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For our departed radical patriots

January 2010

**by
Edwin Madunagu**

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Calabar - NIGERIA

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1.

I left Calabar for Uyo, capital of neighbouring Akwa Ibom State, on Tuesday, August 11, 2009. It was to be a four-day trip and I had negotiated the services of a professional driver who also happens to be my friend. It was my first movement out of Calabar since I was discharged from the hospital about three months earlier. The purpose of that trip was two-fold: to “stretch out”, thereby testing the state of my recovery; and to see some comrades I had not seen, or heard about, for quite a long time. In the event I discovered that though I was recovering fast, I had slightly exaggerated the speed of recovery and under-rated the supportive power of my home and immediate family. I absorbed the lessons. The first on the list of comrades I planned to meet was Udo Atat, a retired professional television cameraman.

Ordinarily the drive from Calabar to Uyo would take about 90 minutes. But with the really deplorable condition of the federal road linking the two state capitals the journey took about three hours. On getting to Uyo I asked the driver to head for Abak Road. I told him I wanted to see Udo Atat even before settling the question of accommodation. As the driver struggled to find the easiest route to enter Abak Road, I phoned a lawyer-comrade of mine in the city. I wanted to confirm that Udo Atat had not changed residence. But rather than answer my question the lawyer called me “Comrade” in a tone suggesting either that something had happened to Udo Atat, or to assure

(*) First published in *The Guardian*: October 1, 8 and 15, 2009.

himself that I was the one at the other end. "What is the matter, or is Atat dead?", I asked, now literally trembling. To cut a long story short my lawyer – comrade announced to me that Comrade Udo Atat, the great humourist, a trained revolutionary combatant, who earned a living as a professional television cameraman, died "about two years ago". It was enough. I went to look for a place to lie down.

When I returned to Calabar on Friday, August 14, 2009. I started mourning – not just for losing Udo Atat, such a fine human being and great patriot, but for losing him without knowing. Three weeks later, on Saturday September 5, 2009, at about 9.20am, Kayode Komolafe of ThisDay newspaper sent me a text message: "So sad. Gani is dead". And less than 48 hours after Gani Fawehinmi's death, in the early hours of Monday, September 7, 2009, a young friend phoned to announce that Comrade Assim Otto Assim Ita, another trained revolutionary combatant, had died an hour earlier at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital. This series of "bombardments" - Udo Atat, Gani Fawehinmi and Assim Ita - explains the absence of this column last week.

I am now painfully aware, more than ever before, that the "old guard", the pre-globalisation generation of the radical political platform in Nigeria is disappearing and is not being renewed in a manner I would have wished. I cannot say "not being renewed", as some people say. This will be false, or at least, hopelessly subjective. I would rather say "not being renewed in a manner that corresponds to the revolutionary tasks of the time" - tasks defined by the new imperialism, globalist capitalism, deepening poverty, violence and general insecurity, internal colonialism (most recently discussed by Biodun Jeyifo in his Sunday Guardian column) and the "global war against terror". The

“disappearance” to which I refer is both as a movement and as individuals. I must hasten to add that this situation can be analysed, understood and explained in historical terms. This is, however, not the central subject of this piece.

My limited aim here is to remember some recently departed Nigerians whose common denominator can be taken as radical patriotism. And by “recently” I mean, in the last two decades. The long list would include: M. E. Kolagbodi, Wahab Goodluck, Dapo Fatogun, Tony Engurube, Niyi Oniororo, Ernest Etim – Bassey, Iwok Udo-Unam, Comrade Ola Oni, Jonas Abam, Kanmi Ishola-Osobu, Aka-Bashorun, Armstrong Ogbonna, Gambo Sawaba, Margaret Ekpo, Bade Onimode, S. G. Ikoku, Michael Imoudu, Mokwugo Okoye, Ita Henshaw, Bala Usman, Ikenna Nzimiro, P. A. Curtis Joseph, Edet Uno, Oyo Orok Oyo, Udo Atat, Omafume Onoge, Gani Fawehinmi and Assim Ita.

