

REVIEW ESSAY

THE TROUBLE WITH NIGERIA

Levi A. Nwachuku and G. N. Uzoigwe, eds. *Troubled Journey: Nigeria since the Civil War*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2004. xxviii + 340 pp. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. Maps. Photographs. Tables. \$60.00. Paper.

Robert I. Rotberg, ed. *Crafting the New Nigeria*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2004. x + 273 pp. List of Acronyms. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. Maps. Tables. \$55.00. Cloth.

Ayo Olukotun. *Repressive State and Resurgent Media Under Nigeria's Military Dictatorship, 1988–98*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004. Research report no. 126. 136 pp. SEK 100. Paper.

Osita Agbu. *Ethnic Militias and the Threat to Democracy in Post-transition Nigeria*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004. Research report no. 127. 53 pp. Bibliography. Appendixes. SEK 100. Paper.

Timothy Tseror. *Democratic Rule in Nigeria*. Jos, Nigeria: Greenworld Publishing Company Ltd., 2002. ix + 93 pp. Bibliography. Index. Price not reported. Paper.

Nigeria remains one of the most important and fascinating countries in Africa, with abundant human and material resources. If these could be harnessed effectively, Nigeria could easily become one of the most influential countries in the world. The country has played a leadership role in everything from the liberation of southern Africa to the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union, and the attempted stabilization of Liberia and other states in the region.

The decline of Nigeria, although not as severe as the decline and even collapse of other states in Africa, has saddened all who love her and disheartened all who had hoped for great things from independent Africa. Today Nigeria is better known for the “scam spam” that clutters up Internet mailboxes around the world than for its great authors, musicians, and other creative people. Massive investments in industry have failed to industrialize the country; the hope of post-Biafra, oil-boom Nigeria has given way to cynicism, corruption, and despair. The great religiosity of Nigerians has

become less a call to righteousness than a reason to murder followers of other religions. Who can ponder Confucius's famous statement that "the material prosperity of a country does not consist in material prosperity, but in righteousness" without thinking of Nigeria? Understanding the decline, if not quite yet fall, of Nigeria is one of the most important tasks facing Africanist scholars today.

If journalism is the first draft of history, the books under review here represent its second draft. They are all concerned with recent events in Nigeria, are written by social scientists and historians, and often use journalistic accounts as primary sources. They seek to make sense of the recent past in order to help readers understand contemporary events in Nigeria. All make important contributions to our understanding of recent developments in Nigeria, though in different ways.

Probably the most useful book to the widest number of readers of the *African Studies Review* would be *Troubled Journey: Nigeria since the Civil War*. It is a reference history of Nigeria over the past few decades, and incorporates most of the events and personalities that those writing about or working in Nigeria need to know. It could well serve as a textbook for political science classes about Nigeria or Africa in general. The book opens with two survey chapters to set the context, the first dealing with Nigeria before independence and the second with Nigeria after independence. Then follow nine chapters about post-Civil War Nigeria, organized by administration or regime, with a concluding chapter speculating on the future of Nigeria.

Troubled Journey not only contains much important information, it also makes a number of important analytical points. The authors note that Nigeria, both as a colony and as an independent country, has been dominated by the military; at the same time, the politicization of the military has led to a militarization of Nigerian politics. Indeed, when I was in Nigeria in 2000, many people commented that the long experience of different military regimes had left Nigeria without distinct civilian political parties but with a military divided clearly into a more conservative, repressive party (dominant in the Buhari and Abacha regimes) and a more liberal, tolerant party (dominant in the Obasanjo and Babangida regimes). When I returned in 2004, Nigerians explained that the liberal military party had metamorphosed into the ruling PDP, whereas the conservative military party had become the All Nigerian People's Party, each of which had run former military heads of state for president in 2003. Essays in the book make clear that the military had been running a unitary state in disguise and that therefore democratization led to centrifugal tendencies. Ironically, this contradicts a basic premise of the book, stated at its beginning, which is that the Nigerian "nation" is somehow a natural phenomenon, whose coming together might have happened without colonialism.

This is not the only flaw in the book. More serious is the fact that it does not reflect what Nigerians refer to as "federal character." All of the

authors are southern Nigerians, most of them Igbos (as the ethnonym is spelled in the book). This is not to suggest that Igbo perspectives are irrelevant to understanding Nigeria; indeed, the failure of Nigeria to effectively use the many talents of the Igbo people is one of the major problems of contemporary Nigeria—and a major reason why so many writers of this book are working as expatriate scholars in North America. However, the statement on page 1, “that the conventional thinking that regards Nigeria as a mere historical expression is flawed,” and that there exists “in fact, a natural unity to Nigerian history and geography,” is not only contrary to the feelings of the Yoruba followers of Obafemi Awolowo (not to mention other Nigerians), it is a misunderstanding of the nature of states and the method by which the Nigerian federation was created. Coming from erstwhile Biafrans, this position is strange to the point of surrealism, although one should note that it seems to originate in Nnamdi Azikiwe’s early position, as opposed to Awolowo’s support of a nationalities policy for Nigeria.

