes, “name of the society ‘Egbe ãró’ or ‘Kiteteyemi Club’....It consists of well drilled patriotic men — self-denying etc.”¹¹ In the Yoruba language, *egbe* can be translated as club, society, or association. According to an explanatory note written by Solanke, *ãró* is the Yoruba word of *awaduro* or *awaro* and has the definition of “united we stand.”¹² Hence, *Egbe ãró*, at the very least, carries the meaning of “an association formed by members who stand together.” Regardless, it can be inferred that Solanke was planning to start an organization of some kind to help Africans as early as the first half of 1923—the year following his arrival in Great Britain.

On July 17, 1924, Solanke appealed to Nigerian-born students to establish an organization called the Nigerian Progress Union (NPU) (Adi, 1998; Ochiai, 2018a). On August 7, 1925, Solanke then founded the WASU together with 20 students from the four West African colonies under British rule: Nigeria, Gold

⁹ Solanke, *Diary, Notes, Memo etc.: Private and Confidential* (1920).

¹⁰ Solanke, Ladipo, “West African Land and Self-Development: To the Editor of West Africa,” *West Africa*, April 4, 1925, p. 311.

¹¹ Solanke, *Diary, Note, Memo. etc.: Private and Confidential* (1920).

¹² Solanke, *Diary, Note, Memo. etc.: Private and Confidential* (1920).

Coast (today's Ghana), Sierra Leone, and the Gambia. Although the WASU was initially established by 21 West African students (including Solanke), membership continued to grow year over year with approximately 170 members in 1937¹³ and roughly 250 members by 1939.¹⁴ The organization had reached over 300 members in 1951 after the Second World War (Garigue, 1953: 64). Due to space considerations, this article cannot cover in detail the various activities of the WASU outside of its hostel-related work. However, Alexander Timothy Carey, who surveyed colonial students living in London after the Second World War, stated concerning the importance of the WASU that, "W.A.S.U. is the largest and politically the most important of the colonial students' societies in this country; this reflects, of course, the numerical importance of the West African contingent in relation to the total student body. The way in which W.A.S.U. was formed and the purpose to which it was dedicated reflect political and social conditions in West Africa as well as the students' experiences of British life" (Carey, 1956: 97).

Having thus founded an important African student organization in the form of the WASU, Solanke was called to the bar in 1926. After graduating, he would continue to graduate school at University College London, where he continued to research "Law and Customs in Yoruba."

The "House of Self-help"

As previously mentioned, out of all the activities engaged in by the WASU, Solanke was most passionate about hostels. When he first arrived in Great Britain, African students were overall poorer than Asian or Arabian students, and routinely encountered severe racial discrimination, such as being denied entry to hotels or eating establishments.¹⁵ Before long, the idea of establishing hostels for African students as a possible means to help support students facing such issues and difficulties began to attract attention.

As a Nigerian-born self-supporting student, Solanke found himself in agreement with discussions on establishing hostels for African students soon after arriving in Great Britain. The financial difficulties he experienced possibly led him to view achieving this as a personal mission. When he founded the NPU in 1924, opening a hostel to support African students in London was important enough to be included as a goal of the organization.¹⁶ When he founded the WASU in 1925, Solanke positioned opening a hostel as an important goal of the organization again.¹⁷

Of course, it required significant funds to open and run a hostel, and Solanke

13 WASU, Vol. VI, No. 3, Christmas Number 1937, p. 43.

14 WASU, Vol. VII, No. 1, May 1940, p. 13.

15 NA CO 323/1025/60050. NA and CO stand for the National Archives and the Colonial Office, respectively.

16 Constitution of the Nigerian Progress Union, July 26, 1924, NA CO 583/138.

17 "The Constitution of the West African Students' Union," WASU, Vol. V, No. I, May 1936, p. 14.

was unable to make his vision a reality immediately after founding both the NPU and WASU. However, he met a government officer in the Colonial Office, Hanns Vischer, and it became a turning point in Solanke's efforts to establish a hostel.¹⁸

British government officials and Members of Parliament had discussed establishing a hostel for African students as early as 1914,¹⁹ but could not achieve anything concrete due to complications, including the First World War. However, having earlier refrained from traveling to Great Britain due to the wartime regime, an increasing number of African students began attending universities in Great Britain in the 1920s, and even the British government began to recognize the need for a hostel to house them. Finally, in 1927, the Colonial Office, responsible for managing colonial students, began to consider opening a hostel for African students.

