

OBITUARY

JOHN ELLIS LAVERS, 1936–93

Professor John Lavers died in Kano, quite suddenly, at the age of 56, on 16 May 1993 and was buried in Dan Dolo cemetery below Gorondutse — a place where scholars have been buried since the seventeenth century. He had been teaching since 1966 in the History Department of Bayero University, almost from its inception — in those first years as Abdullahi Bayero College it was located at the old Airport Hotel (now part of the Nigerian Air Force base). All but one of the current staff in the department have been taught by him — but he was in no way the ‘Lugard’ of history in Kano. He was no empire-builder. His attention was directed not on creating institutions or building an academic power base, or on forging a career for himself or drawing around him a ‘school’; it was centred more on the students themselves, whether first-year undergraduates being introduced to the archaeology and technologies of world history or some mature post-graduate finishing a thesis, a thesis that had to be minutely detailed and very thorough, excellently footnoted and evidenced. Kano was no ‘Dar es Salaam’, nor even a ‘Zaria’... yet John’s impact on those he taught was enormous. His delight in the past was quite infectious. Seldom was a teacher or colleague so generous with his ideas and his expertise; his personal library, of books and offprints, was vast; so too was the range of his reading and his recall. Embedded in all our works are the bits and pieces, very often unacknowledged, that John gave us. He published relatively little — under his own name, that is: but he was a ‘source’ written into others’ texts. (A complete bibliography of his writings, published and unpublished, has appeared in the 1993 issue of *Sudanic Africa*; his papers, along with his library, are now in Arewa House, Kaduna.) Typical of him was his contribution to the expansion and annotation of the second edition of *Nigerian Perspectives*: Thomas Hodgkin welcomed John’s help in transforming it into a classic, and accurate, sourcebook for Nigerian history. Similarly he virtually re-created the Gidan Makama museum (and wrote the guide book) to make it *the* showpiece on Kano history for Kano’s adults and children alike: his quest for early photos was indefatigable, as was his delight in pressing them on others.

John Lavers was initially a Londoner, with roots in Plymouth, before he settled in Kano and started a family. Both his father (an engineer) and his uncle were keen amateur local historians and took John, an only son, on regular Saturday treks around the City or to sites in south-east London; on holidays, it was Cornish mines and things prehistoric that drew them out of Plymouth or away from the family farm. After national service with the Royal Engineers in Germany and in Egypt (briefly, in the Suez campaign; he was his company’s medical orderly there), anthropology at University College and archaeology at London’s Institute of Archaeology gave him access to Daryll Forde and Glyn Daniel and a host of young scholars there; but he found plenty of time for other passions — for the (very early) cinema in Tolmer’s Square, formal photography, college theatricals,

his Lambretta, above all his close friend Liman Ciroma. It was this breadth of interests and friendship that he took with him to Nigeria, when he finally went out to Potiskum to write a Ph.D. thesis on Fika and its Bolewa culture and history. In Potiskum the old Emir took Malam bo-Moi, as John was called, as another son; it became home for him (and his Lambretta) for a year until he got the invitation to come and teach history in Kano. There, becoming formally a Muslim late in 1966, he married Liman Ciroma's sister and, as two of his former students wrote in *West Africa* (19–25 July 1993, p. 1278), 'he set about collecting, with extraordinary determination and persistence, every scrap of documentation as it related to his special interest — Borno and the other states of the Chad basin, in particular'.

With the deaths of John Lavers in May and Professor M. G. Smith earlier in January, 1993 seems the end of an era. The third of these historians of northern Nigeria, Professor Abdullahi (H. F. C.) Smith, died much earlier, in Zaria, during Ramadan in 1984. It is tempting to look back (as many no doubt will) at the work of these three — two English, one Jamaican — who spent so much of their lives teaching or researching northern Nigerian history, and to classify them together simply as 'expatriates'. I think that would be misleading — for one thing, their differences are greater than their similarities. M. G. Smith (1921–93), a veteran of the Normandy landings, brought a sharp legal mind to the material of the past, cross-examining and systematising it while all the time angry at the collusion between the British and the 'Fulani' elite: he had experienced the insidiousness of colonialism in Jamaica and had no time for political romance and religion. Abdullahi Smith (1920–84), a south Londoner (like John Lavers) and a Metropolitan policeman's son who was introduced to Islam as a conscript in the Signals in wartime India but only became a Muslim early in 1967, ultimately sought a solution to the problem of justice not in the anger of politics or the force of the law but through the implementation of divine laws in a moral, well led Muslim community. John Lavers, almost a generation younger, was altogether different: he did not share Abdullahi's vision (they both loved detective stories, though), nor did he care for the intellectual rigour that marked M. G. Smith's analyses. His approach was more eclectic, more openly expressive of the humour in life, more curious in the way only a polymath can be. Above all, John was not out to *prove* anything to anyone — other than the complexity and wonder of the world around him, past or present; and *that* he was indeed ready to point out to everyone.

In short, I like to think that 'being an expatriate' is not in itself a factor of importance in the contribution that John Lavers or M. G. Smith or Abdullahi Smith made to the historiography of northern Nigeria. Northern Nigerian historiography is too ancient and too pluralistic in its composition not to be able to absorb the contributions of all and sundry and to gauge the worth of what a scholar writes or teaches by his allegiance to accuracy and his search for the truth. It is by these standards that John Lavers's work is judged, and honoured, in Bayero University — and far beyond.

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