

**Heiss, Jan Patrick 2015. Musa. An essay (or experiment) in the anthropology of the individual. Berlin: Duncker&Humblot, ISBN- ISBN 9783428147816, 329 p., 89,90 €**

*Thomas Widlok, University of Cologne*

**Review**

- <1> An individual who taught me as a graduate student at the London School of Economics suggested that we should read the work of French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu back to front, i.e. the last chapters first. As a reviewer of "Musa. An essay (or experiment) in the anthropology of the individual" I am now putting forward the same recommendation. Reading the last two chapters of this book first is recommended, unless you are a specialist on the ethnography of Nigerian Hausa and by default willing to read some 300 pages of detailed ethnographic description anyway, or unless you are in an experimental mood to follow the author in his "essay (or experiment)" who decided to give the description of a single Hausa individual center stage to his book.
- <2> I confess that I was initially not sufficiently experimentally minded but then I suppose I am also not the only one who has been trained to think of individuals always in terms of their social relations and their cultural habitus, thus I decided to read this book back to front. What we get in the last chapters of the book is a number of very useful aides. First of all we get a short but helpful summary of other ethnographies that anthropologists have devoted to individuals and how these compare to the current study (Chapter F). This chapter of the book indicates that there are less works of this kind than one might expect. Secondly, we also get a short overview of theories of the individual. This part is unfortunately rather short und limited to the works of Gary Becker, Anthony Giddens, and Albert Piette. Paging through Brian Morris' books on individualism (1991 and the self (1994) suggests that there are many more candidates to consider. Moreover Heiss' very closely sticks to Tugendhat's theory of the person while I was expecting a discussion inspired by current developmental psychology which - at least since Lev Vygotsky - tends to hold that the social is key even to what we consider the most basic individual processes of cognition and emotion. This is where argument or critical reflection on the key assumptions of this study could have come from. But thirdly, and again very instructively, Chapter G then provides a summary of peasant studies and some of its major works. This delving into peasant study is very useful in two ways. For one, we read that the village under study here is "a rather ideal-typical example of a peasant village" and that Musa "proved to be a rather ideal-typical peasant" (p. 265). Thus, independently of the question how representative Musa, the individual, is for the situation of Hausa in the village of Kimoram today, we can rest assured that the Hausa of Kimoran (in Niger, where Musa spends half the year when he is not in Nigeria) today are a good case to provide fresh ethnography of what has been proposed for peasant societies elsewhere in Africa and beyond. To pre-empt some of the results: The ethnography confirms some of the theoretical predictions provided by Eric Wolf and others, but not all of these comparative predictions, as one would expect. But there is another reason why this excursion into the peasant study literature is useful. After all, the situation in this field is also typical of the state of the art of current anthropological research in old established fields of comparative anthropology (pastoralist or hunter-gatherer studies being obvious parallel cases to peasant studies).
- <3> As I read through Heiss' summary I asked myself, what short-term goals may a younger researcher realize who has decided to work in an established sub-field of anthropology in a situation in which a fairly coherent body of ethnography and theory has been compiled by a couple of generations of researchers. One common if negative strategy is patricide, dismantling the category altogether and claiming that nothing of what has been written on peasant society (in this instance) is relevant

anymore. The last chapter of the current book reviews the Marxist work of Meillassoux in this light but as a whole Heiss has taken another route. Instead of building a career on being negative, a patricidal *Bilderstürmer*, he has taken a more creative, productive and experimental route by reworking, instead of dismantling, the field from a different perspective. In this case the perspective taken is an explicitly Weberian one. In a nutshell, it tries to replicate Max Weber's study of the relation between religion and economy (in the "Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism") for a present-day Muslim in Nigeria. An important qualification is that unlike Weber the author of the present work did not have a host of written texts on the topic available as Weber did for his case, but had to achieve this single-handedly so to speak in the course of a one-man-field project.

- <4> On the final pages of the book Jan Patrick Heiss makes a fairly convincing argument along these lines. A very short version of that argument is the following: Hausa of Kimoram do show many features of a typical peasant society in terms of the prevalent social structure, including some of the features that have been predicted with regard to the attitudes or dispositions of a member of such a society. However, not all features are found and there is a clear gap in explaining in particular the dimension of value, virtue and what Musa, the subject of this ethnography, considers to be a good life worth striving for. Moreover, an analysis of peasant social structure and culture drawn with a broad comparative brush leaves many questions unanswered with regard to what drives the individuals who make a living and who lead their lives under the conditions of a peasant society. Putting the research question more poignantly: Is it "peasant values" or "Islamic values" or a combination of both which informs Hausa life in Niger today? Heiss makes the convincing argument that for answering this question we necessarily have to do research at the level of the individual because when studying Musa's life ethnographically (shadowing him over a long period of time as Heiss did) the intricacies become visible and can be disentangled. Therefore, Heiss at the end of the book turns to the local manifestation of Islam (in terms of popular sermons spread on tape and other aspects of everyday practice) and matches these with what he has established (in the early chapters of the book) about what Musa does in his everyday life.
- <5> Having taken in these arguments in from the final chapters, I was finally prepared to actually read the earlier chapters in order to find some of the evidence. While chapters A (on the research site) and B (on the research methods) are introductory, it is chapters C (daily life), D (Musa's relationship to his wife, children, father, the wider community and to God), and E (Musa's values) that form the core of the book. It struck me that this part of the book is probably an instance of what Andrew Abbott (2016) recently called (and propagated as) 'lyrical sociology', or 'lyrical anthropology' for that matter. It is not that Heiss has experimented with poetic forms of writings but rather that his account is, as Abbott would put it, "not organized around a narrative of either a case or a group of variables" (Abbott 2016:75). Instead of a single narrative structure or a variable-based analysis, the ethnographic description focuses on situations in Musa's life, predicated on his immediate engagements, on particular locations, and on the multitude of momentary and transitory aspects of everyday social life. Readers should decide for themselves as to how well the text works for them and which parts they find most successful. Personally, I was struck by the description of Musa's relation with his wife, more than for instance the sections on Musa's relation with God. A good part of the book, in the end, is about social relations, but tackled from a different angle namely that of individual experiences. In countless previous ethnographies we read about men in such societies having authority and power over their wives but Heiss' more lyrical account (in Abbott's sense) provide a much more impressive, vivid, nuanced and ultimately more convincing picture. We see Musa and his wife Mariama leading their lives together, joyfully haggling over the price of a cola nut traded between them (p. 89) or disagreeing on whether Mariama was allowed to stay away overnight when doing visits elsewhere (p. 82). These pictures are drawn from a rich ethnographic base and Heiss does well in not immediately conscripting these ethnographic vignettes into the construction an overall narrative or explanatory model. While he does not delete himself as an observer from the picture, he also does not drift into postmodernist navel-gazing and he does well to stay clear of arbitrariness or subjectivism. With Abbott I agree that there should definitely be room for such a stance in the social sciences.

**References:**

Abbott, Andrew 2016

*Processual Sociology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press

Weber, Max 1920 [1988]

*Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. In: Max Weber *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Bd. I, pp. 17-206. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck [facsimile edition in 1988. Tübingen: Mohr]

Morris, Brian 1991

*Western concepts of the individual*. Oxford: Berg

Morris, Brian 1994

*Anthropology of the Self: The Individual in Cultural Perspective*. London: Pluto Press