

Iliffe, John: *Obasanjo. Nigeria and the World*. Oxford: James Currey 2011. ISBN: 978-1-84701-027-8; 326 S.

Rezensioniert von: Dirk Kohnert, Institute of African Affairs, German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg

There already exists a wealth of literature on General Olusegun Obasanjo and the impact of the latter's rule during his lifetime. Most of these books and articles, however, are of limited value because of their apparent partisan and biased writing. Nevertheless, apart from these, about a dozen scholarly publications written by renowned academics like Victor E. Dike deal explicitly with different aspects of Obasanjo's regime.¹ They contribute significantly to the evaluation of the life and the actions of one of the most prominent African elder statesmen. Evidently not all of them have been consulted by Iliffe. Therefore, the question whether an additional publication would be justified and could add any significant surplus value is perfectly justified. Actually, I would answer in the affirmative. In my view at least, John Iliffe's biography is the most authoritative, comprehensive and well informed account of Obasanjo's rule and personality up to now.

The book is mainly based on published sources, including political memoirs, newspaper articles and recently released Foreign Office documents. It is structured in 24 chapters, spread over five parts (I. Making a Career [1937-70]; II. Military Rule [1970-9]; III. Private Citizen [1979-99]; IV. The First Presidential Term [1999-2003]; V. The Second Presidential Term [2003-7]). The description of Obasanjo is intimately embedded in a detailed analysis of the political and economic development at his time. To make both ends meet the publisher apparently had to compromise on the length of the book that grew somewhat out of proportion; its more than 300 close-typed pages (possibly more than 500 pages in normal type) are rather difficult to read.

The author does not explicitly specify the methodology used in writing the biography. John Iliffe's precise principal aim is „to understand General Obasanjo, which I believe to

be the chief task of a biographer“, as stated in the preface (p. ix). Obviously, this biography is nothing else than a provisional account, firstly, because the story's hero is still alive, currently acting as mediator and elder statesman on a number of international stages and secondly, because many potentially relevant sources are not available yet. Even so, I agree with the author that Obasanjo's impact on the modern political history of his country and Nigeria's global importance (p. 3) justify the present publication. This is all the more true, since the value of stimulating biographical accounts as crucial contribution to political analysis is often underestimated in mainstream political science.

The historical approach chosen by the author to explain and analyse a personality's thinking and action against the background of its socio-cultural and -political setting is especially suited for a deeper understanding of public figures with cultural roots different from the readers'. This still applies even though nowadays most political leaders are forced to think and to act on a global scale. Olusegun Obasanjo is no exemption in this respect, as Iliffe elaborated in detail, especially in part three of the book: „Private citizen (1979-99)“. Yet, the recognition of personalities' 'otherness' constitutes an important means for the exploration of human lives and characters. Obasanjo's roots in his Yoruba culture, blended with a deepening commitment to Christianity, form a recurrent theme and the core of the biography (p. 2): „He remained a Yoruba farmer and a Yoruba chief. His notions of proper gender and generational relationships remained those of his village origins.“ (p. 1; similar statements: p. 63, 159)

Regarding one important point, however, Iliffe probably still underrates the continuing impact of the so-called 'African traditional culture'. The inherited (neo) colonial structures of indirect rule, imposed by the British, but reinvented according to the needs of the local power elite, are still very much alive. In chapter 14 ('The candidate'), the author describes Obasanjo's political strategy of courting the state governors as „perhaps the key element“ (p. 170; „the“ set in italics by J.I.)

¹ Victor E. Dike, *Nigeria and the politics of unreason. A study of the Obasanjo regime*, London 2003.

of his reign after the end of military dictatorship. Certainly, this executive pact between the head of state and his governors was a shrewd tactic, both to protect all stakeholders against parliamentarians and party barons as well as to assure their subjects' votes (pp. 170-71). But it could not replace the reverence of 'traditional authorities', like emirs, imams or priests of African local religions. The latter still play a decisive role in informal politics as king makers and grey eminence behind the political scene, not only in the Northern Hausa-Fulani emirates, but also in Igbo and Yoruba society, and in all places where traditional secret societies still exist. The Okija shrine affair in Anambra State in 2004 is just one example which became public rather by chance and revealed that even today senior political figures like governors and legislators have to pay allegiance to African cults, which are considered wielding power of life and death over their subjects.²

Yet, the author never falls into the trap of historical materialist determinism. It may be tempting to use historical embeddedness to explain something as an inevitable development of a human being's character, notably that of political leaders. However, Iliffe reminds us that although his protagonist has acquired international fame as „A man of controversy“ (title of chapter one), the underlying contradictions are all based on Obasanjo himself (p. 2). According to Iliffe „four themes run through his contentious life“: apart from his African roots and their mix with orthodox (evangelical) Christianity, these are „his distinctively Nigerian patriotism“, „power, his use of it, and its effects upon him“, and finally the rapid changes in the national and global context during his two reigns as head of state, separated by two decades. Apparently, it was not always possible for him to adapt to these changes in time, notably concerning an ideology shift regarding Third World development as well as the expectations of Nigerian voters concerning democratic transition.

In Iliffe's view, it was not power which corrupted Obasanjo, as many of his critics believe, but the vigour of his own patriotism (p. 3), a 'messianism', an „almost fanatical allegiance to the concept of Nigerianness“ (pp. 61, 159). Dedication to promote the unity

and growth of Nigeria became his absolute priority, the end which justified all means. This is why he grew increasingly authoritarian and unscrupulous especially at the end of his reign which is analysed in detail in chapter 20 entitled „The imperious presidency“. This explains also the author's overall evaluation of this 'man of controversy': „His decisions were invariably based on political calculation, rather than the legal and constitutional principles that concerned his elite. A man of great physical and intellectual energy, he exercised power with skill and ruthlessness, sometimes unscrupulously but seldom cruelly.“ (p. 3; similar p. 186)

However, this is not to say that Obasanjo's reign was without significant merits. According to Iliffe, depoliticising the army was probably his greatest achievement, which led to the containment of violent conflicts that marked the modern history of Nigeria, a nation riddled by ethnic, religious, regional cleavages (p. 184, cf. chapter 15 'Containing conflict'). Other outstanding achievements were his decisive role as an international conciliator and mediator in national and international conflicts as well as his role as one of African Union's founding members (pp. 120, 186), and last but not least, on the economic side, the liquidation of Nigeria's heavy external debt (p. 186).

HistLit 2011-2-217 / Dirk Kohnert über Iliffe, John: *Obasanjo. Nigeria and the World*. Oxford 2011, in: H-Soz-Kult 16.06.2011.

² Stephen Ellis, The Okija shrine. Death and life in Nigerian politics, in: *Journal of African History* 49 (2008), pp. 445-66; Dirk Kohnert, On the renaissance of African modes of thought – the example of the belief in magic and witchcraft, in: Burghart Schmidt / Rolf Schulte (eds.), *Witchcraft in Modern Africa. Witches, witch-hunts and magical imaginaries*, Hamburg 2007, pp. 39-61.