

# Nigeria

Nigeria is black Africa's richest nation, the United States' second largest foreign oil supplier, and, currently, the world's fourth largest democracy. Last October, an elected civilian government took office after 13 years of topsy-turvy military rule. The new regime's prospects are uncertain. A decade after the cruel Biafran war, strong tribal differences persist. As in Iran and Mexico, petrodollars have created as many social problems as they have solved. But oil has brought Nigeria's views of Rhodesia, South Africa, and Angola increased attention in London and Washington. As the nation's new President, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, observes, "Nigeria's interest does not stop at our borders." Here, economist Sayre Schatz surveys the current scene; Africanist Pauline Baker traces the country's troubled history from colonial days; and novelist Charles Larson provides a sampling of Nigeria's world-class literature.



## MOVING UP

*by Sayre P. Schatz*

Few visitors to the seaside city of Lagos ever forget it.

With boundless vitality, it has grown since 1965 from a city of 300,000 souls to a sprawling metropolis of 3.5 million. Already the city has spilled over from its original islet, one-tenth the size of Manhattan, to the adjacent islands and the mainland. New communities take root at the fringes every year. In all of "greater Lagos," there are perhaps 10 million people.

The city boasts a modern university, a sports arena, a theater complex, a national museum. Downtown, rising from the bustling marketplaces, pastel-tinted skyscrapers with surfaces of glass hold up a mirror to the great natural harbor dotted with

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freighters, low in the water, waiting for a berth. Lagos is a port, a commercial hub, a rail center, a national capital.

It is also choked with automobiles. The new "ring roads" and superhighways, coupled with on-the-spot police whippings of traffic offenders ("Operation Ease-the-Traffic") have neither appreciably eased the congestion nor shortened the casualty lists. (The monthly news magazine *Africa* has estimated that 300 people are killed in Lagos in auto-related accidents every month.) Undeterred, passengers squeeze into exhaust-belching, rickety old buses; others jauntily finesse the notorious "go-slows" and "hold-ups" by riding bicycles.

### Dazzling Prospects

All about, people flow among stalled cars like a torrent around boulders: tailors carrying sewing machines; clothing merchants with their entire inventory on a pole; street hawkers selling fried *akara*, paper twists of peanuts, copies of the new 104-page constitution. Outside the air-conditioned department stores, lepers and beggars keep vigil, expectantly.

Lagos is, in short, a place to make a fast buck—to turn a *naira* (1 ₦ = \$1.75). Today, the country's oil-powered economic boom beckons unending streams of Nigerian villagers to the city's squalid alleyways and satellite shantytowns. "For the next five years," one Nigerian intellectual commented recently in the *New York Times*, "even the most exploited wretch can still con himself into thinking he can make a million."

Foreigners are not far behind. The clipped lawns at the Ikoyi Club and the Lagos Yacht Club (whose membership criteria were suitably amended in the 1950s to embrace the black elite) are speckled with gin-sipping "expatriates" of every stripe: American salesmen, German builders, Indian demographers, British bankers. Unlike Algeria or South Africa, Nigeria has never had a large, resident European minority controlling the details of its internal affairs. Now there are strangers aplenty.

Lagos is unlike the rest of the country but somehow

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*Downtown Lagos*

epitomizes it. It is the focal point of the nation's development, a microcosm of its failures. The decisions made here will determine the future of Nigeria in two key respects: whether it can forestall another military coup, and whether its enormous economic potential can be put to good use.

Nigeria's big money is oil money—very new money—and in six short years it has opened up dazzling new prospects for this country of some 90 million, the most populous nation in Africa.\* With net government petroleum revenues topping \$16 billion in 1979, and climbing, Nigeria's federal government is bankrolling an ambitious development effort aimed at providing more infrastructure, more schools, more industry, more exports—and more participation by Nigerians in the economy. Nigeria has also begun work on a spanking new capital city, "Abuja," in the country's geographic center, a kind of West African Brasilia. When the basic outline of the new city was worked out in 1977, unpublished official estimates put the cost at \$30 billion, then twice the size of the nation's entire Gross Domestic Product.

As the world's sixth largest petroleum exporter, Nigeria has also become, almost *ex officio*, a key actor in world affairs, thereby putting some substance into its leaders' old avowal that

\*No one knows exactly how many people live in Nigeria. Census-taking is a divisive political issue, because census results determine political apportionment and, more important, allocation of state oil revenues. A completed 1973 census was scrapped after charges of under- and over-counting eroded its credibility.

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"Africa is Nigeria's natural sphere of influence." At home, a new civilian government peaceably assumed power last October after 13 years of relatively benign military rule.

More than 30 daily and weekly newspapers keep the country informed; they range from tribal-oriented papers like *The Sketch* to the national (state-owned) *Daily Times*. Political debate is lively and largely unfettered, though newspapers are required to support the new constitution. Each of Nigeria's 19 states now has a state-run radio station; most have a TV station as well. Television offerings include the usual U.S. imports (children's cartoons, "Mission: Impossible"), as well as some unremarkable domestic programming.

### A Slow Start

Nigerians are proud of their recent accomplishments at home; proud, too, of their new prominence in the world scene. But the pervasive problems of underdevelopment cannot easily be swept away. And so far, Nigeria's leaders have shown neither the wisdom nor the will to spend the oil billions effectively.

Nigeria was not prepared for affluence. Before the 1967-70 Biafran civil war, agriculture was the backbone of Nigeria's economy. Farmers made up about 80 percent of the labor force; without mechanical aid or even, in most cases, animal power, they worked their land with short-handled hoes or "matchets."

But Nigeria was able to grow 95 percent of its own food. Cocoa, palm products, cotton, peanuts, and rubber accounted for 75 percent of all export earnings, and for a comparable share of the scant attention the outside world paid to Nigeria.

Native businessmen, meanwhile, sought a niche in the economy. Nigeria's basic economic goals—initially formulated by the British colonial government in 1949 in response to nationalist pressures—have been twofold: "develop" the country, and increase the degree of Nigerian management and ownership in the largely foreign-dominated "modern" sector. Nigeria's economy is unabashedly capitalist, but the government's role is significant. It nurtures private enterprise with a variety of incentives, as well as through careful attention to roads, communications, and so on. It is also the country's biggest employer and spender.

Progress was slow in the pre-civil war years; the new native enterprises rudimentary. A shoe "factory," for example, might have consisted of eight employees, four of them unpaid apprentices, working in a poorly lit hovel. Even the largest Nigerian-owned companies—textile mills, tire-retreading

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plants, construction companies—were relatively small, costly to run, and often of necessity protected by a high tariff wall. Large foreign firms such as the United Africa Company and Michelin continued to dominate the upper reaches of the economy. The most profitable smaller enterprises tended to be run by Lebanese, Greeks, Indians, and other foreigners—a situation found in many Third World countries.

During these years, as many as half of all Nigeria's children died before the age of five. Most of the population was illiterate, and schooling was so scarce that parents in Lagos lined up overnight to enroll their children in what amounted to a first-come first-served school system. Annual growth in Nigeria's real per capita income—\$83 in 1963—lagged behind that of the Third World as a whole.\*

After exploration began in 1937, however, British geologists reckoned that there was oil somewhere in Nigeria. They finally found it in the mid-1950s beneath the steamy Niger delta. (By Saudi Arabian standards, Nigeria's proven reserves—about 20 billion barrels—are small, but the oil is of choice quality, and tankers can almost pull right up to the wells.) The first Nigerian crude shipment embarked for Rotterdam refineries in 1958.

