CHAPTER THREE

MARXISM DURING THE 1950S: REFORMATION, REGROUPING, AND THE FUTURE

Introduction

The banning of the Zikist Movement did not lead to the extirpation of Marxian ideology in Nigeria, and most certainly did not discourage attempts to build Marxist organisations. Still, the assault on Zikism prompted activists to shift their energies away from a nation-wide organisation and instead devote themselves to building strong local groups. These efforts produced many embryonic Marxist organisations in Nigeria in the 1950s, although the Nigerian working class movement remained separate and apart, as it had been through the 1940s. The Communist Party of Great Britain, the main satellite with which Nigerian Marxists were closely associated, was perturbed about the eruption of Marxist splinter groups, formed and re-formed throughout the late 1950s.

Nigerians and the Pressure for Progress

There was pressure both inside and outside Nigeria, as elsewhere in the colonies for colonial

reforms and development after World War II. Understanding the situation during this period would shed light into the role of the Marxist and other leftist organisations during the 1950s. Leftist organisations generally did not trust colonial administrators in terms of their claims to develop the economy and social structure. To them the goal of the colonial state was to consolidate its hegemony by all means, police and sanction the leftist groups, and ensure the integration of colonial economy into the capitalist world. Constitutional development, socio-economic development plans and inclusion of conservative nationalist leaders in administration were seen as camouflage and deceptive measures aimed at dividing the leftist group.

It seems there was an “imperial responsibility” on paper rather than in action as Nigerian Marxists, like their counterparts in the Gold Coast, British and French Cameroon, gained momentum and regrouped to challenge the colonial administration and leading nationalist parties participating in the devolution program. There was a broad-based demand for reforms in view of the

poverty among the majority of the people - farmers, small business owners, market women, government workers, and the whole citizenry, for a redistribution of the nations' wealth. What distinguished leftist groups from mainstream nationalist groups was the road towards achieving reforms and wealth redistribution among the people.

For instance when in late 1949, John Macpherson (new colonial governor general) instituted a nationwide debate to review and revise the Richard's constitution of 1946, the leftists were not satisfied with the process. The Richard constitution had been criticized partly because of its regionalism, non-consultation with Nigerians, divide-and-rule tactics, and ethnic division. Although Macpherson allowed and encouraged participation by Nigerians in what later became Macpherson constitution in 1951, the leftists saw the process as anti "pan-Nigerianism." The idea of collectivity, people's power, and socialism remained elusive. What obtained was the perpetuation of regionalism and sectionalism, quasi-federalism, and continued disparity between the poor and the rich.

Anti-colonial feelings were not however limited to internal events. Nigerians were not insulated from the growing Pan-African ferment; Ethiopian defeat of Italy, the series of riots in British West Indies colonies between 1935 and 1938, and criticism by leading British scholars, organisations, and administrators. The role and writings of such eminent people such as Richard Coupland, Lord Hailey, Margery Perham, William Macmillan, and William McLean is too well-known to be retold here. It seems however that the most influential effort was from the British Fabian Colonial Bureau. The Bureau with its constant anti-colonial views and its members' role within the British House of Parliament influenced Nigerian Marxists in challenging colonial rule and the call for freedom.

It was in this environment that the leftists committed to keeping the pressure on British colonial rule to reform and give political freedom. Since they were marginalised in the mainstream nationalist political parties, they formed groups in the fifties that promoted ideological alternatives to colonial socio-political, economic,

and cultural reforms through debates, newspaper publications, and protests as occasion permitted.

Marxist Groups in the 1950s

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) identified at least six different groups of Nigerian Marxist organisations operating in 1953, while also conceding that there may have been groups on which it had no facts.[1] In November 1950, Nduka Eze, undoubtedly the most outstanding defender of the Nigerian working class, had formed the Freedom Movement as a vehicle for the crusade to liberate Nigeria and Nigerians. The Freedom Movement aspired to replace the banned Zikist Movement and continue the struggle for Nigeria's independence under communist auspices. It organised Marxist lectures and discussions and circulated Marxist literature on different subjects.[2] By October of 1951, however, ideological conflicts and stiff government opposition had rendered the group defunct.

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1. CP/CENT/INT/50/03: "Marxist" Groups in Nigeria - Draft for Commission, August 4, 1953, National Museum of Labour History Archive (NMLH), Manchester.