If, from this long list, I focus on those with whom I had one-on-one intensive interaction - in the course of duty - but to whom I have not paid tributes in this column, the list would reduce to: Ernest Etim-Bassey, Jonas Abam, S. G. Ikoku, Mokwugo Okoye, Udo Atat and Assim Ita. Of Course, neither the long list, nor the abridged one, is exhaustive. It is to this much shorter list that I devote the rest of this combined tribute. Gani Fawehinmi is not on the shorter list because I have written much about him – from the time I first encountered him, in 1975, to January 2009. When this exceptional human being died last month I put some of these writings together in a small publication, with a short introduction. The publication, titled Gani Fawehinmi, was distributed, first at the funeral, in Ondo, and then generally.

Chief Ernest Etim-Bassey was born in 1926 in Ikoneto, in Efikland, in the present Odukpani Local Government Area of Cross River State. The territory of his birth is known in history as Western Calabar. He died in Calabar on August 6, 1998 and was buried in Ikoneto on October 25, 1998, after extensive funeral rites in Calabar which included receptions by the Obong's Council and the Cross River State Council of the Nigeria Union of Journalist (NUJ). I received Comrade Etim-Bassey's body at the Press Centre on behalf of the NUJ. In a speech, I called on the NUJ Council to name the Press Centre after the late activist journalist. The proposal was unanimously adopted, and executed, almost immediately – a clear indication of the man's stature in his life time. The Press Centre still bears that name: Ernest Etim-Bassey Press Centre.

Ernest Etim-Bassey was a widely trained, talented, courageous and resourceful journalist, publisher and publicist, super-activist socialist, diplomat, and public servant who fought for the self-determination of the Efiks and against ethnic politics and ethnic domination, corruption and bad government as vigorously as he fought for popular-democracy and socialism. I first met him in Zaria, Kaduna State, at the end of July, 1977. That was during the Second All-Nigeria Socialist Conference. Although both of us came to Zaria from Calabar, and had both been active in radical politics in Nigeria we had not met before – partly because I relocated to Calabar less than a month earlier.

Our subejct, who held the traditional title of Otu Ekong (War Commander) of Efikland, was, at various times, Publisher and Managing Editor of the Nigerian People, a radical newspaper based in Calabar; Chair, Cross River State Council of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ); Chair, Cross River / Akwa Ibom State Boundary Peace

Committee; Nigeria Scout Commissioner for Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Abia, Bayelsa and Rivers States; and Member of OMPADEC. In spite of these positions, Ernest Etim-Bassey suffered political victimization and state harassment almost continuously from 1968 (during the Civil War) till his death 30 years later. The fact is that he was a permanent rebel and agitator – rebel against injustice, corruption and bad government and agitator for justice and transparency. He was always either just out of detention or engaged in agitational acts that could easily lead to arrest, or something worse.

Although I met Ernest Etim-Bassey very early in my life in Calabar, and immediately struck a revolutionary political accord with him, and enjoyed very close personal relationship with him until his death, we never belonged to the same nuclear political organization. But whenever we met and acted it was clear to each of us that we were not idle conspirators, but represented two political centres united on broad objectives and some specifics. Our alliance was always practical. Thus, when our comrade, Ingrid Essien-Obot, a German national, but married to a Nigerian, was found dead in her residence on the campus of the University of Calabar on Friday April 24, 1981, it was Ernest Etim-Bassey and his newspaper, *The Nigerian People*, that joined us to investigate the death.

The newspaper came out with the verdict of “murder” and a clear hint that the crime was a result of a high – profile political conspiracy in which the Nigerian state, some trusted individuals and senior politicians were implicated. And when, against orders and threats from both the government and University authorities, we decided to hold a memorial rally for late Ingrid, a Sociology lecturer, medical psychologist and

mother of five children - one female and four males - in April 1982, on the campus, Comrade Ernest Etim-Bassey courageously honoured our invitation to preside over the event.

