

MAHIR ŞAUL and PATRICK ROYER, *West African Challenge to Empire: culture and history in the Volta-Bani anticolonial war*. Oxford: James Currey (pb £16.95 – 0 85255 479 6; hb £45.00 – 0 85255 474 5); Athens: Ohio University Press (pb US\$26.95 – 0 8214 1414 3; hb US\$65.00 – 0 8214 1413 5). 2001, 404 pp.

For those interested in French colonial West Africa, the region of what today is Burkina Faso and Mali, once Haut-Sénégal-Niger, is particularly interesting. For a start, the region is home to 'famous' anthropological cases. These range from the semi-complex Samo kinship systems studied by Françoise Héritier to the much more complex Dogon cosmologies analysed by the Griaule school. It is also home to historical sites such as Jenne or Bandiagara, and one of the more important regions for the spread of Islam in West Africa. The action of many of the books by Amadou Hampaté Bâ is located in this region (particularly relevant here is his masterpiece *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, a biography of a colonial servant to which this book can be an historical companion). Last, and certainly not least, the region was the scenario for an anticolonial revolt (the Volta-Bani) which took place between 1915 and 1917, and has been described in the writings of French scholars such as C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, M. Izard or M. Michel.

Revolt? In fact, the authors of the impressive study under review tell us right at the beginning of their book that the received scholarship (which, surprisingly enough, has never given this movement the attention it deserves) has minimized the magnitude of the event. As the title of the monograph indicates, this was not a *revolt*, but a proper *war* that mobilized thousands of people and provoked a drastic reaction from the French, whose response was the systematic destruction of whole villages, of both human lives and property. The book provides an extremely detailed account of each of the main battles of the confrontation. Some readers might feel tempted to skip some chapters or sections, because of the fullness of the detail, but in my opinion this would be a mistake. Once one gets to know the main characters and sites, the book reads like a good novel with a well-constructed plot, and there is a kind of 'suspense' which lasts from the time of the initial battles, in which the anticolonialists were clear winners, until the final victory by the French army, which was only achieved through a colossal military effort, involving several columns of troops, in which the use of recently introduced cannons and machine guns became crucial. Indeed, without this new artillery, Şaul and Royer tell us, the war would probably not have been won by the French. This microscopic detail is accompanied by a telescopic contextualization of the movement. It is of course no coincidence that this happened during the First World War, but few authors would have been so successful in describing the connections between the European conflict and the African one, thus making of it a rare case study of the international perspective affecting a local 'primary resistance' movement. Incidentally, it is commendable that this is a study of resistance in which the resistance is found in the data itself and not in over-interpretations by the authors, who in this case tread cautiously to avoid reading too much into their historical data.

In many ways, the Volta-Bani war started as a reaction to forced conscription, but too many authors have made the mistake of reducing it to a mere reaction to compulsory enlistment. There was much more to it than that, and the roots of discontent went far back to the earliest French attempts to rule the region and to de-legitimize or to support, as they saw fit, local power structures. The book examines closely the ways in which the French administered the territory from the earliest times and reconstructs some of

the more problematic episodes that led to violent misunderstandings between colonizers and colonized long before the Volta-Bani war. Indeed the book is a good case study of how the French *politique des races* worked (or rather how it did *not* work) and a good analysis of all the contradictions and intrigues of French armies in Africa. The models by which the French administered the territory (classifying ethnic groups, granting some the title of *état*, reducing others to 'tribes') become more relevant to understanding the cultural logics of the movement than to the study of each one of the ethnic groups involved. Ethnicity as such, while not denied or reduced to a French colonial invention by the authors of this book, is certainly made irrelevant. This was clearly an inter-ethnic movement and the forces at play had more to do with social differentiations created by French rule and with precolonial networks and leagues, reactivated through ritual shrines and oaths by the leaders of the movement, than with ethnic particularities. In fact, not only is ethnicity not a relevant category, even the insistence either by colonial administrators or by scholars to see the peoples of this region as 'acephalous' or 'stateless' can be a pitfall to understanding the political complexity of precolonial structures and the capacity of people to centralize their political and religious agency against the intruders or against their allies among the native canton chiefs or Muslim houses.