2. Ibid.

Earlier in 1951, another group had emerged in Ibadan called “The Communist Party of Nigeria and the Cameroons.” The only record of the organisation is a letter sent to the CPGB office (London) from Ibadan on March 19, 1951, by Samuel Alamu and O.O. Gbolahan. A membership roster is not available, nor is a record of their activities, as is the case with most Nigerian Marxist groups during the period. This group was likely a clique of young people interested in obtaining assistance from the CPGB and the ***Daily Worker*** for membership education efforts.[3] The organisation was a Communist Party in name only and had no discernable impact on the contemporary political scene; remnants later became associated with the "Lagos Marxist" which established The League in February of 1951.

Formed as a result of the momentary fusion of two existing Marxist groups in Lagos (Eze and Ikoku/Ogunsheye factions), The League emerged to "initiate, direct and guide the building of a many-sided and nation-wide working class movement on the

3. Ibid.

basis of Marxism."[4] This was the first time, and perhaps the last, when the Marxists were united. By early 1952, Ikoku/Ogunsheye group had formed another group called the Committee for People's Independence, renamed the Peoples Committee for Independence, in February of 1952.

Even during its short time span, The League had considerable impact among Nigerian Marxists. Formed by eighteen comrades, The League's activities were threefold: (a) "To disseminate Marxist thought throughout the country;" (b) "To initiate purely Marxist ideas through trade unions, political and other organisations;" and (c) "To formulate policies for the individual of the Marxist organisations (i.e. trade unions, political parties, peasants, youths, women, student and ex-servicemen's organisations)."[5] At their weekly meetings on the ideological education of members, discussion leaders focused on one or another particular aspect of Marxism then led a general discussion on a topic of

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4. CP/CENT/INT/50/05: The Communist Party (Nigeria and Cameroons), Ibadan, to, The Executive Committee, The Communist Party, London, March 19, 1951, NMLH, p 1.

5. CP/CENT/INT/25/01: Statement Issued by The League, Lagos, Nigeria, October 1951, NMLH, p 1.

the day in order to move comrades from the abstract and theoretical to the realm of action and implementation.

Over time, when leaders found that justice could not be done to the study of Marxism in these ordinary meetings, they arranged a series of special, mostly secret, meetings to cover both local and international issues, including (a) "Marxism as a scientific approach to the study of human society;" (b) "Social development and the laws that govern it;" (c) "The nature of capitalist society;" (d) "Imperialism;" (e) "The post-war tactics of imperialism;" (f) "Marxist tactics (general - in the trade unions, reactionary parliaments, compromise, etc);" (g) "The dangers of overseas capital with special reference to Nigerian Government policy;" (h) "The Persian oil dispute;" (i) "The local political scene (from time to time);" and, (j) "The constitution."[6]

While it is difficult to evaluate the success of these programmes, at least in terms of intention and indoctrination, they did mark an improvement in

6. Ibid.

Marxists' efforts to influence the political modernization of the colonial state during the 1950s. By early 1953, however, The League had died, primarily because of personality clashes amongst its leaders. Those who left (Agwuna, Ogunsheye, Nzimiro, Ikoku, etc) formed the Peoples Committee for Independence, discussed more fully below.

A group calling itself the Nigeria Convention Peoples Party formed in 1951, a few months after creation of The League. This was not a political party, but yet one more splinter Marxist group formed by Eze's former followers. One of its leading members was Ikoro, a former close associate of Eze. This group was more inclined towards the Gold Coast CPP and made fruitless efforts to garner financial support from it.[7] As in the case of previously organised groups, one of the main reasons for its formation was the personality clash among Nigerian Marxists precipitated by the failure of the December 1950 labour strike. The group nonetheless preached "scientific socialism to the masses in the village, workers in the factory, unemployed ex-servicemen,

7. Ibid.

youths, and progressive intellectuals."[8] With inspiration from Palme Dutt's "Britain's Crisis of the Empire," its leader (Ikoro) published a pamphlet entitled "Imperialism versus the People," castigating British rule in Nigeria, and warning Nigerian Marxists that theory alone would not bring socialism to Africans.[9] Interestingly, unlike other groups, the Nigeria CPP openly stated its willingness to accept directives from the CPGB concerning it activities in Nigeria.[10]

Perhaps the most formidable group emerging from Eze's debacle was the Peoples Committee for Independence, formed in February of 1952. With its office in the Lagos suburb of Yaba, the new group's declared ultimate objective was to build a mass and united nationalist movement, seize power, and establish a socialist society. This involved "waging an uncompromising battle against British imperialism and the reactionary forces within the ranks of our

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8. CP/CENT/INT/50/05: Idise Dafe - Report on Visit to Nigeria, n.d. (probably 1951 or 1952), NMLH, p 4.