In its editorial of May 10, 1981, on Ingrid's murder, Ernest Etim-Bassey's *The Nigerian People* wrote: "You were murdered, because you knew so much about the ten-percenters and gangsters who are scrambling for power and wealth. Your death shall not be in vain. The three murderers shall certainly give testimony to their nefarious act. Rest in perfect peace! Your love and devotion to the cause of the black race, the oppressed and the unprivileged shall remain a shining example for eternity".

2.

In the first part of this combined tribute, I discussed aspects of the life and career of Chief Ernest Etim-Bassey, a radical patriot who died in August 1998. I think I should briefly touch on one of his other experiences before I move on to other departed comrades. Etim-Bassey was born into the Presbyterian Christian faith and had his early education in Presbyterian institutions in Calabar. After working for some time as a radio journalist he traveled abroad for further training in journalism. His religious affiliation weakened and almost disappeared for a long period until the last five years of his life when he joined the One Love Family or Sat Guru Maharaj Ji. It appears he attained great heights in the organization. This movement from orthodox religion to what some people may call “atheism” and finally to unorthodox religion - at the tail and of his life - is a feature that I have found in more than five departed comrades.

I propose that this movement of religious affiliation corresponds, in part, to the rise and decline of radical politics in the country. Beyond this, I found an element of Hegelian dialectics where the third point in dialectical movement (“synthesis”, or “negation of negation”) resembles, but is not a return to, the starting point (“thesis”). I must quickly add, however, that this is not a general movement - experienced by all departed radical patriots and revolutionaries. A prominent exception was Comrade Peter Ayodele Curtis Joseph who died in 2006 at the age of 86 years. Like Leon Trotsky, who was assassinated in Mexico in 1940, Curtis Joseph remained with his “faith” or “non-faith”, through long tribulations and suffering, till the end of his life.

When I arrived in Calabar in mid-1977 I asked my spouse who had relocated there a year earlier to introduce me to just one lecturer at the University whom she could describe as “progressive” or “radical”, but not necessarily a Marxist or a socialist. She mentioned Ime Ikiddeh, a poet, who was teaching English. (Ime Ikiddeh died in October 2008 at the age of 70 years). I asked why she chose Ime Ikiddeh and she replied that she had been impressed by the man’s contributions at meetings of the Association of Calabar University Teachers, or ACUT. It was this association that later became the university’s branch of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) when the latter was formed in 1978. We decided to start our political mobilization, radicalization and organization on campus with Ime Ikiddeh.

It was Ime Ikiddeh who recommended the first set of students that formed the nucleus of what later became the Movement of Progressive Nigerians (MPN), University of Calabar. Some former members of MPN are, today, in very prominent positions in the academi..a, journalism, medicine, law, politics, business and other professions in the country. One of them who became President of the university’s Students’ Union and was expelled and incarcerated in the April 1978 “Ali must Go” rebellion is today a professor of Medicine in the United States of America and also currently serves as a Senior Consultant on Health to a state government.

I must say a word or two about Ime Ikiddeh even though he is not on my list. At a personal level, Ime Ikiddeh was an adviser and counselor to me during the turbulent period that followed the “Ali Must Go” rebellion over which my spouse and I (and others) were arrested and summarily dismissed from our teaching positions. He stood by us during

the three years that our dismissal subsisted, played a leading role in the battle – legal and political – that led to our recall and, of course, collaborated with several people to ensure that we did not starve. Throughout his stay at the University of Calabar, Ime Ikiddeh remained very active, and played leading roles in the affairs of ASUU, becoming the Chair of the Unical branch of the union, I think, more than once.