The book also constitutes a good study of the relationship between Islam and French colonialism which consisted here of a double ambiguity. On the one hand, the relationship between Muslim Africans and the French was ambiguous in itself, Muslims being seen by the French as 'superior' to other people and more easy to recruit as literate staff, but being regarded as potential enemies too – an ambiguity that increased after the Ottoman Empire became an ally of Germany in the First World War, which made Islam become suspect in all French colonies. On the other hand, the relationship between Islam and the local shrines had also been extremely ambiguous, sometimes enemies but at other times syncretic allies. In this book all these ambiguities and alliances are spelled out and the complexity of Islamic trends is one of the elements that provide the book with the aura of 'suspense' already referred to.

In sum, this is an ethnographic study of an early colonial encounter in which both the local population and the French authorities are under meticulous scrutiny, one in which the life stories of the ritual leaders of the resistance movement are as important as the life stories of the French military and civil servants. Obviously the authors have found it easier to document the French moves and intentions than the anticolonialist ones, and one feels one would like to have more information on the ritual dimensions of the movement. Unfortunately, all the information needed is today unavailable and, although the book contains a fair amount of substantial data obtained through oral history recorded by the authors *in situ*, they have carefully avoided any abuse of ethnographic reconstructions based on either oral memory or on the dubious ethnography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As well as a rich body of data and well-grounded interpretations, the book contains a very helpful series of maps, a comprehensive index and a glossary of French colonial terms bound to become a useful tool for all scholars interested in French-speaking West Africa. Now that the postcolonial situation demands a renewed look at the anthropology of colonialism, this book will certainly become a 'must read' for West Africanists. Maybe one would have wanted to know a bit more about how the movement affected, or was perceived by, neighbouring British territories, where some of the population are culturally

close to some of those involved in the events the book deals with. But then again maybe this could be the object of yet another historical ethnography of the region. If so, let us hope it will be as thorough and solid as this one.

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NKPAROM C. EJITUWU and AMAKIEVI O. I. GABRIEL (eds), *Women in Nigerian History: the Rivers and Bayelsa States experience*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications (pb £21.95, US\$35.95 – 9 7836 1221 2). 2003, 342 pp.

In view of the fact that gendered histories are largely invisible in Niger Delta literature, Nkparom Ejituwu and Amakievi Gabriel endeavour with this edited volume to establish the varied experiences of women in Rivers and Bayelsa States as visible. This collection of twenty-three essays was presented at a workshop themed 'Women in Nigerian History', organized by the Port Harcourt Branch of the Historical Society of Nigeria in 1994.

Bolanle Awe opens Section One with a review of the existing historical literature on the Niger Delta (of which there is little) and proposes a multidisciplinary approach to researching, documenting and teaching the history of women in the region. She cautions that these tasks should be carried out not only by women but also by men. Perhaps following this call, the majority of this volume's nineteen contributing authors are men. Regretfully, the voices of the few female contributors are thus rendered somewhat obscure. Nevertheless, the significance of Niger Delta women in the socio-economic, cosmological and political history of the region is suitably introduced.

The seven chapters that make up Section Two provide an interesting if not divergent range of gender analysis and theory. Juliana Okoh's presentation of the debates surrounding the concept of feminism – and, more specifically, African feminism – is both refreshing and insightful when she insists that feminism is not a monolithic construction but instead is intertwined with ethnicity, history, religion and environment. E. J. Alagoa, a noted historian, contributes a well-written chapter on Niger Delta women in cosmology (particularly concerning creation myths), politics, economics, social structure and kinship – the Ijo were primarily matrilineal – and the arts. He contends that women played, and continue to play, significant roles in every aspect of culture and society, which warrant further study. Emma Onwuzirike draws upon analogies from the animal kingdom to explicate the 'divine' conferment of headship on men, labelling women as the 'helpers' of Adam. She posits that a 'growing number of women have improperly digested equality concepts' (p. 68). The psychological reductionism and flattening of individual experience in this chapter negates the efforts of other contributors. The remaining two chapters in this section offer a more critical and complicated investigation of regional gender studies, the symbolism of womanhood in oral literature and historiography.

Section Three (Chapters 9 to 13) includes contributions centred on women's uprising. John H. Enemugwem describes the Women's War of 1929 against British colonial taxation in the Eastern Niger Delta as paving the way to independence in 1960 and as an ongoing source of inspiration against injustice. This uprising, which culminated in Ikot Abasi and resulted in many wounded and dead, fell on the heels of the women's revolts in Aba and Owerri. In Chapter 10, Ibibia Sasime portrays the Epie (Central Niger Delta) women's

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