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Rhiannon Stephens, *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa: A Conceptual History*. Duke University Press, 2022, 312 pages. ISBN 9781478016199. ISBN: 9781478018827 (paperback). ISBN 9781478024514 (ebook).

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Spanning over two thousand years of African history, historian Rhiannon Stephens has written an innovative work of historical linguistics that offers new insights into the distant past of Eastern Uganda. Her themes are poverty and wealth in the eastern region of Uganda, an area of historical encounters between Bantu and Nilotic language speakers. Stephens' ambition is to use the discipline of historical linguistics to write an African conceptual history of wealth and poverty in these contexts, focusing on the social, material, and emotional dimensions of how people in the past understood various terms for these concepts.

Stephens includes a helpful methods chapter to "roll back the curtain" as it were, on her complex and often difficult methodology. African historical linguists have been refining their methods since Jan Vansina demonstrated some of the possibilities of such an approach. Historical linguistics starts from a basic fact about languages—their interrelatedness and borrowing from each other. All modern languages diverge from older languages, inheriting some features, shedding others, and innovating or borrowing still others. Historical linguists begin by collecting glosses in their target language(s) for 100-200 of the most universally common concepts. They then identify cognates between two given languages, creating a matrix of percentages based on the strength of the number of cognates shared between two languages. Those with a high percentage of cognates are identified as descended from a proto-language. This method is called *lexicostatistics*. A related approach to this is called the *comparative method*—this way similarly uses cognates but adds a comparison of morphological features or innovations to establish a relationship from a group of modern languages to a proto-language.

Examining a history of semantic change requires familiarity with the various theories of why words change their meaning, as well as familiarity with how modern speakers understand the meaning of these words. Historical linguists must put this data together with an understanding of how sound change occurs in phonemes, based

on how speakers of that language generally combine different kinds of sounds. Finally, they can also use a method called *glottochronology*. This method uses an average rate of change in core vocabularies—14% over 500 years—as a constant. Establishing dates for the existence of speakers of a reconstructed proto-language can be difficult. In addition to glottochronology, historical linguists must rely on other kinds of data to tie historical-theoretical utterances to the material record of the past. African historical linguists must thus develop fluency in these methods of historical reconstruction from archaeology, climate science, and paleobotany, among others. When linguistic analysis is put into conversation with the archaeological record, stunning new insights into a previously opaque past are possible. Stephens has gathered an impressive amount of linguistic data and is adept at integrating each of these methods into a historical synthesis.

Poverty is a concept loaded with all kinds of moral connotations, from misfortune to bereavement to danger. Wealth is similarly multivalent and complex. Stephens brilliantly explores these nuances, speculating about the ties of various words to material like cattle and crops and social dynamics such as wealth in people, wealth in knowledge, and sharing with others. She includes an appendix with the vocabulary, attested and reconstructed, that form her major evidence base. Stephens's work is not light reading, even with the methods chapter and maps. Part of that difficulty is inherent to the limits of the method—it rarely lends itself to a rip-roaring story. But that shouldn't distract serious readers from the major accomplishments of this book. It offers a comprehensive conceptual vocabulary of the various glosses for poverty, poor person, wealth, and rich person by reconstructing utterances from reconstructed proto-languages from two distinct language families—Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan—in one sub-region of East Africa, offering 500- to 1000-year snapshots of historical change from people moving into new ecological niches, adapting to climate crises, adopting new forms of tradable wealth, and intermarrying with speakers from another community.

To readers familiar with the challenges of writing ancient African history, the stakes of Stephens' intervention are striking: her work gives insight into African historical dynamism extending deep into Africa's past, where documents cannot, belying still regnant stereotypes of an unchanging and static Africa. The final chapter of the book examines the innovations brought by coastal traders and then the colonial state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These factors can be better understood using Stephens' explanations of how to listen to the richly complex social and ethical vocabularies of Bantu and Nilotic language speakers as they discussed and debated the existence and impact of poverty and wealth in their communities.

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