

A Review of Kai Kresse's *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast*

(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, for the International African Institute, London, in collaboration with Columbia University Press. x + 288 pp. Photographs and maps. Bibliography. Index. US\$ 100.00 cloth)

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Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)

New Series, Vol.3 No.2, December 2011, pp.1-8

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http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index

That knowledge creation takes place daily as part of ordinary experience is not unique to any particular culture or tradition, but perhaps just not every type of knowledge. That African folk produce philosophical knowledge as part of their daily intellectual quests is considered by many to be a recent academic novelty, yet even there it continues to vie for global recognition. Far less recognized is the idea, first defended by the Belgian missionary, Placide Tempels in works drafted in the 1930s and published in different versions immediately before and after WW II, that ordinary African folk have intellectual practices or inclinations associable with philosophical thinking.¹

¹This view appeared to overlook the work already produced on indigenous thinkers that shows the philosophically interesting content of their ideas. Examples of such work include,

In between Tempels and Oruka there were Marcel Griaule (1948), Kwame Gyekye (1985, second edition 1995), Barry Hallen and John Olu Sodipo (1986), Kwame A. Appiah (1992), and Nkiru Nzegwu (2006) among many others. Yet, the skepticism, or even outright rejection, over the view that ordinary African folk can feed philosophical thought with their experiences notwithstanding, the practice of African cultures, like that of cultures elsewhere, continues to strike the mind of she or he who cares enough to listen diligently to discern the content of the discourses when they are observable, or the principles and norms - or call them beliefs - that inform and try to direct these practices as the make-up of African traditions and histories. That is what human experience does to thinkers everywhere. Those discourses, whatever their objects and objectives, are the mills that churn out the norms by which communities live and around which their members continue to debate further, at different levels, of course, including in the academic towers. In some communities, debating the grounds for proper conduct or the nature of other socio-cultural values engages far more people, and far more intensely and routinely than in others, whether it is in regard to some religious code or in the everyday secular world of Wanjiku's and Adongo's interests.

In this brilliantly written book, *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practice on the Swahili Coast*, Kai Kresse joins the class of those listed above, and many others indeed, in demonstrating that the sources of philosophy are many and variable. In Africa one of those sources includes, but is certainly not limited to, the discourses that ordinary folk carry out in varying circumstances of their daily lives as part of their creation of tradition. Besides philosophy, the results of Kresse's study reveal the riches of the Swahili construction of their historical and religious knowledge.

The manner in which the spectacles through which knowledge is created differs vastly from

but are not limited to, Henry Odera Oruka's *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, Brill Publishers, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1990, and ACTS Press, Nairobi, 1991. The other widely discussed work in this area is Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo's *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*, Ethnographica, London, 1986 (Second edition: Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1996).

place to place, and often reflects what lies at the center of a community's value system, and how the content of this is reflected not only in the subject matter of the discourses but also in the demographic structure of its execution. Under what circumstances are certain or specific issues discussed, by who, and to what end? The consideration of such factors in knowledge-production may unveil how a community assigns gender and age-based roles and also builds and uses its hierarchy of social authority and influence for purposes of advancing its interests, both within and between it and other competing voices within a given geographical-cultural region. Thus, although there may continue to be contestation between different scholars or representations about what should take priority in a community's self-definition, and about how such representations should be understood, the social world of a community is sustained by these competitions of views or interpretations of the core and common texts everyone shares. Surely, there is hardly any human community that thrives on a culture of unanimity. This point runs through the entire text of Kai Kresse's book.

Kai Kresse shatters the false yet persistently pervasive perception of African cultures as unanimous at different levels. At the first level, he unveils the discursive dynamism that accompanies the incessant pursuit of a proper understanding of Islam among both scholars and everyday folk based either on their sectarian belongings and biases, or the differences of their interpretation of received doctrines. Dr. Kresse uses his training as an anthropologist - the other half of his training and competence - to show that not even the everyday Muslim who has not acquired college education fits the characterization of a zealous and unquestioning follower or practitioner of the Islamic faith. Instead, what the "proper" understanding of Islamic texts is is constantly debated, both by the scholars themselves as they undertake critical reflection and comparison of sectarian doctrines, and by those to whose practical application of such doctrines the interpretations are ultimately directed. Definitely, this is to be understood as normal among a community that depends partly on the word of others, especially the teachers at the *Madrasa* (classes) as well as the preachers who are regarded as experts of interpretation.

Added to the embrace of Islam largely as a way of life rather than abstract knowledge whose truths are hidden in the claims of the books, debating meaning as a requirement for proper

application is a daily matter of attention. In the broader context of the Islamic world, plural pursuits of an understanding of the Islamic message complements layers of the plural cultural and historical identities of Muslims in the region that historically and culturally connects the Middle East and the Indian Ocean rim generally, the identities of East African Muslims more particularly, and those of the urban “Swahili” among the Kenyan Coastal groups even more specifically.

