Greater Tomorrow: Freedom Radio and The Struggle Against Abacha

Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún
September 5, 2023

Mọlará Wood

Even now, decades later, Gbọ́láhàn Ọlálẹ̀mí cannot go to sleep in a dark room. It is a residual anxiety of the psychological trauma of the dictatorial regime of General Sani Abacha, when Ọlálẹ̀mí was detained at the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) in Apapa, Lagos. They had come for him on the morning of March 10, 1997. Eight operatives of the DMI including one named Katanga, a female from Kwara State and a Yorùbá officer, were at Ọlálẹ̀mí's door at 7.30 a.m. It was the start of a difficult period of detention, during which he came face to face with the dreaded Col. Frank Omenka, the Abacha regime's Director of Military Intelligence. In the end, when they couldn't pin anything on him, Omenka let him go with the pyrrhic gift of a book titled, '*Why Innocent Men Suffer*'.

It was a time without mercy. Col. Omenka had physical and mental torture down to a fine art; and no doubt revelled in his own capacity for sadistic humour. The book presented to the erstwhile detainee may have also been Omenka's way of demonstrating that, when it came to maintaining repressive order and the ruthless crushing of dissent, he had thought it through, read up on it, theorised it, and had reconciled himself to the absolute necessity of collateral damage by way of the suffering of the innocent.

As the former detainee took his leave, he may have had double cause to heave a sigh of relief. Arrested because of his links to an exiled associate, Dàpọ̀ Ọlọ́runyọmí, the jailers had missed the elephant in the room – for Gbọ́láhàn Ọlálẹ̀mí was the main operative behind the illegal Freedom Radio. The pirate radio station had become such a threat to the regime, it was said that Abacha had released five million dollars for the arrest of those behind it. And yet here was the wanted man walking free, undetected, though not unscathed. It was something of a miracle.

In a Lagos living room in 2015, Ọlálẹ̀mí – also known as Lẹ̀mí – sits down to recall the events of those dark days, and to recount his own part in the struggle to free Nigeria from the chokehold of military dictatorship. To tell the story, in a sense, is to relive it. But tell it, he must. A spectre of the palpable fear of those days hangs over the room, as Lẹ̀mí tells his ponderous, halting tale. He speaks in a low voice, measures his breaths, moves his hands slowly, and skips over some of the details. It is too soon, he says, to reveal some things, for the safety of many of those involved. It is too recent a history, and elements of the dark forces are still at large, even though Abacha is long dead, and Nigeria is under democratic rule.

The story is being told in the house of George Noah. Also listening is Noah's longtime associate, Dayọ̀ Johnson. As the two main operational hands behind Radio Kudirat, Noah and Johnson were a crucial duo; London-based Nigerians, they put their lives on hold to join the struggle against Abacha. After the murder of Kudirat Abiola – and, called up by the quartet of Wọlé Ṣóyínká, Bọ́lájí Akínyẹmí, Àlàní Akínrìnádé and Káyọ̀dé Fáyẹmí – George Noah and Dayọ̀ Johnson left the UK and holed up in Norway for three years to run the daily operations and broadcasts of Radio Kudirat, constituting a thorn in Abacha's side. Now, years later, the comrades-in-arms listen to Lẹ̀mí's story about the Lagos operations of Freedom Radio, the precursor to Radio Kudirat.

At the time of his detention in 1997, Ọlálẹ̀mí was Director of Programmes at Channels Television in Lagos. Few, not even his employers and colleagues, knew of his involvement in Freedom Radio. The stranglehold of military dictatorship on the Nigerian society had reached its apogee. The annulment by self-styled Military President Ibrahim Babangida of the June 12, 1993 presidential election won by Chief M.K.O Abíọ́lá and widely acknowledged as free and fair, brought the country to the precipice. The truncation of Babangida's much-vaunted transition programme supposedly intended to bring Nigeria back to democratic rule, threw the country into an unprecedented period of political, social and economic instability that, not long after, dovetailed into the even more repressive era of the Abacha regime. If Babangida brought Nigeria to the brink, Abacha brought her to the edge of the abyss.