### **Nigeria First**

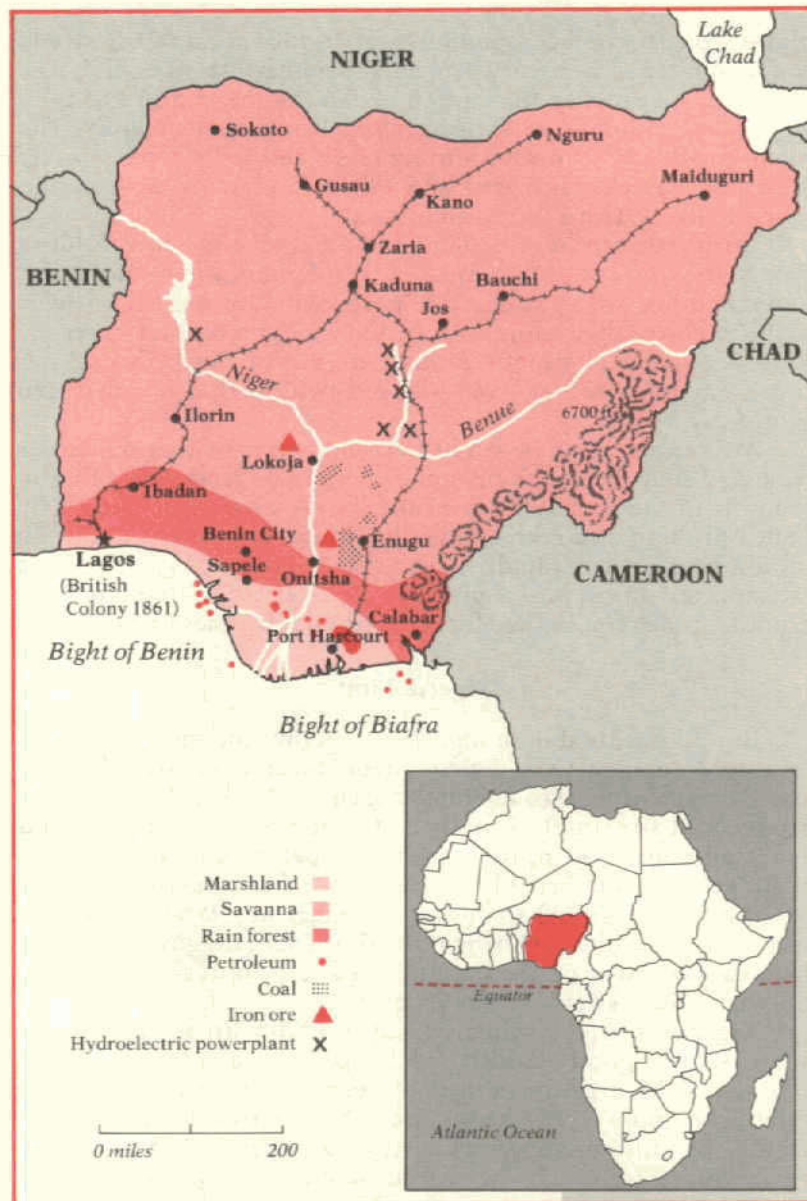
But oil hardly dominated the economy; the industry was a lucrative enclave that depended on foreign capital, foreign know-how, and foreign technicians. In 1964, Shell/BP (the only producer at the time) had only 2,800 employees in Nigeria and exported some \$90 million worth of petroleum. In contrast, peanut production brought in about the same amount in export receipts and gave work to millions of Nigerians. When the Biafra secession grew into civil war in 1967, the federal government in Lagos relied more on the cocoa bean and peanut than it did on the contested oil fields to pay its bills.

Nigeria emerged from civil war in 1970 with an economy in surprisingly good condition. There was also a new self-confidence, an urge to get back to business. In keeping with the established policy of bringing more Nigerians into the modern sector, the military government in 1972 issued its famous "indigenization decree," which, with subsequent extensions, reserved certain commercial activities to Nigerians and otherwise re-

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\*Of course, comparisons of real income figures for developed and underdeveloped countries generally exaggerate the difference; they should be viewed skeptically and treated gingerly. This is particularly so in the case of Nigeria, where neither the GDP nor the population statistics are reliable.

NIGERIA



Nigeria's 356,000-square-mile territory is more than twice the size of California. About half the country's arable land is under cultivation, and most of its people are farmers who work scattered plots averaging three acres.

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quired foreign firms to sell off sometimes 40, sometimes 60 percent of their equity to local citizens. (Today, 60 to 80 percent of the equity of foreign oil companies' local operations is Nigerian-owned.) IBM and Citibank fled the country, but most firms gradually complied, in the process creating a class of affluent Nigerians known as the "Mr. Forty-Percenters." For most people, however, life changed little.

The 1973 OPEC price hikes transformed Nigeria. As the price per barrel rose from \$3.01 to \$11.20 between October 1973 and April 1974, oil's share of Nigeria's export earnings soared to over 90 percent. Combined with a boost in production, petroleum receipts quintupled. The military government launched a raft of new development projects.

Like Saudi Arabia and Mexico, Nigeria has been spending most of its new oil wealth on "infrastructure"—hospitals, schools, railroads, waterworks, harbors, pipelines, the foundations on which private enterprise is supposed to build. Six regional airports are being upgraded to international standards. Under 207 separate contracts totaling \$6 billion, European, American, and Nigerian engineering companies are building 9,000 miles of new highway.

### **Corn Flakes and Caviar**

Some striking industrial projects are also underway: steel mills, oil refineries, a petrochemical complex, a liquefied natural gas plant. Volkswagen and Peugeot have opened automobile assembly plants; British Leyland, Fiat, Daimler-Benz, and Datsun are on the way.

Thanks to massive government spending, Nigeria's gross domestic product grew by an average of more than 13 percent a year between 1973 and 1978, a fast clip, far outdistancing South Africa and even oil-rich Algeria. Needless to say, the immediate beneficiaries have not been the mass of Nigerians but rather those with political power, businessmen with "pull," and the lucky few who have landed jobs with foreign companies or in the swelling (1 million strong) government bureaucracy.

Nigeria, in short, has come a long way. Even the average citizen is without a doubt better off today than he was a decade ago. But feverish activity and conspicuous wealth create the illusion of greater progress than has in fact been the case. There have been headaches aplenty, some of them avoidable, some of them inevitable. To quote President Shehu Shagari's 1979 election manifesto, "too many things do not work as they should."

Ironically, government "planning" in recent years has been

### SWEET CRUDE

In 1970, Americans got by without one drop of Nigerian oil. Today, the United States is Nigeria's No. 1 customer, and Nigeria accounts for 17 percent of total U.S. petroleum imports, second only to Saudi Arabia. The United States paid \$6 billion for 350 million barrels of Nigeria's "bonny light" crude in 1978.

Since 1958, Nigeria has been producing low-sulfur ("sweet") crude—ideal for gasoline and hence in great demand. In 1978, Nigeria ranked sixth among the world's oil producers. With proven reserves of 20 billion barrels, Nigeria can maintain its present rate of production (more than 2 million barrels a day) for at least two decades. Currently, oil provides more than 90 percent of the country's export earnings, well ahead of cocoa.

But oil has not produced a simple success story. Corruption and incompetence within the state-owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) run high; in a scandal that is still bubbling to the surface, government audits have revealed that, during the 1970s, some \$5 billion in revenues was somehow left off the books. Tactical miscalculations have also taken their toll. In 1977, an "adventurous" (i.e., high) pricing policy cost Nigeria \$1.5 billion when North Sea and Alaska oil suddenly glutted world markets. Prices dropped temporarily, and Nigeria wound up on a "pricing limb."

Since then, the picture has brightened. The NNPC plans new oil exploration and hopes to exploit vast natural gas reserves. The oil glut has evaporated, owing in part to the upheavals in Iran. Last November, Nigeria ignored the OPEC benchmark by upping the posted price of its oil from \$23.47 to \$26.17 a barrel, which should mean record revenues in 1980.

part of the problem. Drawn up in 1974 at the peak of oil-triggered euphoria, the Third National Development Plan (1975–80) called for capital investment of \$50 billion, far beyond Nigeria's capability. It was an oversize grab bag. Because government agencies could not hope to meet their targets, worried civil servants concentrated on the easiest and often the costliest projects, not necessarily those of most importance, in order to boost their departments' "plan fulfillment ratios." Government monitoring of costs and performance was relaxed, and contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars were awarded without time-consuming competitive bidding.

Bottlenecks became more of a problem than ever. The most publicized example occurred during 1975, when Nigeria placed orders for 20 million tons of cement, although the annual ce-



Nigeria has used oil to back up its diplomacy. Last spring, for example, Lagos warned of an "appropriate response" if the Carter administration lifted economic sanctions against the new biracial government in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. (The sanctions remained in place.) In July, Nigeria abruptly took over British Petroleum's equity shares in Shell/BP in retaliation for Britain's tentative overtures to the regime in Salisbury as well as for its oil exports to white-ruled South Africa. The other foreign oil companies in the country—Gulf, Mobil, and ENI-Phillips—were warned to "respect the policies of Nigeria."

Nigeria's latest move: a bid for more generous U.S. economic help to Africa. Nigerians cite an aid "imbalance"—Nigeria, for example, with 90 million people, will receive only \$3 million in U.S. aid this year; Israel, with 3 million people, will get \$785 million in economic assistance alone. Nigeria's President Shehu Shagari has explicitly tied future oil exports to stepped up aid for Africa from Washington. If an increase is forthcoming, he has said, "then, of course, it is our objective to reciprocate."

