

Nation on Board

Becoming Nigerian at Sea



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Introduction

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with Nigerian seamen was in the stories I heard and collected in Douala, Cameroon, in the late 1990s. I was in this West African port city to research and interview residents about the social and cultural history of the colonial era, and several of the testimonies and reminiscences that I gathered made reference to the African seamen who passed through Douala while employed on colonial ships. Women in particular described the spectacle of the eye-catching seamen in their bright white uniforms as they crossed the city from the port to the bars and brothels of the popular quarters. These seamen inspired admiration among the local residents, but the former beer brewers and prostitutes of Douala also remembered the seamen as a raucous bunch of troublemakers. The larger-than-life portrayals and stories of these African seafarers stuck with me, and ultimately inspired the research that led to the writing of this book.

My initial imaginary of these African seamen was a romantic one, as I envisioned adventurous men traversing seas and cultures and social landscapes, leaving their indelible mark along the way as evidenced in the popular memory of Doualans. Opportunities such as these for transnational mobility were extremely rare among working-class Africans in the colonial era, and I was deeply curious about the worlds that opened up to seamen in the course of their travels. At the same time, as a historian of colonialism in West Africa, I was also keenly aware of the ways in which seamen's status

as colonial subjects must have shaped and limited the freedoms and opportunities they enjoyed in the course of their travels. While seamen were extraordinarily unique among colonial subjects in Africa for their experiences of transnational mobility, I believed that research into the history of their lives on and off colonial vessels could shed new light onto the ways in which colonialism shaped and limited the opportunities of African subjects.

The early stages of research into Nigerian seafaring in the colonial era confirmed this anticipated trajectory. Beginning in World War II, British shipping companies began the mass recruitment of African seamen in Lagos. From the very start, Nigerian seamen's entrance into the colonial shipping industry was characterized by contradictory experiences. On the one hand, these seamen were cast as cheap and unskilled labor performing menial tasks on vessels where hierarchies of class intersected with hierarchies of race. Both on board with European crews and offshore among local populations, seamen experienced discrimination and hardships that characterized the experiences of black working classes across the Atlantic World in the post-World War II era. At the same time, transnational travel opened up a world of opportunities that seamen were quick to seize. To supplement meager wages, many developed a lucrative business as traders of secondhand goods. Offshore hours also provided seamen with opportunities to encounter cultural and social landscapes far removed from Nigeria, and many nurtured relationships that traversed racial and ethnic boundaries. Thus, as unskilled labor in the workforce of the colonial shipping industry, Nigerian seamen confronted discrimination and poor working conditions on the one hand, but they also exploited numerous opportunities for both adventure and personal gain on the other.

Although my focus was the colonial era, numerous interviews with former Nigerian seamen quickly revealed that seamen's life stories and experiences were not molded by colonialism alone. Moreover, I was surprised to hear many of those interviewed describing colonialism as an idealized era that had been lost. While seamen acknowledged the discrimination they suffered on board British ships, most remembered their employment on colonial vessels as years of golden opportunities, justice, and propriety. In fact, seamen described their most poignant experiences with injustice and disempowerment as taking place following the transition from colonialism to independence. In the postindependence era, seamen in Lagos were no longer recruited directly by British shipping companies, and many took up employment with the Nigerian National Shipping Line (NNSL). Inspired by nationalist fervor, seamen were initially optimistic about the creation of the national line, and many hoped that conditions would be more favorable aboard Nigerian ships. But a lack of sufficient resources and mismanagement

doomed the venture, and seamen ultimately experienced deep disappointment with the move to the NNSL. The bitter disillusionment these seamen experienced in the context of their work in the postcolonial era impacted the ways in which seamen remembered and described colonialism. It became clear to me that the history of Nigerian seafaring in the colonial era could not be studied in isolation from postcolonial experiences.

Seamen's testimonies thus led me to reshape the focus and scope of the project. Rather than a history of colonialism, this book evolved into a working-class perspective on decolonization, nationalization, and the meaning of the "postcolonial" for labor in Nigeria. By looking at the history of Nigerian seafaring from the colonial period through independence, I could gain a better perspective on how seamen experienced and interpreted the broader strokes of Nigerian history over the last sixty years. The history and life stories of Nigerian seamen provide poignant testimony into the complex and contested process experienced by working classes while "becoming Nigerian."

What follows is a history of Nigerian seafaring from the late colonial period of the 1950s through the processes of decolonization and the first decades of independence in Nigeria. The aim is to provide a working-class perspective on the critical developments and transitions of this volatile period in the modern history of Africa. While histories of the end of colonialism abound, they often privilege a familiar trajectory. They outline the anticolonial struggles of Westernized African politicians, European concessions, and a negotiated transition to the establishment of independent nation-states. Much has been written about the ways in which elite interests, both African and European, were protected in this process. Largely missing from this narrative are the working classes and their perspectives and experiences on the end of colonialism, the promise of nationalism, and the significance of independence.

AN OVERVIEW ON NIGERIAN SEAFARING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

From the very beginning of international shipping between Africa, Europe, and the New World, Africans were employed on merchant vessels as crewmen. Particularly from the eighteenth century onward, the increase in commercial traffic on these routes led to the large-scale recruitment of Africans on European ships, serving as a cheaper and more efficient alternative to white sailors, who suffered from the tropical climate and its associated diseases.¹ "Coloured" seamen² engaged in ports throughout the British Empire were paid considerably lower rates than white seamen, and shipping companies increasingly exploited this cheap source of labor. From the era of the

slave trade until the outbreak of World War II, the vast majority of Africans who worked on European vessels were Kru sailors recruited in Freetown, Sierra Leone. As the forerunners in the evolution of a pool of seafaring labor in West Africa, the Kru exploited colonial dependency upon them to establish relatively favorable conditions of employment for African seamen.

