

MARX IN NIGERIA

Report on a Conference

**Held at
Ahmadu Bello University (ABU)
Zaria, Nigeria
March 14-18, 1983**

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If the pace of this conference is typical of Nigerian Marxists, then they must be a hard-working lot! The conference started at 9 A.M. on Monday the 14th and was scheduled to continue till evening of the 18th. In between these two, little time was allowed for respite. I was not present at the opening exercises and could not stay through the end. Neither did I attend all the sessions while I was at ABU, for I also needed to see a number of other people. However, I did experience enough of the conference to be able to pass on some relevant introductions and suggestions.

That these Marxists are hard working was also evident from the avalanche of papers that had been prepared – almost 70 full-fledged papers! However, because the number of registrants was much higher than expected, the number of copies available of each paper was far short of the demand. As a result, basically only those with the proper connections got copies. I have worked hard at making contacts with some key people who have promised they would send me a full complement. It was such a rare collection of papers that I am prepared to drive the 75 miles/130 km to ABU, if necessary, to ensure getting them.

There was not enough time to summarize, let alone read, so many papers. Hence, it became practice to give six speakers ten minutes each to summarize their papers and then to allow one hour for discussion. This left much to be desired, for treatment tended to be superficial and the facts needed to support the contentions were seldom adequately presented – but perhaps this was done on purpose? Dogmatism does not thrive on clear facts!

There was much dogmatism and, sometimes, propaganda. The USSR was defended a few times by sheer dogmatism. When it was attacked from the floor, such issues tended to be glossed over. Some speeches had little relation to reality and could have been made by someone living on the moon with nothing but Marxist literature to read. But it would not be fair to say that this was true of all or even most papers. I hope to get the opportunity to study them all to get a more complete picture of the Marxist movement in Nigeria.

One question that kept occurring to me: How serious are these folk about their professed Marxism? A few practicing comrades chided most of their academic counterparts for being too theoretical

without engaging in praxis – something that occurs sometimes among Christians with respect to lecturers in university departments of Religious Studies. Are they serious or are they merely careerists?

Other problems parallel to Christian issues included questions such as: Who are the true believers and how can they be identified? Marx was a European Jew. How can he be relevant to Africa? This is a challenge Marxists have to face as frequently as do Christians. In fact, the Vice Chancellor of ABU, in his opening speech, suggested that Nigerian traditions make better foundations for a new society than alien ideology does.

The comrades attempted hard to be wholistic in their approach to life. They sought to apply the Marxist perspective to many areas of life, including the fine arts. There was an exhibition of Nigerian cloth, but I was not able to find out whether that was actually meant to be Marxist decoration or not, for it looked quite traditional to me. No mention was made of it while I was in attendance. I did sit in on discussions of Nigerian literature, but the issues were too narrow in their focus to be able to do justice to all the richness that goes into good art. An exclusively economic focus can clear up certain issues but it cannot do full justice to art.

In vain did I await a treatment of religion in the Nigerian context. The topic was carefully avoided. Even when it came up from the floor, as it did a couple of times, it was ignored. The planners were obviously well aware of the deeply religious nature of Nigerian society and, especially, of the sensitive religious situation on the ABU campus.

There was plenty of inexpensive Marxist literature available. Some of it straight from Moscow. I bought a 3-volume edition of Marx's *Capital* for N12. The Chinese had a cultural exhibition including very inexpensive literature such as Marxist classics, fables and fairy tales as well as historical works.

Of all the people I met, three were outstanding in what I learned from my contact with them. One is a member of one of the TEKAN churches and teaches history at ABU. He considers himself a Christian in some way, but also identifies himself as a Marxist historian. He has not (yet) turned his back against the church, but he is bitterly disappointed that his church has nothing to offer him in relation to his daily historical concerns. He was relieved to meet in me a TEKAN-related pastor who shares his concerns and was thus sympathetic to his plight. I wonder how many such there were in the conference. I was struck with the need for the Christian community, especially church leaders, to learn how to relate to such people.