	1972	1974	1976	1978	1979
U.S. imports of Nigerian oil (thousands of barrels per day)	243	713	1,024	904	1,045
posted price per barrel	\$ 3.18*	14.69*	13.80†	13.54†	23.47*

Source: U.S. Department of Energy; *Platt's Oil Price Handbook*.

\* posted price  
† landed cost

ment unloading capacity of Nigerian ports was less than 2 million tons. As a result of these and other exuberant purchases, a flotilla of 400 merchant ships soon gathered off Lagos. For months, they waited their turns to unload, all the while charging costly demurrage fees.

Even the most promising of plans have encountered some temporary obstacles. In September 1976, the government introduced universal, free primary education (UPE), at a projected cost of ₦17 million a year by 1982. Demand proved unexpectedly high, however, as perhaps 3 million new students suddenly flocked to the schools. Half of all the new students, ranging in age from 6 to 13, were in the first grade. By the time the 1978 school year rolled around, UPE was already absorbing ₦78 million annually—about one-third of the Nigerian government's

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noncapital budget.\*

For all its undoubted ultimate benefits, public education, at least in the short run, will probably exacerbate one of Nigeria's chronic problems: the unplanned, uncontrollable influx of countryfolk to the cities. Historically, rural Nigerians with even a primary school certificate have disdained village life and set out for the relative affluence of Lagos, Kano, Ibadan, and Port Harcourt. Partly as a result, Nigeria's once thriving, if only moderately lucrative, agricultural sector is in serious trouble. Gains in domestic food production lag behind population (which is climbing by 2.5 percent annually). In 1978, Nigeria imported \$1.5 billion worth of food, most of it staples but much of it luxuries, ranging from corn flakes to caviar.

Rapid urbanization is a fact of life in Nigeria, as it is in other Third World nations. While two-thirds of Nigeria's people still live in rural areas, farm income is low, and the work is hard. Most of the countryside lacks paved roads, electricity, running water, and medical care. For younger members of a family, the rural "push" factors are considerable. (A senior son, at least, stands to take over the property.) The chief urban "pull" factor is the prospect, generally illusory, of real prosperity in the cities—a stroke of business luck, a well-paying job.

And so the hopefuls come, often leaving their wives behind. Younger brothers, sisters, and cousins arrive to live with those who have "made it"—often in crowded and expensive slum settlements, pervaded by the stench of sewage in open trenches.

### Cleaning Out of Dead Woods

Urban unemployment is high in Nigeria, but given the lack of accurate data, no one knows how high. (Some estimates put the figure at 35 percent.) Fear of worsening the situation is one reason why the federal government has slowed demobilization of the armed services.† The specter of armed, disgruntled, and recently cashiered soldiers roaming the countryside appeals to no one.

By and large, the most prosperous people in the country

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\*Free *secondary* education has also been decreed, which will mean substantially more expenditures if it comes to pass. With some 35,000 students, the 13 universities in Nigeria are all public; there is talk of doubling the number. Tens of thousands of Nigerians study at colleges abroad, including 12,000 in the United States and 6,000 in Great Britain.

†After the civil war, the regime planned to discharge some 130,000 men from the 230,000-strong armed forces. To date, however, only about 50,000 soldiers have returned to civilian life. Nigeria has virtually no Navy and only 24 combat aircraft, all of them aging MIG fighters. There are no threatening neighbors to bother the British-equipped Army, but a battalion of Nigerian troops is serving with UN peace-keeping forces in Lebanon.



*From Nigeria: The Land, Its Art and Its People. Reprinted by permission of Felix Gluck Press Ltd.*

*Niger River scene, 1833*

have not been those who arrived at impoverished urban settlements imbued with the work ethic. Ever since the British began transferring power to a venal Nigerian political class in the mid-1950s, corrupt use of state power—to land a contract, start a business—has been the most certain means of personal enrichment. After a 1975 coup ousted General Yakubu Gowon and installed General Murtala Muhammed as head of state, the military government conducted an extensive purge—“cleaning out of dead woods,” as Nigeria’s newspapers enthusiastically put it. Some 10,000 public employees, from full colonels to messenger boys, were fired or induced to resign. Ten of the 12 military governors were summarily dismissed.

No one believes that corruption has actually been rooted out. Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, who succeeded Muhammed upon the latter’s assassination six months after assuming power, lamented in 1977 that “ours is still a place where people are prepared to destroy anything, to cover up any crime, if doing so promotes their economic interest or might.” That same year, Nigeria lost about \$1.5 billion in foreign-exchange through currency scams. And everyone is aware that “dash” is often needed to get a job, secure a permit, get a seat on an overbooked Nigerian Airways flight, or “quench police troubles.”

Venal manipulation of an oil-engorged state—by busi-

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nessmen, politicians, bureaucrats—is a prime cause of the startling income inequality in Nigeria, made all the more conspicuous by a strong local tendency to flaunt one's wealth. Most Nigerians can barely afford ancillary school expenses—books, for example—and shoes are a luxury for many. But the elite send their children to chic European academies and dress themselves in the latest fashions. They live in modern, air-conditioned homes in districts like Ikoyi—once the exclusive foreign colony in Lagos—with their imported appliances, their china, their lace. Although millions are undernourished, and meat is a rarity in the average person's diet, Nigeria was, until recently, the world's biggest importer of French champagne. (Both champagne and lace have now been banned.)

The acquisitive frenzy in Nigeria today is obvious on all levels. Nigerians have always been willing to work long hours to improve their economic status; they have energy, resourcefulness, persistence, and a yen for education and self-improvement. But today, the quest for any way of turning a naira proceeds with an intensity far beyond that of the past. Self-help correspondence courses have proliferated—for bookkeeping, law, high-school equivalency, and much else.

Everyone, it seems, is scrounging around for someone with influence—someone with “long-legs”—to be his sponsor, his benefactor, his golden entrée to a rosy future. “The dog likes to run behind the well fed,” one Ibo politician explained.

### **Cutting Back**

But most Nigerians have been grievously disappointed. Inevitably, some turn to crime. Robbery is common, and Lagos has become one of the most violent cities in the world, quite apart from the carnage on its roads. The public executions of murderers and armed robbers are attended by thousands; they seem to be as much spectacle as deterrent, a shock to foreign businessmen staying at the Lagos Holiday Inn. (The hotel overlooks Victoria Beach, within earshot of the Army firing squads.)

It is only within the last year or so that the Nigerian government, first under the Obasanjo regime, then (after the return to civilian rule) under President Shagari, has moved to put the brakes on the country's frenetic, over-extended economy. Simply put, the aim is to get Nigeria to start living within its means again, and to put the development effort on a firmer, if less extravagant, footing. In material terms, this means restraint on imports, more careful government spending. In psychological terms, it means lowered expectations.

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Imports have hurt. Despite its oil billions, Nigeria has been running in the red for four years. Its balance-of-payments deficit surpassed \$2 billion in 1978, most of it due to the sheer expense of rapid development, some of it traceable to costly luxuries imported from abroad.

Drastic import curbs imposed that year resulted in widespread shortages and helped bring on a recession that has, in turn, helped bring down the inflation rate, which hovered above 30 percent in the mid-1970s, to a more manageable 9 percent. (At one point, yams, a staple in the Nigerian diet, were selling for more than \$2 apiece.) At the same time, the government backed off from several huge capital projects and scrapped others already begun.

The three OPEC price hikes last year helped ease Nigeria out of its balance-of-payments crunch. Imports are being monitored closely, and money may be redirected to agriculture and light manufacturing, to reduce reliance on foreign goods. Outside consultants have helped rationalize the government's graft-prone import practices. A \$16.6 billion "austerity budget" is in place for fiscal year 1980. With luck, Nigeria's development can now proceed with more logic, less waste.

There is much discontent, poverty, and anger in Nigeria today. Expectations, fanned by media images, conspicuous wealth, and politicians' promises, are still high. Nigeria's national income, though high by 1966 standards, is spread very thin among 90 million people. And while the bottom of the country's economy is home to millions of budding capitalists, established Nigerian businessmen often tend to wait for foreign investors to do the big-time pioneering, then hop on board as partners, as specified by the indigenization laws. Nigeria's "nurture capitalism" orientation has not been effective.

In sum, Nigeria faces many unknowns, perhaps too many of them, over the next 10 years. If the oil revenues are used well—as well as one can reasonably expect, anyway—the country might just be able to proceed peaceably on course. Unfortunately, even performing reasonably well may not be good enough. Nigeria's record does not inspire confidence.



## LURCHING TOWARD UNITY

by *Pauline H. Baker*

"Mammy-wagon" slogans—the West African equivalent of bumper stickers—are painted on the ramshackle wooden trucks, owned mostly by women, that provide Nigeria's chief means of mass transportation. One of the favorites: "No condition is permanent," a suitable motto for a people that has experienced the heights of optimism and the depths of despair over two turbulent decades.

