

Aderinto, Saheed: *Guns and Society in Colonial Nigeria. Firearms, Culture, and Public Order*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2018. ISBN: 978-0-253-03160-0; 336 p.

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Guns feature prominently among the commodities that have been constantly imported into Africa since early modern times. Historical research on this subject saw a first wave in the 1960s and 70s, when the vast precolonial importation of firearms was discussed in the context of slave trade, warfare, and state-building. Recently, firearms have returned to the research agenda, but today, the focus lies more on the social and cultural history of firearms, and on arms control. Saheed Aderinto's new book follows this recent research strand; it explores the social, cultural, economic, and political role of firearms in colonial Nigeria, focusing on the period between 1900 and 1960.

The most astonishing finding of Aderinto's study is that it was only in the 1920s, under British colonial rule, that Nigeria became a gun society. Much depends on definition here, but Aderinto shows convincingly that despite a much longer history of firearms importation, it was only in consequence of a relatively liberal British gun policy that certain types of firearms became so widespread and so interwoven with every-day life that one can justifiably speak of a gun society.

Guns were instruments of destruction, used in warfare, armed resistance, hunting and robbery, but their usage went well beyond this; they were also objects of value (and could be pawned), fashionable sporting equipment, markers of status, and signifiers of ceremony, announcing for example the birth of a child. The history of firearms in colonial Nigeria was closely connected with ideas of citizenship, safety, class, gender, race, and the human interaction with the environment. The possession and usage of firearms strongly shaped colonial society, structuring state as well as inter- and intra-ethnic violence. To demonstrate all this, Aderinto draws on a vast array of sources: district and provincial records, firearms registries, colonial laws, court cases,

anthropological surveys, records of the Nigerian Rifle Association, memoirs, travel writings, newspapers and oral narratives.

Aderinto's study starts by outlining the history of precolonial arms importation. Although weapons never overtook textiles, from the 1630s flintlock muskets (locally called Dane guns) became a significant trading item, with great purchasing power and inextricably linked with the slavery business. In precolonial times, firearms possession was monopolized by military aristocrats and warriors, but these firearms were rarely used for hunting in this region. After the colonial conquest, in which superior weaponry played a decisive role, a new regime of gun ownership was established in the British colony under Frederick Lugard. This regime strikingly reflects colonial hierarchies: all Nigerians were eligible for a license for a Dane gun, the simplest, oldest and for its users most dangerous of available guns (which however required the highest skills for effective usage); „educated“ Nigerians could apply for the technically more advanced shotguns; pistols, revolvers and rifles were strictly reserved for Europeans. This hierarchical but relatively liberal gun policy secured tax revenues for the colonial government, but, as already stated, it was only through this policy that Dane guns and shotguns penetrated deeply into everyday life. Aderinto gives numerous examples – one very interesting observation here is the various forms of noise consumption when firearms were as much an element of imperial spectacle as of communal festivity. Double-barreled shotguns became particularly fashionable among the educated middle classes and served as a social marker. Paradoxically, although they were actually hunting weapons, shotguns were most widespread among city dwellers. Aderinto also looks in detail at the everyday misuse of guns, and, using newspaper accounts and oral narratives, shows that tragic gun accidents were common; and he describes how the criminal use of guns ushered in debates over stricter regulation.

Local blacksmiths soon adopted gunsmithing skills, and by the 1930s Yoruba gunsmiths had mastered the production of Dane guns. However, import rates remained

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high and consumption relied heavily on the import of gunpowder, which could be produced locally only in small quantities. Dependence on gunpowder importation was particularly exploited during the Second World War, when the British adopted a „palm kernel and rubber for gunpowder“-policy, with the aim of squeezing out more of these strategically important resources. Against all odds, this policy helped some Nigerian farmers to get a foot in the door of palm kernel production. Colonial authorities even generated artificial scarcity by hoarding gunpowder in store-houses; however, this plan proved to be an error of judgment, as the gunpowder became damp and unusable. Meanwhile, the unfair trade conditions were increasingly criticised by Nigerian nationalists.

Looking into the European possession and usage of firearms in Nigeria, their role for the construction of racial superiority becomes all the more evident. European men (and very few women) monopolised rifle shooting, particularly for leisure hunting, and this also reflected the idea of imperial control over nature. The gun was a symbol of imperialism, and for Europeans, gun possession was not a privilege, but a right. The claim to racial superiority was produced and reproduced through superior guns on a daily basis, and under the „pretext of self-defence“, „Europeans were known to commit serious gun-related violence“ (p. 147).

Through legal and illegal proliferation, firearms also played an important part in armed resistance against colonial rule in Nigeria, but proved to be much more destructive in inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts. Transition to independence in Nigeria, Aderinto underlines, may not have witnessed the same level of violence as in Algeria or Kenya, but it was by no means peaceful – and the violence of the transitional period was structured by the gun. Aderinto demonstrates that the Enugu Colliery shooting of 1949, in the course of which 21 striking coal miners were shot and killed by the Nigeria Police Force, had an even broader connection to firearms through a security report that informed the colonial authorities of the miners' access to explosives. The event also marked a turn-

ing point in the British policy on gun control in Nigeria, which only now became more restrictive with regard to shotguns. Nonetheless, guns became the dominant symbol of political power among Nigerian leaders during and after independence, and they were also violently used by „party loyalists and hooligans to intimidate opponents“ (p. 181), e. g. during the Kano riot of 1953. The postcolonial state, Aderinto makes clear in the epilogue, lost complete control over the regulation of firearms. Among other factors, such as the strong increase in arms sales through the former imperial powers, permeable borders and corruption on all levels, it was the colonial gun usage that had laid a foundation for the widespread postcolonial gun violence in postcolonial Nigeria.

The only thing the reviewer missed in this well-researched and insightful monograph was a more elaborate study of the importance of firearms for gender identities and gender relations, which is touched occasionally and obvious throughout, but not assessed systematically. And the claim that gun societies did not exist at all in Africa in earlier times (p. 7) will require more research to be either confirmed or challenged. Notwithstanding these points, Aderinto's book makes an important contribution to the history of firearms in the twentieth century. Its findings underline the major importance of guns and gun policies for the construction of colonial and postcolonial societies, and the meticulous study of the way in which guns gradually permeated everyday life is exemplary, pointing far beyond the Nigerian case.

HistLit 2019-1-005 / Felix Brahm über Aderinto, Saheed: *Guns and Society in Colonial Nigeria. Firearms, Culture, and Public Order*. Bloomington 2018, in: H-Soz-Kult 08.01.2019.