
BACKGROUND BOOKS

NIGERIA

Without sentimentality, Olaudah Equiano, a freed Ibo slave, described his people as "almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets . . . [whose] manners are simple, [whose] luxuries are few."

Kidnapped during a 1756 slave raid, Equiano was taken to Virginia, then to England. He purchased his freedom in 1766, served as a sailor on merchant ships until 1777, then settled in Britain and took an active role in the antislavery movement of the day.

His memoir, **The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African**, 2 vols. (1789; London: Dawsons reprint, 1969), edited by Paul Edwards, provides a vivid portrait of Ibo village life during the mid-1700s. Marriages were arranged, recalls Equiano, and most men took no more than two wives. When neighboring tribes raided Ibo villages for slaves, Ibo women fought alongside their men. Equiano remarks that the prisoners taken by his tribe and kept as slaves fared better than those sold to Europeans; some of the Ibos' slaves had slaves of their own.

Equiano's autobiography stands alone among authentic early Nigerian documents, according to British historian Thomas Hodgkin. Most written native chronicles of West Africa dating back to the 17th century, he notes, are in Arabic and provide "no clear dividing-line between fact and legend." Their authors are preoccupied with ruling dynasties and wars.

In **Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology** (Oxford, 2nd ed., 1975, cloth & paper), Hodgkin ex-

tracts short descriptive passages from more than 140 Arabic, West African, Portuguese, Dutch, and British sources from the 9th through the 19th centuries. He includes Sir Richard Burton's account of the 1861 British takeover of Lagos and its dependencies—"a pleasantly vague frontier." When asked to sign over his kingdom, the king, writes Burton, "consented and refused, as the Negro will, in the same breath. . . . Without awaiting, however, the ceremony of signature, possession, nine-tenths of the law, was at once entered upon."

British writer-travelers from the 16th through the 19th centuries shaped European and American perceptions of West Africa. Only a few of them—notably Mary Kingsley and German-born Heinrich Barth—went beyond condescension to serious study of the natives.

A classical scholar, linguist, and Arabist, Barth (1821–65) had traveled widely in North Africa and Asia Minor before he visited black Africa in 1850–55. Unlike most contemporary voyagers, Barth had a sense of the past; to his vivid travelogues he added essays on the history of the regions he traversed. His *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* (1857) runs to five volumes. A.H.M. Kirk-Greene has extracted the portions pertaining to Nigeria and added a brief Barth biography in **Barth's Travels in Nigeria** (Oxford, 1962).

Mary Kingsley (1862–1900) went "skylarking" through West Africa between 1893 and 1895. Devoted to explaining local religions, superstitions, and ceremonies, she was West

Africa's first anthropologist. She was also still very much a Victorian. She noted that Africans did not have lunatic asylums, prisons, or hospitals, but the "institutions [of] slavery, the lash, death." R. Glynn Grylls has gathered up a sampling of her observations in **Travels in West Africa** (1897; London: Charles Knight reprint, 1972).

More rigorous scholarship developed after World War II. Two of the most dependable surveys of West African history are British historian J. D. Fage's succinct **A History of West Africa: An Introductory Survey** (Cambridge, 1955; 4th ed., 1969, cloth & paper) and a two-volume collection of essays by 27 African, British, and American scholars, **History of West Africa** (Columbia, Vol. 1, 1972, 2nd ed., 1976; Vol. 2, 1974; all eds. cloth & paper), edited by J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder. Crowder's **The Story of Nigeria** (London: Faber & Faber, 1963; 4th ed., 1978, cloth & paper) remains the best one-volume history of Nigeria proper; it contains a useful basic bibliography.

Other histories focus exclusively on the colonial period.

Britain and Germany in Africa and France and Britain in Africa (Yale, 1967 & 1971), jointly edited by Prosser Gifford and William Roger Louis, provide a Big Picture of European rivalries at work in Africa, including Nigeria, and of their varied impact on the Africans.

Two complementary studies are John D. Hargreaves' **Prelude to the Partition of West Africa** (St. Martin's, 1963) and J. C. Anene's **The International Boundaries of Nigeria, 1885-1960: The Framework of an Emergent African Nation** (London: Longman, 1970).

