

WHEN I learnt in the evening of Wednesday, December 22, 1999, that Comrade Ola Oni had died earlier in the day in Ibadan I was struck — more forcefully than ever before — that the general staff of the Nigerian socialist movement which brought my own generation to Marxist consciousness was gradually passing into history. I was simultaneously gripped by fear and pain: fear that the social and political conditions which terminated Comrade Oni's life at the age of 66 were still there and may not spare the lives of the few leaders still remaining; and pain because I knew that after the usual wave of tributes the material and spiritual import of the comrade's death will pass to his immediate family, and life would continue as before. In the 1970s when I was brought to revolutionary consciousness I had romanticised the funeral of a revolutionary socialist leader like Ola Oni as a historic event that would involve columns and columns of the popular masses: workers, women, youths and students, peasants, professionals, intellectuals and, of course, armed detachments if the socialist movement was in control of government or in command of an armed revolution. How much of this shall we have now? Why?

Tributes to Comrade Ola Oni referred to him explicitly as a "pro-democracy" and "human rights" activist and implicitly as an activist leader of ethnic nationalism. The only appropriate word here is activist, because Ola Oni was indeed an activist in the best sense of the word. But when this word is qualified, in the way it is now being done, by "pro-democracy", "human rights", "ethnic" or "nationality" then a monumental violence is done to the comrade's memory and to history. Of course, Ola Oni was committed to popular democracy and fought for it selflessly, consistently and courageously for more than four decades. But he did not come to democracy via imperialist-inspired "pro-democracy movement" of the 1990s. Ola

# Understanding Comrade Ola Oni

By Edwin Madunagu

Oni's popular-democratic politics for these four decades included, at its very core, the struggle for, and defence of, fundamental and all-embracing human rights—generally and as they relate to the conditions of the masses. He was not brought to human rights consciousness by the "international community", the global enslaver that now pretends to be the champion of human rights. Most of the tributes that have poured in since Comrade Ola Oni departed have either been grievously misleading or have said little to nothing about him. Who then was Ola Oni? How does the young generation understand him, and others like him?

Ola Oni was a Marxist, a communist and, *ipso facto*, a socialist and a humanist. He was an intellectual of the working class. The distinction which Antonio Gramsci makes between organic (developing from within) and non-organic (developing from outside) intellectual of the working people vanishes in Ola Oni, just as it vanishes Eskor Toyo, Bala Usman, Baba Omojola, the late Gogo Chu Nzeribe and some other intellectual giants of the working class movement. Ola Oni, as an intellectual, was an organic to the working class movement as he was to the university system where he taught, researched and mobilised for more than two decades. Ola Oni was a proletarian fighter of international reach and perspectives. He was a militant nationalist and a Nigerian patriot — where nationalism and patriotism here refer to Nigeria and not any fractions of it. But above all, Ola Oni was a revolutionary where this means an active and activist commitment to overturning the existing enslaving, exploitative, anti-people and oppressive social order by destroying its roots. Put all these attributes together, and you have Comrade Ola Oni and some others like him.

*To give a testimony:* At the end of July 1993, there was a gathering of leftist political activists, including myself, in Benin City. Most of these activists are now the leaders of pro-democracy and human rights movement in Nigeria. The venue of the meeting was the residence of Chief Anthony Enahoro and the occasion (which was actually a cover) was the birthday of the chief. The violent opposition of Babangida's annulment of Abiola's election as president was still raging, especially in Lagos. We had all been involved in this, one way or the other, but we now thought that there should be a stronger national coordination and a clearer and louder socialist and popular democratic voice in the protest. In other words, we felt that we should not just be tailing the professional politicians many of whom had "chickened out" when, immediately after the annulment, we had proposed a Philippine-type response whereby a crowd of about five million people would be mobilised to form a two-kilometre shield around Abiola's house and have him proclaimed and sworn in there as president. We entered the night-long meeting angry with both Babangida and the professional politicians. But history teaches that in such matters it is not sufficient to be angry (although it is necessary). The situation calls for the presence of people who are sufficiently dialectical and clear-headed, and who have the ultimate goal always before them. The angry young men and women who assembled that night from Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu, Kaduna, Calabar, etc, did not possess all those attributes in appropriate measures. But fortunately, Ola Oni was there.

The argument of those who convened the meeting rested on two pillars: first, that Nigerian socialists must intervene in the

on-going political struggle which was a popular democratic one; and secondly, that they must intervene as socialists not just as anti-militarists, or pro-democracy or human rights activists. We warned against isolationism, arguing that unless socialists succeeded in intervening in the struggle on clear platforms and slogans then we and the political tendency we represented would become irrelevant both in the evolution of the political crisis and in its final resolution. And this would be tragic for the country.

Comrade Ola Oni accepted all the propositions, but warned with passion characteristic of him: "Remember where we are coming from; remember the class character of the personalities around whose names this struggle is being waged; remember the specific and general affinities between the military dictatorship and those it denied electoral victory; remember how the militant nationalists and, after them, young socialist idealists, were betrayed by their bourgeois leaders and idols; remember the betrayals of the Babangida years; bear in mind that since the aims of the bourgeois political class are very limited in this struggle, they will not only abandon the struggle when these aims are realised (such as the restoration of Abiola's electoral victory), they will also turn against us, their crisis-allies, if we go beyond their limited objectives; above all, in this struggle as in all other popular-democratic struggles, we must make our demands, especially its class and national character, clear; in other words, we must resist the bourgeoisification and ethnicisation of the struggle; we must never betray the masses."

That was the warning of Comrade Ola Oni, the dialectician, made in a loud, clear and passionate voice. We shouted, quarrelled, abused, walked out and walked in again, and on a number of occasions almost exchanged blows. In the end, as the

sun was rising, we reached a consensus which embodied the essence of our propositions but also bore the stamp of Ola Oni's warnings. When Ola Oni read the draft communicate and seemed satisfied, he shook hands with comrades, including me. In his usual vigorous manner, put on his cap, carried his weather-beaten hand bag and set out for the Benin motor park to board a commercial vehicle to return to Ibadan where he had scheduled a couple of meetings and rallies. I myself left for Calabar to organise a congress which Ola Oni and others were to attend later that week.

*Another testimony:* Early in the 1980s I wrote a book titled *The Tragedy of the Nigerian Socialist Movement*, an angry analysis of the failure of the movement to come out with a strong socialist party after the 13-year military rule which ended on October 1, 1979. I had referred to the role of Comrade Ola Oni, but not by name. Shortly after, Ola Oni replied, but referring to me by name: "The point is that there is no tragedy and the left movement is not in disarray. What has been going on all along is the struggle between revolutionary comrades and left opportunists who had imposed themselves on the leadership of the proletarian movement. There will always be disagreement between revolutionary committed comrades and the left opportunists on the issue of how to organise the proletarian struggle and on the formulation of strategy and tactics of struggles." He then warned me against a blanket denunciation of the efforts of the older generations of comrades: "It is the task of revolutionary comrades to understand the historical processes correctly, to know that the present is a product of the past and that we cannot advance successfully unless we build on the positive contributions of the revolutionary comrades that had been in the struggle before us. There is no present and no future without history."

That was Ola Oni, respected in the movement for his tireless and consistent struggle against opportunism; and for ideological purity and correct political lines.