In March 2003 I sent two of my newly published books – *The making and unmaking of Nigeria* and *Contradictions of Progress* - to Ime Ikiddeh who was then Dean of Postgraduate School, University of Uyo. In acknowledgement he wrote: “My dear Eddie: Thanks a lot for the two fine books you kindly sent to me. I really appreciate the books and started writing a rather long comment on *Contradictions of Progress*. I couldn’t finish it when my health failed, and I couldn’t get back to the work. Many many thanks.” He went on to say other things more personal. Unfortunately, I did not get Ime Ikiddeh’s comments before his final departure. In June 2007, Ime Ikiddeh, now a professor, sent to me copies of his two books that had just been published: *Historic Essays on African Literature, Language and Culture* and *Broken Monodies and Children of the Black Earth: Selected Poems*. I shall, very soon, attempt an appreciation of Ikiddeh’s two books as well as his *Blind Cyclos* which is included in *Ten One-Act Plays*, edited by Cosmos Pieterse and published in 1968 as Number 34 of African Writers Series.

Just as we asked Ime Ikiddeh to introduce some progressive students to us – to form the nucleus of a future radical students’ group - we requested Ernest Etim-Bassey to put us in contact with progressive trade unionists and leftists in Calabar metropolis. Etim-Bassey gave us several names and, after a brief session of question and answer, we

settled on Comrade Assim Ita. The latter then introduced Comrades Ita Henshaw and Udo Atat. These three Marxist activists – Assim Ita, Ita Henshaw and Udo Atat - all now dead, together with my spouse and me, who are still alive, became part of the eight-member foundation of the Calabar Group of Socialists (CGS) formed in August 1977. The other three are also alive: still very active and prominent, though ageing.

As a young worker in Lagos just before Nigeria's independence on October 1, 1960, Assim Ita had joined one of the several radical Marxist groups. About 1964 he was selected by the group to travel abroad for political and military training – for no one could predict the future trajectory of the peoples' struggle in Nigeria. It could as well pass through the phase of armed struggle! Assim first landed in Accra, Ghana. Here he dropped his Nigerian passport and picked up the Ghanaian one. He then flew to Asia. After the training in February 1966 Assim Ita returned to Ghana. Unfortunately he landed in Accra on February 24, the day the military coup d'état that removed President Kwame Nkrumah from power, was staged. Also, unfortunately, Assim Ita's identity had been uncovered before he landed in Accra. He and associates were simply "collected" and taken to prison.

The two military regimes – in Nigeria and in Ghana – later negotiated to have the Nigerian detainees repatriated to Nigeria. To cut a long story short, Assim Ita and his associates, just like detained Isaac Boro, found themselves on the federal side when the Civil War broke out in July, 1967. They defined their immediate duty, as Marxist revolutionaries from the minorities, to be to help defeat Biafra and actualize the new 12-state structure. Their medium-term objective was to overthrow the capitalist, corrupt and tribalistic social order in Nigeria.

The long-term objective was, of course, world revolution.

I must hasten to add that Assim's strategy was one line of thought. There were other lines of revolutionary thought on the the Nigerian crisis and Civil War. For example, several small groups - unfortunately working in isolation from each other - thought of removing both General Gowon and General Ojukwu and re-uniting Nigeria on popular-democratic foundations. This subject is, however, not our main concern in this tribute. As a volunteer on the federal side, Assim Ita commanded one of the strategic units that captured Calabar from the Biafran forces. But after the battle he was asked to enlist in the Nigerian army as a non-commissioned officer, perhaps a sergeant! Assim asked for a commission but the request was turned down. He simply removed his temporary uniform and walked away. As expected, Assim became a "security threat," constantly harassed, in and out of detention. He was still so classified, and treated, when I met him in Calabar in August 1977.

Between August 1977, when I met him, and September 2009 when he died, Comrade Assim Ita tried his hands on several things to earn a living. He ran a bookstore (with me), he operated a typing centre, he sold firewood, he kept a farm (with my spouse and me), and he traded in palm oil. He was, for some time, a full-time revolutionary cadre, supported by two comrades. He fought many battles. Eventually Assim became a village head in Kasuk, a Qua clan in Calabar Municipality. He rose to become Secretary of the Kasuk Qua Clan Council, the de-facto deputy head of the clan and heir-apparent to the Ntoe, the Clan Head.

