

For comrade James Crentsil

By Edwin Madunagu

WHEN my mobile telephone rang around 4.00 am on Wednesday, April 15, 2020, I knew, before checking it, what news I would receive: the death, at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital (UCTH), of James Kolawole Kwame Crentsil, popularly known as Comrade James Crentsil in and outside Calabar and in and outside the Nigerian Socialist Movement. He died at the age of 63, a unique member of the set of classical "cadres" or "foot-soldiers" of the post-Civil War Calabar socialist formation. The general and particular meanings of these key defining terms – "cadre", "foot-soldier", "classical" and "unique" – will become implicitly clear in the course of this composite but brief tribute to Comrade James Crentsil and, through him, to the Calabar Group of Socialists and the Nigerian Left, both of which he served with uncommon faith and exemplary dedication for more than 35 years. Like most of us, the surviving members of the Old Guard of the Nigerian Left, Comrade James Crentsil, though younger than our average age, had been aging and ailing for quite some time, long before the present pandemic.

Students of history of modern revolutions will recall that at the beginning of the 20th century, a fierce debate on party formation arose in the communities of exiled Marxist revolutionaries in Europe, particularly the Russian exiles in central and western Europe. The debate was around the most appropriate type of organization that was demanded by the socialist revolution that was generally believed to be fast approaching. The serious choice was between a "mass party" and a "cadre party" – a military-type formation, in concept and in operation. Of course, these were approximations because there were "cadres" in mass parties and mass participants in cadre party activities. But we are talking of essences, rules and methods.

Another crucial debate was on the first step in the socialist revolution and the exact theoretical characterization of that first step.

This twin-disagreement was the main dividing line between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in the Russian Marxist revolutionary movement. Be that as it may, it was the Bolsheviks, the faction led by Vladimir Lenin, which advocated cadre-party formation and actually formed one, that won the debate through its leadership of the 1917 Socialist Revolution.

In a cadre-party every member, male or female, young or old, high or low, was a "cadre" or a "foot-soldier" or at least had a definite action-based assignment – in addition to the general responsibilities of party membership. The Calabar Group of Socialists (CGS) formed in August 1977 – just like the Anti-Poverty Movement of Nigeria (APMON) and the Revolutionary Movement for the Liberation of Nigeria (REMLON) which I mentioned in my tribute to Bj and KK in January 2020 – was a grand-heir of this aspect of Leninism. In its development through the decades the Calabar Group of Socialists had to shed some of its original attributes. But it retained some, and partly retained a particular one: the cadreship (or "foot-soldier") phenomenon. Our departed compatriot, Comrade James Crentsil, was an eloquent statement and unique symbol of that phenomenon.

Put simply and directly: For more than 35 years and with his base in Calabar, Comrade James Crentsil remained a consistent, selfless, frontline and indeed unique "cadre" and "foot-soldier" of the Nigerian Left and the Calabar Group of Socialists. He was unique in the sense that at least in the last decade of his life he remained virtually alone in the role our history had placed him and which he neither regretted nor betrayed.

Comrade James Crentsil was not a foundation member of the Calabar Group of Socialists. The foundation members of the group included Eskor Toyo, Ebony Okpa, Bene Madunagu, Bassey Ekpo Bassey, Assim Ita and myself. James Crentsil was admitted in the first half of the 1980s in one of the big

waves of mobilization and admission that characterized the first decade of the group's existence. The waves included the "Ali Must Go" students' protest of 1978, the celebration of Zimbabwe's independence (1980), the May 1981 general strike, the formation of the National Democratic Movement (against fascism) (1981), with Comrade Dipo Fashina as a prominent frontline mobiliser and organizer, the National Political Debate (1986), the formation of the Cross River State-based Directorate for Literacy (DL) and Calabar-based Citizens for Community Action (CCA) (1987), and the formation of the Labour Party (1989).

At the time Comrade James Crentsil came into the Nigerian Socialist Movement through the Calabar Group of Socialists the latter had transformed from a unitary formation governed by the Leninist principle of "democratic centralism" to a formation resembling Yugoslavia's ruling revolutionary party under Comrade President Broz Tito. Students of the history of socialist revolutions will recall that the structure of the Yugoslav party – for better or for worse – reflected (or was reflected by) Yugoslavia's federalism and federal state structure. The transformation of the Calabar Group, a product of its own "earth-shaking" internal struggle between late 1977 and early 1978, was in two directions – partly resembling the Yugoslav experiment: a shift from "unitarism" to "federalism" and a significant relaxation of the categorical demands on cadres and "foot-soldiers".