Identity debates between, on the one hand, descendants of migrants from the Middle East whose journeys and settlement along the East African Coast followed the expansion routes of Gulf imperial interests in trade in the region, and, on the other, indigenous populations have long dominated the political landscape of the strip, especially in urban and semi-urban centers where migrant presence is visible, usually catching the “Swahili” precariously in the middle. Kresse shows not only that when this identity discourse softens in the open conventional political arena it nonetheless shows up potently through the debating of Islam, but that it also uses Islam as the unifying point at the same time. As a result, the perennially precarious relations between these social cleavages are built on conflicting tendencies that oscillate between separatist socio-cultural hierarchization on the one hand, and social integration on the other in which Islam is used as the symbol of alliance.

As seen in Kenya in the national constitutional review debate in 2009- 2010, religion emerged as an issue over which citizens revealed the depth of their distrust for one another, thus including Kenya among nations where Muslim minorities may view themselves as not accorded equal respect or embrace like other citizens, or where their faith is regarded as a blemish on their citizenship. This way, debating Islam both doctrinally and as a political medium provides a window for observing the definitions of histories and ethnicities of the Coastal peoples of Kenya and how they integrate with their counterparts in Kenya’s *bara* (hinterland) to constitute the post-independence nation. But that, as Kresse explains, should not be surprising. It is only since 1962 that the Kenyan Coastal strip has been a politically integral part of the Kenyan nation after the failure to heave it off either into integration with the remnant of the old Sultanate of Zanzibar, or into an autonomous entity altogether. The ground for such claims, of course, was that it had exhibited a historical distinctness from the

rest of the British colony, and over time acquired a cultural and religious character and identity that drew it closer to the rest of the region that bore the visible and practical influences of Middle Eastern migrations dating back to the Omani empire. A negotiated truce between the British colonial government and the Sultanate of Zanzibar had left the coastal strip under the influence of the Sultan of Zanzibar.

At another but related level, Kresse's *Philosophising in Mombasa* is a case study within the school of philosophical sagacity. Taking the well established Swahili traditions of thought as example, Kresse's study buttresses Oruka's view that African traditions include practices of philosophical deliberation by individuals whose ideas and thoughts are well regarded in their respective communities. As portrayed in the works of the acclaimed representatives of the tradition, people such as the poets Muhammad Kijumwa from Lamu, or Shaaban Robert from Tanganyika, Swahili thought focuses, unsurprisingly, on ethics as the pillar not only of ideal personhood, but also of a good society. I say unsurprisingly because, from a historical standpoint, the successive political enclaves whose interests significantly helped shape the social make-up of the Swahili coast as we know it today did not always care about justice or the general welfare of their subjects, especially the indigenous populations. Social critiques of such shortcomings always took the form of verse and allegorical narratives, thereby enhancing the growth of poetry as the main genre of Swahili literature, both oral and the later written version.

The demand that poetry address difficult issues of life as experienced pushed good poets to become major thinkers and, considering the centrality of Islam in the mix, they often became also teachers and Koranic commentators. Orature and sophistry, depth of knowledge and, above all, poetic gifts, are intellectual and performative skills that are admired primarily for the social elevation they give their bearer. Indeed, as Kresse illustrates with the story of the intellectual roots of sectarian pluralism among "the Swahili" (pp.81-83), one earned admiration and following from one's people as much by the strength of these traits as by one's piety.

The recital of poetry or engagement in debates on and about life issues is not a reserve of

formal platforms. Neighbors may regularly get together in the evenings after the day's occupations, usually over spiced coffee in an elder's courtyard or another spot of convenience, to interact and informally share stories and discussions. These are the small family-oriented *barazas* (gatherings) where both domestic and some broader social matters may be brought up for the counsel of family elders and friends. They may also serve as occasions to keep the youth informed. Yet the structure of these *barazas* reveal the racial and cultural tensions and divisions among the coastal Muslims themselves. Although it may have become far more common to see elders of different racial origins mix today, the *barazas* were otherwise held along a variety of demographic features defining the plurality and separations of the inhabitants of the neighborhoods of coastal towns.

Islam is not just a religion: it is a culture - a way of life - and often one whose adherents shun those who profess different faiths. In those neighborhood environments, close friendship between Muslims and non-Muslims was often rare, although a superfluous form of non-engaged mutual tolerance and respect between neighbors or work colleagues was not uncommon. Muslims love and take great pride in their religion and the lifestyle they believe it demands of them. Although known to exist as seen in the cultures of non-Muslims, other forms of belief and lifestyles are frowned upon, usually quietly but sometimes openly. Nevertheless, the disdain and schism that exists between Muslims and non-Muslims is cultural rather than personal, and may be more common among the non-reflective majority on both sides.

Kresse's study unveils the intricate intellectual complexity and sophistication that surround and direct the daily lives of the Swahili people of Mombasa, especially as he encounters them in the environs of their cultural hub, Mombasa's Old Town, locally known as Kibokoni. This is a beautifully written book that draws as much from the works of established scholars of Swahili history and culture as it does from Kresse's own trained ethnological observations while living and traveling among the coastal Swahili. In both its style and orientation, built on and reflective of the author's multi-disciplinary grounding in philosophy, cultural anthropology, languages, literature and history, this book should reach a broader readership than the classic scholarship within and about East African coastal Islam have managed and

should, on that strength, cause greater engagement among African scholars, especially philosophers, with this rich but sadly marginalized tradition in the broader realm of African modes of thought. At US\$ 100.00 for the hardcover edition, it is not only an enjoyable and informative book, it is a treasure absolutely worth the investment that the price really is.

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