

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Naylor. *From Rebels to Rulers: Writing Legitimacy in the Early Sokoto State*. Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2021. vi + 199 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. \$115. Cloth. ISBN: 9781847012708.

While the Sokoto Caliphate has been studied time and again, “there has been little attempt to understand the Fodiawa’s writings within their own context, or to think seriously about the function of the written word at that time” (19). In his insightful book *From Rebels to Rulers: Writing Legitimacy in the Early Sokoto State*, Paul Naylor seeks to fill this gap. He argues that “the explosion of Arabic texts in the nineteenth century represents the collective response of Muslim intellectuals to a changing discursive space” (29), and that the Arabic texts left behind by the Fodiawa do not project unity. He also confirms that Arabic texts served as vehicles for discourses of legitimation and delegitimation in the nineteenth-century Sahel region of West Africa.

The book is organized chronologically, and it draws on Arabic sources, nineteenth-century European accounts, and secondary sources. Compared to other studies, it is a distinctive work in several ways. For instance, its approach that views legitimation as a multi-faceted phenomenon and its inclusion of the caliphal state’s discourses of legitimation within the context of the nineteenth-century West African discursive space are both original ideas.

To demonstrate his claims, the author, after an introduction, dedicates Chapter One to examining the discursive tradition of legitimacy that existed in the Sahel region before the nineteenth century, highlighting the three strategies that Muslim leaders used, separately or together, to establish their legitimacy: religious knowledge, knowledge of the hidden, and claims to noble origin. The author spends Chapter Two examining how the Fodiawa, who drew on the Sahelian discursive tradition of legitimacy, shifted from discourses of dissent to discourses of moderation between 1790 and 1814. In addition, the chapter stresses how Abdullahi frustrated Usman’s efforts to smooth over contradictions between the discourses of dissent and discourses of moderation, which Usman attempted after realizing that the former legitimation strategy was under duress between 1810 and 1817. Naylor also

argues that to curtail discussion over the legal justification for his rule, Usman claimed legitimacy partly by referring to his victory in the jihad of 1804.

In Chapter Three, the author considers how Bello claimed legitimacy in the period from 1817 to 1821, when he faced internal and external challenges to his rule, arguing that although Bello removed most of these challenges through warfare, he also sought legitimization through several other means. In Chapter Four, the author considers how Bello claimed legitimacy during his unchallenged rule, from 1821 to 1837, arguing that he sought legitimacy mainly by raising his status and enacting policies that “carried inherent authority in and of themselves” (125). The author also ties the origins of the familiar image of a Sokoto Caliphate to the Arabic text Bello composed during his rule, and he highlights attention to issues related to differing concepts of government in Sokoto and Gwandu. Naylor uses the concluding chapter partly to stress that the Fodiawa’s experience of establishing legitimacy by engaging with Islam’s fluid set of discursive traditions provides an example illustrative of a dynamic that existed throughout the Muslim world.

There are a number of specific points that deserve mention. First, Naylor did not authenticate the Arabic texts he used in writing the book. Additionally, he did not mine relevant texts left behind by merchants. The book’s almost exclusive focus on materials left behind by political elites does not quite allow us to consider the history of the Sokoto Caliphate in a way that contrasts radically with earlier triumphalist interpretations. Naylor establishes that Bello thought of himself as a caliph, but he does not investigate whether the caliphal ruler’s identification of himself within this category inspired the mid-twentieth century coining of the name “Sokoto Caliphate” by Murray Last, and whether it facilitated the acceptance of the name by the contemporary Northern Nigerian political elites. Here, he misses an opportunity that may cast doubt on the notion that the caliphal rulers never named or even never thought of naming the state they created. Although Naylor does say that he will not use the formulation “Sokoto Caliphate,” it is disappointing that he named the expanding state Usman created after a city in that state, “Sokoto” (130 and elsewhere). Naylor understates the way in which Bello sought legitimacy by establishing slave plantations. And finally, his analysis of legitimization by hereditary succession does not discuss Bello’s ambivalent stance concerning this matter and is therefore incomplete, to say the least.

Overall, however, despite these criticisms, it should be noted that this is an important book that will appeal not only to scholars interested in understanding the development of the Sokoto Caliphate, but also to scholars of political legitimacy, comparative politics, Islam, slavery, and identity.

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