Triulzi, Alessandro. - *Salt, Gold, and Legitimacy. Prelude to the History of a No-Man's Land : Bela Shangul, Wallagga, Ethiopia (ca. 1800-1898)*

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Les leçons de cette pré-histoire scientifique ou de cette politique appliquée nous éclairent sur la logique coloniale mais aussi sur la nature même des sciences sociales en situation coloniale comme en situation métropolitaine.

Ayant « donné » de façon beaucoup plus grossière que les auteurs évoqués ici dans ce genre littéraire, je me sens d’autant plus à l’aise dans cette (auto-)critique : on ne peut révéler les perversités des sciences coloniales indépendamment des perversités des sciences sociales en général. A trop abstraire ces discours de leurs conditions originelles de maturation (l’Europe), on n’en voit plus que l’aspect anecdotique et exotique. N’oublions pas que ces « pensées » envisageaient simultanément l’ouvrier comme le barbare des villes industrielles. L’inalement, la colonisation était bien plus bavarde car elle était moins rigoureuse que l’exploitation capitaliste at home. Les malheurs des uns n’excusent pas ceux des autres. Ils permettent seulement de signaler qu’il s’agit d’une face de la médaille, que pendant un siècle les expériences et réflexions d’ici et de là-bas vont se croiser et se féconder. La science coloniale n’est pas fille de la seule colonisation.

J. Copans


In this new study, Alessandro Triulzi discusses an area on the borderlands of Ethiopia and the Sudan called Bela Shangul, arabized as Bani Shanqul. This highland region (between 5,000 and 8,000 feet on average), now entirely within Ethiopia, has its centre about 150 miles directly south of Fazogli/Fazoglu on the Blue Nile. It is now the home of the Berta. In the 19th century and before, it was called Dār al-Barta or Dār-al-Bartat by the Arabs, ‘Barta’ being an Amharic word for the major ethnic group of the region. These people are first mentioned in a Portuguese source, ca. 1600, as tributaries to the Funj kingdom of Sinnar. It is probable that the Bela Shangul region, always famous for its gold and enslavable population and raided from every side until the end of the 19th century, formed a part of the older region of Sasu, mentioned about 525 A.D. by Cosmas Indicopleustes as a source of gold for Axumite traders. Undoubtedly this is the first mention in African history of the ‘silent trade’ fable, a well-worn legend used by commercial monopolists to disguise the details of their exchanges. Bela Shangul may also have had ties to the kingdoms of Napata and, later, Meroe. Likewise, O. G. S. Crawford and others have identified this region as being the ‘lost Ethiopian province’ of Damot, a source of ‘fine gold’ for medieval Ethiopian and Muslim traders.

The Berta (or Bertha, the spelling preferred by Triulzi) had many unique customs. One of these was a divinatory system, involving the ‘reading’ of the flames of a fire fed by selected kinds of grass, or ebony wood. In this way, a diviner (ngeri) received messages of divine guidance on important political, social, and personal matters. Such a fire-ceremony (shangur) seems to be connected to the cult of a sacred stone or rocky outcrop (the shangul) in various parts of Berta territory. Invariably, these rocky outcrops adjoin the sites of the first Berta migrant settlements on the Berta plateau. Triulzi makes it clear that the usual name of the region, Bela Shangul, refers to these outcrops and their associated cult of divination, rather than to an eponymous ancestor, hinted at by the arabized phrase ‘Bani Shanqul’.

Another custom, etho, has to do with the allotment of land for grazing, farming, or hunting purposes to each sub-unit of the Berta. Ingeniously devised, it aimed at the avoidance of conflict among these groups. Even so, it was not always
successful. The feda, or hunting ceremony, was an annual event for the ‘smoking’ of spearblades and boomerang-shaped hunting sticks (bang), which was accompanied by the brewing of a special beer (hatso) drunk by hunters to bring them success. Finally, a complex harvest ceremony (ero) saw the ritual killing of the Berta king: whether another ceremony of dog-killing at the same time was a later substitute for this annual regicide is not made clear by Triulzi. He suggests that this institution might have served the Berta as an ‘internal check against the imposition of alien authority […] or a deterrent against its abuses’ (p. 55).

From the socio-political organization of the Berta, Triulzi moves to the relation of the region to the Funj State of Sinnar. Fazoghli and the Berta were on the southern fringes of Funj territory and made up, at the end of the 17th and part of the 18th century, an essential section of the busy trade network contributing their gold and slaves to the wealth of the Funj State—a construction better grasped in economic terms than in political or ethnic ones. Like so many other parts of this prosperous kingdom, territories outside the core of the Funj realm were incorporated by force, then left to themselves in a sort of ‘indirect rule’ from Sinnar. This had its impact on the institutions of the Berta, a wave of arabization and islamization, slow-moving at first, then accelerating towards the end of the Funj period and after. The spread of Islam and of trade in Bela Shangul also brought many new settlers into the region, easily accepted and assimilated. But the Islamic tincture was very slight, and as Triulzi makes clear, very largely accepted for reasons of ‘advantages in trade’ (p. 89, quoted from James Bruce, the Traveller, Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile… Edinburgh, Constable / Manners & Miller, 1805, vol. VI: 389-390).