The Second World War changed the hiring practices of shipping giants such as Elder Dempster, which controlled the lion's share of cargo, mail, and passenger shipping between the United Kingdom and the West African coast. The war greatly increased demands on the company, and the need for seamen was acute. Hiring was moved to Nigeria, where Elder Dempster could sign on inexperienced fresh recruits for salaries lower than those of the Kru. Nigerian recruits came from a wide range of ethnic groups spanning southern Nigeria, and they lacked the social and cultural cohesion that had facilitated Kru labor organizing over the years. Colonial shipping companies exploited the Nigerians' lack of experience and organization, and paid Lagos recruits considerably lower wages than the Kru. Elder Dempster established a four-tiered pay scale during the war: At the bottom of the scale were the Nigerians signed on in Lagos, followed by the Kru recruited in Freetown. The third level of pay was given to Africans employed from Liverpool, while the highest salaries were reserved for European seamen, who were paid the National Maritime Board rates.

Thus, seamen recruited in Nigeria were embraced by colonial shipping companies as the cheap alternative to the Kru, with the additional benefit of being inexperienced in labor contract negotiating. But Nigerian seamen did not accept this inferior status passively, and they immediately sought ways to improve the conditions and benefits of their work. They soon formed the Nigerian Union of Seamen and began agitating for better working conditions. Seamen also exploited unofficial channels and opportunities to improve their lot. The primary source of additional income was the independent trade conducted by seamen, and most men leveraged whatever resources they had to engage in this trade. In Europe, seamen bought a wide variety of secondhand goods for resale in Africa, such as electronics, kitchen appliances, furniture, mattresses, ceramic goods, clothing, tires, and even used cars. Seamen nurtured and negotiated their relations with captains, immigration officers, customs officials, dockers, European retailers, African customers, and fellow crewmates in order to ensure their ability to buy, transport, and sell goods from one continent to another, and seamen had to continually adapt their activities to changing circumstances. Trading was a vital aspect of seamen's activities, and proof of seamen's ability to creatively and autonomously improve their financial standing.

While independent trade sustained seamen financially, it was the allure and intrigue of meeting new people and seeing new places that seamen associated most centrally with the core of the seamen's existence. The exploration of foreign lands and the bonding across geographic and cultural spaces provided seamen with a sort of spiritual compensation for their hard work and meager salaries. Seamen sought to re-create home wherever they were, and many spoke with great pride of their foreign wives and children in ports scattered across the world. The social bonds formed during their travels became the self-fashioned cornerstone of each individual's identification with a seaman's lifestyle.

Nigerian seamen's encounters with the work and lifestyle of seafaring thus nurtured a unique cosmopolitanism. But this exposure to cosmopolitanism also taught them the power of national identities and the hierarchies of the passports that accompanied them. Seamen were thus poised to engage with the nationalist fervor that grew in Nigeria during the post-World War II era, but they did so from their position as seamen. The demand for indigenization was a central focus of the nationalist elite, and included calls for the indigenization of shipping through the establishment of the Nigerian National Shipping Line. Seamen measured and appropriated nationalist ideology through the prism of the national shipping venture, and they equated the end of colonialism with the "Nigerianization" of shipping. Seamen could finally imagine a sense of home and belonging on board Nigerian ships, and they were enticed by the NNSL promise of higher wages and an end to discriminatory practices toward African seamen. Thus, the "freedom dreams" of working-class seamen in the era of nationalist organizing were starkly different from those of the political elite.³

For these seamen who had invested much hope in the outcome of decolonization, optimism quickly gave way to discontent and disappointment with the Nigerian national line. The Nigerian government was never fully committed to the success of the NNSL, and from the outset, politicians refrained from taking the necessary financial and legislative steps that would protect and bolster the enterprise. While the establishment of the national line was extolled as a vital step in freeing the Nigerian economy from colonial exploitation, this ideological support was not enough to ensure its success. Mismanagement and a lack of technical expertise perpetually plagued the enterprise, and company resources were slowly pillaged by management and government officials. Ships were used by captains and management for personal gain, and seamen were forbidden to conduct their own trade. In the context of their employment in the NNSL, seamen encountered a new set of prejudices based on ethnic rivalries and injustices around new forms of corruption and exploitation. The seamen, who had once seen themselves as "workers of the

world,” ultimately found themselves without employment or prospects as the Nigerian National Shipping Line underwent liquidation in the early 1990s. Just as seamen had embraced nationalism from the prism of seafaring, so, too, did they evaluate the outcome of decolonization through their experiences as seamen, and disillusionment with the NNSL was translated into a broader critique of corruption and inequality in postcolonial Nigeria.

REVISITING AFRICAN LABOR HISTORY

Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea signifies a return to labor history, a field that has been largely neglected in the historiography of Africa over the last two decades. While historians attributed a crucial role to working-class organizations and struggles in the years leading up to independence, labor has slowly disappeared from histories of the postcolonial era. The move away from labor and working classes as categories of analysis is apparent not only in the field of African history, but can be seen as part of a general departure from a strict materialist agenda across the social sciences in the last two decades. This was not always the case in the field of African studies. To measure the sea of change that has taken place, one needs only to recall the 1984 proclamation of Bill Freund: “No subject has in recent years so intruded into the scholarly literature on Africa as the African worker. Labor has become a fundamental issue to those who seek to develop African economies or to revolutionize African polities. The elucidation and debate about the relationship of labor to historical and social issues is currently under way over an impressive range of places and a number of languages.”⁴

Beginning in the colonial era, labor became a focus of Western research in Africa, but early studies produced on African workers and productivity were permeated with the colonial agenda. Particularly from the 1930s, European regimes advanced increasingly complex development schemes, and the need to extract labor from Africans became more pressing.⁵ Colonial officials commissioned sociologists and demographers to study the cultures, migration patterns, living quarters, and birth rates of African workers in an effort to maximize their productivity.⁶ In the postwar era, African working classes came under more scrutiny as labor movements played an increasingly prominent role in anticolonial agitation. European officials sanctioned the formation of trade unions in an effort to contain the discontent.⁷ These concessions were not enough to quell the unrest, and, by 1960, organized labor and working classes had joined broad-based nationalist movements to successfully negotiate a transfer of power. Historians of nationalist movements throughout the continent have highlighted the

pivotal role played by African labor unions in the transition from colonialism to independence.

