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Abdulrahman Mohammed Babu 1924-96 — A Personal Memoir

*Horace Campbell**

Introduction

It was on my birthday, November 1, 1988, in Chicago. Babu, David Johnson, Mrs. Roy (Makini's mother) and I were enjoying the evening. Babu was cooking a special pillau and he was reminiscing and explaining life in Africa to Mrs. Roy. We had just recently finished participating in the African Studies Association meeting in Chicago where Babu had presented a paper titled "Liberalisation in Tanzania". On the panel was also Issa Shivji; the session was packed. It is easy to remember the meeting; for during the occasion the hotel room in which Babu and Shivji were staying was burgled while they were asleep.

There are many fond memories of working in collaboration with Abdulrahman Mohammed Babu who passed away on August 5, 1996 in London. I remember him as a father, a revolutionary, writer and Pan-Africanist who wanted a united and independent Africa. The last discussion group that Babu participated in was in 1994 at Oxford where the discussion was on the responsibility of Africans for the genocide in Rwanda. Two months before, we were all involved in seeking ways to define a new path for the global Pan-African movement.

My first close contact with the political work of Babu was in Tanzania in 1973 while he was still incarcerated. There were regular meetings in the home of Walter Rodney who was working with lawyers and other activists to ensure that Babu received justice following the assassination. The meetings were being called to bring attention to the fact that Babu was detained without trial. Representations were made through legal channels to ensure that Babu and others then in jail would not be forgotten. In his home in Dar-es-Salaam, there was the picture of himself and Che Guevara which was taken when Che was in Africa to fight in the Congo (now Zaire).

Babu was born on September 22, 1924, in Zanzibar to a Swahili family when

the festering sores of colonialism and racial divisions were still alive. After his secondary school education he went to London in 1950. At that time many nationalist from different parts of London were debating the issue of self-determination for Africa. Nkrumah had just returned home from London having been influenced by the passive non-violence example of Mahatma Ghandi and the decolonisation process in his country, India; his slogan at that time was Positive Action. Mohammed Babu studied philosophy and literature in London and went back to Unguja as a political activist. He came in contact with members of the British Communist movement and other anti-imperialist forces. Slowly Babu learned that Africans had to be self-reliant in the area of ideological development. Though he later spent some time in China, throughout his life, Babu wanted to deepen the Pan-Africanism as an independent ideology of liberation. He demonstrated this when he became Secretary of the Pan-African Movement for Eastern and Central Africa during the war of liberation in Kenya.

During the struggles of the Kenya Land Freedom Army, the impetus for closer cooperation among the forces of resistance led to the formation of the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa (PAFMECA).¹ The force of the popular conception of Pan-African unity among the people (and expressed clearly in the letters of Dedan Kimathi) was such that in the fifties all the leaders of African independence movements rallied to the idea of regional unity as a step towards the freedom and unity of the whole continent. In September 1958, the first meeting of PAFMECA was held in Mwanza, Tanganyika, with representatives from Kenya, Uganda, Zanzibar and Nyasaland. Julius Nyerere and Tom Mboya were in the leadership of this coordinating freedom committee. Babu was Secretary bringing the experience of the wider anti-colonial sentiments of the Bandung movement the purpose of which was to intensify the struggle against European domination. At the end of the Mwanza meeting they announced that PAFMECA intended to:

foster the spirit of Pan-Africanism in order to rid all the East and Central African territories of imperialism, white supremacy, economic exploitation, and social degradation by stepping up nationalist activities to achieve self-government and establish parliamentary democracy. To coordinate nationalist programmes, tactics, projects and efforts for the speedy liberation of the said territories.

This affirmation of Pan-African solidarity was an important development even before the first Pan-African meeting which was hosted by Kwame Nkrumah on African soil. The All African Peoples' Conference, which was held in Accra, Ghana, reinforced the impetus for a coordinated resistance across territorial boundaries. Babu attended this conference as the Secretary of PAFMECA. On more than one occasion he repeated the story of how his delegation introduced

Patrice Lumumba to the meeting, and to Kwame Nkrumah.

Babu was fond of telling young people of how before the meeting Nkrumah was calling for non violent resistance to colonialism. He explained that at this meeting the forces from East Africa and Algeria, along with Franz Fanon, said that it was not possible to speak of non-violence across territorial boundaries. They called on the conference to support the armed struggles in Algeria and Kenya. On the strength of the PAFMECA delegation, Mboya was made Chairperson of the meeting and, in conjunction with Nkrumah, produced the conference slogan, "Independence by any means necessary." This slogan was later popularised in the United States by Malcolm X who was taking a similar position in the context of the call for non-violence in the civil rights movement there.

