ALBINO MANOEL PACHECO – PIONEER ETHNOGRAPHER OF THE ZAMBESI REGION

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Abstract

In 1861 a Portuguese officer, Albino Manoel Pacheco, was sent by the governor of Tete to re-establish the old fair and settlement at Zumbo which had been located at the junction of the rivers Luangwa and Zambezi rivers. Pacheco duly completed his assignment and the account he wrote of the expedition was published in the Boletim Official do Governo Geral da Província de Moçambique in 1883. Pacheco’s Viagem de Tete ao Zumbo is similar in many respects to Gamitto’s O Muata Cazembe which was first published in 1854. Gamitto’s work is a record of his visit to the country of Kazembe’s Lunda in 1831-2. It is based on a diary kept during his journey with a number of detailed descriptions of the flora and fauna and the customs of the inhabitants of the countries through which he passed. Pacheco clearly took this as a model and the Viagem is also partly travel diary and partly a series of essays on ethnography and history. Although the Viagem is considerably shorter than O Muata Cazembe, it is just as important. It has been used by most scholars writing about the history of the Monomotapa ‘empire’, the role of spirit cults and the history of the Portuguese town of Zumbo. Indeed Pacheco’s book is an indispensable source for the study of all three topics. The interest Pacheco took in the mhondoro spirit cult and the history of the Monomotapas make his work a pioneering study of the ethnography of the middle Zambesi valley. He not only gives the first detailed account of the activities of the mhondoros but records the myths of origin that provided the legitimacy for a number of ruling dynasties in the Chedima and Dande regions.

Pacheco was familiar with the languages spoken in the Tete region, especially the dialects spoken by the Nhungue and the Tavara, and his work is essential for the study of these languages as he gives what are, in many cases, the earliest record of the African terms for a wide range of topics. Finally, the Viagem is interesting as a supplement to the voluminous records of Livingstone’s Zambezi Expedition. Pacheco is mentioned in the diaries of both Thornton and Kirk and his expedition was in large part a response by the Portuguese to the energetic explorations of Livingstone and his companions.

Keywords: Albino Manoel Pacheco, ethnography, Zambezia, Mozambique

BACKGROUND:

In 1861 the governor of the Tete District organised an official expedition to reoccupy the site of the old feira of Zumbo. The man he appointed to be the capitão-mor and leader of the expedition was Albino Manoel Pacheco.

The decision to re-establish Zumbo had been taken as early as 1854 but the outbreak of war on the Zambezi had delayed the despatch of any expedition.

Then in 1856 Livingstone had visited the site of the old feira on his way across Africa from Angola. In 1858 Livingstone had returned with a well equipped expedition and in 1859 he and one of his party Richard Thornton had again visited Zumbo. Livingstone sent very hostile reports of Portuguese activities to London and the Portuguese authorities decided that it was necessary to prevent any possible hostile activities by Britain in the Zumbo area.

Pacheco set off with a detachment of 20 soldiers on 27 November 1861.
Reaching Zumbo in March 1862, he formally re-established the feira and remained capitão-mor of Zumbo until 1864; he was reappointed 1867 and died in 1870, apparently on a trading expedition to the Kafue.

As well as official reports, contained in AHU, some of which were published in Annaes do Concelho Ultramarino, Pacheco wrote an account of his expedition entitled Uma Viagem de Tete ao Zumbo. This remained unpublished until 1883 when it appeared in the Boletim Official do Governo de Moçambique and as a separata printed in Ilha de Moçambique. A French translation by C. Millot and Paul Guyot appeared in Société de Géographie de l’Est, Bulletin Trimestrial in 1887 and 1888.

One reason why this work is relatively unknown is that the text was transcribed and typeset with numerous mistakes. The French historian Randles claimed that the text was so corrupt that it was more reliable to use Millot’s French translation than the original.

Pacheco’s Viagem can be compared with A. C. P. Gamitto’s much better known O Muata Cazembe which had been published in 1854 (GAMITTO, 1937; CUNNISON, 1960). Pacheco was familiar with Gamitto’s work and his text, although much shorter, is in many ways similar to it. It consists of a diary recording the day to day movements of the expedition with extended passages on flora, fauna, ethnography, language, history and many other topics.

**IMPORTANCE OF PACHECO’S INFORMATION**

In the 17th century the Portuguese had had extensive contacts with the Shona kingdoms and many well-informed accounts had been written which provide detail about the region’s ethnography. The narratives of Lacerda and Gamitto revived this tradition but they described the African societies north of the Zambezi on the road to the capital of Kazembe’s Lunda. The Shona-speaking societies south of the river, along the road followed by traders en route to Zumbo, were less often described and the 71 printed pages of Pacheco’s Viagem are therefore of exceptional importance.

Pacheco was an educated man – he could quote Portuguese and Latin classics, was acquainted with Brazilian and English literature, knew the local African languages of the Tete region and clearly had a very inquiring mind. However, he was not a professional ethnographer or scientist and was not free of the prejudices of his time, dismissing much of what he observed as primitive barbarism.