When sub-Sahara Africa's richest and most populous state achieved its independence from Great Britain on October 1, 1960, it was widely hailed as a "showcase of democracy" with a bright economic future. *The Times* of London waxed euphoric:

Rarely, if ever, can the relationship of master and servant have been transformed into partnership with so much understanding, sincerity, and humility; rarely, in the evanescent world of politics and diplomacy, has one felt so profound an emotion as at those moments when, at midnight on Friday, the Union Jack fell from the masthead at Lagos race course to be replaced for the first time by the green and white flag of Nigeria.

The applause died down with the collapse of the first civilian government in 1966. For the next decade and a half, Nigerians staggered from one political nightmare to another: coup d'états, assassinations, tribal pogroms, secession, and civil war.

Yet, the nation described by one of its architects, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, as "a mere geographical expression," has somehow held together. With the return to civilian rule in October 1979, Nigeria seems once again ready to try to fulfill its early promise. The outgoing head of state, Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, whose ambition, unusual among his peers, was to relinquish the Army's monopoly on power to a democratically elected government, told his people last summer: "Let our past experience enrich and enlighten our future. We cannot afford to disappoint Nigeria, Africa, and the world."

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Nigeria represents the classic African political dilemma writ large: how to create unity out of a mosaic of conflicting cultural legacies. The country's 80 million people speak some 250 languages or dialects; it is the most linguistically diverse state on the continent. There are divisive religious heritages—Islam and Christianity, as well as various African faiths—and competing traditions of government (emirates, monarchies, and village councils), with representative democracy a latecomer.

The origins of most of Nigeria's peoples remain obscure. The Nok agricultural society flourished 2,000 years ago near the present-day city of Jos; its striking terra cotta sculpture represents the earliest contribution to Nigeria's rich artistic heritage.

During the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., scholars believe, in the first of several invasions by Arab nomads, rugged Berber tribesmen from North Africa swept into the semi-desert and savanna regions of northern Nigeria. (The ancestors of Nigeria's Muslim Hausa tribe, the largest in the country, probably migrated from what is now Chad.) The caravan trade with Tripoli and Egypt was brisk, and Nigerian Muslims exchanged local cloth and skins for European textiles, metals, and glass. Government in the north was based on Koranic law, and the region's numerous emirates from time to time coalesced into empires. The last of these was the great 19th-century Fulani domain, centered around the powerful Sultan of Sokoto in northwest Nigeria.

### **The Slave Coast**

The history of the non-Muslim peoples of the southern rain forest and coastal swamps is also murky. The Yoruba states of Ife and Oyo and the Kingdom of Benin were once the most powerful societies in the area, but there were many other tribes, including the Ibo, Ibibio, Efik, Ijaw, and Tiv. These self-sufficient communities of farmers and hunters were variously led by chiefs with limited authority or councils of elders.

For more than a millennium, then, what is now Nigeria has been like a divided cell, its peoples grouped into two broad cultural clusters, Muslim and non-Muslim, Arab and Negro, with the clusters themselves divided and subdivided. This is the central fact in the country's political history.

The first white men arrived in Nigeria during the winter of 1472-73, when Portuguese seafarers, from bases in Senegal and Sierra Leone, ventured into the Bight of Benin. Initially, the Portuguese sought gold and peppers, but by 1500, they were interested in a single resource: human beings. Feuding tribes were happy to oblige. The Kingdom of Benin, wrote Portuguese

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explorer Duarte Pacheco Pereira at the end of the 15th century, "is usually at war with its neighbors, and takes many captives, whom we buy at 12 or 15 brass bracelets each."

For 350 years, trade in Nigeria meant slave trade, and by the 18th century, some 20,000 Nigerians were being shipped each year to plantation owners in Brazil, the West Indies, and North America. The area around Lagos became known as the "Slave Coast," to distinguish it from the "Gold Coast" (Ghana) and the "Ivory Coast" (which has retained its name).

Europe's Christian powers contended bitterly for control of this appallingly lucrative traffic. Bit by bit, Dutch, French, and British entrepreneurs chipped away at the Portuguese monopoly. By the early 1700s, France and Britain had cornered the market; Liverpool and Bristol grew fat on the proceeds. In 1807, however, in the face of mounting abolitionist pressures and changing economic conditions, Britain declared the slave trade illegal. By the mid-1840s, "legitimate" trade in ivory, gold, kola nuts, and palm oil (a lubricant widely used in England's new factories) had replaced human cargo.

### Indirect Rule

When the Berlin Conference of 1885 divided Africa into German, French, and British "spheres of influence," a London-backed firm, the Royal Niger Company, was effectively granted exclusive trading rights in the Niger basin. The company set up its own military force, exercised judicial authority, collected taxes, and stamped out pockets of slave trading. In short, it exercised virtually all the powers of an independent state.

Meanwhile, an assortment of plucky Methodist, Baptist, Anglican, and Catholic missionaries penetrated deep into the interior. They braved a torrid climate and deadly malaria to promote "the Bible and the plough" in an area of the tropics reputed to be a "white man's grave." Their efforts opened up the hinterland. "It certainly is an inspiration," wrote Henry Dobinson, Archdeacon of the Niger, in 1894, "in this rather forlorn and

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*Sir Frederick Lugard,  
Britain's High Commissioner  
of Nigeria (1900–06),  
Governor General of  
Northern and Southern  
Nigeria (1912–14), Governor  
General of Nigeria (1914–18)*



*The Mansell Collection*

desolate land, to see in every river and settlement the brave old Union Jack floating in the breeze. Our countrymen are wonderfully energetic and pushing.”

The British Government formally took over the Royal Niger Company’s territory in 1900, then rushed to claim, by gun and treaty, as much additional ground as possible before the French (to the north and west) and Germans (to the east) could take it. In their Whitehall offices, the British drew frontiers that ignored natural barriers and tribal boundaries, and installed Sir Frederick Lugard as the first High Commissioner of “Nigeria.”\*

Lugard was the archetypal colonial administrator. He was quick to assure local tribes, particularly in the north, that British rule would bring little noticeable change in their way of life. Thus, in 1903, he pledged to the Sokoto Council of Notables that he would be guided by “the usual laws of succession. . . . Emirs and chiefs . . . will rule over the people as of old time.”

Lugard, in effect, was making a virtue out of a necessity. Rebellion was never a serious threat; as Hillaire Belloc once wrote, “Whatever happens we have got/The Maxim gun and they have not.” But daily administration—tax collecting, maintaining courts, and the petty details involved in governing 15

\*The name “Nigeria” was suggested by Lugard’s wife, Flora Shaw, colonial editor of *The Times*, in a letter to that newspaper in 1897. It won out over “Niger Sudan,” “Negretia,” and “Goldesia,” the latter in honor of Sir George Taubman Goldie, who secured the Niger Basin for Britain during the European “scramble for Africa.”

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million people spread over 360,000 square miles—was another story. Hence the policy of “indirect rule,” similar to the system the British adopted in India and elsewhere in Africa.

On balance, Lugard’s approach worked smoothly in the north, where the populace was accustomed to obeying authoritarian emirs. Lugard used the Muslim administrative system (and the Muslim administrators) for official purposes. Tactfully, he decided not to interfere with Islam and discouraged Christian missionaries from proselytizing in Muslim strongholds. While it eased the pain of conquest, the ultimate effect of this policy was to isolate the north from European education for half a century.

### **Peace and Profit**

In the south and other non-Muslim areas, indirect rule was a disaster. Wrongly assuming that the Muslim administrative system had its parallels in the rest of Nigeria, the British equated local chiefs with emirs and used them as tax collectors, often in areas whose inhabitants had never paid taxes—to anyone—before. In the southeast, where there were no chiefs, the British appointed local notables as “warrant chiefs.” The system was unpopular. Anti-tax riots were commonplace. In the long run, Lugard’s policy catalyzed anti-colonial sentiment in the south, sowing the seeds of nationalist fervor that would eventually lead to an independent Nigeria.

What exactly were Great Britain’s interests in Nigeria? Whitehall’s injunctions to its colonial governors—in Asia, Africa, the Middle East—were generally two: Keep the peace, and turn a profit. Nigeria, the richest of Britain’s African possessions, responded handsomely. By 1920, London’s total import-export trade with the colony reached \$43 million; revenues to the Crown topped \$13 million. Colonialism was not a charitable exercise.

Yet, there were positive side-effects, as far as the Nigerian people were concerned. Commerce required good transportation; highways and railroads began to link major towns. Because the colonial administrators needed teachers, doctors, clerks, and lawyers, thousands of Nigerians, particularly southerners, received proper British educations. English became the official language; for the first time, Nigerians had a common means of discourse.

