

*Lange, Dierk: Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa: Africa-Centred and Canaanite-Israelite Perspectives.* Röhl Verlag, Dettelbach 2004. 586 pp. Price € 59,90. ISBN 3-89754-115-7.

Dierk Lange, Professor of African History at the University of Bayreuth, has recently published "Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa", combining previously published work with new insights on the basis of his central theme, the historical links between ancient West African polities from Bornu to the Yoruba States and the ancient world of the Near and Middle East.

When a historian of modern African history dares to review this book, which is full of methodological and linguistic considerations far beyond his competence, it is done in order to support efforts to break down the historiographical isolation of pre-colonial African history from the context of world history. In consequence of colonial traditions denying African initiative in all aspects of state formation by assuming "racially superior" influences from outside Africa, post-colonial historians were extremely reluctant to discuss any possible connections with the wider world. They thus systematically refused to take into account any possible relations with the ancient Mediterranean and Near East societies either via Egypt or Phoenician North Africa. This is the core issue of Dierk Lange's book. He has pursued

this path during more than fifteen years of research mainly in splendid isolation. For his cross-continental studies he uses a great variety of linguistic methods as well as comparative approaches in mythology, the process of legendarisation and the social and cult-dramatic embedding of oral traditions.

It is impossible for this reviewer to follow and judge the complicated methodological arguments and assumptions in detail. Dierk Lange himself is convinced that the reconstruction of this very old history can only be attempted with elements of speculation and permanent critical re-reading of sources and re-interpreting artefacts.

In my review I concentrate on the new pieces: "Hausa History in the Context of the Ancient Near Eastern World" (pp. 215–307) and "The Dying and Rising God in the New Year Festival of Ife" (pp. 343–376) leaving out the third new contribution "From Ghana and Mali to Songhay: The Mande Factor in Gao History" (pp. 495–544).

With respect to the Africa centred position of the author the reader may turn to a number of articles originally published in the *Journal of African History* between 1978 and 1988. It is striking that here as well sophisticated methodological arguments are displayed in order to deal with the dynastic and ethnic history of the major medieval empires of West Africa.

What makes this work difficult for many historians – most of whom are not familiar with the ancient and medieval periods covered by Lange – is the almost unbelievable gap he tries to bridge by arguing that even in present day cult-performances the mythical and ritual heritage of the "Canaanite–Israelite tradition" can be discovered and shown to be nearly identical.

However, I think that Lange has a very strong starting point which he sums up in his conclusion to Section Four "Trans Saharan Slave Trade and the spread of Canaanite State" (pp. 372–377). The core argument is that, before the introduction of the camel at the beginning of the Christian era, the Sahara was much easier to cross even on foot and of course by horse-drawn chariots and later by riding horses. He believes that the Phoenicians strove to establish political links across the Sahara, and to organize garrisons south of the Sahara in pursuit of the slave trade rather than in search of gold. Thus, trans-Saharan contacts became of paramount importance for the foundation of the Sudanic states and not, as formerly assumed, for the relationship between Egypt, Meroe and the Western Sudan.

His second argument is that through these connections via Phoenician North Africa, the legends of the founding members of the polities south of the Sahara were enriched by elements deriving from myths and kinglists from ancient Syrian and Mesopotamian societies.

In the case of the "Dying and Rising God in the New Year Festival of Ife" (Section four: Yoruba States) Lange constructs convincing parallels between this festival and the ancient Semitic New Year Festivals, in order to show on the basis of present-day religious practices that there must have existed strong trans-Saharan influences in the ancient period.

Critics might argue that he makes his point too forcefully here, because there must also have been important inner-African developments: the input from outside may have laid the basis but it probably did not lead to the extinction of earlier local forms of social organization. However, total transformation could have been achieved by the permanent presence of foreign elements. In this respect the later interaction between African sources of power and the Islamic concept of state shows how foreign influences could produce internal change in the case of a continuous though relatively weak input from the outside world.

I think that Lange's attempt to consider trans-Saharan trade as having been very intensive even in ancient times is very worthwhile. The relevance of oral traditions based on fundamental and very old cultural traits is at the core of Lange's assumptions. He thus comes close to Assmann's theory concerning the long-term historical memory. His attempt to reconstruct the pre-Islamic past of African societies is in itself a step forward. It is certainly a necessary prerequisite to looking beyond the dominant pattern of Islamic traditions in many West African societies.

The core argument of the book therefore deserves careful attention, even if a number of constructions and methodological assumptions may not find many supporters. However, neglecting this unusual but very scholarly approach would impoverish Africa history by dismissing offhand the possibility of its ancient and intensive connections with the ancient world.

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