

Multimedia

Book Review of Edwin E. Etieyibo and Odirin Omiegbe, *Disabilities in Nigeria: Attitudes, Reactions, and Remediation*, Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2017

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Abstract

A review by Shu Wan of the first comprehensive monograph discussing the issue of disabilities in contemporary Nigerian society, Edwin E. Etieyibo and Odirin Omiegbe's *Disabilities in Nigeria: Attitudes, Reactions, and Remediation*, Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2017.

Keywords: Africa, Nigeria, perceptions of disability, cultural cross-comparisons

Africa

Almost 14 years ago, African historian Julia Livingston published the first academic book regarding disabilities in African countries, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana*. In it, she investigates the (mis)representation of disabilities in the African nation. Following this book, an increasing number of academic works regarding issues of disability in Africa have followed. With a combination of theoretical analysis and concrete studies of multiple cases, African anthropologists Edwin Etieyibo and Odirin Omiegbe's volume *Disabilities in Nigeria: Attitudes, Reactions, and Remediation* addresses the state of disability in Nigeria. They demonstrate the social construction of visual, mental and physical disabilities in Nigeria and the distinction from similar processes in Western Europe and North America.

Consisting of 12 chapters, the organization of this volume could be divided into three parts. The first part mainly demonstrates prevalent perceptions of disabilities in Nigeria and their causes. In chapter 1, Etieyibo and Omiegbe attempt to establish a theoretical framework for their further discussion. The model includes the divergence of medical perception, social

construction of disabilities and academic discussions regarding disabilities in West Africa. In the following chapter, Etieyibo and Omiegbe proceed to examine the prevalent cultural explanation for disabilities in Nigerian society. Indigenous religious beliefs in Africa have profoundly shaped Nigerians' understanding of disabilities. In these beliefs, disability is blamed on spiritual sins of the disabled people and their families. In chapter 3, the authors review scientific accounts for the actual causes of disabilities. In scientists and medical professionals' views, occurrence of disabilities can be attributed to malnutrition, chronic diseases, drug addiction and other unhealthy behaviors. At the same time, this "scientific view," which represents the medical model of disabilities, may itself stigmatize people with disabilities as the *diseased* and *abnormal*.

In the second part of this volume, Etieyibo and Omiegbe examine many examples regarding the experiences of people with disabilities and their encounters with mainstream society in Nigeria. In chapter 4, the authors present an overview of experiences of different disabilities in Nigeria, including visual, physical, and mental. Chapters 5 and 6 follow up with an exploration of physically and visually disabled people's perceptions of their own conditions through a series of interviews with people with different kinds of disabilities. Despite consistent efforts to struggle with disability-based discrimination, as seen in these interviewee's personal narratives, people with disabilities in Nigeria still suffer unfair treatment in the job market and within intimate relationships. Those frustrations affect the formation of their self-identity; furthermore, some accept the misrepresentation of disabilities as sins and take on the cultural shame of their disabilities.

In chapter 7 and 8, Etieyibo and Omiegbe turn to the role of the family in shaping the experience of people with disabilities. Considering perceptions of family members with visual disabilities, through intense ethnographic fieldwork, the authors examine difficulties family members encounter living with and caring for visually disabled family. With heavy financial and psychological pressure, the parents, spouses and siblings of people with visual disabilities are often also themselves victims of wide-spread discrimination in Nigerian society. As a result, most of the interviewees in this research articulate the discontent of both people with disabilities and their families with the national government's negligence of blind people's basic rights as citizens. According to a "sister of a person with visual disability": "we still don't regard the disabled as members of the society" (Etieyibo & Omiegbe, 2017, p. 120).


In the second part of the book, Etieyibo and Omiegbe turn to the theoretical foundations of disability studies in Nigeria. The final chapters in this section consider ways to meet the needs of people with disabilities in Nigeria and reviews the legal culture of disability-based discrimination in the national culture and local society of Nigeria.

Through examining the conditions of people with disabilities in Nigeria, Etieyibo and Omiegebe succeed in demonstrating the frustration encountered by many in their everyday lives. The authors' collected testimonies from one hundred people with disabilities and their families give a clear picture of perceptions of disabilities and reactions to the oppression over disabilities in Nigeria. As the first comprehensive monograph discussing the issue of disabilities in contemporary Nigerian society, this volume represents insightful and inspiring research.

Shu Wan is currently matriculating as a PhD student in the Department of History at the University at Buffalo.

References

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