A sophisticated native elite developed. Men like Nnamdi Azikiwe (“Zik”), the American-educated Ibo journalist who became independent Nigeria’s first President, and Obafemi

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Awolowo, a British-trained Yoruba lawyer, returned from abroad with radical ideas and visions of freedom from colonial rule. Such people were hardly representative of the great mass of rural Nigerians. But as Awolowo put it: "It must be realized, for now and for all time, that the articulate minority are destined to run the country."

Self-government came to Nigeria in stages. During the early 1920s, to accommodate the first stirrings of nationalist sentiment, the British began allowing a few members of the black elite to serve on local governing bodies. The election in 1922 of three Africans to the Nigerian Legislative Council, for example, provided the first voice in government to the inhabitants of Lagos (males with an annual income of \$240 or more were entitled to vote). Such advances were mostly symbolic. By and large, the early history of Nigerian nationalism is the story of a black urban elite pressing for limited reforms through short-lived native political parties and firebrand newspapers.

World War II changed all that. Within the British government attitudes toward colonialism softened. Indeed, as most hard-headed politicians in London realized, the Empire's post-war days were numbered, if not for reasons of justice, then for sheer expediency as anti-colonialism accelerated.

### **The "Jews of Africa"**

Beginning in 1945, the British experimented with various constitutional formulas to pave the way for self-government. Decolonization was not strictly a British affair. Indeed, in retrospect, probably too much weight was given to competing Nigerian leaders seeking narrow political ends, not enough to building real foundations for national unity.

By the end of colonial rule, there were three distinct administrative regions—the North, West, and East. Each had a separate bureaucracy and a separate budget. Each gave rise to a major political party dominated by a single tribe.\* Led by ardent nationalists like Awolowo and "Zik" in the West and East, and by the conservative religious leader, Sir Ahmadu Bello, in the North, these parties struggled for regional prerogatives. The tug-of-war produced, in essence, a tripartite federal system, ratified in 1954 by the last of the colonial constitutions. But "balance" proved elusive. Because parliamentary districts were drawn on the basis of population, the huge Northern Region had

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\*The Northern Peoples' Congress (Hausa-Fulani) in the North; the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (Ibo) in the East; and the Action Group (Yoruba) in the West.

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twice as many seats in the central legislature as the other two regions combined.

Thus, when Nigeria was granted independence in 1960, its internal power structure was skewed in favor of the least developed and most insular part of the country. A Muslim northerner, Abubakar Tafewa Balewa, became the country's first Prime Minister. And for the first six years after independence, the North maintained an iron grip on Nigeria's political life.

Educationally and economically, however, by 1960 the Ibos of the east—geographically mobile, receptive to change—had pushed ahead of the other groups. Whereas 50 years earlier, owing to their fragmented, village-based society, they hardly considered themselves a coherent “people,” great economic strides had reinforced their tribal identity. As the Ibo elder statesman, Nnamdi Azikiwe, put it years before: “It would appear that the God of Africa has created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of ages.”

All over Nigeria, Ibos filled urban jobs at every level far out of proportion to their numbers, as laborers and domestic servants, as bureaucrats, corporate managers, and technicians. Two-thirds of the senior jobs in the Nigerian Railway Corporation were held by Ibos. Three-quarters of Nigeria's diplomats came from the Eastern Region. So did almost half of the 4,500 students graduating from Nigerian universities in 1966. The Ibos became known as the “Jews of Africa,” despised—and envied—for their achievements and acquisitiveness. Inevitably, ethnic tensions mounted. Competition for political offices and job promotions routinely degenerated into tribal rivalry. Nigeria was smoldering.

### **Mutiny**

On January 15, 1966, following controversies over rigged national and regional elections, a military coup toppled Prime Minister Balewa's civilian government. Balewa, his finance minister, and the premiers of the Northern and Western regions were killed. The mutiny, led by five Ibo officers, was quickly suppressed by federal troops, but a military government was formed by Major General J.T.U. Ironsi, the head of the Nigerian Army—and an Ibo. Ironsi, well respected though sometimes maladroit at fitting actions to his good intentions, swiftly suspended the constitution, consolidated the regions, and attempted to impose unity by decree.

The Ibo junta insisted that there was no ethnic basis to the regime. But the military takeover was predictably seen by most

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Nigerians, especially northern Muslims, as an Ibo *putsch*. In a country that thrived on rumor, horror stories abounded. According to one, the Ibos were flaunting photographs of the coup leaders proudly displaying the corpse of Sir Ahmadu Bello, murdered premier of the Northern Region; atop each picture (so the rumor went) was a crowing rooster, symbol of the Ibo political party. Riots rocked northern cities. Around the country, armed thugs hunted down local Ibo residents. Thousands of innocent people were massacred, and over 1 million Ibos were believed to have fled back to their homes in the east.

### No Victors, No Vanquished

In the middle of all this, a detachment of Muslim soldiers heard unconfirmed reports that General Ironsi had drawn up a "hit list" of northern officers. The Muslims decided to strike first. In the early morning hours of July 29, 1966, they found Ironsi at the home of the military governor in Ibadan, the capital of the Western Region. The two men were taken to a remote forest outside of the city, stripped, "interrogated," and shot.

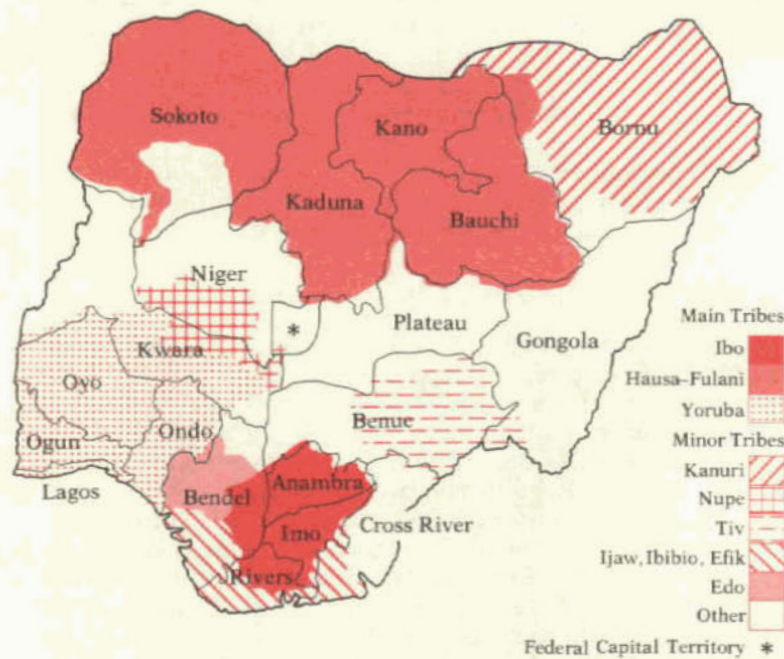
As the next Supreme Commander, the Army chose 31-year-old Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, a compromise candidate. Gowon, then the Army chief of staff, was a Sandhurst alumnus, a Christian, and a northerner, though from a minority (i.e., non-Hausa-Fulani) tribe. He kept his job for nine years.

Gowon immediately faced civil war. The military governor of the Ibo-dominated Eastern Region, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, refused to back the new regime, demanded "autonomy" for his territory, and finally called for outright secession. Arrogant, intelligent, and wealthy, Ojukwu had once told Oxford classmates that he would be "King of Nigeria"; he proclaimed the Republic of Biafra in May 1967.

The Ibos were euphoric. With one-quarter of the country's population and one-twelfth of its territory, Biafra was the richest and most developed region in Nigeria, crisscrossed by railroads and serviced by three large airports. Within its boundaries: the bustling oil rigs near Port Harcourt in the mangrove swamps of the Niger delta. Moreover, Ojukwu had about half of the Nigerian Army on his side, and most of the junior officers. He scored some impressive early victories, at one point even threatening Lagos.

With only 5,000 men, no tanks, no warships, and no combat aircraft, Gowon started at a disadvantage. Then came transfusions of arms and ammunition from Great Britain, artillery and MIG fighters (reportedly with Egyptian and East German pilots)

## ETHNIC FEDERALISM: NIGERIA'S TRIBES AND STATES



As Nigeria's many tribes have sought greater political representation, so the number of its states has grown. Out of the original three regions (North, West, and East), a fourth (Mid-West) was created in 1963. The Gowon regime then carved the whole into 12 states (1966). In 1975, the Muhammed government increased the total to the present 19.

from the Soviet Union. The Army mushroomed to 250,000. Time was on the federal side.

