

BOOK REVIEWS

The Story of Gambo Sawaba, by Rima Shawulu, Jos, Echo Communications Limited, 1990. 155 pp.

This biography of a female political activist in Nigeria is an attractive proposition. It deals with a woman from a rather ordinary background and how she addressed the problems of her society by becoming deeply involved in politics. Rima Shawulu provides extensive background on Hajiya Gambo Sawaba's family and early life and discusses the impact of her political activities on her personal life. There are not that many biographies of modern African women. Fewer yet are those of women who are not important, at least in part, because of their blood or marriage relationships to famous men. Certainly, however, there are numerous African women who have, as individuals, been important players in shaping their place in society, or at least attempting to do so. Such life stories are often presented in works of fiction, such as those of Buchi Emecheta, but biography would seem to give more legitimacy to the lives of these women. Despite promising potential which is greatly played up on the back and in the foreword by B.J. Takaya, *The Story of Gambo Sawaba* has many serious flaws.

The first two chapters cover the background of Gambo Sawaba's parents and her life up to age thirteen. The third chapter deals with her personal life from this point, marked by the death of her mother and Gambo's withdrawal from school, through four marriages. In this chapter her political activities are mentioned only briefly, in order to explain the end of three of these marriages. The author does, however, refer to her popularity, which was "soaring high," and her "relative prosperity." Since no reasons for these assertions are provided at this point, the reader is left puzzled by them. There are also no dates or time scale in this chapter, increasing the confusion and decreasing the relevance of the chapter itself. This chapter reaches its climax with Gambo's first husband Abubakar (not to be confused with her fourth husband, Abubakar) returning to her and dying in her arms. Immediately after his death, the chapter ends.

Chapter four begins, "And so Gambo went into politics." Though this is the most glaring example of incoherence, there are unfortunately numerous others throughout the book. This sentence seems to suggest a causal relationship between the death of Gambo Sawaba's first husband, after her other marriages, and her involvement in politics. However, it already had been mentioned that her other three

marriages broke up because of her involvement in politics. Additionally, there was the reference to her wealth and popularity. Despite these problems, though, it does serve to inform the reader that the remainder of the book is to be devoted exclusively to Gambo Sawaba's political activities. Her personal life beyond this point is completely ignored. Thus the reader is not supplied with any clear links between her political and personal lives. Furthermore, the lack of any chronology in chapter three makes it impossible to relate any of the sketchy events provided in that chapter to her political life.

The chapters dealing with Gambo's personal life (but especially chapter three) are very superficial and disjointed. The most startling omission from her personal life is her *hajj*. Though the author constantly refers to her as Hajiya Gambo Sawaba, mention is never made to any journey outside of Nigeria. It seems unbelievable that what is for most Muslims the most important event of their lives was inconsequential for Hajiya Gambo Sawaba. The absence of any mention of her personal life later also suggests that the author may be deliberately glossing over what she considers less important. Perhaps the author is merely trying to emphasize Gambo Sawaba's political activity, but the result is a further emphasis that, for women, personal and political lives are incompatible.

Chapters four through ten, dealing with Gambo Sawaba's political activities from the early 1950s to the late 1980s, do contain some interesting information. There is a good deal of basic background information about the situation around decolonization as well as about the major political parties of Northern Nigeria, particularly the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU). These elements would seem very useful to those who do not know much about Nigerian politics. However, the discussion of the parties is very biased against the NPC. The whole tone of the book suggests that the NEPU is a perfect party, that it is free from all corruption, and that it struggles selflessly for the improvement of the most oppressed of the Nigerians, including the Talakawa and women. The NPC, on the other hand, is presented as corrupt and tied to the colonial government and Nigerian elites. Moreover, the NPC and their government patrons are constantly presented as brutal thugs who assault and bring false charges against Hajiya Gambo Sawaba and other members of the NEPU. On the other hand, the NEPU apparently never attacks the NPC except in self defense.

The author doesn't even attempt though to point out any basic ideological differences between the parties. Also, though there are often references to the radical nature of the NEPU, and Gambo Sawaba herself claims at one point that the NEPU is a "socialist party" and the NPC a "capitalist" one, there are not many examples of radical policies or actions on their part. Though Gambo Sawaba reportedly has a

picture of Karl Marx (among others) in her parlour, there is never mention of her, or any of her associates, having studied Marxist thought. Gambo and the NEPU as a whole have frequently spoken of oppression and class conflict, but they don't present any concrete strategy for alleviating this oppression. When their rhetoric is compared with that of other African political parties it seems much more along the lines of progressive nationalism than any sort of "socialism." The sense which of this creates, at least with the skeptical reader, is that the author, Rima Shawulu, is somehow linked to the NEPU. While this is not necessarily a problem, it would shift the nature of the book toward that of being sheer partisan propaganda, a point which should be especially kept in mind by readers who don't know much about Nigerian politics.

