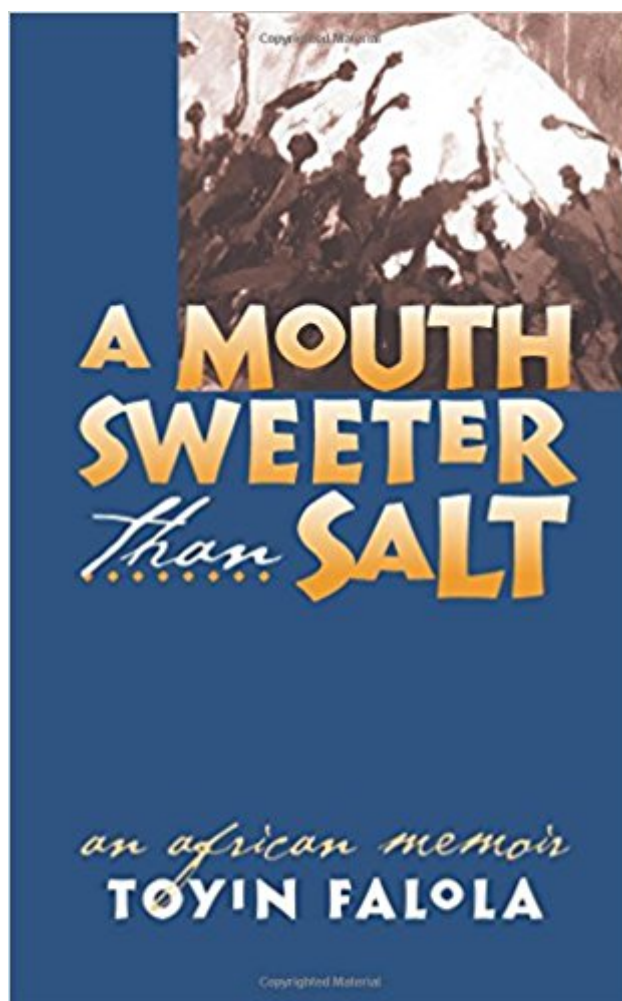


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A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt: An African Memoir



Synopsis

"Toyin Falola has given us what is truly rare in modern African writing: a seriously funny, racy, irreverent package of memories, and full of the most wonderful pieces of poetry and ordinary information. It is a matter of some interest, that the only other volume *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt* reminds one of is *Ake*, by Wole Soyinka. What is it about these Yorubas?"-Ama Ata Aidoo "A splendid coming-of-age story so full of vivid color and emotion, the words seem to dance off the page. But this is not only Falola's memoir; it is an account of a new nation coming into being and the tensions and negotiations that invariably occur between city and country, tradition and modernity, men and women, rich and poor. A truly beautiful book."-Robin D. G. Kelley "More than a personal memoir, this book is a rich minihistory of contemporary Nigeria recorded in delicious detail by a perceptive eyewitness who grew up at the crossroads of many cultures."-Bernth Lindfors "The reader is irresistibly drawn into Falola's world. The prose is lucid. There is humor. This work is sweet. Period."-Ngugi wa Thiongo'o *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt* gathers the stories and reflections of the early years of Toyin Falola, the grand historian of Africa and one of the greatest sons of Ibadan, the notable Yoruba city-state in Nigeria. Redefining the autobiographical genre altogether, Falola miraculously weaves together personal, historical, and communal stories, along with political and cultural developments in the period immediately preceding and following Nigeria's independence, to give us a unique and enduring picture of the Yoruba in the mid-twentieth century. This is truly a literary memoir, told in language rich with proverbs, poetry, song, and humor. Falola's memoir is far more than the story of one man's childhood experiences; rather, he presents us with the riches of an entire culture and community-its history, traditions, pleasures, mysteries, household arrangements, forms of power, struggles, and transformations.

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Customer Reviews

"... a rich and often profoundly beautiful book.... There's little doubt that within the growing body of African autobiographical literature, this book is going to stand high." - Sunday Independent (South Africa)"

Toyin Falola is Frances Higginbothom Nalle Centennial Professor of History and Nelson Mandela Professor of African Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Author or editor of over fifty books and countless articles, he has written extensively on subjects ranging from political economy, nationalism, development, and violence to religion.

