



Poverty and Wealth in East Africa

A CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

Rhiannon Stephens



POVERTY AND WEALTH IN EAST AFRICA

BUY

Poverty and Wealth in East Africa

A Conceptual History



Rhiannon Stephens

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Durham and London 2022

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

© 2022 Duke University Press

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by PageMajik

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stephens, Rhiannon, [date] author.

Title: Poverty and wealth in East Africa : a conceptual history / Rhiannon Stephens.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022001174 (print)

LCCN 2022001175 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478016199 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478018827 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478024514 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Development economics. | Uganda—Economic conditions. |
Uganda—Social conditions. | Uganda—Economic policy. | BISAC: HISTORY /
Africa / East

Classification: LCC HC870 .S747 2022 (print) | LCC HC870 (ebook) | DDC
338.96761—dc23/eng/20220625

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022001174>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022001175>

Cover art: Banana fiber weaving. Photograph by the author.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

For Jarod and Menna

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

CHAPTER ONE

Methodologies and Sources for a Conceptual History of
Economic Difference over the *Longue Durée* 22

CHAPTER TWO

Excavating Early Ideas about Poverty and Wealth 45

INTERCHAPTER

Overview of Climate Developments 64

CHAPTER THREE

The Bereft and the Powerful: Greater Luhyia Concepts of
Poverty and Wealth through the Nineteenth Century 72

CHAPTER FOUR

Gender and Honor: North Nyanza Concepts of Poverty and Wealth through
the Nineteenth Century 99

CHAPTER FIVE

Orphans and Livestock: Nilotic Concepts of Poverty and Wealth
through the Nineteenth Century 120

CHAPTER SIX

Wealth, Poverty, and the Colonial Economy:
Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries 144

Conclusion 167

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Appendix: Reconstructed Vocabulary 171

Notes 207

Bibliography 253

Index 277

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has its earliest origins in a talk at a series on “Rethinking Poverty in Africa” at the Centre for African Studies, Cambridge University, back in 2009, and so I have accumulated multiple people and institutions to thank over the years, including Derek Peterson and Megan Vaughan, who invited me and prompted me to stop and rethink poverty in early Ugandan history. The next impetus came from an invitation from Axel Fanego Palat and Bo Stråth to join the ConceptAfrica project. The meetings we had were instrumental in pushing my thinking and my decision to pull both wealth and poverty into the same frame. I thank all the participants in those meetings for their comments and conversations, and in particular Axel Fanego Palat, Pamela Khanakwa, Ana Lúcia Sá, and Anne Mager. I also benefited from feedback on various parts and versions of what became this book at a number of different venues. These include the Makerere Institute for Social Research, the Fung Global Fellows Program at Princeton University, the University Seminar Studies in Contemporary Africa at Columbia University, the Uganda Society, Medieval Africa? Middle Ages in the Wider World Conference at the University of California at Berkeley, the New Directions in Economic History panel at the African Studies Association Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, the 6th International Conference on Bantu Languages at the University of Helsinki, the Rethinking Economic Concepts in Southern and Eastern African History panel at the African Studies Association Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, the Beyond Words and Things: Archaeology and Historical Linguistics panel at the Society of Africanist Archaeologists 24th Biennial Meeting at the University of Toronto, the African History Workshop at Columbia University, and “Extracting the Past from the Present”: International and Interdisciplinary Conference on African Precolonial History at the University of Ghent. The conversations we had through the Undocumented Stories workshop series, with Zoë Crossland, Severin Fowles, and Caterina Pizzigoni, and all our invited speakers, especially Jan Bender Shetler and Adria LaViolette, helped shape my thinking. And I thank Emily Callaci, Cymone Fourshey, Raevin Jimenez, Neil Kodesh, Kate de Luna, Andreana

Prichard, David Schoenbrun, Yaari Felber Seligman, and Constanze Weise for our ongoing conversations about research.

Funding for the research for this project came from Columbia University, including from the Lenfest Faculty Development Grant. The Makerere Institute for Social Research and the Department of History, Archaeology and Heritage Studies gave me research affiliations, for which I am very grateful. Research in Uganda was approved by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology and an Institutional Review Board exemption was awarded by the Human Research Protection Office at Columbia University. While writing, I benefited from a fellowship at the Heyman Center for the Humanities, Columbia University, and I thank my cofellows for their thoughtful feedback on my work. Over the past year, I have benefited from an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation New Directions Grant, which allowed me to complete an MA in Climate and Society at Columbia University that has been pivotal in enhancing my understanding of past climate change.

