

# Book Reviews

## **This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime**

By Stephen Ellis  
Oxford University Press, 2016  
256 pp., \$29.95  
ISBN-13: 978-0190494315

### **REVIEWED BY RAYMOND GILPIN**

Nigerians are no strangers to international controversy. This book opens by recounting a comment by erstwhile U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell who described Nigerians as scammers who “tend not to be honest.” In May 2016 then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom David Cameron described Nigerians as “fantastically corrupt” during an unguarded conversation with Queen Elizabeth. Regardless of how one interprets these comments, there is no denying that unlawful activity is ubiquitous across Nigerian society. Multiple decades of criminal activity have been debilitating and stultifying for the vast majority, but extraordinarily profitable for a few. *This Present Darkness* uses a historical lens in an attempt to unravel the scope, complexity and longevity of corruption and criminality by Nigerians in their country and worldwide. This book bears the hallmarks of Stephen Ellis’

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work—meticulous research (endnotes and references account for almost one-fifth of this book); balanced policy-relevant analysis; and a very lucid narrative. Well-placed vignettes inform and illuminate this very engaging read.

Ellis takes the reader back to the dawn of Nigeria’s statehood as he tries to answer the following questions: Why is corrupt behavior condoned (explicitly or implicitly)? Why is impunity rife? Does an enduring legitimacy crisis explain why successive institutions of governance have been unable to address systematic malfeasance? Is Nigeria’s reputation for organized criminal activity justified? Legitimacy and leadership are recurring themes, starting with the amalgamation of vastly disparate regions into one nation as a colonial convenience. Nigeria’s size and diversity challenged the British model of indirect rule. It must, however, be noted that Nigeria was not peculiar in this regard. Other colonized parts of the world had a similar experience. The roots of Nigeria’s legitimacy crisis lay in the grand bargain the British crafted with the emirs in the north, the elite in the east, and traditional leaders in the South to facilitate indirect rule. Ellis points out that in early colonial Nigeria (with the notable exception of the northern Islamic emirates) legal systems were seen as an “expression of power in that it resulted from a command; it was not based on any perceptions of truth held by the indigenous population.”<sup>1</sup> This dynamic laid the foundation for an ambivalence to the rule of law and the view that the state is driven by power, not laws.

Customary law, which is heavily influenced by the metaphysical, holds sway in most Nigerian communities and defines the

country's political economy. Group survival and personal advancement are still determined by "wonder workers" and traditional shrines, described by Ellis as the backbone of a *de facto* theocratic administration in Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> By sanctioning vices like embezzlement, trafficking, kidnapping and ritual murder as legitimate means to economic prosperity and political prominence, these shrines have woven Nigeria's social fabric. Unfettered capitalism and Machiavellian politics supplanted ethics and empathy. The new "theocracy" redefined impunity and offered a generously sliding scale in matters of morality. This notion has endured over the decades. Contemporary religious and traditional leaders celebrate ill-gotten wealth and aggrandizement. Ellis noted that at independence, politics in Nigeria was not about "nation-building but the control of Federal power and therefore the resources of the nation."<sup>3</sup> The net effect was that zero-sum politics was institutionalized and criminal activity was not only accepted, but justified.

Nigeria's acute legitimacy crisis, predatory approach to politics, and climate of impunity (facilitated by some religious and traditional leaders) set the stage for pervasive crime in Nigeria's early independence years. Originally, crime was organized along family and ethnic lines. Over time, it became more political and institutionalized. Ellis explains that while the oil boom intensified domestic embezzlement (unabated under both civilian and military governments), the oil price shocks of the late 1970s triggered a globalization of organized criminal activities by Nigerians. "Nigeria, which had long been a magnet for immigrants" from neighboring countries suddenly became "an exporter of people," many of whom were university graduates.<sup>4</sup> Nigerian

university fraternities and secret societies, and their political patrons, provided the ideal network for the globalization of organized crime. The internet was both the gateway and the highway. Correspondence fraud, narcotics, prostitution, tax evasion, and the sale of stolen crude flourished.

While many political patrons excused globalized crime by explaining they were collecting a colonial debt—alluding to perceived injustices suffered under colonial rule, in reality the slump in oil prices severely reduced the size of Nigeria's "national cake" and the patrons required other sources of income with which to lubricate their neo-patrimonial political networks. Ellis, and other commentators, describe this as the dawn of the Nigerian 419 scam (nicknamed after the section of Nigeria's penal code it contravenes), which globalized and democratized organized crime in Nigeria. Complex alliances of financiers and facilitators spanned continents. Opportunistic entrants who could prove themselves quickly swelled the ranks. Even though these alliances were not as tightly knit or hierarchical as storied organized criminal groups in Europe, South America, or the United States, Nigerian criminal syndicates quickly carved out a global niche. Being nimble and flexible allowed these syndicates to proliferate.

*This Present Darkness* does not provide a history of organized crime in the classic sense; rather, it plots the trajectory of the institutionalization (and rationalization) of criminal activity by Nigerians even before the dawn of nationhood. This invaluable contribution to scholarship closes with a poignant question: "Why Nigeria?"<sup>5</sup> Why does unethical behavior seem so pervasive in Nigerian communities at home and abroad? Why is

the line between ethical and unethical choices so blurred in Nigeria? Is Nigerian organized crime *sui generis*? Some readers might be disappointed that Ellis elects not to provide direct answers. Instead, he revisits the recurring themes of leadership and legitimacy, and underscores the cumulatively corrosive effect of Nigeria's perverse "theology" of impunity and greed. By so doing, Ellis masterfully unmask the multi-headed hydra that is organized crime in Nigeria. His historical analysis should be viewed as a backdrop, not a prescription. He challenges the reader to connect the dots and try to figure out how this phenomenon could be better understood and curtailed. It is only by so doing that we can rewrite the narrative and take meaningful steps to curb Nigerian organized crime at community, state, federal and global levels. PRISM

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Ellis, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Ellis, 63.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Ellis, 120.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Ellis, 223.

## Security in Africa: A Critical Approach to Western Indicators of Threat

By Claire Metelits  
Rowman & Littlefield, 2016  
156 pp., \$85.00  
ISBN: 978-1-4422-3955-5

## REVIEWED BY HILARY MATFESS

Claire Metelits in *Security in Africa: A Critical Approach to Western Indicators of Threat* illustrates clearly and concisely that the most commonly used threat indicators provide a narrow, flawed view of threats in sub-Saharan Africa. Metelits' work should not be as groundbreaking as it is: consider that on a recent survey conducted by AfroBarometer—a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys in more than 35 countries in Africa—the police were perceived as the most corrupt institution throughout sub-Saharan Africa, where survey data from Gallup suggests that police are among the most trusted institutions in the United States—even when trust levels are at a 22-year low.<sup>1</sup> However, Metelits' book is one of the few venues that fully appreciates the

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