

For Bene Madunagu at 75

By Edwin Madunagu

This is a revised and updated version of the tribute I paid the subject five years ago, on March 21, 2017 when she became 70 years old. Although she has since then lived largely in retirement and ill-health, she has nonetheless done a number of things - directly and indirectly, alone and in combination with others - that now contribute significantly in defining the essence of her entire adult life. The most significant of these "things" is offered as an Update in the closing paragraphs of this edition.

OUR subject is known officially, especially in the academic world, as Professor (Mrs) Bene Edwin Madunagu; but in the Nigerian Left and in radical and feminist politics within and outside the country, she is simply Comrade Bene. In other spheres she is called Bene, Ben, Mumsy B, Mummy and Auntie Bene. To those old enough to remember the name she was given at birth, and insist on calling her so, she is Benedicta. Her parents, now both dead, were from Afaha-Essang in Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. She had her secondary education at Uyo, Higher Secondary in Lagos and University education in Lagos and Ibadan. Her working experience - mainly research and teaching - has largely been in the University of Calabar.

Bene Madunagu, who turns 75 on Monday, March 21, 2022, is variously described as a feminist, a human rights activist, a humanist, a scholar and teacher, a democrat, a Nigerian patriot, an internationalist, etc. She is all these, and more. Essentially, however, Bene has been and remains a socialist revolutionary and a Marxist. Beyond this general statement I also confirm that Bene and I have constituted a revolutionary cell in the Nigerian Left since January 1975 during the popular struggle against General Yakubu Gowon's military dictatorship. This statement explains why this tribute is bound to have a character that may, in part, appear personal.

The journey began in 1973 at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. That year, our subject, Bene Madunagu (then Miss Benedicta Michael Afangide), was a graduate student of Botany residing in the Main Campus' Female Hostel. I, Edwin Madunagu, was a graduate student of Mathematics residing in the Main Campus' Male Hostel. The hostel where I resided, the hostel where Bene resided and the Faculty of Science where both Bene and I were students were closely located as if by a design of history. As if also by design, Bene's path from her hostel to her laboratory in the Faculty passed in front of my window in the Male Hostel. She passed here - almost

unfailingly - at least four times every day between Monday and Friday, and sometimes as many times on Saturday. This routine was also noticed on some Sundays whenever, as I learnt later, she was conducting experiments in her laboratory that needed close monitoring.

I took note of her goings and comings. My friends knew this and helped me to take note whenever I was unable to do so, and reported to me accordingly at the earliest opportunity! That was before our "fateful encounter." Bene was unaware of both this observation and the fact that it was the first impression she made on me - a powerful impression of commitment and discipline at a time my consciousness was undergoing a rapid revolutionary transformation!

Early that year, 1973, the Postgraduate Students' Association (PSA) of the University of Lagos was formed. In the election that followed the inauguration, Barrister Ayeki became President; I, Edwin Madunagu, became Secretary; and Benedicta Afangide became Treasurer. This girl, with whom I had had no previous contact whatsoever, supported my candidature almost militantly; and for reasons that can be inferred from what I have said so far, I equally supported her nomination militantly. Our relationship had begun - on a political foundation! The other dimensions of the relationship - the ideological, the intellectual, the personal and the passionate - were to develop later: rapidly, I would say.

Later, but still in 1973, I introduced Bene to two non-campus leftist groups - Nigerian Youth Action Committee (NYAC) and Society for Progress (SOPRO). The leadership of the former included Comrade Charles Akinde and that of the latter included Comrade Olu Adebayo and Comrade Jonathan Ihonde. By the middle of 1974, Bene and I had joined the revolutionary Marxist Anti-Poverty Movement of Nigeria (APMON) and could address ourselves and were addressed as revolutionary socialists, Marxists and communists. Our key "idols" in APMON at the time we joined the organisation included Comrade Tony Engurube and Comrade Gbolaga Akintunde. I can also confirm that by the middle of 1974 Bene and I had become lovers, in addition to being friends and comrades. We got married two years later.

Now, let this point be made clearer and more explicit. Though I introduced Bene to socialism and radical politics following our entry into the Postgraduate Students' Association, University of Lagos, in 1973, my own consciousness was at that stage undergoing rapid revolutionary transformation. Put differently, my revolutionary consciousness was being rapidly - and fundamentally -

transformed as I was introducing Bene to socialism and radical politics. It can therefore be proposed, and I do propose that Bene and I moved into explicitly revolutionary consciousness - away from mere radical consciousness - together; and, I would add, we moved together through the instrumentality of the same set of critical events and experiences.

