

Alice Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile: a Saharan liberation movement governs*. Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press (hb US\$59.95 – 978 0 8122 4849 4). 2016, 296 pp.

Alice Wilson, after apparently spending half a decade off and on in the desert, has written a superb insight into the Western Saharan liberation movement. The study examines the tension between Sahrawi ‘tribes’ (to use the book’s terminology, or *qaba’il*) and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and its parent organization, the Peoples’ Liberation Front for Rio de Oro and Saqiet el-Hamra (the Polisario Front) as a palimpsest in which the overlain ‘tribes’ emerge when the SADR surface is scratched. In so doing, the book is a palimpsest of its own, between detailed anthropological analysis and the political argument that the SADR is indeed a state, or at least a project of sovereignty. There are many balls in the air (to change the metaphor), but these are handled skilfully, bouncing off each other with alacrity yet deftly caught and tossed.

More simply, this is a book about revolution. As Spain, the colonizer, withdrew from the Spanish Sahara in 1974, Morocco arrived in force and the Polisario rose to contest it on the ground until Morocco built a wall around 85 per cent of the territory, while much of the population (numbers still unknown) took refuge in camps in western Algeria near Tindouf. The movement was born in violence and, as occurs in social revolutions, the social order was disrupted and upended, with the fighters becoming the ‘upper class’, the Polisario ran the SADR and governed the refugees, and the ‘tribal’ structure, itself semi-sovereign, was targeted for elimination. In the ‘early revolutionary’ period, social relations were levelled, popularized, revolutionized. But there were ways in which the ‘tribal’ structure was still relevant, emerging to reassert itself or actually being utilized by the revolutionaries.

In 1991, under UN urging, Spain and the SADR declared a ceasefire and began to organize a referendum. They could never agree on the voters’ list and the UN gave up, but a major change occurred in the camps. The SADR focused on making a state out of the revolutionary movement. The Polisario selected the secretary-general who ran the SADR. It became institutionalized, even bureaucratized, as it prepared to move back into the territory and take over government. Yet that did not occur. Sahrawis travelled to Europe, Algeria and elsewhere, and returned to the camps to set up businesses and engage in trade; state control of food distribution from international agencies and of the economy in general gave way to more liberalized relations. ‘Tribes’ re-emerged, newly adapted to fit these new structures. It is the story of any revolution – from fervour to stasis – but with the ethnic twist giving special form to the struggle between new and old ways.

Wilson breaks down the analysis into different aspects of governance – law, resources and inequalities – to show how the proto-state and ‘tribes’ either made compromises (Part II) or continued to engage in conflict (‘dilemmas’ in Part III). The first compromise, in Chapter 3, concerns the clash between ‘tribal’, Islamic and ‘people’s’ law. The second compromise (explored in Chapter 4) is between ‘inverted taxation’ in food distribution and labour contribution. The third compromise (in Chapter 5) concerns social attempts at re-stratification in marriage arrangements. In Part III, Wilson shows how the introduction of markets by the proto-state upset gender relations and commodities while the proto-state’s creation of governing bodies with changing roles transformed the criteria for candidate selection and elections.

In the end, where do the ‘tribes’ go when the revolution appears? Where does the revolution go when the state takes over? The elements all remain and transform each other as the context evolves from a revolutionary war to a state in

waiting. This account shows how the Sahrawi experience is not just an exodus of Bedouins into desert camps but the building of a governance experience and structure. It shows that, in this governance, there is a state or a proto-state, living on borrowed territory, half-recognized and wholly uncertain, yet what is sure is the identity of the people. Whatever the final solution of the Sahrawi problem, it will have to come to terms with these elements.

Wilson does not venture into the political question of the Saharan future, although she clearly understands and sympathizes with the people in the camps and sees their organization as a candidate state. When the 'end' comes, the Sahrawi and their proto-state will face problems of integration. If the Sahrawi take over and become fully recognized, the 'tribal' population that is now on the Moroccan side will join their revolutions, along with equal numbers of Moroccans from the north. If Morocco prevails with its proposal for autonomy, in which self-determination is to take place within Morocco's borders, the same challenges will arise when the Sahrawi seek participation in elections and governance. It will not be over when the UN recognizes one solution or the other. Nevertheless, this excellent account helps bring the components of the situation into focus.

The only criticism that can be raised about this fine work is that it is often turgid and repetitious, heavy with anthropologese. But the palimpsest comes through clearly and sharply, in its detail, its analysis and its implications.

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Ebenezer Obadare, *Humor, Silence, and Civil Society in Nigeria*. Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press (hb US\$85 – 978 1 58046 551 9). 2016, 177 pp.

Nigeria has long enjoyed a dynamic public life. Even if we ignore ancient traditions of civic engagement among the region's peoples before Northern and Southern Nigeria were unified in 1914, Nigerians have long enjoyed discussing, criticizing and laughing at their rulers. More than that, today even the most casual observer must be struck by the vitality of Nigerian public engagement. From the constellation of civic organizations and their constant invocation of the 'civil society sector' to the sly observations of street-level humour, Nigerian civil society is at the heart of national life. That dynamism and centrality make Ebenezer Obadare's *Humor, Silence, and Civil Society in Nigeria* a welcome addition to the literature. Obadare notes a central paradox to his topic at the outset: no one quite agrees on what counts as 'civil society': that is to say, theoretical formulations of 'civil society' are various and often incompatible. Beyond that, many classic formulations of civil society claim that it is a specifically Western phenomenon, unavailable to African cultures. To the extent that 'civil society' has become a force to be invoked, it is because donor countries in the 1980s became disenchanted with state agencies as recipients of development assistance. NGOs became favoured project partners, their grass-roots legitimacy asserted through their status as instantiations of an authentic civil society. Nigerian civil society is critically important, but scholars cannot agree on what it is.

Obadare elaborates this provocation with élan. How can one productively discuss a phenomenon whose very contours are imprecise? Obadare does not agonize excessively over what counts as civil society – or whether a country