With the announcement of the annulment on June 23, the eight-year transition midwifed by Babangida was abruptly terminated, as were court proceedings regarding the elections. The ensuing political turmoil and civil unrest eventually consumed the Babangida regime, swept out of office as though by a gale on August 27, 1993. In its place was instituted the Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shónékàn, a civilian. However, as Max Siollun wrote in his book, *Soldiers of Fortune*:

If Nigerians thought they had seen the worst of the military's excesses, they were badly mistaken. Things were about to get much worse.

Photo credit: Premium Times

Shónẹ́kàn's Interim Government was sent packing on November 17, 1993 by General Sani Abacha, ushering in five long years of grim contestation for the very soul of Nigeria. The press was to play a major part in the intensifying struggle for democracy. From the Babangida regime to the ascendant Abacha one, journalists went into the trenches; the heated confrontation with military dictatorship formed the crucible that birthed what became known as 'Guerrilla Journalism'.

The foundations for the courageous journalistic feats of the 1990s were laid about a decade before, with the founding of *Newswatch* Magazine in 1985 – the same year Babangida seized power. The Editor-In-Chief and CEO of *Newswatch* was the larger-than-life Délé Gíwá, a new kind of journalist who would later pay for his daring with his life, grimly despatched by a letter bomb delivered to his home one Sunday in October 1986, in an unsolved murder that remains one of the greatest mysteries of the Babangida regime. Babangida later froze the accounts of *Newswatch,* in 1987, over the magazine's pre-emptive publication of the Cookey Political Bureau Report, which recommended a return to civilian rule by 1990. But no matter what he did, the age of the investigative, boldly confrontational weekly news magazine had dawned. *TELL* Magazine went on the newsstands on April 15, 1991; and *TheNEWS* followed two years later. As one of the founding editors of *TheNEWS*, Kunle Ajibade, later recalled in his book, *Jailed for Life*:

We set up TheNEWS in February 1993 to be a true people's magazine, which would breathe a fresh air of patriotism into Nigerians. We set it up to tear apart the mask of lies in our national life. Looking back now, we exposed ourselves to grave dangers, considering that those who were murdered by the regimes of Babangida and Abacha were no greater nuisances to those regimes than we were.

The Babangida regime promulgated the infamous decrees 33, 35, 43, and 48, in a sweeping curtailment of press freedom. It carried out large-scale arrests of editors and journalists; closure of media houses; as well as the regular seizure of those editions of publications suspected to be carrying content critical of the regime – on one occasion seizing 80,000 copies of *TheNEWS*.

In addition to the repression of the press, there were widespread human rights abuses, including

arrest and detention without warrant or fair trial, seizing of the passports of known critics of the government, and denial of the right of assembly as well as other freedoms. The atmosphere became even more oppressive for the press. Hostile acts like the retroactive proscription of *TheNEWS* by the Babangida regime in May 1993, only prefigured a further tightening of the noose by the even more ruthless Abacha regime that came after. The five founding editors of *TheNEWS* – Sẹ̀yẹ Kẹ́hìndé, Dàpọ̀ Ọlọ́runyọmí, Báyọ̀ Ọnànúgà, Babáfẹ́mi Ojùdú and Kúnlé Ajíbádé – had been declared wanted under Babangida. *Newswatch* Editors Ray Ekpu, Dan Agbese and Yakubu Mohammed were in detention by 1994. Ajíbádé was, as recorded in the title of his prison notes, '*Jailed for Life*'. Harsh sentences were also handed down to George Mbah, Chris Anyanwu and Charles Obi. A fifth editor, Nosa Igiebor of *TELL*, was jailed without trial.

News magazines were forced to go underground as a result of the clampdown. Regular newsroom structure was decentralised into cells that held editorial meetings at random places like football stadiums, to evade the authorities. *TheNEWS* was reincarnated almost immediately as *TEMPO,* and hit the streets every week. Its editor, Gbilé Ọ̀shádípẹ̀, wrote in the debut edition:

The pro-democracy protests failed. At the end of several weeks of rage and sporadic outburst only dead bodies, shattered dreams and a hopeless nation were the visible dividends. Nigeria totters on, held hostage by the military and a collaborative political elite. It is amidst the unending uncertainty and absolute insecurity that TEMPO evolves.