At that time, Vischer working in the Colonial Office, heard of the need for a hostel from African students, and served as a mediator between the Office and African students. Vischer knew that the WASU planned to open a hostel, and in October 1927 contacted Solanke (who was serving as Secretary of the WASU) to notify him that the Colonial Office was interested in what the WASU was planning and that it was prepared to offer support.

However, Vischer's plan was slightly at odds with that of Solanke from the very start. Vischer viewed opening hostels as a means for the British government to supervise African students under the Colonial Office's leadership. More specifically, his plan involved first establishing a committee formed by related parties such as universities and the Colonial Office with a few African students acting as representatives, discussing concrete plans within the said committee, and then finally having the colonial governments of British Africa contribute required funds.²⁰ In 1930, a detailed hostel scheme that closely followed Vischer's plan²¹ was formulated within the Colonial Office. In 1934, a hostel for African students, named "Aggrey House," was opened in the center of London on 47 Doughty Street, London, W.C.1.²² On the surface, the hostel was established by a committee formed of private experts such as university staff and Africans living in Great Britain. In reality, however, it was founded under the vigorous initiative of the Colonial Office.

In response, Solanke decided he would use self-help on the part of Africans to open a hostel. Through his contact with Vischer, he was pleased to learn that the

18 For detail of Vischer, see "Sir Hanns Vischer: One of a Great Brotherhood," *West Africa*, March 3, 1945, p. 182; "The Late Hanns Vischer: Sir George Tomlinson's Appreciation," *West Africa*, May 5, 1945, p. 402.

19 "An Appeal: Need for a Central Home in London for African Students", WASU, Vol. I, Nos. 6 and 7, August 1928, p. 32.

20 NA CO 323/1025/60050.

21 Confidential: Memorandum Prepared in the Colonial Office, Colonial Office Conference, 1930, NA CO 323/1078/70238.

22 The hostel was named after the prominent African educator, James E.K. Aggrey.

Colonial Office was willing to cooperate with the WASU hostel scheme, and this development gave him a significant boost in confidence. However, he became cautious about the hostel scheme developed under the Colonial Office rather than the WASU.

That Solanke was apprehensive of this from the moment he contacted Vischer is apparent in the Minutes of the WASU Executive Committee. According to these minutes, during a meeting of the Executive Committee on November 4, 1927, Solanke insisted that negotiations with the Colonial Office on the hostel scheme should not continue unless the Colonial Office agreed to four conditions. These conditions were: (1) hostels must be established independently from the Colonial Office or African colonial governments, (2) hostels must be placed under the management of a committee approved of by African students, (3) expenses for opening hostels must be primarily provided by Africans themselves with any additional expenses paid for by the Colonial Office or African colonial governments, and (4) a deferment period of at least one year must be granted for the WASU to gather funds from Africa and elsewhere when opening hostels.²³ In other words, Solanke wanted to open hostels not through “supervision from above” provided by the British government, but through “self-help from below” on the part of Africans themselves, including students.

Despite this fundamental difference in thought between “supervision from above” and “self-help from below,” Vischer and Solanke continued to discuss in writing and in person what would need to be done to open a hostel. However, in 1929 Solanke finally took a bold step toward achieving his dream of opening a hostel based on the spirit of self-help. That is, Solanke spent a roughly three-year period lasting from October 1929 to September 1932 visiting British West Africa to gather funds to open a hostel. In a letter sent to Vischer immediately before leaving Great Britain, Solanke provided notification that the WASU had finally decided to send him to British West Africa to collect funding for a hostel, and stressed that this was done in the spirit of self-help.²⁴

On October 9, 1929, Solanke left for British West Africa as a WASU Missioner to raise funds to open a hostel in London. According to a report by Solanke published after his return to Great Britain, the WASU was unable to provide any financial support whatsoever for his visit to West Africa, requiring Solanke to negotiate for deferred payment of fares with the marine transport company and to cover other expenses on his own.²⁵ However, as a reward for Solanke’s hard work, the WASU promised to provide Solanke with a paid position as Warden upon returning to Great Britain after securing funds in West Africa.

23 “Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting of 4 November, 1927,” Minutes of the Executive Committee of the West African Students’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland, SOL Box 77.