In the first decades of independence, labor continued to draw the attention of historians and sociologists in Africa, with research deeply shaped by both Marxist ideology and an identification with the nationalist agendas of postcolonial states in Africa. Trade unions were seen as the uncontested representatives of working classes, while their role in nation-building was scrutinized and debated.⁸ The conceptualization of these histories remained faithful to a universalist narrative of proletarianization, and evidence of solidarities among laboring constituencies that were not class-based were deemed to require analysis and explanation. By the 1970s and 1980s, “labor” became one of the most researched fields within African history.

Within this broader field, Nigeria played a prominent role as the site of some of the most influential studies produced on African labor in this era. Research in the 1960s and 1970s focused on the evolution of wage labor from the colonial era through independence, and was generally preoccupied with evaluating the effectiveness of the proletariat in organizing against economic and political exploitation. Tijani Yesufu’s pioneering work was one of the first broad studies of the evolution of industrial relations from the late colonial era into independence in Africa. Yesufu evaluated the extent to which joint consultation and collective bargaining had taken root in employee-employer relations in Nigeria. Using Great Britain as his model, he explained Nigeria’s failure to evolve according to the principles of industrial democracy as “problems of adolescence.”⁹ Most of the subsequent work focused on Nigerian labor unions themselves, and scholars engaged in heated exchanges concerning the role unions played in advancing pro-labor legislation. This debate was set off by a 1964 article by Elliot Berg and Jeffrey Butler, who claimed that Western scholars had highly exaggerated the role that trade unions played in advancing the political agendas of African working classes.¹⁰ A dispute around the significance of trade union organizing ensued, and the General Strike of 1964 in Nigeria provided fodder for scholars on both sides of the issue. W. M. Warren and Peter Kilby each argued that unions had indeed played an effective role in the achievement of wage increases, while John Weeks countered that unions were fairly limited in their ability to pressure the government on the issue of wage legislation.¹¹ Other studies looked at specific sectors of the working class in an effort to understand the nature and significance of working-class activism. In an in-depth examination of shop-floor organizing among factory workers in Lagos, Adrian Peace concluded that urban working classes were most effective when they mobilized against their specific employers for better

working conditions.¹² Peter Waterman's study of worker organization at the Port Authority of Lagos attempted to understand how conservatism among dockworkers prevented the emergence of broad alliances among working classes.¹³ Robin Cohen's seminal work, *Labor and Politics in Nigeria, 1945–71*, provided a broad view of the relationship between wage earners and working classes in transition from colonialism to independence, and concluded that unions could claim "occasional" successes in the struggle for higher wages.¹⁴ Theoretical and empirical differences notwithstanding, all these studies adopted a strict Marxist perspective from which to examine and evaluate the role of organized labor in Nigeria. As Adrian Peace wrote, "The Nigerian working classes are those wage-earners who stand in a consistently subordinate relationship in the industrial mode of production, whose surplus product is appropriated by those who own the means of production . . . and who on the basis of this relationship can identify a common opposition to their own economic interests and act accordingly."¹⁵

The commitment to the classic narrative of proletarianization in African labor history began to unravel in the wake of widespread disillusionment with socialist regimes both inside and outside Africa at the end of the 1970s. The corollary weakening of labor movements at the end of the twentieth century led to a general crisis in labor studies, as William Sewell has noted, "because the organized working class seems less and less likely to perform the liberating role assigned to it . . . the study of working class history has lost some of its urgency."¹⁶ It was increasingly evident that Africans had not been transformed into a revolutionary proletariat even when engaged in wage labor within capitalist enterprises. In addition, universalist conceptions were challenged by the growing body of literature focusing on local meanings for productivity and materiality. As Robin Cohen conceded in 1980, the major weakness of research into African working classes was the uncritical adoption of "traditional formula dichotomies," and a narrow focus on strikes and unionization, with no attention to the ways in which local cultural and social influences shaped labor consciousness.¹⁷

Post-structural criticisms cast doubt on the applicability of Marxist analysis to African contexts, and the growing discomfort with universalist categories led many historians to avoid class all together as a category of analysis. But rather than joining the retreat from the study of labor, some scholars have mobilized post-structural and postcolonial critiques to revisit materialist perspectives in African histories, and thus reinstate class as a valuable means of historical analysis. Recent studies are grounded in specific cultural and social contexts, and describe the ways in which African laborers have negotiated class interests in dialogue with ethnic, religious, regional, and gender-based

alliances.¹⁸ There is a more complex understanding of the interactions and contestations that exist between capitalist and noncapitalist sectors, and the multiplicity of strategies and ideologies leveraged by laborers. These are timely efforts, especially in the face of the gradual slide of working classes toward economic, political, and social marginalization in recent decades. African labor has experienced persistent poverty, failed schemes of development, and disempowerment, and there is a pressing need for more research on the ways in which African workers have lived, interpreted, and responded to their changing material and political circumstances. We need to better understand the diverse histories and cultures of work in Africa, and the impact that broader processes have had on African working lives over time.

