

The Journal of
**AFRICAN
HISTORY**

VOLUME 55 · NUMBER 1 · 2014

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Journal of AFRICAN HISTORY

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The Journal of African History (ISSN 0021-8537) is published three times a year. Three parts form a volume. The subscription price (excluding VAT) of volume 55, 2014 (which includes print and electronic access) is £258 (US \$453 in the USA, Canada and Mexico) for institutions; £54 (US \$94 in the USA, Canada and Mexico) for individuals. Students ordering direct from the Press and certifying that the Journal is for their own personal use can subscribe to the print version at £37 (US \$59 in the USA, Canada and Mexico). The electronic-only price available to institutional subscribers is £222 (US \$388 in the USA, Canada and Mexico). Single parts £93 net (US \$162 in the USA, Canada and Mexico). Prices include delivery by air where appropriate. EU subscribers (outside the UK) who are not registered for VAT should add VAT at their country's rate. VAT registered subscribers should provide their VAT registration number.

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The Nigerian Story.

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JOURNALISTS CONFRONTING MILITARY RULE. *The Role of the Press and Communication Technology in Democratization: The Nigerian Story.* By Agbese. New York: Routledge, 2013. Pp. x + 119. \$136, hardback (isbn 978-0-415-98149-1); \$44.95, paperback (isbn 978-0-415-65272-8).

ABDALLA UBA ADAMU

The Journal of African History / Volume 55 / Issue 01 / March 2014, pp 129 - 130
DOI: 10.1017/S002185371300100X, Published online: 01 April 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S002185371300100X

How to cite this article:

ABDALLA UBA ADAMU (2014). The Journal of African History, 55, pp 129-130 doi:10.1017/S002185371300100X

JOURNALISTS CONFRONTING MILITARY RULE

The Role of the Press and Communication Technology in Democratization: The Nigerian Story.

By Aje-Ori Agbese.

New York: Routledge, 2013. Pp. x+119. \$136, hardback (ISBN 978-0-415-98149-1); \$44.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-415-65272-8).

doi:10.1017/S002185371300100X

Key Words: Nigeria, democracy, media, military, violence.

This book, directly based on the author's 2004 Bowling Green State University dissertation, explains the turmoil Nigerian journalists have to face whenever, as one of her respondents put it, the military 'clamp down on us' (p. 74). Under assorted regimes, Nigerian military dictators arrested, jailed, and killed journalists, and closed news organizations for long periods before democracy was restored in 1999. This is a story of their survival in those dark days, framed within the overall press agenda of ending military rule in the 1990s. Journalists and their news organizations carried stories that encouraged a push for democratization. In presenting information that tallied with the press's democratization agenda, journalists and news organizations faced a variety of challenges. This book, using an ethnographic approach, explains how the most prominent journalists in Nigeria at the time overcame these challenges.

The title, however, misleadingly gives the impression that it addresses communication technologies in Nigerian journalism. Aje-Ori Agbese notes that the challenges facing Nigerian journalists at the time included ‘lack of social infrastructure (good roads, electricity and communication facilities) ... and access to information’ (p. 75). During the period covered by the original study (1990–9), the internet was still in its infancy in Nigeria. As noted by Agbese herself, ‘the commonest forms of communication technology in Nigeria in the 1990s were fax machines, pagers, personal computers and telephones’ (p. 85). These were hardly cutting-edge compared to the new information technologies that power the social network ecology of today to which the book title seems to allude.

Further, although ‘these technologies helped with communication and production’ of news in Nigeria at the time, even ‘they were not readily available to everyone in Nigerian media houses. Most times only top staff and owners had easy access to or owned some form of communication technology.’ (p. 85) This book is therefore decidedly not about the role of Information and Communication technologies (ICTs) in African journalism *per se* – for such a role would conjure up images of the use of contemporary mediascape tapestries in journalism, which would include the whole gamut of current internet technologies. The ICTs featured in the book were evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, devices. Although used to run circles around baffled military and secret service agents, they only appeared revolutionary at a time when the Olympia typewriter ruled the typing pool roost.

What the book does feature is the role of the African journalist as the ‘voice of the voiceless’ who as Dr Reuben Abiti put it, had to ‘protect the people against the excesses of the forces in power and authority’ (p. 73). Abati was by 2013 Special Adviser on Media and Publicity to President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria. The book details the series of cat-and-mouse tactics – or ‘guerilla journalism’ – adopted by the correspondents to escape the State’s secret agents. In the process, ‘luck, chance and God featured prominently in avoiding arrest because they understood getting arrested meant torture, jail and possibly death’ (p. 82).

Speaking through ten of the most influential journalists in Nigeria – and as the daughter of another influential journalist, who, though not included in the sample, facilitated access – Agbese provides an extremely effective study of how journalists survived in the often brutal, suppressive, and dysfunctional military regimes that attempted to muzzle freedom of information and public accountability. The most significant contribution the book makes to modern African journalism is the insight it offers about the various strategies journalists adopt to escape prosecution and live to report another day. These ranged from cross-dressing for males to avoid detection and arrest, to pretending to be motor mechanics, to removing trademark eyeglasses, and the more conventional process of simply ‘legging’ it to escape arrest.

Occasionally the narrative prose of this otherwise interesting book suffers from the retention of its original thesis format, which interrupts its narrative fluidity; the book is also encumbered by the overly lengthy literature review.

ABDALLA UBA ADAMU
Bayero University Kano