The absence of northern voices in the book leads to statements about the north that are questionable at best and should have been challenged. For example, the idea that the Hausa-Fulani have monopolized all power in Nigeria since independence is a popular one in Nigeria but one that has been questioned by many. Similarly, the analysis of the imposition of criminal *shari’a* law in many northern states fails to provide a real understanding of the issue, repeating instead the hysterical claims of many southerners who have not read the laws in question and do not realize how carefully crafted they were to avoid conflict with the Nigerian constitution. The “conventional wisdom” about the shari’a issue, “that religion is being used as an opiate of the people” (300), may be the conventional wisdom of southerners, but it is not that of any northerners or even “middle belt”ers” with whom I have spoken. The problems of criminality and vice are real in Nigeria, and criminal shari’a is a popular solution among northern Muslims at the present time. This is an issue on which the masses have been ahead of their leaders, and the enactment of shari’a is arguably the most democratic and truly federal thing that has been accomplished in the current Nigerian republic. Whether shari’a law is a good idea is, of course, another issue entirely, but it is ironic to hear many Nigerians calling for “true federalism” with one breath and decrying shari’a laws in the north with the other. This reviewer would also like to have seen more discussion of General Babangida’s failed transition to democracy. Not that Nigerians have not already said plenty about the cancellation of the June 12th elections, but this cancellation has too often been presented, even by those who should know better, purely as a Hausa versus Yoruba battle. The positions of Igbo intellectuals deserve to have a better airing, especially if they see the tragedy from a different perspective.

Crafting the New Nigeria presents more varied perspectives from both expatriate scholars and Nigerians (including a lone northerner). It is of most

interest, as the title implies, to those concerned with the “nation-building” school of social engineering, and it assembles a wide range of distinguished experts to ponder the mistakes made in building the Nigerian nation to date. As the product of a conference held at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, the collection not only reflects the wisdom of the conferees but also their interactions with each other (with copious cross-references between chapters). It is not intended to be a comprehensive reference work but rather a series of attempts to diagnose what has gone wrong with Nigeria and to prescribe solutions for the future. This breadth of analysis and information makes the book indispensable for anyone interested in understanding Nigerian politics; indeed, it should be required reading not only for political scientists specializing in Nigeria, but also for diplomats, NGO workers, expatriate businessmen, and others who need to understand the political economy of Nigeria today. It should also be published in a Nigerian edition available to administrators and voters there.

The thoughts this book will provoke are many. For example, a recurring theme, implicitly or explicitly, is that there is a fundamental contradiction between the federal nature of the Nigerian polity and the unitary nature of its funding: 95 percent of Nigeria’s foreign exchange comes from the oil revenues accruing to the federal government. Federal funds are then disbursed to state and local governments, which have become dependent on oil money from the federal coffers for their existence, but the formula for disbursing such funds is one of the most contentious issues in Nigerian politics. This is as central to the issues of federalism and state creation in Nigeria as is the more frequently studied issue of ethnicity.

The three other books under review here are much shorter and more specialized. In the first of the two from the Nordic Africa Institute, Ayo Olukotun looks at the repression of the Nigerian media under both General Babangida and General Abacha. This will be an especially useful work for those who will compile the inevitable third draft of Nigeria’s history. They will need to evaluate their sources carefully, for the Nigerian press has always presented problems. While it is highly developed and has a strong tradition of independence, its accuracy is less certain than its freedom. It faced trying times, first under Buhari and then under the later Babangida regime, as well as under Abacha. The economic problems of Nigeria have also adversely affected the press: Readership has declined, and media outlets have had to support themselves by off-market infusions of funds. If a free press is really a market-regulated press, the Nigerian press is more than free, for declining readership has not affected the profitability of some publications. This extension of Nigeria’s endemic corruption into the fourth estate has unfortunately left it unable to perform its traditional function of exposing corruption. One result has been a further decline in readership, leading to a vicious circle in which even the literary quality of many newspapers and magazines has suffered. The recent explosion of Internet

use is promising to shake up the Nigerian information landscape even more radically in the future.

Olutokun's book is good on detail and nuance, and in several places it specifically rejects the facile misreading of the June 12th crisis as an ethno-sectional one. I was particularly pleased to read the details of such incredible happenings as the state security service's publication of fake editions of *Tell* magazine. One edition of *News* magazine actually announced on its cover that it was a banned publication! Stopping Nigerians from saying what they want to say is simply impossible—I have been there under both Buhari and Abacha, and know that criticism of the government is going to come out whether the government likes it or not. Desktop publishing and the Internet make it even more difficult to suppress freedom of the press. I hope the Nigerian government has finally just given up.

