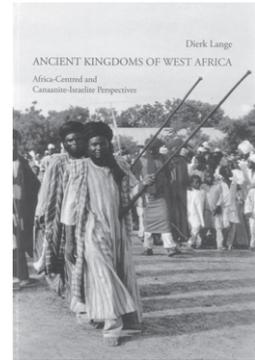

BOOK REVIEW



Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa: Africa-Centred and Canaanite-Israelite Perspectives. By Dierk Lange. Verlag J.H. Röhl, Dettelbach, 2004, 586 pp., ISBN 3-89754-115-7. Price EUR 59.80.

In the colonial period, it was generally assumed that the rise of states in sub-Saharan Africa was a consequence of important outside influences in classical times. With the independence of the African states this idea has been discarded in favour of internal developments within African societies. The states of the Sahelian zone, therefore, were supposed to have originated during the medieval period in consequence of the rising trade sparked off by the Arabic conquest of North Africa. The only alternative position was that of Fage and Oliver who suggested, in 1962, a diffusion of the ‘Sudanic’ states from Meroe and South Arabia. Since then there has been hardly any new research trying to look afresh at the enigma of the origin of these states. The book “Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa” by Dierk Lange takes up the earlier line of thought. It suggests that sub-Saharan African societies owe important cultural inputs to the Semitic world, which in the Phoenician period stretched from Morocco to South Arabia.

The massive volume is a collection of Lange’s formerly published studies in English and French. Moreover it includes three new chapters in English dealing with the kingdoms of the Central and Western Sudan. These chapters compose, by their number of pages, a book in themselves. They have two aims: firstly, they present original interpretations concerning the medieval history of these states and, secondly, they follow an innovative comparative approach dealing with their foundation in classical times. This second part will certainly attract more attention. It suggests that Phoenician slave traders established south

of the Sahara and, specifically in the region of Lake Chad, some interdependent trading posts and garrisons which constituted the nuclei of the future Sudanic states. Further, there are short excursions on the ancient history of South Arabia and Somalia showing similar cultural influences.

With respect to the ancient period, the book pleads for research in the historical perspective of *longue durée* by means of comparisons between African rituals and ancient Near Eastern myths. The unexpectedly slow change of clan and state structures in Africa is revealed by numerous impressive parallels between still existing religious festivals in Hausa and Yoruba kingdoms and ancient Semitic New Year festivals of the pre-Christian era. The book also deals with internal written texts and with oral traditions. Contrary to the wide-spread idea that oral traditions are *feedbacks* from recent Islamic or Christian inputs, it is shown that these legends are so firmly linked to social institutions and festal traditions that they must go back to the foundation period of the states concerned.

The volume is divided into five regional sections followed by a supplementary chapter called “Addenda et Corrigenda”, which includes a re-evaluation and updating of the author’s former articles republished here. Section one comprises Lange’s early publications on trans-Saharan trade relations via the central Saharan route between Tripoli and Lake Chad. These articles are based on field research along the central Saharan route in 1976 and deal with trade relations in the medieval and modern period. They describe a number

of important archaeological sites which up to now have remained unexcavated. Some surface remains have been dated to the Roman period by earlier travellers and scholarly minded colonial administrators. In the present volume, Lange draws again attention to the importance of the central Saharan route as a continuous and easily usable line of communication between sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean world.

The formerly published studies in section two testify to the author's ongoing interest in the history of Kanem-Bornu. Lange started his career in 1970 by searching for new data in European and Arabic written records. Later he complemented his research by adding oral traditions and cultural remnants as important sources for the reconstruction of history. Some new remarks concern the shift of the Duguwa to the Sefuwa clan-family which is now seen in connection with the local cult-mythological set-up. Lange goes beyond the regional approach restricted to the idea of local borrowings between the Nilo-Saharan and the Chadic speaking societies. He attributes the basic institutions of sacred kingship to a common substratum reaching from the Yoruba states in the south to the former Semitic states of the eastern Mediterranean world in the north. It is remarkable which new insights may be gained by such a vast comparative approach.

Section three deals with the Hausa States. Here the previously published articles offer examples of the author's continuous attempts to point out the connections between oral traditions and the great religious festivals. Thus the Bayajidda legend is seen as a foundation charter, fully embedded in Hausa society since the king and other officials contribute to re-enact it during the Mawlud or Gani festival. Moreover, it exhibits striking parallels with the Israelite story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. The legend therefore must have been transmitted together with the basic institutions of the Hausa states. Other aspects of the Hausa section concern the names of ancient Near Eastern kings in the various written dynastic lists of the Central Sudan. Against the objection that these parallels are chance similarities, impressive parallels between royal rituals of various Hausa kingdoms and Ugaritic myths are pointed out. Additional data in support of an important cultural input from the Semitic world is provided by Lange's detailed historical deliberations on the clues of slave trade south of the Sahara by Phoenicians. Furthermore, the chapter includes the first oral version of the Bayajidda legend in translation collected from a palace official of Daura.

Section four focuses on the Yoruba states. The new essay reveals the Canaanite and Israelite cult-mythological pattern of the dying and rising god as the underlying principle of the major kingship festival of Ife. The argument of a Semitic New Year festival surviving among the Yoruba implies a considerable longevity of clan and state structures. This is supported by a description of the three most important ritual days of the Yoruba feast. Further, it is buttressed by a brief comparison of the six main deities of the festival with their Canaanite equivalents. This opens an entirely new perspective on a rather anthropological field achieved by painstaking field research in combination with audacious intercontinental comparisons. The reader, however, would like to have more details in order to be fully convinced of the validity of the far-reaching implications of these parallels. Another important achievement of the new approach concerns the interpretation of Yoruba myths in terms of an *euheristic* world view – perceptible also in Canaanite mythology. The depiction of deities as former human beings should therefore not mislead historians to take the legendary stories at face value and read historical events into the myths actually concerning primordial times.

Section five deals with the medieval states of the Middle Niger. It shows that a thorough analysis of texts in combination with oral, linguistic and archaeological data permits surprisingly new insights. Thus, with respect to the history of ancient Ghana it now appears that the pre-medieval nucleus of the state was in the Lakes region of the Niger southwest of Timbuktu. Lange puts the history of Gao into a new perspective by identifying an early twelfth century king of the famous stelae of Gao-Saney with a king of the dynastic list of the Timbuktu chronicles. Another challenging aspect of this chapter concerns the ethnogenesis of the Songhay, which is now seen as a result of the struggle of liberation against the fourteenth century domination of Mali over the Middle Niger region. More difficult to evaluate is the idea of a dynastic shift during the Almoravid period from Ghana to Gao. This new view on the states of the Middle Niger will probably prove to be a breakthrough in the historiography of medieval West Africa.

Finally, the book includes a number of useful original maps and charts which allows one to easily follow the innovative arguments concerning the parallel positions of West African and ancient Near