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The Sudan of the Three Niles: The Funj Chronicle

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The Sudan of the Three Niles: The Funj Chronicle

Abstract

P. M. Holt's *The Sudan of the Three Niles* is an annotated translation of the Funj Chronicle, a history of the Funj sultanate (1504–1821) based at Sennar, along the Blue Nile, and of the Turco-Egyptian regime that succeeded it at Khartoum. Along with the *Tabaqat* of Wad Dayf Allah (a biographical dictionary of Sudanese Muslim holy men compiled in the late 18th century), the Funj Chronicle is the most important Arabic source on the northern riverain Sudan in the Funj era, a period in which Islam was spreading widely and the region was developing its pronounced Arab–Islamic identity.

Disciplines

African History | History of Religion | Islamic Studies | Islamic World and Near East History | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

Comments

At the time of publication, author Heather Sharkey was affiliated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Currently, she is a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.

P.M. Holt, *The Sudan of the Three Niles: The Funj Chronicle, 910-1288/1504-1871*, Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts (Leiden: Brill, 1999). pp. xx + 208.

Reviewed by Heather J. Sharkey, Department of History, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts

The Sudan of the Three Niles is an annotated translation of the Funj Chronicle, a history of the Funj sultanate (1504-1821) based at Sennar, along the Blue Nile, and of the Turco-Egyptian regime that succeeded it at Khartoum. Along with the *Tabaqat of Wad Dayf Allah* (a biographical dictionary of Sudanese Muslim holy men compiled in the late eighteenth century), the Funj Chronicle is the most important Arabic source for the northern riverain Sudan in the Funj era, a period when Islam was spreading widely and the region was developing its pronounced Arab-Islamic identity.

The primary author of the Funj Chronicle was Shaykh Ahmad ibn al-Hajj Abi Ali (b. 1784-5), generally known as Katib al-Shuna, because of his service as granary clerk for the Turco-Egyptian government. Having reached maturity in the late Funj era (the period of the "Hamaj regency" when Funj kings had lost effective power), Katib al-Shuna witnessed dramatic political and social upheavals. Reflecting that the days of the Funj kings had become mere "anecdotes and homilies" (p. 77), Katib al-Shuna sought to record their history and to extract moral guidance from it. He drew primarily on "tales in circulation" and first-hand observation, supplemented by a Funj king-list and the aforementioned *Tabaqat of Wad Dayf Allah*, his solitary written sources. Although he ended his story in 1838, by which time the Turco-Egyptian system was well entrenched, a few other writers added to and revised his account, taking the record up to 1871.

The Funj Chronicle is therefore not one text but a series of texts. It has multiple authors, and multiple versions. The latter have slight narrative variations, while some survive in only fragmentary form. Even taking Katib al-Shuna's account alone, the existence or survival of an "original" text is doubtful. Based upon internal evidence in the text, Holt concludes that Katib al-Shuna wrote the work over the span of two decades. Moreover, an extant version of the chronicle produced by Shaykh Ahmad al-Hajj Muhammad Janqal (the first to add to Katib al-Shuna's story) includes passages that appear to be antecedent to manuscripts in Cairo and Istanbul, the oldest surviving copies of the manuscript. Holt concludes that in reproducing his chronicle for Turco-Egyptian authorities, Katib al-Shuna may have edited his own copy -- a version now lacking.

Holt faces up to the challenges of these variant versions, by comparing and where appropriate synthesizing them. He relies primarily on the printed version of the Cairo manuscript (the closest thing to a core text, published by al-Shatir Busayli Abd al-Jalil as *Makhtutat Katib al-Shuna* [Cairo, 1963]), supplemented by manuscripts in Istanbul, Nottingham, Vienna, and Paris, as well as by the printed

rendition of the last recension up to 1871, published by Makki Shubayka as *Tarikh muluk al-Sudan* (Khartoum, 1947).

The Sudan of the Three Niles has three main parts. The first is the fascinating introductory essay in which Holt discusses the textual history and authorship of the Funj Chronicle. The second is an annotated translation of an amalgamated prose text, indicating the source of inclusions from manuscripts other than the Cairo version. (Holt omits extensive passages of poetry which Katib al-Shuna included within his narrative, arguing that these verses are primarily of literary rather than historical importance.) The third part of the volume includes ancillary materials, namely, appendices of supporting texts (e.g., introductions from the chronicle's first and second recensions); genealogical tables and king-lists; a glossary; a bibliography; and indices (for people, places, and social groups).

The Funj Chronicle is above all a political history, detailing the rise and fall of rulers (the Funj kings, later the Hamaj regents, and finally the Turco-Egyptian governors and administrators); their wars; and their foreign relations. It pays rich tribute to Sufi holy men -- their powers of erudition and miracle-making -- and in this regard reflects the growth of Islamic culture in the region. Scattered details also yields insights into the history of environmental disaster (droughts, famines, flooding, and earthquakes); endemic disease (plague, smallpox, guinea worm); urban life (consider Arbaji, a ruined Funj city which Katib al-Shuna extols for its beautiful buildings, fine cuisine, and scholarship); clothing; population movements (e.g., the migrations of Nuba soldier-slaves and West African pilgrims); and natural phenomena (especially eclipses and falling stars).

The Sudan of the Three Niles aims for a highly specialized audience. Those who are not well-versed in the details of Sudanese Funj and Turco-Egyptian history should read more general works before broaching this one. The sparse bibliography of this volume points to two historical overviews -- O.G.S. Crawford's *The Fung Kingdom of Sennar* (Gloucester, 1951) and Richard Hill's *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881* (London, 1959). It does not mention, however, an important and very readable third, Jay Spaulding's account of the Funj in *Kingdoms of the Sudan* (London, 1974; co-authored with R.S. O'Fahey), or a more recent work concerned with the growth of the Sudan's Arab-Islamic identity in the Funj era, Neil McHugh's *Holy men of the Blue Nile* (Evanston, 1994).

Before this volume, the only English rendition of the Funj Chronicle was a summary translation published in 1922. P.M. Holt has done historians a great service by presenting this rigorously researched, annotated translation of the full Funj Chronicle. Over the years, Holt's other works have already enriched the historiography of the Sudan, notably *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898*; and his general history of the region, *The History of the Sudan* (first published 1961, revised by M.W. Daly in various editions beginning with the third in 1979). With this translation of the Funj Chronicle, Holt makes a major and lasting contribution to the field.