

Unpopular Essays

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Tribute To A Fallen Fighter...

Chukwumerije Never Dies

ABOUT this time last year, somewhere between Owerri and Aba in Imo State, a heavy vehicle overran a taxi cab waiting for its own turn to cross a narrow bridge. A number of people died, one of them, an anxious young man, the type that should never die.

About this time last year, the nation's newspapers began to release the unhappy news, one after the other, almost hesitantly, as if they were afraid to handle the staff.

At the television station at Aba where the expired man had offered his labour power in unfair exchange for money with which to live, another young person got on the air to climax the sordid drama. Instead of his usual programme, he announced a resignation in protest against his establishment's failure to send representatives to the fallen man's funeral.

The reason offered for resignation may appear feeble and unjustified, but at bottom, the broadcaster was denouncing, not merely a callous establishment, but also a society that could no longer be trusted to preserve life, useful life. A society which, by its own contradictions, has become so alienated from itself that it can no longer come to terms with the original purpose of its own existence.

Why did Onyex Chukwumerije die? We must discover the answer to this important question by posing another:

Who really was Chukwumerije? For it is only in examining the exciting person of the expired man that we can see how the contradictions of his society created him, an antithesis for resolving those contradictions. And how one of those contradictions prematurely floored him on that February day.

By the newspaper reports which announced his death one year ago, Chukwumerije was just a university graduate who happened to belong to the first degree of journalism (and therefore had friends and colleagues in most of the major newspapers and broadcast stations of the land).

That characterisation of Onyex was at once an insult and a compliment. Insult, because Onyex never acknowledged the shallow pretences of learning with which our university products pride themselves. For such pretences are always translated into a simplistic quest for the little material things of middle class comfort — and that never was Onyex's forte.

Chukwumerije was not one of those people who thought that because they belonged to a university degree, society owed them a living. Besides, he never saw the university as a supreme enclosure of learning. As far as learning goes, the university in Onyex's eyes, was important in so far as it could be considered part

of the larger society.

Associating him with the university could therefore be considered a compliment if what is meant is that it was in the microcosm of the university that he first undertook a serious study of the Nigerian society.

It was not sterile, academic study. Onyex identified the problems

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and applied himself to solving them, through struggle. One such struggle was the struggle against ethnicity.

When in 1972, the Socialist Union of Nigeria, Nsukka collapsed under the ethnic question, a small informal group emerged from the ruins of the union, dedicated to resolving ethnicity on the campus.

The crisis issue within the socialist union was the contradictory candidacy of two members for the post of president of the students union. While efforts were being made to reconcile the two candidates in the union, some members of the union were engaged (on another level) in reconciling the two Ibo candidates in the race, one of whom was not a socialist, so as to make and ethnic issue of the election.

A number of people left the union in protest against this perfidy. Some completely abandoned the struggle, some tried to reconstitute the socialist club. A third faction co-opted some radicals into a group whose immediate historical mission was to combat ethnicity.

Chukwumerije was in this third formation, a

remarkably loyal member. When the group got involved in subsequent student union elections, Chukwumerije did his share of the work competently, with enthusiasm. The group was also in alliance with the Akinwumi Adeniran faction in NUNS (National Union of Nigerian Students) politics, and there Onyex acquitted himself creditably.

He was a man with inexhaustible reserve of energy. He ate little and slept little, and was a rare blend of hedonism and work.

Chukwumerije's hardest test was in the struggle against the ethnic interpretation which students at Nsukka were giving to the Kunle Adepeju affair in February 1974. The vast majority of Ibo students in the universi-

ty would not observe the Kunle Adepeju day because the martyr was not Ibo. And they were backed by the executive of the student union!

Chukwumerije's group transformed itself into the S.D.S. (Students For A Democratic Society) for the purpose of waging this one struggle.

Chukwumerije's credentials as an Ibo man were never in doubt, but along with the other Ibo members of the S.D.S., his interpretation of his Iboness was in Macro — patriotic terms. He had grown above the primordial stage of group feeling and insecurity and he was determined to pull his countrymen into his high level of social perception. To him, tribalism was a secondary contradiction. Behind every tribal struggle, Chukwumerije identified a concealed self-interest of an elite group who, by themselves, do not hate, but recruit others into hating in furtherance of their personal interests.

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The story of the S.D.S. is a grim account of struggle, of intimidation, defection and triumph. Triumph, and moments of failure and betrayal.

At a point, the university administration entered into a meeting with Ukpabi Asika, then the administrator of the dismantled East Central State. The stand of the university was that the S.D.S. members be expelled as a means of restoring peace to the campus. Asika countered that since it had become apparent that S.D.S. had gathered massive student support, expulsion of their members would only escalate the crisis rather than restore peace.

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After university, Chukwumerije dedicated his time to studying the other contradictions, including the issue of accidents on our roads.

It was becoming clearer and clearer that beyond the various road safety campaigns, there was a simple logic, that is, we have so many accidents on our roads because there are so many vehicles. The bourgeoisie have no commitment to public transportation. They ask everybody to provide himself with a means of transportation. And so there is unmitigated chaos on our roads. The system has introduced its violence and the violence claimed Onyex Chukwumerije one year ago.

It claimed his carcas,

not his spirit, for Chukwumerije never dies. He lives in everybody who fights social injustice, who fights and never betrays.