The "critical events and experiences" being referred to include relatively mild protests in which we both participated between 1973 and 1975 as students over several issues - existential and political: the 1973 Nigerian students' protests against the character and specific contents of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme as it was being introduced by the military government of General Yakubu Gowon (it was during these protests that we met Comrade Ola Oni); protests over the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973 - protests in which Bene and I dramatically moved from pro-Israeli to pro-Palestinian positions through the radical intervention and unrelenting challenge of Comrade Tony Engurube.

Also included in the "critical events and experiences" of this period were the 1974/75 protests over the federal governments' national workers' wage reviews (Udoji Awards); protests against Gowon administration's increasing political intolerance, corruption and what Chief Obafemi Awolowo used to call "tenacity of office", that is, disposition to remain in office indefinitely. It was during these protests, in January 1975, that I was first detained by the military and Bene first acquitted herself as a revolutionary - to the admiration and commendation of many comrades and compatriots, including Gani Fawehinmi, Babatunde Kuye (Babs K), Femi Olufokunbi and students of the University of Lagos.

Every political history has its significant dates, landmarks or turning points. In Nigeria's political history, for instance, landmarks would include October 1, 1960, January 15, 1966, July 29, 1966, May 30, 1967 and January 15, 1970. Likewise, in every painstaking research of the Post-Civil War history of the Nigerian Left, Christmas Day, December 25, 1975 and August 6, 1977 will be listed among landmarks. On the first date (1975), in Lagos, the Anti-Poverty Movement of Nigeria (APMON) held a revolutionary one-day Congress and on the second date (1977), in Calabar, the Calabar Group of Socialists (CGS) was formed. Bene attended, and in fact, co-hosted both meetings. She emerged from each of them with heavy responsibilities.

Madunagu wrote from Calabar, Nigeria.

To be continued tomorrow

For Bene Madunagu at 75 (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

It was in Lagos, on Christmas Day, 1975 that a number of young Nigerians, including Bene, Comrade Biodun Jeyifo (BJ) and myself resolved and committed themselves to the revolutionary transformation of Nigeria on the platform of workers' power, popular democracy and socialism. Through monumental sacrifices and exemplary acts of courage and commitment - the results of which are nearly always credited to other people and entities, on account of the covert nature of most of our activities - Bene has remained faithful to the 1975 Lagos landmark resolution and its 1977 landmark re-endorsement in Calabar.

When Bene turned 60 on March 21, 2007, Comrade Professor Biodun Jeyifo (BJ) wrote a tribute, For Bene Madunagu at 60, which was published in *The Guardian* of April 11, 2007. In the second paragraph of the long tribute, BJ said: "If it is undeniable that part of the identity of Bene Madunagu derives from the fact that she is the wife of Eddie Madunagu, it is equally true that Bene stands so completely in her own shoes and in so many diverse areas of life that one can equally say that Eddie Madunagu derives part of his identity from being the husband of Bene. I shall come back to this point but first, a few significant details of the life of this most selfless, most dedicated and life-affirming of the activists of my generation...."

This insight can be extended, elaborated and substantiated in several directions. But this cannot be done in full here and now. I shall therefore limit myself to the following statement: In any of at least seven sub periods of the 47-year period (1975-2022), Bene and I would have been physically destroyed or politically liquidated - with the Nigerian Left suffering serious setbacks - if Bene had not possessed the attributes highlighted by BJ, if she had not been standing "completely in her own shoes", or if she had just been sharing my shoes as lover and wife!

The sub periods are January-May 1975 when I was detained in the dying months of General Gowon's regime; June 1976 - May 1977 during the "extraordinary" revolutionary engagement at Ode-Omu in present Osun State; April - June 1978 during the national Ali-Must-Go students' protests; April 1981 when Comrade Ingrid Essien-Obot, our German-born, Nigerian-married comrade and Secretary of the University of Calabar branch of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU-UCB), was murdered in her official residence on the campus; 1988-1990 during Bene's long tenure as Chair of ASUU-UCB when the union was confronting the neofascist repression of the dictatorship of General Ibrahim Babangida; 1997-1998 when, for unknown reasons, General Abacha's security apparatuses turned their attention on our adolescents' conscientisation and empowerment programmes in Calabar; and about mid-2006, during President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration, when the silent state harassment of 1997/98 returned.

In a number of the crises that characterised each of these seven sub periods Bene confronted and corrected my tactical errors, bore the sacrifices dictated by them and took brilliant, courageous and heroic steps that ultimately led to near-realization of our original strategic objectives.

