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Rhiannon Stephens, *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa: A Conceptual History*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022, 304 pp. ISBN: 9781478016199, ISBN: 9781478018827 and ISBN: 9781478024514.

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Since the anthropologist Jane Guyer used the phrase “wealth in people” to describe wealth in Equatorial Africa, it has become the most salient concept to describe notions of affluence on the continent (1995). In *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa: A Conceptual History*, Rhiannon Stephens questions the wide-ranging application of this term to African societies. She shows that while sometimes this concept did apply, there was an array of other ways people understood wealth and poverty. She focuses specifically on the eastern region of modern Uganda and thirteen modern languages in the Bantu and Nilotic language families. Those languages include, Lugwere, Lusoga, Rushana, Lunyole, Lugwe, Lusaamia, Lumasaaba, Lubukusu, Ludadiri, Ateso, Ngakarimojong, Kupasabiny and Dhopadhola. Using historical linguistics, archeology, climate data, and ethnography, Stephens traces the ancient proto forms of each of these languages to identify changing conceptualization of poverty and wealth from nearly two thousand years ago to the twentieth century.

In undertaking this conceptual history of poverty and wealth in the *long durée*, Stephens demonstrates “the diversity of people’s thinking about inequality in the region before colonial conquest or incorporation into global trade networks” (p.1). She sets out to show that precolonial East Africa was contrary to contemporary stereotypes not always poor, nor was it perfectly egalitarian. Indeed, socioeconomic differentiation was common. Ultimately, Stephens is successful in uncovering the myriad of ways people thought about what it meant to be poor or rich. Indeed, she answers Ogbu Kalu’s call for scholars to “define poverty and wealth from an indigenous African perspective” and proves that economic thought and intellectual work existed on the African continent long before colonial conquest (p. 25).

In six chapters, Stephens identifies three broad themes that structured peoples’ notions of poverty and wealth in eastern Uganda. According to Stephens, people understood wealth and poverty in social, material, and emotional terms. Social understandings of poverty tied it to kinlessness, or the inability to marry and

reproduce. People understood the material form of poverty to be a situation of lack and absence of the means of subsistence. Finally, the emotional form of poverty focused on it as a form of suffering, or bereavement and sickness.

In Chapter One, Stephens describes in detail her methodology and sources. She primarily writes about a period for which there are not any written documents. To overcome this problem, Stephens uses historical linguistics and a methodology described by linguists as “words-and-things.” She uses genetic classifications of modern languages in eastern Uganda to identify the common ancestral, or protolanguages likely used in the past. She traces “to the fullest extent possible, all the meanings associated with a word that can also mean wealth, poverty, rich person or poor person” (p.12). She uses the linguistic data, with archeological data, climatic data, and ethnography to map how language changed with large events, like drought, migration, and the arrival of new trading partners.

Focusing on the “oldest concepts of poverty and wealth” in the region, in Chapter Two, Stephens sets out to establish a baseline from which she builds in her following chapters (p.56). Looking at languages including Proto-Greater Luhya, Proto-West Nyanza, Proto-Eastern Nilotic, Proto-Western Nilotic, and Proto-Southern Nilotic she shows how many of these early languages acknowledged no difference between poverty and other kinds of suffering. People speaking Proto-Greater Luhya drew on older words for bereavement to develop new words for poverty. While people speaking Proto-West Nyanza linked poverty with sorrow and in Proto-Eastern Nilotic there was a recognition that the poor were “disturbing or troubling” (p.61). Overall, the terms for poverty and wealth did not relate to economic specialization; in other words, there was no separate concept of poverty for pastoralists and agriculturalists rather these earlier proto-language speakers drew on multiple different notions of poverty.

In the chapter following Chapter Two, which Stephens calls an “Interchapter.” She evaluates climatic data and fluctuations in rainfall over two thousand years. She contends that climate changed “the range of the possible” (p.18). In other words, it changed the decisions people made both economically and culturally regarding their means of subsistence.

In Chapter Three, Stephens zooms in on the languages that emerged from Proto-Greater Luhya after the sixth century. These languages included Lunyole, Proto-North Luhya, Proto-Gwe Saamia, and Proto-Luhya. Lunyole speakers, who conceived of wealth in gendered terms, often focused on marriage, reproduction, and bride wealth. They also had a negative attitude towards the poor. Similarly, in Proto-North Luhya there were ideas of the poor as selfish or disruptive. Meanwhile, wealth that was honorable and worthy of respect was tied to leadership. In Lubukusuku, a modern language with its origins in Proto North Luhya, there was an idea of the rich “as those who had displaced others” (p.19). Proto-Gwe Saamia had material

understandings of poverty and wealth as something elders and powerful people possessed.

Emerging after 1200 CE, Proto-North Nyanza, Proto East Kyoga, Lusoga, and Lugwere saw some changes in peoples' concepts of poverty and wealth. Proto-North Nyanza recognized more "gradations of poverty." Furthermore, wealth was gendered and often attained through violence. However, unlike Proto-North Nyanza, Proto-South Kyoga did not see wealth as plunder. Lusoga focused on the "naturalness of poverty" and gendered aspects. Chapter Five focuses on people speaking the languages that emerged from Proto-Southern, Proto-Eastern and Proto Western Nilotic. In Proto-Kalenjin, poverty was related to begging and orphans. Further, for men being an orphan related to not having cattle passed down from their fathers. Therefore, poverty and orphanhood also were associated with not owning cattle. Conversely, Ateso speakers had two understandings of wealth, wealth in food and wealth in livestock.

The Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries brought disruptions to the lives of people living in Eastern Uganda. In Chapter Six, Stephens addresses how these disruptions, drought, colonialism, coastal trade, and cattle diseases, impacted notions of poverty and wealth. She shows that while in some cases new ideas about wealth and poverty were developed, in other ways older concepts endured. For instance, colonialism brought ideas about the wealthy wearing clothes and having mission educations. Nevertheless, wealth was still linked to gender and livestock even as these new ideas about wealth were developed. Overall, Stephen's chapters take the reader through thousands of years of eastern Ugandan history and a wide diversity of thought about poverty and wealth.

Stephen's methodology is without a doubt the largest strength of this book. She has accomplished something very difficult in producing a conceptual history of a region and time without written documents. Indeed, she's proven that historical linguistics can help historians write conceptual histories of precolonial Africa. While Stephens' work demonstrates methodological acumen in reconstructing the deep past of Eastern Uganda over a hundred years before written records, the book can be a bit demanding for those not well versed in historical linguistics or East African history. Nevertheless, Stephens makes important observations about poverty and wealth from an indigenous African perspective. Her conclusions about the variety of definitions of poverty and wealth that are not static, and her astute methodology make this a book from which everyone can and should benefit.

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