TRIBUTE TO PROF. MAARTEN DE WIT

On the 15th April, 2022 Geology lost one of its finest brains and one of the most amiable geologists to my knowledge, Professor Maarten De Wit of South Africa. I first met amiable Maarten on July 3, 1990 while attending the 23rd Geocongress in Cape Town, South Africa. We became instant friends.

As recorded in my book “My Travel Reminiscences” (Ekwueme, 2007), 1989 and 1990 were among the years in my academic career which I can describe as rewarding in terms of contacts with colleagues in various parts of the world through attendance of international conferences. I attended the 28th International Geological I arrived Harare on 10th September, 1989 to participate in the Archaean-Proterozoic conference. It was more of a field-oriented conference and it started with fieldwork to study the Archaean-Proterozoic transition. Participants travelled from Harare to Zvishavane via Bulawayo, Kadoma. Ewuru on the 11th of September, 1989. They crossed the Great Dyke at several points. The dyke cuts across the greenstone belt composed of dunite, pyroxenite and granite from bottom to top. On the 13th of September, 1989 participants left Zvishavane to Budhwa mine and visited Sarabthuru quarry. The Archaean-Proterozoic boundary between Zimbabwe greenstone belt (greenschist facies) and Limpopo belt (granulite facies) is marked by the occurrence of pyroxene in enderbite and charnockites which is situated just before the Sarabthuru quarry. Before the fieldwork there was a get-together organized for the participants on the 11th of September. During the party, I met many geologists from South Africa mostly white Africans. That was my first time of meeting such people but contrary to what I heard about them that they practised apartheid and do not associate with black people, these ones were friendly and expressed their desire to collaborate with me. I also met geologists from Botswana. The geologists from South Africa and Botswana were well-funded by their institutions and spent money freely. Both groups realized that I was not funded by my institution. The South Africans and Botswanians tried to make me happy. They tried to outdo each other by showering love on me. The South Africans led by Jackie Schalkwyk wanted me to be closer to them. Jackie gave me a pair of Rugby Shorts so that I could wear shorts as other participants. He was vehemently against apartheid policy.

Congress in Washington, D.C. during which I was awarded the Hutchison Young Scientist Award by the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS). While at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., I met Prof. Jan Kramers of University of Zimbabwe, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe. He informed me that he had secured a grant from Third World Academy of Sciences (TWAS) to enable me to attend the Archaean-Proterozoic Transition Conference (APT’89) organized by IGCP 255 led by Prof. Kent Condie, Geological Society of Zimbabwe and Department of Geology, University of Zimbabwe. He told me that there was nothing different between me and him, that the colour of skin meant nothing but that the human person was what was essential. He came very close to me and told me that he read “Things Fall Apart” by Chinua Achebe and was excited with the reverence he gave to Kolanut in the book. I told Jackie that I had Kola nut. I brought it out and we prayed with it asking God to strengthen our friendship. I broke it and gave a lobe to him to eat. The evered nut started working wonders.

As the APT’89 was ending, Jackie told me that he would work hard for me to attend the Limpopo Belt Workshop to be hosted in South Africa in 1990. Jackie really put in a lot of efforts to invite me to the Limpopo Belt Workshop. I arrived South Africa on the 24th of June, 1990, a week after the conference had started because of flight challenges. I met and stayed with Jackie at Pieterburg and he told me that the Government had approved a full sponsorship for my attendance and that I should not spend my money. We met the participants in a Marble Quarry in Transvaal. The Quarry was owned by an apartheid chief and I was lucky not to have met him at the site. The participants from eight different countries welcomed me warmly. I was the only black person. They consisted of the best brains in Petrology, namely: Prof. R. Newton, Dr. F. Spear, Dr. Lamb, Dr. Maarten de wit etc. The chairman of the organizing committee Prof. Dirk Van Reenen and the Head of Department of Geology (RAU) Prof. Chris Roering introduced me to the participants. Later in the night, I led the group at the Berlin Game Farm in the ritual of breaking of Kola nuts. My uncle Augustine Agbo had given me two bunches of Kola nut. I opened one and it contained eight nuts. I gave representatives of...
each country one nut and they held it up as I broke one
praying for the unity and progress of Africa and the
world. I prayed that in less than five years from then
South Africa would abolish apartheid and I would not be
the only black person attending such conference again
in that country. Every participant concurred and the
prayer was answered as apartheid was overthrown and
Nelson Mandela installed the first black president of
South Africa in 1994.

