This ambitious work aims at reviewing the most significant influence driving the writings of Nigerian historians from the late 1950s until the present, namely nationalism. The authors argue that from the end of the colonial era to the present, historical scholarship on Nigeria has experienced rapid growth, evolving into a massive discipline that contains within it many fields and subfields. While few scholars can boast a mastery of all the various directions this scholarship has taken, Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto claim that the overarching agenda propelling the production of historical writing in Nigeria has been a nationalist one. As recent years have seen a decline in the output and innovation of Nigerian historical scholarship, this book offers a critique of the field as it has evolved over time until reaching the present crossroads. Falola and Aderinto aim to “take stock” of Nigerian historiography and understand its origins, its most significant voices, its impact, and its shortcomings.

Beyond providing a simple intellectual history of several key figures or paradigms, the authors argue that the evolution of historical knowledge is intimately tied to the unfolding of history itself, and therefore an examination of nationalist historiography in Nigeria must be contextualized in the political, economic, and cultural landscapes within which nationalist historians emerged and worked. Thus, while Falola and Aderinto are largely interested in the conceptualization and mobilization of history in the first decades of Nigeria’s independence, they situate this particular chapter in Nigeria’s intellectual history within a much broader narrative that begins with precolonial historical practices and traditions, colonial interventions and impact on the conceptualization of history, and the relationship between postcolonial politics and the work of professional scholarship in Nigeria over the last fifty years. The result is a highly detailed and rich survey of the complex web of traditions that have played a hand in shaping the ways in which Nigerians have come to think about and write about their past.

The broad and far-reaching scope of the book, spanning a progression of ideas and methodologies from the nineteenth century to the present and giving voice to the multiplicity of peoples and cultures that make up the Nigerian past and present, ultimately leaves the reader with a sense of fragmentation and divergence with regard to the Nigerian nation. Indeed, the sheer diversity of voices and agendas grouped here under the banner of nationalist historiography recalls Obafemi Awolowo’s often-quoted proclamation, “Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression.”[1]

It is not only the diversity of voices that leaves the reader with a sense of ambiguity with regard to Nigerian nationalist identity after completing Falola and Aderinto’s book. The book exposes much deeper uncertainty about the extent to which the nationalist agenda could truly engender decolonization from Western intellectual traditions. According to the authors, modern historical writing became an ideological weapon against colonial knowledge, and offered “an African-centered counterdiscourse to the objectionable idea that Africans could not
govern themselves and thus had to be placed under alien rule” (p. 4). But while the underlying goal of these pioneering historians was to infuse Nigerians with a strong sense of an afrocentric identity and national pride, the reader of Falola and Aderinto’s book is confronted with a cohort of scholars whose work ultimately testifies to the contradictions that arise when attempting to convey an authentic African voice through an academic discipline firmly rooted in Western culture. The authors are keenly aware of this problematic, and they speculate that this could be the reason for the growing irrelevance of nationalist historiography in contemporary Nigerian society.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, “The Foundation of Knowledge,” provides the intellectual, cultural, historical, and political background to the emergence of academic historical writing in Nigeria. In chapter 1, the authors demonstrate that the peoples of Nigeria have long-standing traditions of preserving and transmitting historical knowledge, demonstrated by oral traditions and Islamic historical writing. The survey of precolonial historical practices in Nigeria provides essential context for understanding the writings of early cultural nationalists who emerged among the Western-educated class of the colonial era. For these intellectuals, writing the histories of their communities “was considered the best means of expressing their views about the impact of foreign domination” (p. 17). But as Falola and Aderinto note, already in this early stage of nationalist historiography, those who undertook to resist colonialism through the production of alternative knowledge faced the same dilemmas as the academic historians who followed in the twentieth century: “How should Africans represent themselves to their people and the outside world? In what ways should they present an agenda of modernization, in view of their encounter with the West? How aggressively should they pursue power to shape their own destinies, lead their own people, and generate new forms of modernity?” (p. 18).

