

medicine, and royal power as opposed to emphasizing the importance to these histories of immigrant groups from the north and east.

Even this compact and readable book has shortcomings. Maps are sometimes overloaded with information, and the sheer volume of directional arrows and place, ethnic, and personal names may well overwhelm the novice reader of African history, even if each bit of information in the maps is, in fact, incorporated into the narrative. The authors rarely analyze political culture, artistic meaning, gender, or health and healing as constituents of African history. To do so would have both expanded the book's scope and required even more narrative compression, but it would also have delivered on the authors' claim to present "a more distinctive African viewpoint" (vii). Islamization and Christianization are given much play as conditioning factors, but their character receives little explication. Readers might be forgiven for thinking that these religions were prime causes of historical change instead of ideologies and practices that changed over time and place.

A ghostly trace of the theme of race in early African history turns up as the last sentence of the introduction: "On the whole, it would seem that Africans were divided from each other culturally by the multitude of different environments of their continent rather than by any fundamental antagonisms that could be attributed to race" (13). During the last five centuries of their narrative, European involvement with Africa included a strong commitment to slave trading, a commitment that played a major role in producing experiences drawn upon by European intellectuals in the work of inventing racial identities. It seems, therefore, odd that the category of race should enter this book as a common-sense analytical term, instead of as something to be unpacked and historicized. Only then could they demonstrate whether Africans used "race" to think about and act in the world and, if so, where, when, and why.

This introduction to medieval African history emphasizes causal relations between political scale and the dynamics of trade and primary production within a context of diverse and uncertain environments. The actors in the book, whether named political leaders or nameless hunters, herders, and farmers, are mostly male. Merchants buy cheap and sell dear; political and military leaders seek alliances to expand or defend boundaries and seek tribute with which to support followers. In their hands, medieval African history was not so much distinctive as shot through with an implicitly gendered logic of instrumental power.

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*West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War.* By Mahir Saul and Patrick Royer. (Athens and Oxford: Ohio University Press and James Currey, 2001. Pp. xiii, 404. \$65.00.)

This book is an outstanding example of how two scholars from the distinct disciplines of history and anthropology can join talents to produce an excellent study, one that adequately combines dense narratives with insightful theories. Using extensive archival and oral sources, the authors present a masterful account of the anticolonial

resistance wars in the Volta and Bani areas of West Africa in 1915–1916. The resistance was directed against the French at a time when they were also active in World War I. To be sure, the French had encountered African resistance in previous years, including a prolonged instance in West Africa in the late nineteenth century. However, as this book points out, the Volta-Bani resistance was the largest and the most sustained such effort with the major aim of terminating French colonial rule. Indeed, the authors assert that this was also the largest armed opposition to any colonial power in Africa, although the Volta-Bani war has largely been ignored. Thus the first major accomplishment of the book is to fill an important gap in the literature.

The industry of the authors' data gathering is impressive in itself, as they combed all the important archives and undertook difficult ethnographic work. As Mahir Saul and Patrick Royer understood the process, they concluded that extant literature on colonial Africa failed to offer any convincing explanation for why the people in the Volta-Bani areas could be so successful in organizing such a massive resistance against the French, with their superior power. For several months, Africans were able to mobilize against the French. The hero who emerged from the struggles was Yisu Kote, who began the protest, built an impressive army, organized the procurement of arms and ammunition, and fought a series of battles.

The story of resistance presented here shows the power of human agency to respond to change, to improvise to meet emergency situations, and to defend one's rights, even with limited forces. What is clear is that Yisu Kote was able to convince thousands of people that victory was possible and that the outcome would lead to a better life. An initial victory in 1915 and French colonial excesses energized Africans to support the war. Islam and local religions further empowered the resistance by supplying both additional sources of motivation to fight and the magic and the charms to the belief that enemy obstacles would be overcome. However, in the final analysis, the resistance collapsed, mainly due to France's superior artillery.

The principal merit of the book lies in providing an understanding of the process of resistance and war, rather than the limitations of their end results. With an eye for detail that would be hard to match, the authors elaborate on the political and cultural underpinnings of the resistance, the leadership, the management of armies and the fragile political association, and the various strategies of the African leaders for fighting the French. Thus, the book presents us with not only a dense political narrative about men and motives, but also a cultural history, with the magic and the supernatural dimensions of wars. Military and cultural histories are carefully blended such that a full picture of politics and war emerges clearly and forcefully. Although not the authors' primary concern, one also sees the steps taken by the French to consolidate their colonial conquests.

A warning to readers unfamiliar with the region is necessary: first understand the maps before you begin to read the book. The authors provide some maps, but the readers should use additional maps of West Africa as well. While their names and places are numerous, the narrative is very easy to follow and digest. The book is, no doubt, a great accomplishment.

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