



12-2002

Becoming Walata: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation

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Recommended Citation

Sharkey, H. J. (2002). Becoming Walata: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation. *African Studies Review*, 45 (3), 89-90. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1515112>

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Comments

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Timothy Cleaveland. *Becoming Walata: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002. xxiii + 232 pp. Maps. Figures. Bibliography. Index. \$67.95. Cloth.

In the thirteenth century, a small sahelian town called "Biru" in the Mande language began to flourish in what is now eastern Mauritania, sitting astride the trade routes that connected Saharan salt mines to grain-producing centers along the Niger River. Later the town became known by the Berber name "Iwalatan", and finally by the Arabized name "Walata". In *Becoming Walata*, Timothy Cleaveland explores the history of this town over several centuries and traces the evolution of social identities within it. In the process, he explains how local Walata elites in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries largely forgot or minimized the town's Mande and Berber heritage while valorizing its Arab-Islamic connections.

In Walata, population movement and settlement was an important motor of social transformation. Over successive generations, the town drew an assortment of traders, camel nomads, cattle pastoralists, Islamic scholars, and slaves. Cleaveland calls those who moved to Walata "emigrants" (not "immigrants"), literally translating the Arabic term *muhajirin* as used in local sources. While the term *muhajirin* historically referred to the first generation of Muslims who set out from Mecca to Medina to establish an Islamic society, for Walata chroniclers it affirmed the historical role of its traders and scholars in contributing to the spread of Islam in Africa.

As the centuries passed, many groups contributed to the construction of Walata identities, and yet by the time French colonial authorities entered the town in 1912, its layers had been compressed into two broad categories: residents were reckoned either Bidan (meaning "whites" in Arabic) or Haratin. The Bidan were descendants of free Arabophone males of Arab, Berber, or Mande heritage, although through the maternal line they were often descended from female slave concubines who had originated in sub-Saharan societies. The Haratin, by contrast, were descendants of slaves through the paternal line. When Cleaveland visited Walata in 1990, slavery was long gone and the Haratin were all free, and yet they retained a status as clients vis-à-vis the local elites who enjoyed substantial leisure. Thus Haratin men and women did most of the local labor, with the men building and repairing houses, watching livestock, and drawing water from deep wells, and with the women tending to the homes and children of the Bidan (while taking care of their own families as well).

To produce this book, Cleaveland drew from a broad range of sources, including local Arabic chronicles, French colonial records, and oral testimonies of local residents. (His citations show that he conducted many interviews in Walata, although he does not list these in his bibliography nor does he provide dates or biographical details.) Together these sources gave the author sharp insights into the histories of elite local families, and enabled him to chart political rivalries and changing alliances from approximately 1800 to the coming of the French in 1912.

Located 1000 km inland from the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott and 300 km west of Timbuktu, Walata is remote by today's standards. For two centuries its population has been steadily diminishing (having already declined from about 4,000 in c. 1800 to 2,000 in 1912), while many of its oldest adobe houses are collapsed and abandoned, as Cleaveland observed first-hand. Residents have been moving out west to the capital but more commonly south to riverine Mali. Even Walata milk supplies seem to be dwindling: according to the townswomen, cattle produce less than their counterparts a generation ago -- perhaps a sign of encroaching aridity. In an age when the Sahara is no longer a major "ocean" for long-distance trade (as Arab geographers metaphorically regarded it), the future of Walata and of kindred towns remains open to question. Hence the value of Cleaveland's book which explores and pays tribute to its rich and complex past.

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