The bloody war dragged on for two-and-one-half years, owing in part to massive Western shipments of food and medical supplies (as well as arms and ammunition, which the secessionists demanded be sent on the same planes) to the beleaguered Biafrans. International public opinion generally sided with Biafra, although France was the sole nation openly to provide military assistance.\* The suffering of the Ibos was plain, their public relations effort first rate. (Novelist Cyprian Ekwensi was Biafra's Minister of Information.) And, too, the Nigerians whom most Westerners knew were the well-educated Ibos.

\* Only five states—Tanzania, Gabon, the Ivory Coast, Zambia, and Haiti—recognized the rebel government.

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The United States remained officially aloof, though public opinion was decidedly pro-Biafra. After a 1967 visit to Washington to explain the position of the Nigerian government, Chief Anthony Enaharo, Gowon's emissary, observed that there was "diminishing comprehension of the Nigerian crisis the higher up the hierarchy one went. . . . [The State Department] tended to gauge us by a double standard: What was right for the American federation in 1860 did not hold for the Nigerian federation." The frustration of Nigeria's rulers turned to anger when U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk baldly suggested that the Nigerian crisis was a "British responsibility," implying that, in American eyes, the country was still a colony.

Surrounded, starving, and broke, the Biafrans surrendered on January 15, 1970. Ojukwu fled into exile in the Ivory Coast. With Abraham Lincoln as his avowed model, Gowon adopted a policy of "no victors, no vanquished." Ibos were quickly reintegrated into Nigerian life. Officials of the rebel government were given new posts in the federal bureaucracy; most Ibo officers kept their ranks. "In the history of warfare," wrote John de St. Jorre, who covered the war for the London *Observer*, "there can rarely have been such a bloodless end and such a merciful aftermath."

Nigeria's troubles were not over. Although the country's oil revenues doubled and doubled again after the 1973 OPEC price hikes, for most of Nigeria's people life had not much improved. The great influx of money into the economy also brought massive inflation. Corruption was rampant, and some of Gowon's military governors milked their districts as if they were private estates. In 1975, after reneging on his promise to return the country to civilian rule, Gowon was overthrown. (He retired to private life, enrolling as a freshman political science student at the University of Warwick in Britain.)

The new head of state was Brig. Gen. Murtala Muhammed, a no-nonsense northern Muslim who started to get Nigeria back on its feet. Muhammed dismissed the hated military governors, fixed a date for return to civilian rule, and began firing venal bureaucrats. He also made plans to move Nigeria's capital out of traffic-clogged Lagos. Six months after taking office, however, he was assassinated by disgruntled Army officers while his car was stalled in a Lagos traffic jam. He was succeeded by the next in command, Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, a devout Baptist, a Yoruba, and a career Army man.

Carrying forward Muhammed's program, Obasanjo deftly shepherded the country through an unprecedented three-year-long exercise in grassroots democracy, which included the elec-

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tion of hundreds of local governments, public debate on a new, American-style constitution, registration of 47 million voters (most of whom were voting for the first time in their lives), and the overseeing of five elections to fill state and national offices. "Never in the history of Africa," commented the magazine *West Africa* when it was all over, "have so many people been consulted so thoroughly about how they wished to be governed."

A casual observer might be tempted to conclude that Nigeria is merely back where it started in 1960. The new President, Hausa-Fulani nobleman Alhaji Shehu Shagari, is a northerner, as was Nigeria's first Prime Minister, Abubakar Balewa, whom he resembles. The election breakdowns show that tribal loyalties remain a powerful, even decisive, political force.

Yet Nigeria's political prospects may be brighter than would appear on the surface. The new 19-state federal system better reflects the country's cultural pluralism and effectively carves up the old Hausa-Fulani, Ibo, and Yoruba strongholds. Moreover, the new constitution seeks to ensure that elections are truly "national" in character; to be elected President, a candidate must receive not only one-third of the popular vote but also at least one-quarter of the vote in two-thirds of the states. (In the 1979 elections, for example, Shagari needed critical support in the east, beyond his central base in the north.) Finally, the new constitution provides for effective checks and balances. Shagari's party holds only 38 seats in the 95-member Senate and 168 seats in the 449-member House. It is therefore obliged to wheel and deal.

Political reforms alone, of course, cannot guarantee national cohesion. In a country where leaders are as important as institutions, the real test is whether Shagari and his successors can actually govern this complex society—enriched by oil, afflicted by inflation, corruption, and poverty, and fractured by special interests.

Most Nigerians, publicly proud, privately pessimistic, seem determined to make the democratic experiment work. As the most populous state south of the Sahara, Nigeria is one of black Africa's natural leaders, a maverick member of OPEC, a commanding voice in the Organization of African Unity. What happens inside the country, therefore, has a certain importance to the outside world. Brave steps have been taken by the Nigerians; grave risks remain.





## NEW WRITERS, NEW READERS

*By Charles R. Larson*

Looking back at the past 25 or 30 years, it is clear that the writing of fiction in sub-Saharan Africa has been dominated by Nigerians.

Why? The Nigerians' most obvious asset has been their perseverance despite such severe national upheavals as repeated coups and the 1967-70 Biafran war. Even in formerly French Africa, the most talented authors either have been silenced by government censorship or have slackened their efforts.

Numerous factors combined to give Nigeria its preeminence.\* Nigeria's large population (35 million in 1959, just before independence) with its increasing literacy (6.1 percent in 1952, 25 percent in 1975) provided a literary marketplace. The development, in the eastern city of Onitsha, of a "pop" literature for the masses also helped. Perhaps the most important stimulus was the emergence of a group of young Nigerian intellectuals who spearheaded a national literary movement.

The literary output of these writers gave strength to Nigeria's post-independence drive for "Africanization" during the early 1960s. As a teacher at a boy's secondary school in eastern Nigeria, I at first followed a syllabus (set by the new government in Lagos) devoted only to England's great men of letters: Shakespeare, Hardy, Milton, Bunyan—all the obvious authors. This soon changed. British literature that described a world few Nigerian youths had ever seen or imagined was replaced by the works, in English, of native-born writers.

Most modern African fiction has been written in the "colonial" languages (English, French, Portuguese); Nigeria's has been no exception. Fifteen years ago, African writers hotly debated the problem of writing in European languages. Some younger writers argued that by using the colonial language they were denying their African heritage. Yet many African languages, although rich in narrative tradition, still lack a written literature. And the question of "authenticity" soon faded when it

\*Of 215 books in the prestigious Heinemann Educational Books' African Writers Series, 52 are by Nigerian authors. South Africa is second with 23 books.

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became clear that works in indigenous languages would have few readers outside Africa and that (in those days, anyway) the African writer's readers and publishers were mostly in Europe.

Today, the publishing situation is changing as a second generation of Nigerian writers and readers emerges. But the Nigerian who writes in his tribal language still discovers that he has considerably reduced his potential domestic audience. Nigeria has nearly 250 languages and dialects, so (as in most of sub-Saharan Africa) a European language—a second language—has become the language of literature, and of officialdom. After the second grade, instruction in Nigerian schools is in English.

### “So Sweet and Sexy”

Nigerian literature began its emergence shortly after World War II with the development of publishing in the Ibo city of Onitsha. The literacy rate, particularly in the urban centers, had begun to grow. During the war, many Nigerian males had fought with the British armies in Europe and the Middle East—an eye-opening experience. In the cities, Nigerians came together from different tribal groups. And Western movies and lifestyles became popular as the booming oil-and-cocoa economy put money in Nigerian pockets that had been empty.

“Onitsha Market Literature”—the Nigerian equivalent of the American dime novel—developed as a response to an expanding audience. Newly, often barely, literate Nigerians devoured these sensational stories. The Onitsha writers' works, using a vocabulary of several hundred English words, were often replete with grammatical and typographical errors. The readers didn't mind.

Some of the early titles accurately indicate the works themselves: *The Sorrows of Love*, *Veronica My Daughter*, *Life in the Prison Yard*—melodramatic accounts of life, designed to serve as moral examples for their readers.

*Mabel the Sweet Honey* has always been my favorite. The author's description of his book, taken from the cover, reads as

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*Charles R. Larson, 41, is professor of literature at The American University. Born in Sioux City, Iowa, he received a B.A. from the University of Colorado, Boulder (1959), and a Ph.D. from Indiana University (1970). He is the author of The Emergence of African Fiction (1972), American Indian Fiction (1978), and The Insect Colony (1978), a novel set in West Africa during the Biafran war; and has edited African Short Stories: A Collection of Contemporary African Writing (1970) and Opaque Shadows and Other Stories from Contemporary Africa (1975).*



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During the civil war, Onitsha market books were stamped "Printed in the Republic of Biafra." Rarely more than 64 pages long, they frequently picture stiffly posed, sweater-clad Caucasians on their covers. The reason: To keep costs down, printers go to press with whatever art is available; one major publisher uses a supply of plates from a European sweater catalog.

follows: "Her Skin would make your blood flow in the wrong direction. She was so sweet and sexy, knew how to romance. She married at sixteen. But she wanted more fun. Yet it ended at seventeen, and what an-end? SO THRILLING."