9. CP/CENT/INT/550/05: Amaefule Ikoro to Communist Party of Great Britain, 1951, NMLH.

10. Ibid, p 1.

countrymen."[11] For them, Marxism was a guide to action, embodied and enriched by the experiences of common people all over the world struggling for national independence. Thus, Marxism was "open to adaptation and should not be seen as a set of ready-made rules."[12] As had previous groups, they identified ideological education, the use of trade unions, and the pursuit of unity as absolutely vital to success.

At a meeting on May 7, 1952, executive members of the Peoples Committee for Independence (Ikoku, Ogunsheye, Gogo Nzeribe, D. Fatogun, J. Onwugbuzie) took a dramatic political stride, agreeing to form a nation-wide Marxist-Leninist political party that would unify all existing pseudo-Marxist groups.[13]

This initiative went aground, falling short of CPGB expectations, when Marxist sects attacked Ikoku and the others for posing as saviours and saints. Some members of the Peoples Committee for

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11. Ibid.

12. CP/CENT/INT/50/05: Peoples Committee for Independence - Circular Letter No.1/52, February 22, 1952, NMLH.

13. Ibid, p 1; CP/CENT/INT/25/01: Peoples Committee for Independence, Lagos, to Guiseppe Di Vittorio and Louis Saillant (WFTU), Paris, May 7, 1952, p 1.

Independence were also involved in the formation of another group in July of 1952, the United Working Peoples Party. Its first secretary was Ogunsheye, who was then replaced by Uche Omo, upon the former's late 1952 appointment in the Labour Department.[14] It comprised some "returnees," most notably Anozie, Anagbogu, and Onwugbuzie. This group distanced themselves from the main political parties, maintaining that the dominant position of the bourgeoisie in those parties thwarted the progress of communism and foreclosed socialist solutions.[15]

In the absence of adequate information (even from the CPGB and British TUC archives) it is difficult to assess the strength and influence of the U.W.P.P. It is, however, clear that the group was confined to the Eastern Region. By 1955, they had modified their anti-party position and were openly working in alliance with the Action Group and

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14. Ibid, p 1; and, CP/CENT/INT/50/05: Ikoku, S.G. *et.al* Manifesto of the...Party of Nigeria and the Cameroons, n.d. NMLH. There is need to set the record straight here. Chukwudolue Orhakamalu was not the first secretary of the UWPP as suggested by Maxim Matusevich (See "*Crying Wolf: Early Nigerian Reactions to the Soviet Union, 1960-1966*," in Falola, T. (ed.) *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century*, (Durham, 2002), p 710. According to the records of the Communist Party cited above, he became secretary of the CPN after Uche Omo's term in 1952.

15. CP/CENT/INT/50/03: "Marxist" Groups in Nigeria, p 3.

the U.N.I.P. (Chike Obi's party, a break-away from the N.C.N.C.).[16] In September 1955, the U.W.P.P. and U.N.I.P. made futile attempts to disrupt activities of the Azikiwe-led N.C.N.C. government in the Eastern Region. A joint statement calling for an army to fight "the combined forms of imperialism and reactionary leadership of the N.C.N.C." was issued in Enugu.[17] There is no indication that the Action Group was involved in this.[18] When most of its leading members joined the main political parties or took employment in government departments, the U.W.P.P. died naturally before the end of 1955.

Ikoku and the Nigerian Socialist Review

Among the most prolific Marxists during the 1950s was Samuel Ikoku, initially one of Eze's followers. With others, Ikoku broke away, and in 1952 formed the Peoples Committee for Independence and, later that same year, the United Working Peoples Party. In his various correspondences with

16. CP/CENT/INT/24/04: Nigeria - Report for January 1956, p 13.

17. Ibid. Also, CP/CENT/INT/50/03: Marxist groups, p 9.

18. CP/CENT/INT/24/04: Nigeria, p 13.

CPGB and WFTU leaders, he emphasised the need for a sustainable press for the propagation of Marxist ideas.[19] Ikoku had been joint editor of the *Labour Champion*, established in 1950, and he blamed the collapse of the journal on Eze and Ezumah.

