

## REVIEW OF BOOKS

### RELIGION AND THE MAKING OF NIGERIA

*Religion and the Making of Nigeria.*

By Olufemi Vaughan.

Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. xi+311. \$99.95, hardcover (ISBN: 9780822362067); \$25.95, paperback (ISBN: 9780822362272).

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**Key Words:** Nigeria, religion, Islam, Christianity.

The most profound and far-reaching socio-cultural transformations in Africa in the last two centuries have arguably been religious ones. Following European colonial disruptions and interventions on the continent, ethno-religious cleavages became fundamental to post-colonial African nation-states, especially in Nigeria, as Olufemi Vaughan underscores in this book, *Religion and the Making of Nigeria*. Muhammadu Buhari's victory in Nigeria's presidential election of March 2015, after three previous defeats, was an acrimonious contest that was fought, lost, and ultimately won on religious grounds and — as many now believe — for religious ends. (Buhari is a staunch Muslim, with a southern Pentecostal pastor as a vice president, while his opponent, Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, aligned with a northern Muslim as a running mate.) The well-researched, historically nuanced explorations that unfold in the nine chapters of this book detail how religious disputes and political manipulations that date to the nineteenth century shape the character and dynamics of contemporary Nigeria.

In systematically developing and addressing the expansive objectives laid out in the Introduction, Vaughan draws widely on Africanist scholarship and on debates on religious conversion and identity formation pioneered by Robin Horton, J.D.Y. Peel, Terence Ranger, and Jean and John Comaroff. In this analysis, Vaughan demonstrates the pervasive and structuring influence of religious doctrines, institutions, and rituals on the organisation of socio-political consciousness. Vaughan shows how these dynamics produced and, crucially, continue to animate the Nigerian nation-state. Seen in this way, the book is a critical history of religion as a heuristic structure of consciousness and national identity formation.

Vaughan develops his foundational premise by focusing on Islam in northern Nigeria, where the 1804 jihad led by Othman dan Fodio coalesced into a Hausa-Fulani ethno-religious identity and politico-religious power structure stretching from Sokoto to the country's Middle Belt. In this context, Islam created the impetus for moral governance based on the Qur'an and sharia law. Further south, missionary Christianity quelled the turbulent 'cataclysmic disruptions' caused by 'warrior entrepreneurs' in search of slaves and war booty in the first half of the nineteenth century (27, 26). Christianity brought mission stations, literacy, and healthcare infrastructure that cumulatively transformed the circumstances of the southern regions. Vaughan argues that for northern and southern Nigeria, in

both the precolonial and colonial eras, ethno-national identity was inescapably and intricately interwoven with competitive Islamic and Christian impulses. As he explains: ‘The intersections of contending regional and global religious movements were decisive in transforming Nigeria into a modern state and society — and these religious structures themselves were transformed by the enduring social, political, and economic imperatives of Nigeria’s diverse communities’ (224).

Although Nigeria’s religious and political histories are juxtaposed with perspectives of the future, the book’s tenets are fraught, such as Vaughan’s assertion that Nigeria of 2016 is a ‘modern [successful] state’ (224). Furthermore, ignoring or failing to squarely implicate Islamic and Christian doctrines, institutions, and practices (especially, the Pentecostal variant which receives much praise in the book) as significant contributors to Nigeria’s contemporary malaise is problematic (140). Looking at the state of Nigeria in 2016 (when this book was published), one unstated but critically important implication of this analysis is that it suggests that religion as practised and politicised in Nigeria lacks the requisite features for promoting pragmatic social development, or for generating sustainable and far-reaching change. Indeed, the transformation that took place when Hausa-Fulani emirate institutions and missionary Christian agencies colluded with, and were appropriated by, the British colonial bureaucracy are constitutive fibres of contemporary Nigerian nation-state and its persistent frailty.

Against the religiously-driven dynamics of Nigerian politics, Vaughan recommends that ‘the custodian of the Nigerian state sustain a durable constitutional and political framework to effectively respond to the country’s entrenched ethno-religious and ethno-regional fault lines’ (231). But how does a society embroiled in a persistent, two-hundred year religious conflict develop a durable solution through a constitutional framework? While this book is commendable in how it comprehensively summarises the two-hundred year history of the intersection of religion with the politics of nation-building, it also falls critically short because it commends religious entrepreneurs and organisations for empowering their members and providing a reformist vision of the future (146). This position stands at odds with, or glosses over, the reality of Nigeria’s chronic and religion-induced developmental impasse.

There are, additionally, some minor factual errors. First, the monthly prayer event established by Enoch Adeboye, the leader of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, is not ‘Holy Ghost Camp’, but is rather the Holy Ghost Service (145). Second, the church founded by Mike Okonkwo is not ‘True Redeemed Evangelical Mission’ but The Redeemed Evangelical Mission (TREM) (142).

In my view, *Religion and the Making of Nigeria* should be read along with Peel’s *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* (Berkeley, 2016), the combination of which will offer more elucidation and insight. That is because Vaughan neglects to consider the analytical and heuristic power of indigenous religions, which Peel addresses. Notably, both authors recognise semblances between Pentecostalism and neo-Salafism, which they identify as ‘reformist’ movements, although each provides divergent explanations for their orientation and aims. Those issues notwithstanding, this book makes a formidable contribution to the analysis and understanding of

the place of religion in the Nigerian nation-state and of the complexities of ethno-regional identity politics among Nigerians.

ASONZEH UKAH  
*University of Cape Town*

## AFRICAN WOMEN IN AFRICAN HISTORY

*African Women: Early History to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.*

By Kathleen Sheldon.

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017. Pp. xvii + 330. \$85.00, hardback (ISBN: 978-253-02716-0); \$40.00, paperback (ISBN: 978-0-253-02722-1).

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**Key Words:** comparative, women, social, political, general.

Kathleen Sheldon is a specialist on women in Mozambique with a strong interest in urban African women. But perhaps the most direct preparation for this comprehensive textbook on African women from early history to the twenty-first century came from her writing of the single-authored *Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*, a wide-ranging volume focusing on both individual women and women's organizations. Her new book is welcome and long overdue. As Sheldon notes in the Introduction, the most widely used classroom books are now two decades old, predating pioneering new research on women in precolonial history and an explosion of writing on such issues as marriage, childbirth, sexuality, and gender. The time frame for Sheldon's book, extending into the twenty-first century, allows her to address current topics such as Boko Haram and Ebola. Countering the simplistic but common portrayal of women in sub-Saharan Africa as singularly oppressed, Sheldon emphasizes the variety of women's lives and experiences to offer a 'more expansive and more accurate narrative of initiative, resilience, and success' (xvii).

In introducing this long time frame, Sheldon approaches the material chronologically, with some sections of the book organized by region, others more thematically. The earliest chapters are the most challenging for general readers. Sheldon begins by covering African systems of kinship, marriage, social organization, and religion. Her discussion ranges from matrilineal kinship, bridewealth, and bride service to woman-woman marriage, levirate marriage, pawnship and slavery, and goddesses and initiation rites. Interwoven with this discussion are illustrative examples from particular African societies and portraits of a range of women leaders and rulers. The chapter also emphasizes the importance of motherhood, a theme that Sheldon revisits in later chapters. Curiously absent, however, is the idea, argued most effectively in scholarship on Igbo and Yoruba societies, that some pre-colonial communities lacked gender-based hierarchies altogether.

The narrative flow picks up in the second chapter, which focuses on the rise in commercial activity related to European merchants, slavery and the slave trade, the prominence of women of mixed descent in coastal politics and commerce, and more documentation of women's position in many societies across the continent. Using this information, as well