Osita Agbu's study highlights another problem of Nigeria: the appearance of ethnic militias in parts of the country. Post-Biafra Nigeria has not had state police, primarily because the Northern Regional Police were unpopular in large areas of the former Northern Region. This constitutes a major flaw in Nigerian federalism, arguably leaving the constituent parts of the federation without the partial sovereignty that is indispensable to true federalism. This vacuum has been filled in part by such local militias as the Bakassi Boys, the Egbesu Boys, the Chikoko Movement, and the O'odua Peoples Congress. The failure and corruption of the Nigerian federal police have given such local militias much popularity. Agbu includes the Arewa Peoples Congress in his list of militias, but this probably betrays a lack of familiarity with the north. The equivalent of these local militias in the north would have to be the various shari'a enforcement groups that have been set up. If the Nigerian federation finally collapses, these various local militias will probably constitute the successor states.

In *Democratic Rule in Nigeria*, Timothy Tseror paints a short but detailed portrait of Nigeria in decline. This is a study of Obasanjo's second-coming as a civilian elected president, rather than a military head of state, and it is organized thematically. After an opening look at the collapse that occurred after Abacha's death and the hurried transition that swept Obasanjo into office, chapters follow on political, social, and economic developments, as well as one on international relations. Tseror mentions the existence not only of local militias but also of private armies of thugs. Indeed, the incidence of political assassinations in Nigeria is appalling: Sometime after the publication of this book, the federal attorney general himself was gunned down in his own bedroom. Although the outspokenness of many Nigerians may be a good sign for democratization, the increasing level of political violence is not. At the same time, the very level of violence and crime has led many Nigerians to support local militia groups.

Tseror makes a number of other good points, such as connecting the implementation of shari'a law with the increasing demands of southern states for control of their oil wealth. He also points out that many gover-

nors use the cover of “true federalism” to borrow an immense amount of money, pocketing the loot and leaving the federal government with the bill. The Nigerian textile industry, once thriving and hoping to lead an export boom, has almost collapsed under the dumping of Chinese textiles. One of the few bright spots is the absence of media closings or detentions of journalists since Obasanjo’s return to power. While some politicians have sponsored violence against their opponents, no such charge has been directed at Obasanjo. True, the elections of 1993 were not the best in Nigeria’s history, but there is little doubt that Obasanjo still enjoys broad support among many Nigerians. The major complaint against him in this book is that his treatment of the grievances of certain minority groups (in particular the Tiv and the Ijaw) has not made him popular with them. The treatment of minorities is, of course, a problem in any system of majority rule. It has been a perennial problem in Nigeria, and will continue to be so into the foreseeable future.

All of these books have some surprising omissions. The fact that the military has always insisted on an executive president over the objections of the civilian politicians is never touched upon, despite the fact that many authors comment on the common, allegedly frivolous, impeachment moves not only against various state governors but even against Obasanjo himself. While charges of impeachment may or may not be justified, in many cases they seem to be at least partly motivated by a desire to make the executive subordinate to the legislature, instead of an independent organ of government. This phenomenon underscores the need for a real understanding of the “American system” Nigeria has adopted (ironically on the orders of General Murtala Muhammad, the most anti-American president Nigeria ever had). Whatever the country, the executive is such an important prize that it pressures politicians into two parties. Certain features of the Nigerian constitutions, along with the fractured nature of its contentious body politic, have worked against this tendency. Nigerian politicians, and the public, need to have a better understanding of how the American system works and how their own differs from it in many details.

Also not really dealt with in any of these books is the question of whether nation-building works at all. The authors in the Nwachuku/Uzoigwe volume assume that Nigeria is a natural nation and does not need to be built. The authors of most of the other works under review here, especially the Rotberg volume, assume that nation-building can succeed if the right formula can be found. It is a cliché of the independence era that it was much easier for Africans to make the leap from local and ethnic allegiances to a sense of pan-African identity than to any loyalty to the artificial “nations” created by the colonial powers. It is worth considering whether pan-Africanism has become necessary to rescue these artificial postcolonial states from impending disaster, a disaster that has already struck many of them. These states are not natural; they are not even

arbitrary, random lines on a map. They were deliberately designed to facilitate outside “divide and rule” manipulation. Consequently, they will either unite into a greater federation or federations, or they will continue to collapse, one by one.

Social scientists must remember what states are. They are institutions that attempt to monopolize force in order to control a territory and extract a surplus from it. The Nigerian state was created first by the Royal Niger Company, then by Frederick Lugard and his West African Frontier Force. Lugard built an army of “middle belt” minorities to conquer the Sokoto Caliphate before using the institutions of the Caliphate to control the middle belt, eventually extending his system of indirect rule to the whole country, employing a surplus from the south to subsidize the north, and perfecting one of the most effective forms of divide and rule ever devised in Africa, if not the world. This same middle belt-dominated army held Nigeria together in the Biafran War; it is still predominantly composed of middle beltlers. Any serious look at Nigeria must consider the middle belt central, and not only in the geographical sense. The fact, unnoted in any of these books, that the current ruling PDP began as an attempt to create an autonomous middle belt political force is only more evidence of this.

John Edward Philips
Hirosaki University
Hirosaki, Japan