Since it was first published in 1883 the Viagem has been recognised to be of exceptional importance by all scholars persistent enough to gain access to the text. It provides:

- Detailed information about the geography of the middle Zambesi and the conditions of travel

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- A wealth of African linguistic terms, which constitute one of the earliest records of the African languages of the region
- A history of the Portuguese settlement at Zumbo and its relations with neighbouring African societies, apparently largely derived from oral sources
- Most important of all, the earliest description of the *mhondoro* spirit cults and details of how they operated.
- And the oral history of the ruling dynasties of the heartland of the old Monomotapa empire.

**MHONDOROS**

Although Portuguese writers in the seventeenth century refer to spirit possession in the religious beliefs and social structures of Africans living south of the Zambesi, Pacheco’s *Viagem* is the earliest detailed account of *mhondoro* spirit possession.

Pacheco was writing primarily about the Africans who inhabited Chedima and Dande, the two regions that were the heartland of the Monomotapa state. The Monomotapa state was characterised by immigrant Karanga ruling dynasties controlling pre-existing populations, partly by conquest and partly by establishing a ritual legitimacy in the eyes of the conquered. Out of this need to accommodate the interests of conquerors and conquered, there arose a complex system of religious institutions and ritual observances.

*Mhondoros* (always referred to by Pacheco as *pondoros*) are the spirits of mythical ancestors and former chiefs, and the mediums through whom they speak are powerful figures in the land. When a chief dies it is thought that his spirit inhabits the body of a lion (the word *mhondoro* means lion) and roams the forest as guardian of his territory. When he wants to communicate with his descendants, he does so through a medium who has been selected and trained to be his mouthpiece. The mediums of the *mhondoros* can be very influential. Pacheco describes how he “receives the petitions and gifts of the natives; gives sunshine and rain when he pleases; foretells their future and their happiness; shows the calamities that may happen in a given period; decides all the cases which are submitted to his judgment; condemns or absolves according to the gravity or slightness of the guilt”. In addition he mediates in disputes, including disputed successions to chieftaincies, admits strangers to the land and co-ordinates communal effort in all sorts of fields, including resistance to colonial rule. Each *mhondoro* is also the guardian of the history of the dynasty to which his spirit belongs and of legends pertaining to it.

It is known that important individual Portuguese after their deaths became *mhondoros* who from time to time spoke through mediums. Pacheco himself says that the medium of the *mhondoro* of Frei Pedro da Trindade, supposedly the founder of Zumbo, offered him advice on the conduct of his affairs.
There are still many *mhondoro* spirits active in the Dande and Chedima region and they form a strict hierarchy, which relates closely to the position of each chief in the hierarchy of the dynasty. The most prestigious of the *mhondoros*, are those of Mutota and Matope Nebedza, the legendary founders of the Mutapa state and the ancestors of a number of ‘royal’ lineages throughout the region. Although the religious ideas relating to *mhondoros* may appear fixed and unchanging, in practice there has often been competition between different mediums and their followers reflecting the political tensions and rivalries between groups. The cults, and the influence of their mediums, are subject to evolution and change, so that Pacheco’s record, made 150 years ago, is of special importance.

When Pacheco first encountered a *mhondoro* he witnessed an episode of spirit possession, rather unsympathetically describing – “the hideous faces he [the *mhondora*] made, the roaring in imitation of the roar of a lion, the half unintelligible replies he made to the questions which were put to him by a big crowd of stupid people who pay the greatest attention to him and from all sides deluge him with presents such as beads, ivory, cloth, and drink, all accompanied by drumming, dances, merrymaking and shouting with the final request that the *mambo* ask the *mesimos* to deliver them from wars, hunger and other calamities.” And he records that “the *pondoros* are not permitted to see arms or instruments of war, nor anything coloured red.”

Pacheco also recounts an episode of what looks like the first stages of the spirit possession of a medium, though he thought it as some form of nervous illness.

> the sick woman showed an appalling debility and her eyes, bulging and terrified, became cross-eyed and bloodshot. Suddenly, in despair and looking as if she was suffering hallucinations, she tried to throw herself into the Zambesi, which those standing around were only with difficulty able to prevent. Twisting herself with a frenetic force, she tore herself free from the hands that held her, crying out as if she had in front of her supernatural beings, which she had to reach. In one movement she seized a piece of tobacco which was near her, mixed it with water and then drank the mixture in one gulp, immediately falling prostrate in a complete swoon with her face covered with tears.

It is quite possible that Pacheco is here describing the ‘illness’ that descends on someone before they are possessed by a spirit and become a medium.

Pacheco’s account of the Nebedza *mhondoro* is the earliest detailed account of this powerful figure, one of the two most senior mediums. When the *mhondoro* wishes to make himself visible, Pacheco says,

> he is represented by Umvuza his medium who suffers and thinks like other mortals. Like them, he has passions and desires which he needs to satisfy and for this reason he cannot live without women, and he has many (all of the very best appearance and offered to him voluntarily by their fathers and mothers) to make his existence more pleasant. ... From this one can conclude that the prophet, the *pondoro* and the umvuza, the umvuza, *pondoro* and prophet, or the trinity of the cafres of Chedima, are three entities in a single body.

