A History of Nigeria

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A History of Nigeria is an impressive book, the more so because its ambitions initially appear straightforward. Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton describe their project as ‘a general background survey of the broad themes of Nigeria’s history from the beginnings of human habitation … to the early twenty-first century’ (p. 1) treating not just political and economic history but broader issues of social and cultural history as well. So a wide topic, posing considerable narrative challenges, but far from impossible. National history is always ideologically fraught, difficult to separate the project from nation-building more generally. As Benedict Anderson famously observed, national projects are always acts of imagination (1) – bringing a national community into existence and then positing that it has a natural, non-political, trans-historical quality. These imagined communities, groups who belong together within one state because of social affinity, can treat attempts at historiography as a source of national charter myths, celebrating particular views of national belonging while omitting inconvenient counter-narratives. And so a too-rigorous history of the nation is often unpopular – as some citizens of the U.S. prefer to forget the genocide of native Americans, of Israel the expulsion of the Palestinians, of Japan the country’s imperial endeavors.

Covering a national history is thus inevitably difficult, all the more so when the nation in question is one like Nigeria, which was created in 1914 by the amalgamation of the British protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria, themselves only slightly older. The unit thereby created, although its boundaries constitute the ‘Nigerian nation’, does not correspond to any longstanding category of a Nigerian people. Most African states (2) lack the ‘Volk’ of a romantic nationalism. The boundary-creating exercises of European powers at the start of widespread colonization in the late 19th century grouped populations together willy-nilly, often with very different languages, cultures, and historical patterns of interaction. African nationalist movements
became significant after the Second World War but could not posit the inherent community of a Congolese, an Ivorian, a Nigerian nation and instead emphasized their opposition to colonial control. The histories that accompanied these movements tended to stress the power and legitimacy of pre-colonial states or longstanding patterns of resistance to colonial rule. Ideologically, the emphasis was much more on the desirability and necessity of self-rule rather than a national identity warranting an independent state.

In Africa, nationalism was not just a ‘derivative discourse’, to use Partha Chatterjee’s famous term. For Chatterjee, the challenge of nationalism was that it was a European political category whose salience in countries like India came from the colonial encounter. This was paradoxical, because the basic unit of political freedom and self-determination arose from a political relationship denying precisely that.(3) For most African states there was a further problem. The categories of belonging the nation was supposed to reflect did not correspond to the boundaries it occupied. The African nation-state was doubly derivative of European political projects – both the nation as a political project and the state as a geo-political construct were created by the colonial encounter.

National history in Africa has therefore been difficult to write. The need to overcome the legacies of colonialism, the highly artificial quality of national boundaries, and as a direct consequence of arbitrary borders the distinct (and often divergent) interests of local communities (4) within the state all complicated attempts to craft a narrative of national self-becoming. But national historiography faced daunting empirical challenges as well. Only during the 1950s did mainstream academic history begin to look at the African past, starting systematic efforts to trace out the histories of peoples who now found themselves brought together within the relatively new system of state boundaries mandated by the colonial powers, and to narrate these in an idiom of disinterested western academic knowledge and in European languages.(5) The history of Nigeria therefore concerned a national unit not chosen by its peoples, and it depended on weaving together histories that only gradually were coming to be known in academic language as opposed to other forms of historical knowledge. Textbooks of Nigerian history did appear soon after independence (Michael Crowder’s The Story of Nigeria was originally published in 1962, only two years afterwards), and it was succeeded among others by Elizabeth Isichei’s truly excellent History of Nigeria.(6) Nonetheless, these earlier works show both the limits of the historiographies of their day and the challenge of trying to knit together a skein of diverse precolonial histories into a coherent whole. Unsurprisingly, these works have tended toward narrating a pastiche of regional histories of political events and great men, leavened with archeological findings and historicized social anthropology.

