

A review of: “Naija Marxisms:

Revolutionary Thought in Nigeria” by Adam Mayer¹²

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Adam Mayer’s volume (Mayer 2016), a well-considered Cold War history of Nigeria’s radical left as well as a history of political theory and labour organization, grew out of its context of Hungarian African studies in an organic way. Nigeria, especially in comparison with Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Mali, Angola, Mozambique, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, the Congo Republic, Benin, Burkina Faso, or Madagascar, is a relatively lesser-known theatre of Africa’s Cold War history. Never a people’s republic, always firmly on the side of the Anglo-Saxon powers, Nigeria seems to embody the capitalist ethos in a West African – or pan-African – context and comparison. Mayer, through meticulous research of out-of-print, hard-to-reach theoretical and historiographic material as well as interviews and archival sources, uncovers here a forgotten aspect to Nigeria’s Cold War history.

My review is less concerned, however, with what this excellent volume does to the history of ideas in a West African context (however interesting that question is – as others had written on these aspects before me). What I would focus on here is the way Mayer’s work is an outgrowth of Hungary’s African Studies, a discipline that, compared to other regions of the Third World (such as Latin-America), was in a somewhat marginal position during the Cold War and beyond.

The Warsaw Pact operated in a peculiar way in the Third World: the European people’s republics had regions in which they augmented the USSR’s foreign policy roles, and had embassies and trade offices, and others where they were absent almost completely. Hungary focused on Arab North Africa in this kind of specialization. Sub-Saharan Africa was more a focus for Czechoslovakia and for the GDR, along with the USSR of course. This also had direct repercussions in terms of the status and relative importance of disciplines that studied these regions. In Hungary, African liberation movements – and socialist tendencies – were a topic confined to media and had an almost exclusively political relevance. In that context, this relevance was perceived as real. To illustrate this point, we must make mention of the fact

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² Mayer, Adam, *Naija Marxisms: Revolutionary Thought in Nigeria*. London: Pluto Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-745336-62-6. pp. 256. GBP 85.

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that András Sugár, the star of 1970s and 1980s political journalism and broadcasting in Hungary, wrote books on Angola where he travelled regularly to interview the fighters (Sugár, 1978). A real 'Area Studies' focus (with a left-leaning bent but going beyond mere journalistic propaganda) was practiced by Mihály Benkes in these decades and after 1989 (an example is Benkes, 2006). Benkes calls his sub-discipline „politikai afrikanisztika” (Political African Studies), a confluence of Political Studies and Africanist Area Studies.

Mayer drew on Benkes, György Kalmár, and others, when reconstructing the picture of 1960's, 1970's and 1980's Communist theory and agitation in Nigeria, but for the Anglophone public (Benkes had focused on Francophonic Africa, and especially the Congo/Zaire).

Mayer's volume (and subsequent article output: Mayer, 2018; Mayer, 2020; Mayer, 2021) had been strengthened by the recent resurgence of Africa Research Institute Studies in Óbuda (where the Africa Research Institute is located) and Győr (where a new African Studies major is being created newly in 2021 around the doyen of Hungarian African Studies, Gábor Búr (Búr, 1988) and also Júlia Szőke, János Besenyő, and him). At Óbuda University, Doctoral School on Safety and Security Studies – and also a Humanitarian Management MA – is attracting talent in the field of African Area Studies today. The Africa Research Institute's founder, Dr. habil János Besenyő, also founded the very journal which hosts this review. Besenyő's role as blue beret officer in Africa (Darfur, Western Sahara) allowed him to come out with extremely strong, field-centred analysis on these theatres of conflict (Besenyő, 2017; Besenyő, 2020; Besenyő, 2021). Besenyő and Mayer have cooperated on research, as in the case of the extremely pertinent article on Boko Haram's early years (where Mayer was stationed as a young instructor at the American University of Nigeria, Yola) (Besenyő and Mayer, 2015). These works are signs that practical field experiences, as well as cutting edge research on Africa's own social science, is enriching Hungarian African Studies in 2021 – the field is already strong due to the efforts of István Tarrósy in Pécs (Tarrósy, 2017).

These positive developments take place in the context of the Hungarian government's Southward Opening initiative (since 2015) that seeks for economic and other opportunities and roles that can widen Hungary's outreach and international presence. Research that goes beyond immediate economic concerns (such as research on Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Peace Studies as well as Security, National Security, and realist and neo-realist IR) is as necessary as research that is enriched by increased awareness of Africa's own, home-grown social science (beyond the application of Northern theory).

Mayer's historical account, *Naija Marxisms*, thus grows out of Hungarian as well as African historical experiences and schools of historiography. This prevents Mayer from looking at African Marxist fighters with rose tinted glasses. He finds orthodox Marxist-Leninists as well as Social Democrats, Maoists, and even hippie style communes amongst them, showing us that Nigeria in the 1970s was a very fashionable place (even if occasionally misguided in its fashions).

Today, when Africa as a field of FDI and also economic growth is receiving more and more



attention, it is reassuring to see that Hungarian African Studies scholars are at the forefront of breaking new ground in research on the continent's 20th century history.

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