One final point that I need to state here very clearly - for history - is that the "crises" to which I refer in the preceding paragraph were quite serious, very serious. The only hint I can permit myself to provide here and now about the seriousness is that at certain periods of our history, including the second half of the 1970s, our movement was "highly mobilised". Correcting tactical errors in a "highly mobilised" revolutionary movement engaged in battle as Bene did - not once, not twice - was, to put it mildly, doubly risky and heroic. At certain points of our engagements our organisation came close to being liquidated or at least beheaded. Aside from the extraordinary revolutionary engagement of 1976-1977, the closest we came to this tragedy was during the national Ali-Must-Go students' protests of April-August 1978. Bene saved the day - although I was in command! Organisations and institutions in which Bene belongs or belonged and on whose platforms she has been, or was active-up to leadership levels - may be classified broadly into five: academic, professional, popular-democratic, sociopolitical and revolutionary. The first four are in the public domain and may therefore be skipped. Formations in the fifth category, the revolutionary, may be listed, in part: Nigerian Youth Action Committee (NYAC) (1973), Society for Progress (SO-PRO) (1974); Anti-Poverty Movement of Nigeria (APMON) (1974); Revolutionary Movement for the Liberation of Nigeria (REMLON) (1976); Calabar Group of Socialists (CGS) (1977); Democratic Action Committee (DACOM) (1980); Movement for Peoples Democracy (MPD) (1977); Directorate for Literacy (DL) (1986); Socialist Revolutionary Vanguard (1989); Congress of Popular Democracy (CPD) (1998). The most prominent of the popular-democratic formations which also happened to be Leftist-feminist, include Women-In-Nigeria (WIN) (1982) and Girls' Power Initiative (GPI) (1994). The years indicated were the years Bene joined the organisations or co-founded them.

On attaining the age of 65 in 2012, Bene Madunagu - this bundle of humour, warmth and kindness - retired formally from the University of Calabar. That same year she delivered her Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Botany on Plant-Human Relationships. The following year, in 2013, she also retired formally from all executive positions - including that of Chair of Executive Board - in Girls' Power Initiative (GPI) Nigeria, a girls' and young women's empowerment organization she co-founded in 1993/1994.

Let me at this point isolate and underline three integral attributes of the relationship between Bene and myself: compatibility, complementarity and love. The first two attributes are necessary - and, indeed, irreducible - for a cell in a revolutionary movement. But a revolutionary cell which, in addition, is endowed with internal love

has an added advantage of high degree. Bene and I have constituted such a cell in the Nigerian Left since 1975.

The contents of this revolutionary union of Bene and myself have included the following: All major decisions in our organisational, political, professional, occupational, financial and family lives since 1975 have been taken together and executed together - sometimes with one person above ground and the other underground. Sometimes we creatively follow the revolutionary dictum: "March separately, but strike together - agreeing on where to strike and when to strike".

Beyond this, everything that can be called property (which, excluding literary acquisition, is very limited) is collectively owned in a revolutionary sense (that is, with individual authority to use or deploy) - but with the formal ownership residing with Bene. Division of labour, where this is inevitable, also follows the revolutionary principles that are continually moderated by our 1978 decision to have one joint foot in the existing bourgeois society, and the other outside of it - a duality that, under our subsisting historical circumstances, is inevitable in the life of a genuine revolutionary, individual or cell.

An essential Update: I have searched around and reflected on what I have called Update, that is, Bene's life in retirement and ill-health since I wrote the first edition of this tribute five years ago, in 2017. I finally settled on the Introduction to the 2021 book, *Edwin Madunagu at 75: Tributes and Reflection* edited, introduced and put out by Comrade Chido Onumah. The relevant part goes like this:

"This publication is the outcome of the conference that held on May 15, 2021 - the 75th birthday of Edwin Ikechukwu Madunagu (Eddie, to comrades, friends, and associates). Two of the highlights of the conference was (1) the reaffirmation of the long-standing commitment of Comrades Eddie and Bene to "Marxism, socialist revolution in Nigeria and world-wide and to revolutionary internationalism," and (2) the decision by Comrades Eddie and Bene to transfer their "Combined Archives and Libraries" built up since 1973, to the Nigerian Left.

"Following this decision, an 8-member Board of Advisers (BOA), chaired by Comrade Professor Biodun Jeyifo was established to manage the Combined Archives and Libraries on behalf and in the name of the Nigerian Left. In the months since the May 2021 conference, the Combined Archives and Libraries of Edwin Madunagu and Bene Madunagu have morphed into the Socialist Library and Archives (SOLAR). Work is actively going on to make SOLAR a reference library/archives not just for the Nigerian Left but for researchers, students, academics, and the public."

Even in ill-health Comrade Bene Madunagu has challenged herself on several occasions to remember several events, participate in the re-organization and authenticate several processes that made possible the transfer of our "Combined Archives and Libraries" to the Nigerian Left.

Concluded

Madunagu wrote from Calabar, Nigeria