By now, understanding of the histories of Nigerian people has matured sufficiently that writing a national synthesis is at least empirically possible, though Falola and Heaton’s task remained extremely daunting. However, the senior co-author in particular is almost uniquely qualified to undertake it as probably the most prolific and wide-ranging historian of Nigeria in the world. The result of their collaboration is impressive. A History of Nigeria provides a nuanced, state-of-the-art account of the histories that brought Nigeria’s peoples together without naturalizing the process. Yet more remarkably, it does not confine its account to political history but rather successfully intertwines political, economic, cultural, and social developments. Its chapter divisions are basically chronological, except for a final chapter on Nigerians’ interactions with the world and an afterword on corruption and the fight against it.

The first chapter, which covers the period 9000 BCE – 1500 CE, perhaps unavoidably, is a somewhat sprawling attempt to survey a huge number of societies with little to unite the material thematically. The second chapter, considering 1500–1800, examines Nigerian societies through the lens of slavery and the slave trade. This is a particularly insightful choice, since it brings into focus many of the most important developments that intensified links between different societies in the area of modern Nigeria during the early modern period. Slavery, slave-raiding, and the traffic in people within Nigeria and beyond proved central to political and economic transformation while simultaneously causing widespread change even within the most intimate domains of family life. The third chapter, which considers the first half of the 19th century, continues looking at the same dynamics: the gradual eclipse of the trans-Atlantic slave trade led to continuing economic transformation in some places (as societies dependent on the trade with Europe diversified into the production of cash crops, often grown with slave labor) and as revolutions and civil war
created, destroyed, and transformed the region’s largest polities. The next three chapters look at the expansion of British colonial control across the latter 19th century, at the colonial period to the start of the great depression, and at the remainder of the colonial period with an emphasis on anti-colonial resistance and nationalism. Chapter seven concentrates on the decade following independence, emphasizing the political instability that destroyed Nigeria’s First Republic and then led to the 1967–70 civil war in which the southeastern portion of the country attempted secession. Chapter eight then considers 1970–83, emphasizing the transformative effects of the oil boom as military regimes ceded power to the Second Republic in 1979, which in turn imploded in 1983 with the a fall in oil prices and the start of the international debt crisis. Chapter nine takes the account almost to the present, looking at the military (1984–1999) and civilian regimes that have governed a Nigeria troubled by persistent low oil prices and sky-rocketing corruption. The final chapter on Nigerians in the wider world and the afterword on corruption then serve as timely reminders that a national history is meaningful only in global terms and that the issue of corruption is key both to understanding contemporary dynamics in Nigerian politics, the way in which Nigeria is perceived internationally, and how it might ultimately be transformed in the future.

This structure does remarkably well at capturing the histories of many of Nigeria’s key regions without losing track of the forces bringing them increasingly into interaction and interdependence and without ignoring smaller societies on their fringes. History’s weight, not unexpectedly, is on the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria – the Hausa of the north, the Yoruba of the southwest, and the Igbo of the southeast – with a fair amount of attention during the first few chapters devoted to the ancient and powerful kingdom of Benin, somewhat to the east of Yorubaland.

Unsurprisingly, given the scope of the work, specialist readers will find a few quibbles here and there. Thus, for example, Falola and Heaton correctly identify the seven putative ancestral Hausa states as the Hausa bakwai (the ‘Hausa seven’) but call the seven secondary Hausa states the Hausa banza (two adjectives meaning ‘useless’ and Hausa), when they would properly be referred to as the banza bakwai (‘the useless seven’ – as opposed to the primary Hausa bakwai). Or later on, History’s account of the politics of the stillborn Third Republic reverses the imposed ideologies of the two government-created political parties – the Social Democratic Party was supposed to be left-center and the national Republican Convention right-center.

