BOOK REVIEW

Camille Lefebvre. *Des pays au crépuscule : Le moment de l'occupation coloniale (Sahara-Sahel).* Paris: Fayard, 2021. 341 pp. Index. 24 €. Paper. ISBN: 978-2-213-71810-1.

Camille Lefebvre's marvelous new book, *Des pays au crépuscule : Le moment de l'occupation coloniale (Sahara-Sahel)*, takes up that liminal moment when complex African societies from the Niger River to Lake Chad first encountered the French military in all its contradictions, a time when much that we take for granted today about colonial rule had not yet been determined. The dusk preceding what Achille Mbembe has referred to as the "dark night" of colonial rule had only just begun. Lefebvre's brilliance lies in her ability to see anew narratives and evidence that have been all around us. In France the "colonial library" celebrates conquest as the apogee of the virility and initiative of French "civilization." A recuperative narrative of resistance shapes approaches to conquest in contemporary Niger. Drawing out how the peoples of the region understood, experienced, and negotiated French intrusion at the time, Lefebvre juxtapoises these familiar accounts with the multi-vocal, gendered, and often ambivalent perspectives of Africans and soldiers on the ground at the time.

Lefebvre teases out the political dynamics at play by focusing on two key sites: Agadez and Zinder. In Agadez, the French military confronted the incommensurability of the mobile and non-hierarchical Tuareg political order with their expectations of territorial hierarchy. Situated at the juncture of the Sahara and the Sahel, Agadez was the longstanding locus of arbitration and trade in the Hausa language. Zinder was the new commercial center and capital of the Sultanate of Damagaram, itself only recently detached from the state of Borno. A cosmopolitan city where Hausa, Kanuri, Tamasheq, Fulbe, and Arabic might be heard, Zinder's hegemony rested on its military capacity to conduct regional warfare and slave raids to maintain control of trade routes and markets. Throughout the region, slavery profoundly marked the social order, and a great many slaves were female.

Treating the French military as a complex society in its own right, Lefebvre uses French colonial memoirs to convey the difference in perspectives between the military elite, junior officers, and the lower ranks. Novels

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and biographies and the neglected corpuses of unpublished letters, diaries, and draft documents in archives and private collections shed light on the intimate domain. The immense body of African *tirailleurs* in the French army who had been enslaved, recruited, or purchased in Senegal and Soudan receive particular attention as the author reads between the lines of conventional sources. Lefebvre draws a fascinating picture of family life and labor in the military camp as part of the emerging order. She focuses on intermediary figures (notably the translator Moïse Landeroin) whose movement between multiple worlds, languages, and social statuses made them indispensable to governance. Her approach throws into high relief the significance of gender to this military society; women taken captive were crucial to retain the allegiance of *tirailleurs*, enslaved women seized upon the presence of French troops to evade their masters, and women in military settings formed longer-term attachments to particular French officers, whether out of love or pragmatism.

Lefebvre develops an African library of scholarly texts in Arabic or Arabic script (songs, fatwas, letters, historical treatises) to counterbalance the colonial library. Five under-studied manuscripts held in the Arabic manuscripts collection in Niamey and in private collections offer a rich sense of the range of possible Islamic rhetorical positions that were taken and is suggestive of the distance between scholarly debate and the pragmatism of times of crisis. Lefebvre also uses the numerous Hausa language texts originally collected to train explorers, missionaries, soldiers, and administrators to reflect upon the political culture of mobility and on popular perceptions of power. These sometimes-fantastical stories reveal not only how the words and actions of the French military were perceived but also how African leaders were critiqued.

The French drew upon the idiom of Islamic commerce and diplomacy in their own Arabic language communications with major figures in the region. These communications entailed multiple layers of translation into French and Arabic via local vernaculars, mediated through an oral dimension as groups gathered to parse and interpret such letters. Juxtaposing the Arabic texts with the French provides a glimpse of how local understandings of power made their way into colonial writings and vice versa. By performing the role of a benevolent power ordained by Allah to rule, France simultaneously reinscribed and upended the existing social order.

France's rhetoric of enfranchisement and of Islamic order could be deployed by Africans to their advantage. During this moment of possibility some individuals—women, eunuchs, slaves, minor royalty—seized upon the French presence to redefine their positions without necessarily undermining the social order itself. Others did what they could to maintain their authority by accommodating or simply evading the French presence. However, this window soon closed as the eradication of slavery was sidelined, Islamic rationales were reified to support the hierarchy, and the subordination of women was endorsed in the name of order. French rule maintained and reinforced hierarchies while giving rise to a sense that the

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existing order had been upended. The unstable legacy of French rule in the Sahel lives on in a commitment to social mobility that regularly confronts an uncompromising social hierarchy.

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