In the Nigerian context, recent scholarship demonstrates that there is much to be gained from a reinvigorated focus on the working class. Several studies focused on the experiences and perspectives of labor have informed us of how work and productivity take on meaning and operate in specific social and cultural contexts. This can be seen in Paul Lubeck's work, which examined the coexistence of precapitalist and capitalist social and economic institutions in postcolonial Kano. Lubeck found that Koranic students and malams constituted a vocal and influential subgroup within the industrial proletariat. Rather than occupying a separate sphere, Lubeck claimed, the ideologies and social practices of Islamic institutions articulated with capitalism and shaped class consciousness.¹⁹ Carolyn Brown's study of coal miners in the Enugu Colliery during the colonial era also emphasized the role played by local culture in the construction of work regimes, class consciousness, and organizing among Igbo miners. According to Brown, Igbo miners drew upon local ideologies, cultural practices, and economic spheres to negotiate "what they would and would not do" in the face of exploitative structures in the mines.²⁰ Finally, Lisa Lindsay examined the impact of wage earning on the construction of gendered identities and roles among Yoruba railway workers and their wives in southern Nigeria. Similarly to Brown, Lindsay argued that local notions of gender were resilient in the face of colonial modernizing projects, and shaped the ways in which working classes and their families navigated the colonial workforce.²¹

Taken together, these contributions affirm that the ideologies, experiences, and identities of African working classes cannot be understood outside of the local contexts from which they emerged. Each of these groups of laborers resisted or modified the process of proletarianization within the context of the Islamic, Igbo, or Yoruba cultural and social institutions in which they operated. At the same time, the focus on a specific regional and cultural context has made it difficult to problematize the role of ethnicity in

the construction of consciousness among the Nigerian working class, or to offer an alternative to the trope of ethnicity that has dominated the study of Nigeria in the past and present. As seamen were drawn from a broad range of ethnic groups and did not share a common cultural or social foundation, their experiences provide an alternative case study that can further complicate our understanding of the experiences of postcolonial labor in Nigeria. Among the socially diverse group of seamen, it will be seen that the lack of ethnic cohesion gave birth to new types of solidarities and conflicts within this one sector of the working class in the postcolonial era.

The focus on seamen can further deepen and broaden our understanding of labor in the national context of Nigeria by including a transnational perspective in the examination of working-class lives. Leading scholars in the field of labor history have argued that a major limitation of classical labor history in Africa was that most studies were confined to the boundaries of national histories. As Philip Bonner, Jonathan Hyslop, and Lucien Van Der Walt argued, when national borders define the unit of analysis in the history of labor, we lose sight of the regional or transnational solidarities that often shape and define working-class identities and organizing.²² Bonner and his coauthors advocate for a transnational approach to labor history, which “does not accept that its field of enquiry should stop at the ‘national’ border, or that a ‘national’ unit is self-evident, or necessarily a particularly useful unit of analysis.”²³ This investigation into the experiences of Nigerian seamen confirms that a transnational perspective can be imperative for understanding African working-class histories. Beginning with an analysis of the transcontinental migrations and cosmopolitan lifestyles that characterized seamen’s working lives, the narrative that unfolds problematizes and destabilizes the nation-state as a fixed context of analysis in the study of African labor. As will be seen, seamen’s working lives were deeply shaped by the broader histories of British imperialism and the black diaspora. Their organized struggles and working lives were inherently connected to the ideological currents and social ties linking communities across what Paul Gilroy has called the “Black Atlantic.” Seamen’s ties to the black diaspora provide rare insights into working-class expressions of Pan-Africanism. But as will be seen, seamen also forged bonds that cut across boundaries of race. Seamen’s organized and individual struggles exposed the broad array of cultural, religious, and ideological discourses that attracted them, inspired them, and shaped their worldviews.

This was not an unbridled process, and as discussed later in this book, nationalism and nationalization became hegemonic forces that slowly ruled out these transnational alliances. The broader context of decolonization was characterized by the triumph of European capitalist interests and their

African elite collaborators in constructing a postcolonial future favoring and protecting elite economic and political interests at the expense of rank-and-file labor. As several scholars have shown, African working classes have continually confronted limitations on their ability to assemble and exploit solidarities when these have come into direct conflict with the political and ideological agendas of power elites.²⁴ Thus, in the era of decolonization, African labor was corralled into allegiances reflecting the political programs of the African power elite in collusion with colonial capitalist interests. Both local and transnational imaginaries lost ground to the nationalist perspectives, and it was ultimately the nation-state that became the preeminent framework within which class struggles were negotiated and fought in the postcolonial era.²⁵ Thus, only by maintaining an awareness of seamen's transnational experiences and perspectives can we more fully appreciate the ways in which Nigerian seamen experienced the rise of nationalism and the bordering processes that accompanied it.²⁶

VISIONS OF DECOLONIZATION, NATIONALISM, AND THE POSTCOLONIAL FROM BELOW

This history of Nigerian seamen aims to broaden our understanding of how nationalism and the nation-state were imagined by everyday Africans. To date, the history of nationalism in Africa is largely concerned with expressions of anticolonial agitation that brought about European decolonization and the establishment of independent, modern nation-states within the borders of former colonial territories. Across most of the continent, nationalist movements were led by Westernized elites who adopted political discourses, tactics, and platforms deeply influenced by Western-style political activity and political entities. In most contexts, members of this small male-elite were educated in Europe and the United States, and returned to lead the struggle that resulted in the transfer of power from colonialism to independence. Thus, in the words of Susan Geiger, the historiography and master narrative of nationalism have focused "almost exclusively on the lives, actions and contributions of 'a few good men.'"²⁷

