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# Murder of a leftist-feminist

By Edwin Madunagu

ON August 25, 1978, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria under General Olusegun Obasanjo published a White Paper on the report of its judicial investigation of the "Ali must go" students uprising which shook the country four months earlier. Through that statement, the government confirmed the repressive and punitive actions it had either taken or were widely expected in the Nigerian Left: the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) was formally proscribed and its leaders detained; several students were expelled from NUNS-affiliated campus unions across the country and banned from re-admission any time in the future; two university vice-chancellors (Lagos and Zaria) were removed from office; one senior assistant registrar and a medical director in the University of Lagos were dismissed. Also dismissed - with immediate effect - were four University of Ibadan lecturers, two University of Calabar lecturers, a lecturer at the Polytechnic, Ibadan and the political editor of *Chronicle*, a state-owned newspaper published in Calabar.

In the national uproar that followed this announcement, a remarkable woman stepped out in Calabar. That woman was Ingrid Essien-Obot: a German by birth, Nigerian by marriage and internationalist by ideological choice. She had, before now, become known but only in core-revolutionary circles in Calabar, as Comrade Star. Born in July 1944, Ingrid became radicalised at the University of Heidelberg where she read psychology. She became a leftist, a feminist and an activist socialist. She married a Nigerian and, together, they moved to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1972 as lecturers. From Nsukka Ingrid transferred her services to the newly-established University of Calabar in 1976; but her husband moved into business and politics, also in Calabar.

Ingrid carried her militant feminism and socialist activism from Germany to Nsukka and then to Calabar. Along the line, a new

revolutionary consciousness - pacifist humanism - also blossomed in her. This rare revolutionary combination, unique and enviable to many, was however to cost us her life. For we had reasons to believe that if Ingrid had defended herself against her attackers in the night of Tuesday, April 21, 1981, she could have either repelled the murderers or attracted outside intervention. By the time Ingrid was murdered in her campus residence she and her husband had five children: a girl, born in Germany and four boys, born in Nigeria - the last in 1978. Ingrid was brilliant, physically imposing, bold and courageous in revolutionary struggle but shy and pacifist in private life.

Between her arrival in Calabar in 1976 and the university purges of August 1978, Ingrid carried out her revolutionary activities like an isolated humanitarian social worker. The fact of being a white as well as a woman, a mother and a wife in a patriarchal society initially constrained her revolutionary impulses. So, she restricted herself to contributing radical articles in local newspapers and magazines and speaking in radio and television programmes.

Ingrid shocked her readers and listeners and at times, embarrassed her families in Nigeria and Germany with her revolutionary views on women's rights, workers' struggle, capitalist exploitation and imperialism. As a Marxist psychologist, her views on depression, self-doubt, beliefs in witchcraft, superstition, etc, were to say the least, not only against the "current", but explosive. In addition to teaching her courses in the Department of Sociology, she organised extra lessons for her students and other students who were not taking her courses. She organised counselling sessions with students and non-students. She also played active roles in the organisation and struggles of the University of Calabar chapter of NAUT and its successor, ASUU.

It was in September 1978, shortly after the "Ali must go" purges that Ingrid "stepped out." By "stepping out" I mean that she be-

came involved in explicitly political activities within and outside the university. She demanded to know why the military dictatorship which, a few months earlier, had gunned down several university students who were protesting the increases in school fees should now order the rustication of many more students and the dismissal of several university teachers and administrators across the country. Having stepped out into radical but non-partisan politics, Ingrid refused to step back, not even for one moment, not even when her husband became a state commissioner, until her life was violently terminated. At the time of her murder she was serving as Secretary of the University of Calabar chapter of ASUU. Today, more 36 years later, Comrade Star is still on the list of unresolved murders in Nigeria.

Many of us, male revolutionary Marxists, thought we held revolutionary views on women's liberation until we met Comrade Star. But she smiled and challenged us: "Freedom for a woman is meaningful if it includes the freedom to associate with whom I like, to spend my money on what I please, to choose the topic and ways of communication, to decide on my own life-plans and follow them, to decide what I talk about and with whom, to go and come as I like and go where I like, to choose the type of relationship I like and decide whether it should include sex or not. Women are not free to do these things but I consider them human rights. Women have a right of existence when they are owned by men. A woman not owned is made use of in the filthiest way, and in the most degrading manner. We must bear their children; we must yield to their sexual whimsies, but our own sexual needs are immoral!" She was addressing a closed meeting in Calabar in 1980.

In marginal notes she wrote while reading the book: *The liberation of women: a study of patriarchy and capitalism*, Ingrid said: "Women must liberate their sexuality. Sexual satisfaction has a physical component which women neglect; men neglect the

mental component"; "women's life is determined by their men's status"; "men define their role, women live it; when will women define and live their own lives?"; "the experience of the oppressed is the relevant experience and should be the basis of analysis"; "it is wrong for feminist analysis to start from biological differences; every analysis, including the feminist analysis, should start off from the experience of oppression".

Criticising some Marxists for what she saw as sectarianism and sexism, Ingrid asked rhetorically: "Do you want to say that a woman who does not see her oppression as part of the capitalist oppression has no right to protest it? Do you want to say that a woman who is beaten by her husband, and when she runs to her family is beaten because of running away, and when she returns to her husband is beaten for having run away (in the first place), has no right to join a movement which aims at protecting her without realising the economic cause of her being mistreated? Do you want to argue that a woman who is part of, or active in, a purely feminist movement has no right to join a revolutionary socialist movement?"

Ingrid's pacifist humanism was, even to her comrades, an enigma: Though endowed with imposing physical build and unusual strength and energy, though she was frequently an object of provocation, Ingrid would not be drawn to violence, not even in self-defence! She would never quarrel with a woman because she saw herself in every woman. She was not only generous (to a fault, one would say) but had contempt for material accumulation. Her passion for justice was immeasurable.

In a 1982 tribute, Comrade Biodun Jeyifo wrote: "To Ingrid: Courageous, indomitable and irrepressible in life; in death remembered now and always by the comrades and the oppressed whose cause she totally and militantly made her own and to whom her exemplary devotion and selflessness remain sources of rededication to the great cause of socialist humanism."