Review


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Nigeria, Africa’s most populous state, became independent in October 1960, six months after the Sharpeville massacre, and its independence was greeted with much jubilation in many parts of Africa. Some anticipated that the end of colonial rule in tropical Africa would soon be followed by the end of white minority rule in South Africa. When this did not happen, Nigeria became a leading supporter of the Organisation of African Unity’s attempt to liberate Southern African from colonialism and apartheid. Thabo Mbeki is only the best known of a number of South African exiles who lived in Nigeria during the 1970s and 1980s. In early 1986 South Africans learned that a former Nigerian head of state was visiting South Africa as co-leader of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group, and Olesegun Obasanjo met Nelson Mandela in Pollsmoor prison.

Other, less politically important connections between South Africa and Nigeria include the fact that Kenneth Dike and other Nigerian historians, along with a South African historian, John Omer-Cooper, who taught at the University of Ibadan, led the way in decolonising
African history and so influenced the liberal Africanist historians in South Africa in the 1960s, while in the 1970s Robin Hallett, an Englishman who had worked in both south and northern Nigeria, pioneered the study of African History at the University of Cape Town. The initial optimism about Nigeria faded from early 1966, if not sooner, for the military took power and then civil war broke out. Nigeria suffered under military rule for many decades, until in recent years, having returned to civilian rule, it embarked on a nation-building enterprise somewhat similar to South Africa’s after 1994. In 2012 both countries face similar challenges, such as large-scale poverty, youth unemployment and corruption. Some expect Nigeria soon to take over from South Africa as Africa’s largest economy.

Why did Nigeria fail to live up to the promise many had of it when it became independent? In retrospect it was always unlikely that so unnatural a colonial creation would have remained stable and conflict-free after independence, but the question of ‘what went wrong?’ continues to exercise the minds of Nigerian scholars. The two books under review both deal with the failure of nation-building in Nigeria after independence and the reasons for political instability in that country. EC Ejiogu, a sociologist who has now moved from an academic post in the United States to one at the Centre for Africa Studies at the University of Free State, reminds us of the colonial legacy that Nigeria inherited. Britain brought together the separate nationalities of the Igbo in the south-east, the Yoruba in the south-west and the Hausa-Fulani in the north in one colonial state in 1914, the year in which Fredrick Lugard amalgamated the Protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria. The historian GN Uzoigwe claims that over two hundred separate languages are spoken in Nigeria, but not surprisingly the chief struggle after independence was between the three leading groupings, the Igbo, ‘arguably the most strident and articulate exponents of a united Nigerian nation’ (Uzoigwe 2011:5), the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani. Uzoigwe argues that in the 1960s each of these groups tried to impose on the others their own interpretation ‘of what one Nigeria meant’ (2011:5). Uzoigwe traces in detail how the struggle for mastery among the three power blocs evolved from 1962. It was, he claims, developments in the Western Region that led to the military coup d’état of January 15, 1966 that ended Nigeria’s First Republic (2011:65). He writes of a failure of leadership and suggests that a government of national unity should have been formed in 1960 (2011:67), though given the Westminster system that Nigeria inherited from Britain that was hardly an option. Highly critical of the northern leaders, and of Abubakar Tafawa
Balewa in particular (2011:87), Uzoigwe maintains that their failure to reconcile conflicting visions of Nigerian nationhood ‘forced’ the Nigerian military to topple the government in 1966. While he recognises that ‘the house that Lugard built was… not securely founded’, he argues that ‘it was the responsibility of those who inherited it to reinforce it and to prevent it from collapsing’ (2011:89).

Uzoigwe, who comes from eastern Nigeria, has long taught in the United States. His book is mainly concerned with the background to the Nigeria-Biafran war of 1967-70 and seeks to explain why the Igbo suffered what he calls genocide at the hands of non-Igbo in 1966 (in his sixth chapter he provides detailed justification for describing what happened to the Igbo as genocide). Though he says that it would be ‘unkind’ if readers accused him of ethnic bias (2011:90), his book is not an impartial, analytic discussion of the issues he is concerned with. Its second part is a justification of Biafra’s disastrous attempt at secession, while a long third section publishes documents that support the case for Biafran secession. Though Nigeria’s current president, Goodluck Jonathan, comes from the eastern region of the country, Ejiogu claims that Nigeria remains ‘in the tight grips of Hausa-Fulani ruling elite’, which is ‘doomed to implode and perish with Nigeria as it is presently structured and misgoverned…’ (Ejiogu 2011:20). Few historians will follow Ejiogu as he moves into sociological theory, but they may well concur when he concludes that the ‘only viable solution for political instability in Nigeria’, and other similar African states, is through ‘a viable federal arrangement which will allow each nationality…the autonomy to direct certain aspects of its affairs without let or hindrance from the central government’ (2011:187). Neither book is the kind of balanced investigation likely to help the cause of nation-building in Nigeria, but South African scholars may be able to learn from such books as they consider similar issues – such as the legacy of colonialism/apartheid, and the reasons why the initial optimism of 1994 was not sustained – in the South African case.