Anene, a Nigerian historian, tells

the African side of the story. He examines the instability of Nigeria's warring native kingdoms and the complexities of British, French, and German diplomatic relations. He concludes that the dominant West African ethnic groups were *not* destroyed or seriously fragmented by the arbitrary colonial boundaries set by the Europeans.

Two of the prime movers in Britain's colonization of Nigeria were Sir George Goldie (1846-1925) and Sir Frederick Lugard (1858-1945).

By 1879, the ambitious Goldie, "the founder of modern Nigeria," had joined all the major trading companies along the Niger river into the United African Company. A persuasive negotiator, he thus ensured local British hegemony. The ups and downs of his life are told by John E. Flint in **Sir George Goldie and the Making of Nigeria** (Oxford, 1960).

Lugard was the dashing, paternalistic colonial administrator who amalgamated the British protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria. Mary Perham's detailed two-volume biography, **Lugard** (1956; Archon reprint, 1968), captures both the man and the country he ruled on behalf of the Crown.

Missionaries from Europe had a profound effect on Nigeria's development. In **Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite** (Northwestern, 1965), Nigerian historian J. F. Ade Ajayi suggests that their most important contribution was the introduction of Western education. Christian schoolboy-converts became the middle-class professionals who led the first movements for self-government after World War I.

Western-educated Nigerians often looked to American black leaders for political guidance between the

World Wars. In **Nigeria: Background to Nationalism** (Univ. of Calif., 1958; reprint, 1971), historian James S. Coleman notes that most educated Nigerians favored W.E.B. DuBois' emphasis on the advancement of the "talented tenth" of the black race over Booker T. Washington's vocational training for the masses. During the 1920s, observes Coleman, Nigerians—including Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was to become his country's President (1963)—were deeply impressed by Marcus Garvey's cultural nationalism and his call for a free Africa.

Independence achieved, civil strife was not long in coming. The best narrative history of the cruel Biafran war is John J. Stremlau's balanced **The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970** (Princeton, 1977, cloth & paper). More detail is available in A.H.M. Kirk-Greene's two-volume **Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook, 1966-1969** (Oxford, 1971).

Unfortunately, there are no major studies that compare the Nigerian experience with those of other new African nations. But some good microanalyses of Nigeria do exist.

In **Urbanization and Political Change: The Politics of Lagos, 1917-1967** (Univ. of Calif., 1975), Pauline H. Baker notes that Lagos grew from a colonial town of about 100,000 people to a metropolis of more than a million by the late 1960s. Interestingly, Baker finds that, as the city grew, local political

control shifted away from national groups and foreign interests to resident factions, with their own ideas about municipal uplift.

One durable anthropological study describes the people of the basin formed by the Niger and Kaduna rivers. In **A Black Byzantium: The Kingdom of Nupe in Nigeria** (Oxford, 1942; Gordon Press reprint, 1976), S. F. Nadel, of the University of Vienna, provides a meticulous account of kinship, village life and politics, and the strong position of women in Nupe society. He also discusses local farming (cotton, rice, cassava), industry (crafts), and trade.

Growing self-confidence and the discovery of oil have led Nigeria out into the wider world. Seven papers by Nigerian scholars comprise **Nigeria and the World: Readings in Nigerian Foreign Policy** (Oxford, 1979). Editor A. Bolaji Akinyemi notes that although Nigeria's foreign policy remained essentially pro-Western from 1960 through the mid-1970s, the strains of the Biafran war led to increased contacts with the Soviet bloc. During the 1975 Angolan civil war, Nigeria broke with the neutral policy of the Organization of African Unity to support Angola's victorious Soviet-backed MPLA faction, thus directly opposing U. S. goals.

Seemingly, many Nigerian leaders share the belief of several of the book's contributors that they should use their country's size and new wealth to take the lead in deciding economic and political questions that affect the entire continent.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Titles mentioned in this essay were suggested by Aaron Segal, program analyst at the National Science Foundation, and by Wilson Center Fellow Emmanuel N. Obiechina, chairman of the Department of English, University of Nigeria.*