

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



Crumbs off the wife's table

BOOK launches/presentations have become embedded in the Nigerian publishing/book culture. Critics object to the crass commercialism, politicization and egomania which characterize the more grandiose of these occasions. It should be remembered that the original motivation for such launches was to maximize publicity and sales of the books in a non-book-reading and non-book-buying society (apart from textbooks). Records do show that post-launch book sales are very low.

There is nothing inherently wrong with celebrating the author or subject as well as the book. Besides, some book launches are tasted full and appropriate such as the presentation of "Let's Talk it Over," the collection of radio talks of Monsignor Pedro Martins which I discussed in previous columns and the one I attended in Benin City recently, to present *Crumbs off the Wife's Table* by Mrs Hilda Ogbe.

This was a modest, intimate occasion because every person in the audience was either a relative or friend or associate or colleague of the author and her late husband, Thomson O. Ogbe (the first Nigeria Lawyer employed by shell-BP in 1961). Another striking feature of this event was that one of the presenters, Mr Albert Esiri, declared, "the blind also have the right to read" and undertook to have the book brailled and produced in sufficient numbers for education institutions for the blind.

Fortunately, as readers of my column may recall, there exists in Lagos the facility to produce brailled books, the *Niger Wives Brailled Book Production Centre*.

Mr Esiri's innovative gesture is, I believe, unprecedented. (I would be pleased to be corrected) and hopefully, maybe emulate that indeed positive results can come out of book launches.

The book itself is a very special one as I hope you will see my review which I delivered at the launch.

Writing an autobiography and making a spiritual will are practically the same (Shalom Aleichem, early 20th century East European Jewish famous writer who wrote in Yiddish).

That is, the person writing his/her life story is expressing the ideas, values and feelings which define that life and is thus leaving behind a legacy of how the person wants to be remembered by posterity. Hilda Ogbe autobiography articulates with graceful clarity a consistently held set of values, a world outlook that is deeply humanistic, humanitarian, holistic and humble.

Writing an autobiography, which is published in the lifetime of the author, takes great courage and self-confidence. Especially so when it is frank and outspoken as this one is in the prologue. Hilda Ogbe states that she was advised to be truthful in writing the book and says, "I cannot be other than truthful". Hilda Ogbe is painfully and brazenly honest and shares with the reader her most intimate feelings and reflection on her 80 years-long life.

This openness, honesty and introspection are the characteristics that distinguish an outstanding autobiography from a mediocre one; many autobiographers conceal and distort the fact of their lives and present a well-laundered image to the public

This is not the case in *Crumbs off the Wife's Table*.

The autobiographies of people in public life face the problem of how to get the right balance of the public and private spheres of life stories. Both Hilda and Tommy Ogbe were active in public life and Hilda Ogbe adroitly combines the two, so that the readers learn not only about the private lives of Hilda and family but also gain insight into the Second World War, into life in post-war Britain, the lives of Africans in Britain in the 40s and 50s and into Nigeria at the end of colonialism, during the First Republic and the Civil War.

Among the many gems of observation, I shall cite just two; in 1946, Hilda and Tommy were standing in a crowded tube when Hilda was asked by a man who stood up to offer her a seat whether she was Peggy Appiah (the daughter of a British labour Minister who married a Ghanaian). Hilda smiled and replied, "I'm sorry I'm not - but we admire you greatly Mr Prime Minister". Yes, it was Clement Attlee who doffed his hat then made his way to the exit.

And, in 1956, when Zik, then Premier of the Eastern Region was in London, Tommy Ogbe tried but failed to secure a partner for Zik "but we went dancing, all the same, to the Hammersmith Palais de Dance.

Tommy and Zik took turns dancing with me. It was a tiring but enjoyable and interesting evening although the men's conversation between dances went right above my head."

The title of this book is very catchy, more so in juxtaposition with the marvelous photo on the front cover (Kudos to Spectrum Books, the publisher, for an excellent cover). The author holds the readers' curiosity for 48 pages before explaining the title, which is when Tommy explained in England before their marriage.

You know, we Nigerians always have a girlfriend in the corner somewhere, these girls come and go. They don't know what love is. But they only get the crumbs that fell from the wife's table.

Hilda resolves to accept and cope with this philosophy but, as time goes on, she sees that the crumbs became the slice and then the whole cake. Though it is indeed eye-catching and thought-provoking, I am not personally comfortable with the title precisely because it is her husband's reality, her husband's perception, not the author's (i.e. She allows her thinking to be predicated on and defined by her husband). It is almost as if Tommy Ogbe has hijacked his wife's life story. Yet this is exactly what Hilda set out to do in her autobiography as she states in the prologue:

"My husband was a large part of (my life) of course. He would not want to be forgotten after his death. I hope that this book will help to keep him alive."

The heart of this book is the history of the relationship between and Hilda Tommy who met in 1943 in a munitions factory in wartime England, who after marriage on July 5, 1952, lived variously in Warri, Akure, Ogwashi, -Uku, Enugu, Port Harcourt and finally Benin until Tommy died 23 June 1999. The book presents one of the best-documented marriages in Nigerian literature and historiography.