Chapter 2 examines the role of K. O. Dike in establishing the Nigerian National Archives, a critical achievement without which “the production of historical scholarship in Nigerian would have taken a different course altogether” (p. 27). Dike is recognized as spearheading figure in the collection and preservation of masses of documents from the offices of the various branches of the colonial government. This intervention stopped the destruction of records that later became the fodder for historians of colonial rule in Nigeria. While Falola and Aderinto identify the major achievements associated with the establishment of the National Archives, they also examine the slow slide of this once venerated institution to a neglected and decaying facility that has largely lost its functionality and relevance as a reservoir of knowledge. The authors cite the lack of resources as the root of the severe neglect that plagues the infrastructure and operation of the archives today, but they tread lightly in assigning blame for “the lack of professionalism on the part of its staff” (p. 36).

Part 2 of the book undertakes to provide an overview of the major trends and themes that have characterized the historiography of Nigeria. Each of chapters 3 through 6 is dedicated to a major field in Nigerian history, sketching key ideas and authors who have played a foundational role in shaping the field. This section of the book is aimed at providing readers with a broad framework within which to place the work of the nationalist historians to be examined later on. Chapter 3 focuses on political history, and examines work done on precolonial political institutions, international relations, colonialism and indirect rule, nationalism, and decolonization.

Falola and Aderinto identify political history as the most-studied aspect of the Nigerian past, but they criticize the field for being overly focused on elites to the neglect of the role the masses have played in Nigerian history. Chapter 4 examines the economic history of Nigeria, covering an immensely broad range of topics including underdevelopment, Marxist histories of imperialism, precolonial economic systems, colonial enterprises, currency, agricultural history, private business and entrepreneurship, and mining industries. Chapter 5 surveys the broad topic of social history, which began with biographies and life histories, and later developed into an examination of social issues, such as crime, family, and marriage. The final chapter in this section is dedicated to women’s history, a once neglected field that has become an important focal point of critical scholarship, as feminist historians have mobilized their research to challenge Western stereotypes of African women.

The authors’ decision to provide an overview of the major trends and ideas emerging in the entire field of Nigerian history since independence may have been overly ambitious. The reader finishes this section feeling overwhelmed with the topics and authored covered, and few receive more than cursory mention. A survey of these chapters also raises questions about the role non-Nigerians have played in the field of Nigerian history. The ideological motivations of those writing in the first decades following independence were quite identical to those of Nigerian historians seeking to produce a body
of knowledge that African communities could draw upon as an alternative to colonial knowledge. Thus, the categorization of nationalist historians offered by this study could have been expanded beyond Nigerians alone, a move that might have promoted a more textured conceptualization of nationalist historiography.

Part 3 focuses on a selected group of individual nationalist historians. In each chapter, the authors provide an in-depth sketch of a particular scholar’s work, weaving together a detailed trajectory of his or her intellectual development and output as a historian along with biographical information, a description of his or her professional development, and ideological leanings. The overall argument is that we cannot separate history and historians, and the work of the historian must be seen against the backdrop of the period in which they live, the political environment in which they work and write, and the larger debates prominent in the of the field of history. The authors acknowledge that the selection of scholars required a process of elimination, and some prolific and highly influential scholars such as E. A. Ayenlede and Nina Emma Mba were not featured in an individual chapter, although they do figure prominently throughout the other sections of the book.

Falola and Aderinto chose each of the eight scholars featured in part 3 not only for the noteworthy quantity and quality of their scholarship, but also because each represents a broader trend in the larger field of Nigerian nationalist historiography for the period covered. For each of the authors, we can identify an ideological commitment to using historical writing to counteract the impact of colonialism on African societies, cultures, and psychologies. Thus, nationalist historians sought to recover an African past that would serve as a source of pride and inspiration in the project of postcolonial nation-building. They did so by using sources such as precolonial oral histories, tales, poetry, and religious ceremonies as alternatives to colonial archives and believed they could produce an afro-centric approach to history. Beyond providing insights into the evolution of the field of history in Nigeria, part 3 constitutes a window into an era of idealism and mobilization, as the men and women featured here were all charged with a dedicated sense of purpose that seems largely lost today: “Afigbo’s generation would not just go to universities to obtain degrees but would use their education to empower the nation, and to promote new ideas that would affirm indigenous cultures and values” (p. 113).