As for religious affiliation, Comrade Assim Ita was born in 1938 into a Roman Catholic family, with the name Innocent. He later dropped

this name, went through a very long period of "atheism", then experimented with a Pentecostal Assembly and finally went into a thoroughly unorthodox religious grouping. Thus Assim Ita's "religious odyssey" was similar to that of Ernest Etim-Bassey.

3.

In this third, and final, installment, I shall look at the remaining personages on my list and then conclude with an epilogue. On Thursday, October 11, 1990, I left Lagos and traveled to Enugu to meet separately with Comrades S. G. Ikoku and Mokwugo Okoye. These two personages were prominent in the militant wing of pre-independence nationalist movement. I had met them together, in Calabar, 18 months earlier, in April 1989, on the sidelines of a national labour workshop. It was one of those attempts we made to “summon the spirits of the past to the service of the present,” to paraphrase Karl Marx. But in Enugu I met the two old fighters separately.

A prolific writer with several historical, political and philosophical books to his name, Okoye was a foundation member of the Zikist Movement formed in 1946. He rose to become its Secretary-General. He was in and out of prison. Later he formally joined the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) which later became the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (also NCNC). He was very active in the First Republic (1960 - 1966). He was in Biafra during the Civil War (1967-1970). After the war he was appointed to some middle-level public offices and flirted with left-wing electoral politics. In general, however, Comrade Mokwugo Okoye was largely non-partisan, although political, from the end of the Civil War to his death in 1998 at the age of 72.

Comrade Mokwugo Okoye loved writing. He must have written about 25 published books. And none of these is, by any means, a small book. Those that I have seen, and read, are large. They include: Storms

on the Niger: A story of Nigeria's struggle (1964); A letter to Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe: A dissent remembered (1955); Embattled Men: Profiles in Social Adjustment (1980); and the Growth of Nations (1979). They are all copiously annotated with many citations and quotes. Their historical scopes, as well as their theoretical sweeps, are impressive. A comrade once commented - I can't now remember in what spirit - on Mokwugo Okoye's "quotism". The man's Letter to Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe remains, in our context, a classic of radical polemics.

Samuel Ikoku, a trained economist and well-read Marxist, joined the Action Group led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo in the First half of the 1950s. His break with Awolowo, after the Civil War, was as loud and bitter as his dissociation from Nnamdi Azikiwe and the political movement the early 1950s onward. S. G. loved political polemics. He made name by contesting a legislative election in the former Eastern Region against his own father and defeating him. He partook of the tribulations of the Action Group during the First Republic, escaped to Ghana where he worked with Kwame Nkrumah, was repatriated to Nigeria, taught Economics at the University of Lagos, and served as a Commissioner in the Ukpabi Asika administration in the former East Central State. He was in Nigeria during the Civil War (1967-1970).

Ikoku was a foundation member and Secretary-General of the left-wing Peoples' Redemption Party (PRP) in the Second Republic, but later joined the right-wing, but ruling, National Party of Nigeria (NPN). He remained political and partisan until his death in 1997.

I had gone to Enugu in October 1990 in connection with the research I was then conducting into aspects of Nigeria's political history. The result of the research was a 10-part article that was published in my

column in *The Guardian* between November and December 1990 titled Refutation of official history. The subjects I discussed with the two men included the military coups of January and July 1966 and the exact role of Nkrumah's Ghana in our revolutionary struggle. The material conditions in which I met Okoye in particular, were not only poor but, to say the very least, also depressing.

I first met Jonas Abam, a radical Nigerian trade union leader and Marxist socialist of Niger Delta ethnic extraction in 1982 when he came to Calabar in connection with a training seminar organized by the Dockworkers' Union. But before our physical encounter, I had learnt about him from books and the accounts of veteran labour leaders and socialist activists. I had learnt of his arrest, trial and imprisonment – together with others, including a British Labour intellectual, Allen – after the 1964 General Strike. I had learnt – and Jonas Abam confirmed this to me in Calabar – that he and his comrades were “betrayed” by other comrades who were opposed to his “Trotskyism”, another name for the theory and practice of permanent revolution and opposition to ideological “peaceful coexistence”.

