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Searching for the normal in the wake of the Liberian war by SHARON ALANE ABRAMOWITZ
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp 268. $65 (hbk)
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This important book follows Liberians in search for a 'new normal' in the years of recovery after ten years of civil war. The book is, in Abramowitz's words, about 'the relationship between individual and collective trauma and the project of postwar social repair during a moment in which the Liberian state and its citizenry were in a state of traumatic transition' and it explores 'the new normal through the lens of the massive global humanitarian project of reconstruction' (p. 4). The focus of the book shifts in scale, from individual traumas and stories to a nationwide political order or maybe a 'moral national disorder' (p. 11). Theoretically Abramowitz debunks popular cycle-of-violence ideas, but shows how such positions were nevertheless central building bricks to psychosocial work in Liberia. Throughout the book she shows how western ideas of trauma are coupled with local ideas. It is to the 'interventionscape' (p. 36) the book contributes most substantially by scrutinising how Euro-American interventions facilitate the development of a 'new normal'. Fused with local responses novel ways of dealing with trauma are created – a pidgin psychiatry (p. 11). Abramowitz shows how trauma workshops and other psychosocial methods geared Liberians with new tools to deal with individual traumas and collectivised became an effort towards 'healing' the nation. It wasn't neat and controlled, but was rather a mess of unregulated, NGO self-styled counselling that also came to include abstract conflict resolution methods and indirect evangelisation of human rights and other western values. In her rich and fascinating material Abramowitz comes to the conclusion that despite the apparent mess the creation of a new normal went rather well.

In essence this is a very good book, but I still have some issues, especially two main concerns. First, Liberians always use the expression 'normal day' to connote what was before the war and what they hope to see after the war. 'Normal day,' as an expression, is however mostly a nostalgia for a past that was never there. According to most Liberians during 'normal day' all kids went to school, poverty was limited, the state was fair and there was little everyday violence. In short: life was good. But scrutinising Liberia's at times very brutal history shows a quite different picture. Abramowitz however use this idealised 'normal day' backdrop as she seamlessly crosses over from normal day society to what is mentally normal in opposition to the traumatic or pathological (p. 60). By focusing on the new normal in relation to the civil war and the imagined old normal she at times appears to pathologise the entire nation in a

collective war trauma, where a new normal is positively strengthened by a western, neoliberal, human rights based socio-cultural regime. Indeed the war traumatised many, but not all, and a majority has found other ways to deal with it outside the interventionscape. Indeed, in my own work with ex-combatants I have been struck by how well most of them cope and how mentally sound they are despite their previously violent conducts.

Second, a good deal of Abramowitz's knowledge comes from field work, in particular by interviewing psychosocial workers themselves as well as people who were aided by them. Yet very few are found outside the interventionscape. Maybe this is why there is an over-focus (and maybe over-belief) in the constructive change that the humanitarian regime can accomplish in creating a new normal? In my own work, having almost always worked outside, although in parallel with, the interventionscape, I have observed distrust and resistance between those outside and inside. I want to highlight this difference with two examples where my analysis may diverge from Abramowitz. In the first case Abramowitz joins a trauma team going to the countryside (p. 71ff). Sharing lodging with two of the trauma workers she notices that they both wake up in the middle of the night, apparently because of nightmares about the war. Both pray to God and then go back to sleep. They never talk about this, but Abramowitz concludes that these are the effects of traumas from the war. Although I cannot say for certain that my analysis is either more correct or better, what comes to my mind is instead the constant fear that urbanites, even if they are born on the countryside, have when they travel to rural areas. Traversing Liberia often accompanied by urbanites I have been struck by how otherwise sound people refuse to sleep in villages, hardly exit their car, or even dare not turn off the engine: a fear that stems from a combination of rumours of witchcraft and beliefs of the violent habits of rural dwellers.

Abramowitz also narrates a story where the trauma team makes a stop in a village to fix a flat tyre (p. 114ff). One of the boys at the tyre shop is identified as an ex-combatant. The narration that follows shows to Abramowitz a team of psychosocial workers devoted to their chore efficiently aiding an ex-combatant in need for psycho-social guidance. The young man in the story obeys like a small boy and hardly says more than amen. Travelling with urbanites I have seen similar stories unfold many times, but I have also been the researcher staying in these settings and encountered the other side. After the team had left there is a good chance that the young man would straighten up his body posture, spit on the ground, and grumble something like 'these people in their white cars enter like kings and queens, think they know everything and are all powerful' (and the way many local NGO employees after a visit carry off poultry and agricultural products show outright disrespect). He does not challenge the visitor upfront, but usually he would ignore the talk, brushing it off because it does not rhyme with his reality. There is a covert power structure that is not directly visible which he will both obey and resist.

As in the Indian story of a group of blind people trying to find out what an elephant looks like; where one examine a foot, another one the trunk, one the tail etc.; as individual researchers we only research a small part of a huge animal. In Abramowitz's case she has examined the interventionscape, and she has done this well (and I have myself researched another part), but we

ought not to forget that the trunk is only one part of the elephant and furthermore that the whole is more than the sum of all parts.

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Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities and Conflict in Northern Nigeria, edited by ABDUL RAUFU MUSTAPHA
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This collection brings together experts interested in adding nuance and historical depth to understandings of Northern Nigeria's contemporary religious landscape. The volume parallels another recent collection, *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, edited by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2014), but is broader in scope. *Sects & Social Disorder* will be useful for readers seeking to contextualise the violence by Boko Haram, but also for audiences interested in Qur'anic schooling, Muslim immigrants in northern Nigeria, and minority Muslim sects. In his foreword to the volume, Muhammad Sani Umar emphasises its strengths: its multi-causal explanations for complex phenomena, and its grounding in fieldwork and careful documentation.

The volume includes seven chapters, three of them by the editor, Abdul Raufu Mustapha, and another co-authored by Mustapha and Mukhtar Bunza. In Mustapha's introductory chapter, he sketches Northern Nigeria's religious history from the jihad of Shaykh 'Uthman dan Fodio in 1804 to the present, highlighting three themes: religious fragmentation, struggles over texts, and changing attitudes toward the state. Mustapha and Bunza investigate these themes further in the chapter 'Contemporary Islamic Sects and Groups in Northern Nigeria,' discussing Sufi orders, the Izala movement, Nigeria's Shi'a, and Boko Haram. The authors also note the significant presence of unaffiliated Muslims. This is mostly familiar ground, but it is presented skilfully.

In two other chapters, Mustapha analyses Boko Haram. The chapter 'Understanding Boko Haram' argues for a 'multi-dimensional evidence-based approach' (p. 166) focused on doctrines, poverty, politics, personal agency, and geographic context. In the volume's conclusion, Mustapha critiques Nigerian government policy toward security and governance, advocating a 'more concentrated approach to poverty' (p. 215) as well as the promotion of a 'counter-doctrine' (p. 217). These recommendations are not new, but that does not make them wrong.

Three other chapters showcase elements of Muslim life that are often neglected or misrepresented in discussions of northern Nigeria today, namely history, education and ethnicity. Murray Last shows how dissent has recurred from the time of dan Fodio through moments of resistance to colonialism and up to post-colonial episodes of violence. He examines manifestations of dissent in ritual, dress, and exodus. Hannah Hoechner, meanwhile, continues to challenge stereotypes of Qur'anic students (Hausa: *almajirai*).[1] Here she argues that far from existing as a clearly demarcated, marginalised group, *almajirai*