24 Solanke, Ladipo, to Hanns Vischer, Sept. 28, 1929, NA CO 323/1025/60050.

25 Solanke, Ladipo, “The Official Report of the W.A.S.U. Mission, 1929-1932,” WASU, Vol. IV, No. 3, Sept. 1935, p.40.

After leaving Great Britain, Solanke first stopped at a port in Freetown and then traveled to Accra in Gold Coast, arriving on October 22, 1929. In Gold Coast, he interviewed sources such as members of the colonial government and traditional leaders and spent roughly two weeks traveling from region to region, discussing the importance of opening a hostel for African students in London and raising funds. Solanke left Accra on November 5, 1929, but visited Gold Coast on two more occasions in 1930 and 1932 to raise funds again. After leaving Accra, Solanke arrived in Nigeria on November 7, 1929, and then spent approximately two years visiting regions in Nigeria until the beginning of 1932. During this time, he interviewed members of the colonial government, traditional chiefs, and intellectuals, and held assemblies at schools and churches asking for donations to open a hostel in London (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Solanke and WASU supporters at Ijebu-Ode (March 17, 1930). He visited various places in Nigeria to raise funds in order to open a hostel for African students in London. He is second row, third from right, sitting in a chair. (Photo courtesy: University of Lagos Library)

During these assemblies held in regions all over Nigeria, Solanke would first distribute petitions to the audience requesting financial cooperation and then discuss in detail topics such as the activities and history of the WASU. He elaborated on his hostel scheme's details and significance and how the hostel should be managed. He then would ask for donations. In addition to chiefs and other adults, it is reported that even children donated funds. Upon returning to Great Britain, Solanke had held more than a thousand general assemblies and lectures throughout Nigeria.²⁶ Following the completion of his campaign in Nigeria, Solanke left

²⁶ Solanke, "The Official Report of the WASU Mission, 1929-1932", p. 63.

the colony in 1932, spent several months visiting Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, and then returned to London on September 19 that same year.

Solanke was able to raise £1,380 during the roughly three years he spent visiting West Africa. From this, WASU deducted Solanke's various expenses, remaining only £600. These funds were used to open their first hostel in January 1933, on 62 Camden Road, London, N.W.1. Named "African Hostel," this three-story building contained such facilities as a meeting hall, billiards room, library, parlor, kitchen, and lodging rooms.²⁷ Although the hostel would change location and name several times, it continued to serve as an important means for African students living to interact with one another. It also hosted many visitors from the Colonial Office, members of Parliament, and intellectuals from Africa, Europe, and the United States, and provided an opportunity for a lively discussion between these visitors and the African students living there (Fig. 3).

However, maintaining the hostel required significant expenses, and the financial conditions of the WASU rapidly deteriorated soon after. Of these expenses, rent was a particularly troublesome issue for the strained financial conditions of the WASU. Therefore, having just achieved his goal of opening a hostel, Solanke launched a fundraising campaign to maintain the hostel. He expected significant support this time around from the Colonial Office and the colonial governments of British



Fig. 3: Nancy Cunard is a British writer, heiress and political activist. WASU members interacted with British people like colonial officers, Members of Parliament and intellectuals at its hostel in London.
(Photo courtesy University of Lagos Library)

West Africa. The relationship between the WASU and the Colonial Office had deteriorated with Solanke's visit to West Africa. Furthermore, Aggrey House had been opened in 1934 under the Colonial Office's initiative, putting the two organizations in a decidedly antagonistic relationship. Solanke viewed the Colonial Office's behavior to open Aggrey House hostel while promising support to the hostel

²⁷ "W.A.S.U. Hostel," WASU, Vol. II, No. 1, January 1933, p. 5.

scheme of the WASU as an act of betrayal and a manifestation of the cunningness of imperialism. Solanke, in a letter sent to a local newspaper in Gold Coast, provides a scathing criticism with undisguised hostility of Aggrey House, which was opposed to the WASU African Hostel, arguing that, “Aggrey House is essentially a piece of Imperialist machinery, set up side by side with our African Hostel, under the good old slogan ‘Co-operation’, but really designed to watch every movement of this our Hostel, and to pretend to be doing exactly the same thing that this our Hostel does, while all the times under cover of talk and lavish promises, it is acting in truth and in fact just contrariwise.”²⁸

Although discussions were held twice in 1934 to settle the issue between the



Fig. 4: WASU members and guests at Africa House (n.d.) “African House,” the second WASU hostel was opened at Camden Square in 1938, where Solanke lived and died in 1958. (Courtesy, UNILAG Library)

