

# BOOK REVIEW

**Moses E. Ochonu. *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and the Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria*.** Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016. 250 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$85. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-253-011602.

In *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and the Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria*, Moses Ochonu focuses on what became known as the Middle Belt in the colonial project that the British carved out of portions of West Africa's greater Niger basin and designated as the country we know as Nigeria. The British colonialists subsequently sought to submerge this Middle Belt sub-portion into the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, which they had also created. Their goal was an accessible colonial rule based on their indirect rule system of colonial administration which they had effectively applied in India. It is also noteworthy that in the entire area of the greater Niger basin that became the colony of Nigeria, it was only in the main area, the core Caliphate empire that was created and ruled by the Fulani (with its religio-administrative capital in the city of Sokoto), that the indirect rule system was not resisted by the various distinct indigenous inhabitants upon its introduction and imposition. Ochonu writes from an insider perspective, since he is originally from the Middle Belt, in contrast with many scholars who seem to understand neither what the Middle Belt sub-region of post-colonial Nigeria is, nor what it stands for in terms of its political history and evolution during and after the end of de facto colonial rule. Ochonu describes the boundaries of the Middle Belt region with clarity, as encompassing southern Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa, the Benue River Niger valley, and the Adamawa-Taraba areas of the upper Niger.

The inability of many scholars to come to terms with the boundaries of the greater Middle Belt, as articulated above, and what it stands for causes them to play around with its historiography and that of its distinct inhabitants. They either confuse it with the post-jihad upper Niger basin, especially the colonially-created Protectorate of Northern Nigeria and the Fulani-founded and dominated caliphate empire that preceded it in parts of the upper Niger, or ignore it completely in the invented historiography of the post-colonial upper Niger basin. What emerged and exists yet today as the Middle Belt in Nigeria is characterized by several distinct peoples who identify neither with

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association.

the Hausa Fulani culture of the upper Niger, nor with the culture and political history of the Yoruba people who inhabit the lower southwest parts of the Niger basin. These peoples include the Igbo, whose homeland borders the southern portions of the Middle Belt and ranges southward far into the lower southeast of the Niger basin, and several other distinct peoples—such as the Efik, Ibibio, and Annang—who also inhabit the evergreen rainforest ecological zone.

According to Ochonu, Islam was introduced in Hausaland in the fourteenth century through Fulani herdsmen, itinerant Fulani traders, and preachers. Subsequently, Usman Dan Fodio declared and utilized his *jihad* to defeat and conquer most of the indigenous kingdoms, especially in Hausaland, early in the nineteenth century. However, except for pockets of the area, the peoples of the Middle Belt successfully resisted his *jihad* and quest to conquer and Islamize them. Ochonu shows in his book that the struggle and resistance by most of the peoples against the jihad and the quest by the Fulani to bring them under caliphate domination raged on into the onset of British colonial incursion, which also saw the advent of Christian missionaries who successfully converted them to the Christian faith instead. Even as late as 1957, on the eve of Nigeria's independence, these peoples under the aegis of the United Middle Belt Forum submitted a memorandum to the Willink Minority Commission, which was set up by the departing colonial regime to address the fears and concerns of the political and demographic minority groups in the Nigeria project. In that memorandum, these groups clearly expressed their fears of being subsumed under the Hausa-Fulani caliphate hegemony as part of the now defunct Northern Region. They preferred to be granted a new and different Middle Belt Region, which is now defunct also.

Ochonu aptly denotes the indirect rule system as imposed in the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, which included the inhabitants of the Middle Belt, as colonialism by proxy, given that it brought those distinct inhabitants under de facto Hausa-Fulani control. Throughout the book, Ochonu emphasizes this fact by pointing out how through the indirect rule system, the British adopted the caliphate empire's Islamic political structures of leadership and extended them to the inhabitants of the entire upper Niger region. The misconception was that those structures and the Islamic faith from which they derived their claim to legitimacy was literate and, as a result, superior to the indigenous cultures and political structures of the original inhabitants of the Middle Belt.

The author identifies the processes through which the British accomplished this rule of the Fulani by proxy over the peoples of the Middle Belt: the appointment and imposition of emirs as administrators, and the designation of Hausa-Fulani agents (tax collectors, soldiers, policemen, village heads, and judges). The practice of recruiting and deploying Hausa soldiers was further applied beyond the upper Niger. Like elsewhere in the Nigeria project, in the Middle Belt the indirect rule system brought much dissatisfaction among the non-Muslim inhabitants, who rightly took offence.

Resistance to indirect rule led to revolts of all sorts in the Middle Belt and elsewhere.

Ochonu's work is a worthy history book that adopts social theories and utilizes them to examine British colonialism and its application in the upper Niger. It falls right there alongside E. A. Crampton's *History of Christianity in Northern Nigeria* (G. Chapman, 1979), and Yusufu Turaki's *Tainted Legacy* (Isaac Publishing, 2010), both of which examine related matters. This reviewer recommends all three books to readers who desire to gain an extensive knowledge of this area.

Kefas Lamak 

University of Iowa

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

[kefas-lamak@uiowa.edu](mailto:kefas-lamak@uiowa.edu)

[doi:10.1017/asr.2023.66](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.66)