

# Tribute to a fallen Comrade

By

Ronald Elly Wanda

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Dr Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem who died last month on a road accident in Nairobi, for along time was an admired presence within the often fractious world of African politics and the relentless mission of Pan-African literature. As a close friend, I have found it difficult to organize words in a way that truly capture my grief. That said, Kenya's *Daily Nation* (that first reported the accident), somehow encapsulated the general mood of all concerned Africanists when it noted that "death has robbed Africa of one of its most illustrious sons". A native Nigerian, he was witty and intellectually high minded but at times daft enough to appreciate the humour of a young and less known fellow pan-African writer. He definitely was unassuming and gentle.

When I first met Taju, (seen here on the right: photo: majimbokenya.com) my impression was: a chunky, bearded man dressed like an Abaluhya warrior ready for war; he looked fierce and at times frightening. Then his brilliant, ebullient eyes lit up and a huge gap-toothed grin cracked open his face. "I'm pleased you've read my book Wanda!" he said, with a well-bred grin. "We now have two things in common," he added, referring to his book *Pan-Africanism* (1996) and



(apparently) the gap on my front teeth that he perhaps thought akin to his. That was almost six years ago, following an introduction to him by another friend (a former Ugandan [UPDF] soldier) at a run-down pub in north London. We remained friends ever since. And in the course of time, whenever he was in London, he'd either send an email or SMS and we'd meet either at an event he'd be attending or at the Institute of Education's pub, flanked by the usual suspects, we'd then be updated by him on all matters Africa. In the course of our social and political ingestion, subjects ranged arbitrarily from the price of *goro goro* (maize) in Kenya to the plight of immigrants in London to the appalling situation in Darfur.

He died on the early hours of Monday the 25<sup>th</sup> of May. A day that is also known as Africa Liberation Day, according to the Pan-African political calendar, for it commemorates the date (May 25, 1963,) when leaders of 32

independent African States met to form the Organization of African Unity (OAU) now African Union (AU). It is also a day that is used by many of us, as Pan-Africanists the world over, to reflect and gauge the growth and development of Pan-Africanism, a cause to which Taju had dedicated most of his life. An engaging political scientist, he was also a prolific writer and an outspoken debater that candidly believed in African solutions to Africa's problems.

He was born in Funtua, Katsina State in northern Nigeria on January 6, 1956, where he attended primary and secondary school, later gaining entry to Bayero University, in Kano, where he read political science. He came to international prominence as the first student from northern Nigeria to attend Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar; where he went on to write his PhD on the Nigerian military.

Mid-1980s was an interesting time for Nigerian radicals fighting military rule in their country and Taju rose to the occasion when he launched various campaigns against military rule and General Sani Abacha's human rights abuses in Nigeria. It wasn't long before his activities landed him in trouble with the authorities. He was declared a wanted man by the Buhari/Idiagbon government (1984-1985) and narrowly escaped detention and possible death, under the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha (1993-1998), Abacha eventually arrested him and had his passport confiscated in 1993. With the help of Uganda, he escaped Nigeria and fled to Uganda in 1994.

Taju's intellectual mentor while in London Abdurrahman Babu (RIP), a well known architect of Tanzania's *Ujamaa* political system and one time Minister in Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's government, played a significant role in Taju's election to the Secretary General-ship of the Pan African Movement (headquartered in Kampala), leading him into active association with President Museveni's "Movement" politics, and Paul Kagame's R.P.F (Rwanda Patriotic Front) contest for power in Rwanda. His presence in Kampala, it is noted, enabled him to be a key player in East African politics. He was on first name terms with most Eastern African Presidents, Museveni, Kagame and Zenawi amongst others. On Taju's death, President Museveni, who fell out with Taju over his strong criticism of the 2005 lifting of the constitutional term limits known locally as *Kissanja*, (that would have enabled the president to rule the country indefinitely), said he "enjoyed his skilful writings and never had any problem with him."

In London, he was the founding coordinator of the Africa Research Information Bureau and editor of its journal, *Africa World Review*. He was also the founding chairman of the Centre for Democracy and Development and co-founder of Justice Africa. In March, my article "*The End of the Capitalist error in east Africa?*" featured in his widely read usual slot 'Pan African

Postcard', at *Pambazuka*, presently the most pulsating journal on Africa. Most editors of newspapers that he wrote for, some of which included The Monitor (Uganda), Weekly Trust (Nigeria), The African (Tanzania), Nairobi Star (Kenya) and the Weekly Herald (Zimbabwe), thought he was also unreliable. "His respect for deadlines didn't exist and he typed as he spoke and thought", said one editor whilst another added "He simply sent us copy that was unpunctuated, no spell checks - straight off the cuff - a nightmare and yet worthwhile because what he had to say was always pertinent."

He will continue to be a torch of inspiration and encouragement to me both as a fellow political scientist and an African writer (albeit younger). His signature 'Don't agonise, Organise!' will forever remain a permanent imprint on my mind. The best we can do to honour his tireless efforts in promoting social and political justice in Africa, is to continue exposing the injustice that exists and call for a renewed sense of quality African citizenry. May his soul forever rest in peace.

**(BORN: 8 January, 1956, in Katsina State, Nigeria. Died: 25 May, 2009, in Nairobi, Kenya, aged 53).**

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