In early February, with support from CPGB and the WFTU, Ikoku began publishing another newspaper, the *Nigerian Socialist Review.*[20] Although the *Review* suffered the fate of its predecessor after a government clamp down on its editor in late 1952, Ikoku articulated several important ideological and tactical ideas. In the inaugural edition (29 February 1952), Ikoku called for a new party of the working class in combination with Marxist intellectuals and the impoverished peasantry.[21] Defying Eze's view that Marxists should work within existing political parties, the editorial asserted that this "new party" should "be the rallying centre of all the finest elements in the working class, who

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19. Ibid.

20. CP/CENT/INT/25/01: Peoples Committee; Also, CP/CENT/INT/25/01: Ikoku, S.G. "Report on the trade union movement in Nigeria," autumn 1951.

21. Editorial Comments: *Nigerian Socialist Review, no.1*, February 29, 1952.

have direct connections with the non-Party organisations of the working class and frequently lead them."[22] This latter category of non-party organisations referred to the U.W.P.P. and P.C.I., both Marxist groups of which he was a member.

This new party was to be guided strictly by Marxist-Leninist theory. Leaders should "adopt the road of open and determined revolutionary struggle against imperialism and against all forces of exploitation and oppression. It must be an efficient and virile organisation on a national scale."[23] There is no doubting the fact that Ikoku and other members of the editorial board (C.O. Mmaba and Meke Anagbogu) were Stalinists. Their position as shown in the various publications before government crackdown on them in late 1952 and early 1953 was strictly Stalinist, and indeed that "there is no alternative to Stalinism in the Marx-Lenin tradition."[24] Emphasising the need for a working class party, Ikoku quoted Stalin to justify

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22. Ibid, p 1.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

his position that “Its function is to combine the work of all the mass organisations of the proletariat (i.e. the working class) without exception and to direct their activities toward a single goal, the goal of the emancipation of the proletariat.”[25]

This was the first stage in the struggle, to use the new party to make Marxists truly independent of the bourgeoisie. During the supposed second stage, a National Front would be formed to act as the army of the revolution.[26] Successful completion of this stage and the defeat of British imperialism, Ikoku predicted, would usher in the third stage—completion of the democratic revolution (the fight for the security and guarantee of political rights for all).[27]

Marxists’ vision in Nigeria included acquiring political power and concentrating it in the hands of the "toiling masses.” These were seen as the culminating stage towards Marxist "revolution" in

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25. Kolakowski, L. *Main Currents of Marxism - Volume 3*, (Oxford, 1981).

26. *Nigerian Socialist Review*, no. 2, March 14, 1952, p 2.

27. *Nigerian Socialist Review*, no.1, p 1-2.

Nigeria. Ikoku maintained that "this is the road for us to tread, this is our line of match." He concluded, like a true Stalinist that, "it is the only sure road to national independence and working class emancipation." Assurance of a victory, however, absolutely required this “new party.”[28] In a short article entitled *"A Young Socialist at Work,”* C.O. Mmaba supported this vision, reiterating the need for unity among Marxist intellectuals as a prelude to a successful inauguration of a working people’s party encompassing all existing Marxist groups.[29]

In the second edition of *Nigerian Socialist Review*, published on March 14, 1952, Ikoku concentrated upon the workers themselves. He argued that the workers themselves could only achieve the emancipation of the working class by organising independent parties, associations, and trade unions in order to propagate and realise the ideas of

28. Ibid.

29. *Nigerian Socialist Review*, no. 2, p 2.

Communism.[30] It was in support of this position that Meke Anagbogu asserted in his "Unfurling the banner of Struggle for Independence and Socialism," that "only a revolutionary mass movement, headed by the working class and its political party, can effectively and sincerely fight for independence and socialism not for reforms and capitalism."[31] Predictably, the Nigerian Socialist Review was outlawed in January 1953, under the "Unlawful Publication Ordinance 1950." Its editor was later jailed for sedition and unlawful possession of some copies.[32]

The International Department and Nigerian Marxists

The International Department of the CPGB was responsible for moulding and guiding ideological orientation of members and fraternities in the colonies. During the 1950s, CPGB officials, including Palme Dutt, Cox, Harry Pollitt, and

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30. Mmaba, C.O. "A Young Socialist at Work," *Nigerian Socialist Review,* no.1*;* Anagbogbu, M. "Unfurling the banner of struggle for Independence and Socialism," *Nigerian Socialist Review*, no.2, p 2.

