Soji Akinkugbe Oral History Interview

February 16, 2025

Interviewee: Soji Akinkugbe
Interviewer: Dawn Chinagorom-Abiakalam
Location of Interview: WhatsApp call

Biographical Note

Soji Akinkugbe is a trained medical doctor by training and entrepreneur by vocation. He is a third-generation physician who transitioned from clinical medicine into business, particularly manufacturing, where he has worked for over three decades. He is committed to local skill development and prioritises the transfer of technical knowledge to indigenous staff to support sustainable production in Nigeria. He is the founder of Colours in Africa, where he leads creative and design direction as a core part of the brand's identity and success.

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Technical Note

This interview was recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed from an MP3 audio file. The transcript has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity and readability while preserving meaning and content.

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Dawn Chinagorom-Abiakalam: So my name is Dawn Chinagorom- Abiakalam and today is February 16th and I'm recording an oral history interview for the Nigerian Stories Archive and I would like you to introduce yourself please.

Soji Akinkugbe: Okay, I'm Soji Akinkugbe, medical doctor by training, third generation doctor, but I'm an entrepreneur by vocation. I've been doing this for now about 35 years in different fields of business, but mainly as a manufacturer.

DCA: Okay, well that sounds really cool and we're going to circle back to your medical training and then now your business, but for some basic background, would you mind telling us what part of Nigeria you are from and a little about your childhood and where you grew up?

SA: Okay, well I come from Ondo State and that's an Ondo town, which is where my father comes from and my mother is a Lagosian, so I would call myself, I mean I'm Yoruba, but quite mixed because my father comes from a big structured family in the southwest and my mother comes from Lagos and has a very rich background.

In Lagos, her own mother was half Ghanaian and Lagos, as you may know, is a pot purri of West Africans and a lot of them ended up in Lagos and we do have some of the returnees who, the Creoles who came back from, freed slaves who came back from America or Brazil.

You know, so I do have a little bit of a mix in that regard. So I was born in Ibadan, I was born technically, but then we lived in Ife, I was born in 1967, we lived in Ife until I was seven or so, and my dad was a medical officer in the western region, my mother practiced law in Ife.

I mean, there wasn't too much for a female lawyer to do there, but she had a little practice, you know, and she was a very enterprising lady, she was, and from there we moved to Abeokuta for a year. My father was posted, that year was quite interesting because I got to know Fela's late mother very well, Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti who happened to have been my mother's teacher at some point when she was growing up, so, you know, and so I was very close contact, we used to go to her house.

Quite often she used to bring us water in a tanker because we didn't have water, and then from there we moved to Lagos, and my father got an appointment with the University of Lagos Teaching Hospital and the University of, yeah, as a professor, as a lecturer and a consultant.

So, and then I've been in Lagos since then, so, you know, so I had a good, robust experience in the south-west as it were, so I have friends in different areas, you know, I've formed friends in Ife, in Abeokuta, and then I went to school in Ibadan in ISI where I met Akanimo, so I would say that I would say I'm a solid product of the south-west and then ended up in Lagos, to do my university and I've lived in Lagos since then.

DCA: Yeah, wow, it sounds like you had a really varied experience growing up. One thing I want to ask about based on what you were talking about is kind of the differences in the different towns you grew up in. So you mentioned living in Ife for a bit, and then Abeokuta

where you met Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and then Lagos again. So in the time you were growing up, how do you remember all these places being different in terms of what was happening culturally and what the social norms were?

SA: Well, I mean Ife at that time had the University of Ife. It was just new, you know, and Ife University of Ife was a very cosmopolitan setting. It was an Awolowo project, and the Vice Chancellor was Professor Oluwasanmi who was married to, who went to Georgetown University and was married to, his wife was a West Indian. She was an editor with one of the publishing houses. Ife was very cosmopolitan, you had lecturers from literally everywhere in the world, everywhere. You know, so even though it was a remote town, we also had the opportunity to be quite close to the Oba, the Oni of Ife, Adesoji Aderemi.

We used to go to church, same church on Sundays, and then from there he would put my brother and I in his Rolls Royce. We would go to see the palace, and then my parents would come and pick us up in the late early afternoon, they would have had lunch. And he would send us off with a crate of Coke, which was boy, which was a real treat, because I mean it's not like today whereby these things are two for a penny, it was a real treat to have those privileges.

