

Gani, a Giant Failed by his Country

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By Okey Ndibe

The 17th century English poet John Donne immortalized the verse that ends with these memorable lines: "Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

There are at least two senses in which Donne's sentiments apply to the late Gani Fawehinmi, a giant in several respects.

First, Mr. Fawehinmi's crusading life was informed by an insistence that injustice to any citizen was deeply personal, nothing less than injustice to himself. Despite his privileged training - or actually because of it - he believed it was his place to combat the dehumanization of the least privileged among us. For him, the needless and senseless degradation of Nigerian lives translated into a personal diminution. When the poorest Nigerian was felled by the machinations of brutal, unconscionable power, Gani went to war on behalf of the voiceless, the powerless, and the dispossessed. The denigration of any Nigerian was, as far as he was concerned, a direct affront.

Second, it is no surprise that a man like Fawehinmi, who exuded extraordinary love, should attract fulsome affection in life and effusive praise - even by his erstwhile detractors and bullies - in

death. Here was a man whose precepts and work buttressed a belief that others' privations were his business. Generous to the point of being self-disregarding, this human luminary and brilliant legal mind was both larger than life and familiar. He was so familiar, in fact, that even total strangers would come to know him - to address him - simply as Gani.

His generous fellow feeling earned him the depth of public admiration we have seen on display since his passing on August 5, 2009. The relay of tributes testifies to one fact: that here's a man whose death has impoverished us.

Fawehinmi's death has come up in my conversations with numerous friends and acquaintances. There's not a single person, even among those who never met him in flesh and blood, who did not express a deep sense of loss, indeed a personal testimonial of bereavement. Nigerians, it is safe to suggest, are mourning the passage of a man whose magnificence not even his most inveterate foes dare deny.

Consider, by contrast, the celebratory fever that gripped Nigeria when news spread of the death of maximum ruler, Sani Abacha. The dictator had funneled billions of dollars of public funds into his

private foreign accounts, or those of proxies. Yet, all that loot could not buy him a moment's reprieve when death came, nor could it procure the unspoken but solemnly observed stricture against ravaging the memory of the deceased. Abacha, like Ibrahim Babangida before him, had made a point of hounding Gani, rewarding the searchlight he beamed on their perfidy by processing him in and out of jail.

For the power-obsessed, in uniform or agbada, the likes of Gani are nothing more than insufferable irritants to be contained - through police beatings, detention, imprisonment, or defamation by the machineries of state power. Thus, an outstanding patriot like Gani was labeled a dissident, a disgruntled element, an idle rabble-rouser.

Yet, if any lesson is to be learned from the differing fates of Abacha and Fawehinmi in death, it is that, in the final consideration, the verdict of history cannot be rigged - whatever the size of the rigger's pocket.

Gani Fawehinmi gave himself wholly to Nigeria, which makes it all the sadder that Nigeria betrayed him - as it betrayed Michael Imoudu, Mokwugo Okoye, Aminu Kano and a multitude of other true and tested patriots. It was Gani's terrible luck to be born in a country whose hospitals could not diagnose his cancer, until it was too late. It was his bitter pill to live in a country where his advocacy of democracy, transparency and accountability was treated as high crime.

It is now up to history to redress the manifold wrongs done to this ethically agile and morally well-funded man. And history's reparation is underway, even now. It is evident in the somber mood that's enveloped Nigeria. In the end, it is Gani and citizens cast in his mold, not the Abachas, Babangidas and Obasanjos with their airy rhetoric ("all hands must be on deck," "moving the nation forward," "delivering the dividends of democracy") who will be festooned for gallantry.

Gani's expansive place in the national imagination appears assured. One trait of his greatness, remarked upon by many since his death, was his allergy to pretentiousness and cant. He was an intrepid foe to the enemies of the Nigerian people, and a dependable ally to those who fought to achieve democratic ends. He was quick to detect, and detest, wantonness and puniness in those who made the wrecking of Nigeria their main preoccupation.

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Okey Ndibe is a Nigerian novelist, poet, and political commentator. He is the author of the critically praised novel, *Arrows of Rain*. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988 to be the founding editor of the *African Commentary*, an award-winning and widely acclaimed magazine published by the novelist Chinua Achebe. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. He is finishing work on a novel titled *foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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