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Islamic Sufi Networks in the Western Indian Ocean (c. 1880-1940). Ripples of Reform.

Islam in Africa, Volume 16. Leiden: Brill 2014. xiv + 227 pages, € 104.00, ISBN 978-900-425-1342.

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Islamic Sufi Networks in the Western Indian Ocean (c. 1880-1940). Ripples of Reform

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Ever since her study *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea. Family networks in East Africa* (2003), Anne K. Bang has a reputation for being one of the leading specialist in East/South-East African Islam. Her recent publication *Islamic Sufi Networks in the Western Indian Ocean (c. 1880-1940). Ripples of Reform*, which renders the results of different research projects dating from 2006 to 2012, is yet another proof for her competence in this field of research.

The author's declared aim is "to link the locations of the Ḥaramayn (Mecca and Medina), the Ḥaḍramawt, Lamu, Zanzibar, the Comoro Islands, northern Mozambique, Diego Suarez and Cape Town with one general movement of Sufi-based Islamic reformist activity." (2) In addition, she intends "to place changes in this region within the wider Islamic reformist discourse in the mid- to late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century." (*ibid.*) The underlying concept is that the main protagonists in this Islamic reform—which Bang defines as "a change with a program and readiness to travel (10)—are not just the religious scholars, organizations, or travelling missionaries, but also their respective local and social surroundings, so the study examines the interaction of all these factors.

In research history, the notion of “Islamic Sufi Reform” underwent some controversial consideration. During the last decades of the 20th century, the shift of Sufi activity from contemplative to social activity was seen as its main component, whereas Rex S. O’Fahey and Bernd Radtke¹ later demonstrated that this was nothing new, but, on the contrary, law and mysticism have been connected for long. In Bang’s eyes, these positions are not necessarily contradictory. Moreover, as she writes, the theological contents can have their origin in chains of transmission and unchanged spiritual substance. Nevertheless, as changes in society occur, this can cause changes in the function of this spiritual substance. Thus, the agency of Sufi authorities and their adherents can be seen as an important factor for changes.

The starting point for the discussion is the author’s interpretation of the personal-local relationship as a network, a concept introduced among others by Roman Loimeier and Stefan Reichmuth² for the analysis of Islamic knowledge transmission. As Bang explains, she uses the term to describe people, books and other texts, rituals, and institutions, and sees Sufi-networks as systems transgressing political, cultural, and ethnical borders—always against the background of local authority strata. On this basis, she renders three case studies (northern Mozambique, northern Madagascar, Cape Town), followed by a more theoretical point of view that traces translocal changes concerning written material (books, manuscripts) and ritual forms. From these observations she draws conclusions regarding the influence of Islamic Sufi reform (by the way, is there any non-Islamic Sufi reform?) on the region, and *vice versa*.

1 Radtke, Bernd and Rex S. O’Fahey. 1993. “Neo-sufism reconsidered.” *Der Islam* 1: 52-87.

2 Loimeier, Roman and Stefan Reichmuth. 1996. “Zur Dynamik religiös-politischer Netzwerke in muslimischen Gesellschaften.” *Die Welt des Islams, New Series* 36 (2): 145-185.

The result is a contextualization of travelling Sufi scholars' activities against the background of both the Islamization and the Islamic reform movement of the Western Indian Ocean regions. Following Engseng Ho³, Bang emphasizes the transfer of knowledge, by largely omitting political and economic factors, and thus points out that activities of certain scholars and intellectuals in connection with local agency can amount to something new on the level of ideas and belief, but also on the level of practices.

Following the somehow confusing introduction (Chapter 1), whose systematics can approximately be deduced by re-reading it after reading the whole book, Chapter 2 ("The Luminescent Sun and Brilliant Rays of Light: Towards a Geography of Reform") is determined to define "a Geography of Reform" (20). Proceeding from the migration history of an ʿAlawī family (the Jamal al-Layl) since the 17th century, Bang describes the geographical territory she occupies herself with in her study. By the transmission of reformist ideas from Cairo, Beirut, Istanbul, India, Mecca, Medina, Muscat, and the Ḥaḍramawt via the Swahili coast to the Comoro Islands, Madagascar, and Mozambique, different centers of reform emerged, with the Ḥaramayn, the Ḥaḍramawt, Lamu, Zanzibar, and the Comoro Islands as important centers of learning and imparting ideas to the south. Although these locations had their specific social, political and cultural traditions, they were connected by migration patterns since the 17th century, whereas an exchange of scholars can be verified since the mid-1800s.

In Chapter 3 ("The Branches of the Qādiriyya and the Shādhiliyya in Northern Mozambique. *Silsilas* to the South") the author outlines the position of Muslims in northern Mozambique - which can be seen as the first important station for the spread of Sufi orders in East Africa - within

3 Ho, Engseng. 2006. *The Graves of Tarim. Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley: California UP.

the general Indian Ocean tradition. The chapter traces some routes the Qādiriyya and the Shādhiliyya orders took from Zanzibar to Mozambique, in order to depict some ways of knowledge transfer and the corresponding processes of localization.

