

Rhiannon Stephens, *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa: A Conceptual History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022), pp. 312, \$27.95 (paperback). ISBN 9781478018827.

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The following prayer to the ancestors, recited by a group of Banyole men at a funeral in the 1970s, captures the scope and intellectual ambition of this impressive book:

We are begging here for wealth, we are begging that the children here may study and learn, here we also would like a motorcar to drive. Wherever we plant millet, wherever we plant sesame, wherever we plant sorghum, may it come quickly and soon. Here let us elope with women, we are begging here for facility in getting wives, here we beg for reproduction, may we strike two by two so that we may have a twin ceremony everyday. (cited at p. 5 and p. 167)

This short excerpt hides a dazzling semantic stratification. The prayer conceptualizes wealth as possession of commodities and material goods (such as motorcars), and gestures at notions of intergenerational development shaped by the colonial encounter (“that the children here may study and learn”). But it also conjures much more ancient discursive repertoires, indexed in the seasonality of the harvest and in wealth’s reproductive ramifications. While appearing simultaneously as part of the same cultural expression, each of these notions has its own history, grounded in historical transformation and linguistic evolution.

Focusing on Eastern Uganda, Rhiannon Stephens charts the evolution of concepts of “wealth” and “poverty” across thirteen different languages belonging to two larger linguistic families: Bantu (Lugwere, Lusoga, Rushana, Lunyole, Lugwe, Lusaamia, Lumasaaba, Lubukusu, Ludadiri) and Nilotic (Ateso, Ngakarimojong, Kupsabiny, Dhopadhola). The volume reconstructs the continuities and discontinuities in these two “key concepts” over the course of two millennia, until the end of colonial rule, c. 1960. The ease with which Stephens’s work navigates the (very) *longue durée* is impressive, and was already a distinctive feature of her monograph on the history of motherhood (Stephens 2013). The vast temporal coverage, and the oral character of these languages until the nineteenth century, led Stephens to embrace a multidisciplinary approach that draws on anthropology, archeology, and, especially, historical linguistics. This is certainly one of the book’s most exciting features.

Over the course of six incisive chapters (plus introduction and conclusion), the reader is drawn into a rewarding tour de force. Chapter 1, of significant interest also to non-Africa specialists, discusses in a succinct and effective manner the sources and methodological principles underpinning the book. Chapter 2 focuses on the five proto-languages from which the thirteen modern languages at the center of the book emerged. It shows that, already in the 2nd millennium BC, concepts of wealth and poverty had material, social, and emotional connotations. Following a brief “interchapter” on the environmental history of Eastern Uganda, Chapter 3 analyzes the Greater Luhya speaker communities. Of particular interest is the discussion of how, over time, lexicons of poverty came to incorporate the root of words associated with bereavement. The North Nyanza speaker communities’ conceptions of wealth (discussed in Chapter 4) “placed strong emphasis on gendered wealth, wealth in people, and the networks that were formed through marriage” (p. 119). Chapter 5 looks at the Nilotic languages,

spoken primarily by pastoralist groups. Not surprisingly, some of these languages tended to define wealth and poverty with reference to the possession (or lack thereof) of cattle, but also contained alternative conceptions that evolved over time. For example, by the nineteenth century, wealth was increasingly seen as coterminous with power, and poverty as a form of “social death.” The association between poverty and social isolation also recurs in other African languages, as shown by proverbs in Yoruba, Twi, and Serer, for example (Serra 2022, p. 6). Chapter 6 recasts the colonial domination from the late nineteenth century as a moment of significant transformations in discourses of wealth and poverty, and in the political economies that underpinned them. Linguistic and conceptual change reflected significant transformation in both values and material conditions: if the missionaries contributed to disseminate ideas of poverty as individual failures (p. 165), the predatory nature of colonial rule “reinforced the idea of wealth as plunder” (p. 166). This succinct book is complemented by a useful “Reconstructed Vocabulary” of wealth and poverty, presenting the painstaking linguistic evidence gathered by Stephens. This, running over thirty pages, constitutes in itself a valuable contribution on which future scholars could build to formulate new hypotheses, follow alternative linguistic trails, or simply to be reminded of the vastness and diversity of the conceptual and semantic worlds lurking behind the seemingly intuitive ideas of “wealth” and “poverty.” Indeed, the latter is one of the book’s most valuable contributions.

If approached differently, two issues could have perhaps expanded the book’s analytical resonance. The choice to maintain a tight focus on root words gives the volume order and consistency. However, a more expansive exploration of colonial print cultures in indigenous languages could have helped make the volume more directly conversant with recent histories of East African political thought (Bromber 2006; Hunter 2015). The second aspect pertains to how the book accounts for linguistic change. By suggesting that the ways in which people spoke about wealth and poverty were “shaped by” (p. 64), or simply reflected (p. 58) (with a time lag) new environmental, economic, and political conditions, and that new words emerged only when previous ones were no longer adequate, the volume might give the impression that, in the *longue durée*, the intellectual and linguistic work of ordinary people is destined to be a “superstructure” without any degree of autonomy and anticipation. As a result, it also becomes harder to fully capture the subversive potential of language. While the nature of the sources and the wide time window adopted is conducive to this kind of hypotheses, it would have been interesting to expand on the perspectives presented in the first chapter (pp. 36–40), and to see a more open-ended theorization of the relationship between linguistic evolution, semantic transformation, and other factors.

These are very minor remarks. *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* is a significant book: lucid and meticulous, yet ambitious and imaginative. From the viewpoint of African studies, this work stretches significantly the time span of studies on African poverty (remarkable examples include Iliffe 1987; Isichei 2002; Agyekum 2017), and replaces these texts’ focus on broader discourses and cultural articulations with a laser-focused emphasis on words and their roots. Given the essentializing nature of much Western discourse on Africa’s “poverty,” a study that unpacks this concept through indigenous categories and ontologies is to be much welcomed. Although African intellectual history has known a significant expansion over the past few years, conceptual history approaches grounded in historical linguistics remain somewhat unorthodox. Stephens continues her mission (Fleisch and Stephens 2018) to demonstrate their

usefulness, relevance, and democratizing potential—marking the shift from literate colonial and post-colonial elites to encompass larger “speaker communities.”

Historians of economic thought without a scholarly interest in sub-Saharan Africa would also significantly benefit from reading this book. While there is no shortage of conceptual histories of economic categories, these are typically set in Europe, and centered on written texts (a fascinating recent example is Withington 2020). In contrast, Stephens’s book carries several precious invitations: to diversify the geographical scope and expand the temporal horizon of the histories we write; to think about what intellectual history looks like when it does not revolve around written texts; to reimagine the subjects of our investigations by drawing more extensively from different disciplines. For all these reasons, *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* should not be received just as a solid work of Africanist conceptual and linguistic history but also as a catalyst of important questions about our discipline, its “canon,” and its methodological conventions.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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