

**John Iliffe**, *Obasanjo: Nigeria and the World* (London: James Currey, 2011), pp. xiii+326; ISBN 9781847010278; \$80.

This is a fascinating story of an elderly historian writing about an elderly politician, indeed of a retired historian writing about a retired politician. Both seek to continue to claim relevance – Iliffe writing yet another long book, and Obasanjo claiming to influence Nigerian politics. The small fonts of the book may mean that both Iliffe and Obasanjo, and those of their age as prospective readers, may have to endure torture in reading it.

The main source upon which the book relies – i.e. contemporary Nigerian newspapers – is precisely what Obasanjo also despises. As a free press, Nigerian newspapers contain verifiable and non-verifiable stories, accounts, facts, honorary facts, and gossip. The long-term legacy of the book rests solely on the accuracy of the main source itself. Iliffe himself admits to the very limitations of his sources.

Remarkably, Iliffe has written about a controversial man and politician in a non-controversial manner, avoiding taking sides with Obasanjo's numerous critics, but explaining the reasons for the contradictions in his life-style, policies and politics. Reading Iliffe's book, there is so much to like about Obasanjo: with an initial education ending at the grammar school level (plus military training), he became an author of no less than twelve books; from a poor background, he eventually became a wealthy man; and from an ordinary Yoruba boy, he became a preeminent Nigerian patriot. A multi-tasking personality, Obasanjo's enormous energy was deployed into politics, business, administration and diplomacy.

As the book also makes clear, there is so much to resent about former Nigerian President Obasanjo: for example, he has little or no loyalty to friends and associates; he sees himself as a messiah without whom Nigeria will not make progress; his personal style is arrogant and over-bearing; and he can be vengeful.

Both his strengths and weaknesses are captured in a biography that conveys Obasanjo's life from his birth to the end of his second term as president of Nigeria in 2007. Chapter one sets the stage, presenting Obasanjo as a bundle of contradictions. According to Iliffe, Obasanjo and Nigeria are both complicated entities. Highlighting these complications and contradictions about the man and his country, the biography explains that both had abilities and talents, but that they could not transform themselves from negative to positive entities.

The chronology covers his early years and formative period as a "Yoruba boy" (chapter 2); his service in the army (chapter 3); his involvement in the Nigerian civil war (chapter 4); his leadership and being head of the country in the 1970s (chapters 5, 6, and 7); his retirement and service in various capacities as a farmer, author, diplomat, personal and political woes, and return to power (chapters 9-14); and his activities as president for two terms from 1999 to 2007 (chapters 15-23), and finally his retirement (chapter 24). In all, there are problems and prospects for Obasanjo, moving from failure to success, and then to failure. Problems and controversies seem to follow him, some of his own making, some created for him by his enemies, and some the consequences of his style and approach to power and political management.

His legacy remains controversial. To him, he managed a transition from one civilian government to another (yet, his successor – Yar' Adua – was known to be a chronically-sick man, who died in office). He claimed to have united Nigeria, although all the ethnic and

religious divides are still flourishing. He wants credit for improving the country's image; yet his successors embarked on "rebranding" the country's image. He, above all, wants to be credited with better economic management, yet the level of corruption has never been so high and pervasive.

If Obasanjo started life as a poor and humble man, he is ending it as a rich as well as arrogant person, a testimony to the changing vicissitudes of life that Iliffe has brilliantly captured in stages, turns and phases. One thing is clear: Nigeria is yet to produce a political hero, whose accomplishments and legacies can transform the country and move it to the next level. In spite of all of his limitations, Obasanjo has ensured that no one can write about modern Nigeria without mentioning his name. Thus, Iliffe has offered an excellent introduction to an important, if flawed, character that contributed to the shaping of Nigerian history since the 1960s. Iliffe uses an enchanting language to create an engaging-*cum*-engaged biography, providing both descriptions and analyses, events and interpretations, creating a tapestry of the very complex nature of a country struggling to become mature, in spite of the reckless and immature personalities that are at the very center of its limited successes and limitless woes.

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