Wow. Just, wow. In short, this is a great read for anyone who wishes to understand the context and culture surrounding the greater African independence movements of the last century. To be honest, I wasn't too keen on this book at first. I thought it was cumbersome and almost redundant. The more I read, however, I realized that the style which Falola writes is something to be savored. Too often do we read books simply to get to the next word, sentence, page, chapter. Sorry for the corny cliché, but I think it applies here: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts when it comes to this book. At first, the only parts of the book I enjoyed were the periodical African idioms and sayings. When I finally reached a point to where I could examine the totality of the message, I realized that interspersed in these memoirs is a much deeper understanding of Africa during a time of abrupt transition from a traditional culture to a foreign/forced modern one. If at first you start to lose interest, keep reading. It's definitely worth it.

I have just started to read it and I tell you that the dish of text and its context is a brother sweeter than honey, so it was worth my money's worth.

Growing up in Nigeria in the years around independence provides good material for a personal memoir. These must have been extraordinary times, full of hope and expectation for the emerging new country. For a growing teenager though, the issues were closer to home. Falola, well known scholar of African history, has used his personal experiences to create a rich innovative kind of memoir that combines his growing up during that time with events in his community and the country

as a whole. The resulting book gives the reader vivid insight into a complex society with its intricate traditions, in particular those of the Yoruba culture. Falola writes an easy accessible style, often addressing the reader directly. He demonstrates his narrative skill and an ability to impart local events with gracefulness and humour. He demonstrates how the use of proverbs, idioms and traditional imagery has remained part of everyday discourse by interweaving sayings into his narrative. "A proverb is regarded as the 'horse' that carries words to a different level, investing them with meanings...". Falola's account suggests that he was already at the age of 10 a curious youngster and an astute observer of people, relationships and events. His early fascination with trains led him to experiences beyond his age level that were to influence his standing in his family and community. After an unplanned train ride and its aftermath, that created upheaval in the family, he was transplanted to another branch of his family in a more rural sector of Ibadan, the city-state in Nigeria's south-western region. Not having taken notice of the hierarchical structure of his polygamous family, he realized only then which of his "mothers" is his birth mother. There he also learned to connect with the rich traditions of the local people who have maintained much closer links to their past than those in the urban centre. For example, children are given an additional name by the family, a praise name (oriki). This name should establish a link to a real or imaginary hero of the past. Such names should enhance the young person's deep character and his ambition to emulate the past bearer. Like a young detective he tracks an old woman, different from any he had seen in the neighbourhood. When he is finally confronted by her, the outcomes are an important lesson for his life and future. These early influences shape his thinking into his adult life. While the chapters stand as independent stories or essays, they flow together easily as a portrait of a person in his time and place. He merges the memories of his childhood with his comprehension of circumstances as an adult. Understanding of his roots and the culture instilled in him led him to study the cultural traditions of the Yoruba people and the history of the land. His reflections on how the two religions, Islam and Christianity managed to co-exist with the rich African traditions are as pertinent today as they were during the sixties. So is his criticism of the trend among the younger generation to denigrate their own culture in the face of western influences. [Friederike Knabe]

This book is arguably the greatest book I've read in a long time. It left me feeling proud to be a Yoruba, African and black. Sometimes I wished I was from Ibadan. Yes. that's how much I was intrigued by this book. lol. It wasn't all rosy, though, because Professor Falola touches on some sensitive topics about how traditional life changed for the worse with modernisation. that left me kind of sad. Another thing is, it left me looking back at my childhood in 90's with emotional nostalgia. But

his encounters with Iya Lekuloja has to be the highlight of this book. And I think this story, this memoir is not complete. Mr. Falola owes us more. Lastly, I want to see more Africans of that generation write memoirs like this.

Falola's memoir, *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt*, is a "must read" for anyone seeking to gain deeper and serious insights into the mind of the true African child. The author gives the reader a breath taking, bird eye view of the cultural panorama of the Yoruba society, and the implications of growing up in its most complicated and sophisticated city of Ibadan. The uniqueness of this book lies in its ability to transcend academic and cultural boundaries. It is as good a history book as it is a novel; social scientists will find it valuable and educators will find it to be of great relevance. It is a story of life and of living. It is indeed a celebration of youth and its rites of passage. Humor, wit, and readability add color and lucidity to all pages of this book. Wild, weird, wide, and even scary at times, this is a memoir that will stand the test of time.

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