After Calabar, I was to meet Jonas Abam again in Lagos in 1988. In this second encounter, we had long sessions together, sometimes with late Comrade Tony Engurube and sometimes with Kayode Komalafe who was then labour reporter in *The Guardian*. My discussions with Jonas Abam helped to “lubricate” the negotiations that produced Paschal Bafyau as President of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). Comrade Jonas Abam died in 1995.

Epilogue: I returned to Akwa Ibom State on Monday, September 21, 2009. The purpose of this return journey was to see the families, or

at least former homes, of some of the departed patriots mentioned in this combined tribute. On this occasion I requested the driver to take it easy with me and with his driving. Before leaving Calabar, I called unannounced at the home of Comrade Assim Ita who died on September 7. Here I met a “civil war”: segments of his nuclear and extended families were giving conflicting interpretations to his legacies and wishes. And I did not think Assim had left any written Will or Testament or had made any authoritative or irreducible pronouncements about himself. It was impossible to settle the “disagreements” – for each segment was holding up a small chunk of the truth. I simply showed “righteous indignation”, performed some private obligations, and left.

At Uyo, capital of Akwa Ibom State, I went to the former home of the late poet and professor of English, Ime Ikiddeh. As I met only children I requested the oldest of them to take me to the residence of Ime’s brother, Ema. I met him and he faintly remembered me. He again recounted how his late brother had suddenly died on October 25, 2008, after a full day’s work which included teaching a class at the University and attending a traditional marriage. I responded with my own testimonies. I spent the rest of the day making enquiries about the whereabouts of the immediate family of Comrade Udo Ata whose death “about two years ago” I had learnt on my first trip. It was shocking that none of the comrades I contacted could offer any usable lead on how to begin to search for the family, or when exactly Atat died, or how. I was not more informed even when I met the comrades – all of them my former students – together at a hurriedly arranged luncheon in my honour. I criticized them, but did not spoil the mood of the gathering.

On the second day of my visit I traveled to the village of Ikot Usop in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area, one of the LGAs bordering Rivers State. The purpose was to see the immediate family, or at least former home, of Comrade Iwok Udounam. A “rugged”, but honest and selfless, trade unionist and committed socialist activist who was always so hungry for knowledge, Iwok had died in his village a very poor man in 1993. But his death was “discovered” only accidentally by comrades more than a year later. I knew what to expect. Iwok’s widow was the first – and, as it turned, the only one – to emerge from the tiny water-logged mud house. Her five children, each with very little formal education, had gone out to battle for survival.

The woman leaned on my shoulders and wept for a fairly long time. After this, I asked her to lead me to her husband’s grave. We stepped inside the house, passed through a corridor and emerged at the back. There was an unmarked tiny space between the house and the kitchen. She pointed and said “Here is your comrade”. I broke down, but quickly recovered. Saying “goodbye” was hard, but I managed to leave after about an hour. She insisted I must take some heads of coconut and a bunch of plantain.

Back in Uyo, I continued the search for Udo Atat’s family. No success. Eventually, in the morning of Thursday, September 24, 2009, someone directed me to a man in Calabar. I immediately returned to Calabar. Before checking on the “reference” man, I went to the house of late Assim Ita where I had met a “civil war” on my way out of Calabar earlier in the week. The situation had worsened with the Traditional Village Council joining the combat. I withdrew as fast as I could. Next, I went to the house of Ernest Etim-Bassey (discussed in the first part)

who died in 1998. There was relative peace in, and around, the compound. Finally, I traced the man to whom I was referred in connection with Udo Atat. He confirmed that Udo Atat was his "distant cousin", that he died "about three years ago" and that he was "bumped off" by "diabolical means".

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