We the readers share the joy, excitement and passion of a love which consumed Hilda for 30 years and which was central to Tommy's life, up to his death. For it is clear that Tommy never stopped loving his wife but, on his terms only, which selfishness eventually destroyed Hilda's love. In 1961, Tommy flogged his 5 years old son, Monu for not washing the bath well and when Hilda, pregnant with Temi, tried to stop him, he replied, "if you try to stop me, I'll cane him harder." Hilda writes, "I had lost a large chip of my love and respect for my husband."

In 1974, the relationship had deteriorated much further, and Hilda became more disillusioned and aware. "I was no longer going to be manipulated by sweet words if my husband of 30 years understands me so little that he thought I could be mollified with a present after he had committed treacheries... there was no hope."

Finally in 1978 comes the final estrangement for Hilda when Tommy shouted: "the trouble with you is you never put a foot wrong - I will drive you"

Hilda reacted, "Drive you. I, Hilda Gerson, drive me from the house like a goat. No, I was not going to be driven, I was going to leave." Hilda moved out of her husband's house but remained deeply concerned about him till his death as this poignant passage shows.

"The old rascal had become my friend and 56 years of attachment are not a small thing in one's life. He had gone through a divorce because of me. He had brought me to his country where I could fulfill myself. He had broken my heart, but I forsake him, this though was a great comfort to me".

That phrase, "A country where I could fulfill myself" is an apt description of Hilda's relationship with Nigeria. Her

contributions are enormous; the creation of a silver jewelry industry of world-class standards, which elevated the status and remuneration of a generation of silver craftsmen and impacted Nigerian fashion in terms of women's accessories and events on their materials. The Swiss lace manufacturers in 1970's made the heaven guipure lace with silver thread instead of gold which had been the fashion for many years. As Hilda puts it, "it was exciting to think that we had made a difference to the fashion in Nigeria by introducing silver jewelry."

Hilda's work was also a model of small-scale entrepreneurship which inspires other enterprises by people whom Hilda trained or encouraged. Although never formally trained as a teacher, Hilda has a passion and gift for teaching people to help and fulfil themselves.

This is demonstrated time and time again in her autobiography. Certainly, her contributions to the craftspeople of the old Mid-West state are unequalled and her Mid-West Arts and Crafts Centre was a model of how-to best project and project indigenous culture and artefacts.

Later in her life, this Renaissance woman of multiple talents and deep learning taught herself to become an authority on sickle cell care and management and this is well documented in her book. Hilda Ogbe has saved lives. She has truly made a great difference to Nigeria.

Hilda's problems have never been with Nigeria but with her relationship with her husband. She adapted quickly and smoothly to Nigerian cultures. A gifted linguist (German, French, Spanish), Hilda speaks Itsekiri and can outdress the most regal Itsekiri or Bini women. Hilda is Jewish, Tommy a non-observing Christian, but the religious difference and isolation did not disturb Hilda.

"I was comfortable with my Jewish way of life. I did not need organized religion to carry the Jewish tenets in my heart."

Much later in her life, Hilda realizes how being Jewish did influence her with Tommy. "Perhaps, subconsciously, I threw my lot in with Tommy since the sign of Hilda's days in Germany, which says Jews and Negroes are not wanted here, had been indelibly inscribed on my memory."

Hilda came to Britain in 1938 on her 18th birthday with her mother and brother, as Jewish refugees from Germany. Like so many other refugees, they arrived penniless and had to accept menial jobs to survive. When the war broke out, they were interned in a camp for enemy aliens. Hilda's father, who was to follow them, never made it and with many of her relations, was killed in a Nazi concentration camp. Hilda and her family were later released, and all enthusiastically joined the British war effort. Hilda became a British citizen before she came to Nigeria in 1956 and was subsequently naturalized as a Nigerian citizen.

Crumb off the Wife's Table is not the first autobiography by a foreign spouse of a Nigerian: I believe the credit for that goes to Rosemary Uwemedimo's *Mammy Wagon Marriage In the 1960s* and later Lana Solaru's autobiography in the 1970s. Marita Golden's *Migration of Heart* is an autobiographical novel of a wife who did not stay long in Nigeria. Hilda Ogbe's book extends the parameters in terms of intimacy, depth of analysis and literary skill.

English is not Hilda's mother tongue, but she is another example of a foreigner whose mastery of English has enriched the language. *The Crumbs off the Wife's Table* is beautifully written, full of linguistic felicities, elegant phrases, dry wit and crafted perceptive insight. The well-crafted narrative is dramatic and makes compelling reading. This autobiography is a real contribution to the art of autobiographical writing not only in Nigeria but worldwide. I have every confidence that this book will find an attentive and absorbed audience in many countries.

Hilda Ogbe will put Nigeria, and Benin City in particular, on the world reading map just as Karen Blixen did for Kenya in "Out of Africa." Now, all we need is an enterprising Nigerian filmmaker to turn "*The Crumb off the Wife's Table*" into a film.