One particularly puzzling aspect of the book is the fact that several events are repeated almost exactly at different points in Gambo's life. On two different occasions, Gambo Sawaba does not have enough money to pay her bus fare and the conductor attempts to take her wrapper, the only one which she has, as payment. In the first case (p. 62), Gambo resists and the balance of her fare is paid by the person whom she is going to visit. Later (p. 85) she has no money and passively allows the driver to remove her wrapper and is "left standing with her underwear." The situation is remedied by the women with whom she is travelling, who give her another wrapper. The first occurrence is explicable in terms of the facts that it was her first trip out of northern Nigeria, that she had gotten off the train at the wrong stop (Lagos instead of Abeokuta), and because she gave the driver the money which she had. The second instance however, seems rather strange. The author doesn't try to explain why she took the bus to Sokoto, with other women, without having any money. It also seems strange that this woman, who is elsewhere portrayed as very strong-willed and stubborn, would merely look "blankly ahead" and allow a bus driver to remove her clothes, particularly given the fact that her friends who were there could have come to her rescue.

On two other occasions, when Gambo Sawaba was assaulted by political opponents (pp. 94, 99) "sand was pored [sic] into her private part." This seems a rather strange act to be committed once. When it is perpetrated twice against one woman it would certainly seem to deserve some comment. The author however doesn't remark at all upon the same act occurring twice. Is this perhaps some form of torture unique to northern Nigeria? Is it a literary device commonly used there to signify something else? Perhaps one event has in some way been made into two different events.

One final instance of an event being repeated is perhaps the most troubling in view of Gambo Sawaba's espoused radicalism, her struggle for the rights of women, and the assertion that she "did not and still does not exhibit any form of intolerance" (p 118). In 1952 she was

imprisoned in Kano. The author claims that one of the wardens in the prison was a lesbian who was "reputed to be forcing helpless female prisoners to bed" (p. 49). One day, as the warden was approaching Gambo's cell, Gambo "removed her clothes and ran out of the cell naked screaming 'She wants to rape me!'" The warden was then fired for sexual harassment. Ten years later, in prison at Zaria, the same thing occurred, though this time the warden was arrested and fired (p. 97). In this case, unlike the pairs of similar events mentioned above, the author acknowledges at the time of the second occurrence that the same thing had happened earlier. Thus, it is easier to believe that the two events actually happened.

This, however, is perhaps even more disturbing on two counts. First, the only mention of lesbians other than these two is provided as an example of the insults which the NPC heaped upon Gambo Sawaba. They had accused her of being a lesbian. This certainly reflects a serious prejudice against lesbians, it is an insult to be called one, and they are all rapists. Secondly, by admittedly accusing the wardens of rape when they certainly did not attempt to rape Gambo and were only "reputed" to have raped others, Gambo Sawaba is not only committing a crime against these two women, but she is also not lending much credibility to women who are truly threatened with rape. Just as the proverbial boy who cried wolf, such false accusations, particularly when they are glorified in a book such as this, may lead to Gambo Sawaba, and other women, not being believed when they tell of genuine rapes. Women are believed rarely enough in such situations without having false accusations of rape being thus held up as some sort of example of women's liberation.

This following paragraph from the book would exemplify many of the problems of this book, including incoherence, irrelevance, excessive partisanship, and typographical errors:

But the NPC gave Gambo no peace. Once she had decided to go in NEPU's Volkswagen Bettle [sic] to Soba, to see a NEPU supporter whose house had been gutted down. The man's wife had also given birth to twins. On their way back, they ran over a nail that was planted on the road by the NPC. The tyres burst and the car somersaulted. The twins however did not die. They are still alive today (p.98).

Though typographical errors are to be expected, their number in this book (at least one on almost every page) is truly excessive. If the book had otherwise been good they might barely have deserved mention, but with the other shortcomings, they fit well into the pattern. The fact that this book is strongly biased against the NPC is clearly evidenced in this passage. It seems quite a stretch of the imagination to

believe that the NPC would have known that Gambo was coming along this route and placed a nail on the road and that her car would have run over it and that a serious accident would result. Is there no possibility that the accident could have been just that, a random accident? As far as incoherence and irrelevance are concerned, the author could have more clearly stated that Gambo had taken the twins with her. There also seems to be little connection between the house having been "gutted down" and the woman having "also given birth to twins", unless, of course, the NPC was responsible for the latter as well. Finally, though it was certainly a relief to hear that the twins are "still alive today", this paragraph, as well as many others, does not contribute to "the story of Gambo Sawaba" and could have been omitted.

It was noted earlier that there have not been many book-length biographies of African women. While this book could be added to that genre, its numerous shortcomings mean that it would not contribute much. Poorly written, *The Story of Gambo Sawaba*, ultimately fails even in giving any sense of Gambo's life or her personality. The ostensible subject of the book comes off as an idealized heroine. At the same time, she is often subordinated to the political conflict between the NEPU and NPC. Much of the time she seems important only as an example of the righteousness of the former and the wickedness of the latter. If writing talents comparable to those who write fictional life stories of African women could be applied to biography, perhaps the real story of Gambo Sawaba, and other African women, could be told.

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