Yet, while each of the scholars undoubtedly identified with a higher mission of national purpose, a closer look at the varying perspectives presented raises deeper questions concerning the multiple and perhaps contradictory ways in which the nation of Nigeria has been conceptualized and defined. Thus, at the same time the book recovers an idealism that once characterized an era, it also highlights the ambiguities and fragmentation of Nigerian national identification. For many of the scholars studied, the contribution to nationalist history is made through the lens of their own ethnic group. Chapter 7 is dedicated to Adiele Afigbo, the “doyen of Igbo studies” who wrote extensively on the history of the Igbo from an insider’s perspective. The next three chapters deal with Yoruba scholars, all of whom made substantial contributions to the study of Yoruba history. F. Ade Ajayi researched nineteenth-century warfare and the demise of the Old Oyo Empire. J. A. Atanda, a scholar of Yoruba “to the core,” also searched for explanations for the fall of the Oyo Empire, focusing on the impact of the Fulani jihadist intervention. Bolanle Awe is noted for her contribution to the study of the military history of Ibadan and Ekiti. The only northerner in the book, Yusufu Bala Usman, also began his career focusing on his region of birth, writing extensively on Hausaland and the Sokoto Caliphate. While Bala Usman is largely credited for his activist criticism of Western capitalism and its impact on the underclass, Falola and Aderinto critique his defense of the poor as sometimes limited to northern populations.

The life histories of the scholars also resonate with the postcolonial history of intergroup conflicts. While the scholarship of Obara Ikime, the subject of chapter 11, advocated for national unity and an end to ethnic tensions, Falola and Aderinto speculate that Ikime’s own professional biography may have been influenced by ongoing divisionary tendencies in Nigerian society: “Did he write the way he did because he was a minority from the southwest? … In federal Nigeria, minority elements, including scholars among them, express their sense of being marginalized by the dominant ethnic groups” (p. 170). As in the case of Ikime, the biography of G. O. Olunsanya, reviewed in chapter 12, also reflects the impact of ethnic conflicts on an academic career. Olunsanya was forced to leave his post at Ahmadu Bello University in 1966 in the wake of violence and discrimination against southerners. The work of Tekena N. Tamuno seems to break this mold, as his approach toward political and administrative history is described by the authors as “Pan-Nigeriana.” As Falola and Aderinto note, “Unlike his colleagues who celebrate their own majority ethnicities and defend them, Tamuno opens his lens to all groups and
peoples in Nigeria” (p. 199).

It would be wrong to portray all of the nationalist historians examined here as purely ethnic partisans, and each of the scholars examined in this study made important contributions to historical knowledge beyond that of their own ethnic identification. For example, Bolanle Awe is most noted for her leadership role in promoting women and gender studies in Nigeria, and Ajayi’s achievements in the field of mission history also moved beyond a purely Yoruba focus. But it is not only the research agendas and biographies of the scholars examined here that leave the reader questioning the role played by nationalist historians in nation-building in Nigeria. The work of Falola and Aderinto concludes with an acknowledgement of the inherent contradictions imbedded in nationalist historiography, as scholars sought to construct a counterdiscourse to Western knowledge “within the framework of how the Western academy defined research and university education” (p. 226). As the authors write, these historians “never fully worked out how European ideas and values could be avoided and how indigenous knowledge could be carefully integrated into the larger body of academic writing” (p. 113). The work of nationalist historians ultimately failed in their goal of inspiring the Nigerian masses, few of whom identified with “the various essays and books being offered presumably on their behalf” (p. 237). These incongruities resulted in a crisis of relevance, as Ajayi himself declared, “Of all the branches of African Studies, African history is the most useless of all its disciplines. Its failure to relate research to the practical problems of Africa is phenomenal” (p. 237).

In a concluding chapter, Falola and Aderinto suggest that historians offer Nigerians with a more usable history by focusing on topics that can shed light on pressing national priorities: science, technology, industrialization, and the environment. By casting a wider net when formulating a research agenda, it is hoped that historians can play a more decisive role in advancing development and prosperity in Nigeria. At the same time, it is possible to recuperate the work and aspirations of the nationalist historians as an expression of truly Nigerian traditions of cultural syncretism and adaptation rather than casting their strategies as irrelevant or inauthentic. The lives and work of these historians occupied the kind of cultural border zones that have deep roots in the Nigerian past and present. Indeed, the historical record shows that African societies and identities have long been characterized by hybridity, flexibility, and multiculturalism. Falola and Aderinto’s work on the lives and works of these nationalist historians constitutes another chapter in the long history of cultural innovation in Nigeria, as African intellectuals continue to seek out and exploit new opportunities for empowering and enriching their communities.

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