Then we moved to Abeokuta, which was another civil service town, you know, wasn't as cosmopolitan as Ife was, but Abeokuta was a very old, you know, probably the oldest, the center of Christianity in the Southwest. So you've got old schools there, you know, and strong civil service, and so they were quite characteristically different. I mean, Ife had this tertiary institution, which was miles ahead, it was what you would almost call a liberal arts college, if I was going to describe it today, by American standards, you know, the architecture, the topography, just everything was just so well ahead of its time, you know, and then of course full of youthful young people, you know, and then you had a very strong drama scene, you know, Duro Ladipo, Wole Soyinka. You know, so it had a very, very strong drama scene, so from a very young age, we're very used to going to the theater, Omo Olokun theater group, you know, which was one of the birthplaces. In Abeokuta, we saw quite a little bit of drama, which was also Herbert Ogunde, who had a traveling troupe, you know, so we were very, very well exposed.

And then of course coming to Lagos, which was very, very different to both, you know, but still very different to what it is today. I mean, Lagos is a real, real mega city, has probably lost the character that it had then, you know, and taken on a different type of character today, but that's really, you know, to describe it in a nutshell, that's what it was.

DCA: Yeah, that sounds super interesting. And I also picked up, you talked about quite a number of women that you knew that were working at this time. So like your mom had a law practice in Ife, and then the wife of the vice chancellor, who was an editor at the publishing

house, and then you also knew Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. I was wondering if you could talk a little about how women working was perceived at that time, specifically women doing white collar jobs, and then also a little more about Mrs. Funmilayo, because I think there's lots that is known about her in our history, but some people don't also know a little about what she did outside of being the first woman in Nigeria to drive a car.

SA: Well, my working women was not new to me. My late grandmother, Elsie Femi-Pearse, was in the action group with, she was a youth leader with Awolowo. So working women was already, before even my mother's time, when you are already in the midst of women who are educated and should we say independent of sorts, then it doesn't come to you as a surprise that women can hold their own as it were.

So for a lot of people in my own contemporaries, I would say that my own background was not the ordinary, if you understand, it was not the ordinary then, because having a grandmother who was, in fact, a street in Victoria Island is named after her for the work she did in Lagos State, not because she was a landowner there, but because she was recognized, and it's still named after her till today, Elsie Femi-Pearse. So basically, you know, it wasn't, when you were born into something, then it doesn't seem as though you just assumed everybody's like that.

DCA: Yes.

SA: So with Mrs. Ransome Kuti, you know, we were young, I was probably about five or six or six or seven or something, you know, there was a lot of mystique, I mean, Fela was already quite well known, you know, her house was very quaint, she had a piano, she used to play the piano in her house, and when we went there, you know, even just her eyes, you know, made you sit where you were meant to sit, you know, but she was very kind, you know, she would offer us biscuits and this and that, and my mother would, you know, go on and, you know, have a chit chat and this and that. And of course, because they were, my mother was also very interested in pushing the agenda of the female child, as it were, the girl child, you know, so they had a lot of commonalities, and my mother was, what do I say, looked up to her as a role model, you know, to ensure that she got as much as possible out of her, you know, so, but you know, to us, she was like, like, like a grandmother, if you know what I mean, that's what she looked like to us, you know, a kind grandmother. But we definitely knew that she was a very important person. I mean, I got to know her son, Fela, very well, I got to know her brother, her son, Onikoye, the former minister of health, you know, also very well, because he was also my dad's colleague, you know, and I mean, I got to know the whole family in different ways as it were, you know, but this was a really close encounter, which I still remember very well, 50 years on.

DCA: Yeah. Well, that sounds super interesting. And you also talked about Ife being this really cosmopolitan place with lots of people from different places. And so one thing I was wondering if you remember a little about is kind of what the city or the area felt like a post war, because my, I'm guessing, and I'm not sure it could correct me is that there were probably lots of people in Ife who were from the Southeast who had to leave and I was wondering if you remember anything about what that experience was like after the war with people who may have been from the southeast of Nigeria or from that region.

SA: Well, you know, this was post war anyway, you know, so this was post war. So, and then, you know, as a young child, you really didn't really know people by their tribes, you know, we didn't really know people by their tribes, you know. Nigeria was more more to us anyway as a child, of course, to my parents, probably, they saw things from a slightly different perspective.

You know, and because it was a young university, I don't know whether there were already that many people from the southeast. I think maybe places like Ibadan would have had more people from the southeast who had had to leave, you know, but Ife University started I think in 1966, which was just about the time the civil war started. So I'm not sure, you know, I can't really remember, even off the top of my head, anybody who came from the southeast, you know, I can't really remember. I mean, there probably was, but I can't really remember.