(Trials & Triumphs: The Story of TheNEWS, by Wale Adebanwi.)

Guerrilla journalism was at full throttle, in an era of "defiant publishing", as later described by Ọlọ́runyọmí:

Editors had to maintain a status of strict internal exile, and for about six months I could not stay in my home. I hopped from one sleeping hole to another every night, moving about in crowded commuter buses to evade arrest.

It was in this oppressive yet defiant atmosphere that Dàpọ̀ Ọlọ́runyọmí met briefly with Gbọ́láhàn Ọlálẹ̀mí in Ogba, Lagos, sometime in January 1994. Ọlọ́runyọmí more or less said to Lẹ̀mí: "Things can't go on like this. We need to do something."

A maverick, Ọlọ́runyọmí was one of five editors that decamped from M.K.O Abíọ́lá's *African Concord* during the nineties to establish *TheNEWS*. As Adébánwí wrote:

A prose stylist and natural rebel, Dàpọ̀ Ọlọ́runyọmí was not given to the trappings of being a boss... Dapsy was an intellectual insurgent or insurgent intellectual... he had been involved in the innermost of the inner cells of the Marxist movement while at the University of Ifẹ̀. There, he learnt the tactics and strategies of actualizing a materialist understanding of social contradictions. He had a radical intellectual attitude towards his social mission, and journalism was only one of the forms of expression that he saw as critical to social transformation. He was therefore involved in the human rights community and eventually in the pro-democracy movement that led to the struggle against military fascism.

In addition to the clampdown on newspapers and weekly news magazines like *TheNEWS* and *TELL*, all radio and television stations were to carry government policy papers, nothing negative. "Fortunately, I was involved with some pirate radio stations in London. So I said, yeah, I can do something. [Ọlọ́runyọmí] said, OK, let's meet," recalls Lẹ̀mí. He was at the time an editorial consultant to Independent Communications Network Limited (ICNL), publishers of *TheNEWS* and *TEMPO*, and it was in the course of the publication of these magazines that the conversation took place.

Lẹ́mí's involvement with pirate stations in the United Kingdom led him to believe something indeed could be done outside the realm of the print publications already drawing the ire of the regime. "So I said (to Ọlọ́runyọ́mí), 'Yeah, we are going to do that'. We agreed that we had to find a strategy on how to go about it."

The Story of *My Sister*, as told by Lẹ́mí

"We decided: let's meet to see how we can go about it. He said I should allow him to have a meeting with some people. He went ahead and had a meeting. That was around January 1994. About March, he came back again. He said: We need to go and have that meeting together. So we had a meeting, three of us: Dàpọ̀, Bẹ́kọ Ransome-Kútì and myself. So we met at Bẹ́kọ's house at Imaria Close in Anthony Village (Lagos). We decided on a date on when we should go to Cotonou to meet our crew who were coming from London. When we got to Cotonou, we met with General Àlàní Akínrìnádé, Professor Wọlé Ṣóyínká and Prof. Bọ́lájí Akínyẹmí. There was a particular place where we met. It was at one man's house, and that was Campo Chichi, an architect, a Beninoise. There had been another place where all of us met. But where we had the real meeting was at Campo Chichi's place (in Cotonou, Republic of Benin).

"How did Campo Chichi get involved? This was his link: he met 'Àdán' on the plane – ah! (for those who may not understand, Àdán, or BAT is Bọ́lá Ahmed Tinúbú). He met him on the plane and they became friends. And that was how it was decided that when 'the material' was coming in, we should use [Campo Chichi's] place – and we met at his place. But Àdán didn't go (to the meeting), he facilitated only; and we were told that they had already paid £5,000 for the material. Among those who contributed funds for the purchase of the material, were: Bọ́lá Ahmed Tinúbú, Prof. Bọ́lájí Akínyẹmí, General Àlàní Akínrìnádé, and Brigadier-General David Mark.