Other Onitsha pamphlets are self-help books: *Money Hard to Get But Easy to Spend*; *How to Speak to Girls and Win Their Love*; *How to Avoid Misatkes [sic] and Live a Good Life—A Moral Instructions on Don'ts in Public Meetings, Social Gatherings and Functions for Boys & Girls, Workers and Traders*.

One of Nigeria's most famous writers, Cyprian Ekwensi, now 58, began his publishing career in Onitsha in 1947 with *When Love Whispers*, a "pop" novelette about a young woman who meets and marries another man while her fiancé is going to school in England. Ekwensi, an Ibo who has worked as a pharmacist, forester, and Nigeria's Director of Information Services, later found British publishers for his work. His most popular novel is *Jagua Nana* (1961), the melodramatic tale of an aging prostitute.

The first Nigerian writer to gain an international reputation was Amos Tutuola. Born in 1920, Tutuola astounded the London literary scene in 1952 with his rough-hewn *The Palm-Wine Drink-*

*ard*. The novel, best described as an oral epic set down in broken English (Tutuola's formal education was limited to primary schools), caused immediate controversy. Europeans and Americans concluded that subsequent African literature would be written in Tutuola's style; the author's fellow Nigerians were embarrassed that their semi-literate countryman had dishonored them. Neither reaction was justified. Amos Tutuola was and is one of the foremost African story tellers, Nigeria's counterpart to Aesop or the Brothers Grimm.

If Amos Tutuola represents homespun narrative, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka represent formal writing in the Western tradition. Achebe, 49, is an Ibo from eastern Nigeria; Soyinka, 44, is a Yoruba from his country's western region. Both began publishing shortly before Nigeria's independence in 1960 and are also, it seems to me, the two most talented Anglophone writers on the continent. Frequently nominated for the Nobel Prize, they are probably the only writers in tropical Africa who could live on their royalties, although both teach—Achebe at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, Soyinka at the University of Ife.

#### Focusing on Immorality

Achebe's masterpiece, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), was the first novel by an African writer included in the required syllabus for secondary-school students throughout English-speaking Africa. It chronicles the coming of the white man to a small Ibo village in the 1890s. The main character, Okonkwo, is the archetypal Iboman (masculine and warlike); he dies tragically by taking his own life, a symbolic act representing the death of the traditional culture.

Though the book was praised when it first appeared, only years later did Achebe achieve international fame. By that time, he had published a sequel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960); *Arrow of God* (1964); and *A Man of the People* (1966), a satire which predicted Nigeria's era of political instability. As an Ibo, Achebe spoke eloquently for the Biafran cause during the war, but since that time, he has largely been silent on politics in his writing, limiting himself to poetry and short stories.

Wole Soyinka, on the other hand, has become not only Africa's most famous playwright but also Nigeria's most prolific writer and social critic. At last count, he had published more than 20 volumes of drama (including *A Dance of the Forests*, 1960; *The Lion and the Jewel*, 1963), poetry, fiction, and literary criticism.

Soyinka's finest work is *The Man Died* (1972), a journal of

the two years he spent in prison in Lagos during the civil war. Held by the Nigerian government without specific charges and denied writing materials by prison authorities, Soyinka kept his mind active during his years of solitary confinement by surreptitiously writing a number of subsequently published works, including his journal, between the lines of books that were somehow smuggled into his cell.

Ekwensi, Tutuola, Achebe, and Soyinka are beyond doubt the leading figures on Nigeria's colorful literary scene; their literary reputations are assured. But there are at least a handful of other important writers. Several of these—John Pepper Clark, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo (who was killed in the Biafran war), T. M. Aluko, John Munomye, Elechi Amadi—began their writing careers at roughly the same time as Achebe and Soyinka. A number of younger writers (T. Obinkaram Echewa, Flora Nwapa, Nkem Nwankwo) have shown great promise.

As Nigerian society has changed during the last few decades, most of these writers have shifted their social focus from the impact of colonialism to the behavior of Nigeria's new, native elite. Current literature places more emphasis on the individual than on the system, as writers examine present-day African problems, especially corruption and immorality among political and social leaders.

Nigerian writers have been successful by world standards. To illustrate the richness of Nigeria's literature, several excerpts follow, drawn from an Onitsha pamphlet, two novels, a poem, and a play:

## The Nigerian Bachelor's Guide

by A. O. Ude

*Onitsha market pamphlets usually have modest sales of 3,000 to 4,000 copies, but the more popular have been reissued several times. The Nigerian Bachelor's Guide, for example, has sold 40,000 copies. In this excerpt, its author gives "Advice to Young Men on Marriage."*

**Q.** When you are ready for marriage what will be your target for selecting a wife?

**A.** The target should be

(a) A girl from a good family. For a family to be good, the parents of the girl must have lived successfully as husband and

From Onitsha Market Literature. Edited by E. Obiechina. © 1972 by Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.

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wife. The father should not be too poor and his wife should be a dutiful, strong, intelligent, faithful wife. She and her husband should have a fair report of people.

(b) The girl should not be very beautiful, for beautiful women are dangerous. She should not be ugly. Ugly women make their husbands unhappy and uncontented.

(c) The girl should have good manners and be of good conduct.

**Q.** Why do you say that beautiful women are dangerous?

**A.** This is so because many of them are generally loose. They suffer too much from the trials of men and so become too kind to men. This often leads them to evil. Women of moderate beauty are therefore better for housewives.

**Q.** Is it good to go against the advice of your parents in choosing a wife?

**A.** It is not good. Our parents are our God's representatives and in all matters relating to marriage, their voice should be heard. In the real sense of the word, they are not against our marriage, but at times, after examining the girl and family, our parents may have good objections to our marrying the girl we love. Love is strong, but we should try to suppress it, and look for another girl. Failure in marriage is generally due to the neglect of our parents' advice while selecting a wife.

**Q.** Is it good to pay £100 for a girl?

**A.** No. This is buying the girl. Human beings should not be regarded as articles for sale. A sensible wise man will not receive a farthing for his daughter.

## No Longer at Ease

by Chinua Achebe

*Although Chinua Achebe did not leave home to study at a foreign university, many other Nigerian writers and teachers (including Wole Soyinka and T. Obinkaram Echéwa) have studied overseas. In this excerpt from Achebe's second novel, No Longer at Ease, the central character, 25-year-old Obi Okonkwo, has just returned to Lagos after studying English literature in London. His childhood visions of Lagos aren't quite the same as the city he sees on his return to his homeland.*

Obi was away in England for a little under four years. He sometimes found it difficult to believe that it was as short as that. It seemed more like a decade than four years, what with the miseries of winter when his longing to return home took on the

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sharpness of physical pain. It was in England that Nigeria first became more than just a name to him. That was the first great thing that England did for him.

But the Nigeria he returned to was in many ways different from the picture he had carried in his mind during those four years. There were many things he could no longer recognize, and others—like the slums of Lagos—which he was seeing for the first time.

As a boy in the village of Umuofia he had heard his first stories about Lagos from a soldier home on leave from the war.

... "There is no darkness there," [the soldier] told his admiring listeners, "because at night the electric shines like the sun, and people are always walking about, that is, those who want to walk. If you don't want to walk you only have to wave your hand and a pleasure car stops for you." His audience made sounds of wonderment. Then by way of digression he said: "If you see a white man, take off your hat for him. The only thing he cannot do is mold a human being."

For many years afterwards, Lagos was always associated with electric lights and motorcars in Obi's mind. Even after he had at last visited the city and spent a few days there before flying to the United Kingdom his views did not change very much.

Some years later as Obi, newly returned from England, stood beside his car at night in one of the less formidable of Lagos slum areas . . . his mind went over his earlier impressions



*Early Lagos*

*From Visitors Guide to Lagos, 1975.*

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of the city. He had not thought places like this stood side by side with the cars, electric lights, and brightly dressed girls.

His car was parked close to a wide-open storm drain from which came a very strong smell of rotting flesh. It was the remains of a dog which had no doubt been run over by a taxi. Obi used to wonder why so many dogs were killed by cars in Lagos, until one day the driver he had engaged to teach him driving went out of his way to run over one. In shocked amazement Obi asked why he had done it. "Na good luck," said the man. "Dog bring good luck for new car. But duck be different. If you kill duck you go get accident or kill man."

