

BOOK REVIEW

Oluwatoyin Oduntan. *Power, Culture and Modernity in Nigeria: Beyond the Colony*. New York: Routledge, 2018. x + 191 pp. Abbreviations. Primary Sources. Bibliography. Index. \$160.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781138104235.

Power, Culture and Modernity in Nigeria: Beyond the Colony, by Oluwatoyin Oduntan, uses the example of the Egbas of Southwest Nigeria to argue that Africans were never the passive spectators enthralled by socio-cultural, religious, and political modernization efforts orchestrated by European Christian missionaries and their colonial counterparts, as they are often portrayed. Rather, Africans were active players who, by sheer effort and ingenuity, created their own innovative socio-cultural, economic, and political systems before the Euro-Christian intrusions. While not discounting the evolutionary characteristics of the colonial consciousness, Oduntan rejects the view that Euro-Christian mission and colonial rule in Africa were civilizing and modernizing missions aimed at replacing Africa's traditional and "pre-modern" system with a modern Euro-Christian way of life.

Modernity, or "the modern," as Oduntan argues, was a product of the Industrial Revolution and its alteration of production and consumption, along with the creation of social problems, including labor-related rebellions and migrations, urbanization, and pollution, as well as the attendant demands for rights and freedoms. Using the resilience of traditional healing, crafts, and biological modes of production to show the failure of "the modern" to replace "the traditional," Oduntan argues that rather than disappearing, traditional practices continued to contest the discursive spaces, sometimes claiming originality and authenticity, and, at other times, modifying and challenging the claims and values of "the modern." Christianity and colonialism were not immediately transformative as previously thought, and neither can explain the kinds of developments that occurred in Abeokuta during the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

As Oduntan shows, the Egbas who returned from Brazil, Cuba, and Sierra Leone to Lagos, Badagry, and Abeokuta late in the nineteenth century were carriers of Victorian ideas and values; as such, they cannot be described as "uncivilized," "uneducated," and "unproductive" pre-modern people who needed Euro-Christian experiences to be made civilized. As mission-educated

innovators, educators, and highly trained professionals, they negotiated the obnoxious British policies in Sierra Leone, and risking re-capture and re-enslavement, they returned to Lagos, Badagry, and Abeokuta where they used their Victorian ideas and values to negotiate with the colonial powers. They changed the socio-economic and political landscape of those cities (34–53) and found comfortable accommodation within Yoruba socio-cultural, economic, and political lives. Combining their African cultural heritage with their Victorian culture, they formed clubs and associations, such as the Egba Patriotic Association (established in 1893), the Egba National Council (established in 1898), and the Lisabi Club (established in 1934), with which they navigated and bargained for the actualization of their own notion of modernity.

It was therefore on the shoulders of these new Egba elites and their nation, composed of erstwhile inhabitants and the returnees, European missionaries, and colonial administrators, that the socio-economic, cultural, and political transformations of Abeokuta rested. The subordination of the Egba United Government, an Egba organization that aimed at balancing power and administration between “centralists and monarchists” (86), allowed for the transformation of the Alake of Ake, who became the Alake of Abeokuta and head of the Egba Native Authority under the supervision of the British Colonial Resident Officer. The colonial empowerment of the Alake meant the subordination of other Egba chiefs, a move that came with its own contestations. Many Egba chiefs, mostly Saros, moved away and acquired territories further afield. They were later brought under the Alake’s control by colonial might during the Adubi War of 1918.

In challenging the dominant, universalist assumptions of African passivity, Oduntan brings marginality (the Egbas) and modernity (Christianity and colonialism) into a dialogue that rejects the popular framing of the marginalized as “a pitiful peripheral, and insignificant” group (4). In addition, the author shows that while the colonial experience meant Christianization and civilization to the Europeans, it meant racism and economic exploitation, along with modernization and renaissance to the colonized and marginalized Egbas.

By exploring how African society confronted global ideas and generated local ones, the book not only “uncover[s]” the richness of African life and society through political organization and economic sustenance, gender and masculinity, health and healing, culture and identity, but also how Africans conceptualized and negotiated power through obedience to and disregard of power. Despite its close examination of the transformation that occurred among the Egbas during the colonial period, the author unfortunately fails to explore the role of women beyond a brief discussion of Mrs. Olufunmilayo Kuti.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Adebanwi, Wale. 2010. "The Clergy, Culture, and Political Conflicts in Nigeria." *African Studies Review* 53 (3): 121–42. doi:[10.1017/S0002020600005709](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0002020600005709).
- Berman, Edward H. 1974. "African Responses to Christian Mission Education." *African Studies Review* 17 (3): 527–40. doi:[10.2307/523799](https://doi.org/10.2307/523799).