

Review: Tim Livsey, Nigeria's University Age: Reframing Decolonisation and Development (2017)

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Alimi, I. . S. (2018). Review: Tim Livsey, Nigeria's University Age: Reframing Decolonisation and Development (2017). [Review of the book *Nigeria's University Age: Reframing Decolonisation and Development*, by T. Livsey]. *Africa Spectrum*, 53(3), 137-139. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-11636>

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Africa Spectrum

Alimi, Shina (2018),
 Book Review: Livsey, Tim (2017), *Nigeria's University Age: Reframing
 Decolonisation and Development*, in: *Africa Spectrum*, 53, 3, 137–139.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-11636>

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:
[<www.africa-spectrum.org>](http://www.africa-spectrum.org)

Published by
 GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs,
 in co-operation with the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg, and Hamburg
 University Press.

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Book Reviews

Livsey, Tim (2017), *Nigeria's University Age: Reframing Decolonisation and Development*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-1-137-5650-1, viii+285 pages

In *Nigeria's University Age*, Tim Livsey provides a new perspective on how to rethink and unbundle the decolonisation process in the British Empire. The book explores universities as sites of transnational histories of development and decolonisation. This is a radical break from the traditional views on and historiographies of decolonisation that limit knowledge about it to only nationalist struggles and constitutional negotiations. The book examines local, national, and transnational debates on African (optimistic) aspirations, visions, and imaginaries of development. In doing so, the book looks at university administration, student culture, as well as debates around the foundation of different Nigerian universities.

The author conceptualises his work within “frames for development,” which denotes ideas and standards envisioned as well as the geographical stretch within which development is imagined. Beyond abstraction and theory, “development is seen as a practice in which people set about creating the futures they envisioned” (7). The author notes that “negotiations about putting development ideas into practice usually involved a range of parties with their own visions of appropriate aims and methods” (7). “Frames for development” and “practice” approaches emphasise what individuals and groups think, do, practice, and claim as development. These approaches also lay bare the internal inconsistencies that characterise these ideas and practices of development.

Livsey's work also recognises a wide range of ideas and a variety of actors as being involved in the process of development. Hence, “development” in this context is not limited to mere abstraction or the physical built environment, but rather it unpacks the thought behind the deeds, the doers, as well as the receivers of such actions. Development is therefore seen in terms of both ideal and reality. Significantly, Livsey argues that there are many frames and practices of development: the imperial frame; the indigenous or African frame; the national or subnational frame; the pan-African frame; the transnational frame, and so on. The author draws on multiple primary sources, and consults a wide range of secondary materials too. He combines both chronological and thematic styles in his analysis.

The book contains eight chapters. The first defines the concepts utilised, explains the chosen framework, and summarises the contents of the book. In the second chapter, the author focuses on the debates that preceded the establishment of University College, Ibadan (UCI). He argues that while the establishment of UCI was seen as a wise decision – though also an expensive investment in the stride towards development – by the British colonial government, it was also a development project shaped simultaneously by African visions of progress and by imperial frames of development.

In chapter three, Livsey notes that the newly established UCI in the era of decolonisation was a paradoxical example of the second colonial occupation of Africa. The author observes that while universities formed part of an arena wherein decolonisation was negotiated, it represented the core paradox of decolonisation: being characterised by the simultaneous expansion and reduction of colonial power. The importation of expatriate teachers and technical experts exemplified another era of colonial invasion, one characterised by latent racial prejudice against local culture and intellectual capabilities.

The fourth chapter focuses on the making of modern space at UCI. It discusses African expectations of modern space, what constitutes modern architecture of the late colonial period, the development and forms of expertise, and the place of university space in decolonisation. The author notes that the development of modern space in the period of decolonisation was a product of optimistic visions and expectations, multilaterally framed. It involved a wider range of knowledge on development, and was a negotiated practice that involved different actors rather than being an imposed frame of reference. As a semi-state institution with some degree of autonomy, UCI created a space and ambience for debate, negotiation, and contestation over development.

Chapter five considers the culture of decolonisation in colonial Nigeria by drawing on UCI as a space where cultures are negotiated and contested. Invoking UCI as a reference point, the author provides a deeper analysis and connection between decolonisation processes and cultural nationalism. The author looks at how Nigerian students navigated their socio-cultural space and development through various geographical frames. Within the wide scope of the cultural space available to them, these new crops of educated elites selected, negotiated, and sometimes rejected cultural frames from the repertoires of a global culture. While the age of decolonisation redefined socio-economic, political, and cultural meaning for the decolonising state, Nigerian students strived to

occupy these spaces. The author concludes that the new educated elite produced on the eve of independence was incomplete.

Chapter six examines frames of development and modernity in Nigerian universities during the Cold War era. Specifically, the author focuses on the growing interests of the United States of America in Nigerian educational policies as well as support for higher education in Nigeria by philanthropic foundations. The author views universities as a space wherein Cold War politics were negotiated and contested. Chapter seven finally discusses the place of universities in the development of post-independent Nigeria. The initial high optimism gradually dimmed as these institutions became enwrapped in the ethno-political crisis of the First Republic. Chapter eight summarises and concludes the book.

The work has many merits. In the first place, the approaches advanced by Tim Livsey offer innovative perspectives for understanding decolonisation processes, development, and related practices. Through these fresh perspectives, the author creatively unpacks the concept of development and rethinks decolonisation processes in Africa. Development is therefore not understood as a mere abstraction of ideas, visions, or knowledge, but also a practice or performance that involves multiple layers of interaction, negotiation, and contestation. The book also examines the rise and fall of the Nigerian university age, and discusses the factors responsible for this.

This book is, however, not without a few shortcomings. It focuses on the story of what is now the University of Ibadan, whereas regional universities such as Ahmadu Bello University and the University of Ife are sparsely mentioned. In addition, the title of chapter five only partially reflects its actual contents. Appropriately defined, the title of the chapter should ideally have been: "In Search of Identity: Student Culture, Everyday Life, and Decolonisation at University College, Ibadan."

In summary, this book constitutes a brilliant contribution to the historiography of development and decolonisation in general, as well in Africa specifically. The themes explored by the author are relevant to ongoing debates on the place of universities in the complex process of development, making this publication a very timely one.

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