Recent decades have seen significant efforts to broaden this body of literature to include alternative (and sometimes subversive) voices to the history of nationalism in Africa. Jean Allman's work on Asante nationalism argues that ethnic movements such as the Asante National Labor Movement that gave voice to anticolonial aspirations were not merely reenactments of primordial, tribal politics, but in fact constituted an alternative voice of African nationalism.²⁸ Susan Geiger's work also expanded the narrow boundaries defining

nationalist organizing by documenting the central role women played in constructing and organizing the nationalist movement in Tanganyika, thus debunking previous claims that women had filled only an auxiliary or reactive function in the Nyerere-led movement.²⁹ Tefetso Mothibe makes a similar case with regard to working-class nationalism in Zimbabwe, claiming that organized labor was not subordinated to petit bourgeois nationalism, but instead played a proactive and creative role in determining the direction the nationalist movement took.³⁰

But while important works such as these have made significant contributions to broadening and deepening our understanding of how nationalism emerged and took shape in Africa, they still remained confined to an overly narrow vision of what the “postcolonial” signified for African masses both on the eve of decolonization and into the period of independence. The historiography of nationalism in Africa, with all its modifications and expansions, largely adopts the political vision of the Western-educated male elite for the postcolonial nation-state. Fred Cooper argued, “Nationalist leaders often began to channel the variety of struggles against colonial authority on which they had drawn—embracing peasants, workers, and intellectuals—into a focus on the apparatus of the state itself and into an ideological framework with a singular focus on the ‘nation.’ In the process, many of the possible readings of what an anticolonial movement might be were lost.”³¹

The agenda of the nationalist elite did not reflect the aspirations of all Africans. As colonialism drew to a close, individuals and communities from across the continent conjured up visions and interpretations of what decolonization could and should mean, but many of these have been subordinated, lost, or silenced by narratives of nation-building. Even within the context of nationalist ideologies, formulations that diverged from the political agenda seeking to establish modern nation-states existed, but they have been largely lost in the historical record. Although many of the paths taken in the era of decolonization became irrelevant, outdated, or even oppositional with independence, their significance should not be measured by their ultimate fate in the postcolonial landscape. As Fred Cooper has argued, the difficulty in writing a contoured history of decolonization and accurately assessing the significance of the new possibilities born in this era is that “we know the end of the story.”³² Looking back from the present, historians tend to privilege narratives describing processes of nation-building as the main theme of decolonization. Left behind are the other possible routes and outcomes—cultural, political, and economic alliances not corresponding to the physical or conceptual borders of postcolonial African nation-states.

Histories of decolonization in African contexts have insufficiently examined how everyday Africans embraced and promoted alternative visions of postcoloniality rather than those ultimately enforced by political elites. And, little attention has been paid to the individual and communal journeys taken by nonelites toward the assumption of national identities and ideologies, and the consequences of their entwinement in this historical trajectory. One notable exception is Gregory Mann's work on the fluid and changing notions of political belonging invoked by Senegalese veterans in the colonial and postcolonial eras. Mann argued that national identity was part of a broad and changing set of statuses inhabited by veterans in an effort to claim political and material benefits. For Senegalese veterans, national identity was a "claims-making" instrument that diverged from more formal, legal notions of citizenship signified by decolonization and the establishment of nation-states in Africa.³³ Similarly, it will be seen that Nigerian seamen's formations of nationalist consciousness bore little resemblance to elite visions, which were aimed at constitutional reform, political emancipation from foreign domination, and nation-building. For seamen, becoming "Nigerian" was a strategy for achieving better pay, more just relations with management, and an end to racial discrimination. Thus, this investigation into the Nigerianization of seamen unpacks the meaning and significance of a Nigerian identity and highlights its fluidity and evolution over time. It will be seen that decolonization was a process that everyday Africans responded to, interpreted, and experienced, rather than one merely dictated from above.

While this book illustrates how ordinary people exploited opportunities to create a political agenda and postcolonial vision tied to their particular circumstances, it ultimately draws attention to the processes and institutions that finally prevented seamen from representing themselves and protecting their interests. For masses of Africans, decolonization was a process that ultimately ended in unfulfilled promises. The transition to independence was characterized by the collaboration between European capitalists and African political and economic elites to construct a postcolonial future favoring and protecting their specific interests. Once independence arrived, these elites had to confront the tremendous challenge of meeting the needs of the masses. Fred Cooper has claimed that while most African states took up projects of development, few had the necessary resources or dedication to serve the interests of the people. Instead, postcolonial ruling elites ensured their own survival and prosperity by becoming "gatekeepers" over the limited resources that moved into and around the newly born nation-states.³⁴

This book provides a clear illustration of the processes described by Cooper. Seamen's expectations of the postcolonial reality went unfulfilled because the management of the Nigerian National Shipping Line had insufficient resources and managerial experience to develop the national line into a viable enterprise. Instead, Nigerian officers tightened their control over the resources moving in and out of Nigeria through the ships of the NNSL. Against this backdrop, seamen experienced a worsening of employment conditions on board ships, and a narrowing of possibilities for those engaged in independent trade. This case study thus illustrates how political and economic developments associated with the transition from colonialism to independence ultimately limited the autonomy of African labor in crafting postcolonial identities, and provides background for understanding the disillusionment working classes expressed toward the postcolonial reality. In chronicling the defeats and failures experienced by Nigerian seamen, the study exposes precisely how power was consolidated in the processes of nationalization at the expense of labor, and how deals struck between European and African elites on the eve of independence continue to limit the choices and opportunities available to African working classes today.

CORRUPTION AND DECLINE OF A POSTCOLONIAL BUSINESS VENTURE

The history of the establishment, functioning, and ultimate demise of the Nigerian National Shipping Line can be seen as a microcosm of the broader fate of countless political and economic schemes in postcolonial Nigeria. This focused investigation into one enterprise provides insights into how the promise of economic nationalism slowly evaporated as it confronted the political and economic realities of postcolonial Nigeria. The story of the NNSL can be woven seamlessly into a larger narrative of mishaps and failures of government planning and economic development in the postcolonial era. These narratives of unrealized opportunities, failed government, underdevelopment, and corruption abound in the history of postindependence Nigeria, and scholars across disciplines have attempted to provide an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding their causes and long-term effects. Academics have debated the roots of the political and economic instability that has plagued Nigeria since independence, as well as the stark inequalities and misappropriations that only seem to deepen over time. Indeed, these debates are not limited to Nigeria, and many scholars inside and outside the continent struggle to understand the persistent economic and political difficulties faced by postcolonial African states.