PAFMECA was short-lived. But its coordination of the opposition forces to colonial rule in East Africa caused consternation for the British who, while supporting the economic integration of East Africa, did not look too kindly at the meetings of PAFMECA and the plans for linking the independence struggles to Central and Southern Africa. But there was a contradiction here : the external forces which opposed a unified resistance front of the African patriots later supported the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar. As was to be expected their main motive was to contain the Zanzibar Revolution which broke out soon after that island-nation became independent in December 1963, and overthrew the Sultan in January 1964. The truth about the revolution in Zanzibar is one of the issues that the AAPS had hoped that Babu would have clarified in his biography. In fact, Babu had developed a draft outline of his memoirs and these were to have been published by AAPS as part of its publication's project on the Biography of African Leaders.

The question of the formation of the Umma Party and its role in the Zanzibar revolution has not been fully aired. During the height of the cold war, the prospect of a popular revolution in Zanzibar had created serious waves in the USA. This was brought out in the book by the partner of Babu, Amrit Wilson. The book, *US Foreign Policies and Revolution-The Creation of Tanzania*, has exposed how Frank Carlucci, who was then the US Charge d' Affaires in Zanzibar, worked to control the revolution because "the revolution in Zanzibar could spread to the rest of Africa." In the eighties-when Frank Carlucci rose in the Republican Party to become the Defence Secretary Babu pointed out how conservatives such as Carlucci made their political debut by undermining the cause of African independence, first in the Congo and then in Zanzibar.

It was refreshing to hear of Babu speak of the enthusiasm and youthfulness which the Zanzibar revolution brought to Tanzanian politics. Activists of the Umma Party such as Salim Ahmed Salim became one of the youngest international diplomat. Ali Mashud as an officer in the Tanzanian army provided the crucial military support for Frelimo in 1971 when Portugal tried to create a Gordian Knot to prevent the advance of the armed liberation struggle. Mashud, like Babu, was

arrested in Tanzania in 1972. The reality, however, was that despite the efforts by external interests to contain the Zanzibar revolution through the Union with Tanganyika, the Zanzibar revolution affected Tanzanian politics in many ways.

A.M. Babu in the Tanzanian Government

The stories Babu told of the leading personalities of the world revolution exposed the work he had done in this period of African politics. During his tenure at PAFMECA, logistics and networking supported fledgling nationalist movements. When Nelson Mandela visited Addis Ababa in 1963 - 1964, he did so under the auspices of PAFMECA. After the independence of Kenya in 1963 PAFMECA changed its name to become the Pan-African Movement of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. It was during this period that Babu was at the center of attempts to network with revolutionaries from other parts of the world.

He spoke warmly of his meetings and discussions with Malcolm X and Che Guevara. One of the prized pictures which he displayed in his Dar es Salaam home was a picture he took with Che Guevara. Babu had been in touch with the Cubans and, with the help of the Tanzanian government, had assisted Che to travel through Dar es Salaam to Kigoma to fight against the mercenary forces who had toppled the legitimate government of the Congo (now Zaire) and assassinated its leader, Patrice Lumumba.

Babu was linked up with all of the liberation movements which had their base through the OAU Liberation Committee in Dar es Salaam. As a minister he provided crucial support for Frelimo, ZANU, SWAPO and the MPLA. John Holness, the Jamaican revolutionary, had met Babu in London in the early fifties. Babu had invited him to work in Tanzania. John and Marga Holness became unofficial representatives of the MPLA and Babu was able to assist the movement in many ways.

Regarding his work with the liberation movements there was one regret in his life. He felt that he had been taken in by the rhetoric of Jonas Savimbi. Like many other African nationalists at that time Babu was endeared by the energy of Jonas Savimbi and he took the credit for introducing Jonas Savimbi to the Chinese. Some latter day members of the Umma Party use this relationship as a rationale for their own dialogue with Jonas Savimbi and UNITA.

When Babu was the Minister of Economic Planning in Tanzania he sought to give substance to the Arusha Declaration. He spoke at length of his commitment to the development of a planned autonomous economy. After the unilateral declaration of independence by Ian Smith, the Zambians and the Tanzanians wanted to find an alternative route to the sea for Zambian copper. The West had told both Tanzanian and Zambia that building a railway through the heart of Africa was not technologically feasible. Babu introduced President Nyerere to Prime Minister Chou en Lai and arranged for the Tanzania President to visit China. He

was personally responsible for the negotiations which led to the agreement for China to build the railway line from Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia to Dar es Salaam. This railway line remains a monument to the true possibilities of cooperation between countries of the Third World.