One of the objectives of the Limpopo Belt Conference
was to distinguish between the Igneous and
Metamorphic charnockites. On the 27th June, 1990, the
participants left Berlin Game Farm to study the
mylonitized gneiss of Palala Shear zone. From the
Palala Shear zone, they visited the Sand River Area
where they studied the Sand River Gneiss and attempt
was made by the participants to differentiate between
Igneous and Metamorphic charnockites, the main
purpose of the Limpopo Belt Workshop. The field
evidence was there, but it was not convincing.

The participants arrived Cape Town on 23rd July, 1990
and participated in the 23rd Geocongress of Southern
Africa. Dr. Maarten de Wit was friendly disposed towards
me. He invited me to his house in Cape Town and
introduced me to his friend Dr. Marian Tredoux.

Prof. Maarten de Wit knew how to maintain cordial
relationship. He followed up our first meeting and did all
he could to contribute to my academic career. He invited
me to contribute an article in the book "Greenstone
Belts" (De Wit and Ashwal, 1997) which he edited with
Dr. Lewis D. Ashwal. The 809 page book had
contributors from scholars from different parts of the
world and covered all aspects of Greenstone Belts. It
was published by Oxford University Press as Oxford
Monographs on Geology and Geophysics 35. I co-authored
an article with a Ghanian Dr. Kodjo Attoh of
Cornell University, Ithaca, New York entitled "The West
African Shield" (Attoh and Ekwueme, 1997). This is a
major contribution to the body of knowledge on
Greenstone Belts and shows the thoroughness and
painstaking way Prof. Maarten de Wit did his work. The
book remains an invaluable reference material in the
study, exploration and exploitation of Greenstone belts.

Prof. Maarten de Wit had earlier in 1992, led eight other
renowned geologists in the publication of a masterpiece
"Formation of an Archaean Continent" in Nature volume
357 no. 6379. In this article the Kaapvaal Craton of South
Africa which formed and stabilized between 3.7
and 2.7Ga ago was used to show that the Archaean
Cratons of the world might have been welded together
by the processes similar to those of modern-day plate
tectonics and that the earliest sub domains may have
owed their origin to the onset of efficient recycling from
the Earth’s hydrosphere into the mantle (De wit et al.,

Prof. Maarten de Wit though a giant in geology
recognized the contributions of other scholars and
eulogized them. It was a surprise when he told me in
2016 that he had read my book “The Precambrian
Geology and Evolution of the Southeastern Nigerian
Basement Complex” (Ekwueme, 2003). He congratulated me and considered the book as a
significant contribution to the knowledge of the Nigerian
basement. He even indicated his intention to attend the
Colloquium on African Geology held in Ibadan, Nigeria
in 2018 to enable him go to the field with me and see the
rocks I described in the book.

In 2016, Prof. Maarten de Wit gave me a soft copy of
the book “Geology and Resource Potential of the Congo
Basin” (De Wit et al. 2015). This 445 page book was
published by springer and Prof. Maarten de Wit led two
other scholars to edit the book. The dedication of the
book which reads "Our Congo book is dedicated to
three remarkable earth scientists whose work over a
span of nearly 65 years, pre-and post-independent sub-
Saharan Africa changed the course of knowledge about
the geography, geology and natural resources at the
Congo Basin and surrounding regions of central Africa;
Lucien Cahen, Normal Snelling and Henri Kumpunz. The contributions of these three giants of geology were
highlighted and eulogized in the book. Democratic
Republic of Congo is no doubt one of the richest if not
the richest part of our planet in terms of abundance of
variety of mineral resources. This book discussed the
occurrence, exploration and exploitation of these mineral
resources. Unfortunately, instead of being a blessing the
mineral resources including gold, diamond, cobalt etc.
have been a curse as the country DRC has remained a
war zone after the assassination of its first and
charismatic Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in early
1960’s. The war is ranging on because of bad
governance and inordinate ambition of people to exploit
and loot the money accruing from the mineral deposits.

