

BECOMING WALĀTA

Becoming Walāta: A History of Social Formation and Transformation by Timothy Cleaveland. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann 2002. xxiii, 232 pp. ISBN 0-325-07027-X. £57.50

Anthropologists have for some time criticized the concepts of nomadic society based on ‘segmentary’ lineages as being too ahistorical and that they do not adequately explain the processes of change. Now a historian has joined the fray to study the construction of such a lineage identity from historical sources. The entity in question is the Maḥjūb or Lemḥājīb of Walāta in south-eastern Mauritania.

The town of Walāta (Iwalātan) was originally, under the name of Bīru, inhabited by Mandé groups, but migrations of Zenāga Berber and later Arabic or Arabized nomads changed its identity—though not necessarily the actual composition of its population. Cleaveland shows how Walāta was based on a continuous exchange of peoples; its trading activities led to a steady outflow of people to trading diasporas while new people moved in, through the sedentarization of nomads as well as by the inclusion of slaves—or rather, the offspring of free/slave unions—into the general population of the town.

At some point—before the eighteenth century, but perhaps not much earlier—the majority of the people in the town began to consider themselves to be ‘Arabs’. This happened partly through the increasing settlement of people from the Tuwāt (the Shurfa, fr. *shurafā*³) or of nomads of ‘Hassān’ identity, but also through the reinterpretation of Berber lineages to become Arabs. The most successful of these were the Maḥjūb. This became a common name for a

set of Walāta families that dominated the town for about a century. Originally designating only the descendants of one °Abd Allāh al-Maḥjūb, the name came to encompass also those families that allied themselves with them. At the same time, the line of descent was drawn backwards to Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī (also the origin of the Kunta genealogy) and to an early Arabic immigrant from the Ḥijāz, either in the second or seventh century AH.

Thus, what was in many cases political and economic alliances and contacts were translated into genealogical ties. Cleaveland shows this by analyzing historical sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The main sources are, beyond the biographical dictionary *Fath al-shakūr* (published recently in Beirut), two local histories, the anonymous *Taʾrīkh bilād al-Takrūr* of c. 1820, and *Taʾrīkh Walāta* which the Maḥjūbī scholar Ṭālib Būbakar (d. 1917) wrote for Paul Marty and which the latter published in translation. In addition, Cleaveland has used a genealogical poem on the Maḥjūb by Muḥammad al-Daysafī, which he argues must have been written in the middle of the nineteenth century or later, and which shows the merger of three separate groups into the ‘Maḥjūb’.

This span of a century of sources for basically the same genealogical data allows Cleaveland to demonstrate a development in how Maḥjūb genealogy is displayed. For example, an important family line that that is known only as ‘al-Walātī’ in the earlier sources (a name few others used) is referred to as ‘al-Maḥjūbī’ in the mid-nineteenth century ones. This would indicate that a ‘Walāta’ identity came first but was later replaced with a Maḥjūbī one when the process of assimilation into the dominant lineage was complete.

Cleaveland also points out that, while the sources only emphasize patrilineal descent, many political events become improbable or hard to understand if matrilineal connections and alliances are ignored. They were as, or probably more, important for political power structures. The actors did not

have the anthropologists' single-minded devotion to either patrilineality or matrilineality; they used the resources they had of either kind to promote their interest.

The main factor Cleaveland sees behind this reformation of identities is a response to new groups entering or threatening the established Walāta families. They included both surrounding Berber groups, such as the Idaylba and the later Tuwātī immigration of the Shurfa. As the latter name indicates, these claimed not only Arab descent, but a lineage going directly back to the Prophet. It was important for the existing population, who in particular wanted to maintain a sharp line between themselves and the 'blacks' of the Sūdān towns, to answer this genealogical challenge. This was then done by raising the status of a single lineage, that of the Maḥjūb founder, to pass through al-Kuntī to the Prophet, and then by all those in favour rallying around this genealogical line. The *sharīf* identity was not crucial, as was seen when the Shurfa split in opposing factions, but it helped. The cohesion of the Maḥjūbīs was also based on a continuity of residence and common interests.

Cleaveland's study is a detailed study of genealogical sources, but also of interest for its discussion of more general social developments of nomadic and non-statal societies of the desert and desert side. It shows not least that genealogy and lineage is not something static on which we can base other social categories, but is the result of power relations and political strategies by groups who can reconstruct their past at very short notice.

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