WASU and Aggrey House, the suspicion and animosity felt toward Aggrey House and the Colonial Office by the WASU and Solanke were deeply rooted. These feelings served as a major obstruction to reconciliation efforts, and the organizations could not improve the relationship between the two hostels. However, the financial conditions of the WASU became further strained due to the high cost of maintaining the African Hostel, and the organization found itself £300 in debt at the end of 1935. Having determined that public assistance was the only remaining option for maintaining the WASU hostel, Solanke, in 1936, reconciled with Vischer and the Colonial Office. In 1937, the WASU received £250 in funding from Nigeria’s colonial government as its first assistance payment. From this point onward, assistance payments received from colonial governments of British West Africa, such as Nigeria and Gold Coast, would allow the organization to maintain its hostel.

The WASU, in July 1938, purchased a property on 1 South Villas, Camden Square, London, N.W.1, and moved the

28 Solanke, Ladipo, “The New Year’s Open Letter: To the Educated Youth in West Africa”, *The Gold Coast Independent*, January 5, 1935, p. 20.

hostel there (Fig. 4). In purchasing the property for this hostel (christened “Africa House”), the organization turned to the Committee for the Welfare of Africans in Europe for support, formed in 1921 as a subcommittee of the Antislavery and Aborigines Protection Society.

However, immediately after opening Africa House, the WASU began insisting on opening an additional hostel due to the small number of lodging rooms in Africa House. Therefore, an agreement was reached between an Anglican church-related organization called the Anglo-African Committee (later renamed Westminster Committee) and the WASU, under which the committee would cooperate in opening a new WASU hostel on condition that a chapel directed by a chaplain selected by the committee would be installed. Following this agreement, the Anglo-African Committee conducted a fund-raising campaign throughout Great Britain to obtain funds to open the new hostel, while the WASU once again dispatched Solanke as a missioner to West Africa.

In October 1944, Solanke left London with his wife Opeolu and headed to West Africa. Unlike his first visit to West Africa, no report was officially published when Solanke returned home, and it is assumed that the results of the visit were poor in comparison. This is demonstrated by the fact that, although it was estimated that approximately £50,000 would be required to open a new hostel, Solanke could only obtain £6,000 over the three years until his return to Great Britain in 1948. This suggests that Solanke obtained little support from traditional leaders, intellectuals, and the general population, all of whom had provided generous support during his first visit.

The difficulty of raising funds is likely due to the conditions prevailing in West Africa, which experienced wartime and postwar economic stagnation, and not due to any mistakes or lack of effort from Solanke. West Africa was able to escape post-war economic stagnation due to the increase in demand for primary products spurred by economic recovery in Europe beginning in 1948, and by a sudden increase in the cost of primary products caused by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Solanke, who visited West Africa from 1944–1948, was at a loss about obtaining funds during this economic stagnation period. Although Solanke had expected to raise significant donations from native authorities in Nigeria, he could not do so due to pressure from the colonial government. This, too, contributed to his poor showing during his second visit to West Africa. However, regardless of these results, the WASU was able to use the funds secured by Solanke together with donations collected by the Anglo-African Committee throughout Great Britain, as capital to open their second hostel in 1949 on 13 Chelsea Embankment, London, S.W.3 along the Thames River.

With this, the WASU owned and operated two hostels located in South Villas and the Chelsea Embankment from 1949 onward. However, financial conditions soon began to worsen again. The organization stopped paying Solanke's wages as Warden and had trouble maintaining its two hostels unless it obtained additional government assistance. However, the Colonial Office, which was already critical

of African students in the WASU who increasingly embraced left-wing politics, declined appeals for additional financial assistance, leading the executive committee of the WASU to close the cramped African House hostel in South Villas.

Solanke was unable to accept the decision made by the WASU's executive committee. Having spent many years as Warden running Africa House and viewing the hostel as a traditional symbol of the WASU, Solanke was unbearably distressed by the issue of its closing. While most students in the WASU supported the executive committee's decision to close the South Villas hostel and continue to operate the Chelsea Embankment hostel, Solanke did everything he could to resist this policy. He worked independently to request for financial support from government staff, Labour Party MPs, and intellectuals, to continue operating Africa House. Solanke, already 70 years of age, gained sympathy but could not convince anyone of financial support. It placed Solanke in opposition with the administration of the WASU about the hostel issue. This coupled with his antagonism toward students moving further to the left politically, meant that he would become increasingly isolated within the WASU. He would ultimately separate from the main faction of the WASU. However, Solanke did live the rest of his life in Africa House in South Villas, even after the WASU officially decided to close down the hostel.

