

WELCOME to my second column. If you read my first, you may recall that I promised to comment on Ebenezer Babatope's interpretation of the Abacha era as expressed in his book *The Abacha Years: What Went Wrong*, and in his comments at the launch of the book. Babatope, a self-styled radical A woist and political theorist, is the author of several books about politics in Nigeria since independence. This book is as much about himself as politics: That is, it is a political memoir. Memoirs are one of the great interests if the memoirist is extremely unusual or brilliant. They are customarily written towards the end of a long life of achievements. Whether Babatope's life fulfils those criteria or whether the memoir is premature is for the reader to decide. It seems to have been written to satisfy a confessional urge and is very self-defensive.

In his review of the book at the launch, Odia Offemun (as quoted in the Vanguard, December 21, 2000) described Babatope as 'a man of instant history'. The context was not given so it was not clear whether the reference was to Babatope's acts in making history or to his work in recording history. The latter is more meaningful since Babatope's writing is journalistic and, in many cases, journalism is the first rough draft of history.

Perhaps because of Chief Ebenezer Babatope's pseudonym/nickname, Ebino Topsy (his book was self-published by his company of the same name), I cannot help being reminded of the nursery hymn about Humpty Dumpty toppling from a wall "...all the kinsmen couldn't put Humpty together again." Nor am I alone in this perception. The Guardian political editor, Yinka Aderibigbe, described Babatope (Dec 28, 2000) as "A troubled and frustrated politician finding it difficult to find his rhythm after a political somersault." (emphasis mine).

The aura of nonsense and magic is intensified by Babatope's comments at the launch of his book when he refers to himself as being "safe from the witches and wizards of the Yoruba land." But this is a world of evil, not magic.

At the launch, Babatope was as brazenly defiant and unrepentant as Mustapha at the Oputa panel (which I discussed last Monday).

"I do not have any regrets of any kind for serving as a minister under late General Sani Abacha for it was not Abacha I had offered my service to but Nigeria... I have eaten the forbidden apple by serving a military government that I have spent the greater part of my life condemning (This day 21 Dec. 2000).

This "affirmation", as he puts it, is contradicted by the subsequent lament that if he had heeded the call to quit, he would have been dead by now. Babatope pleads for understanding based on the data he provides in his book. Certainly, all his anecdotes about the intrigues, double-dealing, treachery, looting, and brutality constitute useful materials for future historians. They may then point out that the Nuremberg trials did not accept a defence of "following orders." Any person who served in the Nazi government or was a member of the Nazi party was considered guilty of crimes against humanity. Nor did the Nuremberg judges accept a defence of ignorance, of not knowing what was happen-

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Remembering Humpty Dumpty

ing.

There were so many of us—eyewitnesses—when Abacha seized power, who were able to recognize the terrible dangers he represented. We may not have resisted but we didn't collaborate. It is difficult to credit the willful,

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gullibility or gluttony of otherwise clever, decent citizens like Babatope who did zealous collaborators. It is even more difficult to credit their non-repentance, their lack of guilt when confronted with all the evidence of the repercussions of their collaboration.

One such piece of evidence was graphically provided by Chris Anyanwu at the Oputa panel. Already the winner of international prizes for outstanding, heroic journalism in my mind, she deserves another accolade for her article "Saying Sorry Takes Guts" in *This day* Dec. 22, 2000. In a powerful, poignant essay, Anyanwu explains why at the Oputa panel she embraced Zachary Bui who had tortured her when she was arrested for publishing information about the 1995 phan-

tom coup and "very nearly plucked out my eye." Bui was one of Abacha's hand-picked men, "the best in the area of physical and mechanical torture." However, after giving evidence, Bui apologized to Anyanwu, unsolicited, and impressed her with the "spontaneity and genuineness of his apology." As Anyanwu rightly points out, "the concept of apology seems to be anathema to Nigeria public life" and it is the first to be heard from the Abacha cabal.

Babatope had fled the government and the country by the time Chris Anyanwu was unjustly imprisoned but there were plenty of other victims of Abacha's system of terror while he was inside. When Anyanwu observes that the Abacha inner circle say time and time again, "I will do it again, they have chosen the easier part. It is easier to hold on to a wrong," it is as though she is referring to Babatope.

On a deeper and global level, Chris Anyanwu's article raises a profoundly troubling question on whether the victims of torture and abuse should forgive and forget. As she admits, some of her fellow victims condemned her. This is an issue around which many literature-creative, scientific, sociological analyses have been written. As Anyanwu also notes, her response was predicated on her psych and her cultural and religious background. Forgiveness is a Christian virtue, but not so valued by other religions. Forgetting, however, seems to be universally devalued... hence war memorials and museums to honor the civilians as well as the soldiers all over the world, as I discussed last Monday. Justice Oputa was very wise when he advised that the places of torture and execution be preserved as monuments to the victims of tyranny and as reminders to us and the future generations of the need to prevent such horrors from happening again.

In five days, a young woman who has just given birth is scheduled to be flogged in Zamfara State for engaging in pre-marital sex. Protests against this act of "justice" are being mounted overseas: Here at the time of writing in Nigeria, the silence is resounding apart from a couple of vigilant human rights organizations. And this is a *human* rights issue not a "women's issue" for the man concerned was also flogged. I hope the volume of protest swells across the land.

I regret to inform our readers that there will be no column for the next few Mondays. My father, Joseph Gantman, died in Sydney on January 12, aged 86. As you read this, I