

Review - Nigeria at Fifty

Written by Toyin Falola

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TOYIN FALOLA, JUN 9 2013

Nigeria at Fifty: The Nation in Narration
Edited by Ebenezer Obadare and Wale Adebawo
London and New York: Routledge, 2012

The book 'Nigeria at Fifty: The Nation in Narration' takes stock of the country's history since 1960, when it obtained its independence, analyzing the lingering problems while also projecting into the future. In seven substantive chapters and an epilogue, each written by a notable intellectual figure, major issues are located in a historical narrative, before offering a series of cogent solutions to both broad and specific problems of nation-building. Of these problems, the following stand out: leadership (examined by Eghosa E. Osaghae in chapter 2); elite failure (chapter 3 by Adekunle Amuwo); the use and mismanagement of oil (chapter 4 by Cyril Obi); federalism and its management (chapter 5 by Rotimi Suberi); the rise of Pentecostalism (Afe Adogame in chapter 6); and elections and the transfer of power (chapter seven by Darren Kew).

In the epilogue, Axel Harneit-Sievers notes the passion that drives the discussions on Nigeria, a constant narrative of despair and hope, held daily in private, the media, and conferences. He is right in making this important remark tucked at the very end of the book: The discussions are always vibrant and permanently controversial, respecting

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neither age nor status. As recently as 2013, Chinua Achebe's last book, *There Was a Country*, revived almost all of the arguments that led to the civil war. In some ways, the sage forgot the fragility of the nation state and ended his glorious career enmeshed in controversies around ethnicity.

Either stated or unstated in all the chapters is about how the country spends its resources which, to me, lies at the very center of most debates on Nigeria. With politicians who live grandiose lifestyles, many Nigerians believe that the government is not accountable and not serious about development. Various chapters communicate this message of failure in the most powerful of analyses and words. Let me supply a catalogue that you will hear on the streets of Ibadan, Calabar or Sokoto: There is no electricity most of the time; people supply their own water in boreholes; security is not ensured; and health services are poor. Even police barracks constitute an eyesore, exposing to ridicule those who are meant to protect the citizens, while explaining why they survive on bribes to augment their salaries. The narrative is that the state has failed its citizens, unable to run institutions and ensure the survival of the majority of its people. Poverty is continually reproduced, which in turn ensures chaos and violence.

The citizens are right in their acerbic criticisms of their country and its leaders. Whether in the chapter by a political scientist or a scholar of religion, the book is validating the personal experiences of the authors as well as the lived realities of millions of Nigerians. To be sure, the opportunity to build an agricultural foundation was missed by revenues from oil. As agriculture declined, the rural sides were abandoned and devastated. Expectations ran high that oil would transform all economic sectors. The oil sector damaged other ones, and access to power revolved primarily around access to oil revenues. What we label as democracy becomes no more than a political arrangement for select members of the political elite who would share the resources of the nation. Thus, segments in many chapters narrate issues of economic mismanagement, while the introduction and some other chapters relay the negative political outcome.

Holding a huge and diverse country together has been a difficult exercise. This is a credit, recognized by the book but not adequately celebrated. The country has been severely tested: a secession failed; long periods of military rule ended; the so-called democracy has produced more emperors than democrats; its leaders have their eyes on state revenues to put in private pockets; and the citizens are fully adapted to corrupt institutions.

However, in spite of all the talk about breaking up the country into ethnic pieces, and in spite of its artificial nature, Nigeria keeps standing. Not a few worry about the enormous consequences of such a big country breaking up. Federalism does not work well, but various state creations have transferred power to a diversity of local elite, each controlling their own areas. If federalism does function, states and local governments will have more autonomy, only that they cannot rely on the distribution of oil largess from the center. As long as oil from the Niger Delta constitutes the basis of revenues, minorities in those areas will continue to complain that they are being cheated, and those who manage the local and state governments in areas without oil will continue to see it as "free money."

The next fifty years must now turn to institutionalizing the principles of accountability at all levels of governance. Perhaps, this is the message that the book wants to communicate. As I reflect on a large body of various recommendations embedded in many chapters, I can distill them into three. The first step, and the most difficult one, would be to rescue the nation from its decadent political elite. Would this be through gradual reforms or a revolution? No one seems able to supply an adequate answer. Now entrenched in political parties, these elite see Nigeria as a "private" project to enrich themselves. The second step is to create institutions that will cut across ethnicities, primarily to disempower members of the political elite who manipulate primordial loyalties for self aggrandizement. The heterogeneities of cities such as Lagos and Abuja and the extensive social interactions among the population show that this can be done. The third is to continually seek the means to empower the population by creating a diversified economy that would provide opportunities to meet the basic needs of society.

Hopefully, when Nigeria turns a hundred, it would have matured into a better country full of citizens able to live their dreams and fulfill their aspirations. This valuable book, with its two competent editors and a brilliant introduction, has offered us a clear mirror to look into a troubled past and a road map to understand an uncertain future. "Nigeria," as the first anthem started in its opening line, "we hail thee!"

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