

# ‘Whatever is remaining of the Left’

By Edwin Madunagu

READ the tribute which *The Guardian* paid to late Comrade Tunji Otegbeye in its editorial column: *Jeremiah Adetunji Otegbeye (1925-2009)*. (October 25, 2009). It was an informed, fair and clearly patriotic tribute by a liberal newspaper that is not a socialist organ. Anything deeper than that will have to come from either of two opposite poles: from a person or organ that is either anti-socialist or subscribes, in general, to the ideology that propelled Tunji Otegbeye to the forefront of militant politics in Nigeria more than 50 years ago. The tribute of Tayo Akpata, the Ima of Benin City (Adieu, *Comrade Tunji Otegbeye, The Guardian*, October 20, 2009) falls generally in the latter category; but though fair, the tribute is not deep enough. And the Ima himself should know this. Perhaps we cannot go beyond that in a newspaper article. The rest is left for books, memoirs and meetings of “believers”.

The present article is not a tribute, but a comment on one small but important aspect of *The Guardian’s* tribute. In the opening sentence of the sixth paragraph of the nine – paragraph tribute, the paper said: “Not unexpectedly, the late Otegbeye has been described as one of the very last of whatever is remaining of the left movement in Nigeria”. I should be fair to *The Guardian*: the paper was reporting what some people have been saying and what some others have been understood to be saying. But does the phrase “not unexpectedly” indicate that the newspaper shares the opinion? Whatever the case, I think a brief comment will be as appropriate and as patriotic as the tribute from *The Guardian*. Since the newspaper was reflecting a widely held opinion, this article, cannot, strictly speaking, be regarded as a “response” to the newspaper. It is simply a contribution to an undeclared and unstructured debate.

In what follows I shall implicitly attempt to read the mind of the editorialists in the

same way that lawyers attempt to read the mind of drafters of Constitutions. In the first part of the three-part article, *For our departed radical patriots (The Guardian*, October 1, 2009), I expressed the following regret: “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 task of the time’ – tasks defined by the new imperialism, globalist capitalism, deepening poverty, violence and general insecurity, internal colonialism... and “the global war against terror”.

I believe not only in criticism, but also in self-criticism. For the latter, I believe that it can be “merciless” when this is demanded. But just as in criticism (of others) self-criticism, whether explicit or implicit, must be clear: What are you actually criticising and what do you think the correct or appropriate conduct should be or should have been? Is the criticism or self-criticism specific or general and open-ended? The demand of specificity is the demand that both the historical period and the aspect of the reality under criticism or self-criticism should be clear. For instance, I did not say, in the self-criticism sketched above, that the Nigerian Left movement is disappearing. I only talked about the disappearance of the “old guard” or the “pre-globalisation generation” of the Left movement in Nigeria. Secondly, I did not say that there is no renewal. All I said was that the renewal is not appropriate to the tasks of the time.

The above is by way of self-clarification. The Nigerian Left movement is alive and growing. The problem is specifically with that segment of it that used to be called

“vanguard”. We would, for several reasons, use another term today and also radically modify its conception and constitution. This notwithstanding there is internal vanguard and there is external vanguard. Strictly, what I was referring to is *external vanguard* which, by definition, is self-identified and self-constituted. By the way, the external vanguard is not external to the country. It is only external to the mainstream structures of the movement. What by the way, do we actually mean by the Left movement? The movement as an ideology? The movement as aggregate of living human beings and things? The movement as an organisation which includes formations and detachments? Put differently can we differentiate between a movement and the organisation of the movement? Between the organisation of a movement and its leadership? And between the leadership and individual leaders?

So, where is the Nigerian Left or whatever is remaining of it – if it exists at all? Let us look at the place it can be seen, or felt, if it exists. First, look at the socio-political sector you call pro-democracy and human rights community, that group of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that defend democracy and human rights in Nigeria. Where do the more radical and consistent of them – and there are literally tens of thousands of them – get their inspirations, politically, ideologically, intellectually and morally? From President Yar’Adua’s Ministers and Special Assistants? From the National Assembly and State Assemblies? From mainstream party leaders and contractors running around and “chopping” money in Abuja and the state capitals?

What language do the radical pro-democracy and human rights activists speak? What is the content of what they do:

Rightist or Leftist? What of the Labour Movement: the low-income and the high-income; the junior and the senior; the academic and the non-academic? And what of that tribe of lawyers described by the Nigerian media, including *The Guardian*, as “radical and human rights lawyers”? I mean lawyers like Femi Falana and Bamidele Aturu, and, above all, late Gani Fawehinmi? What language do they speak and what is the content of their struggles, messages and advocacies? What is the source of the inspiration: Rightist or Leftist? What of the professionals of different spheres including those who feature from time to time on the opinion pages of the print media? What of the Women’s Movement and, in particular, the feminist detachment? What of the Students Movement?

Finally, let us look at the Niger Delta. What are the people that are now nationally and globally referred to as “militants” saying? Take the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) together with its main affiliates, for instance. Has the Nigerian media tried to analyse the content and language of its messages? Has the media tried to study its political and military tactics? And has the media tried to trace and study the antecedents of the more prominent militants: the schools they attended, what they studied, the influences to which they were exposed, their academic and extra-academic records in school, and above all, where their current inspiration comes from? In short, what can be said about their continuing political and ideological nourishment? And most importantly: Have you attempted to locate the militants historically – from the colonial days? Or, did the militants just drop from the blues? What, for instance, is the link between late Michael Imoudu and Isaac Boro? Have you ever heard of Tony Engurube? What is the link between him

and Isaac Boro, on the one hand, and between him and contemporary militants, on the other? Please, don’t look for Tony. He died 13 years ago.

Let us return to the concept of the vanguard – whether internal or external. Who are they, really? This is perhaps a rhetorical question, but I am not engaged in rhetorics here. Let me paraphrase and apply a thesis which a revolutionary Leftist leader once offered: “In the national struggles of the masses the vanguards point out and bring to the front the common interest of the masses, independently of all ethnic or regional location; and in the various stages of development which the struggle of the masses passes through, the vanguards always and everywhere represent the interests of the masses as a whole”. Elsewhere he said that although vanguards are acutely concerned about the present, they also point to the future.

Two generations after the Leftist just cited, another offered a proposition which I have again taken the liberty to paraphrase and apply: “Only on the basis of a study of political processes in the masses themselves, can we understand the role of vanguards. They constitute not an independent, but nevertheless a very important, element in the process. Without a vanguard the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a pistonbox. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam”.

Twenty-seven years ago, in September 1982, late Comrade Ola Oni presented a paper, *Proletarian struggles in Nigeria: a brief historical highlights*. On the last page of the 27-page paper, Ola Oni angrily addressed me by name: “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”. Although this point is only of historical importance now, my present article brought it and its author back to my memory.