

BOOK REVIEWS

Steven Feierman, *The Shambaa Kingdom: A History*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1974, pp. 235.

Most readers will have seen Professor Steven Feierman's chapter on the Shambaa in *Tanzania before 1900* edited by A. Roberts. The chapter was written while the author was still doing his field work on the Usambara Mountains. But the summary therein promised so many new insights on the Shambaa Kingdom that the publication of *The Shambaa Kingdom* must have been long awaited.

Historically, the Shambaa Kingdom, until recently the only well-known big Kingdom among the Eastern Bantu-speaking peoples, has attracted a number of writers. But no researcher before Steven Feierman has spent so much time among the Shambaa and understood Shambaa society so thoroughly. As a well-trained historian and anthropologist, Dr. Feierman did "two separate but complementary projects at once: the first is the collection and analysis of Shambaa oral traditions, and second, a general study of Shambaa culture and society" (p. 4). Apparently this book consists of the results of the first study (originally submitted as a Ph.D. dissertation in History to Northwestern University). *The Shambaa Kingdom* is an outstanding masterpiece clarifying most of the confusion which existed in the literature about the Shambaa. Another book based on the second study is also awaited. This is to be based on his unpublished D.Phil. thesis in Social Anthropology, titled "Concepts of Sovereignty among the Shambaa and Their Relation to Political Action", submitted to Oxford University.

Professor Feierman has clarified four important points in this book. Firstly, by providing proper analysis of the Mbegha myth, the story of the founding of the Shambaa Kingdom has become much clearer. This is the point where training in social anthropology can be seen to be a valuable tool in handling the history of a non-literate society. Mbegha has always been recognised as the founding hero of the Shambaa Kingdom, but the story surrounding his life is an important epic in the development of the Shambaa society itself. As Dr. Feierman puts it, "the story of Mbegha is both an intellectual's and a moralist's model of the Shambaa Kingdom. For it told how the Kingdom should work, and at the same time how the Kingdom, in evil times, does work" (p. 64). By analysing the various symbols of the myth, the author has been able to show that the myth existed before the time of Mbegha, and that descriptions of historical events were integrated into the myth later.

Secondly, Professor Feierman has greatly clarified the position of the Kilindi in Shambaa culture. Contrary to the diffusionist idea of Kingship, the author states that "there is remarkable body of evidence which survives from

the time of Mbegha's son Bughe, and which supports . . . the notion that the royal rule was a glorification of traditional Shambaa culture" (p. 93). This can partly be explained by the fact that Mbegha came from a neighbouring society much similar to that of the Shambaa and from which some of the Shambaa themselves had migrated earlier. The effort of transforming Shambaa society can therefore be seen as an attempt to unite and preserve a culture which at that time was threatened not by the Kilindi, but by the alien cultures of the Nango and Mbughu (both non-Bantu-speaking groups) who had entered Shambaai and caused tensions within the unified culture.

Thirdly, Professor Feierman has greatly illuminated the nature of the Shambaa Kingdom by focussing on its political economy. Although Kimweri ye Nyumbai achieved harmony throughout the greatly expanded Kingdom by using his own sons and grandsons as chiefs, the real strength of the Kingdom was the tribute collection system which permeated the entire population. Thus the changes which took place in the nineteenth century and destroyed the unity of the Kingdom were mainly in its political economy: "The political economy of the Shambaa Kingdom changes, in the nineteenth century, from one based primarily on tribute and territorial control to one based primarily on trade" (p. 120).

Finally, Dr. Feierman has clarified remarkably well the question of regional action in the Pangani Valley. By the time Kimweri ye Nyumbai died in 1862, the Shambaa Kingdom had been virtually decentralised. The Bondei had become chiefless, a small Kingdom had been established in East Usambara and Shambaai was divided between the forces of Semboja (Kimweri's son who became master of the new power base-trade) and those of the heirs of the traditional power base. Unlike the traditional kinship alliance and tribute, Semboja's power was of regional nature. Because of the importance of trade in this period "the major war for power in Shambaai was fought by the Wali of Pangani, chiefs of Bondei and Zigula, and the most prominent family of Mombasa [Mbaruk el Mazrui], it is clear that the most important events were no longer local in scale, but regional. In this setting the traditional Shambaa concern with maintaining the culture of the ancestors was clearly out of step" (p. 197).

The Shambaa Kingdom is undoubtedly a very valuable contribution to the history of East Africa. Its value as a scientifically well-produced and critically analysed work has already been stated. As a microhistory it is unique in that it discusses ideas of wide generalisation. For example questions of interpretation of myth and relationship between African thought and African history. This is a book which is likely to be of interest to most readers of history, specialist and non-specialist alike.

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Robert Chambers and Jon Moris (eds.), *Mwea: An Irrigated Rice Settlement in Kenya*, Afrika—Studien Nr 83, Weltforum Verlag, Munchen, 1973, pp. 539.