

# BOOK REVIEW

**Judith A. Byfield. *The Great Upheaval: Women and Nation in Postwar Nigeria*.** Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2021. 320 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$36.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8214-2398-1

*The Great Upheaval* by Judith Byfield transcends the usual bifurcated narrations of the Abeokuta Women's Revolt, the demands of which included the exemption of women from paying taxes and the abdication of Oba Ademola, the Alake of Egbaland. It is an eye-opener in many senses, the most important being the manner in which it moves the narrative of the anti-colonial activism and interventions of women beyond such established labels as activists, feminists, rebels, and liberators of Nigerian women. Such outstanding examples as Olufunmilayo Ransom-Kuti, Efunroye Tinubu, and Chief Alimotu Pelewura, among several others, are presented in an illuminating portrayal and representation as "Female Nationalists." Revisiting gender roles within the emergence of the Nigerian State is not unknown in the literature; nevertheless, Byfield's insightful and extensive historical treatment of her subject is not only fascinating but startling. It provokes a plethora of questions waiting for answers by scholars and practitioners in that, in the author's own words, "it allowed me to explore new literature, reread old classics with new questions and NEW EYES, and engage the stimulating work of a new generation of Africanist historians" (ix).

Byfield's conscious efforts to present the active roles played by women in the emancipation of the Nigerian nation points to a robust future for women's agency in Nigeria and in Africa in general. The way women determined important political dynamics such as party formation and the creation of the Nigerian Women's Union (NWU) and its separation from the male-dominated and anti-female leadership in the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC) is a testimony to women's active involvement in the nationalist movement in Nigeria. Another instance of women seeking to counter the male domination of the political and governance terrain is seen in the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies (FNWS). It is unfortunate that the tendency persists for men to dominate governmental institutions, along with the struggle for significant political inclusion of women in today's Nigeria.

More specifically, this book represents Byfield's successful effort to "humanize" women in the African context. This is crucial to an understanding of the dichotomies that permeate all social contexts such as culture, religion, politics, education, and economics, which have been employed by the colonialists and post-colonialists to undermine the value of females as humans worthy of contributing meaningfully to the development of their societies. The whole essence of womanhood in nationalism is thus presented for further academic discourse beyond the roles of "wifing," mothering, catering, and pitying. Rather, we now have an intellectual foundation upon which the new generation is able to construct women as capable of building a nation, not from the position of victims—who need to protest their victimhood—but as whole human beings, entitled to all fundamental human rights as stated in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Furthermore, this book has reinstated the argument that Nigerian women have never been totally dependent on their men, as they are often portrayed. For example, the involvement of the Abeokuta women in processing crops such as cassava, palm fruits, and corn and their domination in the importation of salt, clothes, and matches as well as the manufacturing of dyed fabrics known as *Adire* is a testimony to the timeless independence, resourcefulness, nationalization, and internationalization of the economic status of the Nigerian women. Byfield's decolonization of both men's and women's experiences during post-war Nigeria is commendable. This is the height of gender discourse, devoid of the segregation that has depicted women as either less a part of a nation or as outright non-state actors, seeking attention or emancipation from nothingness. The state-centeredness of women in Byfield's critical analysis of Nigerian colonial history is quite revealing, as it affords us the opportunity to comprehend the post-war experience of women and the intersection of power, politics, and nationalism during this period. The historic, continental, traditional, gender, conceptual, and intellectual "travel" experienced by reading this book represents a great upheaval which is likely to change the narration of female movements in Nigeria across times and spaces forever. The interconnectedness of Western events with domestic issues as examined in this book is exceptional.

In conclusion, the *Great Upheaval* offers a rebuttal to the popular notion of women's aversion to political involvement in Nigeria. Rather, it is a revelation of the existing deliberate exemption of women's experiences, roles, and contributions to the political landscape of the country by academics, historians, media, and other relevant stakeholders. Byfield has created for us a women-centric notion of nationalism. She has contrasted the "what has been" against the "what can be" narratives in today's gender discourse. Byfield does not leave us without pressing questions yearning for urgent answers, such as the demand for a better understanding of women's political associations, how the women were able to bridge the gaps between social divisions and collective political goals, what survived, what failed, to what extent did they enjoy the cooperation of all women in society, and the level of cooperation enjoyed, especially given the circumscription of

traditional rituals such as *Oro* (a dreaded male-centric deity in Yoruba society). This is a clarion call to future researchers and policymakers to advance the demands and ideals of female political agency in Nigeria.

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