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Author

Vartavarian, Mesrob George

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Moses E. Ochonu. *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014). pp. 273.

Mesrob Vartavarian

Moses Ochonu has effectively moved beyond standard analyses of Indirect Rule to chart the development of Hausa-Fulani sub-colonialism in the Nigerian Middle Belt. Rather than seeking forms of colonial mediation that utilized indigenous elites to act as middlemen between the colonial state and society, Ochonu argues that British officials deployed Hausa personnel to act as “civilizing” agents in an area considered to be too backward for Indirect Rule. Senior administrators felt that the Middle Belt would only be able to produce appropriate elites after an extended period of Hausa-Fulani sub-colonial tutelage. These elites would then be inducted into a system of autochthonous representation. Thus, the policy of Indirect Rule that came to typify the caliphal zone would eventually be extended to Northern Nigeria in its entirety after an intermediate stage of what Ochonu calls “native alien” rule.

Ochonu begins his study with an insightful analysis of converging colonial imaginaries in which both British imperial agents and Hausa-Fulani elites came to view the Middle Belt as a pagan zone desperate for monotheistic good government. The core of the book lies in case studies charting the extension of caliphal institutions and personnel to southern Kaduna, the Plateau-Nasarawa basin, the Benue valley, and Adamawa province.¹ Ochonu concludes by positing that emirate rule in the Middle Belt rendered plans to construct a cohesive sociopolitical unit in Northern Nigeria highly problematic.

British personnel drew on South Asian colonial practices to justify the North’s sociopolitical hierarchies. Prior developments of martial race theory on the Indian subcontinent were modified and applied to the Hausa-Fulani in order to validate notions of sub-colonial supremacy.² Literate bureaucracies coupled with traditions of conquest marked the emirates as naturally predisposed to rule less complex societies in the colonial imaginary.

However, Ochonu stresses that none of this came about solely as a result of British machinations. Hausa-Fulani agents were strongly complicit in processes that extended their socio-economic and political privileges in an imperial framework that

placed Islamic civilizations above acephalous societies.³ The northern emirates had long viewed the Middle Belt as a zone of colonization. Slave raids and wars of conquest established a caliphal presence in the Middle Belt throughout the nineteenth century. Yet, these conquests were far from complete. In numerous instances, emirate incursions stalemated as victims of raids fled to hilltop fortifications that proved almost impossible for cavalry-based armies to breach. In many cases, the transition to British rule tipped these struggles in the Hausa-Fulani's favor as the superior firepower of the colonial state was deployed on behalf of its sub-colonial proxies. British interventions went well beyond reinforcing preexisting ambitions in places like the Benue. Here, emirate agents had never established a lasting presence of any significance. It was only with British protection that Hausa-Fulani functionaries founded a dominant presence justified on grounds of their own racial and civilizational superiority.

Caliphal impositions generated tremendous grassroots resentment that effectively undermined British efforts at administrative homogenization. Rather than view Hausa-Fulani agents as instructors in the virtues of a superior civilization, Middle Belt peoples such as the Tiv and Idoma consolidated political communities that were antithetical to the caliphal model.⁴ Nascent elites took advantage of the opportunities presented by Christian missionary education to formulate counter-narratives of victimization at the hands of alien interlopers. This led to violent protest movements that constantly drew British imperial overlords into a series of vain attempts at mediation. Efforts by the Northern People's Congress government to pacify dissent in the 1950s through a combination of political patronage and draconian crackdowns proved only partially successful. Instead of fostering integration, Hausa-Fulani sub-colonialism aggravated regional demarcations.

Ochonu's well-researched study makes good use of a variety of archival and oral sources. It is concisely written and case studies from across the Middle Belt effectively demonstrate how converging local experiences made for a broader regional consciousness. The work might have made more sustained linkages between South Asian precedents and Northern Nigerian practices as well as elaborated further on how sub-colonialism in the Middle Belt hardened notions of Hausa-Fulani identity in the face of non-Muslim majorities. Yet, these are minor criticisms in an

otherwise major contribution to the literature on native agency in sub-colonial formations.

Notes

¹ Moses E. Ochonu, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), chapters 2-6.

² *Ibid.*, 67-68.

³ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 109-118, 200.