



**Lynn Schler.** *Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016. 259 pp. \$32.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8214-2218-2.

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## **Review of *Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea***

Lynn Schler's *Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea* (2016) is a unique history of decolonization told from the perspective of working-class Nigerian seamen over the second half of the twentieth century. Britain's mass recruitment of Nigerian seamen began at the end of World War II, when Elder Dempster, a British shipping giant controlling most cargo, mail, and passenger transport between the United Kingdom and West Africa, turned to Lagos for cheap unskilled laborers to work as stewards, deckhands, stokers, and trimmers. Many Nigerian seamen soon transferred to the Nigerian National Shipping Line (NNSL) after its founding in 1959, hoping for better working conditions within Nigeria's nationalized shipping industry. But decades of corruption, underfunding, and mismanagement led to NNSL's collapse and liquidation in the early 1990s, leaving many Nigerian seamen without employment or prospects. Like other working-class Nigerians, the steady disempowerment of seamen left them bitterly disappointed by the transition from colonialism to independence and deeply disillusioned with "the national project of Nigeria itself" (p. 192).

More broadly, *Nation on Board* demonstrates how "hierarchies of power originating at the international level in the world shipping industry ulti-

mately filtered down through the national context and locked seamen into the lowest rungs of the industry" (p. 191). Within the realm of global shipping, Schler argues, Nigeria's shipping industry negotiated a "complex relationship of dependency between postcolonial economies and the international system," suggesting the "impossibility of economic autonomy" for postcolonial societies like Nigeria (p. 104). At the national level, NNSL—like many economic and political schemes in postcolonial Nigeria—used nationalization to consolidate its own power at the expense of the working-class labor force. Ultimately, Nigerian labor experienced a hierarchy of disempowerment that "limited the autonomy of African labor in crafting postcolonial identities" (p. 14).

The first two chapters of *Nation on Board* describe difficult working conditions and racial discrimination faced by Nigerians on British vessels, as well as the ways seamen circumvented these hardships and created opportunities for themselves within colonialism's hierarchies of power. Chapter 1 traces the racial division of labor onboard Elder Dempster ships during the 1950s, when officers, engineers, chief stewards, and mates were exclusively European. European crewmen regularly engaged in discriminatory practices and abuses

of power, for example by forcing Nigerians into unpaid overtime, which pushed many seamen to join the Nigerian Union of Seamen. Schler notes the union had little success improving working conditions onboard Elder Dempster ships, and racial and class hierarchies remained deeply entrenched throughout the late colonial period.

Nevertheless, chapter 2 reveals that many Nigerian seamen defied these exclusionary practices and maintained a certain level of autonomy from their colonial employers. Nigerian seamen considered themselves “workers of the world” whose cosmopolitanism helped build transnational networks with Black communities and ideologies in Liverpool and beyond. Despite gradual reforms to British immigration policies and growing antagonism toward colonial seamen in British port cities, the vast majority of Nigerian seamen used these transnational networks to build individual trading enterprises, supplementing their low wages with profits made from the import and export of secondhand goods, a practice tolerated on most British ships.

While Nigerian seamen’s social and cultural lives reflected what Schler calls a “lived Pan-Africanism,” chapter 3 reveals how decolonization actually limited seamen’s connection to diasporic working classes. Instead, a growing discourse of “Nigerianization” steered workers toward an inward-facing perspective based on new political borders, and a “hardening of ideologies and identities” replaced the more “radical visions of liberation” informed by Pan-Africanism (p. 97). The Nigerian Union of Seamen, recently accepted as an equal negotiating partner by British shipping companies, encouraged this ideological shift. The consolidation of power and influence by Lagos-based union officials, now largely coopted by British interests, meant “rank-and-file labor lost the ability to initiate spontaneous protests or to represent themselves in disputes on board ships” (p. 79).

A national shipping company was considered essential to Nigerian nation-building, and chapter

4 describes early calls for a nationalized shipping line that were “steeped in rhetoric of self-reliance, economic autonomy, and indigenization” (p. 111). However, NNSL still relied on the foreign capital and technical expertise of Elder Dempster that, together with British shipping company Palm Line, owned 49 percent of NNSL shares. Public outrage over this foreign partnership led to the Nigerian government’s premature buy-out of the British partners in 1961. Nigeria’s reliance on European resources highlights the extreme disadvantages faced by NNSL and other African shipping companies entering a globalized shipping industry that highly favored, and was largely controlled by, former colonial shipping giants.

NNSL’s management recruited seamen with promises of better pay and fair treatment, but chapter 5 shows seamen also wanted the opportunity to feel a sense of ownership and belonging. “Nigerianization” manifested onboard NNSL ships through a shift to Nigerian food, the issuance of Nigerian passports, and flying of the Nigerian flag. However, a lag in the education and training of Nigerian officers meant the colonial era’s racial division of labor remained intact. While more seamen felt able to fight against unfair treatment at sea through acts of protest and insubordination, Nigerian seamen experienced an erosion of order on NNSL ships, including diminishing regard for ship maintenance and the welfare of crewmen.

From its infancy, politicians and management conceptualized NNSL in ideological terms as a political rather than an economic project and, therefore, the company suffered from a “leakage of authority” beginning in the 1960s (p. 175). As described in chapter 6, the company’s lack of dedicated leadership, increasingly scarce resources, and constant uncertainty resulted in a breakdown of discipline among seamen at all levels, who sometimes turned to patrimonialism and ethnic solidarity while at sea. The common practice of private trading in secondhand goods continued, but as circumstances devolved, illegality—including drug

smuggling—became another “viable means for maintaining some autonomy and wealth” amongst seamen (p. 191).

While a complete NNSL archive does not exist, Schler skillfully gathered evidence from government, corporate, and personal collections in Nigeria, Liverpool, London, and Amsterdam to tell the story of the company and its employees. By far her most fruitful and interesting sources are seventy oral interviews with former NNSL employees at all levels of service—from rank-and-file seamen to upper management—collected by Schler in the 2000s. The interviews reveal how nationalism and the nation-state were imagined by “everyday Africans” and show that one’s experience of nationalism was largely determined by class (p. 11). Schler concludes that for most Nigerian seamen “life on ships became a microcosm of the disappointments and disempowerment they experienced in the postindependence era” (p. 157).

Highly organized and well written, Lynn Schler’s *Nation on Board* is an important addition to the fields of maritime history, labor history, business history, and the history of decolonization. Schler uses an analytical framework transnational in scope and her argument successfully connects West African workers with global flows of people, capital, and ideas. Schler’s impeccable research contributes to growing trends in maritime and business history that connect corporations with the social and cultural realities of their employees, recognize businesses as highly political rather than just economic enterprises, and contextualize shipping companies within global, national, and local webs of power. Finally, *Nation on Board* reminds us of the many ways colonialism continues to impact our postcolonial world.

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