Several distinct approaches have taken shape in these debates. There are those who find explanations in institutional weaknesses, many of which are attributed to the legacy of colonialism. Thus, Mahmood Mamdani has argued that the roots of inequality in postcolonial Africa are found in the colonial legacy that institutionalized unequal structures of power that served the needs of only a small elite at the expense of the masses.³⁵ Scholars from the schools of underdevelopment theory and dependency theory also argue that the colonial legacy is largely responsible for instituting a world system that leaves postcolonial states at a perpetual disadvantage in international markets. But while acknowledging the immense obstacles colonialism placed on Africa's road to development, many are beginning to feel ill at ease with these explanations that do not confront the postcolonial factors shaping Africa's present. As Timothy Burke summarized the situation, "The *problem* of postcolonial Africa is treated by the majority of scholars, especially anthropologists and historians, as an extension of or continuation of the *problem* of the colonial, that the moral and political challenge of postcolonial society is subordinated to or situated within a modernity whose character is largely causally attributed to colonial intervention."³⁶

As we move further away from the colonial era, there is a growing need for understanding postcolonial realities beyond the impact of the colonial legacy. In recent years, several significant works have argued that the postcolonial instability and weakening of African polities and economies must be understood against the backdrop of the cultural contexts of local societies. Thus, argue Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, African states will never evolve into exact replicas of the Western state because this transplanted model does not serve the interest of local elites. African elites prefer to maintain a deeply rooted traditional system based on "a reciprocal type of interdependence between leaders, courtiers and the populace. And it is a system that *works*, however imperfectly, to maintain social bonds between those at the top and bottom of society."³⁷ The persistence of patron-clientism and moral obligation has been cited by many scholars as a prominent cause of misappropriation and corruption in African political and economic systems. Jean-François Bayart wrote, "A man who manages 'to make good' without ensuring that his network shares in his prosperity brings shame upon himself and acquires the reputation of 'eating' others in the invisible world."³⁸ J. P. Olivier de Sardan also cites local cultures as the source of poor governance and corruption in Africa. Included in his survey of widespread social practices that ultimately lead to corruption are practices of negotiation, gift-giving, and the logics of predatory authority and solidarity networks. But unlike Chabal and Daloz, de Sardan rejects the notion that these are

precolonial carryovers: “All these logics are syncretic, none is ‘traditional,’ none comes directly from any so-called pre-colonial culture.”³⁹ While hardly an exhaustive survey, these few examples illustrate the types of polarities that exist in the ongoing debates about the “failures” of postcolonial Africa.

This history of the Nigerian National Shipping Line reveals that there are no simple formulas for explaining the unsuccessful economic and political ventures of the postcolonial era. As we will see, the NNSL began as an ideological project. For Nigerian politicians and businessmen, the indigenization of shipping was a powerful symbol of decolonization, representing a reversal of centuries of economic exploitation at the hands of European colonizers. But the success of an international shipping venture required far more investment than just ideological zeal. From its creation, the national line suffered because of inadequate financial support from the very politicians who had reaped political rewards by grandstanding its establishment. Political motives, rather than economic ones, hindered decision-making processes, evident in the hasty buyout of the technical partners, Elder Dempster and the Palm Line, after only two years of operations. This move greatly weakened the already scarce managerial resources of the company, and the NNSL suffered from a lack of expert knowledge essential to running an international shipping line. Political instability further exacerbated this situation, as the revolving door of ministers led to constant hirings and firings of staff, and no one stayed around long enough to ensure solid business practices. The lack of leadership and authority at the NNSL ultimately led to the unchecked pillaging of the company by politicians and their networks of clients who had no interest in the success of the shipping venture. With time, there was a trickle-down effect seen in practices of misappropriation and corruption. All parties involved in the shipping line, from the management to officers and captains, down to the rank-and-file crew, looked for ways to maximize opportunities. By the 1980s, illegality flourished at all levels: seamen engaged in theft and drug trafficking, captains and officers used the ships for their own private enterprises, and management embezzled millions in company resources.

The history of the NNSL demonstrates that a complex array of factors, spanning the colonial and postcolonial eras, led to the demise of the Nigerian National Shipping Line. From the start, material inequalities became a breeding ground for abuses of power, illegality, and misappropriation. Local responses to the instability and scarcity of resources were indeed culturally rooted, but they cannot be understood in isolation from inequality and injustice. In his work on corruption in postcolonial Nigeria, Daniel Smith has argued that the roots of corruption are neither purely institutional

nor purely cultural, but rather can be found at “the intersection of local culture and larger systems of inequality.”⁴⁰ Against the backdrop of political and economic insecurity and inequality, Smith argues, people exploit all available resources, whether they be economic, political, or cultural, in order to survive and thrive.

This history of the Nigerian National Shipping Line provides a unique view into the evolution of a postcolonial enterprise from multiple perspectives. By focusing on the evolution of the NNSL from the perspective of seamen, but also engineers, captains, and management, it aims to reveal how each class fared against the backdrop of broader political, economic, and ideological developments. In maintaining a view of all the actors involved, the study provides insights into the divergent ways in which working classes and elites experienced the opportunities and limitations that characterized the history of postcolonial Nigeria.

