

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



"For precious friends hid in death's
dateless night"

—Shakespeare

Rest in peace

Dr Haijiya Gambo,

Ahmed Aka Sawaba 1930-2001.

Renate Albertsen Marton 1949-2001

And

Live in peace

Safiyah Tungar-Tudu 1968-?

Last month, Nigeria was diminished by the deaths of two women who had contributed significantly to its development. Should the third young woman be stoned to death in December 2001 by order of a Sharia court in Sokoto, then Nigeria will have permitted such a gross abuse of women rights, that is her reputation and image will be forever diminished and bemoaned. I discuss this case in full cognizance of the warning issued by the Sokoto State Commissioner for Justice that any person criticizing the Sharia court judgment could be charged for contempt of court. (Daily Times November 13, 2001).

Does this indicate that contempt of court is defined differently under Islamic law and that Sharia has jurisdiction over non-Muslims in and beyond the area in which the Sharia court is situated?

It is sadly ironic that this anti-human judgment was passed just as the greatest champion of the rights of women in Northern Nigeria, Haiji Gambo Ahmed Sawaba, passed on. Almost fifty years ago in 1953, Gambo and 200 other women were sentenced to a month in prison by what was then known as an Alkali court in Kano. Their crime? Attending the first meeting of the Women wing of the Northern Element People Union (NEPU) led by Aminu Kano. Gambo had joined NEPU in 1951 and had been trained in political strategy by Aminu Kano who believed in the rights of women and recognized their potential power.

Inspired by her mentor, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Gambo embarked on the mobilization of women—Muslim and Christian in Kano—for the attainment of the emancipation and enfranchisement of women in the North. Over the next twelve years of the First Republic, Gambo was severely criticized by the Alkali court in Kano and Zaria (her hometown thought her father was Ghanaian and her mother Nupe). She endured many prison sentences with hard labor and was brutally beaten several times by thugs of the ruling party in the Northern Region. The Northern People's Congress (NPC). Like her mentor whom she visited often in Abeokuta and with whom she collaborated in the Nigeria Women's Union, Gambo was not only a feminist but a radical socialist. She added NEPU's slogan, *Sawaba*, which

Death of three women

means, freedom to her name. Interviewed not long ago, Haiji sharply criticized the Sharia system introduced in 1999 for polarizing Christians and Muslims in the North. She recalled how she grew up with Christian women in the North. (Gambo was awarded an honorary PhD by a Christian University in Glendale, California).

The Sharia has always been there in the penal code. The Sardauna of Sokoto introduced Sharia through the penal code, why can't we stick to that? Are they now saying that they are more knowledgeable than the Sardauna? (*This Day* Sunday, October 2001)

Gambo Sawaba continued her politi-

'All of Gambo Sawaba's lifelong work for Northern women would have been futile if Northern women did not rally against the sentence of Safiyah Tungar.'

cal career after the First Republic and after Northern women were finally enfranchised in 1976 by the military government headed by General Obasanjo. In 1978, she declared her intention to run for president and to form an all-political party.

However, in the end, Gambo joined one of the Northern-based political parties, the GNPP. Just after that, Gambo paid a glowing tribute to Funmilayo Ransome Kuti who died as a result of the injuries she sustained in the invasion of the Kalakuta Republic.

Interestingly, one of the most eloquent tributes to Haiji Gambo Ahmed Sawaba was by a Southern woman politician, Olivia Agbajoh, a member of the Federal House of Representatives, who stated that Gambo was her mentor, an icon (who) "advised us women politicians to be courageous and learn to absorb shocks in the political system." Agbajoh's tribute appeared in the *Vanguard* on November 14, 2001. She explained that she was vice president when Gambo was first National President of the forum of Nigerian Women in Politics, which means that Gambo Sawaba remained politically active and committed up to her death. It is sadly ironic that Gambo died just a week after the award of the national honor, Member of the Federal Republic (MFR), a very belated recognition of women in Nigeria after Ransome Kuti.

All of Gambo Sawaba's lifelong work for Northern women would have been futile if Northern women did not rally

against the sentence of Safiyah Tungar-Tudu.

In Afghanistan, women formed an organization of resistance against Taliban oppression and the films which exposed the Taliban public have been shown on television all over the world. Women in Sokoto and other Sharia states need to summon the courage and take a stand, especially since the court judgment has been criticized by Dr M.T Landan, senior lecturer in Islamic law at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria who points out that the precondition of the witnesses to prove the allegation of adultery was not met nor was there any charge or sentence of the man responsible for Safiyah's pregnancy. Moreover, the Quran rules that the punishment for adultery should be confinement to the house and/or 100 stripes (lashes) for the man and the woman.

The third woman, Renate Albertson Marton, before her death, was the doctor of the Germany Cultural Centre, the Goethe Institute in Victoria Island Lagos, a position she had held for less than two years. But previously, from 1988-1995, Renate had been head of the languages department and deputy director of the institute.

It was then that she made her greatest impact on strengthening Nigeria-German cultural relations. She organized more than 50 exhibitions at the Goethe Institute for Nigerian artists, some of whom thus received their first promotion and patronage. Renate also arranged theatre productions and concerts for Nigerian musicians and artists both in the institute and Germany. When Renate left in 1995, the arts community in Lagos mourned her departure at an elaborate farewell feast.

On November 10, the same art community held a moving and impressive farewell for Renate Albertsen Marton at the Goethe Institute; there was a roll call of who's who in the cultural sector.

Traditional praise chants and a drum call by the Guild Nike Oshogbo Cultural Troupe, performance by the Guild of Nigerian Dancers and drama performance by the Africa project artistes and music by Benson Idonije. Others were the National Theatre Troupe by Ben Tomolaju, songs by Francesca Emmanuel and Chief Segun Olusola, poetry and speeches by Jahman Anikulapo, Professor Femi Osofisan, Duro Oni, Odia Ofeimun, Toyin Adewale, Jimoh Buraimoh, Chief Segun Olusola, the society of Nigerian artists, the National Film Institute, all paying tribute to their friend and supporter.

Renate and her husband came to love Nigeria on their first posting, so much so that when her husband sadly died during their stay, he asked to be buried in Osogbo. Since Renate died in Nigeria, not Germany, she had also arranged to be buried in Osogbo.