

Bio-Profile

Obituary

Dr. Nina Mba

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Bolanle Awe

Nina Mba is well-known as a feminist historian. But the picture of her that had emerged by the end of her life was that of a woman of many parts - activist, historian, journalist, biographer, literary critic and a truly humane person. One dominant theme which ran through her life was her commitment to justice, her clear analysis of the facts before her, and her frank and blunt articulation of the issues at stake. Her various life experiences and exposures moulded her into a versatile and dynamic person with diverse interests that spanned a range of disciplines. They also encouraged her to engage in different activities through which she touched the lives of many Nigerian men and women.

Her experiences from childhood defined what was to be the hallmark of her life. She grew up as a child in an environment that provoked her to ask acute questions about justice and equity. As an Australian born of Jewish parents who had managed to escape the Nazi holocaust in Europe, she was frequently exposed to the discussions of their bitter experiences, and her young mind soon began to explore the reasons for such injustice. As an undergraduate in Australia, fate also led her to meet and eventually marry a fellow student, Ben Mba, a Nigerian and historian from a different culture and geographical environment. Her entrance into Nigeria was in 1967 at the start of the Nigerian civil war between 1966 and 1970. The conflict was triggered by glaring injustices in the distribution of power and resources among the different ethnic groups of the country. Her decision to undertake postgraduate studies in history at the University of Ibadan and to focus her attention on women's contribution to politics in Nigeria presented her with yet another dimension to the issue of justice and raised for her the burning issue of women's human rights.

Nina Mba's sojourn at the University of Ibadan was the beginning of an intellectual encounter that was to dominate her professional life. Her doctoral thesis, which was eventually published as a book, *Nigerian Women Mobilised: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900 - 1965* (1982), emerged as the first full-length publication on Nigerian women in politics. It gave an insight into their resilience and their numerous, although often ignored, contributions to their country. At least two other important offshoots emerged from this major work: a full length biography of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (2000) which was co-authored with Cheryl Odim-Johnson and "The Heroines of the Women's War", a collective study of women at the grassroots, which was published in an anthology edited by Bolanle Awe, *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* (1992). In different ways, both demonstrated the leadership qualities of Nigerian women in fighting for their emancipation and their rights. They were significant not only for this reason, but also because they introduced another interesting dimension to Mba's profession as a historian - that of biographical writing.

Through the experience of writing two different types of biography, Mba was able to appreciate the value of biographical writing not only in yielding important insights about individuals, but also about the societies in which they lived and the historical processes that made them what they eventually became. This awareness of the historical insights that could be yielded through biography drove her ongoing work on biographies, particularly of key players in Nigeria's modern history. Mba produced a fascinating biography of Chief Ayo Rosiji who, after a tempestuous career in politics, had built up an impressive business empire in response to the needs of a newly independent Nigeria. There were others in the pipeline at the time of her death, and Dr. Alex Ekwueme had invited her to be a member and

coordinator of his Nigerian Biographical Foundation.

However, Mba's contributions in the field of women's studies were especially significant in opening up exploration of neglected historical actors and processes in Nigerian society. Here her writings indicate the dedication of a scholar determined to explore complex and hidden levels of human experience. They opened up a new area of knowledge production in the country, and underlined the fact that Nigerian history is not simply the history of male agency. Mba was able to demonstrate to a sceptical intellectual community the feasibility of women's studies as an academic discipline capable of generating stimulating scholarship. Through careful search of the archives, painstaking interviews, examination of oral traditions and general reading around subjects, she proved that women's contribution to development was a veritable area of study. Her writings on the political activities of Southern Nigerian women in particular have become influential sources for many scholars, both in and beyond Africa, who deal with the subject of African women's militancy against colonial oppression.

Mba was committed to the development of women's studies beyond that of providing an area of specialist research for established scholars. She also encouraged the teaching of the subject and remained dedicated to the need to make young scholars aware of the importance of women's studies and gender analysis. Mba became a staunch advocate for the introduction of women's and gender studies into regular university curricula in Nigerian universities, and at every opportunity, she encouraged and participated in panels on women's history at various conferences and workshops. At the annual congresses of the Historical Society of Nigeria, for example, she coordinated two notable panels in Ile-Ife and Kano to sensitise historians to the need for teaching women's studies. At the same time, she encouraged students, particularly at the University of Lagos where she taught, to take up gender issues for their final-year independent research projects. In fact, Mba also supervised the first Ph.D. thesis in this field at that university. Significantly, it was a thoroughly-researched project which, apart from throwing more light on the women's movement which her own work discussed, also took pains to examine the theoretical issues underpinning gender studies in Africa.