31. Editorial comment, *Nigerian Socialist Review*, no.2.

32. Anagbogu, M. "Unfurling the banner," *Nigerian Socialist Review*, no.2.

Barbara Rehumen, were more concerned about the internal conflict among Nigerian Marxists because it prevented the creation of a nationwide organisation. Efforts toward resolving the conflict invariably brought direct CPGB intervention in Nigerian affairs. In devising their approach, CPGB officials resisted the impulse to choose between rival Marxist groups. Experience had shown that when individual Nigerians had returned from England and Europe claiming to have the backing of the European and/or British communists, this only exacerbated existing tensions, widening the divisions among Nigerian Marxists.

This had been the result when, for example, Anagbogu returned to Nigeria in December 1952, claiming to have secured pledges of "fraternal assistance from abroad," and Aggams similar assertion that he had official CPGB backing.[33] In the face of these divisive claims, it became necessary for Harry Pollitt to issue a letter making it clear that no one returning to Nigeria had any authority

33. CP/CENT/INT/50/03: Marxist Groups in Nigeria, p 4.

to speak for the CPGB.[34] As well, from the early 1950s on, the International Department refrained from any official contact, even by post. The rule of secrecy was predicated on making official letters unofficial. Letters from London to Lagos were sent as personal letters rather than official.[35]

The CPGB International Department thus urged conflicting Nigerian Marxist groups to come together, thrash out their differences, and formulate a consensus-based policy and programme.[36] This is not to say that the CPGB did not have its own view about the most promising "road to a Marxist Party" in Nigeria. They evidently supported Eze's vision, observing that, "a Marxist can only work effectively as a member of an organised party, which has close relations with the working class and the peasantry, and which seeks to win mass backing for the policy which it pursues in the wider movement."[37] Uniting splinter groups was but

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34. Ibid, p 5.

35. Ibid, pp 5-6.

36. CP/CENT/INT/50/03: Marxist Groups in Nigeria, p 4.

37. CP/CENT/INT/48/01: What Next in Nigeria? – 1954, p 18.

the first stage in forming a “Marxist party in Nigeria [that] would aim to develop militant trade unionism... to create an alliance between the working class and the peasantry and to win a leading position for the working class, and the Marxist party in the broader national movement.”[38]

Taking the situation as a whole, and bearing in mind all the complications of the rival Marxist groups in Nigeria, the CPGB developed four evolving guidelines throughout the 1950s. These were (1) Maintain friendly contact with all Marxist groups in Nigeria and all individuals interested in Marxism; (2) Refrain from official recognition of any Marxist group, but urge all professed Marxists to unite and reach a policy and programme that would speed up the formation of a Marxist Party; (3) Ensure a more adequate supply of Marxist literature to groups and individuals, and other means of assistance for the regular publication of material in Nigeria; (4) Regularly undertake thorough on-the-spot reviews of the fluid situation

38. Ibid.

in Nigeria before making any official pronouncements.

Conclusion

Between the late 1950s and early 1960s, Marxists intensified their activities in Nigeria, although lacking the same momentum from earlier years. In November 1960, a group of youths made up largely of members of the Nigerian Youth Congress formed the Communist Party of Nigeria in Kano. Official records indicate that the initial inspiration and subsequent sponsorship came from the Communist Party of Great Britain. Unfortunately, surviving records do not provide answers about, for example, why Kano was chosen over other areas, and who the group leaders were. What little information we have comes from a membership list, which while still classified as to specific names, has an aggregate total higher than that of the Communist Party of Nigeria, formed at Ibadan in 1951. Interestingly, the Kano group's constitution was based on the 1945 Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party.[39] However, whether it

39. Ibid.

received financial sponsorship and political directives from the Chinese Communist Party is not yet clear, as available records remain silent on the question. The only available evidence is that financial support came through Egypt and Ghana but, contrary to contemporary official views, was most likely intended for nationalism-building purposes rather than for the promotion of Communism.

Another group identified by official intelligence reports was the "Nucleus," made up of returnees from Soviet bloc countries. This organisation probably emerged in late 1959 or early 1960. Officials could not penetrate membership activities because of the group’s highly secretive nature. American intelligence reported that "although small in members it presents a long-term threat to security since its leaders are indoctrinated disciplined Communists with close relations with the Soviet bloc and markedly untainted by the corruption and venality which afflicts other pseudo-Communist bodies in

Nigeria."[40] In a post-independent Nigeria, communists looked to the “Nucleus” to provide the impetus for extricating the country from international capitalism. The British and their allies (including both Nigerians and Western powers) initiated and effectively executed policies to prevent a pendulum swing in favour of the Nigerian Marxists.

40. “Africa - Communism: Communist in the Federation of Nigeria,” 1961, p 1, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, University of Texas-Austin, Texas, USA.