This brother is not unique. The majority of socially-concerned academic Christians in Nigeria use Marxism as their main academic framework. That's the only one they have been taught or even heard of. Of course, they have heard of Capitalism, but it has been so harsh on Africa that it is not considered an option. They never heard of Christian perspectives on history or science or any other subject. They are totally bifurcated; their spiritual life takes them in one direction; their academic, another. And never the twain shall meet. This is the reason a few years ago I sought to establish a beachhead at ABU to help both faculty and students develop Christian perspectives in their respective disciplines. Alas, our attempt was squashed when the Gowon regime was overthrown by a coup, a story you can read in vol. 2 of our *Every Square Inch*.

The second outstanding person I met was Dr. Yusufu Bala Usman, a former secretary to the ousted Kaduna governor, a faithful Muslim who is also a radical social critic. He is so radical that Marxists at the conference claimed him as one of them, but he objected. In a personal conversation he told me that he became a strong social critic through his reading of Usman Dan Fodio¹ and of popular Hausa poetry! He was very interested in our work of awareness building among the poor and encouraged me greatly to continue. He asked me to provide him with two things: a bibliography of Christian liberation theology and some films on the problems of the church in Latin America. As it turns out, I will be able to satisfy him on both counts.

The third person was Dr. Patrick Wilmot, head of ABU's Dept of Sociology and a Marxist anti-apartheid crusader from Trinidad. Though by way of name, profession and race I had everything against me, I was able to establish at least a cordial relationship with him after I gave him information he did not know about, namely ecumenical efforts against apartheid. The busy schedule of the conference prevented us from extended discussion.²

My experiences with the last two indicates to me the great possibilities open to Christians who are prepared to go into dialogue with people of such different backgrounds. When one is open, sympathetic and aware of the issues, even radical non-Christians are prepared to at least consider one's point of view.

Finally, I wish to comment on the great interest evoked by this conference. Over a thousand folk registered. In addition, there were many students and lecturers from ABU who dropped in as time allowed.³ The crowd was enthusiastic. In fact, I was reminded of evangelistic meetings! I could not help feel that I was in touch with a movement that will increase in significance in the near future. The reason for this feeling is that this group is concerned with an issue that concerns 90% of Nigerians, namely that of poverty. It is the fact that they appear serious to eliminate poverty and that they *seem* to have understood its causes and solutions that makes their movement attractive especially to students.

From observing the events of this week, I am reminded again that the Gospel must be brought in terms of issues that are of deep interest to the people, not in terms of our own interests. At this point of time in Nigeria, that means we must prepare ourselves to present an alternative to the present order of exploitation and corruption. People are tired of the status quo and are ready to listen to anyone who will address himself seriously to present the problems. To say that mission is apolitical

¹ Dan Fodio was a Muslim reformer who established the Sokoto Sultanate and authored many Arabic books—theological, philosophical, poetry, etc. I sometimes consider him the Abraham Kuyper of Northern Nigeria, while the latter could be considered the Dan Fodio of The Netherlands.

² Some time later, Wilmot was picked up by Nigeria's security agents and put on a plane to London. He had become a *persona non grata* in Nigeria. In 2013, our son Wiebe, now CEO of the Tony Elumelu Foundation in Lagos, met Wilmot in London, UK.

³ It was a popular reaction similar to a 2004 conference on sharia at the University of Jos. Both attracted around a 1,000 people; both dealt with issues of deep concern to the common man. The Zaria conference dealt overtly with poverty from a Marxist perspective; the other, overtly with sharia, but indirectly also with poverty.

is at this time tantamount to betrayal of the Gospel. And, come to think of it, the Gospel has more than enough to counter both elite exploitation and its Marxist counter offensive.

PROPOSAL TO DIRECTOR, INSTITUTE OF CHURCH AND SOCIETY:

I propose that the ICS organize a conference to search for a Christian response to the challenges of Capitalism and Marxism in order to present this nation with an alternative to both that will squarely address itself to the problems of the poor in the name of Christ and liberate the church from her present bourgeois shackles and complicity in corruption.