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## REFERENCES

BENDER SHETLER, Jan. — *Telling Our Own Stories. Local Histories from South Mara, Tanzania*. Leiden-Boston, Brill (« African Sources for African History »), 2003, 334 p., ill., cartes, bibl., index.

- 1 The present volume by the historian Jan Bender Shetler is a publication of the African Sources for the African History Series whose purpose is to cover the history of the African continent. Contrary to West, Southern, and Central Africa, publications of historical texts about East Africa are very limited. *TellingOurOwnStories* tries to remedy this lack of historical data. It presents a large collection of written local stories from the South Mara region of Tanzania collected by the author herself in the mid-1990s. The whole volume, divided into three sections, brings together forty-two stories of various length dealing with the history, the traditions and the rituals of the peoples living on the southeastern part of Lake Victoria, such as the Ikizu, Sikazi, Ishenyi, Nata Ikoma, Ngoreme, Tagota, Nyanncha and Zanaki. The stories range from one paragraph interviews to a fifty-five-page text which makes up the whole of chapter I, section II. What is worth emphasizing in first approach is the originality of the material presented in this volume. All stories were collected and written down not by a European academic ethnographer or historian, as it is often the case, but by South Mara literate men in the 1980s and 1990s. Secondary school teachers, church workers, clerks and governmental officials worked in collaboration with elders to gather local narratives with the view to preserving them from forgetting. In another words, the present volume gives access to texts written by local people in collaboration with local people.
- 2 The first section is an introduction which presents the origins, the various authors and the objectives of the collection of the written narratives, as well as the history of the

people of South Mara. We learn that the process of writing local narratives started in the colonial period. At that time, elders choose to tell the story of their “tribe”, instead of their descent group or age-set group for example, because Indirect Rule required such units to be the pertinent groupings for administrative purpose. The fathers of the Tanzanian independence in the 1950s and 1960s encouraged the ongoing shift from orality to literacy, without questioning the ethnical divisions introduced by the colonial administration. The same concern on ethnicity permeates the texts collected in the present volume. The main purpose of the authors was to preserve their own knowledge of the past, as the preambles to many stories in which they explain their motives in collecting and writing down narratives clearly underline. But the second objective was to identify what it means to be an Ikuzu or a Nata, an Ishenyi or a Tagota in post-colonial Tanzania. In order to do so, the authors choose what to include or not to include in ethnic histories, from origins to social organization through rituals, customary law or religion. In other words, as Shetler asserts, the writing down of narratives is part of the process of creation of identity, made possible by the manipulation of data.

- 3 In a second part of the first section, the author presents a comprehensive account of the history of the various peoples living in South Mara region. With the exception of the Tagota, all these people speak closely intelligible languages and share a common regional culture. The author focuses on pre-colonial history, insisting on social mechanisms that foster incorporation of foreigners and lead to the unity of the social fabric on a wide area around Lake Victoria. Then, she deals with the changes that the Mara region experienced in the second half of the nineteenth century. She indicates how the Maasai hegemony over the region participated to forge new identities. But it seems that what was nevertheless the most pertinent determinant of identity in South Mara regions before the coming up of present ethnic identities was the divisions in generation-sets units and later age-set units. Such units were used to reach across boundaries of ethnicity so as to create interdependent economic and social relations within the whole region.
- 4 The second section of the volume consists of the written stories themselves. What has first to be focused on is that the literate authors of these stories write in a style and tense that communicates a static past carried on into the present, called “ethnographic present” by anthropologists. In a sense, the patterns of these stories do not differ much from ethnographic monographs. One can make the hypothesis that past ethnographic monographs may have been used as models to write up local narratives. But the reference to a static tradition is also part of a strategy that consists in asserting the differentiation of one ethnic group from the other and the legitimation of the authority of male elders. The second thing to notice is that Shetler publishes most of the stories both in Swahili, the language in which they were originally written, and in English. As a consequence, the texts presented here can be read at multiples levels.
- 5 First, scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds can find detailed information on the history and culture of the people of South Mara. As the collection is based on oral tradition but framed by local people according to their own agenda and based on their own research, it tells as much about concerns of the time of the collection as it does about the past itself. These texts can therefore be taken as sources of historical data as well as discourses on ethnicity, social relations or the legitimacy of domination in the post-colonial era.

- 6 Secondly, the author is also concerned with giving access to local histories to people living in South Mara. She makes it clear that the collection of texts is published in the hope that it will encourage Mara people to continue the ongoing debate about their history, identity and culture. In other words, the present volume is an incentive to develop historical academic research as well as to encourage local people to discuss the meaning of past and present. Chapter IV differs from the rest of the written stories in that it consists of shorter transcriptions of oral traditions collected by Shetler herself. The objective of the author is to give a number of information which may contribute to putting into perspective the written texts collected by the local literate men. These transcriptions of interviews also remind the reader of the oral context that preexists any written text, as they enhance the dynamic process of dialogue between past texts and present enunciations.
- 7 The third section of the volume is composed of endnote annotations which provide many details about other sources of information (other regional oral tradition, archives, linguistic or archaeological data). They aim at creating a dialogue between the various voices of discourse that can be heard about the history of the region (European vs. local, academic vs. empirical, from one region vs. from another region).
- 8 To sum up, one can say that the quality of the material presented in this volume and the quantity of information provided are impressive. As such, it would be a tremendous piece of work, but it is more than that. The material is enhanced by the quite extensive historical and ethnographic researches that are presented in introduction and endnotes. Shetler adds useful comments about the motives of the various local authors in writing down their local stories and about the historical contexts in which these stories have to be placed to be well-understood. She shows that written stories, be they those of the ethnographers or those of local peoples, are part of a process of constant definition and redefinition of identities. As such, and following the wish expressed by the author, *TellingOurOwnStories* can lead the way to increased debates, both academic and indigenous, over South Mara past history and the production of present-day identities.