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BOOK REVIEWS

Ebenezer Obadare, *Humor, Silence, and Civil Society in Nigeria*, Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2016. Pages: x + 177. ISBN: 978-1-58046-551-9

Obadare provides both humour and serious analysis in this fascinating book. Born and brought up in Nigeria, he later moved to USA where he is currently professor of sociology at the University of Kansas. This dual nationality should help the book to be appreciated in the West (taken to mean, in this review, mainly western Europe and north America) as well as in Africa. The author has experienced persecution, principally in his last years as a journalist in Nigeria, and more comfortable living in Nigeria and USA. Perhaps as a result, his understanding of the richness and frailty of our human condition come across forcibly and sympathetically.

In between the Introduction, in which Obadare outlines his life and the topics to be discussed, and the Conclusion, the book is arranged into four chapters. The first two focus on civil society, the third on humour and the last on silence. The meaning of civil society may seem obvious in the West, where democracy is regarded as the norm. But this is not the case in Nigeria where dictatorships have been frequent. The economic situations of Africa and the West are also very different. Obadare shows how 'the language about civil society emerged in Africa and became the vocabulary of antistate forces' (p. 49).

Readers may best begin with Chapter 3 'Use of Levity.' Humour helps the marginalized to keep sane, it is argued, and is useful for political engagement and subversion. Humour, therefore, is a serious matter. The chapter is particularly well illustrated with concrete examples and quotations: from the marginalized who kept their composure, dictatorial presidents of Nigeria who acquired dubious popularity by their 'folksy and flesh pressing style' (p. 68), and many people in-between. Silence is the focus of chapter 4, but silence in various senses: from not speaking and silent manifestations to the

bodily silence of stripping naked as a form of protest. In these way silence can be a very positive and powerful form of protest rather than mere absence or negativity.

The argumentation is tight and complex throughout, with many meanings of civic society, humour and silence being considered. Obadare is well aware that Africa is larger than Nigeria. So the book provides a triangular framework: Nigeria, Africa, the West. Statements in the book are supported by extensive references to recent literature and these publications are collected together in the bibliography 'Works Cited,' which lists some four hundred books and articles. The majority are by western authors but Nigerians and other Africans form a decent minority. This imbalance is largely explained by the longstanding concept of civil society in the West — especially through John Locke, Adam Ferguson, Alexis de Tocqueville and Antonio Gramsci (p. 40) — contrasting with its recent arrival in Africa and resistance there to accepting it in a western form. As Peter Ekeh has warned, there is the danger of 'misapplying Western political constructs to African circumstances, especially when their analyses concern such history-soaked concepts as civil society' (p. 45).

The book is mainly about men, but feminine humour and forms of silence are given some space. More sympathy might have been shown towards the difficulties of high political life in Africa — the presidents and other top politicians mentioned appear in largely negative light — as well as more attention to the political weaknesses of the West. Altogether the work is attractively presented, carefully argued — so careful at times that the argumentation may appear over-analytic, almost convoluted — and very informative. Readers will come to appreciate the splendid qualities and resilience of Nigerians, and of Africans more generally, as well as their difficulties.

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Francesca Aran Murphy, ed. and Troy A. Stefano, Assistant ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pages: xvii + 670. ISBN: 978-0-19-964190-1

Francesca Murphy, in the opening paragraph of her Introduction, makes the bold claim, "This is indeed a classic, comprehensive textbook on Christology whose value will be evident for many decades to come." Is this claiming too much? The rest of the Introduction (pp. 1-5) is the best place to start your evaluation. Here