On Sept. 2, 1958, Solanke passed away at the age of 72 in a London hospital. Although his funeral service was attended by wellwishers from Parliament, colonial governments, and his family, his final years were undoubtedly marked by loneliness and unbearable anxiety caused by his opposition to the administration of the WASU and his separation from the main faction. In an interview with the author, Solanke's eldest daughter stated that during his final years, "He was very lonely." According to his wife, the hostel's ownership in South Villas was brought to court following Solanke's death, with Solanke's family ultimately losing the case and the property being seized by a public institution.²⁹

Forming a Core of West Africa at the Center of the British Empire

During an interview with the author in Lagos, Nigeria, in August 2005, Solanke's widow, Opeolu Ogunbiyi, spoke on why he decided to open a hostel for African students. According to Opeolu, Solanke encountered severe economic difficulties while studying in London due to being born to a poor farming family in Nigeria. Tuition fees at British universities were inexpensive at that time, and poor self-supporting African students like Solanke could study in Great Britain as long as they could afford their living expenses. However, their difficult financial situation and inability to find lodging due to racial discrimination forced some African students in London to sleep in station buildings, in undergrounds and other such locations. Upon witnessing these poor African students, Solanke decided that

²⁹ Author's interview with Opeolu Ogunbiyi, Lagos (Aug. 24, 2005).

he would open a hostel for them. He would open a hostel in London to provide African students respite, even if it meant only safe lodging for a few days.³⁰

Opeolu, as a wife and Matron, continued to support both Solanke and the hostel activities of the WASU for many years. As a living witness of both Solanke and the WASU hostels, her testimony affirms that Solanke's experiences as a self-supporting student from Africa caused him to devote much of his enthusiasm toward opening and maintaining a hostel for African students in London. Solanke, working out of the WASU, likely became passionate about opening and maintaining a hostel for Africans in London due partly to his experience with poverty.

However, this article is not an attempt to understand the relationship between Solanke and WASU hostels merely from the perspective of his experiences with economic poverty. Instead, it attempts to consider this relationship within a broader spatial or chronological context. A speech given by Solanke to public school teachers and students in Benin City in southern Nigeria, in March 1930 provides some understanding of this topic. During this speech, Solanke spoke of three urgent needs. These were:

- i. the urgent need for all West African Children to acquire and assimilate as quickly as possible the best in Western learning and education based on strong moral character
- ii. urgent need for the establishment and promotion of West African nationalism
- iii. urgent need for the establishment of a Hostel in London for African people³¹

Similarly, while staying temporarily in Freetown, Sierra Leone, during his first visit to West Africa, Solanke, on May 16, 1932, sent a private letter to a member of the WASU, in which he stated the following:

Every leader of thought looks now to WASU and the Hostel as forming a nucleus of West African Nationhood to be later developed into a definite West African Nationality.....Another point of very vital importance is the idea that this hostel scheme is not an END but a MEANS to an end. That is to say, we have several West African problems to solve many of which can be solved through this hostel scheme, and through this present WASU Mission, our people in West Africa, have been made to regard this hostel scheme in this light, i.e. as a means to an end.³²

This suggests that Solanke viewed the WASU hostels as a means to resolving problems in West Africa. In other words, he viewed these hostels not only as facilities for use by associations of African students living in Great Britain or as lodging for African students but as a nucleus for West African nationalism. For this

30 Author's interview with Opeolu Ogunbiyi, Lagos (Aug. 24, 2005).

31 "W.A.S.U. Mission in Benin City", *Daily Times*, Aug. 7, 1930.

32 Solanke, Ladipo, to A. Ade. Ademola, May 16, 1932, SOL Box 30.

reason, Solanke, as in his speech in Benin City, often insisted on the importance of West African nationalism by asking for donations for his hostel during his first visit to West Africa. In the letter mentioned above, he also stated that opening a hostel was not in itself the goal, but instead, a means toward achieving independence and liberation for West Africa and resolving related problems. In this sense, as a Warden devoting his life to opening and maintaining hostels for African students in London, Solanke spent the latter half of his life as a nationalist. For Solanke, opening and maintaining hostels based on the spirit of self-help for Africans living in the British Empire's capital served to fight against imperialism. Most African students studying overseas ultimately returned to Africa after completing their studies in Britain to take leading roles in colonial struggles for independence and liberation. In contrast, Solanke fought imperialism not through combat in his home Nigeria, but opening hostels and doing whatever he could to keep them operating right from the British Empire's center. The WASU hostels must have had a symbolic meaning for Solanke as a nationalist.