Shobana Shankar helped improve the book proposal I submitted to Duke University Press. Adria LaViolette, Kate de Luna, and Jarod Roll read the entire manuscript and gave me invaluable feedback. I am deeply indebted to the three of them, but most especially to Jarod Roll. Will Fitzsimons read parts of the manuscript and I am very appreciative for his feedback and our ongoing conversations on Ateker questions in particular. Marcia Wright's feedback on what became my article in the *American Historical Review* continued to inform my thinking as I wrote this book. Jason Smerdon read the interchapter, offered important feedback, and has generally been critical in enhancing my knowledge and understanding of paleoclimatology. I also thank the three anonymous reviewers for Duke University Press, who pushed me to improve the manuscript and offered thoughtful and helpful comments. I'm grateful to Elizabeth Ault at Duke for her interest in the project from our first conversation and to Ihsan Taylor for shepherding it through production. I also thank Paula Durbin-Westby for the index. Any errors are, of course, mine.

Along the way, a number of people have been exceptionally generous with their time and resources. I thank Christopher Ehret, David William Cohen, Ron Atkinson, Susan Reynolds Whyte, Michael Marlo, Kevin Alulu, Hannah Chazin, and Jeff Hantman for their help. In Uganda, I have been privileged to meet and listen to many exceptional people who gave their time to contribute to my research and from whom I learned a tremendous amount: Hihubbi Adam, Stephen Akabway, Gesa Aristarchus, Kasango Banuli, Kurwa Charles,

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Jimmy Eribu, Gudoi Esau, Adyango Freda, Okalany David Hannington, Tazanya Henry, Carol Ilako, Helen Kagino, Peter Kamuron, Veronica Kanyana, Joyce Kawuledde, John Kunena, Joseph Lomongin, Samsom Luvunya, Henry Aloysius Mafwabi, Henry Maganda, Tom Masaba, Madete Mohammed, Henry Mongo, Masai Moses, Joram Mpande, Samuel Mubbala, Peter Michael Muloit, Yokulamu Mutemere, Sam Mwigo, Rehema Nakaima, Harriet Nakibanda, Florence Naasambu, Peter Namaondo, Laury Ocen, George Okambo, Charles Okumu, Musumba Ouma, Robert Osega, John Owor, Mutemo Robert, Samuel Siminyu, Ephraim Talyambiri, James Kangala Tuumuwa, Wanende, Timothy Wangusa, Abel Wanzige, Sarah Maswere Wasake, Cornelius Wekunya, Gertrude Yanga, and Gershom Ngolobe Zablon. Charles Okumu has been especially generous in continuing our conversations over email. Most of all I thank Pamela Khanakwa, who has been a friend and colleague since my first visit to Uganda over twenty years ago, and all her family, especially Kasango Banuli, for their hospitality and kindness.

I want to thank all the graduate students I've worked with at Columbia; my conversations with them and their feedback on parts of my work have challenged me and reshaped much of my thinking for the better: Sarah Runcie, Sam Daly, Devon Golaszewski, Halimat Somotan, Yayra Sumah, Thomas Zuber, Rebecca Glade, Conor Wilkinson, Luz Colpa, Jealool Amari, and Jessie Cohen. I especially thank Conor Wilkinson for his comments on various parts of the manuscript. My colleagues, Gregory Mann, Abosede George, and Mamadou Diouf, in particular, read parts of this and have listened to me talk about this project for many years and have been influential in my thinking. I am grateful for their support. Caterina Pizzigoni, Kavita Sivaramakrishnan, Zoë Crossland, Frank Guridy, Laura Fair, Hannah Farber, and Sailakshmi Ramgopal have been wonderful friends as well as colleagues. Zoom writing sessions with my colleague and friend Adria LaViolette kept me on track. I also thank Rebecca Barrett-Fox and her Any Good Thing monthly writing challenge, which helped ensure that words kept appearing on pages and revisions kept happening, even in the midst of teaching and everything else life brings.

