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Review of *Nation on Board: Becoming a Nigerian at Sea*, by Lynn Schler

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Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea, by Lynn Schler, follows an interesting list of recent works focusing on the way in which Africans shaped the colonial encounter and were shaped by it. The book is a detailed analysis of the intersection of colonialism, African labor, race, and resistance in colonial Nigeria. Schler details the process through which Nigerian men exploited the opportunity provided by European shippers to enter the world of seafaring in the colonial period and the changing identity dynamics that increasingly placed these men as transnational actors. The extension of the analysis into the postcolonial period and to the indigenization of the Nigerian shipping industry provides not only a critique of continuity and change but also an excellent example of the crisis of postcolonial developments in Nigeria and Africa in general.

The strength of Schler's book lies in the juxtaposition and analysis of a range of sources as well as in the broader link it makes between the shipping industry and the larger sociopolitical and economic development of Nigeria in the post-World War II period. However, the book is not just about Nigerian

seamen. It covers important themes that defined African-European encounters, from economic opportunities, race, and the making of new identities and political consciousness, to anticolonial movements.

The author addresses important and exciting themes in African history, including how the colonial encounter provided opportunity for transnational mobility, economic advancement, and new forms of identity. The examination of the life of Nigerian seamen, the author argues, reveals how colonialism “shaped and limited the opportunities of African subjects” (2). Like other outcomes of African subjects’ encounters with colonialism, the results of Nigerian seafaring activities emerged in a particular historical context—the era of the Second World War. The book not only provides a historical overview of the origin of Nigerian seafaring but also draws upon an impressive array of data to portray the lifestyle of seamen aboard colonial vessels.

The significant recruitment of Nigerian seamen that began with the outbreak of the Second World War was a response to the increased demand on the shipping company Elder Dempster. As with other African recruits, their roles as deckhands were essential, even as they were defined by race—Nigerian seamen experienced segregation and had little opportunity for advancement. Yet their recruitment and engagement provided them an opportunity to participate in social movements and unionization.

The engagement of Nigerian seamen had implications for the formation of new identities, a cosmopolitan outlook, and opportunities for other economic activities, such as trading in a variety of goods ranging from used electronics to clothing. Their engagement also resulted in significant social reordering, including the development of romantic relationships across racial lines. These developments had important implications for the emergence of a new consciousness and the development of nationalism at home. A significant level of social consciousness did emerge among Nigerian seamen, which helped in the formation of trade unions. This consciousness emerged in the historical context of the nationalist movement, which influenced the unionizing efforts of the Nigerian seamen.

A significant focus in the book is the establishment of the Nigerian National Shipping Line and the political and economic motivations behind its formation. The author situates the emergence of the Nigerian National Shipping Line within the broader intellectual discourse among Africans in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the Nigerian National Shipping Line emerged in an era when conceptions of freedom and affirmation of African identity that appeared as part of the struggle for independence helped constitute a sense of optimism, the Nigerian state lacked the resources to effectively support a shipping line. That a significant part of its capital was held by British companies, including the Elder Dempster Line, which it had sought to replace, was problematic.

The transition or “Nigerianization” of the shipping industry occurred at a critical time in the evolution of the Nigerian state. Indeed, the author reveals how the formation of the “Nigerianization” of the shipping industry affected the lives of seamen, labor relations and hierarchical structure, and the culture in the industry. Ironically the “Nigerianization” of the shipping industry brought with it fundamental problems that affected the effective operation of the sector, including corruption, ethnicity, and class. The Nigerian factor crept into the shipping industry. The contrasting aspirations of

the workers and the political elite were on full display in the operations of the Nigerian National Shipping Line.

The overall impact of the inefficient structure of the Nigerian shipping sector led to its demise. The inefficiency of its operation the author attributes to economic insecurity and inequalities that resulted in the misappropriation of resources and in illegality. As Schler details, the illegality that occurred in the shipping industry happened at two levels. On one level is the involvement of seamen in theft and other vices, including drug trafficking. On the other level is misappropriation of resources by officials and by the management of the Nigerian Shipping Line. The intersection between economic and political conditions and the decline of the Nigerian National Shipping Line to which the author alludes cannot be understood as isolated from the broader structures of the Nigerian state. The concluding part of the book reiterates the arguments that have been made throughout the work. The book places the Nigerian seamen at the intersection of many issues that defined the postcolonial society and the changing sociopolitical and economic conditions in which Nigerians found themselves.

Nation on Board is an indispensable work on Nigeria's maritime history. More than that, it is an eloquent and penetrating synthesis of Nigeria's struggle for economic independence toward the end of colonialism. The exploration of the economics of colonial relations, social conditions of crew members, relations aboard merchant vessels, and the indigenization of the Nigerian economy toward the end of colonial rule offer a unique perspective into the complex history of the era. *Nation on Board* tells these twinned stories most elegantly. It is a significant addition to Nigerian maritime and economic history.