By the early 19th century, the little Funj tributary chiefdoms in the Bela Shangul region were undergoing great changes. The makh of the place after 1821 (the date of an Egyptian raid into the Sudan) were much weakened, and the economic and political structure shifted. The goods stayed the same, but Egyptian military control over tribute was intensified and its collection was regularized by insistent pressures. The human and mineral resources of the region now found their way into Muhammad ‘Ali’s new-style army and his enlarged treasury. What had started as the overrule of the ‘wise strangers’ coming from the north had degenerated into a perpetual cycle of raiding and revolt, repression and ever-bigger annual tributes. For sixty years, until the 1880s, this dismal period continued throughout the land of the Berta.

With the coming of the Mahdiya in the Sudan (here Triulzi makes a major contribution to the history of this region), a new era opened. Exploiting the views of a people now mostly islamized (Ṣāḥī with many adherents to the Tijani ṭarīqa), the Mahdi wrote one of his famous letters to the ruler of Khomosha (adjoining Bela Shangul to the west) in June 1882. The Mahdi promised the lifting of the oppressive rule of the ‘Turks’ and a return to the rule of Islamic law, without insisting on tribute, merely the zakāt and an acknowledgement of his rule by the arabized elite (known locally by the name of waqāwīt, ‘bats’). Matters continued in this way until 1886, when a new Mahdist governor arrived to demand high taxes and men for the jihad. The jihad in question was aimed at the Leqa Oromo ruler of Fadasi on the upper Dabus river, a tributary of the Blue Nile. Ultimately, this episode turned out badly for the Mahdists. The Oromo called for Ethiopian aid under Ras Gobana, one of Emperor Menelik’s generals. Very soon there was famine in Bela Shangul as Mahdists and Ethiopians fought it out. By 1890 Mahdist overrule ended in defeat. Finally, just after 1900, the Bela Shangul region was added to Ethiopia, of which it forms a part today.

Triulzi’s study—over which he worked for the better part of three years—is based on Amharic and Arabic sources, on local Berta informants, and a thorough familiarity with the country, over which the author and his local companion, Atieb Dafallah, travelled by truck, or on foot. As a historien de plein air (a phrase originated by H. Deschamps), Triulzi has written a truly remarkable study of great
originality and value, breaking down the customary disciplinary barriers, and supplying his own solutions to many difficult historical problems, by way of a variety of languages. It is a further achievement to have written this excellent book in a language which is not his own.

B. G. Martin


Roy Willis' study deals with Ufipa, an area sandwiched in between lakes Rukwa and Tanganyika in southern Tanzania. The Fipa, or 'Wafipa', speak a Bantu language called iciFipa. Linguists have classified this language along with adjoining Bantu tongues which are very similar, but iciFipa itself has a number of dialectal variants, among which iciSukuma is one of the best known. Early European visitors who came to this high treeless plateau included de Lacerda in 1798 and, after him, Gamitto in 1832. Some of Ufipa is at 6,000 feet or higher, and it is divided into two States: Nkansi in the north and Lyangalile in the south, most of whose inhabitants live in villages and use a particular type of cultivation which uses mounds of organic compost as fertilizer. Willis claims that this unusual technique has made possible a 'decisive economic advance', followed by a number of 'organizational developments, leading to a distinctive kind of society'. The history of Ufipa is explained by a number of myths, and very little other historical evidence is available. As yet, little archaeology has been done on the plateau or in adjoining districts.

For these reasons, Willis is forced to examine local myths and folklore in great detail, in the absence of other evidence. This is a real methodological puzzle. Willis, who speaks iciFipa quite well (having worked in this region continuously for about three years with shorter visits later) has chosen to adopt a modified structural approach to the problem, along with trying to obtain an historical reconstruction 'strongly influenced by Marxist theory'. He has also used Lévi-Strauss' theory of myth, as modified by T. Turner, the exchange theory of C. A. Smith, and the Maussian concept of reciprocity. Willis has found a number of similarities in the Ufipa kinship system and that of the Lakalai of New Britain. Further, he employs Kirchhoff's concept of a 'conical clan' organization.

The results of using this bundle of theoretical concepts, plus local information, are of great interest. At the village of Milansi, in the heart of Ufipa, the 'Unnamed One' (the first man, Ntaatakwa), fell out of the sky. Whether the first woman accompanied him or was 'produced from his knee' is uncertain. In any case, Milansi represents a kingdom intermediate in form between a linear segmentary descent organization and a centralized hierarchy. This Ufipan 'proto-State', according to Willis, was perhaps in existence by the 13th century and participating in a barter trade in salt from the Ivuna salt pans south-east of Ufipa. Milansi was also an ironworking centre. In the nearby Rukwa valley, cotton weaving went on, while the two lakes provided an abundance of fish which could be dried for trade. Some of the local iron implements doubtless became standardized commercial objects: a 'trade currency'. Thus by some time, ca. 1500-1700 A.D., Milansi was a significant trade, political, and religious centre. Willis calculates this approximate date backwards from the late 19th century, based on the least amount of time required for the degree of organizational complexity in Fipa society, then observed, to come into existence.

At this point, by way of a 'key myth', Willis interprets several versions of a piece of oral history relating the arrival of certain invaders, the Twa. Here, 'ideological history' becomes converted into 'objective history', as Willis works out