Prof. Maarten de Wit was compassionate and ever ready
to assist others. The 35th International Geological
Congress was held in South Africa from August to
September 2016. My two papers were accepted for
presentation at the congress. I had applied early to
Tetfund for conference fund to attend. My application
was routed through the Director of Academic planning
(DAP) University of Calabar. I had an assurance from
his office that it will be successful and even if the
approval was delayed I would get a refund. On the basis
of that information I mobilized funds to attend. I also
wrote to Prof. Maarten de Wit telling him of my intention
to attend the congress. He told me that he was no
longer in the University of Cape Town but his wife was
still in their house in Cape Town. He offered to host me
during the congress. That was a big relief as the then
Director of Academic planning on my return told me he
did not even submit my application to Tetfund claiming
that as an old Professor he reasoned that I should allow
other younger academicians to benefit.

arrived Cape Town on 28th August 2016 and Maarten
had sent Dr. Bastien to collect me from the airport and to
take me to his house. Maarten’s wife Lynne received me
warmly. She showed me a well-furnished room where I
stayed till 4th September 2016. She was very caring and
prepared breakfasts and lunches for me. She called my
wife Oluwaa and informed her of my safe arrival. I
enjoyed the congress, registered, attended the opening
function and presented my papers. My two papers
were the only papers out of 5000 papers presented by a
Nigerian. I went for the Mantler Tour and examined
diamond and poridolite as well as Diamond, Gold and
Tanzanite Tour. I visited Nelson Mandela Museum and
joined the Tour to Hermanus to see the Whale and taste
wine.

Even though Maarten did not participate in the
proceedings of 35th IGC, he flew in from his new
University Nelson Mandela Memorial University in Port
Elizabeth to Cape Town on 2\textsuperscript{nd} September 2016 just to see me. He took me to a shopping mall at the city center and gave me money to buy things for my wife Olunwa. He also bought books for me.

On 3\textsuperscript{rd} September 2016, Maarten took me around Cape Town showing me the geology. He showed me Granite and the sedimentary sequence lying on it marking an unconformity. The houses were all built on the granite. We went to Hout Bay and saw the Devil’s peak and the 12 Apostles represented by 12 peaks composed of the Cretaceous sequence which cap the Table Mountain. Maarten also took me to Ross memorial/Estate where we lamented the removal of Ross statue and the damaging of his nose. That was during students’ riot during which they demanded the removal of the statue because Ross was an Apartheid chief. It was however Ross that gave the land for the building of the University of Cape Town and he instituted a Foundation which still offers bursary to students. At the African market, Maarten bought necklace for Olunwa. Even though they do not believe in God, Maarten and the wife Lynne arranged for me to attend mass in a church near their house. They told me they had not been in a church for the past 20 years they have lived there. After the mass, Maarten took me to the constatia Botanical Garden. He and his wife are members of the society promoting the area. It is a UNESCO world heritage site and contains more than 500 species of plants ranging in age up to Carboniferous-Triassic era. Sculptures of dinosaurs are there. People have provided chairs in memory of their loved ones and Maarten said it was his interest. He spoke at length on the problems of Africa and Nigeria in particular as failure He urged me to write a book on the contemporary African problems he talked about. He dropped me in the airport on 4\textsuperscript{th} September and I flew back to Nigeria.

REFERENCES


Ekwueme, B. N., 2007. My Travel Reminiscences University Calabar Press, 137pp