The uniqueness of Comrade James Crentsil in this transformation was, first, that he chose to be and remain a cadre of the Calabar Group of Socialists as a whole rather than that of one or a combination of some of the various micro-tendencies and sub-formations of the Group; and, secondly, that he also chose to remain a cadre or "foot-soldier" in the original Leninist sense of complete integration of labour for personal material sustenance and unpaid work as "cadre" or "foot-soldier" of the revolution-

ary movement. In this integration the latter was dominant; the latter took precedence over the former.

I shall return to the attribute sketched above because that was Comrade James' defining character as a revolutionary socialist. But, in the meantime, I propose that just as the Nigerian Left and, following it, the Calabar Group of Socialists had "organic intellectuals" in the sense of Antonio Gramsci – a phenomenon younger Leftists justifiably celebrate – the Nigerian Left and Calabar Group of Socialists also had "organic grassroots leaders" of whom Comrade James Crentsil was a shining example. Thus, Comrade James Crentsil's workshop as a printer in Calabar became a special, but popular operational headquarters of all tendencies and sub-formations of the Calabar Group of Socialists and all spheres of our popular-democratic struggle in which the "grassroots" were involved. And Comrade James himself remained the physical controller of this headquarters from the late 1980s until he died in Mid-April 2020.

When I returned to Calabar from The Guardian, Lagos in September 1994, I noticed that some of the older comrades, including my spouse, Bene and Bassey Ekpo Bassey referred to, and hailed Comrade James Crentsil as "Baba Isale", a Yourba sociocultural term which I may give a modern political translation: "grassroots leader" or "grassroots godfather". Rather than ask for explanation, I decided to watch and see. I knew, to begin with, that the comrades could not simply be alluding to Comrade James' Lagos-Ghana mixed parental origin. Such allusion to national or ethnic origins would be strange in the Calabar Group of Socialists and stranger still in older comrades. It did not take long for me to confirm that the name "Baba Isale" given to James by members of the Old Guard referred to his stature and role as one of our most respected and effective grassroots mobilisers in Calabar.

To be continued tomorrow.

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this article on www.guardian.ng

For comrade James Crentsil (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

Continued from yesterday

THE conventional wisdom in all tendencies of the Calabar Group of Socialists was that if you conceive a mass political action or radical intervention you first discuss the viability with Comrade James Crentsil, the "Baba Isale". He might then tell you, "Comrade, give me two days". It is his preliminary report and advice at the end of that period - after he had "hit the grounds" with some other "foot-soldiers" under his "command" - that will suggest to you whether to move fast with minimum publicity or just move forward and table the idea in a group meeting or simply bury the idea - permanently or for the meantime. The movement had paid dearly whenever it violated this simple rule given to us by our own history.

In the late 1980s when the military dictatorship under General Ibrahim Babangida was executing a convoluted, strait-jacket transition-to-civil rule programme with fascist methods, Comrade James Crentsil became a member of a self-constituted Security Committee of the Nigerian Left in Calabar. The committee was not armed and did not direct any armed formation or activity. So, what did it do? Let me answer with a Nigerian proverb which may be translated thus: "A mother hen says that when she makes noise on the approach of a hawk, the purpose is not to scare away the hawk, but to alert the world to what is about to happen to her, or is happening to her".

In like manner, the Security Committee of which Comrade James Crentsil was a prominent member was created not to confront the Nigerian state, not even to defend the Left or the masses, but to raise the alarm when a danger was apprehended. Older members of the Calabar Group of Socialists, visiting Leftists from other parts of the country, activists of the labour movement and popular-democratic organizations may recall a number of "narrow" escapes, sudden postponements of meetings, shifting of venues and disappearances of comrades during the Babangida and Abacha dictatorships. Most of these occurrences were results of alarms raised by members of the Security Committee.

Now, what factors - biographical, occupational, educational, objective and subjective - enabled Comrade James Crentsil to play the roles he played in the Nigerian Left in general and in the Calabar Group of Socialists in particular? First, James was the product, on June 10, 1956, of a union between a Ghanaian father and a Nigerian mother. Secondly, he had an all-round technical secondary education in Ghana and an all-round technical tertiary education in Nigeria (Kaduna Polytechnic) (1975-1978). In the latter he specialized in Build-

ing and Printing technologies. Thirdly, he was somehow radicalized as a teenager both in Ghana and in Nigeria. Fourthly, he had the benefit of living in the barracks in Lagos and Kaduna after the Civil War with a maternal aunt who was an officer of the Nigerian Army. This partly explains the discipline he exhibited in private and public life. In the fifth place, with his decision to settle in Calabar from about 1980, he was spotted by a revolutionary formation, the Calabar Group of Socialists. Finally, Comrade James Crentsil was fortunate to enjoy what several comrades of his generation did not enjoy: a relatively non-turbulent family life.

