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**West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War.**  
Mahir Saul and Patrick Royer. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001. 404 pp.

According to the authors, the Volta-Bani uprising of 1915-16 was the largest armed movement of resistance to colonialism in Africa. Yet it has been virtually ignored by historians. The first achievement of Mahir Saul and Patrick Royer's meticulously researched book is therefore to fill a significant gap in our knowledge of resistance to colonial rule.

The Volta-Bani War started in late 1915 and lasted about a year. The war was not actually a single united campaign but played itself out in four separate arenas in the western Volta region of what was then French West Africa (FWA). Some 800,000 900,000 Africans in a thousand villages (approximately 8 percent of the population of FWA) were involved in the war, with the African side mustering armies of between fifteen and twenty thousand men at its height. The resistance movement was ultimately beaten by superior French firepower and its leaders executed.

The scale of the war prompts the authors to ask two key questions. First, 'how were the resisters able to marshal such tremendous resources' and sustain a series of military campaigns on such a scale over such a long period? (3) This is especially pertinent, given that the political organization of western Volta society has traditionally been seen as conforming to the segmentary model of African societies. However, as the authors point out, it is not enough simply to recognize that such 'noncentralized societies, too, can offer serious resistance'. (11) The phenomenon requires explanation: what kind of society was it that made this mobilization possible and how did it articulate with the occupying colonial forces? Second, how is it that such a large-scale war has been ignored by historians for so long?

The first few chapters of the book address the first of these questions by examining the structures, customs and practices of West Volta society in the nineteenth century and then showing how the French colonial occupation of the region remained incomplete before World War I. This proves to be an important element in understanding the context within which the uprising started and interpreting the purposes and resources of the anticolonial movement. A complex picture emerges, in which traditional linkages and alliances between the villages of the region played an important role in laying the foundation for the organizational capacity that was to make the sustained campaigns of 1915-16 possible. Subsequent chapters chart the course of the war by examining the specific contexts within which anticolonial opposition emerged and providing a meticulously detailed narrative of the war itself in each of the arenas in which it took place. The authors suggest that their detailed analysis enhances our understanding of the type of society that produced this war effort, although they do not actually summarize in their conclusion the ways in which it is supposed to do this. This perhaps reflects the fact that the

complexity of the picture they have painted defies synthesis and the drawing of 'broad brush' conclusions.

In addressing their second question of why the war has been ignored for so long, the authors suggest some interesting explanations, including the 'invisible language barrier between French and English that still divides postcolonial Africa' and 'the attitudes of successive governments that ruled over these territories'. (24) In the latter case, it was not only France that had a vested interest in drawing a veil over the murderous events of 1915-16, but also the governments of the newly- independent Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) and Mali, for both of whom 'the Volta-Bani anticolonial war concerned areas that were marginal in terms of the symbols mobilized to forge a national identity'. (25)

The authors criticize as unhelpful some of the habitual distinctions made in colonial history between 'resistance' and 'rebellion', 'conquest' and 'pacification'. They are also careful to distance themselves from some of the recent literature that falls within the domain of postcolonial studies, notably that produced by the subaltern school. In particular, they suggest that the term subaltern is not useful for describing West African opposition to Europeans in the first decades of colonial occupation. They also point out that the recent preoccupation with colonial discourse has led to a lack of interest in analyzing actual confrontation and organization, thereby taking us further away from filling in the gaps of our understanding of the latter. They clearly see their study as a contribution to righting this imbalance in the literature and in this they succeed admirably.

Saul and Royer, respectively an anthropologist and a historian, have produced a book that is an excellent example of the value of cross-disciplinary work in the field of African history. It uses an extensive range of oral and archival sources effectively to produce a rich account of anticolonial resistance that challenges historians to rethink and refine the terms and theories that they have used hitherto to analyze such movements.

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