DCA: Yeah, well, that's really cool. And earlier in the interview, you mentioned that you were a doctor by training, and now you do business. And I was wondering if you could talk a little about your career journey and what inspired you to go into medicine and also how you transition from medicine into being a business person.

SA: Well, I would say that, you know, I found, medicine was extremely interesting, I was young to get into medical school, I enjoyed medical school, but at the time I was finishing, you know, this was the beginning of the brain drain, you know, where young doctors were leaving and I didn't feel I was really ready to leave then, you know, and I just had started this business making clothes, you know, and I just felt, you know, when you're young, you're foolish or naive, I thought, okay, let's explore it, you know, and I was earning more than I was as a doctor already, so I just said, you know what, you know, let me give it a sabbatical, which I will still say I'm still in the sabbatical, you know, 30 plus years after, you know, and so it wasn't, what do I say, it wasn't. It was, it was a natural curiosity, should I say, you know, that allowed me, even though many years after my father said that to me that he knew that from my fourth year in university, he knew that I wasn't going to practice medicine, he had already seen it.

DCA: Yeah, and you also talked about the beginning of the brain drain, what was that time like and what do you think were some of the drivers in catalyzing lots of doctors to leave?

SA: It was purely economic, it was purely economic, you know, and then, you know, you have the herd factor, you know, one person leaves and then another person leaves and then another person leaves.

It's not that people felt it was better, you know, because a lot of people who left, it was many, for many of them, it was, you know, their first time to travel out of Nigeria, you know, so it doesn't just know, you know, that they had had privileges of traveling abroad and they knew what life was like.

So for a lot of them, their children are the ones who have had the hard stake as it were, you know, become first generation of that country and, you know, and that's why, you know, sometimes the issue of relation, understanding the cultural norms, you know, because they didn't go through, you know, when you arrive in a country at 25 and you're born in the country, the way you perceive it is completely different.

DCA: Yes, absolutely.

SA: So it was purely economic, just purely economic.

DCA: And then, so in that case, why did you, I guess, not have the same, were there any specific reasons why you did not have the same drive like other doctors or the same, I don't want to call it drive, but like desire to leave the country, the way lots of other doctors at the time did.

SA: Well, as I said, I had already started the business, I was already earning, you know, seemingly earning well, I don't know whether I did it, was the right decision 30 years after, but, you know, at that then, you know, it seemed as though there was a lot to explore, you know, and there's still a lot to explore, you know. So I would say, you know, and, you know, I just felt that it wasn't, maybe also because I was privileged to have been traveling from a very young age abroad. You know, so, you know, the sort of sort of discovery of going to live abroad wasn't something I was so over and above the moon about, you know, and also, you know, my dad went to school abroad, you know, worked abroad and came back to Nigeria, you know, when you have a forebear who can, you have seen what it's like, you know, so I could see what life was like, you know, many years ahead. I mean, I was also very privileged, you know, I was very privileged. I mean, there's a story that I share, you know, Nigerian doctors were at the height of it, in the 70s and 80s, used to have doctors from the UK come to, come to Nigeria to come and examine when they had postgraduate exams.

And I remember when I was in my form four, you know, and we were home on midterm and who was staying in our house in Unilag, Dr. George Pinker, who was the obstetrician to Diana, Princess of Wales. And, you know, we had dinner together on the table, he was staying in my

sister's room, and so he said to my mother, oh, Funke, I have a little bit of gossip for you, you know, the,the throne has a spare because William was born, you know, and this was Harry. So this was the level at which Nigerian professionals were at, you know, and you know, so he was telling her that Diana was with child, with another boy, you know, in our house in Unilag, you know. I mean, that could, could you imagine that happening today, you understand, you know. So when you look at it in the context of it, you see how far Nigeria has regressed.

DCA: Yeah.

SA: And maybe that's why this sort of archive that you're trying to do gives some sort of context to, you know, where we were, you know, and, and whether by omission or commission have allowed ourselves to go to get to.

DCA: Yeah. And I'm hearing about all this for the first time because when I think about the medical field in Nigeria, I think about it as something that has always been pretty much backward. So it's very interesting to hear that there was a time that things were not the way they are now.

And as somebody in the medical field yourself, you have watched that regression happen firsthand. I was wondering if you had any specific thoughts on how that happened over time or if there were any things that catalyzed that or if it was like a slow process or a quick one. Because in my memory of my life, when I think about the medical field in Nigeria, I just think about it as something that has always been behind. And so it's interesting to hear now.

SA: No, it wasn't behind them.

DCA: Yeah.

SA: You had the House of Saud,, the Saudis, they used to come to UCH for medical treatment. The House of Saud, the Saudis, the royal family, they used to come to UCH for treatment.