ON SOURCES

Histories of enterprises and the workers employed by them are profoundly lacking in the history of Africa, largely because archival evidence either has not been preserved out of disinterest or has been deliberately destroyed. This study overcomes the absence of a well-organized and preserved archive, and demonstrates that it is nonetheless possible to write postcolonial histories of African enterprises and the labor employed by them. While no complete archive of the NNSL has survived, I have located a broad base of primary documents in government, corporate, and personal archives in Nigeria, Liverpool, London, and Amsterdam.

The archives of the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool and at the British National Archives in Kew Gardens provided vital documentation on British shipping interests in the colonial era. The archives of Elder Dempster in particular, located at the Merseyside Maritime Museum, provided rich information about the shipping company’s involvement in Nigeria, as well as information about recruitment and employment of seamen, and relations between the company and the Nigerian Union of Seamen. Colonial policies toward “coloured” seamen in general, and Nigerians in particular, could be found at the National Archives. The archives in Liverpool and London also included vital information on the process of decolonization, and on the negotiations behind the founding of the Nigerian National Shipping Line in partnership with Elder Dempster and the Palm Line. For the 1960s–1980s, the British National Archives contain records of the Port Authority regarding illicit trade and drug smuggling involving seamen in general and Nigerians

in particular. The Peter Waterman Papers at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam contain primary and secondary material concerning labor organizing in Nigeria in the postcolonial era. Finally, archives in Liverpool and London included correspondence concerning the various shipping conferences operating between Africa and Europe in the colonial and postcolonial eras.

In Nigeria, few records of the former Nigerian National Shipping Line have survived. But several important sources of information were available in various archives in Lagos and beyond. The Nigerian Shipping Federation houses a partial collection of official ship logbooks from the 1960s through the 1980s. These captain's logs contain rich and detailed documentation of specific incidents that took place on board NNSL ships, and provide rare insights into hierarchies of power and relations between officers and rank-and-file seamen, as well as any disciplinary actions, medical emergencies, and personal issues concerning crew members that arose. The Nigerian Institute of International Relations contains a well-organized collection of Nigerian newspaper articles relating to shipping and seamen from the colonial era to the present. In the collections of the National Archives in Ibadan, I was able to find correspondence about seamen in the colonial era, with an important collection of files concerning repatriations. I supplemented the information found in these archives with official documents, photos, personal letters, and various keepsakes found in the personal archives and photo albums of former seamen, labor union officers, captains, officers, and NNSL management. Many of these records have never been used before by historians.

Without detracting from the significance of all these written sources, this study was largely made possible by the information obtained through oral interviews. Over the course of three research trips to Nigeria from 2007 to 2011, I conducted more than seventy interviews with Nigerians who had varying degrees of involvement with the Nigerian National Shipping Line. As the study began with a focus on seamen themselves, I initially concentrated on interviewing rank-and-file seamen who had worked on colonial and NNSL ships. With the help of research assistants, I located some former seamen and these men directed me to others. The officers at the Nigerian Union of Seamen in Apapa, Lagos, also provided assistance in contacting former seamen, and they generously allowed me to conduct some of the interviews in their offices. While this was an extremely helpful arrangement that enabled me to schedule consecutive interviews over a few days, the interviews that I conducted in seamen's homes were often richer for the insights they provided me. Through dozens of visits to former seamen's homes across greater Lagos,⁴¹ I was able to get an invaluable glimpse into seamen's

offshore lives, and to gain a deeper understanding of how their careers as seafarers had shaped their lives and the lives of their family members. Some had a piece of furniture or another keepsake from their time at sea, while others had pictures of their foreign girlfriends and children on the walls of their homes. But mostly, visits to seamen's homes in the low-income neighborhoods of Lagos provided physical evidence of the dire fate of the working class within the history of the NNSL. The interviews I conducted with seamen were open-ended, but they covered a range of topics including seamen's recruitment and training, life on board ships in both the colonial and the postcolonial eras, time spent at international ports of call, their involvement with independent trade, relations with their families abroad and back in Nigeria, the seamen's union and labor protests, and seamen's perspective on the circumstances leading to the demise of the NNSL. Often, seamen's wives were present at the interviews, and I was able to use this opportunity to interview the women as well. Seamen's wives told very different stories than those of their husbands, as they had to struggle with many months and years of maintaining the household and caring for their children in their husbands' absence. Women provided an essential perspective on the financial significance of men's independent trading enterprises, and they also provided fascinating insights into the romantic relationships their husbands maintained abroad.

As the interview process progressed, and more and more seamen voiced criticisms of Nigerian officers and management, I soon realized that in order to gain a fuller perspective of life on board NNSL ships, it was imperative to interview former captains, engineers, and managers. Interviews with captains and engineers offered a very different perspective from those of seamen. These NNSL officers received far more extensive training than rank-and-file seamen, which included several years of academic study in Britain, and thousands of hours of practical training logged on foreign vessels. They therefore possessed a wealth of knowledge, and the ability to draw comparisons, about the technical and economic aspects of running ships and cargo in the international shipping industry, and the functioning of the NNSL within it. Captains and officers had their own criticisms of both rank-and-file seamen and management, and their perspectives were an important complement to seamen's testimonies. As opposed to the officers, it was fairly difficult to locate former managers of the NNSL who were willing to provide an interview. Many who had occupied positions of influence and power in the former company were not willing to meet with me, probably in light of the rampant misappropriation and corruption that led to the NNSL's failure. But a few key informants from both middle

and upper management of the NNSL did provide important information on the general running of the company, financial issues, and the links between the volatile political history of postcolonial Nigeria and its impact on the National Shipping Line. Finally, one former government official who oversaw the process of liquidation also provided a key interview regarding the final years of the NNSL.

