



# OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO AFRICAN GEOLOGY: A TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR MAARTEN DE WIT (1947 - 2022)

PROF. BARTH N. EKWUEME

(EMAIL: [bachudo@yahoo.com](mailto:bachudo@yahoo.com))

## TRIBUTE TO PROF. MAARTEN DE WIT

On the 15<sup>th</sup> 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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 28<sup>th</sup> International Geological 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 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.

I arrived Harare on 10<sup>th</sup> 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 Zvhishvane via Bulawayo, Kadoma, Ewuru on the 11<sup>th</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> of September, 1989 participants left Zvhishvane to Budhwa mine and visited Sarabhuru 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 Sarabhuru quarry. Before the fieldwork there was a get-together organized for the participants on the 11<sup>th</sup> 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.

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 24<sup>th</sup> 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

**Prof. Barth N. Ekwueme**, Department of Geology, University of Calabar, Calabar Nigeria

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 27<sup>th</sup> 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 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 1990 and participated in the 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 Ghanaian Dr. Kodjo Attoh of Cornell University, Ithaca, New York entitled "*The West African Shield*" (Attoh and Ekwueme, 1997). This book 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., 1992).

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 Kampunzu. 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 35<sup>th</sup> 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.

I arrived Cape Town on 28<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> September 2016. She was very caring and prepared breakfasts and lunches for me. She called my wife Olunwa and informed her of my safe arrival. I enjoyed the congress, registered, attended the opening ceremony 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 peridotite 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 35<sup>th</sup> IGC, he flew in from his new University Nelson Mandela Memorial University in Port Elizabeth to Cape Town on 2<sup>nd</sup> 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<sup>rd</sup> 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 had read most of the book I took to him and the book "*Issues in*

*Development: Leadership, Education and Religion*" (Ekwueme 2014) addresses the Contemporary African problems he talked about. He dropped me in the airport on 4<sup>th</sup> September and I flew back to Nigeria.

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