HALE Sondra & KADODA Gada (EDS.). — *Networks of Knowledge Production in Sudan. Identities, Mobilities and Technologies*

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REFERENCES

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- 1 The volume at hand is introduced with the promise to be the first collection of essays—for Sudan or even North Africa—to intersect issues of identities, mobilities and technologies under the heading of knowledge production. The authors engage in a range of writing styles and text structures, from autobiography (Abdel Halim) and an edited interview transcription (Fábos and Alsarah) over conceptual assessment reports (Elsony, Hassanain and Sithole) to rather conventional ethnographic narratives (Boddy) and argumentative texts (El-Battahani). This corresponds to the authors' assorted backgrounds, listed in the foreword as "anthropologists, musicians, historians, political scientists, lawyers, gender studies scholars, technologists, agrarian economists, and health specialists" (p. ix).
- 2 Topics mostly oscillate around belonging, moving and communicating: how does using other than face-to-face communication influence what is known about oneself and others (e.g. new intimacies as described by Boddy, online imaginaries of a hoped-for future self as described by Grabska)? How does being remote but invested bear on representation of conflict (Abusharaf on Darfur) or remote control pursued by regimes on the prospects of change (El-Battahani on Middle East and North Africa region)? What implications have online spaces on the notion of public social life and subsequent

research ethics (Gruenbaum)? How are these “re-publics” related to other public spaces, and to the kind of relations and divisions that are negotiated in them (Abdel Halim)? How does this play out for a society that is in practice highly mobile but mostly represented—and often self-representing—as monolithic or “traditional” (Hale)?

- 3 Others tread in older debates of population mobility as spectrum between being drawn somewhere else or being tried to be removed from or subdued where one is (Otto & Schultz on pre-/post-independence South Sudanese, Elkarib on displacement to towns, Komey on wartime border crossings, Nayel on diaspora). This sometimes also reacts to narratives overstating mutual impermeability of populations, such as Hale’s redefinition of Sudan to be a fluid social landscape rather than fixed cultures at odds with each other or Komey’s contradiction to a common image of the Nuba Mountains as a closed-up, remote region.
- 4 The extent to which these different studies deliver an intersection of the proposed issues varies very much. Many studies present research or impressions that merely touch on them, and steps that are actually taken in this direction often remain abortive and far from a full-fledged discussion—Kadoda’s proposed tracing of the impact of railway, radio and mobile phone, Gruenbaum’s lent example of an online platform on body positivity (in the US), Abusharaf’s mentioning of Facebook profiles and closed groups.
- 5 An underlying problem is that the technologies supposed to be discussed are often not looked at differentiated enough. “The Internet” (capitalized) and social media often appear as an entity, as a black box, nothing connected to devices, connections, software, content control, search engines, groups, sharing, hours spent online, depths of attention, consequences of delayed or covert responses, etc. Even where technical awareness clearly exists, for instance in Kadoda’s case, this is not carried into the cases under discussion, thereby making many propositions but showing little of how they are to be implemented. In other cases, “technology” appears completely circumstantial, something that is mentioned since it is there in people’s lives, not because there is an analytical focus on it. This is also the case when the supposed revolutionary potential of social media comes up, as many authors appear invested in early-day optimism pushed by the so-called Arab Spring whose actual outcomes have been much more ambiguous. Even where this ambiguity is addressed, though, such as in El-Battahani’s article, there tends to be a lack of depth: when he claims the successful political use of technologies by the National Islamic Front and the failure of so-called progressive forces to do the same, he remains vague as to how intention, use and outcome were actually related.
- 6 Notable exceptions are the articles by Grabska, Boddy and Calkins & Rottenburg: while only the latter goes into depth on technological implications, they all show a detailed interlace of new ways of doing things such as communicating or searching for stuff with previously existing ways. They show that there is a set of basic sociological questions that remain relevant whenever different media of access and exchange win or lose in attraction and importance: how are inclusion and exclusion achieved/negotiated? What is accessible how, what is hidden how? What boundaries persist (linguistically, logistically, politically), and how do they relate to each other?
- 7 The multiple ways in which Sudanese resident households and remittances, political activism online and offline, e-government and surveillance are interlinked should give pause to see how mobilities and immobilities, online and offline communication

continue to be intrinsically intervoven, as Grabska started to work out: households without family members with income abroad suffer more from inflation, online spaces both expose and protect, virtual pathways for official data both serve and discriminate. Calkins & Rottenburg's article is alone in linking up to Kadoda's introductory paragraphs on Science and Technology Studies, or literature from the sociology of knowledge. A balance is missing in both cases: while Calkins & Rottenburg's terminology remains idiosyncratic in this context, other articles could have benefited from more than fleeting reference to such literature.

- 8 The same can be said about identification where defining literature is mentioned but conceptual and observational sophistication they introduced not fully adopted. The problem of translating such insights not only into everyday life and political discourses but even the academic reasoning itself is revealed in the recurrent failure of the authors to steer clear of treating their subject matter using categories in an essentializing way, such as the West and the rest, retrogressive and progressive, Black and White, men and women, Diasporians and ?, etc. The observable association of essentializing categories with taking a political stand indicates the depth of the underlying problem: how do I address being addressed in a certain way without addressing in the same way, just in the opposite direction?
- 9 Missed chances of the authors to cross-fertilize their contributions become most obvious in the contribution by Elsony, Hassanain and Sithole: while they promote the integration of biomedical and social aspects and inclusive decision-making in healthcare, their use of language betrays the same notions of culture, identity, even race as fixed variables in the overall calculation of interventions that the overall volume and most authors declare to be writing against. At the same time, the most controversial question of their topic is sidelined: whose decision-making—with the hierarchy of values that it precludes—is taking precedent when a decision has to be made, especially in life-and-death situations? Their definitive negative statements on Female Genital Mutilation and anti-biomedicine religious leaders indicate but don't reflect the implications of their own values in that regard.
- 10 The danger of critique is, however, not only criticism that is not ready not to commit the same “deeds” in the process. It may also misfire by overstepping its reach—and by overshadowing what actually could be said: the self-invention presented in the dialogue with Alsarah does not build itself—as Abdelhalim's text did—from a multifaceted, colourful narrative of biographical, intellectual, artistic references. Alsarah mostly deplores being confronted with societal concepts of belonging—that are, in principle, inevitable but, in practice, variably inadequate. This may be merited and important. However, what one learns about her artistic production remains little while artists' enduring creativity in Sudan is understated by the recurrent narrative that lack or censorship of public spaces for art means, necessarily, the death of art.
- 11 What underlies many of these unsettled narratives, however, is an ameliorative tone, the seductive notion that history doesn't merely reiterates circles of creation and destruction but can be steered towards something better. In fact, this is what makes the volume so timely, four years after its publication: to be read in a post-revolutionary Sudan where nobody has a clear notion what is to be said and/or how it is to be formed into a coherent narrative.

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