



**Review: [Untitled]**

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*West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War* by  
Mahir Saul; Patrick Royer

Leslie C. Gray

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***West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War.* By Mahir Saul and Patrick Royer.**

Western African Studies. Athens: Ohio University Press, and Oxford: James Currey, 2001. Pp. 404; 34 illustrations. \$65.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

One of the last survivors of the Volta-Bani anticolonial war of 1915–1916 passed away two years ago. His name was Tamini Yambore, after the forest in which he was born. His mother had fled the colonial onslaught that razed her village. Many of the villages in this region of southwestern Burkina Faso were burned to the ground during the anticolonial war. These events are still marked on the collective consciousness of villagers; Tamini Yambore and others were the living repositories of that consciousness. But unfortunately with the deaths of people like Yambore those memories are fading away. The war has also largely been disregarded in academic and education circles as well, despite its size, the resulting massive displacement and mortality, and the changes it brought to the political and social landscape of West Africa. Saul and Royer's exciting book redresses this gap in an important analysis of the origins, organization, and motivations of the actors in this war.

French colonial powers generally assumed that the conflict began in reaction to a conscription campaign; however, the authors describe several events that precipitated the initial uprising and its spread. Saul and Royer argue that the shadow of World War I loomed directly over the conflict. As a response to the war, France pulled out personnel from their West African colonies, lessening their presence in the Volta region, where colonization was fairly incomplete to begin with. This resulted in local leaders' perception of French colonization as weak and waning, and thus vulnerable to attack.

Despite the diminishing presence of colonial powers, the brutality of colonial rule accelerated. The authors detail several events involving the persecution of local dignitaries, both Muslim and non-Muslim, that helped to cement general opposition to colonial rule and lay the groundwork for the uprising. For example, colonial officials conjured up a conspiracy of local Muslim leaders, jailing and torturing them based on vague suspicions of a seditious letter. This persecution had its roots in the anti-Muslim sentiment emerging from the role of the Ottoman Empire as German allies. Saul and Royer demonstrate that these actions, rather than destroying an anti-French conspiracy, instead destroyed a set of French allies. The authors' description and interpretation of the events that led to the war is excellent. They give us great insight into the motivations of different actors, describing very nicely the role of local leaders in the uprising and the petty rivalries and conspiracy theories that led colonial officers to act in the ways they did.

The anticolonial uprising began in a limited number of villages but within months spread to a large region encompassing much of western Burkina Faso and parts of Mali. The war has often been downplayed as a series of disparate upris-

ings, but the authors convince us that these actions constituted a war, one that was well organized, employed sophisticated military strategy, and exploited ritual, social, and military alliances. Indeed they debunk the myth that so-called "stateless" societies are incapable of highly organized military campaigns, showing instead how strong leadership was able to transform a localized conflict into a regional war through the use of diplomacy, propaganda, and the mobilization of intervillage networks. The authors illustrate how societies that seem diffuse and unorganized can unite to form broader regional structures. This coordination led to strong initial victories that spread the movement beyond its initial boundaries.

Among the broad repercussions of the war was a loss of life and economic destruction that plagued the region for years to come. The French responded to their initial losses by a systematic destruction of villages and village livelihoods. This policy was eventually seen as counterproductive and was abandoned in responses to future uprisings throughout their colonies. The war also led to a restructuring and deepening of colonial rule. The splitting up of Haut-Senegal-Niger into two colonies paved the way for the independent countries of Mali and Burkina Faso.

Saul and Royer resurrect this conflict—one of the largest armed oppositions to colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa—and put it in its proper place in history, using an innovative methodological framework to examine the motivations of different actors in this war. This book is a must-read for any scholar interested in the military and social history of colonial rule in Africa.

LESLIE C. GRAY

*Santa Clara University*

***The Bluest Hands: A Social and Economic History of Women Dyers in Abeokuta (Nigeria), 1890–1940.*** By Judith A. Byfield. Social History of Africa Series. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, and Oxford: James Currey, 2002. Pp. xxxix, 263; 12 illustrations. \$24.95 paper.

The title of this volume, *The Bluest Hands*—an indirect compliment to Toni Morrison, author of the novel, *The Bluest Eye*—refers to the hands of women indigo dyers of Abeokuta, in southwestern Nigeria. While the impact of colonial rule on commodity production such as cocoa has been well documented, less is known about its effects on Yoruba women's textile production during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Focusing on *adire*, a distinctive blue-and-white, resist-dyed, patterned cloth produced in Abeokuta and