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BOOK REVIEWS

Aderinto, Saheed. *When Sex Threatened the State: Illicit Sexuality, Nationalism, and Politics in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1958.* University of Illinois Press, 2015, 264pp.

When Sex Threatened the State, the first book-length history of prostitution in colonial Nigeria by Saheed Aderinto, examines the contestations over the control of illicit sexuality in Africa's most populous country. Aderinto renders an impressive interpretation of diverse primary and secondary sources to explain the significance of sex and sexuality in Nigeria during the first half of the twentieth century. The author makes three core arguments: First, he posits that sexuality cannot be understood in isolation from the broader history of a society. "The language of sex" he points out, is not just about such vague categories as "immorality" but also about contestation normally couched in the vocabulary of civilization. Second, he contends that the difference between adult and child sexualities was a significant factor that shaped sexual politics. Unlike existing works that pay overwhelming attention to adult prostitution, Aderinto shows that a comparative discussion of adult and child sexualities would expand the scope of scholarly research in a fruitful manner. Third, the intersection between sexuality and nationalism in Africa, the author argues, is far more complex than the present literature reveals. Throughout the colonial era, Nigerians espoused conflicting forms of nationalism as they interpreted sexual vice and its consequences from their prejudiced perspectives. One of Aderinto's methodological interventions is the idea of a "Total History of Sexuality." (pp 6) He contends that historical scholarship on sexuality has been over-compartmentalized. Thus he calls for a paradigm that combines many fields—economic, urban, social, gender, childhood, race, political, medical, military—in shedding light on the experiences of men and women who sold and patronized sexual services in the past.

When Sex Threatened the State has a total of seven chapters. In Chapter One, Aderinto lays the foundation of the work by examining the history of colonial Lagos within the context of social, gender, and racial relations. This intriguing chapter argues that the history of prostitution in colonial Lagos cannot be understood in isolation from the rapid social, political, and economic changes of the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, illicit sexuality, Aderinto argues, was one of the numerous sites of struggle among diverse groups of people who defined "social" and "moral" respectability to conform to African and European notions of responsible use of time, leisure, and the body. He introduced the men and women (Nigerians and British) who shaped the politics of sexuality in Lagos, exposing the

internal and external factors, which informed their disposition.

Chapter Two then turns to the narrative of sex and vice with particular focus on adult prostitutes. This chapter allows Aderinto to articulate one of his main arguments that the difference between adult and child sexualities shaped the tenor of politics in Nigeria. Aderinto unveils the identities of women who sold sex, integrating their ethnic and social identities within the context of a modern colonial society. But unlike several existing works, which only discuss the experience of women who sold sex, Aderinto gives detailed insight about men who bought sexual favor. His analysis allows us to come to terms with the “inevitability” of sex work in the colonial society. All classes of Nigerian and European men patronized prostitutes. But if prostitution had remained a secret affair between adult men and women, the “moralists” of Lagos might not have contested it. Prostitution related activities such as street-walking supported the activities of young delinquent criminals who undermined the colonial ideals of public peace and decency.

The involvement of underage girls in prostitution was also a serious moral question in Lagos. In Chapter Three, Aderinto presents the history of child prostitution. He takes us through the underworld of girls who worked in Lagos brothels and the kinds of relationship that existed between them and other members of the prostitution subculture such as the *Boma* boys and the madams. One of the biggest questions about child prostitution was the relationship between age and psychosexual development. Child prostitution was morally unacceptable, not only because it involved sexual and financial exploitation of minors, but also because it endangered the medical and psychological health of girls who the Colony Welfare Office, the government establishment that policed child prostitution, and the leading Nigerian elites believed needed state paternalism. While the impact of prostitution on public order and the exploitation of children worried Nigerians and the British colonialists, the increase in the cases of venereal disease (VD) among the Nigeria Regiment of the colonial army, the Royal West African Frontier Force, placed the crisis of illicit sexuality at the center of colonial security. In Chapter Four, Aderinto explores the relationship between prostitution and the survival of the British colony of Nigeria during the WWII. The high incidence of VD in the colonial force became a major security issue, which needed to be addressed.

Chapter Five is about the laws passed to deal with the real and imagined consequences of prostitution. By dividing the anti-prostitution laws into “adult” and “child” related legislations, Aderinto is able to present interesting data about how the government conceived the criminal justice system as the main solution to the “problem” of prostitution. His engagement of VD laws also placed the war against sex work within the framework of medical and legal history. According to Aderinto, colonial laws on prostitution tended to homogenize children’s

experience by disregarding the diverse definitions of childhood across the hundreds of Nigerian ethnic groups. The author focuses on the reactions of Nigerian men to anti-prostitution laws in Chapter Six. His conviction is that men and women responded to anti-prostitution laws differently, because sex work affected them in diverse ways. Chapter Seven tackles the position of the Lagos elite women on the government's decision not to formally enlist their associations (the Women's Welfare Council and the Nigerian Women's Party) in the fight against prostitution. Aderinto notes that the government's decision was based on the well-established notion among British political officials that African women lacked the intellectual capacity to manage resources on behalf of the state. In the Epilogue, the author links the past with the present. He explores the changes and continuities in the politics of sexuality regulation between 1960 and 2014, and notes that the postcolonial government revised the colonial stance on prohibiting sex work by making it an "illegal but tolerated" offense.

My prediction is that *When Sex Threatened the State* will stand the test of time, not only for the quality of Aderinto's analyses, sources, and interpretations, but also for the ways he placed sexuality at the center of core structures of everyday life in colonial Nigeria. This is a major contribution to African studies and historical scholarship on Nigeria.

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