

A MOST CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE OF
POST-INDEPENDENCE NIGERIA

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Obasanjo, Nigeria and the World. By JOHN ILIFFE. Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2011. Pp. xii + 326. £45.00, hardback (ISBN 978-184701-027-8).

KEY WORDS: Nigeria, biography, politics/political, postcolonial.

John Iliffe's *Obasanjo, Nigeria and the World* provides a rich and dispassionate biography of one of post-independence Nigeria's most noted and controversial figures. Much more than a biography, Iliffe's account offers a revealing and remarkably comprehensive overview of postcolonial Nigerian history. A military head-of-state in the 1970s and a civilian president from 1999 to 2007, Olesugun Obasanjo was a central actor in nearly all of Nigeria's recent history, from the civil war in the late 1960s to the recent transition to civilian rule and the country's troubled efforts to bring about democracy and development in the twenty-first century.

Given Obasanjo's polarizing legacy, and particularly the extent of his unpopularity at the end of his second term as a civilian president, when he was widely believed to have attempted to engineer a third term by manipulating political and state institutions for his own benefit, Iliffe's account may come across to some as insufficiently critical. But even to those who will judge Obasanjo's career and historical impact more harshly, in reading Iliffe's account it will be impossible not to be struck by how integral Obasanjo's life story has been to Nigeria's history over the past fifty years. The fact that Iliffe can tell, more or less, the entire post-independence history of Nigeria through the prism of Obasanjo's life is certainly testimony to this. Iliffe makes an even stronger case, arguing and documenting how Obasanjo not only lived and reflected that history, but also, as much as any Nigerian, made that history with his decisions, his leadership, and his overwhelming will.

The evidence for Iliffe's book does not include any recent visits to Nigeria; nor did he interview Obasanjo. It is an unauthorized biography, but one I suspect that Obasanjo would, overall, be pleased with. The fact that Iliffe relies so heavily on published accounts – most especially newspaper and magazine archives, but also Obasanjo's own many autobiographical books – is an interesting aspect of the account, at once a strength and a weakness. Iliffe evinces a laudable and uncanny ability to extract and present a coherent and fair-minded narrative based on the often blustering and biased accounts characteristic of much of the Nigerian print media, not to mention the frequently egomaniacal versions of his own role in Nigerian history that Obasanjo offers in his writing. Iliffe allows us to see through the bluster to grasp the underlying substance. Indeed, the reader comes to realize just how astute Obasanjo is in his analyses of Nigerian political culture. Also striking in Iliffe's use of Obasanjo's published works is that those writings mirror a larger dynamic in Obasanjo's political career: the leader's keen grasp of Nigeria's problems and his profound failure to see his own shortcomings in the same light (captured succinctly in Obasanjo's condemnation of Nigerian politicians and his countrymen in general for their 'unusual love for grandeur'). But because Iliffe does not interview Obasanjo or any Nigerians who lived under his rule, many intriguing dimensions of the man and the way Nigerians experienced his leadership are not fully pursued.

As much as one can appreciate Iliffe's effort at evenhandedness, anyone who lived in Nigeria during Obasanjo's eight years as a civilian president will be frustrated by the author's unwillingness (or perhaps inability, based on the limitations of the

sources he used) to tackle more directly questions about Obasanjo's involvement in corruption. Iliffe acknowledges that Obasanjo was surrounded by corruption and certainly benefited from it (though he suggests that Obasanjo did not benefit as much as he might have), but he chooses to emphasize Obasanjo's role as a Nigerian patriot, suggesting that the erstwhile president – though obsessed with power – was fundamentally motivated by his vision for a united and internationally respected Nigeria. This approach, while refreshing in its refusal to succumb to popular stereotypes about Nigerian politics, also neglects the significant ways in which Obasanjo's regime perpetuated and worsened inequality and political cronyism, to his own benefit.

In addition to Obasanjo's role in Nigerian domestic political history, Iliffe shows persuasively that Obasanjo was almost undoubtedly Nigeria's most globalized leader, as a military head-of-state, a civilian president, and a prominent international citizen. Given how infrequently national histories of Africa and biographies of African leaders are told with an attention to international sphere, Iliffe's extensive treatment of Obasanjo's global role – from his early days in Congo, to the fight against apartheid while he was still in the military, to the formation of the African Union during his civilian presidency, and much more – is a welcome emphasis. Iliffe certainly seems to think that Obasanjo's legacy, including his international stature, will look much greater and more positive after the bitterness surrounding his last years in office has faded.

Perhaps Iliffe's account would have looked different had he chosen to travel to Nigeria and interview Obasanjo, his political contemporaries, and ordinary citizens about their experiences during his rule. But regardless of how one judges Iliffe's treatment of Obasanjo the man, I think there can be little dispute that Iliffe has demonstrated convincingly that Obasanjo has been a grand historical figure. It is as a history of postcolonial Nigeria, through the lens of one man's life, that this book makes its most interesting and lasting contribution.

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A SOURCE OF LIMITED VALUE FOR HISTORIANS OF AFRICA

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Wolseley and Ashanti: The Asante War Journal and Correspondence of Major General Sir Garnet Wolseley 1873–1874. Edited by IAN F.W. BECKETT.

Brimscombe: The History Press for the Army Records Society, 2009.

Pp. xii + 548. No price given (ISBN 978-0-7524-5180-0).

KEY WORDS: Ghana, imperialism, military, sources, war.

The 'Sagrenti War' of 1874, a British-led invasion of Asante, was a devastating blow to the kingdom, resulting in the death and displacement of thousands, the burning of numerous towns and villages, and the (brief) occupation and destruction of the Asante capital of Kumasi itself. Within a year the Asantehene Kofi Kakari was removed from office, and the unity of the kingdom was threatened by a series of rebellions. But the war also cemented the military career of Sir Garnet Wolseley, who organized and commanded the invading British and African forces, as well as those of a number of subordinate officers who served in the expedition. The war was covered extensively in the British press, and a plethora of books appeared in