



History and Truth In Nigeria

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This lively debate will be welcomed by those in Nigeria, the diaspora, and scholars of the region.

History and Truth in Nigeria follows a debate among friends and colleagues “interested in how truth conflicts with popular history.” Ebho Abure and Agbose Akinwole collected written contributions about religion, the history of Nigeria, and the country’s emerging role as a modern nation from informal debates via email by members of the Lagos Lawn Tennis Club and their friends. The contributors hold nothing back in their critique of the accepted history of Nigeria and in their response to other opinions. It is a lively, interesting, and passionate dialogue that is sure to spark further debates among its readership.

Much of the discussion of Nigeria’s past focuses on Chinua Achebe’s *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. Participants vary greatly in their acceptance of Achebe’s writing as reflective of the events of the Biafran War, or of the Nigerian experience. Recurring references to Achebe speak to a deep divide in how Nigerians perceive their country’s history, which Abure and Akinwole capture clearly through this informal format.

The first section, which covers the debate between science and religion, is interesting, though restricted by its format from being overly insightful. With only passing references to Nigeria, especially in chapters two and three, it is tempting at first to see this topic as tangential. However, the discussion helps to shed light on some of the perspectives about Nigeria included in later chapters.

As the authors state later in the text, “If you want to read about the history of Nigeria and its peoples, it is often safer to read a foreign author than a Nigerian one.” Whether true or not, in this case, the detailed personal perspectives and fluency in local issues make this book more appropriate for a Nigerian audience versed in these topics than for a reader seeking to learn about the country from the outside. There is a great amount of detail and reflection on Nigeria’s past, including the 1966 coups and the civil war. The debate format, however, leaves little room for background or contextual information, making the material difficult to grasp for those not already versed in it.

Though some of the perspectives may shock readers with their bluntness, particularly those that speak broadly of flaws in Nigeria, the larger effect is to create a lively debate that shows little constraint. Perspectives fall loosely around tribal differences in discussing the civil war, specifically those of the Yorubas, Binis (Edos), and Igbos. This lends more emotion to the discussion than is necessary, and at times blurs the otherwise factual and enlightening approach. The selected personal opinions and interspersed text from the authors suggest the material has been heavily edited to create a single narrative, leaving readers to wonder what else was said.

The book focuses on a lively debate, but it unsurprisingly comes to no conclusions on the veracity of religion or how to interpret Nigeria’s history. While this will exclude some readers, it is also the volume’s greatest strength. The book will be welcomed by those in Nigeria, the diaspora, and scholars of the region.

ERIC ANDERSON (July 21, 2014)

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