

I WAS pained and confused by the death of Professor Bade Onimode, one of the most prominent Marxist political economists to emerge in the continent of Africa in the 1970s. Pained and confused. Yes, but I was not paralysed. For I was still able to discuss the tragedy with a comrade who communicated the sad news to me over the telephone. I was able to voice an immediate tribute to one of the best in our ranks. What added paralysis to my sadness and confusion was a section of *The Guardian's* report of the sad event. (*The Guardian*, Thursday, December 4, 2001, back page). A member of Onimode's family was reported to have said: "He was known to be a radical economist. However, in his last days, he drew close to God."

If this statement had been broken into its two parts, namely, "He was known as a radical political economist" and "In his last days, he drew closer to God," I would have merely regarded it as a collection of aspects of the life and career of this prominent intellectual. But when the two parts are joined with a *however*, the tribute lends itself to various interpretations. To my mind, if Onimode was not 'closer to God' in his active lifetime it was not because he was a radical political economist; and if in his "last days" he drew "closer to God" this did not represent a re-evaluation of his distinguished career as a radical political economist, or an "atonement" for his radical perspectives. This type of statement is another illustration of the misunderstanding of leftists' attitude to religion. Nigerian Marxists, at least those of my generation to which Onimode belonged, are critical of the manipulation of religion by the ruling classes. Our generation's attitude to religion is non-exhibitionist, non-

Who replaces Bade Onimode?

By Edwin Madunagu

hypocritical. It is not the attitude of "Pharisees" who live by grotesque advertisement of their religious deeds. They regard religion as a very private and personal affair. It is these attitudes, taken together, that many conservatives distort, sometimes deliberately. I rest the issue there.

Beyond all this, however, is the fact that I can now almost see the "last days" of Comrade Onimode. In spite of his mass-oriented career and the presence in his last day of those dear and close to him, Onimode died a lonely man. This is not peculiar to our departed comrade. It is the most frightened attribute of dying: its absolute loneliness, unaffected by crowds, whether friends or foes. In this final hour, in this state of oblivion, the utterances and actions of the dying cannot be easily understood, let alone explained. Why? Because the context of his or her existence has been removed. But I agree that human solidarity can reduce the agony of the last days, for the dying and for their loved ones. That, I believe, was what Comrade Ebenezer Babatope was referring to in his tribute. I shall come back to it.

Comrade Ebenezer Babatope's tribute to Onimode (*The Guardian*, December 7, 2001) frightened me. Babatope reminded his compatriots "we are dying; slowly and gradually the left ranks are getting diminished everyday." Yes "we are dying." In the last decade (1991-2001) the Nigerian left has lost many of its prominent leaders: M.E. Kolagbodi, Wahab Goodluck, Dapo Fatogun, Tony Engurube, Ernest Etim-Bassey, Iwoh Udo-Unam, Comrade Ola Oni, Jonas Abam, Kanmi Isola-Osobu, Armstrong Ogbonna, Gambo Sawaba, etc. And now Bade Onimode. What I read in

Babatope's tribute was that "we" are dying without being replaced. By "we" I mean those sections of the Nigerian left that are anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist and see the liberation of the popular masses, the working and toiling people, the wretched of the "earth" as the essence of their intellectual exertions and practical politics. From about 1950, the ranks of this particular segment of the Nigerian left grew continuously which means that those departing were being replaced by more than 100 per cent. Replaced, not just in absolute terms, but also sector by sector: ranks of revolutionary political scientists, political economists, patriots, orators, philosophers, labour leaders, organisers, ideologists, journalists, teachers, polemicists, etc, continued to grow. This growth stopped, and a rapid decline set in a little over a decade ago. We are no longer being replaced. Who is to replace Bade Onimode?

I first met Bade Onimode late in 1975 or early 1976. The location was the University of Ibadan. A student group, I think the Students' Union itself, had organised a symposium and Bade Onimode and I were to be among the few speakers. I was then teaching Mathematics at the University of Lagos, and Onimode was teaching Economics at Ibadan. I had just been released from detention during which, thanks to the radical lawyer, Gani Fawehinmi, I became very popular in university students community across the country. I therefore had to prepare very well for every appearance. Onimode was to speak first; I was to speak after him. By the time Onimode

had, perhaps, gone half way with his presentation (I think the topic was *The University*) I knew that I would not "steal the show" as I had expected unless I switched from analysis to agitation. He dealt with all the phenomena I had intended to touch upon but he analysed each phenomenon clinically, so to say, with the *method of political economy*; he did not stop at description and denunciation of each phenomenon, but went brilliantly, and almost effortlessly, to its roots, to its political economy. He received a standing ovation. Of course, I received my own ovation but only by switching from analysis to agitation. I could not have matched him in analysis. I was later to learn that Onimode belonged to a small group of dedicated Marxist revolutionary intellectuals based in the University of Ibadan and led by late Comrade Ola Oni. Before then I had only encountered Ola Oni. I drew closer to the group, but not too close because at that time I belonged to a leftist formation that many on the left considered as extremist and voluntarist, and even anarchistic.

I was to meet Bade Onimode again in the epic university battle of 1978 known as "Ali Must Go." Comrade Babatope has written so much about it. Onimode was in that leadership, moving (or rather, racing) from Ibadan to Lagos, Ife, Calabar and Zaria, the main centres of the struggle against the military dictatorship. The "declaration of war" was made in Calabar in April 1978 at an extraordinary meeting of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), then led by Ogun Okeowo. We were all "around" but not in the meeting since we were dismissed. In August 1978, 11 university teachers and one journalist and several students were dismissed: In

Lagos, the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Ade Ajayi, Ebenezer Babatope and the medical director were sacked; at Ibadan, Onimode, together with Ola Oni, Akin Ojo, Onoge and Sanda (teaching at the Polytechnic) were removed; in Calabar Bene Madunagu and I were sacked; and in Zaria, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Iya Abubakar was removed. The only non-university personnel affected was Bassey Ekpo Bassey, then Political Editor of the *Chronicle*, newspaper owned by Cross River State government. This is now history; but I recall it as a tribute to Professor Bade Onimode, that brilliant, hard-working and dedicated Marxist political economist.

In his tribute, Comrade Ebenezer Babatope passionately called for the unity of the surviving members of that generation of Nigeria's radical patriots. He pleaded that we re-establish contact and "keep close to ourselves" in this particular difficult period — politically and personally. I was moved and inspired by his passion. I am aware that some individuals are already working in that direction. But I am also painfully aware of aspects of the problem. We of that generation were not just friends. We were comrades-in-combat, united in revolutionary Marxist politics. But with the decline of the movement nationally and internationally, with the triumph of the capitalist global dictatorship, the uniting force appears to have disappeared. I agree with Babatope: we must maintain contacts and support one another. But beyond that, our movement has to be rediscovered and re-built for the sake of our country and its millions of exploited, oppressed, marginalised and dispossessed masses. This inevitable resurgence will then print, in letters of gold, the names of our departed patriots, including the latest, Comrade Professor Bade Onimode.