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

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At the peak of the ongoing global debates on inequality and difference, Rhiannon Stephens asks a fundamental conceptual question: ‘How did African people understand wealth and poverty and how have those understandings changed across time?’ Stephens grapples with this question in her book *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* as a way to examine how people “sustained and changed their ways of thinking about wealth and its absence” (1). She traverses the shifting articulations of the concepts of “poverty” and “wealth” over the last two millennia. Anchored in interdisciplinary approaches combining history, political science, comparative historical linguistics, archaeology, oral tradition, and ethnography, she develops the first conceptual history of poverty and wealth in the region.

Stephens shows the diverse, complex, and changing nature of the ways people conceived poverty and wealth, the poor and the rich across the *deeper past*, and the attendant transformations wrought by 19th century hegemonic colonial interpolations. Drawing on evidence from Eastern Uganda (from the Nile to the Nzoia River and from Lake Victoria Nyanza to north Mount Moroto, capturing the two language families of Bantu and Nilotic), Stephens highlights continental and global conditions.

In six chapters and a short conclusion, Stephens navigates the historical conceptions of poverty and wealth in Eastern Uganda in an effort to imagine possibilities for reconstructing context-specific understandings of society and its relations. The first part, constituting the introduction and chapter one, forms the book’s methodological and conceptual framing. The second part (chapters two to five) delves into the numerous, complex, and changing context-based articulations of poverty and wealth drawing on different languages and root words that developed from the Proto-Greater Luhiya, Proto-West Nyanza, and the three Nilotic

protolanguages (Southern, Eastern, and Western) particularly focusing on languages spoken in Eastern Uganda today and their proto-languages (18).

These chapters emphasize aspects of spatial and temporal fluidity and borrowing. She highlights how languages of poverty and wealth experienced continuities and ruptures to make sense of the “changes that unfolded as people adapted to and reshaped their material and social environments” (72). Here, she foregrounds the intellectual work of ordinary people by engaging their conceptions not only as indicators, but also as catalysts for “political and social change”, justifying the need to re-center people in their own history by seeing their languages as both historical sources and sources of history in order to understand how they conceived and reshaped their own world. The last part illuminates the disruptive transformations that happened to the context-specific conceptions of poverty and wealth especially with the European colonial and capitalist incursion.

Unlike some traditional historians who are preoccupied with description for its own sake, Stephens makes a compelling argument by cultivating conceptual history. She argues that far from poverty being trans-historical and wealth being historically absent, and vice versa, practices and vocabularies of poverty and wealth existed in the *longue durée* of East Africa in complex, fluid, and dynamic ways. Stephens shows that “societies in the region were neither *purely* egalitarian nor eternally destitute, but instead experienced differences in wealth and degrees of poverty, in a variety of forms, social and emotional, as well as material, *as* rich and poor people...took the time to craft a dynamic intellectual and robust tradition about what those differences meant for them” (170).

In tracing this argument, she contends with two popular scholarly discourses. *First*, she challenges the modernist colonial argument, premised on the treatment of wealth and poverty as exclusively material and economic, by reading historical inequality and difference using modern-day inventions that speak to a particular (Western) ‘civilization’.* *Second*, the book also challenges nationalist and nativist scholarship that argues that poverty did not exist in Africa before colonialism given the egalitarian nature of society [in the precolonial period]. By re-conceptualizing difference, Stephens sheds new light on the history of poverty and wealth and shows that both aspects pre-existed in Africa across time but not in their rigid modern conception/form.

Finally, she offers an internal critique to the *longue durée* approach to writing history. Some *longue durée* Africanist scholars tend to revisit the precolonial to justify contemporary practices and conceptions, including those who rationalize, if

not vindicate, colonial violence analogously by looking for what is familiar in a modernist world. To the contrary, Stephens revisits the precolonial to understand the socio-economic relations and how societies understood poverty and wealth in their own terms, times, and places, without decontextualizing such articulations. Hers is not a search for a precolonial blueprint for explaining contemporary phenomena but rather draws some inspiration and material for understanding existing realities and theorizing the present from the vantage point of a changing society. In conceptually navigating the deeper past, she depicts “historical tensions and socioeconomic realities that might otherwise not be apparent” (87).

Beyond engaging conceptual debates on inequality and difference in Africa, the book grapples with a methodological challenge: how to access the precolonial. Like everyone who historicizes contemporary questions, Stephens wrestles with the ways in which the precolonial can be historically and/or genealogically accessed and understood, since it was neither fixed nor timeless. She is concerned with how to write histories of places without material (documented) evidence and *reliable* archives. Stephens found hope in historical linguistics (23-24), in conceptual history. Yet, I hasten to add, the challenge does not arise because of the lack of material evidence but the valorizing of written records and the colonial decimation of context-specific modes of thinking and knowing. Resultingly, conceptual history should not be seen as an alternative to the absence of written records but as one way we can access precolonial material. Thus, orality was never the problem. Its (colonial) relegation as “unreliable” was. In these circumstances, resurrecting orality is one way to rethink knowledge production from the vantage point of society.

I end the review by reflecting on two essential aspects of the book. *First*, Stephens argues that the colonial encounter was a moment of *transformation* that naturalized, universalized, and homogenized the conception of and response to inequality/difference. To this key emphasis, Stephens should have added the *formative* nature of colonialism. While colonialism indeed violently displaced pre-existing concepts and meanings, it went further: it colonized the same local concepts, through translation, with new meanings derived from new modern concepts of ‘poverty’ and ‘wealth’, and reorganized society based on such conceptions. Some pre-existing concepts like *omwavu* and *omutaki* remained in use, but with (imposed) new meanings. This conceptual transformation and production became a key building block for the colonial state and were inherited at independence.

Meanwhile, society also co-opted and incorporated some Western concepts into their everyday conception of poverty and wealth, which Stephens at some point considers to be *similarity* (152). However, it is possible to read some aspects of society's incorporation as a mode of resistance to the colonial totalizing logic. *Second*, this book opens with a story/prayer and ends with the same. By telling a people's story, she is writing a people's history. Since stories emerge from communities' lived realities, Stephens theorizes and historicizes with the people. My minor critical points notwithstanding, this is an important methodological book that anyone studying power and society should read.

Cited work:

* See also Rahnema Majid, "Poverty". *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, edited by Wolfgang Sachs, (2nd Edition.) Zed Books, 2010, pp. 174-194.

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