

THE PATE CHRONICLE

The Pate Chronicle: edited and translated from MSS 177, 321, 344, and 358 of the Library of the University of Dar es Salaam by Marina Tolmacheva. African Historical Sources 4. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press 1993, pp. xiv, 607.

Although *The Pate Chronicle* is one of the most complete and detailed narratives to come from the East African Coast, it has been underutilized (or even misused), especially by historians. This situation is unfortunate given the historical role of Pate town at the nexus of cultural and economic exchange between the African and Indian Ocean worlds. Until the end of the eighteenth century Pate town competed with its neighbour and rival Lamu as well as external powers (notably the Omanis and Portuguese) for supremacy in the northern coastal trade. Both towns tapped into maritime trade networks which spanned the Indian Ocean. They also maintained connections deep into the East African interior via the Tana river basin and various overland routes. Marina Tolmacheva's new edition is an important step toward remedying that neglect, yet ironically her presentation highlights the very interpretative and historiographical problems which must be tackled before the Pate Chronicle reaches its full potential as an historical source.

Tolmacheva presents eight different versions of the Chronicle, all of which are attributed to Muhammad bin Fumo °Umar Nabahani (known as Bwana Kitini), a scion of Pate's ruling family. Four of these versions have been previously published. The earliest (and longest) to appear in print was collected and published in English translation only by C.H. Stigand in 1908. Tolmacheva reproduces this text adding minor critical and editorial notes. Another version, which Tolmacheva argues was a synthetic compilation of oral tradition, was published in German translation by A. Voeltzkow in 1914-23 although it was probably collected before 1910. The present volume contains a new English translation of a selection from Voeltzkow's text. No original KiSwahili text of either the Stigand or Voeltzkow ver-

sions survives. Because we cannot know the ways in which the text may have been transformed in the process of translation, their usefulness as historical sources is limited. Still, it is useful to have two additional version conveniently available in one volume.

Tolmacheva reproduces other previously published versions of the Chronicle which are more useful to the historian. The first of these was published by Alice Werner in 1914 and 1915, the original KiSwahili text having been written in 1903. Werner's quite readable English translation, has been retained with minor corrections and additions to her copious notes. Tolmacheva also reproduces Werner's KiSwahili text in Roman script. The reader is left wishing that Tolmacheva had made more critical comments on Werner's translation. She notes that 'Although I did not always agree with her [Werner's] rendition of the Swahili into English, no changes were made in the translation.' (p. 133) Unfortunately Tolmacheva does not indicate the exact points of disagreement or possible alternate renderings, a task which could have been easily accomplished in the notes.

Of even more value is Tolmacheva's very complete presentation of a version of the Chronicle originally published by M. Heepe in 1928. Included are two facsimile KiSwahili MSS in Arabic script. Unfortunately these are presented without any notes and some orthographic oddities appear without comment or explanation. One of these is in the KiMvita dialect of Mombasa, the other in KiAmu of Lamu (quite close to the KiPate dialect of Pate). Heepe also produced a KiSwahili synthesis of these two texts, transcribed into the Roman alphabet which Tolmacheva includes. She has also produced a very readable if somewhat ponderous English translation of this latter compilation. The Heepe version of the Chronicle appearing in four distinct iterations will be useful not only to students of Swahili history and culture but also to linguists and literary scholars.

By far the most important contribution of Tolmacheva's volume is her reproduction and translation of four MSS versions of the Pate Chronicle which are appearing in print for the first time. Each version appears in three forms; a very legible KiSwahili text in Arabic script, a Roman transliteration of that

text, and finally Tolmacheva's English translation. One of these, MS 177, is an original manuscript whilst the others are photocopies. All are held by the library of the University of Dar es Salaam. Tolmacheva speculates that MS 177 was copied around 1900, the other three probably copied during the 1920s and 30s. Each of the four MSS versions presented are in the KiAmu dialect instead of KiPate, a curious point on which Tolmacheva offers no speculation. In other respects, her annotations on historical, literary and orthographic matters are quite comprehensive. The English translations are generally clear and quite readable. In each of these MSS the copyist gives a detailed provenance for his version of the Chronicle, all of which ultimately lead back to Bwana Kitini.

Given that all the versions of the Chronicle which appear in this volume all stem from the same source, Tolmacheva's decision to present each in its entirety is rather unusual. Although this approach is a boon to specialists on the Swahili coast who now have the opportunity to do critical reconstruction and evaluation themselves, it is less a benefit for non-specialists. Consider, for example, the plight of an instructor who must wade through eight separate English translations in order to assign an undergraduate class the Pate Chronicle as an example of an indigenous African historical narrative. Another approach would have been for Tolmacheva to construct a synthetic English version of the text and relegate variant and contradictory readings to footnotes. The KiSwahili texts could then have been retained in their entirety for the benefit of specialists. This minor complaint is not meant to detract from Tolmacheva's excellent work, it is merely a regret that it is not more conveniently accessible.

Tolmacheva's presentation of complete versions of the Chronicle does clearly illustrate one of the central criticisms which has been levelled against its value as an historical source, that the various versions simply do not agree. The text has also been criticized for being irreconcilable with external textual sources, such as those of the Portuguese.¹ But this criticism

1 R.L. Pouwels, 'Reflections on Historiography and Pre-Nineteenth-Century History from the Pate "Chronicles"', *History in Africa*, 20, 1993, 263-96.

stems, I would argue, from too narrow a view of how the chronicle might be useful. Scholars have been preoccupied with attempting to use the Chronicle to establish basic facts, especially a chronological list of rulers and the duration of their reigns. Of course the Pate Chronicle presents problems in this area, but I would argue that instead of attempting to extract such information from the Chronicle, scholars should instead focus on that information which it does successfully provide. The Chronicle is a valuable source for addressing issues of culture and identity. It is a reflection of how the people of Pate viewed themselves within the context of their struggles with other communities and forces. The text itself is part of Pate's process of self definition as a community. Tolmacheva's new edition is an important step in allowing scholars to use the Chronicle to investigate such questions. It also points indirectly to another collection of sources which might be used to supplement the Chronicle, material culture. Pate town is a rich yet underexplored archaeological site. Scholars such as Marina Tolmacheva have gone a great distance toward making KiSwahili textual sources useful as historical sources. A comparable effort needs to be made with archaeological evidence. Together, these two bodies of source material promise to make an important contribution to the historiography of the Swahili coast.

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