

A major study of a neglected resistance war. (West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War) (Book Review)

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West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War. By MAHIR SAUL and PATRICK ROYER. Oxford: James Currey Publishers; Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2001. Pp. xiii + 404. [pounds sterling]45 (ISBN 0-85255-474-5); [pounds sterling]16.95, paperback (ISBN 0-85255-479-6).

KEY WORDS: West Africa, Burkina Faso, Mali, colonial, military, resistance.

Anthropologists Mahir Saul and Patrick Royer have written a remarkable history of a major yet undeservedly obscure colonial conflict, which they call 'the Volta-Bani anticolonial war'. For specialists in the history and culture of Francophone West Africa, this war is better known as the revolt against military conscription which occurred in the Niger bend in 1915-16. Based on extensive fieldwork and solid archival work in France, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, this substantial study is accompanied by no less than 27 excellent maps that help general readers situate the war within the 100,000 square kilometres extending in Mali from San to the borders of Jenne, and in Burkina Faso from Koudougou as far south as Bobo-Dioulasso. This vast region included disparate peoples, and cultures, as well as numerous languages within the Voltaic and Mande families. One reason for its obscurity was that the region lacked large African polities or states. Instead, old village leagues and alliances among segmentary societies formed the core of the rebellion. Though numerically a minority, Muslims played an important role in trade, were central figures in the larger towns and among the diffuse leadership of the revolt.

This rising is best understood as a primary resistance movement designed to end colonial abuses such as heavy taxation and especially forced recruitment, and for some, to drive away the French entirely. Given the thin veneer of French rule in this remote area, such a goal was not millenarian, although magic was an important element of cohesion among rebel groups. Also significant were symbolic efforts to erase the French presence: on the surface of roads built with forced labour, rebels planted millet.

The conflict was arguably the largest resistance movement anywhere in Africa between 1914 and 1918. The rebels mobilized as many as 20,000 soldiers at the height of the rebellion in 1916 and the French required 5,000 troops,

mostly tirailleurs, to put out the firestorm among the 900,000 inhabitants touched by the resistance. African flintlocks were no match for French firepower and the toll on resistors was high; one battle near Bobo-Dioulasso in May 1916 left 2,000 dead.

The remoteness of the region and its colonial affiliation may help explain why this story has remained obscure especially to English-speaking readers. There is another and more compelling reason. Primary resistance movements and leaders have often taken pride of place in the history school books of postcolonial states. In Guinea, Sekou Toure even had a personal reason to embellish the memory of his ancestor Samori Toure. In eastern and southern Africa, Maji-Maji, Bambatha's rebellion and the rising of John Chilembwe have all been invoked as proud if unsuccessful movements of resistance against cruel but powerful colonial armies. In Burkina Faso, however, the people who had played the dominant role in the primary resistance were from the wrong part of the country, more closely associated with the Mande minorities in the western part of the country than with the majority Mossi of the old Ouagadougou and Yatenga empires in the centre and north. Indeed, not only did Mossi elites from these empires fight with the French to put down the Volta-Bani warriors, one of their own, Maurice Yameogo, first president of the newly independent republic of Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), was not interested in embellishing the accomplishments of peoples who now supported his political opponents.

The disciplinary strengths of the authors are evident throughout what is essentially an anthropology of a unique resistance movement crossing lines of ethnicity and religion. Weaknesses in this book may also be a product of disciplinary orientation. Although the authors cite major studies of French Africa and the First World War, they treat the French side summarily and inaccurately. The unnamed Governor-General of French West Africa at the time is described as being 'panic stricken' (p. 24) over the rising, whereas in fact Joost van Vollenhoven, who was in charge, used the revolt as part of his campaign to end the heavy burden of military conscription. Also, Senegal's deputy Blaise Diagne, who as an energetic supporter of full African participation in France's war effort no doubt had strong opinions about the revolt, receives no mention.

These criticisms apart, this book is a welcome addition to the literature. Future textbook writers of modern African history would do very well to take notice.

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