Beyond the storm drain there was a meat stall. It was quite empty of meat or meat-sellers. But a man was working a little machine on one of the tables. It looked like a sewing machine except that it ground maize. A woman stood by watching the man turn the machine to grind her maize.

On the other side of the road a little boy wrapped in a cloth was selling bean cakes or *akara* under a lamppost. His bowl of *akara* was lying in the dust and he seemed half asleep. But he really wasn't, for as soon as the nightsoilman passed swinging his broom and hurricane lamp and trailing clouds of putrefaction the boy quickly sprang to his feet and began calling him names. The man made for him with his broom but the boy was already in flight, his bowl of *akara* on his head. The man grinding maize burst into laughter, and the woman joined in. The nightsoilman smiled and went his way, having said something very rude about the boy's mother.

Here was Lagos, thought Obi, the real Lagos he hadn't imagined existed until now. During his first winter in England he had written a callow, nostalgic poem about Nigeria. It wasn't about Lagos in particular, but Lagos was part of the Nigeria he had in mind.

"How sweet it is to lie beneath a tree  
At eventime and share the ecstasy  
Of jocund birds and flimsy butterflies;  
How sweet to leave our earthbound body in its mud,  
And rise towards the music of the spheres,  
Descending softly with the wind,  
And the tender glow of the fading sun."

He recalled this poem and then turned and looked at the rotting dog in the storm drain and smiled. "I have tasted putrid flesh in the spoon," he said through clenched teeth. "Far more apt."



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## Telephone Conversation

by Wole Soyinka

*After attending Ibadan University, Wole Soyinka moved to England in 1954 to study at the University of Leeds. Upon receiving a degree in English literature, he worked at London's Royal Court Theatre until his return home in 1960. This humorous poem, one of Soyinka's best known, drew on his experiences in England.*

The price seemed reasonable, location  
 Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived  
 Off premises. Nothing remained  
 But self-confession. "Madam," I warned,  
 "I hate a wasted journey—I am African."  
 Silence. Silenced transmission of  
 Pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came,  
 Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled  
 Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was, foully. "HOW DARK?" . . .  
 I had not misheard. . . . "ARE YOU LIGHT  
 OR VERY DARK?" Button B. Button A. Stench  
 Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.  
 Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double-tiered  
 Omnibus squelching tar. It *was* real! Shamed  
 By ill-mannered silence, surrender  
 Pushed dumbfoundment to beg simplification.  
 Considerate she was, varying the emphasis—  
 "ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.  
 "You mean—like plain or milk chocolate?"  
 Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light  
 Impersonality. Rapidly, wave length adjusted,  
 I chose. "West African sepia"—and as afterthought,  
 "Down in my passport." Silence for spectroscopic  
 Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent  
 Hard on the mouthpiece. "WHAT'S THAT?" conceding  
 "DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS." "Like brunette."  
 "THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" "Not altogether.  
 Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you should see  
 The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet  
 Are a peroxide blonde. Friction, caused—  
 Foolishly madam—by sitting down, has turned  
 My bottom raven black—One moment madam!"—sensing  
 Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap  
 About my ears—"Madam," I pleaded, "wouldn't you rather  
 See for yourself?"

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## The Lion and The Jewel

by Wole Soyinka

The Lion and the Jewel, Wole Soyinka's satire of the clash between tradition and modernity in Africa, is often described as the finest play written by an African dramatist. Set in the western Nigerian Yoruba village of Ilujinle, its central characters are Baroka, the 62-year-old Bale or village chief, who has a reputation for opposing progress; 22-year-old Lakunle, the village teacher, who wants to modernize the village but whose ideas of progress are superficial ("High-heeled shoes for the lady, red paint/On her lips."); and Sidi, the beautiful but mischievous village belle who is sought in marriage by both men. In this excerpt, Baroka has just tried to woo Sidi by promising to put her picture on the village's first postage stamp.

### BAROKA:

I hope you will not think it too great  
A burden, to carry the country's mail  
All on your comeliness. . . .

For a long time now,

The town-dwellers have made up tales  
Of the backwardness of Ilujinle  
Until it hurts Baroka, who holds  
The welfare of his people deep at heart.  
Now, if we do this thing, it will prove more  
Than any single town has done! . . .  
I do not hate progress, only its nature  
Which makes all roofs and faces look the same.

And the wish of one old man is

That here and there,

*[Goes progressively towards Sidi, until he bends over her, then sits beside her on the bed.]*

Among the bridges and the murderous roads,  
Below the humming birds which  
Smoke the face of Sango, dispenser of  
The snake-tongue lightning; between this moment  
And the reckless broom that will be wielded  
In these years to come, we must leave  
Virgin plots of lives, rich decay  
And the tang of vapour rising from  
Forgotten heaps of compost, lying  
Undisturbed. . . .

Your school teacher and I are much alike.  
The proof of wisdom is the wish to learn  
Even from children. And the haste of youth

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Must learn its temper from the gloss  
 Of ancient leather, from a strength  
 Knit close along the grain. The school teacher  
 And I, must learn one from the other.  
 Is this not right? . . .  
 [*Sidi nods, tearfully.*]  
 The old must flow into the new, Sidi,  
 Not blind itself or stand foolishly  
 Apart. A girl like you must inherit  
 Miracles which age alone reveals.  
 Is this not so?

**SIDI:**

Everything you say, Bale,  
 Seems wise to me.

**BAROKA:**

Yesterday's wine alone is strong and blooded, child,  
 And though the Christians' holy book denies  
 The truth of this, old wine thrives best  
 Within a new bottle. The coarseness  
 Is mellowed down, and the rugged wine  
 Acquires a full and rounded body . . .  
 Is this not so—my child?

## The Land's Lord

by T. Obinkaram Echewa

*T. Obinkaram Echewa was born in an Ibo village and educated in the United States at Notre Dame, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania. His novel, The Land's Lord (1976), tells the story of Philip, an unpaid Ibo servant for Father Higler, the white village missionary. Philip is a recent convert to Catholicism, but his fear of jujus (spirits) remains strong. Finding Christianity, with its promise of heavenly salvation, no more able than his tribe's idolatry to grant him earthly happiness, he has sought revenge by sinning against the gods of both religions. In this excerpt from the book's final chapter, Philip is on trial before the village elders after "crossing legs" with his mentally retarded foster daughter.*

"You know," one man was now saying, "before the White Man came, it was wrong for a man in this village to go in with a woman in the day time. Now the young men do it. The White Man did not ask them to do it, but they do it because of his coming. Our nights have been turned into days and our days

Published by Lawrence Hill & Co., Westport, Connecticut.

into nights. It seems we are confused. Our old certainties seem no longer to be certified. Strangers argue with our truths, and we stand and stare about like foreigners in our own land—as if we have to ask permission to be who we are and think what we have always thought, and act as our fathers acted before us. . . . What are we waiting for? Has the sun not already set twice since this act? Do we want the anger of the Land on our heads before we act, the anger of the concord of jujus assembled here? Do we want the ground to shake? Or the hills to vomit fire first? . . . I take my seat!" . . .

"Do you not know what we must do to you?"

Philip: "Yes. And I am ready. I have no fear in my heart. But for whose sake must you do it?"

"All. For the sake of all. You. The Gods. The Land. All these jujus. Ourselves and our customs and traditions, the whole communion of our group, both living and dead, born and unborn. We have all been tainted by you. The Land must be propitiated with your blood because you have tainted it. It must be cleansed and renewed."

Philip: "But why? Because you fear punishment? Then it is you who are afraid. It is you whose hearts shake and tremble. But me, I am not afraid of how you judge me or what you do to me. I have hit my one blow. I have my revenge against everything!" . . .

"Whence your new courage?"

Philip: "Did I choose to be born? I was born a slave to duty. I had no choice and no voice. My pains and sufferings, my sweats and tears did not justify me. So I have given myself one choice."

"And *this* was it? This heinous act! I say enough!"

The interrogator leaped forward and grabbed a machete.

"If he does not stop talking I will behead him here in front of all of you!"

The dramatic gesture brought the interview to a halt.

*When the questioning stopped, Father Higler pleaded with the elders to save Philip's life, but they would not listen. The priest lunged forward and cut the ropes binding Philip. Instead of fleeing, Philip grabbed a machete and stabbed himself saying:*

"I must die my own death. But if my life has been useless, then my death too. It must be without use. . . . Yes, I will die, but I will not die at your hands, like a goat in sacrifice, so that your hearts can stop their trembling and your minds can have peace."



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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### 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.

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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.*