Imperialism was not happy with progressives in the Tanzanian government. But the progressive forces in Africa saw Tanzania as a place where neo-colonialism was being seriously contested. It was the period when many progressives were attracted to Tanzania. One of the many progressive revolutionaries who worked with Babu was Walter Rodney. Rodney had asked Babu to write the Postscript to his book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. The book and this postscript was to influence my own intellectual development. In trying to come to terms with the form of the state in Africa, I had carefully analysed the words written by Babu in this postscript:

In the absence of committed leadership, many African countries have fallen prey to military exploitation, to the extent that today the generals constitute the majority at the Africa summit. This is as it should be, because when political leadership loses the sense of internal direction, when, in bewilderment, it gives up the efforts to find solutions to people's problems and begin to accumulate wealth for its own individual use, political leadership tends to become commandist in its state operations. Logic and rationale become subversive. And when politicians become commandist, they too become redundant, because who is better fitted to command than the army?

This was a clear statement against corruption and militarism. Babu influenced my own interest in the fight against militarism and inspired my study of the military in Africa, starting with my doctoral thesis which was on *The Commandist State in Uganda*. Babu was a lifelong enemy of militarists and he made an important distinction between military struggles for self determination on the one hand, and militarism and dictatorship on the other.

Babu in Prison

His own political career fell foul of corruption and arbitrariness in Tanzanian politics. Intrigue, arbitrariness and lack of proper judicial procedure in Zanzibar led to the arrest of Babu in Dar-es-Salaam after Sheik Karume was assassinated in Zanzibar in 1972. He was incarcerated without trial for six years. It took a concerted campaign by progressives inside and outside of Tanzania to call for Babu to receive a fair trial. I remember some of the strategy meetings which were held at the home of Walter Rodney in the early seventies. The arrest of Babu and the other revolutionaries was given publicity and Babu was adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. After their release in 1978, Babu went to the

USA and Ali Mafhud went to Mozambique to assist Samora Machel in the liberation war.

Babu in Exile

Patricia Rodney has spoken often of the place that Aishura Babu had in the life of Babu. She spoke of the fact that it was her intervention along with that of Aishura which brought Walter Rodney and Mohammed Babu together. Babu and Aishura had four children; but his exile after release from prison disrupted his family life in Tanzania.

From Tanzania Babu first went to California and then to Boston where he taught for two years at Amherst University. While there he published his book, *African Socialism Or Socialist Africa*. It was while in USA that he consulted the papers at the Johnson archives and assisted in bringing out the book with Amrit Wilson on how the USA worked to create the Union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar.

I met Babu in London in May 1980 when he was there on a visit from the USA. I had just returned from Zimbabwe where I attended the independence celebrations and had arranged for Walter Rodney to visit that country. At our meeting, Babu was keenly interested in the fate of the Working Peoples Alliance and the revolution in the Caribbean. He wanted to know of the Grenada process and the prospects of the other revolutionaries in the region. I remember that after the assassination of Walter Rodney, Babu and his comrades gave moral, political and material support to the Working Peoples Alliance in Guyana.

From the USA Babu went to the United Kingdom. From his base in London he was in touch with all of the progressive movements in several parts of the world. I also remember the impact of his first visit to Tanzania in 1984 when he wanted to test the new directions in Tanzanian politics. He spoke at Nkrumah Hall to a packed audience. He repeated his call for a national economy with backward and forward linkages in the economy. But his words could not find fertile soil at that moment because the IMF and the World Bank were working full time to undermine whatever progressive politics remained in the Tanzanian society.

Babu travelled widely in Africa and in the Americas. He supported young people from all countries who wanted to end dictatorship and he always made himself available to support the progressive cause. It was from this base that he shaped the organisation of the 7th Pan-African Congress. He was available to Africans of a progressive orientation who wanted to give a new direction to the Pan-African movement. The 7th Pan-African Congress was held in Kampala in April 1994 largely under his inspiration and tutelage. Babu was indeed a beacon and inspiration for a young generation of Africans who were looking for an alternative leadership.

The last time I was with Babu was in the context of a meeting in the UK to give clarity to the issues of the war in Rwanda. As a member of the governing body of

the Global Pan-African Movement, he exposed the lies of the "humanitarianism" of France in Rwanda. He helped to rally support in the Pan-African world for the Rwandese Patriotic Front when other intellectuals were pontificating on the need for "majority" rule.

Babu was a passionate believer in the unity of Africa. He wrote lengthy articles on the need for a federation in Eastern Africa to give the base for greater economic cooperation. He always started from the premise that a strong African economy could be built only when the governments begin with the basics, the provision of food, clothing and shelter for the people. This is a basic fact which has been ignored by the economists who spend their time dealing with exchange rates, the value of currencies, and trade in primary commodities.

In 1995 he was an active participant in the Tanzanian elections hoping to give meaning to the democratisation process in his country. He was an internationalist who was an inspiration to all those who believe in human dignity. Babu will be missed by those who are struggling for the liberation of Africa and the emancipation of humanity.

Notes

- * Professor in the Department of African & American Studies, Syracuse University.
- 1. This attempt at a regional force was taken very seriously and the efforts of PAFMECA were studied by international scholars. See J. S. Nye, *Pan-Africanism and East African Integration*, Harvard University Press.