Chapter 4 (“The Shādhiliyya in Northern Madagascar c. 1890-1940: The Planting of a Garden and the Growing of Malagasy Roots”) describes the history of the Shādhiliyya in northern Madagascar as closely connected with the Islamization of the Antankarana people and the migration from the Comoro Islands to Madagascar.

In Chapter 5 (“The Cape Town Muslim Community and East African Sufi Networks: Beyond the Monsoon”) Bang points to some connections between Cape Town and the Indian Ocean Network of Sufi scholarship. After introducing some early teachers, she presents in detail the life and work of Muhammad Salih Hendricks (1871-1945), grandfather of Seraj Hendricks, the current *imām* of the Azzawia Masjid in Walmer Estate and *hakīm* of Cape Town, who obviously was a rather controversial personality.

Occupying herself so far with geographical factors concerning the spread of the Sufi orders, Bang in Chapter 6 (Travelling Texts: Arabic Literate Learning in Coastal Africa, c. 1860-1930”) considers the significance of written sources (books, periodicals, manuscripts) as “the most concrete aspect of reformist thought.” (108) In this context, she classifies the most popular literature as Arabic grammatical works, genealogical and/or geographic texts, works about Islamic law, and devotional works. Though the first printing press in East Africa had been installed as early as 1879, the transition from manuscripts to printed books took place rather slowly, so that books and periodicals did not displace the authority of manuscripts for a long time.

Chapter 7 (“Ritual of Reform – Reform of a Ritual: Rātib al-Ḥaddād in the Southwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1880-1940”) deals with a particular

text, i. e. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAlawī al-Ḥaddād’s (1634-1717) *Rātib al-Ḥaddād*, and its ritual function. The chapter investigates changes in its transmission, performance and comprehension since its establishment as a component of ritual *dhikr* practice in East Africa in the mid-1800s.

In Chapter 8 (“Consolidating the Network: Waqf Distribution and New Organizations in Zanzibar, c. 1900-1930”) Bang describes new organizational forms and the forming of new institutions, using the example of the transfer of *waqf* funds from Zanzibar to Mecca and Medina. As it turns out, long and stable connections existed between East Africa and Mecca, which were not only religious and intellectual but can as well be seen as a “money transfer network”. In addition, teachers and students in Mecca were at least in part financed through *waqf* means from Zanzibar distributed by a handful of *qāḍīs* (instead of giving them to “the poor”). Under British protectorate, these practices led to the establishment of the “Zanzibar Wakf Commission” and eventually to the emerging of new organizational forms (*jamʿīyyāt*) for special religious or ideological purposes, originated from the Sufi networks, but now with a written program, a president etc.

With Chapter 9 (“Conclusions”) of her study, Bang summarizes the possible answers to the main question followed up in her investigation: In which way were changes generated by translocal agents and local leaders able to influence both local societies and Islamic thoughts in general? As she sees it, her study demonstrates that the “change with a programme and a willingness to travel” constituted a reformist movement which remained inside the Sufi domain of knowledge and as such can be read as forerunner of the modernist/Salafist reform movement in the 20th century. Nevertheless, the author closes her impressive presentation with another question: “to what extent did twentieth-century reformers in the southwestern Indian Ocean build upon the lines established by the

generation before them, the local and translocal agents decribed (sic) in this book?" (198)

In fact, the volume is impressive. It impresses through its sheer quantity of facts, be that information concerning persons, or the detailed description of the written and oral sources (interviews) in the appendix.

Nevertheless, some points of criticism cannot be denied. As already noted, the introduction is rather confusing. Furthermore, the subject of "reform" or "reformism" does not become completely clear. Bang describes in detail the journeys of a lot of key figures, their co-studying with other scholars etc. But what kind of reform is meant exactly, with regards to content? Two or three times the author mentions lessons for women, but that cannot be all there is. Some concrete examples for the general propagated "change" would have been very helpful, apart from information about the characteristics of the different Sufi orders in the region.

The last retention regards the dates given in the book. Though the title gives the period c. 1880-1940, these dates are only considered in Chapter 7. Fundamentally more frequently, Bang writes about 1860-1930 (e.g. page 1) and other combinations as the era in question. This indeterminacy in all probability results from a first version of the book intended to be published in 2013, entitled "*Ripples of Reform. Sufi networks in the southwestern Indian Ocean c. 1860-1930.*"⁴ Here, a little bit of accuracy would have been appropriate.

4 See Bang, Anne K. "Alawiyya (East Africa)." *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*. Edited by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Universitätsbibliothek. Available at: http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/alawiyya-east-africa-COM_27296 [accessed December 4th, 2014].

These critical remarks nevertheless must in no way obstruct the perception of the study as a very well-investigated presentation loaded with an abundance of details, which by means of the index can serve as a kind of reference work for experts, but also as informative reading for anyone interested in the history of Islam in Africa.

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