Codename *My Sister*

"'The material' was a transmitter. We were not calling it Transmitter; we were calling it *My Sister* – that was the codename. Once you said, *My Sister*, you know what you're referring to: it was the radio equipment. So we would say: 'How is My Sister?', 'Has My Sister come?', 'No, not yet!' Eventually it came, a week after we landed in Cotonou. It landed in Togo. Káyọ̀dé Ògúndámisí and Prof. Akínyẹmí went to Togo to bring it in. So we had to test it. They brought it into Cotonou from Togo – but it was Cotonou to Nigeria that would be the difficult part. We tested it in Campo Chichi's house and we were having lots of fun, talks and everything! And Dàpọ̀ now went to Prof (Ṣóyínká) and said, 'Prof, this one looks like a longer step to [your radio station hold-up and pirate broadcast] in the sixties!' – and Prof said, 'Well, it's now left for you, the new generation, to take on'.

'Alhaji', or, Búrùjí Kashamu

"It was around this time we were introduced to Alhaji. We'll just call him Alhaji. He helped us a great deal. He did some things for us, including accommodation (and other assistance), especially those who were escaping from Abacha's gulag."

Although it is something Lẹ́mí and many others keep close to their chests, the 'Alhaji' in question was none other than Búrùjí Kashamu. It has remained an unknown aspect of the story of the Ògùn State indigene who later became a prominent, albeit controversial, political figure. 'Alhaji' knew nothing about Freedom Radio, or Radio Kudirat that succeeded it, but he was a Schindler of sorts during the time of military dictatorship, and he was an important underground figure for the struggle. Kashamu provided safe havens for many prominent people, including the wife of nationalist and elder statesman, Chief Anthony Enahoro. Lẹ́mí says of 'Alhaji': "He helped so many people who were running away. He provided accommodation for so many people and, not only that, when I was

arrested and I escaped, I was staying in his house."

Meeting Mama Ìjẹ̀shà

Mama Ìjẹ̀shà's house was situated along the NADECO Route, in Sakete, a stretch of No Man's Land between Nigeria and Benin Republic. The NADECO Route is somewhat circuitous, a semi-circle on the map. Lẹ́mí is still wary of laying everything bare regarding the NADECO Route; with Nigeria's turbulent history, the route may still be needed again from time to time. This much Lẹ́mí is willing to volunteer: "Before the Ìdírókò border, there is Ajégúnlẹ̀. Ìdírókò is known as Igolo on the Benin side. With *My Sister*, Dapsy and I took a vehicle from Domtoka Market to Igolo and from there we took a bike to Sakete and headed for Mama Ìjẹ̀shà's house. We left *My Sister* with her and took public transport back to Ota."

Sakete is a town of some 432 sqm in the Plateau Department region of the Republic of Benin. Its population was pegged at 35,417 people in 2012. A sleepy town, it would have been even less developed and less populated in 1994, when Ọlọ́runyọ́mí and Lẹ́mí came calling, bringing with them *My Sister,* a transmitting equipment in three parts.

My Sister consisted of: a UHF Transmitter (TV frequency) and a Receiver that came in a further two parts – one side that received TV, and another that converted it to FM (a Transceiver).

Sakete is one the sites of cultural linkage for the Yorùbá of Nigeria and Benin Republic, and the traditional ruler of the town is designated the Onisakete of Sakete. The Yorùbá language is widely spoken; and the inhabitants identify with the various sub-groups in the ethnic-nationality, including Èkìtì and Ìjẹ̀shà. Regional Yorùbá dialects can also be heard in Sakete. Little wonder then, that the town yielded a crucial figure in the journey of *My Sister*, in the person of Mama Ìjẹ̀shà. A woman of around 60 years of age who lived in a thatch house in Sakete, Mama Ìjẹ̀shà had no children, and likely saw herself as a mother figure to many in the community. Tall and slim with a dark complexion, she bore a serendipitous resemblance to Lẹ́mí, the young man she took under her wings, and before long, locals took to calling him "Ọmọ Mama Ìjẹ̀shà" (Mama Ijesha's son). The familiarisation process, getting himself embedded in this rural community, had taken the patient Lẹ́mí a good six months.

