

Judith W. Byfield, *The great upheaval: Women and nation in postwar Nigeria*.

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Book review

The Great Upheaval is a tale of Yoruba women's responses to the oppressive taxation policies that accompanied the British colonial government's imposition of indirect rule in Egbaland, located in present-day western Nigeria. The title of the book reflects the swift description given by Wole Soyinka, the Noble Laureate when he expressed a measure of astonishment over the dramatic nature of the Abeokuta Women's mob assault on Alake Ademola II, the British 'stooge' who was forced out of office in January 1949, a movement championed by the Funmilayo Ransom-Kuti-led Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU). In *The Great Upheaval*, Byfield strongly argues that, "the Abeokuta protests were distinctive because they became the foundation from which the first national women's organization in Nigeria, the Nigeria Women's Union (NWU), emerged" (p. 2).

Each of the six chapters of the book, is geared towards explicating the complex evolution of Nigerian nationalism, especially from 1946 when the Abeokuta women's movement came to the limelight. Byfield's gendered approach to the study of nationalism in Nigeria, and from the Western Nigerian perspective, is remarkably revolutionary. By demonstrating how anticolonialism became an

inevitable force when Yoruba women rose against “taxation without representation” in Yorubaland, the work challenges the nationalism narratives which had predominantly centered around the men-dominated educated elite of post-World War II Nigeria. Byfield insists that it is teleological (interpreting the past mainly through its outcomes) to presume in much of the existing scholarship that “all nation-making centered on a Nigerian nation” from the genesis. (p. 3) Far from that linear understanding of the history of Nigerian nationalism, her work illustrates how the massive receptivity of the Abeokuta natives to Christianity and Westernization, paved the way for the evolution of a unique and parochially imagined community, formed well before the twentieth century when the British colonizers obviously came to be regarded as the ‘common enemy’ by most Nigerian groups.

Thus, the book strengthens our understanding of how different tribes in precolonial Nigeria sought to create separate nations that emblemized linguistically imagined communities; imagination which resulted from the ubiquity of imported print cultures. However, this imagination seems like a missed opportunity to extensively compare the ways in which industrial modernity enabled Nigerian/African kingdoms to experiment with nationhood like their European counterparts in the nineteenth century, even before the consolidation of colonial rule in the area. The case of the Egba United Government created in 1898 by the Abeokuta chiefs, stands out, Byfield is, nevertheless, at her best in analyzing the economic and political changes that culminated in the rise and crumbling of the Egba United Government. Here, she traces the ways through which the purveyors of the diminishing Egba nation, gradually shifted their nationalistic commitment in favour of Nigeria, to facilitate her independence from British colonial rule on 1st October 1960. A major part of the author’s regret is that despite the indomitable role of women in the anti-colonial struggles, the bulk of them, especially in northern Nigeria, remained disenfranchised up to the end of the 1970s.

Byfield’s chronological style of analysis is spectacularly intriguing. While the EUG primarily expressed Abeokuta’s sense of national identity through the transformation of the town’s political culture, (especially for Yoruba women in the

nineteenth century,) Egba independence diminished drastically from 1914, following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates to form Nigeria. This unification which seriously endangered 'Abeokuta's imagined community,' was championed by Gov. Frederick Lugard who, in 1918, initiated "taxes into the town as part of his larger strategy to introduce an income tax system in the Southern Protectorate" (p. 64). The oppressive nature of this colonial taxation policy and the resultant resistance patterns, especially for and by the women, inform much of Byfield's narrative.

Interestingly, the year 1930, marked Abeokuta's one hundred years of independence as an imagined community; and this was chiefly remarkable because it symbolizes that the indigenous people remained somewhat intransigent to the British imperial intimidation. Thus, Byfield presents the decade before the town's centenary as a turning point "distinguished by political intrigue and tension as colonial officials tried to stamp out the remaining fires of opposition [while] Ademola attempted to keep the embers of independence lit" (p. 64). The Alake's disposition to maintain the independence of the Egba United Government crystallized, therefore, in a unity-targeted centenary celebration resonates so well with the author for its "highly gendered" state-making process, a trend which entrenched the colonial ideology that the "institutions of government were exclusively male preserves" (p. 97).

Politics in the interwar years defined intensively by race and nation-making at the global stage, finalized shifts in political thought and political identification. Although Byfield argues that these changes followed a complex trajectory—where one development hardly succeeded the other, especially in colonial Abeokuta, the post-World War I intellectual ferment, which had its greatest expression in the fast-transforming Lagos, laid the foundation for a homogenous nationalist movement in Nigeria. This was so apparent that "some individuals who in 1930 argued that Abeokuta should regain its political independence gradually shifted their geographical scope...and even [Ladipo] Solanke ceased calls for an independent Abeokuta," especially as the town had been allotted a seat in the Lagos Legislative Council in 1922.

The impact of Yoruba women in global politics was mostly felt as they stretched support to troubled Ethiopia. Byfield contends that Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, was critical because "Abeokuta [women] became part of a global resistance" which united Black peoples across multiple regions and empires. She substantiates that emperor Haile Selassie's youngest Princess Tsaha, made a global appeal to women in 1936; and in response, "women in western Nigeria collected money on behalf of Ethiopia and wrote petitions to the governor of Nigeria" (p. 113). And following the eventual defeat of Italy, Ademola sent emperor Selassie a "congratulatory message on behalf of the people of Egbaland" (p. 122).

Conjoined already with the British empire, the restoration of Ethiopia's independence did not guarantee a total peace of mind for the Yoruba women. Byfield dissects, in a most logical manner, the rice-centered economic crisis that befell the town of Abeokuta during and after World War II, 1939-45. But even though the war deepened the effect of the economic depression which hit the world in the 1920s, the author's explanation suggests a sense of enthusiasm on the part of the Yoruba and indeed, Nigerians who by both compulsion and voluntarism, shored up economic, military, and moral supports for the Allied Forces. Given the gendered nature of the wartime experiences, Byfield persuasively argues that women's role across Yorubaland was critical, for they "not only processed cassava into gari [cassava granules], palm fruit into palm oil and palm kernels into palm kernel oil, but they [also] dominated the retail sale of all these products" (p. 139).

Germany was defeated by the Allied Forces, but Britain came out of the Second World War economically battered, demoralized, and internationally circumnavigated by the anti-imperial dictations associated with the Atlantic Charter of August 1941. Thus, the rest of the book is devoted to the indigenous peoples' responses to Britain's post-World War II austerity measures, that lead to increased taxation in colonial Nigeria, as well as how such unfavorable economic changes further deepened Abeokuta women's political organizing. Although Byfield denies us the details of Madam Tinubu's nineteenth century political activism, the author demonstrates how that amazon became a beacon of inspiration in the wake of the women's tax revolts, culminating in *The Great Upheaval*.

The book is an excellent example of how to present an original argument. Except for the choice of endnotes which encumbers a seamless source verification process, the narrative style is most commendable. Collective experience under British colonial rule is extensively entrenched by Byfield as the major unifying issue of Nigeria's history of nationalism. Her claim is plausible, but the centrality of the Niger River which made Nigeria a geographically imagined community, must equally be reckoned. Even the British observed that, which reflects in the name "Nigeria" adopted in January 1914 as had already been suggested in 1897 by Flora Shaw in her description of the vast territories administered by the Royal Niger Company. Byfield does not consider the significance of this factor in Abeokuta nationalists' mental shifts—leaders who, from the interwar period, began to increasingly imagine the beauty of the larger scope of nationalist sentiment consolidated through the exchange of "handshakes" across the Niger.