‘We must stand up for those who lay down their lives for us’, Walter Rodney, revolutionary and scholar, 1942-1980.

Friday 23 March 2012 marked the 70th birthday of one of the great sons of Afrika, the outstanding historian, political scientist and revolutionary Pan-Afrikanist, the late Dr Walter Anthony Rodney and the Alkebu-Lan Revivalist Movement joins in solidarity with the entire Afrikan world community in chanting a huge Makorokoto. Congratulations in praise and thanks giving for his life and priceless contributions towards the total liberation of Afrika and all Afrikan people.
Dr Walter Rodney was born on the 23 March 1942, in Colonial Guyana, then called British Guyana. Despite his very modest socio-economic background, Baba Rodney was recognised as a very gifted and talented pupil at a young age. He attended the Queens College in Guyana, where he excelled well academically as well as athletically and where he made a reputation as a formidable debater.

In 1960, he won a scholarship to the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Jamaica, where he graduated in 1963 with a first class honours degree in History. Thus, he earned an open scholarship at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, UK. In 1966, at the age of only 24, he was awarded a PhD with honours in African History. His PhD dissertation was focused on the so-called Transatlantic ‘slave trade’ on the Upper Guinea Coast. It was published in 1970 by Oxford University, entitled 'A History of the Upper Guinea Coast,' 1545-1800. This was widely acclaimed for its hitherto unusual challenge to the conventional Eurocentric approach of the day: the patronising assumptions of European historians about African history. He therefore helped to set new standards of exploring the history of Afrikan people from an Afrikan-centred perspective.

As a student in Jamaica, Baba Walter Rodney maintained an active interest in the politics of the island and the region as a whole. He campaigned vigorously in the 1961 referendum for the accomplishment of a Federation of the Caribbean States. By the same token, whilst studying in London, he frequented Hyde Park Speaker Corner to hone his craft as an orator, par excellence. During this time he met and became an avid student of notable scholar and activist CLR James.

From the day of his childhood when his politically active parents would take him to the meetings of the then highly radical People's Progressive Party, the young Walter Rodney had never looked back.

An untamable political animal by the 1960s, Walter Rodney began travelling the world as a student of world affairs and an increasingly renowned scholar and activist. He learnt Spanish, Portuguese and
French, which was necessary to facilitate his very vast research. Between 1967 and 1968 Baba Rodney lived and taught in Tanzania and Jamaica. This post-colonial period was a time of great political activity for him. He became captivated by the Black Power Movement which was feverishly sweeping the USA and the Caribbean and which eventually consumed him.

This young, exuberant and astute activist grew very critical of the neo-colonial systems which had replaced the old colonial system, but perpetuated the oppression of the majority via a privileged few, working in the interest of their former colonial masters. While in Jamaica, as a lecturer at his alma mater (UWI), in addition to being highly critical of the Jamaican government and 'middle classes', he advocated for the working people and agitated for Afrikan history and an Afrikan language to be taught in schools. But, he did not confine his activism to the academic realms. He took his message of Black Power, Black Liberation and African consciousness to the streets, the shanty towns and the gullies of Jamaica; grounding with the most downpressed, despised and rejected of the society, especially Rastafarians. In fact, he believed passionately, as he oft time said: ‘The intellectual should make his or her skills available for the struggles and emancipation of the people’. The utterance of a manifestly true WARRIOR-SCHOLAR.

Consequently, on 15 October 1968, the Jamaican government, led by Prime Minister Hugh Shearer, barred Rodney from re-entering the island, on his return from the Black Writers' Conference in Montreal, Canada. This sparked a massive revolt on 16 October 1968, known as 'the Rodney Riots,' which claimed the lives of several people and caused millions of dollars in damages. It also triggered an increase in political awareness and unrest across the Caribbean, especially among the Africentric Rastafarian sector of Jamaica, which is documented in his book The Groundings with my Brothers, deemed to be 'The Bible' of the Black Power Movement in the Caribbean. Among the campaigners for the return of Baba Rodney to Jamaica was Mama Amy Jaques Garvey, the widow of the Most Eminent Prophet and King, His Excellency Marcus Mosiah Garvey, who had fully endorsed the activism of Baba Rodney, likening him and his plight at the hands of the Jamaican government to that of her beloved husband.

Walter Rodney moved to Tanzania in 1969, where he and his family basked in the cultural life of this great Afrikan nation and from where he travelled to other parts of the Afrikan continent meeting leaders of nations and liberation movements. He lectured at the University of Dar es Salaam and was influential in developing a new centre of African learning and discussion. In 1972, pained by the devastatingly lasting legacy of slavery and colonialism he was witnessing on the Afrikan continent, he wrote his most highly universally acclaimed book, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, published by Bogle-L'Ouverture in London, in conjunction with Tanzanian Publishing House. The book demonstrated the extent to which imperialist Europe (led by Britain and France) conspired to rape and ravage the Afrikan continent, and its ongoing destructive impact on the economies and societies of Afrika in the 20th century.

In 1974, Baba Rodney, his wife Dr Patricia Rodney and their three children - Shaka, Kanini and Asha - returned to Guyana from Tanzania. The now Swahili speaking proud son of Afrika threw himself into the politics of his country, inevitably, becoming sharply critical of the Forbes Burnham Government. He joined the Working People Alliance, as a challenge to the incumbent People's National Congress, for political power. And as he grew in popularity he became a rapidly increasing threat to the despotic Burnham and his brutal neo-colonial regime; and therefore a target for vicious propaganda, political assault and eventual murder. First he was blocked by the Burnham government from taking up an appointment at the University of Guyana; then he was falsely arrested for arson. Furthermore, he was banned from several other Islands in the Caribbean, including Antigua and pre-revolutionary Grenada.

Alas, on 13 June 1980, a remote control bomb, disguised in a walkie-talkie, handed to Walter Rodney by a senior military officer, Gregory Smith, was the weapon used to assassinate him. The bomb exploded in Baba Rodney's lap while he sat in a car with his brother, ending his life - only 38 years young.

But the power of the legacy of Walter Rodney lives on in the undying fight for the total liberation of Mama Afrika and all Afrikan People. Indeed, we will stand up for him because he laid down his life for us.
Long live the revolutionary spirit of Walter Rodney! Long live the spirit of the Afrikan world revolution! Unite organise now or perish! Rise you mighty people!

EDITOR’S NOTE: Pambazuka Press has just republished Walter Rodney’s classic book, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa [3].

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* Tendai Mwari is the Spiritual Leader of the Alkebu-Lan Revivalist Movement.

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Article-Summary: As Pambazuka Press republishes 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa' we publish a tribute to the late Walter Rodney – who was assassinated by government agents in Guyana in 1980 – tracing his life, career and continuing legacy.

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