As noted in Adébánwí's *Trials and Triumphs*, it was Seidi Múléró, a "laid back" and "unselfish" French translator at *TheNEWS* who hailed from Porto Novo, who introduced Mama Ìjẹ̀shà to her adopted son:

Seidi Múléró was the correspondent for the West Coast. Called "Baba Múléró" by his colleagues… he was French-speaking, which was a great asset not only to the magazine but the entire pro-democracy movement. He would become the great and self-sacrificing guide for the escape of major activists, including some of his bosses, through the famous NADECO Route. The NADECO Route became a critical route for the escape of activists from Nigeria through the bushes and creeks on the Nigerian-Benin border and beyond, as the military regime grew more tyrannous and murderous.

Bringing *My Sister* Home

It was Mama Ìjẹ̀shà that brought *My Sister* to Nigeria from the Republic of Benin. A petty trader who commuted regularly from Sakete in Benin Republic to sell perishable goods in Sángo-Ọ̀tà, she simply put the component parts of *My Sister* in her weather-beaten woven basket, covered it to the brim with the oranges she was taking to the market, and embarked on her cross-border journey. With *My Sister* hidden in plain sight, Mama Ìjẹ̀shà put her basket in the hold of the full capacity, rickety public transport bus, as she had done a hundred times before, and took her seat, seemingly without a care in the world.

Lémi had done a thorough reconnaissance of the route many times, to survey the terrain. There were 23 checkpoints between Ajégúnlẹ̀ and Sángo-Ọ̀tà alone. At least four agencies were on high alert at each checkpoint: Police, Army, NDLEA and Quarantine. "There is a river between Owódé and Sángo-Ọ̀tà, Odò Ajílété (Ajilete River) – all four agencies were there, because the country was tense," Lẹ̀mí recalls. Yet, despite the lockdown, Mama Ìjẹ̀shà sailed through with *My Sister*, with hardly anyone giving the rural woman a second glance. At Sángo-Ọ̀tà, she delivered her prized package to Lẹ̀mí and Ọlọ́runyọ̀mí. "Dapsy's Lada moved *My Sister* from Sángo-Ọ̀tà!" Lẹ̀mí declares with a note of triumph.

Greater Tomorrow

Considering the elaborate organisational structure put in place for the operation of Radio Kudirat later in London and in Norway, Lẹ̀mí reflects that for *My Sister* and Freedom Radio on the ground in Nigeria, "We couldn't afford to have that network link. It was just two people involved – Dapsy and G.T. – Greater Tomorrow. That was who everybody was hearing on Radio Freedom: Greater Tomorrow." And that was Lẹ̀mí. At one point the authorities arrested G.T. Ògúnyẹ, an activist lawyer working with Fẹ́mi Fálànà, on suspicion of being the voice of the pirate radio, in a case of mistaken identity. "I couldn't say anything," Lẹ̀mí now admits. Aside from Ọlọ́runyọ̀mí and Ọlálẹ̀mí, the only other person in the know was Ìdòwú Ọbasá, a stalwart of *TheNEWS* who saw himself as part of the rearguard of the struggle – and even he didn't know the base of operations, for security reasons.

Writing from exile in 1996, Ọlọ́runyọ̀mí touched on Freedom Radio, without any mention of his own crucial role:

An era of "defiant broadcasting" came into being in 1995 with a pirate radio, the Freedom Frequency Radio (F&F), emerging to challenge the state monopoly of the airwaves.

Ọlọ́runyọ̀mí's reticence was understandable. He had been detained for a week in March 1993, and again for a few days in 1994. A 1997 Amnesty International Possible Prisoners of Conscience Report, raised alarm that Ọlọ́runyọ̀mí's wife had been in detention for nearly a month. Military dictatorship had no respect for family; in May 1993 they had detained Ládi Ọlọ́runyọ̀mí with her baby for 24 hours, in lieu of her husband. Given that the terrorising beast that was the Sani Abacha regime was on the prowl all over Nigeria, anything but silence about involvement in a subversive endeavour of the magnitude of Freedom Radio would have been foolhardy.

Yet, despite the choking atmosphere of the time, the intimidation and threats of arrest and worse, Dàpọ̀ Ọlọ́runyọ̀mí and Gbolahan Ọlálẹ̀mí got *My Sister* to Nigeria, safe and sound, in three pieces. Looking back all these years later, Lẹ̀mí says simply, "There was a determination that told us: you will make it."

———

Mọlará Wood *is a writer, journalist, and editor. She's based in Lagos.*