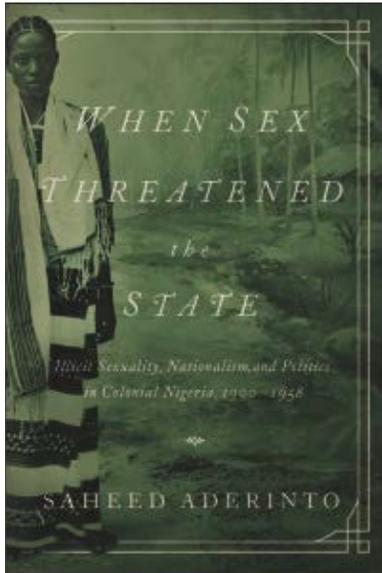


*When Sex Threatened the State: Illicit Sexuality, Nationalism, and Politics in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1958* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015 pp. 264, ISBN: 978-0-252-03888-4) by Saheed Aderinto, reviewed by Oluwakemi A. Adesina (adesinak@run.edu.ng, Department of History & International Studies, College of Humanities, Redeemer's University, Ede Osun State, Nigeria).



*When Sex Threatened the State: Illicit Sexuality, Nationalism, and Politics in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1958*, authored by Saheed Aderinto, is a very ambitious, but fascinating book. This text is an important contribution to literature on sexuality and the involvement of the state in the control of the “oldest trade”-prostitution. Aderinto builds on earlier works of scholars like Luise White’s *The Comforts of Home*, George Mosse’s pioneering study on *Nationalism and Sexuality* and Phillipa Levine’s *Prostitution, Race and Politics*.

The book is the first book-length on sexuality in colonial Nigeria, its divided into seven analytical units and an epilogue. Hence, the crux is centered on sex, sexuality, sexual politics, class conflict, urbanization, and gender. In the first section, Aderinto carefully details the historical evolution of Lagos – the environment under which prostitution flourished. In the analysis presented colonial Lagos was “the most unsafe of Nigerian urban centers” but an attractive city that provided “expanded opportunities for individuals and groups, regardless of ethnicity and class, to experiment with new and diverse forms of social behavior, such as were rarely tolerated or available in the countryside” (p.35). In the second chapter, the author “unveils” the gendered narrative of prostitution that elicited concerns of the colonial government and the nationalists. Aderinto provides compelling arguments that established the link between prostitution (*akunakuna*, *ashewo*, *karuwai*, *asape* and Marina girls) (p.54) and juvenile delinquency (exhibited by the *boma* and *jaguda* boys) as a “mutually constitutive and symbiotic” relation (p. 69). Aderinto emphasizes the relevance of newspaper articles as a veritable source for the writing of history while citing the story of prostitute *Segilola: Eleyinju ege*, a novel about the autobiography of a Lagos prostitute published in *Akede Eko (Lagos Herald)* in 1930 which provided the author with a vivid image of the social life in colonial Lagos. This novel has recently been edited, translated, and introduced by Karin Barber. Most important in this chapter is his emphasis on “adult prostitution” as distinct from “child prostitution” (p. 72).

The third chapter illustrates the “moral degeneration” of society as “criminally minded adults” that introduced underage girls to prostitution. This trend occasioned the new focus of the state to establish the Colonial Welfare Office (CWO) (p.74), and the establishment of child prostitution laws.

However, the claim by the author that "... the age of consent in Nigeria was 13, meaning that an individual legally ceased to be a child at this age" (p. 75) needs further clarification. This is necessary because there is no reference to any document to corroborate this assertion. The question this raises is that, can this assertion be an ethnic or national average? In what areas of life is this age of consent employed? Also is this age of consent gendered?

Chapter four deals with the concomitant of "illicit sexuality" and analyses the "sexual scourge" of venereal diseases that permeated the society and measures proffered to stem the tide of the menace. The prohibition of prostitution was considered the "officially accepted ... measure for the reduction Venereal Diseases." Aderinto explicitly stated that the colonialists were not united about the best methods (p.112) to combat civilian and military prostitution; a phenomenon that had become an "inevitable aspect of military culture" (p.99).

The author in chapter five exhibits careful scholarship firmly grounded in archival sources. Here, the criminal justice system assumed the main position in the control of prostitution. The author discusses the "prohibitionist agenda" of the colonial administration in the establishment of anti-prostitution "sexualized laws" that the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) was expected to enforce (p.113). The unique distinction between adult and child prostitution also comes to form here as the writer establishes the inherent dichotomy of CWO's development approach to addressing the social vices in colonial Nigeria. Whilst CWO-sponsored the Children and Young Persons Ordinance (CYPO) of 1943 (p. 121) which defined adulthood as age 17, legitimized the protection of children, introduced the science of childhood development, and punished adults for prostitution (p.123). However, the chapter concluded with the inconsistent nature of the anti-prostitution legislation, whilst laying emphasis on the selfish nature of the colonial government's commitment to matters that affected "the well-implemented ordinances were those that were presumed to have a greater impact on the colonial political economy, public order, health, and security" (p.133). And chapter six and seven presents the gendered (men and Lagos elite women) and political analysis of sexual control, hence an analysis of men's and women's reactions to anti-prostitution laws to reveal that their perceptions were not static, but guided by identity and social class. Here, women's involvement in sexual politics reveals "a new perspective on established knowledge about colonialism as a male-centered institution" (p. 168). Thus, the author concludes that anti-prostitution laws failed and suggested that they failed not solely because of 'racial and gender bias and a lack of sensitivity to cultural variations among the myriad of Nigerian ethnic groups', but because of "the adoption of a short-term approach to controlling vice meant that the colonialists were merely attacking the superficial aspects of the "problem of prostitution" (p. 154). To address the inadequacies of the colonialists, elite women, 'in addition to holding concerns over the security of "innocent" citizens, injected moral and cultural tones that reflected largely on the future of women, as respectable wives, mothers, politicians, administrators, and law-abiding members of society' (p.169).

Implicit in Aderinto's study is the underscoring of the complexity of the social, political, and economic developments in the colonial period. With reference to this, the author examined the links between colonial concerns, nationalism and sexuality, hence, he draws a similar conclusion as Phillipa Levine did in *Prostitution, Race and Politics* that colonial government's concern was borne out of the health implications of prostitution for the military, 'the defender of the empire' (p. 21).

This text is valuable to scholars, as it is replete with illuminating analysis, but nonetheless cannot be considered definitive. This is particularly so, due to the gap between the time frame of the book '1900-1958' and the twenty-first century issues discussed in the epilogue (a broad survey of recent discourses on and around sex, sexuality, and its political-economy in Nigeria). Though the Epilogue epitomizes post-independent institutional responses to commercial and international sex work; this section should have been reserved entirely for another book project. The author invites researchers of gender and nationalism to consider investigating 'the ideological conflict between Nigerian male and female nationalists' which hitherto 'has not been satisfactorily explored' (p.34). The approach adopted by Aderinto also overlooks the dynamisms of post-colonial Nigeria and the challenges posed by globalization. In short, the book weaves a compelling story as it is written in a clear and fluid language. Scholars of history, sociology, anthropology, gender, women studies, and even generalists will find reading this book highly illuminating and accessible.