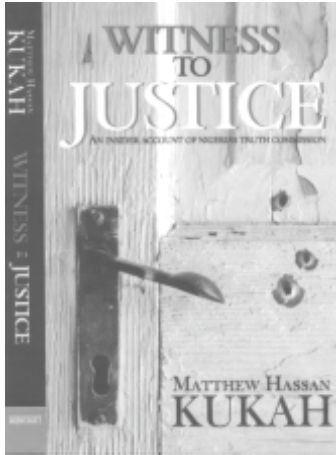


Book Review



Witness to Justice: An Insider's Account of Nigeria's Truth Commission

Author: Matthew Hassan KUKAH

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Reviewer: Kathleen McGARVEY, OLA

The title of this book, better called tome, by Matthew Hassan Kukah, immediately awakens curiosity. Even more so the cover: an old grey evil-looking door, riddled with bullet holes, the black door handle daring one to peek inside while simultaneously giving a stay-back warning. This is an Insider's account of the author's time on the Judicial Commission for the Investigation of Human Rights Violations, popularly known as the Oputa Panel, which was nominated by President Olusegan Obasanjo and over which there has been quite a bit of speculation. Inaugurated in June 1999, the Commission, of which Kukah was a prominent member, was given the task to investigate the causes, nature and extent of human rights violations in Nigeria since 1966 to May 1999, determine the role of the state in the violations and recommend means to pursue justice and prevent future abuses.

Already in the Prologue, using the same provocative manner with which he continues throughout the entire book, Kukah points out that to say the Commission inaugurated an era of justice or even helped bring about justice in any way is a hypothetical question. He believes that in so far as

it permitted even one person to feel heard or if it allowed any bitter parties to be reconciled, then the Commission served as a platform for justice.

In this timely book, Kukah does not present a chronological account of the experiences had with the Commission. Rather, he presents a systematic and what is obviously a profoundly assimilated reflection on the horrors he shared in as he listened to people's stories unfold. The capacity of human beings to inflict suffering on others in the most barbaric forms of torture, the most manipulative forms of betrayal and the most twisted forms of cruelty; the readiness of civilians as well as military to collaborate with a system where human life was without value and where authority was boundless; the culture of impunity that became a way of life for those in power and for the majority who were powerless; all of this is presented in a calm and objective manner that I find truly challenging. Is it possible to hear such stories and yet be at peace with the perpetrators? Is this a gift or is it a vice; does it represent an exaggerated and cold noncommittal impartiality or does it epitomize the attitude of Christ to forgive and to love even our worst enemies? Is this not in fact the attitude which Nigerians must seek to grow in today if they wish to be freed from the deeply ingrained stains of that thirty years inheritance and build a pluri-religious, pluri-cultural nation of democracy and justice?

The objectivity with which Kukah presents the truths revealed to the Commission, and his reflective manner of presenting these atrocities, not to tell the facts but to learn lessons from them, is what I found most engaging about this book. The struggle of the Ogoni people serves as a metaphor for minority peoples everywhere and simultaneously evidences the fact that no story, even that of the one who cries victim, is all that it might appear at first sight. The reflection on torture and its insights into the human mind and the capacity of each one of us to justify even the most barbaric cruelty when circumstances bring evil close to our own experience is frightening in its incisiveness. The courage of journalists and other individuals who resiliently struggled for justice and maintained their integrity serves as a beacon of hope that good will always triumph.

Kukah finishes with what he calls a Theological Economics of Reconciliation, a chapter which I found somewhat lacking in its

theological reflection on reconciliation per se, that of acknowledging and repenting of sin, of publicly seeking forgiveness, of being embraced by the one I have offended. The emphasis is more on justice than on reconciliation; yet as he makes evident, drawing heavily on the teachings of John Paul II, these two go hand in hand. Of great value is the distinction he makes between retributive and distributive justice, this being in fact the major focus of the chapter. He highlights the fact that social and economic issues are at the heart of the human rights violations committed during those years, they are at the heart of the existent structures of injustice in our society today and they are at the heart of a possible reconciliation. In a true reconciliation there is an admittance of one's past sins; similarly, Nigerians all must be aware of the sins of the past so as to commit ourselves to a better future. We must not revert to military dictatorship simply because of our struggles with democracy; the evils Kukah has recounted are enough to make us repent of that option. Rather, as Nigerian citizens and as people of faith, we must be committed to building a society of reconciliation, justice and peace where the voice of everyone, whatever their religion, tribe, or social status, can be heard and their needs met.

I have spent many years reading, studying, and researching the history and the present day dynamics of Nigerian society. However, it is only after reading this book that I feel "Now I understand!" Kukah's Witness to Justice, a mine of information yet a simple, incisive and courageous testimony, gives an insight into Nigeria which no social, political or religious analyst of this country can afford to leave unread.