Pacheco describes how the medium is initiated, and the trials he undergoes, to demonstrate his knowledge of the traditions of the dynasty whose spokesman he will become.
The umvuza … speaking out of the mouth of the prophet (who has taken a mixture of water and powdered tobacco which transports him into a veritable delirium robbing him of his material existence) declares that he was present with God at the creation of the world: … and it was there also that he was examined with the most minute detail when he claimed to be the true medium of the pondoro; these tests consisted of naming all the Muanamotapuas, from Mutota up to the present ruler, and the most notable events of each reign, as well as specifying, by name, all the chiefs who possessed the insignia which they preserve solely for this purpose. He also has to give an account of all the public disasters that have happened in this long period which are explained with a detailed knowledge of the causes … Having done this he begins to roar like a lion … and retires as far as Mussuara-unga the place where the trance is broken. The lion remains there (a sarcophagus both real and imagined of the prophetic spirit) and the umvuza, having come out of the trance, returns looking like an idiot to his village.

Pacheco also describes the death of a mambo and the emergence of his spirit from the burial site.

There are no sacrifices in memory of the mambo as this barbarous custom has been banned among them. However, some of their wives remain at the tomb to watch for his resurrection … which they immediately announce with a great clamour and expressions of joy. From this moment the umvuza begins to assume the highly important role of the incarnation of the mambo…. As soon as the earth, which covers the body begins to sink, because of the corruption of the body, this opens up fissures which are the evident sign of his resurrection.

MONOMOTAPA

Pacheco’s Viagem has long been recognised as possibly the most important source for the oral history of the Monomotapa state, narrated to him by one of the mhondoras of Chedima. There are a number of earlier Portuguese writers who recorded traditions but none of these are as lengthy or as detailed as those recorded by Pacheco. It is likely that the origin of Pacheco’s information was the mhondoro Nebedza who claimed to be the most senior in the hierarchy. So it seems that Pacheco was being subjected to the propaganda of the Nebedza medium.

S.I.Mudenge, the leading historian of the Monomotapa state, drew attention to the obvious problems with oral traditions that are more or less a recitation of king lists.

*It seems … likely that the events described in these sources for the pre-1490 period are in effect a much telescoped version of what happened. …Pacheco’s informants remembered only 20 Mutapas who ruled from the beginning of the state to 1862. The true figure should have been more than 40 Mutapas. (MUDENGE, 1988:37-8)*

Pacheco’s history of the Monomotapa state, however, is more than just a king list. The Viagem is the earliest source for the traditions surrounding Mutota and Matope, the legendary founders of the state. According to David Beach,

*there is some doubt as to whether anyone named ‘Mutota’ [ever] existed, since he did not appear in any account as a state-founder before the 1860s … he represented a one-man symbol of the foundation of the Mutapa state.” (BEACH, 1980:61-2)*

By including important legends about the earlier Monomotapas in his text, Pacheco helps to explain some of the political relations within the Chedima and Dande states in the nineteenth century, in particular how the
mhondoros or Mutota, Matope and Nehanda came to assume such great influence in the politics of the region. For example, Pacheco records the story of the war between Matope and the female ruler, Chicara. Mudenge interprets this as a mythical representation of the struggle between the Dzivaguru cult, an older cult of the supreme being, and the mhondoro spirits of the Monomotapas.

Pacheco’s history also raises questions about the rules of succession. According to him, “the succession goes to the first born from a slave wife and failing that to the brother of the deceased as long as he was born from the same womb and his father was Muanamotapua.” This hints at the adelphic succession rules, which Mudenge claims prevailed in the Monomotapa state and which were opposed to the system of primogeniture which the Portuguese tried to impose on the rulers. Pacheco states that some time, probably in the eighteenth century, this rule of succession was modified and was replaced by the succession alternating between two branches of the royal house, first one providing the ruler, then the other.

Pacheco also records the traditional origin of ritual incest. Matope was able to succeed to the throne because his predecessor had decreed that the succession would pass to whichever of his sons would agree to marry their sister. Only Matope was willing to perform this act of incest. Beach explains that this is the mythical origin of the ritual marriages between the Monomotapa and his sister, which is attested in later documents. That the incest was more than ritual may explain Pacheco’s assertion that the heir to a Monomotapa had to be the child of a slave wife (not, therefore, of incestuous intercourse with a sister). This also is enshrined in the Matope myth since Matope’s son by his sister did not succeed to the throne.

When Pacheco came to discuss the history of the Portuguese settlement of Zumbo he also made use of oral tradition, probably the account of events that was remembered within the Buruma state which was Zumbo’s immediate neighbour.

Pacheco and his expedition may now be largely forgotten and it is difficult to think of any work of comparable importance which is so inaccessible. However, there were few European travellers in nineteenth century Africa who recorded such detailed and important information about the African peoples with whom they came into contact and the Viagem will continue to be one of the most valued records for those who can find it².

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

BEACH, David, 1980. The Shona and Zimbabwe London, Heineman

² A new fully annotated edition of the Viagem, with parallel English translation is to be published by the British Academy in the autumn of 2013.