DCA: Wow.

SA: Yeah.

DCA: Wow.

SA: So I would say it was purely economic, you know, mainly economic, or maybe even aspirational, you know. Oil money came, we ended up with a very strong Naira, you know, so it

just made it seem as though we could buy a lot from abroad for doing nothing, should I say, or for very little.
So it led to us not developing our country the way, and then of course we then had all the coups, and then we had corruption become a behemoth upon us, and, you know, so it was systematic, it was a systemic decay, you know. But I think at the height of it was, when a people lose their sense of direction, as it were, then everything, then you're just, you know, you're fodder for anything.

DCA: Yeah. Yeah. Wow. This is very interesting to learn because I'm hearing about a lot of this for the first time. And then even speaking on oil money and like the coups, I know people always talk about what the, I want to say, atmosphere was at the time these things were happening. And so I was wondering what your memories are of the general culture and the general vibe of the country at the height of like, you know, the oil boom and the different military coups and the transition from military rule to democracy.

SA: Well, you know, being young, you know, I mean, you look at things from the perspective of your age, if you get what I mean, but clearly in hindsight, because, you know, you only see things well after they've occurred, you know. But clearly what was clear was that aspirations or should I say aspirations were not in keeping with a country of growth, you know, and there were some voices, you know, who were making the right noises about where we are and how we were wasting the opportunities, but they were drowned. They were just not enough, you know, the tipping point, you know. And of course, money is like, it's like a drug as it were, you know, I mean, all of a sudden, you know, I'm able to buy a car that I could, couldn't afford before, you know, I could take all my children abroad all the day, you know, and then, you know, it gives me a sense of value that you haven't earned, you know, and that became a national malaise as it were.

DCA: Yeah. Yeah no, that makes sense. And I, it's very interesting to see that we are still facing repercussions for some of that and something I find interesting also is just like watching Nigeria over time and seeing how our culture has changed in terms of what we now value and what we now focus on.

Earlier in the interview, you mentioned the drama culture in Ife and also in Abeokuta. And so my parents are very big drama people. So I say, child, I remember them taking us to the National Theatre and now sometimes we go to see plays at Terra Kulture, but I don't remember that being a big thing that people did in general. So it was interesting to hear you talk about that. And I was wondering if you could talk a little more about the arts and how people experienced them in your childhood and how you think that has changed over time.

SA: Well, I mean, if you look at our culture, you know, our culture is in, art is embedded in our culture.

DCA: Yes.

SA: The way we marry, the way we bury, you know, everything is a song and a dance.

DCA: Yes.

SA: So it's embedded in our culture. You understand, you know. Well, I mean, you had everything around the village square, even in small towns, you know. So they're having the Yam festival. There's a ceremony. You're having the rainy season. There's a ceremony. You're having this harvesting. There's a ceremony. So, you know, unfortunately, should I say, we didn't extract as much value from it as possible to make it more of, I mean, the National Theatre was built upon the Festac event, which was, you know, the largest aggregation of Africans or Black people of African descent. Who came into one place to come and perform. It was a very visionary event, but probably, you know, maybe it was an event that, again, that was oil money, as it were. You know, Festac town was built on the back of that. The National Theater was built on the back of that, you know, but maybe, again, you know, you went for the mega as opposed to going, you know, having small pockets of things going on steadily, you know, that are more sustainable and scalable. But meanwhile, you went to the highest peak and then you couldn't come down from it again.

DCA: Wow. And in terms of what you think of the current culture we have with arts, like with music and film, I guess, what are your thoughts on that in, I guess, relation to where we're coming from?

SA: I mean, I'm pretty happy with, you know, with where we are with the music, you know. Even though I think, you know, it's to imagine that who was who's been the benefactor. The musicians have all been a benefactor of Fela Ransom-Kuti or Anikulakpo Kuti, you know. And he was, he gave music generously and his content of the music was more of a cry of the people. Now, the commercial side of it has been extracted, but the, the, the, should I say the message side of it has not been well supported. Maybe people just want to listen to feel good now. That's all people just want to, you understand. So, I mean, my worry is that if the music doesn't have roots, it might just pass away, you know, you know, and because for something to have roots, it has to, for something to have roots, it has to have a message that is beyond the now, you know. If we look at also, Bob Marley, you know, it's the same kind of thing, you know, Bob Marley remains an eternal messenger because of the content he had to share, you know. So, so

now, now with the Nollywood, you know, I don't really watch Nollywood much, you know, because it's like all the same, you know, it's all, you know, it's all juju and this and that. And, you know, but maybe that's what people want to see, you know, we're now in this fast phase in this TikTok world that everybody just wants to be entertained, you know, you just want to be this sort of make believe, you know, you know, life and, you know, so I don't know, you know. But I think we still have a rich culture which we must still cherish and we must still be subservient to that is my worry that, you know, we're not, we're not being culturally, what can I say, we're not being respectful of rich culture that we have been blessed with, you know, again, you know, maybe until our white colonial masters make something of it, that's when we'll appreciate it.

