

Gani Fawehinmi: A priceless life

By Ibe Uwaleke

RALF Waldo Emerson, an American poet, essayist and lecturer who lived between 1803 and 1882, while describing the characteristics of heroism once said, "The characteristic of genuine heroism is persistency. All men have wandering impulses, fits and start of generosity. But when you resolved to be great, abide by yourself, and do not weakly try to reconcile yourself with the world. The heroic cannot be the common, nor the common the heroic."

Though this statement seems like an advice to those who aspire to be heroes and heroines, there is no doubt that the characteristics espoused by Emerson here perfectly describe Chief Gani Fawehinmi, the Senior Advocate of the Masses (SAM) in the court of public opinion and a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN) in the court of law, whose passage is being celebrated by all and sundry.

Chief Fawehinmi, a great lawyer, author, publisher, philanthropist, a human rights crusader and a social critic who passed on at the early hours on Saturday, September 5, 2009, was so many things put into one. He was indeed a hero not only in the legal world but also in the cause of fighting to improve the social conditions of the down-trodden.

His struggle against the scourge of military dictatorship and irresponsible governments helped to dismantle the military and establish the nascent democracy Nigeria is enjoying today. He was undoubtedly the veritable conscience of the nation and the champion of the interests and causes of the masses.

The late Chief Fawehinmi who lived 71 years on earth was born on Friday, April 22, 1938, to the family of Chief Saheed Tugbobo Fawehinmi, the Seriki Musulumi of Ondo, a successful timber magnet and Alhaja Muniratu Fawehinmi, the Iya Olori Egbe Adini of Ondo Central Mosque. Both parents had since left the stage.

This great legal icon was also a good family man. He was married to two wives - Mrs. Ganiat Ibukun and Abike Fawehinmi. Ganiat has eight children for him while the younger wife, Abike has six.

Fawehinmi had a humble beginning. His early education started at Ansar-Ud-Deen Primary School, Iyemaja-Ondo from 1947 to 1953. He attended a Christian secondary school: Victory College, Ikare from 1954 to 1958 where he passed his West African School Certificate Examinations in 1958. While this great lawyer was in the college, he was known and called "Nation" by friends and admirers because of his passionate interest in national, legal and political affairs.

On January 1959, he came to Lagos from Ondo and got a job as a clerk in the High Court of Lagos.

His interest to read law was boosted while he was working as a court clerk. On April 29, 1961, Fawehinmi left Nigeria by sea with M.V. Aureol Passenger Ship for the United Kingdom.

In England, he enrolled in the Holborn College of Law for the Bachelor of Law degree of the University of London. He completed the programme in 1964. The same year, he left London to Nigeria. On arrival in Lagos, he enrolled in the Nigeria Law School, which he completed and was called to Nigerian Bar on January 15, 1965.

After graduating from the Law School, he practised for a while in the Chambers of his older brother, who later became a High Court judge, Justice Rasheed Fawehinmi.

In April 1965, the deceased established his own Chambers at No. 116, Denton Street, Ebute-Metta, Lagos. He moved the chambers from this place to his house in Surulere and from there to the present location at No. 35, Adeniran Ajao Road, Ajao Estate, Anthony Village, Lagos.

His chambers' library is reputed to be the largest Law Chambers in Nigeria, which grants access to all including lawyers and students across the country and beyond. The library has a collection of law books and related books of several subjects of over 290,000 copies.

Fawehinmi, while he lived was known as a detribalised Nigerian. This is reflected by the mixture of employees and lawyers who worked or still work in his chambers. They are people of different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Perhaps, the most significant feature in Fawehinmi's struggles was his passion showed in fighting for the rejected, dejected and the oppressed in the society. He started by giving support, showing solidarity to Nigerian students in their attempts to oppose the various obnoxious policies of their institutions and the misgovernance by the various governments.

From the University of Ibadan in 1971 to University of Benin in 1976 and University of Lagos in 1978, he demonstrated his unalloyed support to students. He gave the same support to University of Ife in 1981, to University of Maiduguri in 1983 and Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in 1991.

This fallen Iroko did not stop at students. He extended his magnanimity to other groups like labour, market women, traders and the very poor in the society.

No struggle goes without a price. So, Fawehinmi suffered tremendously as he was severally arrested, detained and imprisoned in different parts of the country by the rampaging regimes of the time. His travails started in 1969 in Kaduna when he was arrested and detained at the State Police Headquarters. Fawehinmi from then served various prison terms apart from the confiscation of his passports and books. He was finally released from Bauchi Prison in 1996.

In addition to this, his chambers was severally invaded by armed men and documents, files and vital books and materials carted away.

Despite all these intimidations and callous maltreatments, this dogged fighter did not give up the struggle until last Saturday when he succumbed to death. He died of a protracted lung cancer.

Fawehinmi will be greatly remembered for his consistent efforts in developing the law. The law reports are replete with judgments of cases emanating from his chambers. He was the first to start documenting judgments of the appellate courts in what is today known as the Nigerian Weekly Law Report (NWLRL), which he started some 25 years ago. This report, which he edited himself, is unarguably the best in Africa as it makes available recent judgments for use by judges and lawyers alike.

Words will not be enough to describe this great man of the people as he touched everything and everyone.

He can only be summed up the way The Guardian put it in an article of November 29, 1997: "Chief Gani Fawehinmi, lawyer, human rights activist and social crusader is undoubtedly the most consistent friend of the Nigerian masses but often seen by successive Nigerian military administrations as a thorn in their flesh. For this, he was jailed without trial 27 times in 29 years and in the process, earned for himself such titles as "Senior Advocate of the People", "the Conscience of the People" and a "Prisoner of Conscience".

However, the turbulence that characterised his life did not dampen his spirit....., he still remained his usual self: militant, candid and intrepid".

Adieu great fighter, undaunted senior advocate of the masses and of the law, and a great counsellor. Nigeria will indeed miss you.