In summary, how will the Nigerian Left and the Calabar Group of Socialists remember Comrade James Crentsil? What, in other words, is the essence of this tribute? The answer can be tentatively given under two broad headings: the "Highlights" of Comrade James' revolutionary career as a "foot-soldier" and "Baba Isale"; and the "Examples" of Comrade James.

Under "highlights" we remember Comrade James' role in workers' participation in the 1986 national political debate in the old Cross River State which included the present Akwa Ibom State; his role in the formation and endeavours of the working class-based Directorate for Literacy which emanated from this debate; his role in the Citizens' for Community Action (CCA), his role in the 1987/1988 non-party local government elections which the Left won in Calabar Municipality and in Biase and Obudu Local Government Areas (in central and northern parts of Cross River State respectively). The Left creditably ran the three local governments for the periods they existed. We also recall Comrade James' role in the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) Workshop held in Calabar in April 1989; the formation of the Labour Party (LP) later that year; Left politics during the long years of Babangida-Abacha dictatorship; the prolonged protest over the "June 12", 1993 election annulment; and Left resistance during the Abacha-instigated coup hysteria of late 1997 to early 1998. All these were before the Fourth Republic which began in May 1999.

In the last two decades we may list the following: Comrade James Crentsil's role in the mobilisations around the funerals (other than burials) in Calabar, of several comrades-in-arms, including Ola Oni (2000), Ita Henshaw (2004), Assim Ita (2009), Gani Fawehinmi (2009), Eskor Toyo (2016) and Eyambi Akpet (2019); and his courageous role during the state persecution, and then, personal tribulations of Comrade Bassey Ekpo Bassey in the period: (2000-2010). In all these, and more, Comrade James Crentsil rose to his fullest height as "foot-soldier" and "Baba Isale".

Finally, what are the "Examples" of Comrade James Crentsil? These can be articulated and simply stated: Beyond his ex-

emplary revolutionary understanding and practice of commitment, service and sacrifice; faith and loyalty; humility and proletarian taste; kindness and humanist passion; friendship, comradeship and solidarity, we may underline the immediate material implication of his being a Leninist "cadre" or "foot-soldier" of the Nigerian Left and Calabar Group of Socialists. By this I mean the implication on his material life of his decision to subject his work for family sustenance to the demands of his unpaid revolutionary duty. This particular choice of his put an absolute limit on his material comfort, talk less of personal material accumulation, however good or productive he might be as a commercial printer and all-round technician.

I was shocked, but could do only very little to ameliorate the situation, when, about a decade ago, Comrade James Crentsil told me that what he charged any comrade who brought a job to him (in his capacity as a printer, builder, electrician, plumber or mechanic) was based on "communist costing", rather than "capitalist costing" - where the latter was at least twice as high as the former! Put differently, when Comrade James Crentsil printed a book, journal, pamphlet, calendar or programme, built a house, dug a borehole, repaired a machine or electrical fittings for a comrade he did this not as a contractor but as one of his own paid workers utilizing "unpadded" market purchases.

The critical aspect of this story is that practically everyone who brought a job to Comrade James Crentsil came as a "comrade" who should enjoy "communist costing" and for whom James should work as an ordinary worker and not as a contractor. To deepen the contradiction and worsen the situation, the many people (comrades and non-comrades) who continually made material demands on him would not, on such occasions, consider him an ordinary worker that he considered himself and who he was in objective material terms. No wonder Comrade James Crentsil died in personal material penury!

Comrade James Crentsil must have derived his concept and practice of "communist costing" from the "direct labour" and "communist" costing principles with which the Calabar Group of Socialists, through its popular-democratic formations, ran the non-party Calabar Municipal Government (under Comrade Bassey Ekpo Bassey) from March 1988 to May 1989. James served that government whose territory has since been split into three local government areas as a tireless, but unlisted, unpaid and self-effacing "cadre" and "foot-soldier" committed to our common burning desire to produce the best-run local administration in the country. And so it was. Comrade James Crentsil was one of the heroes of that successful Calabar experiment in Leftist governance. *Concluded.*