

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

such as Nigeria is sufficiently ‘developed’ to have one – but rather focuses on the people whose activity might be considered to be civil society and on what they do. For Obadare, more than a set of institutions or a social sector, civil society is individuals and their actions. Studying civil society therefore is possible for a commentator attuned to the nuances of Nigerian public discourse, as Obadare is. His methodological contribution is to move beyond teleological projects or classification or taxonomies of organizations. For him, civic society is an ‘ecosystem’ for individual and collective action, and, as such, is susceptible to the familiar tools of social science.

Obadare advances his argument in the introduction and first chapter, which provide a wide-ranging, incisive literature review on civil society in Africa, as well as on classical writing from Locke onwards. Chapter 2 outlines the political-economic circumstances in which contemporary civil society took on its current forms, the military regimes of 1985–99, and the Fourth Republic that succeeded them. Chapters 3 and 4 are the most ambitious contributions in the book, providing a new reading of public discourse outside state institutions – the arena of civil society, according to Obadare’s formulation. He points to the central importance of humour in Nigerian popular assessments of the country’s rulers, both the centrality of satirical discourse in journalism and the ubiquity of political jokes throughout daily social interaction. The discussion leads him to his last chapter, which Obadare glosses as a study of the role of silence, of public figures who publicly refuse to comment on official action, making the case that any form of engagement creates moral complicity. Centred on the actions of a former federal Attorney General, Chief Bola Ige, whose silence served as commentary on the grotesque excesses of the military regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, the chapter provides the book’s most important payoff. Here, Obadare leads us beyond the somewhat sterile dichotomies of accommodation and resistance, or of active and passive resistance, and instead demonstrates some of the basic grammar of Nigerian public discourse and political life, an approach that promises insight for other contexts as well.

Humor, Silence, and Civil Society in Nigeria is a highly intelligent book. It develops important arguments, and it opens up a line of inquiry that will enrich our study of civil society. It is also an extended commentary on Nigerian political life from a deeply knowledgeable and engaged observer. If I have a criticism, it is that Obadare’s important intervention is sometimes eclipsed in a narrative that feels more driven by literature review than by his own argument. That is a pity, because Obadare’s contribution is so significant; his mastery of the secondary literature is clear, and I would have appreciated a more extended engagement with Nigerian realities. For that reason, the book is unlikely to work well as a teaching text, nor will it appeal to non-specialists. However, for scholars of Nigeria and of civil society, this is a key text, and I hope Obadare will develop its arguments more fully in future work.

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