

Revisiting *Nigeria's University Age*

Tim Livsey,

Faculty of History, University of Oxford.

In late 2007, while a part-time Master's student at Birkbeck, University of London, I came across a remarkable photograph. It showed in black and white a large building site, with sleek modernist structures emerging from amongst palm trees. The picture depicted the construction of Nigeria's first university, I read, in the city of Ibadan, during the early 1950s. This image disrupted much of what I thought I knew about colonised Africa, and about Britain too. The Nigerian university buildings looked much more futuristic than university buildings in early 1950s Britain. Why was such a big project underway in Nigeria? And why hadn't I heard about it? These questions prompted the research project that culminated in my book *Nigeria's University Age: Reframing Decolonisation and Development*. I am very grateful to Carli Coetzee for giving me the opportunity to reflect on the book here, and to Saheed Aderinto, Rotimi Fasan, Miles Larmer, and Ola Uduku for their thoughtful comments.

I did not anticipate, when I started this research, that such a wide range of people had stakes in Nigerian higher education from the 1930s to the 1960s. I expected to encounter lecturers and students, nationalist politicians and colonial officials, and I knew from the photograph that I was interested in architects. In the finished book we also meet the chiefs of Ibadan, who welcomed the university to their city, and glimpse those who farmed the land that became the university campus, growing cocoa and oil palm trees. We encounter the Nigerians who cheered advocates of a university at a February 1944 meeting of the Commission on Higher Education in West Africa, and those who wrote to Nigerian newspapers to call for new universities, or, later, to complain about their students' behaviour. Ola Uduku is right to note the potential for more work here. The story of Abadina, for example, the on-campus 'village' that houses many of the University of Ibadan's support staff, is, as far as I am aware, yet to be written.

I certainly did not expect at the outset to encounter so many Americans: Peace Corps volunteers, academics, diplomats, development experts, and emissaries of the big philanthropic foundations. The book shows that Nigeria had a bigger role in the global Cold War than we have recognised. A historiography that has focused on a well-rehearsed itinerary of Cold War hotspots in sub-Saharan Africa – that includes Ghana, Guinea, Congo, Angola, and Mozambique – needs to consider how the Cold War shaped the options open to actors elsewhere on the continent.

Nor did I expect when embarking on the work to write about development. Books on development in late colonial Africa were about agriculture or hydro-electric dams – not universities. As this book shows, though, Nigerian nationalists, British colonial officials, and various American representatives saw Nigerian universities specifically as development projects. Many agreed that universities' magnificent buildings testified to progress in Nigeria. British colonial officials funded late colonial universities under Colonial Development and Welfare programmes. And around the time of Nigerian independence in 1960, many experts understood universities as engines of development that, by training 'high level manpower', would drive the socio-economic transformation of Nigeria as surely as hydro-electric dams would generate electricity. Unarticulated, unexamined dreams and desires animated the most apparently technocratic plans of this era, half hidden amongst the graphs and

tables. Indeed, the over-optimistic idea that Nigerian universities were an investment that would pay for themselves forms an important part of the backdrop to the contemporary university funding crisis noted by Rotimi Fasan. The mid-twentieth century saw a global moment of university development tinged by the utopian. It encompassed not only Nigeria's university age, but the rapid expansion of higher education across the world.

As my research progressed, it became clear that it was also about a paradoxical late colonial moment, that saw at once the triumph of African nationalism *and* deeper than ever colonial intrusion into African societies. From one perspective, new universities were liberating, and permitted young Nigerians much improved access to higher education. On the other hand, the university at Ibadan was the product of a late colonial impulse – what Saheed Aderinto calls 'recolonization' – that saw unprecedentedly deep British interventions into Nigerian society as the transfer of power approached. The university was, in its early years, dominated by white British academics, the curriculum shot through with British perspectives, and the few Nigerian lecturers isolated and unsettled.

It was against this unpromising backdrop that the university faced the challenge, highlighted by Saheed Aderinto and Miles Larmer, of integrating into an existing global university network weighted towards the western world, while simultaneously attending to visions of progress, culture, and learning specific to the locality, the Nigerian nation, and the African continent. In the sixteenth century, African states like Benin and Kongo interacted with European states as equals, as Toby Green (2019) has most recently reminded us. When independent African states re-emerged around 1960, after the depredations of the slave trade and colonial rule, it was into a world where norms and standards of institutions like universities, and of statehood itself, had largely been shaped by western countries to suit their own interests.

Crucially, the dynamics of anti-colonial campaigning often inadvertently reinforced the authority of standards informed by the western world and colonial rule, by taking them as the basis for demands for equal treatment. This unfortunate irony was seen in 1930s Nigerian campaigns against the Yaba Higher College diploma, which was tenable only in Nigeria. Debates around Yaba informed many Nigerians' demand that University College Ibadan should award University of London degrees, to guarantee that Nigerian students would not be fobbed off with an inferior qualification, as was felt to be the case at Yaba. So Ibadan initially offered British degrees, although this slowed the adaptation of curricula to local needs. My recent research on housing and state building in West Africa has uncovered similar dynamics in other campaigns of this era, including Nigerian senior civil servants' calls for accommodation to the same standard as white British colonial officials' houses, which unwittingly helped to entrench colonial-era patterns of urban segregation. Standards represented a key concept in late colonialism, explicitly invoked by both Nigerian nationalists and British colonial officials. These debates about standards need to be seen as central to histories of late colonialism and its legacies. This requires studies that cut across late colonial and early postcolonial periods, with an eye for the lingering constraints on Africa's new leaders as well as historical ruptures. As Rotimi Fasan highlights, for example, debates with deep historical roots have contributed towards a contemporary Nigerian bias against vocational education, an issue, probably not coincidentally, also associated with Britain.

When I started this research, I did not expect it to feel so current. The 'Why is my curriculum white?' and Rhodes Must Fall campaigns emerged while the research was ongoing. They posed some strikingly similar questions to those raised by Nigerian students in the 1940s and 1950s, about the relationships between race, knowledge, and institutions. Over the last ten years these debates, that characterised late colonial Nigeria, have emerged more forcefully and clearly in the western world.

Decolonisation remains an unfinished project. In this context, the book's account of Nigerian efforts to remake higher education, and the challenges Nigerians faced, seems disconcertingly relevant to our own era.

Ola Uduku mentions the potential difficulties of accessing sources in Nigeria for this project. I did encounter challenges, but I should say that the only institution that point-blank refused me access to their material was in Britain, and part of the University of London – my institutional home while undertaking most of this research. I would like to reiterate my thanks to the archivists, librarians, and scholars in Nigeria whose patience and dedication made the book possible.

Reference

Green, Toby. 2019. *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution*. London: Allen Lane.