

## Book review- Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea by Lynn Schler

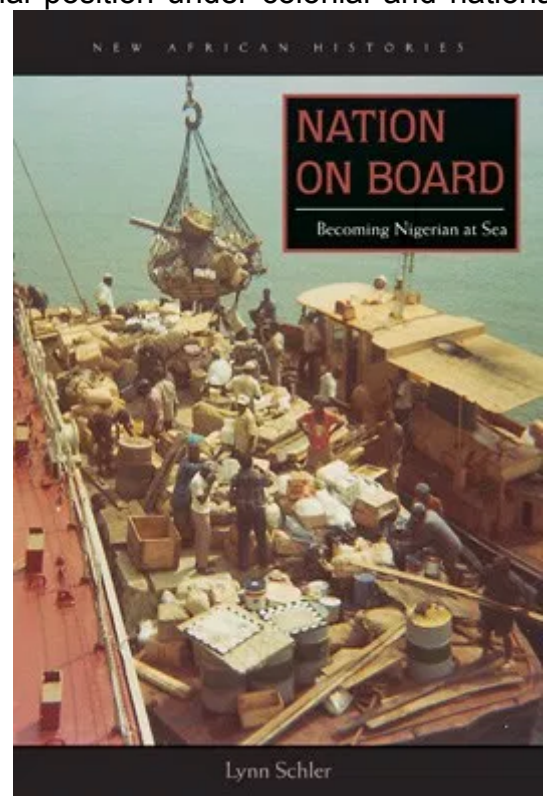
*Jochen Lingelbach recommends this book as an accessible labour history and a convincing bottom-up perspective on decolonisation.*

Seamen seem to be the romantic, rebellious and cosmopolitan characters *par excellence*. The unruly world of pirates and sailors in the Revolutionary Atlantic appears to be a breeding ground for political change. Some of this echoes in Lynn Schler's history of Nigerian seamen, but her book focuses on the less romantic time after the age of sail. *Nation on Board* is rather the history of a working class in a transnational industry that becomes nationalised through decolonisation. Schler shows how these seamen made the most of their marginal position under colonial and national conditions alike.

Lynn Schler (Ben Gurion University) traces the history of Nigerian seamen on colonial ships and in the ill-fated post-independence Nigerian National Shipping Line (NNSL). Her book explores how a mobile African working class experienced the end of colonial rule and the establishment of a new nation state. As she convincingly shows, Nigerian seamen saw themselves as cosmopolitan 'citizens of the world' (p.195) before independence, but the national project of the independent state restricted their opportunities and cut their transnational links. Nigerian seamen supported nationalism as a fight against exploitation and racial discrimination on board British-owned ships, but working on Nigerian ships they fared no better.

The project of a national shipping line was destined to fail (it seems that Schler implies an analogy to the project of a Nigerian nation) because of the dominance of established lines and the missing commitment of Nigerian politicians (p.107). The NNSL was established as a prestigious political project to reduce the dependence on European companies, but evolved into a project for the personal enrichment of its elites until it collapsed in 1994.

Schler's book offers a fresh perspective on decolonisation, leaving the national elites aside and enquiring how decolonisation was experienced and interpreted by African workers. While rank-and-file seamen initially embraced the national shipping line, they became disempowered by British immigration restrictions, the containment of the Nigerian Union of Seamen and a lack of political support in the decades after independence. The seamen were however no passive victims, but were actively trying to make the most of an increasingly unstable, exploitative situation. Schler convincingly interprets their independent trade and smuggling as ingenious ways to use transnational networks and supplement insufficient income (p.63).





The Atlantic Ocean, Lagos, Nigeria.

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Persuasive and seemingly inevitable for the period is the use of oral alongside a broad range of written sources. Unfortunately the use of oral sources is not critically contextualised except for a reflection on the interview situation on the very last pages (p.198ff). The selection of interview partners might have generated a biased narrative as she talked with Lagos residents only. Seamen who settled elsewhere might have told a different story and could have put stronger emphasis on transnational networks and diaspora formation. The fact that oral sources tell about the past *and* the present has to be taken into account and could be a reason behind the importance of the national context for the post-colonial era. I can only guess how difficult it must have been to find the interviewees, but I would have liked a transparent awareness of these limitations.

Another issue that struck me was how the idea of a 'national line' was taken for granted. Where did the idea come from, that a nation needed a state-owned shipping line? Britain was no role model as the near-monopolist (Elder Dempster) was a private company. Was it a kind of competitive regional nationalism, with Ghana's Black Star Line serving as the role model (p.112)? Or could the NNSL be understood as an overambitious attempt of nationalising a globalised industry? With the nationalist backlash these days in mind, this issue becomes highly relevant once again.

In summary, *Nation on Board* offers a fascinating working class perspective on one of the greatest revolutions in recent world history – the end of European colonial rule. Relying on a broad range of source material, Lynn Schler wrote an accessible labour history of decolonisation 'from below'. I fully recommend it to anyone interested in the history of maritime labour, decolonisation, nationalism and the post-colonial state in Africa.

**Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea.** Lynn Schler. Ohio University Press. 2016

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**



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