

## **Africanists of the World United**

*A correspondent writes:*

Well-nigh indigestible food, defective plumbing and false bonhomie seem to have been the salient impressions of the majority of the "non-committed" Western participants in the 25th Congress of Orientalists held in Moscow in August. The president was Bobojan Gafurov, an Uzbek luminary who is one of the tame Soviet colonial figures usually exhibited by the "Agitprop" at international intellectual junkets as living proof of the liberalism of the Soviet Colonial Empire.

The subject matter of the Congress was less dispiriting than its administrative arrangements; but it, too, was marshalled according to the Party Line. This was particularly obvious with the African studies.

The Soviet organisers made great play with the fact that scholars from African countries were attending an international Africanist academic gathering for the first time. These were Modilim Achufusi from Eastern Nigeria and Tekle Tsadik Mekuria from Ethiopia. Otherwise only Professor Graham W. Irwin from Britain had deserved a flattering paragraph in the official communiqué: he delivered what was described as a "very valuable report" on the "Sources of the History of Western Africa." He advanced the non-controversial thesis that since ancient written sources were very hard to come by, folk traditions, legends and songs would have to do instead. TASS observed that Soviet scholars supported this contention.

The head of the Soviet Africanists, Professor Ivan Potekhin, sometime political commissar on the Mongolian border, spoke on "The feudalism of the Ashantis." He stated that the most conservative forces in contemporary Africa were the leaders of tribes who had survived from feudalism. They

should be eliminated. Professor Dr. Horst Störber of East Germany fully agreed, in his paper "Changes in the social status of leaders in Northern Ghana during the early period of colonial domination." Such views must have appealed to President Sekou Touré, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah and M. Patrice Lumumba—all of them sworn enemies of "feudal survivals" in their countries and great and good friends of the Soviet Union. But Potekhin could have hardly pleased Mwami Kigeri V, the ruler of Ruanda, also a great and good friend of the Soviet Union and, according to Moscow Radio, a champion of African freedom. True enough, Kigeri V is a sworn enemy of the Belgian administration and of Mr. Dag Hammarskjöld. But his motives ought to have been less commendable. The King of Ruanda is an unreconstructed die-hard Conservative, and an open defender of an oppressive ascendancy of the Tutsi aristocracy over the Hahutu peasantry who constitute 85 per cent of the population of his realm. His enmity to the Belgians is due partly to his innate xenophobia partly to the Belgian intention to introduce democratic reforms in Ruanda Urundi before they give up next year. To stave off this disaster Kigeri V has already offered Lumumba 2,000 of his warriors "to fight for independence." So far this has been an empty gesture. The King of Ruanda received an accolade from Moscow Radio, but the events in the Congo Basin moved too quickly. No correct dialectical interpretation was offered at the 25th Congress of Orientalists.

Great praise was heaped on the African scholars who attended. Achufusi—a graduate of an East German University due to teach history in Eastern Nigeria next year—read a paper on the foundations of the Solote Empire in the XIX century. This was hailed as of great scientific value. The Soviet comment on Mekuria's "Written language and Christianity in Ethiopia" was more reticent: after all, it dealt with the ancient Christian traditions of an African nation, a subject best glossed over in the Soviet Union. All the same Mekuria's three-volume work was called "The best scientific work on the subject."

This must have surprised Ato Tekle Tsadik, who is a diligent unpretentious pioneer in the field.

The Soviet tactic is simple and effective. The emergent nations of Africa set great store by their history. For the last five centuries Africans have been usually ridiculed and condescended to by Europeans, friends and foes alike. At best they were represented as happy and loyal children; at worst as anthropoids. In either case their past was classified under natural rather than social history. This attitude infuriates African nationalists because of its unfairness and dishonesty. Agitprop decided to cash in. Potekhin and his assistants are consequently making conjectures on sub-Saharan history in order to win friends and influence people—and presenting them as facts. They are gratefully accepted as such by racist Africans in search of antecedents. Eventually many of these theories will be exploded by research. But their disproof will be greeted by the Soviet Africanists as yet another example of western "colonialist-capitalist perfidy."

The charge will be hard to rebut since few people in the world read learned papers. Quite a number, however, in Africa and elsewhere, listen to the radio, which is the favourite weapon of Agitprop. Academic discussions will be turned into burning emotional issues and Africa will get a further injection of bitterness, frustration and suspicion into its bloodstream.