CHAPTER EIGHT

TAKING ORAL SOURCES BEYOND THE DOCUMENTARY RECORD OF MAJI MAJI: THE EXAMPLE OF THE “WAR OF KOROSANI” AT YAKOBI, NJOMBE

James Giblin

INTRODUCTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LOCALITY IN THE STUDY OF MAJI MAJI

Virtually all historians of Maji Maji have asked why and how communities scattered across a vast region rose up against colonial authority. Often this question has led them to attempt studies which encompass much or all of the conflict area. Nevertheless, the historians who have worked these large canvases most carefully have recognized the importance of local “triggering factors.”¹ They have usually assumed that these local circumstances provided the tinder which, when exposed to the spirit of rebellion and the maji medicine, ignited violence and hastened its spread across southern Tanzania. Yet there has been little detailed study of localities during the Maji Maji period. The closest scholars have come to the local scale are the studies of the sizeable areas covered by Lorne Larson and Seth Nyagava, whose decades of research are represented in this volume.

This essay explores the “triggering factors” in one locality. It seeks to identify the circumstances which led one local leader to make war at the beginning of the Maji Maji period. Examining the local situation leads us to question the assumption that rebellion spread because the spark of prophecy and medicine ignited the tinder of grievance against colonial rule. As we scrutinize the local factors, our confidence in the fundamental premise of most Maji Maji studies—that determination to destroy colonial authority reigned widely throughout the Maji Maji region—weakens. Looked at from the perspective of one small locality, Maji Maji takes on a changed appearance. It looks less like a war prompted by common grievances, fought against a common enemy, and spread geographically by a succession of triggering events. It looks more like a multiplicity of very loosely-connected local conflicts, each of which was prompted by men of violence who opportunistically took advantage of the breakdown of colonial order to renew local rivalries.

The setting of this study is Yakobi, a station of the Berlin Mission Society [BMS] in southern Ubena [present-day Njombe District] which was attacked by African forces in the early days of Maji Maji. Compared even to Larson’s Undonde area or Nyagava’s Ubena, Yakobi is a micro-setting. The population of the station and surrounding villages involved in the attack was no more than a few thousand. Yakobi was attacked by Mbeyela Mkongwa, a chief who, together with his sons, Ngozingozi and Mpangile, became the principal rebel leaders in Ubena. The key question about “triggering factors” in Ubena is why Mbeyela Mkongwa chose war. That this was the fundamental question was recognized both by the Europeans at Yakobi who knew Mbeyela, and also by the descendents of Mbeyela and other residents of the area who remain interested in the attack on Yakobi.

Having no first-hand account of the deliberations which led Mbeyela to enter into rebellion, we have three ways of getting at the “triggering factors” in Ubena. The first has been utilized in this volume by Seth Nyagava, who considers how the history of pre-Maji Maji warfare and alliance-building influenced Mbeyela and other Bena leaders at the outset of Maji Maji. Turning from Nyagava’s perspective to the local history of Yakobi allows us to take two other approaches in this essay. One is to use written sources from Yakobi—primarily publications of the German pastor, Paul Gröschel—to reconstruct the interaction between the mission and Mbeyela which preceded the attack on Yakobi in September 1905.

In addition, this essay also uses stories of the attack told by descendents of Mbeyela and other residents of the Yakobi area. At Yakobi,