This research would not have been possible without these interviews, as no official or complete archive of the NNSL exists. Even in the presence of the available sources, interviews provided me with invaluable insights that brought to life, enriched, and contradicted the written material found in archives. But as historians of Africa are well aware, the use of oral histories can raise its own set of concerns, including issues of remembering and forgetting, and questions of accuracy, authenticity, and bias. I attempted to overcome many of these problems by conducting over seventy interviews with a range of informants, thus enabling me to find common threads and themes that emerged again and again from the interviews. Yet, throughout the research, and particularly in this effort to overcome biases and partialities in oral testimonies, I remained keenly aware that many of my informants did not necessarily share my agenda. While my primary concern was to produce a book that *accurately* portrayed their experiences, I realized that those who provided interviews did so with the earnest hope that telling their stories *would make a difference*. For rank-and-file seamen, officers, and managers, the intersections between their lives and the history of the NNSL were not simply a matter of historic interest, but an unfinished business that still evoked varying claims. This issue was all the more complicated by the fact that there were stark contrasts between the agendas of each class of informants. Officers and managers offered systematic analyses of the political economy of shipping in Nigeria, and how the wrongdoings of the past could be overcome and corrected by reestablishing the national line. Working-class seamen, on the other hand, gave testimonies full of pride, anger, disillusionment, and a sense of betrayal around their experiences with the NNSL, and interviews often ended with a bitter lament of their extreme poverty and lack of prospects. Despite stark differences in the material and political agendas that characterized each class of informants, none told their stories to merely enrich the historical record. For all those interviewed, the story of the NNSL strongly resonated in the present, and there had to be utility and impact in its retelling. While conducting interviews, and later analyzing and interpreting the testimonies, I was confronted with the dissonance that existed between my primary concern for constructing an accurate account and my informants' efforts to convey a story that addressed

the injustices and disappointments they experienced. I hope that the narrative that has taken shape, and the lessons it can provide, resolves this issue by signifying something of use to those who shared their insights with me.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The first two chapters of the book trace the origins of Nigerian seafaring in the late colonial period and describe the work and lifestyles of seamen employed on colonial vessels. Chapter 1 provides background on African seafaring in the modern age, and the processes that led to the recruitment of Nigerians en masse. This chapter describes work on board the ships, and the types of jobs seamen were engaged in, training provided, relations with European crews, incidents of racism and discrimination, and the background of union organizing among Nigerian seamen and labor relations between seamen and management of the colonial shipping lines. Chapter 2 examines the cosmopolitanism that characterized the economic, social, and cultural lives of seamen offshore. This chapter describes the trade conducted by seamen in secondhand goods such as electronics, small and large appliances, foodstuffs, clothing, and even in scrap metals and used cars. The chapter also looks at the social lives of seamen abroad, and examines particularly the romantic relationships seamen established with European, Asian, and Latin American women in the course of their travels. This review of the centrality of cosmopolitanism in seamen's consciousness and experiences provides essential context for understanding the eventual impact of nationalism and nationalization on seamen's working lives.

Chapters 3 and 4 evaluate the seamen's organizing efforts and relationship with the Nigerian Union of Seamen, and the impact the rise of nationalism had on this organizing. Chapter 3 focuses on the history of labor organizing and the Nigerian seamen's union in the shadow of decolonization. The chapter examines cooperative efforts between Nigerian seamen and diaspora communities, and highlights the ideological and political support the seamen obtained from these transnational alliances in organizing protests and strikes. This chapter describes how the process of decolonization ultimately limited the potential for cooperative efforts between Nigerian seamen and diaspora working classes. The role played by union leadership in Lagos in bringing about this shift is scrutinized. Chapter 4 examines the establishment of the Nigerian National Shipping Line, reviewing the economic and political motives for its establishment, the terms by which the enterprise was launched, and the relationship between the NNSL, British shipping lines, and international shipping conferences. A close investigation into the negotiations

that took place between Nigerian and British officials reveals the ways in which elite interests prevailed in the history of decolonization. The chapter reviews the intense critique this business relationship between the NNSL and Elder Dempster received from the broader public, who questioned the autonomy of the Nigerian shipping line under the arrangement.

Chapters 5 and 6 trace the history of the Nigerian National Shipping Line and the fate of the seamen employed by it. Chapter 5 examines the process of “Nigerianization” of shipping and the impact this process had on the working lives of seamen on board ships. Based largely on a review of official logbooks, the chapter documents how shipboard hierarchies, labor relations, and working cultures evolved over time and became “Nigerian.” It will be seen that what seamen once anticipated as an act of homecoming ultimately ended in deep disappointment. The scarcity of resources doomed the venture from the start and resulted in corruption and pillaging by those with access to resources. Class conflicts and ethnic tensions from the broader Nigerian political landscape found their way on board. Chapter 6 studies the multiple and complex set of factors leading to the decline and eventual demise of the Nigerian National Shipping Line. This chapter attempts to provide insights into the economic insecurity and inequalities that led to misappropriation and illegality. The examination of the demise of the NNSL demonstrates that material inequalities became a breeding ground for corruption, and corruption can therefore not be understood in isolation from inequality and injustice. It will be seen that the turn to illegality, in the forms of theft and drug trafficking on the part of seamen, or misappropriation of company resources on the part of officers and management, cannot be divorced from broader political and economic contexts.

The concluding argument of the book is that the uneven impact of nationalization on each of the classes involved in the shipping industry can be linked to the broader history of postcolonial Nigeria. The history of the Nigerian National Shipping Line can be taken as a metaphor for the postcolonial economy and society, and the disempowerment of seamen can be linked to the narrowing of opportunities that characterize the political, economic, and social lives of working-class Nigerians to the present. This study helps us to understand that the mismanagement and cronyism of postcolonial states were not just political failures, but processes with broad and consequential effects on the everyday lives of working people who were, at one point, deeply committed to the project of independence, and who believed in the rights and benefits it promised.