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REVIEW



Nigeria's University age: Tim Livsey's history of the genesis of

Q1 Nigeria's early tertiary institutions

Q2 Ola Uduku 

Q3 Manchester School of Architecture

Q4 **KEYWORDS** Universities; Nigeria; decolonisation

Rarely does one come across a book that appeals to both the general reader and the critical researcher. In *Nigeria's University Age*, Livsey has been able to do both admirably. His book provides a much-needed chronology of the genesis of Nigeria's early tertiary institutions from an historian's perspective. This has been no easy task, as the archival sources in Nigeria will have been particularly difficult to access, and the memories of the actors directly involved in the development of this extraordinary period of Nigeria's key tertiary institutions during this early period are nearly all gone. The depth and rigour of Livsey's research is evident as one turns the pages of the book to find ever more interesting facts, and anecdotal quotes from this era.

Most Nigerians of a certain age will warm to the descriptions that Livsey is able to portray of their beloved alumni institutions. Indeed, there are a number of fictional accounts of campus life which bring this era back to life, such as Chukwuemeka Ike's *Toads for Supper* (1970) and indeed Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) which is partially set at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. This is in direct contrast to contemporary times in which these same institutions have become shells of their former selves, losing symbolic status in both their physical and intellectual presence. The title of Livsey's monograph is thus apt in its recollection of a time when Nigeria did indeed have an illustrious university age. From an architectural history perspective there is just enough mention of the distinctive architectural character of the new higher education campuses, which were generally designed from tabula rasa as modernist tropical symbols in their own right. Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew's University of Ibadan library and masterplan is one of these much reference tropical icons (for more on Ibadan, see Jackson and Holland 2014).

Through the conducting of meticulous archival research and detailed conversations Livsey has successfully been able to give us an insight into the politics, socio-economic context, and general background to the period of rapid expansion during which a number of the universities mentioned were built. His critical narrative gets close to his archival research figures, and also weaves in the contextual background to the key decisions and policies which underpinned the evolution of the different institutions. The unique nature of the University of Ife – which was a particularly politically positioned institution – can be directly compared to a much slower take-up of tertiary institutional projects in the north of Nigeria which arguably carries on to contemporary times.

The slight criticism of this volume is its focus on traditional actors and sources, we find out a lot about the thoughts and actions of the Colonial Office and its officials in funding institutions such as Ibadan, and Livsey also gives a good analysis of the political play for these institutions by key Nigerian political parties such as the NCNC in the south east and the Action Group in the west with their charismatic and powerful leaders, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo respectively. We know much less about how the local population viewed these new ivory towers. Nor do we have an idea of what the challenges would have been, to deliver on budget and on time, faced by expatriate architects who were often running construction projects at an arms-length from the UK. These stories are for another volume. In a similar vein the constraints of publishing in the early **twenty-first** century have meant that illustrations are at a minimum and the black and white production does little justice to the vibrant colours of the buildings and campus of institutions such as Ife.

What I find most refreshing about this book is the author's ability to take a neutral viewpoint in his exploration of the development of universities in Nigeria, but still provide an engaging read and insight into the actors, and actions which took place during this era. This is likely to be the definitive text on the evolution of universities in post-independence sub Saharan Africa. Livsey's work complements the existing scholarship about specific universities and their foundations, as well as the excellent publications by Babs Fafunwa, *A History of Nigerian Higher Education*, (1974) and J.F. Ade Ajayi et al.'s *The African Experience with Higher Education* (1996) and a few other publications which focus more on education policy than on the historical founding of specific tertiary institutions, and the setting and context in which they emerged.

Nigeria's University Age should be on every serious West African historians' reading list and indeed should be read by anyone with an interest in the history of the evolution of tertiary education institutions in post-war Africa. This is a significant contribution to West African history, which also opens up areas for further research; from the architecture and planning of University campuses across post-independence Africa, to examining the decolonisation of curricula and courses, and finally to an appreciation of the nuances of politics and policy which helped shaped these nascent institutions. Livsey's volume throws open these and other themes as areas of research for others to take on, as we seek to understand better Africa's – and not only Nigeria's – university age.

Disclosure statement

Q7 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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