

Colonial Meltdown, Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression

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For the past twenty years, historians of colonial Africa have paid relatively little attention to the impact of the Great Depression both upon African lives and upon the relationship between rulers and ruled. The hypotheses advanced by French and British historians in the 1970s and 1980s have been allowed to stand by default.¹ With the publication of this forcefully argued and original contribution focusing on the experiences of non-Muslim peoples in the Middle Belt of colonial Northern Nigeria, Moses Ochuno re-opens the debate. His contribution is especially valuable given that historians of Europe and America are currently drawing parallels between the commercial and financial trends of the 1930s and potential future trends in the evolution of the world economy following the banking crash of 2008.² Ochuno's evidence lends fresh support to the view previously advanced by many Anglophone historians that the Depression intensified the tensions between rulers and ruled in the colonies and protectorates of British West Africa, while countering the view often found in the Francophone literature that such tensions arose from the increasingly effective exploitation of Africans. Ochuno argues eloquently that the Depression was a period of manifest colonial failure which saw the withdrawal of many rural Nigerians from the global economy.

Ochuno acknowledges at the outset a key weakness of his study by comparison with the primary research conducted earlier in the twentieth century: by the time he began to conduct interviews in the Idoma region of the Middle Belt in July 2000, very few people who had been economically active in the 1930s were still alive. Even within the generation below this, many were unable to remember what, if anything, their parents had told them about their experience of the slump. This silence of the suffering masses meant that the researcher was forced to fall back on the local-level colonial archival record, which he subjected to a fine-grained textual analysis in order to infer and deduce the key features of Africans' experiences by reading between the lines of official statements. Issues of discourse loom large in the introduction to the book, as the author deconstructs the official interpretation of events and highlights the internal contradictions and anxieties inherent in the world view of British imperial servants in the 1930s. This discussion paves the way for the remaining six thematic

chapters of the book, in which a systematic and painstaking attempt is made to distinguish between those statements in contemporary documents which represent flourishes of imperial rhetoric and those which provide more solid evidence about local experience.

The picture which emerges is one of an ineffective local administration veering between the neglect of African needs for education, health care, and infrastructural investment, and the violent pursuit of tax revenues which were proving increasingly difficult to extract from impoverished and alienated subjects. Workers displaced from the unprofitable tin mines of the Jos Plateau were placing additional burdens on village families already struggling with high tax demands, low prices of crops and cattle, and recurrent plagues of grasshoppers and locusts. Some young men moved on from the villages of Idoma Division to find fresh work in the cocoa farms of Southern Nigeria, but when they returned home to try setting up their own cocoa farms, they found that the trees failed to flourish. Only one small group seemed able to benefit legitimately from the extraordinary circumstances of the Depression: the women weavers of Kabba and Igbirra, who found demand expanding rapidly as imported cloth became increasingly scarce. It is worth noting that Ochuno has deliberately avoided re-telling the well-known story of expanding Hausa groundnut exports in this period, in order to maintain a clear Middle Belt focus. For this part of Northern Nigeria, he presents a convincingly bleak picture of a grim decade in which the moral and practical weaknesses of indirect rule in Northern Nigeria became painfully apparent both to rulers and ruled, paving the way for the subsequent emergence both of more overtly statist developmental colonialism and of a vigorous movement of resistance from below.

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NOTES

¹ Brown, *Economies of Africa and Asia*; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'L'Afrique et la Crise'.

² James, *Creation and Destruction of Value*, and *End of Globalization*.

References

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