

COLONIAL COERCION AND EXPLOITATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

doi:10.1017/S0021853710000356

Colonial Meltdown: Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression. By MOSES E. OCHONU. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009. Pp. xii + 217. £48.95/\$55, hardback (ISBN 978-0-8214-1889-5); £22.50/\$24.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-8214-1890-1).

KEY WORDS: Nigeria, colonial, economic, state, taxation.

Colonial Meltdown is a must read for scholars and students interested in Northern Nigeria, the Depression, taxation, and the colonial state. The goal of Ochonu's careful analysis is to problematize and historicize colonial economic exploitation. He challenges the assumptions of economic exploitation that presuppose 'a consistent production of surpluses and profits that can be appropriated without harming the production capacity' (p. 2). In very accessible prose, supported by meticulous research, he argues convincingly that the collapsing produce prices and dwindling profits of the Great Depression created a distinctive moment in the history of colonial exploitation in Northern Nigerian, a moment that many scholars have overlooked. The economic crisis proved so debilitating to the region that the state was temporarily unable to extract profits and surpluses, and colonial power began to unravel. Organized in six compelling chapters, Ochonu's book uses the Depression as a prism to examine two interrelated questions: what happens when a colonial power finds itself ruling over an African territory that it is not able to exploit and how do colonial subjects respond to the absence of colonial exploitation?

Ochonu's analysis of the economic crisis is layered in rich social and political history. He analyzes the debates among colonial officials as they strategized to maintain revenue during the Depression. These strategies included: retrenching African and European staff, reducing spending on travel, greater intervention in agriculture, reduced spending on education and public works, and increased pressure on chiefs to collect taxes. Austerity and taxes were at the heart of the state's plans for maintaining financial stability. Officials implemented these strategies against a backdrop of deteriorating produce prices, thus creating circumstances in which farmers paid more than 30 per cent of their income as tax while their incomes declined (p. 50).

Ochonu demonstrates that the impact of these strategies varied across the region. In Kabba and Igbirra, women cloth producers benefited from the increased demand for local cloth (p. 86). However, Idoma division – a peripheral area within the larger colonial economy of Northern Nigeria – suffered severely. Idoma relied on both the remittances from young men who worked in the mines and the export of yams to the Jos plateau. However, both avenues contracted as workers were laid off and demand for yams fell as industries on the plateau closed. The impact of the economic crisis also varied across the social spectrum. Slavery resurfaced and child trafficking increased (p. 78). The relationship between chiefs and their communities and between chiefs and the colonial state became increasingly strained as chiefs tried to respond to both the sentiments of their communities and the demands of colonial officials for taxes (pp. 64–70).

Despite the well-documented economic decline, officials refused to acknowledge the distress of local communities. They kept confidential any discussion about food shortages until taxes and increasing indebtedness helped trigger a famine in 1931 (p. 63). These conditions did not daunt the drive for tax collection; instead, the revenue drive became more aggressive. In Idoma division, colonial officials

resorted to confiscating livestock and yams or to burning the residences of villagers who hid from tax collectors. In order to reclaim their stock, villagers had to pay their taxes. If they failed to ransom their livestock, the animals were sold at auction and state officials kept the proceeds (pp. 153–5).

These extremely coercive measures undermined colonial control, as residents of Northern Nigeria challenged colonial authority in individual and collective ways. Some communities rebelled. Some individuals hid their animals during tax raids or set booby-traps, while some paid their taxes with counterfeit coins. Others used the pen: Samuel Cole-Edwards launched Northern Nigeria's first newspaper, the *Nigerian Protectorate Ram*, in September 1930 (p. 105). Cole-Edwards and his supporters offered strident criticisms of the state's strategy of austerity and taxes, such that officials felt threatened enough to bring charges against him. In response he fled to Onitsha, where he continued publishing the newspaper under a new name, the *Nigerian Weekly Despatch*. Northern officials might have succeeded in removing Cole-Edwards, but they did not put an end to the anti-colonial critique.

Colonial Meltdown is sure to stimulate debate and discussion. Ochonu shows that the nature of exploitation in the pre-Depression era was different from that of the Depression era itself. Equally importantly, he demonstrates that the Depression imposed limits on the extraction of resources and, when confronted with those limits, colonial officials became more direct and exceedingly coercive. *Colonial Meltdown* also demonstrates that the intersection of the Depression, taxation, and anti-colonialism is a rich seam for economic and social historians. It simultaneously highlights not only the need for much more research to better document the imposition and nature of taxation in both Northern and Southern Nigeria but also the social and political consequences of the Depression. Finally, Ochonu provides a good model that can be applied to other regions of Nigeria and other parts of the continent.

Cornell University

JUDITH BYFIELD

NAMING, COLONIAL VIOLENCE, AND VILLAGE MEMORIES IN THE CONGO

doi:10.1017/S0021853710000368

Naming Colonialism: History and Collective Memory in the Congo, 1870–1960. By

OSUMAKA LIKAKA. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009.

Pp. xii + 220. £23.95/\$26.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-299-23364-8).

KEY WORDS: Congo, colonial, memory, method, peasants, rural, violence.

Osumaka Likaka has written a book that renews our faith in history, this millennium-old craft that has had its share of vicissitudes, debates, and crises in the postmodern era. The book is as much about methodology as it is about filling gaps in how the 'village world' made sense of colonialism and its hubris. Recycling some materials from his *Rural Society and Cotton in Colonial Zaire* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), Likaka sets the stage for *Naming Colonialism* by first tackling the dynamics of naming in colonial Congo and skillfully analyzing how naming calls to existence and determines one's life and social trajectory (ch. one). Then, in the following chapter, he presents the harsh conditions of rural life under Belgian colonialism, in which different institutions, including private companies,