

by a group of Sango people to exploit a smallpox epidemic to establish the cult at Ondo (where it had not existed previously). This last case clearly shows that, contrary to what is several times stated in this book, Sango was *not* a pan-Yoruba deity. Rather, up to the late nineteenth century he was regarded as alien and intrusive over a large swathe of eastern Yorubaland. Premature 'Pan-Yorubism', if I can call it that, has two detrimental effects. In the first place, it encourages a distorted view of *orisa* cults outside the Oyo area, as when it is casually asserted (p. 8) that Sango was worshipped at Ile-Ife as Oramfe. In fact Oramfe, worshipped in the Ife/Ilesha/Ondo triangle and associated there with thunder, was an *orisa* of a wholly different character. Second, it is inconsistent with something that several contributors stress, namely Sango's strongly expansionist character, both in Yorubaland and in the Americas – for a cult cannot expand into space it is claimed to occupy already. The real irony of the book (which the editors would surely disavow) is that it provides so much evidence for the view that it was only when Sango got to the New World that he became a truly Pan-Yoruba deity.

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KAI KRESSE, *Philosophizing in Mombasa: knowledge, Islam and intellectual practice on the Swahili coast*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute (hb £65 – ISBN 978 0 74862 786 8). 2007, 288 pp.

Kai Kresse's key aim in this engaging book is to establish the possibility of a study of philosophy in an African context. Philosophy here is defined as knowledge about knowledge, or a reflexive approach to one's own episteme, and Kresse explicitly argues that this is not a study of community knowledge: his concern is with the individual thought of three individuals in Mombasa, as expressed in a series of texts. This may seem an unexceptionable argument, but it does run counter to a tradition of anthropological research whose focus has been on the collective. It also, inevitably, sets the author a challenge. The texts on which the book focuses revolve around discussions of the nature of morality and social values, and it is really impossible to give any sense of the creativity or significance of individual thought in these areas without also considering societal context. In consequence this work has to try and sketch in this background while steering clear of the sort of generalized ethnographic statements which would undermine the focus on individual thought. There has been much previous ethnographic work on various communities along the East African coast, and much discussion of the problematic and contested nature of Swahili identity. Kresse shows an acute sense of the challenges of the topic, and particularly of the hierarchical nature of these communities, which has inevitably shaped ideas about morality and culture; and he is careful to insist that he is not describing 'Swahili society'. But it is striking that two of his chosen subjects of study are closely related, and that all belong in the higher end of this social hierarchy and share a similar culture of learning – to use the distinction which Kresse himself cites, this is really a study of *Schulbegriff*, rather than *Weltbegriff*.

Kresse's discussion suggests that he is in fact uncertain of the philosophical credentials of at least one of these three figures, the poet Ahmed Nabhany. It is hard not to agree – while Nabhany has been an assiduous cultural entrepreneur, advising many foreign researchers as well as conducting his own work, there is

little reflexive thought in his determined project of linguistic preservation and renewal. Kresse is more willing to define his second subject, the poet Ahmed Nassir, as a philosopher, and he discusses one of his poems in considerable detail and depth to make this point. It might be argued that much of this poem is formulaic both in structure and content, but Kresse plausibly argues that it also offers a discussion of the nature of human morality which is both thoughtful and critical. On the third individual discussed here, the religious and political thinker Abdilahi Nassir, the verdict of the book is unequivocal, and almost partisan in its enthusiasm. So much so that the author is perhaps a little too willing to accept Abdilahi Nassir's own account of his political/intellectual journey, in which he presents himself as a long-standing advocate of ethnic and religious harmony, and says little of his role in the secessionist coastal politics of the early 1960s. In that context, it is perhaps not so surprising that Abdilahi was viewed as a turncoat for his subsequent, rather swift, conversion to the politics of Kenyan nationalism, and that similar suspicions of inconstancy attach to his conversion to Shi'ite Islam in the 1980s – a conversion which, surprisingly, Kresse makes no attempt to discuss, beyond briefly attributing it to his belief in 'free will'.

The lack of any serious discussion of that conversion will be keenly felt by many readers. For while Kresse's main argument is about philosophy, I suspect that this book will be read as much – or more – as an immensely useful source on the changing nature of Islam on the Kenya coast in the last three decades. For part of the backdrop to Abdilahi Nassir's thought is the prolonged debate over religious practice, which has pitched what might variously be called 'Salafist' or 'reformist' thought against a range of established practices. Kresse summarizes this very well, and evokes much of the local flavour of this contest. His sympathies evidently lie with the local forms of practice, often Sufi-inspired, which have come under sustained criticism from a new cohort of scholars (and some not-so-scholarly commentators) who have drawn both inspiration and financial support from Saudi Arabia. Abdilahi Nassir's own conversion exemplifies an interesting twist to this story, and this interesting and thoughtful book would have been even more valuable if it had offered some consideration of how Abdilahi's distinctive philosophy led him to Shi'ism, which has apparently been able to reach an accommodation with some of the established religious practices which Salafists have been so determined to eradicate.

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MAMADOU DIAWARA, PAULO FERNANDO DE MORAES FARIAS and GERD SPITTLER (eds), *Heinrich Barth et l'Afrique*. Studien zur Kulturkunde 125. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe (pb €39.90 – 978 3 89645 220 7). 2006, 286 pp.

Heinrich Barth is undoubtedly one of the greatest (if not *the* greatest) of the nineteenth-century European explorers of Africa. It is strange, however, that he seems to be familiar to a narrow group of specialists only, who focus on the history and anthropology of Sudanic Africa. Barth is mentioned indeed in the general histories of European exploration of Africa, albeit in passing, but his travel account is never consulted seriously when the subject is 'European/Western encounters with Africa' – and the same applies to many other German and continental European explorers, too. Equally striking is that there exists no modern comprehensive biography of Barth in English. Even in Germany, the