This is undoubtedly the reason he was so insistent on applying the spirit of self-help in operating the hostels. As discussed previously, Solanke initially sought a cooperative relationship with the Colonial Office in opening a hostel, but ultimately traveled on his own to British West Africa and spent approximately three years raising funds to open a hostel operated by Africans. Solanke viewed hostels as the symbolic nucleus of West African nationalism, and it is for this reason that he yearned to open a hostel not under the supervision of the British government, but through Africans engaging in self-help.

This way, Solanke began to view the WASU hostels as symbolic of West African nationalism and attempted to achieve his self-help goals. However, the WASU would encounter operational difficulties soon after opening the first hostel and requested financial assistance from the Colonial Office and church-related charitable institutions. At first glance, this reliance on the government and charitable institutions in Britain seemed to contradict the spirit of self-help. However, Solanke did not necessarily see a contradiction between financial reliance on external sources and self-help. For example, in a book published in 1927 before the first hostel opening, Solanke (1927[1969]: 62) explained that self-help does not mean non-cooperation with others, but instead means taking the initiative in all aspects. In other words, an African taking the initiative to open and operate a hostel as a symbol of African nationalism was viewed by him as a form of self-help. Therefore, asking for support or cooperation from external sources to maintain that hostel would itself not necessarily contradict the spirit of self-help.

Conclusion

Solake spent his early childhood and adolescence in nearly constant contacts with Christianity, Western education, and other Western cultural forms. He was, after all, raised by a white missionary and educated in mission schools both in

Nigeria and Sierra Leone. His personality has been shaped in this environment, and Solanke, like other elite Africans born in British colonies, undoubtedly developed some degree of affinity and yearning for Western culture in general and British culture in particular.

However, his experiences while studying in London during the second half of the 1930s with the deeply rooted ethnic and racial discrimination and climate of paternalism in British society began to reinforce Solanke's identity as an "African," albeit belatedly, and convinced him of the importance of the spirit of self-help.

For example, in March 1924, *The Evening News*, a London newspaper, ran an article on cannibalism in Nigeria.³³ That same month, Solanke submitted a letter to *West Africa* magazine, in which he strongly criticized the newspaper article. The article depicted Nigerians as primitive barbarians who eat human flesh and whites as agents on a "civilizing mission" devoted to eliminating such wicked practices. Solanke noted that records indicated that cannibalism was never practiced in Nigeria, and warned that news based on racial prejudice and factual errors could only encourage further racial discrimination against Africans in British society.³⁴

As previously discussed, Solanke sent a submission to *The Gold Coast Independent*, dated January 5, 1935, in which he criticized the imperial sense of racial discrimination in British society while insisting on the importance of self-help.

First and foremost, I should like you to realise that we are now living in the twentieth century, those good old Victorian days having gone beyond recall. The particular point I would wish to bring home to you here is that the days when the Black Man might sit down and fold his arms expecting everything to be done for him, either by the white missionaries or by the British government, are gone, gone forever. The age of "Heaven helps only those who help themselves" has come. Nay, it is the age of "Gbe, gbe, gbe, eniti ko ba gbe tire ehinkule re ni nwon ma ju u si." (Yoruba philosophy) That is to say, it is the age when "everybody must be up and doing; otherwise he will be left behind and trampled upon.³⁵

In this way, Solanke rebelled against the climate of racial discrimination and paternalistic imperialism in Great Britain when he arrived there in the early 1920s. He also viewed opening a hostel for African students as his way of resisting imperialism and attempted to achieve this goal based on the spirit of self-help. Solanke viewed the WASU hostels not only as necessary for the activities of the organization and a place for him and his family to live but as embodying his nationalist efforts to resisting imperialism and win independence for West Africa.

33 *The Evening News*, March 5, 1924.

34 "An Outrage: To the Editor of West Africa," *West Africa*, March 22, 1924, p. 247.

35 Solanke, "The New Year's Open Letter", *The Gold Coast Independent*, January 5, 1935, p. 20.

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