Slightly more seriously, the various emphases of the chapters do result in changes of tone and sometimes in the near-abandonment of particular themes. Thus, for instance, the issue of slavery, at the center of chapters two and three, is largely dropped from subsequent chapters, even though slavery was a significant justification for colonial intervention and even though in some areas slaves and former slaves proved sympathetic allies for British annexation. Moreover, especially during the early colonial period, the political question of how to abolish slavery was central to the compromises undergirding colonial practices of ‘indirect rule’ through African (and usually previously slaveholding) elites. Nonetheless, the shifts in focus also enable Falola and Heaton to write a remarkably nuanced survey of the various histories of Nigerian societies and to trace their coming together into the Nigerian nation. Ultimately, this enables an accessible, remarkably non-teleological national history. It conveys the extraordinary histories of the peoples enmeshed in what is now the national project. It is readable by a ‘national’ patriot who wishes to discover the processes through which the Nigerian nation came into being. At the same time, it can be appreciated by someone with more sectionalist interests. While this is likely to be truer of those of one of the ‘majority’ ethnicities (collectively they make up about 60 per cent of the total population) or who come from ancient states like Benin or Borno in the northwest, such majoritarian bias is par for the course in modern Nigerian politics. The important point is that the various sub-histories are sophisticated and judicious in their own right. The history of Nigeria that results is not one of inevitability or natural affinity.

In historicizing the nation without naturalizing it and in many other regards, History manages a remarkable and most sophisticated agnosticism. Its account of what has been called the ‘development of underdevelopment’ is very good indeed, as more generally is its account of the socio-political legacies of colonialism. History describes in detail the long-term processes through which Nigerian societies came to
trade with the outside world in ways that ultimately have disadvantaged Nigerian producers. Nigerian societies have tended to export primary products – human beings, agricultural goods, minerals – while more profitable industries such as those producing leather goods and textiles have languished, a dynamic particularly prominent in trade with Europe. The political transformations occasioned by colonialism have tended to intensify ethnic conflict, foster corruption, and separate governing elites from grassroots checks on their exercise of power. Nonetheless, History is not a simple indictment of global economic inequality or European exploitation. These processes are described as embedded in a complex and contingent set of political, economic, and social developments, one in which Nigerians have always been actors as well as victims.

History also manages a sophisticated, hopeful cynicism about civil society and anti-corruption with its acknowledgement (and measured celebration) of the emergence of a Nigerian national public. Without a doubt corruption is one of the greatest blights on Nigerian political society at present. This is a near-universal sentiment among Nigerians. It is difficult to imagine how it could be otherwise given the way it pervades all levels of Nigerian society, and it is nearly impossible to imagine how the problem could be overcome. Nigeria’s current ruling party has made a series of high-profile attempts to curb corruption even while its own officials engage in corrupt practices themselves. Falola and Heaton know this as well as anyone, and they are appropriately skeptical of formal attempts to improve the situation. But they are also sensitive to the real promise implicit in the emergence of a national culture – a set of publications and media outlets available to much of the population, and a widening of debate to include many segments of society. Ultimately, they suggest, this Nigerian public will be able to demand accountability, and it is the best hope for a decent future.

Falola and Heaton’s account may sit uneasily with some projects of Nigerian nationhood, ones which privilege a particular view of modernity or which attempt to justify the dominance of one particular segment of the Nigerian elite. For all its anodyne cosmopolitanism, it may ultimately be incompatible with stories Nigeria must tell itself – or some Nigerians wish to tell themselves. But whether or not such objections are raised, Nigerians and those who study Nigeria are lucky Falola and Heaton attempted this account. This is no simple story. The portrait they have painted of a country brought into being by a series of global developments is not superficially ideal as the charter myth of a proud nation. However, the ultimate conclusion one draws is that to be Nigerian is to be inheritor of a complex, multi-stranded patrimony. To be Nigerian is to have overcome adversity, to interact with many cultures, and to prosper against all odds. To be Nigerian is to appreciate difference, and fearlessly to object to injustice. In the end, Falola and Heaton may have produced a better charter myth than any romantic could have invented.

Notes

2. The major exception is Somalia, which is for the most part ethnically Somali, though national homogeneity has not notably contributed to state stability. Back to (2)
4. To complicate matters yet further, it is important not to naturalize unduly these local communities either. Many of today’s categories of ethnic identification, which might be interpreted as being potential nations, are themselves relatively recent. Back to (4)
5. The first monograph widely considered to be a work of academic African history was K. O. Dike’s Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta (Oxford, 1956). Dike joined the Department of History at the University of Ibadan and led its rise to greatness, ending up as vice-chancellor. Back to (5)
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