Mba's commitment inevitably made her in 1987 a founding member of the Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC), the first such centre to be established at a Nigerian university. With membership drawn from the universities of Lagos, Benin, Ile-Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and Ibadan, the centre was set up to promote research on women, to serve as a place for assembling relevant documents and information and to encourage networking among scholars working in this field. In launching it, Mba played an important role; her expertise in proposal presentation and in convincing international donors, notably the Ford Foundation and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to give financial support went a long way towards ensuring that the centre had a good start. Even in the 1990s when the establishment of women's studies had become a fact in many universities, Mba did not give up her zeal for the promotion of that discipline; in 1996, she participated in the launching of the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria, and was a member of that Network until she died. It is therefore not surprising that in 1991 she was invited to be co-editor of a special issue on African women for the prestigious SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society.

Devotion to scholarship and academic pursuit was only part of Mba's life. Indeed, she left academia before she could be promoted to a chair that she richly deserved. Outside the ivory tower, she found an outlet for her energy in other areas. She made friends easily and actively participated in a range of social and political activities. She therefore became involved in ventures that continued to stimulate her intellectually, but that also allowed her to deepen her engagement with her adopted country and continent. Literature had been one of her favourite subjects at school, and she was indeed a wordsmith with great ability to use

language skillfully and evocatively. She was one of the few non-native speakers of the Yoruba language who was able to use one of its genres, the graphic Oriki (Praise Poetry) to encapsulate in the English language her thoughts about her subject. Mba's passion for language and writing led her to become an active member of a well-known book club whose largely expatriate female membership committed itself to the study of African literature. Members of that club testify to her incisive contributions in their discussions.

A career in journalism was for her almost inevitable as she contributed articles regularly to the local papers. She soon had a regular column in *The Vanguard*, one of Nigeria's most widely read and respected papers. She used that column to comment on very topical issues that were meaningful for Nigeria's development. The column was appropriately called "The Outsider/Insider", as she wrote from the perspective of a foreigner who had adopted the country as her own and had been accepted as such by many Nigerians. No greater testimony of such acceptance could be demonstrated than her initiation into the Otu Odu society of the Igbo of Onitsha and the conferment on her of the Igbo title, *Iyom Omelorafu*, the highest honour that can be bestowed on any Igbo woman in that culture. Generally, she encouraged other foreign women married to Nigerian men to understand and appreciate the Nigerian society; and was an active member of NIGERWIVES, a club for such women who tried to understand their environment and to settle down in their adopted country by networking and discussing their experiences.

For Mba, settling down in Nigeria had never been a problem. She loved her adopted country fiercely, deeply appreciating its great potential and, like many other Nigerians, often becoming frustrated and bewildered by its failings. She therefore believed firmly in extending Nigeria's reach in the committee of nations. In particular, she was anxious to forge a closer link between Nigeria and her ancestral home, Australia. She spearheaded the formation of the Nigerian, Australia and New Zealand Association (NANZA) to promote closer relations, especially of a cultural and economic nature, between Nigeria and these two countries. Even before the formation of NANZA, she had made valiant attempts to promote dialogue among the women of these countries on gender issues.

I knew Mba for more than twenty-five years and I think it appropriate that I end this short piece on a personal note. She loved her family and was a devoted wife, mother and grandmother who made sure in an unobtrusive manner that all was well with all her family members. Since her commitment to Nigeria was total, she had no inhibitions about reaching out to Nigerians; she was a good friend and has proved fiercely loyal to many who had the privilege of calling her one. In spite of her achievements, she was unassuming and was constantly seeking further knowledge and advice in areas where she could easily be described as an authority. This wonderful life deserves a full-length biography for a true appreciation of its contributions to women's studies in Nigeria, and the country as a whole.

References

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Bolanle Awe is a historian and former Director of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan and founding Chair the Women's Research and Documentation Center. She is the first Chair of the Nigerian National Commission for Women and formerly Country Coordinator of the MacArthur Foundation. Her hobbies include visiting traditional markets and travelling.