

BOOK REVIEW

Wale Adebaniwi. *Nation as Grand Narrative: The Nigerian Press and the Politics of Meaning*. Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2016. List of Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth \$89.95. ISBN: 9781580465557.

Nigeria was created in 1914 by British colonialists, and from that time onward, its history has been influenced by varying and competing efforts to transform the entity on the map into a viable and enduring nation. Wale Adebaniwi's book *Nation as Grand Narrative: The Nigerian Press and the Politics of Meaning* examines the critical and ongoing role the Nigerian press has played in these efforts. Adebaniwi's study examines the political developments that have shaped Nigeria's postcolonial history as they find expression in the pages of the country's newspapers. His expansive review of Nigeria's troubled past draws links between the evolution of events and their coverage in the press, arguing that the print media has played a pivotal role in fueling and shaping political conflicts. "The press," Adebaniwi argues, "has been at the vortex of every important battle around Nigeria's political history and the country's future" (109). Focusing on junctures at which critical challenges to Nigerian unity arose, Adebaniwi provides a detailed analysis of how each crisis was reported, interpreted, and critiqued by the press. He examines the deeper, more fundamental visions and aspirations for a "grand nation" of Nigeria that underscored journalistic engagements with each particular conflict. The main argument of the book is that the divergent narratives of the nation as articulated in newspapers have at times exacerbated, deepened, or resolved each of Nigeria's crises of nationhood.

Adebaniwi's meticulous juxtaposition of the varying viewpoints that emerged around each crisis leave the reader with the impression that the newspapers are all reporting from different countries. This is exactly Adebaniwi's objective. His detailed review of the contradictory visions of the nation that find expression in the press exposes how newspapers have been at the forefront of the struggle to shape Nigerian nationhood. In the history of decolonization and the transition to independence, the links between the press and political interests were easy to discern, as the owners of major newspapers were also leaders of dominant political parties. Nnamdi Azikiwe used his *West African Pilot* as the platform of the NCNC, while Obafemi Awolowo mobilized his *Nigerian Tribune* to promote the

agenda of his AG party, and the northern region's NPC leveraged the *Nigerian Citizen* to advance their agenda as well. However, in later conflicts, such as the Nigerian civil war examined in Chapter 5, Adebaniwi claims that the role of the press in exacerbating the crises leading up to the war has not been fully interrogated or acknowledged. Likewise, in the electoral crisis of 1993, the narratives regarding the crisis appearing in the press served to deepen the schisms in Nigerian society, almost leading to another civil war (Chapter 6). The polarizing effect of journalism is also examined in relation to ethno-linguistic conflicts under Obasanjo beginning in 1999 (Chapter 7), and with regard to the struggles of marginalized groups for resources and territory that are the subject of Chapters 8 and 9.

The book represents a major contribution toward understanding the immensely complex role that newspapers have played in the political history of postcolonial Africa; it provides a unique and indispensable reflection on the very specific ways in which postcolonial societies have approached democracy. In each of the crises examined in Adebaniwi's book, the press fervently upholds certain principles and rights of democracy and free expression, often constituting determined resistance to political oppression. Yet, at every turn, Adebaniwi argues, the Nigerian press also "renders itself totally captive to ethno-regional and ethno-religious passions and calculations," (223) thus contributing to the fragmentation of Nigerian society. These are vital critiques that should reach a wide readership. Non-academic readers, however, might be deterred by the dense theoretical discussions that set up Adebaniwi's analysis. In addition, chapters that originated as stand-alone articles sometimes suffer from repetitions. But these minor issues should not prevent the work from gaining the broad audience it deserves.

Adebaniwi's work draws our attention to the culture of dissent that has characterized the history of the Nigerian press, while at the same time decrying the abdication by the press of its role as "the critical life-blood of democracy" (224). Perhaps the most important contribution of Adebaniwi's study comes at the end of Chapter 7, when he denounces the failure of the newspapers to promote problem-solving in Nigeria. As he wrote: "The media are expected to rise above such partisanship in encouraging dialogue across ethnic, religious, regional, class and gender lines so as to build up a more democratic and multicultural society, which would also help further humanize the state" (224). The future of the Nigerian press as a democratic institution and purveyor of democratic values is undoubtedly dependent upon the newspapers heeding critiques such as those voiced in Adebaniwi's *Nation as Grand Narrative*.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Adebanwi, Wale. 2011. "The Radical Press and Security Agencies in Nigeria: Beyond Hegemonic Polarities." *African Studies Review* 54 (3):45–69. doi:10.1353/arw.2011.0056.
- Aderinto, Saheed. 2012. "Researching Colonial Childhoods: Images and Representations of Children in Nigerian Newspaper Press, 1925–1950." *History in Africa* 39:241–66. doi:10.1353/hia.2012.0001.
- Fleming, Tyler, and Toyin Falola. 2005. "Africa's Media Empire: Drum's Expansion to Nigeria." *History in Africa* 32:133–64. doi:10.1353/hia.2005.0008.