
Two narratives form the spine of this book: political grievances and activism leading to the deposition of the alake of Abeokuta by women, including their leader Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti; and the transformation of nationalism in Abeokuta from one focused on the city and the Egba polity to one focused on Nigeria. By connecting these two developments, The Great Upheaval succeeds in revealing women’s important contributions to Nigerian nationalism and, more broadly, the gendered underpinnings of nationalism itself.

The first set of events is known to specialists of Nigerian women’s history. In July 1948, Ademola II, the traditional king (alake) and paramount chief of Abeokuta, abdicated, spending three years in exile before his reinstatement under altered political circumstances. Ademola was forced out through the protests and activism of the Abeokuta Women’s Union (AWU) under the leadership of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in what her nephew, the Nobel laureate in literature Wole Soyinka, termed “the Great Upheaval.” Byfield traces both the antecedents and the aftermath of this upheaval. The AWU had been formed in the context of wartime economic crisis as a coalition of thousands of diverse women, including elite Christians, Muslims, teachers, and market women from the town of Abeokuta and its rural environs. It promoted three main demands: the abolition of taxes on women, women’s representation on the local governing council, and the removal of the colonial state’s designated sole native authority, Alake Ademola II. In the aftermath of the 1948 Abeokuta protests, women in other parts of Nigeria formed political organizations inspired by the AWU; and Ransome-Kuti and others convened the Nigeria Women’s Union, the first national women’s organization in Nigeria.

The creation of the NWU signals the widening scope of political vision—among women and men—in the 1950s as independence emerged on the horizon. As Byfield argues, female activists from Abeokuta played a critical role in establishing the idea and reality of Nigeria as a nation. But this vision of Nigerian sovereignty was a new development; as Byfield shows, Abeokuta’s sense of itself as a nation—distinct from, and not subsumed within, other polities—stemmed from its inception in 1830 for at least a century. The 1930 celebration of the town’s centenary highlighted this sense of nationhood and, as a result of patriarchal colonial interventions, erased women’s political and economic contributions to Abeokuta’s development. In contrast, during the 1948 tax revolt and in celebrations of its success, women venerated the memory of nineteenth-century merchant Madam Efunroye Tinubu, Abeokuta’s iyalo[n]e, or female chief.

The Great Upheaval thus joins other studies in insisting on women’s contributions to African nationalist movements. At its core, this is a valuable work of recovery, based on the extant and voluminous correspondence of Ransome-Kuti as well as official documentation, the local press, and oral histories. It also provides a case study of the cultural construction of nationalism, particularly in its gendered dimensions. In this sense, it encourages retrospective outrage over the increasing marginalization of women from Nigerian politics in the 1950s, and especially the agreement by all major political parties and the colonial government to deny the vote to women in Northern Nigeria. While women
in the Eastern and Western Regions gained the right to vote in 1954, their Northern counterparts were deprived of the ballot until the late 1970s. This book thus offers important context for more recent developments in the history of Nigerian women and politics.

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A few years ago, I was walking around Varna on Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast. By trade a historian of West Africa, this wasn’t intended as a work trip. We don’t usually think of there being much of a shared history between Bulgaria and, say, Nigeria. But that day, I saw a building oddly reminiscent of Lagos: a concrete sports hall that looked like a miniature version of the huge, crown-like Nigerian National Theatre building.

After a moment’s surprise, the similarity made sense. I remembered reading that the Nigerian National Theatre had been built by a Bulgarian company. The Varna sports hall must have been designed by the same architects. But until reading Łukasz Stanek’s meticulously researched new book, I hadn’t known which was constructed first. Stanek writes that a Nigerian delegation visited Varna in 1972 and approved the sports hall as the “prototype” for the National Theatre. Bulgaria and Nigeria were not so historically disconnected after all.

Stanek’s book advances important arguments about architectural exchanges that de-center our understanding of the end of Western European empires and the global Cold War. It shows how architecture was an arena in which West Africa and the Middle East were networked not only to Western Europe and the United States, but also to the socialist world. (I focus here on the book’s coverage of Africa.) The postcolonial world, Stanek persuasively shows, was characterized by multiple, competing centers of knowledge and resources.

Stanek has a keen eye for new postcolonial mobilities, which for example saw twenty-six Polish architects work for the Ghana National Construction Corporation in the 1960s. These exchanges would have been scarcely conceivable under colonial rule. Stanek explores how these mobilities opened new possibilities. He argues that in Nkrumah’s Ghana, modern architecture “was not imported” but “coproduced by Ghanaians and foreigners who tapped into resources circulating in competing networks of global cooperation that intersected in the country” (p. 31). A chapter on Lagos includes some

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