

Abstract

This paper examines social mobility and the 'politics' of representation of ill health in Yoruba popular cultural imagination. It uses **interpretive textual analysis** to gain insight into the nuances of representation of illness and disability in the music of Yusuf Olatunji. It argues that the projection of the elite or celebrity body as almost immune to ill health and disability produces new social meanings of illness reinforced by a denialist effect in the face of potential threats to well-being. Such representations need to give way to new narratives or ways of popularly communicating bodily afflictions order to rescue society from the denialist syndrome it currently suffers and the implications of such for development.

Well Being

- Epidemics and general illness have been major problems militating against well being.
- Attempts to make sense of health issues or challenges often disregard cultural imaginations of the people

Yusuf Olatunji



Born around 1909 in Gbegbinlawo, Ogun State Nigeria. Popularly called Baba Legba, he lived most of his life in Abeokuta. Travelled and performed widely across South-West Nigeria and the West African coast. Became famous with *sakara* music (a form of vocal music popular among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria and other parts of West Africa coast. Performed at big social functions. Died in 1978 after producing over 33 albums

Yusuf Olatunji ('Yegede')



17th album. Sang of his victory after a major illness that threatened both his life and career. The title track deals with Olatunji's personal experience with illness. While the exact illness was shrouded in secrecy, he sings about power to overcome tribulations resulting from ill health

Theory and Method

- **social reconstructionism** (Emielu:2011)
 - perceives African (popular) music as 'a social concept which is constructed or created through prevailing socio-historical processes' (2011: 379)
- **interpretive textual analysis**
 - has the capacity to reveal the subject position from which a person communicates a message based on the peculiar contexts within which the communication process takes place. Since subject positions could be a reflection of identities, the particular for of projection that an individual makes of the self often has far reaching implications for the public perception of them.

Symbolism and Imagery

Oun to se 'gun to fi pa lori

What befell the vulture that made its head bald

Ti'ru e ba s'agbo won a ti yo'wo e

Should a similar fate befall the ram, it would have lost its horns

Oun to se'la ti'la fi ko

The fate that befell the okro that made it dry

Ti'ru e ba se'kan a w'ewu eje

Should a similar fate befall the eggplant, it would be bloodied.

Oun to s'olowo to fi n roju

The fate that befell the rich that makes him brood

To ba se talika won a ti gbagbe e

Conclusion

Issues of ill health and disability are still being dealt with in an atmosphere defined by considerable secrecy in various communities across Africa. It becomes more significant when affliction relates to the elite or celebrity body. The imagined invincibility of the celebrity elite body stems from the need to preserve the image of such people as possessing some form of power and being immune to the machinations of perceived adversaries. The particularity of composition in 'Yegede' drives home this point in a significant manner worthy of sustained interrogation.