

BOOK REVIEW

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Swahili Muslim Publics and Postcolonial Experience. By Kai Kresse. African Expressive Culture Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2018, pp. xii+237 ISBN: 978-0-253-03753-4

Kai Kresse, Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology,² has a versed experience of more than two decades concerning the Mombasa Swahili Muslim publics. In this culturally and historically grounded book, Kresse used ethnographic information generated from the early 2000s up to 2014. His prolonged stay in the region gained him a discursive space for acquisition of what he calls “a regional understanding of the world and the society.” Tracing postcolonial experiences through discourse analysis, his methods are mixed: including field work, interviews, informal conversations, and media materials – collecting information from Swahili Islamic pamphlets, newspapers, letters, captioned pictures, and open discussion platforms organised by local Islamic radio stations.

The struggle for power and position among Muslim denominations and rivals of the Mazrui clan³ is explained in detail. Kresse has shown strong allegiance to the Mazrui family, which by comparison renders the representation of other Muslim factions in Mombasa inadequate. Nevertheless, some readers will be interested to read voices and texts from underprivileged and marginalised discourses (e.g. the Lamu-based *masharifu* faction of the *Hadrami Alawiyya*) rather than gaining access exclusively to the dominant and perhaps more favoured discourse (i.e. Mazrui voices).

Nevertheless, Kresse’s approach is uniquely reflective in many aspects. Borrowing from social constructionists, he postulates the importance of cultural, historical and political context in the construction of reality. Rather than taking an apologetic attitude to the study of African reality, he believes that African history and the most accurate understanding of African communities and their realities must be acquired through the lenses of African writers. His approach exemplifies anti-Westernism or anti-Eurocentricism;

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³ [Mazruis are from Oman, of political prominence in Mombasa, Kenya from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, in notable opposition with the Omani Al Bu Sa’id dynasty in Zanzibar. – Ed.]

consequently, he imposes a radical paradigm shift in the received description and explanation of African cultures, economic conditions, political dynamics, and social realities. This approach might be controversial in some quarters since it stresses the fact that history itself is ultimately the product of historians based on their contextual perceptions.

Kresse urges African intellectuals to be assertive in this noble, albeit edgy and risk-prone enterprise of constructing and reconstructing Africans' social reality. The results of such scholarship and research is inevitably vulnerable to misunderstanding – it can be read as academic violence or as academic tribalism. But the social sciences have always been the domain of knowledge production infused with ideological dispute, as part and parcel of building new paradigms.

Kresse does more than narrate Mombasa's history and cultural identities in controversial ways; he builds an epistemological case, explicitly defending the view of social reality itself as constituted by discursive practice. He presents the history, reforms and struggles of Mombasa's Muslim societies as properly understood through the analysis of language in use, i.e. pragmatics. In this case it is the Kiswahili language which is essential for an adequate understanding of Swahili Muslims' experiences and processes, as well as the reforms that have taken place throughout Kenya and Mombasa in particular.

Kresse argues, and demonstrates, that through the use of Kiswahili language, individuals sketch their shared experiences, and consequently they draw from a shared conceptual pool which enables their mutual engagement in the discursive practices that constitute a true depiction of reality, and understanding of that reality.

Perhaps what Kresse could have added here would be the fact that the shared experiences often involve a socio-cognitive process which yields individuals' sharing mental models, such as emphasised by T. van Dijk, (see e.g. *Discourse and context. A social cognitive approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 75). The sharing of experience likewise reflects directly the sharing of linguistic resources by members of a discourse community (as developed by N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*. London: Longman, 1989, p. 169). Moreover, it is puzzling that Kresse did not examine the fact that discursive practice oscillates *between* linguistic practice and social practice (as emphasised e.g. by N. Fairclough, *ibid.*) For some decades, scholars in the field of discourse analysis, especially critical discourse analysts, have demonstrated the inter-relationship between linguistic, discursive and social practices; thus there is a rich literature wherein discursive practice is

exhibited as playing an important role of bridging and illuminating the social processes of text production, distribution, interpretation and consumption.

Kresse's work also examines discursive struggles in Mombasa communities. Struggles in Mombasa community are pictured as existing in three ways. Firstly, there is struggle among personalities: those regarded as having religious knowledge are considered better positioned and legitimate sources of authority to offer religio-political advice and clarification, and to issue admonitions to wrong doers. Although other Muslim factions seem discontent with their positions and struggle for equal footing, the Mazrui family and friends are the favourite, or assumed to be the favourite, of the government. Secondly, there is the struggle for political power and representation in government where there is feeling of a lack of freedom by Muslim communities and unfair treatment by upcountry politicians, a majority of whom are Christians. Thus, postcolonial experience positions Muslims as second class citizens. Kresse argues that Muslim communities renegotiate their discursive space and practice concerning politics and political matters by engaging in open discussion platforms organised by local Islamic radio stations. Lastly is the hegemonic struggle for outlets of knowledge: Kresse examines the way different Islamic newspapers and radio stations compete for recognition by Muslim communities as the ideal source of truth and Islamic knowledge. This competition is reproduced in sermons, open public debates, and radio interchanges.

Kresse perceives understanding as a convergence and provision of common ground in the use of certain conceptual apparatus (from repeated key terms, phrases, and idioms displayed in arguing and reasoning) and in observance of convention in social relations and practices sustained by individuals across generations. Kiswahili is perfectly positioned for this end. The emphasis here is that understanding prevails because community members draw from the same conceptual pool. The absence of that shared conceptual pool (and this perhaps is what is missing in Kresse's argument) would lead to understanding – misunderstanding, a discursive mechanism that conveys conflict. Understanding – misunderstanding is depicted in the way Muslim communities reproduce the picture of their being discriminated by upcountry politicians on the one hand, while on the other hand upcountry politicians reveal their feelings of frustration as the Muslim communities do not conform to what are regarded generally as the norms of a peaceful society. Further, the most knowledgeable Muslims in the communities are also frustrated by non-literate Muslim members who fail to follow the conventions expected of ordinary Muslims. Here again, education (i.e. secular and religious

education) is regarded as important in the community; and those who possess both secular and religious education are highly positioned, assume ethical leadership positions, and are legitimised to provide guidance to others. So one can observe these vertical tensions along social and political hierarchy in more than one dimension.

Thus Kresse stresses that readers need to be engaged in the understanding of local and international dynamics of social action, by understanding the regional traditions of intellectual practices grounded in regional intellectual history. Social reality in African communities, as in all communities, is a reflection of their internal dynamics, which are in turn constitutive of people's social micro-interactions and self-conceptualisations.

This book has much to offer in the collateral attempts to rediscover African philosophy, to understand local social dynamics, social cohesion, identity creations, social relations, history and social actions. Although it might be a controversial book for those who are indisposed to accept radical shifts in thinking and methodology, its empirical analysis offers an immense contribution to all those invested in the topic; and it may be regarded as an essential read for students and scholars in a wide range of disciplines including sociology of religion, philosophy, political sociology, religious studies, linguistics, social anthropology and cultural anthropology.