DCA: You know, can you talk a little more about that, like how you see that playing out in terms of people not respecting the culture and what you think has to change or what you think people can do in order to get that and why you think it's beneficial for people to have their respect for culture?

SA: Well, I think, you know, I think the challenge in Nigeria today is, as you mentioned, you know, when a people's value is money, then it's easy to be swayed, you know, we don't have icons in our society anymore. Real icons, icons of truth, icons of dignity, icons of culture, you know. So when you're in a society that is all about feeding you with what you want to be fed, we're not learning from, you know, the people who we should be at their feet and, you know, just being happy to be at their feet, just being there, you know, so that I think is, it's a moral decay, should I say, it's a moral decay.

Again, you know, all this also falls at the fact that education has not been given the priority that needs to be given, you know, so education of our culture, education of our being, you know, so it just becomes a situation of who can spend the most, gets the most attention.

DCA: Yeah, yeah, that all rings true. And then for my final question before we round up is when you look forward because you are in a very interesting place in history where you've watched lots of transitions that have happened quickly, both positive and negative. And I guess when you look forward, what are some hopes you have or some expectations you have of what Nigeria and Nigerians can be looking forward?

SA: Well, Dawn, to be honest with you, I think this sort of project you're doing is, these are the things that they're going to, you know, cause us to look back. You know, I'm happy that people are recognizing that they need for us to look back. They need to capture what is passing us, you know. So whilst the outlook might look grim, you know, I know that you only need a few actors who can hopefully compound together or crystallize and then we can have a tipping

point, you know. Africa must have its own say and it can only have its own say the way it wants to. It's got to define its own way, you know.

I mean, I'll tell you something. Do you know that my parents' wedding was announced in Jet Magazine in 1960?

DCA: In the American Jet Magazine?

SA: Yes, in the American Jet Magazine, yeah.

DCA: Wow.

SA: I will send you the article.

DCA: Wow. That's really cool.

SA: So the African Americans looked to the continent because they wanted to know what was going on here. The pictures of Malcolm X here in Ibadan in the early 60s, Langston Hughes, real American icons, African American icons. But then when the brain drain started in the mid-70s and this and that, they probably just thought, you know what, these guys can't look after themselves. They have to come to America.

So even that, you know, that bond that we could have with, you know, with African Americans or people of African descent all around the world, you know. I mean, if we could just look at how we could use economic power intentionally for ourselves, it could change the continent, whether it's tourism, whether it's fashion. And we were seeing it in music, but we don't own the streaming platforms. So the people who own the streaming platforms who are non-Nigerian, you know, they're getting 90% of the money away, they're getting whatever, 5% or whatever.

So we have to be intentional about it. Nobody gives you anything for free.

DCA: And I guess one last question is, do you think, because people have this view, I also have this view, but do you think looking back is essential to help us to get our act together? Because I'm the way I'm thinking about it now that I know how Nigeria used to be, because I guess I hear lots of tales of how we were great before, but I think this interview is one of the first times I'm realizing just how good things were before.

Do you think it's helpful? All this looking back, and I guess rechecking our notes? Do you think that could be helpful in informing young people in strategizing for how to get our act together for the future?

SA: I definitely think so because we stand on the shoulders of those before us. I think right now, people feel that there's no connection in the past, you know, so there's no bridge. But when people have a sense of this is where we were, it gives them a sense that you know what, let's try and capture some of it back. It's not going to be the same, you know, which is fine. But at least, even if it's just a sense of our being, because, you know, right now we act anyhow because we, you know, our being is not there. Once our being is there, then it's much easier.

DCA: Yes, that sounds, yeah, thank you for that. That sounds really good. And I guess I don't have any more questions for you, but I was wondering if you had anything else you wanted to share before we end the interview today?

SA: No, it's fine. I've enjoyed this thoroughly.

DCA: Thank you. Me too. I've learned so much from you. Thank you so much for doing this and for spending your time today sharing your experiences
with me.

SA: My pleasure. My pleasure. Thank you. All the best.

DCA: Thank you so much. Have an amazing day. Thanks.

SA: And you too. Bye-bye.

DCA: Bye.