This book is dedicated to Menna and Jarod, who remind me every day that a life full of love is a life full of wealth.

Parts of the introduction first appeared in "Poverty's Pasts: A Case for *Longue Durée* Studies," *Journal of African History* 59, no. 3 (2018): 399–409. Those parts are reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.

Parts of chapter 2 and chapter 3 first appeared in “Bereft, Selfish, and Hungry: Greater Luhya Concepts of the Poor in Precolonial East Africa,” *American Historical Review* 123, no. 3 (2018): 789–816. Those parts are reprinted with permission from Oxford University Press.

The logo for Duke University Press, featuring the word "DUKE" in large, bold, white capital letters on a dark gray rectangular background. Below this, the words "UNIVERSITY" and "PRESS" are stacked in smaller, bold, gray capital letters on a white rectangular background.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

INTRODUCTION

Poverty and Wealth in East Africa is a conceptual history of poverty and wealth and of the poor and the wealthy over the past two millennia. It demonstrates the dynamism and diversity of people's thinking about inequality in the region long before colonial conquest or incorporation into global trade networks. Sub-Saharan Africa's economic woes and the poverty of its inhabitants have become familiar narratives.¹ But how did African people understand wealth and poverty and how have those understandings changed across time? In this book, I ask that question for people living in eastern Uganda and examine how they sustained and changed their ways of thinking about wealth and its absence. Drawing on the methods of historical linguistics alongside others, I have been able to reconstruct some of the ways in which people conceived of economic difference over the past two thousand years and more, and I have been able to do so for a region for which the written record is only a little more than a century old. The answers I lay out here challenge much of the received wisdom about the nature and existence of economic and social inequality in East Africa's deeper past. In eastern Uganda, a region that is roughly the size of Switzerland, and only a little larger than Guinea-Bissau, people had—and still have—a startlingly wide array of concepts about poverty and wealth and about the poor and the rich. For example, speakers of one language, Lunyole, use fifteen different word roots to talk about poverty. We can compare that to the one root that speakers of Welsh, a language of similar antiquity, use for the same purpose.² More importantly, the different roots found in Lunyole reflected different conceptualizations of poverty, from connecting poverty and bereavement to conceiving of the poor as deceitful. In reconstructing the conceptual history of poverty and wealth in eastern Uganda, I show the complexity of people's intellectual engagements with these concepts. I also demonstrate that this kind of history can be written for periods long before those for which we have documentary archives.

Extremes of poverty and wealth appear to have preoccupied the thoughts of many people in eastern Uganda for a very long time. That preoccupation has not been static. In fact, people's understandings and framings of these economic concepts have changed significantly over time, even while some understandings

have endured across centuries. In the following chapters, I explore the diverse and dynamic ways that people conceived of poverty and wealth across the *longue durée* and across communities that differed in the languages they spoke, in the kinds of economic activities they prioritized, and in the ways that they organized their political lives. This study focuses on thirteen modern languages that belong to two of Africa's major language families: Bantu and Nilotic. Lugwere, Lusoga, Rushana, Lunyole, Lugwe, Lusaamia, Lumasaaba, Lubukusu, and Ludadiri make up the Bantu languages, and Ateso, Ngakarimojong, Kupsabiny, and Dhopadhola make up the Nilotic languages (see map 1.1). Historically the economic foci of communities in the area ranged widely, from transhumant pastoralism to mixed agriculture to fishing, hunting, and gathering. They also traded in products such as iron tools or ceramic pots, in foodstuffs such as grain and fish, and in wild resources such as honey. Politically, these communities and those speaking their ancestral languages ranged from small monarchies to lineage-based or age-grade- and age-set-based politics. This was by no means a homogenous region in the past, just as it is not homogenous in the present. Instead, it was characterized by high levels of diversity across all aspects of human society. That diversity shaped the ways in which people living in the region since around the start of the Common Era have understood what it meant to be poor or rich, both within their own societies and between their society and those of their neighbors. By taking a regional approach to this study, rather than one defined by a particular language group, it becomes possible to see that diversity and the ways in which some concepts were shared or borrowed across communities.

Until the COVID-19 pandemic, sub-Saharan Africa's poverty rate was said by the World Bank to be steadily declining with GDP (gross domestic product) on an upward trajectory.³ At the same time, the Gini coefficient that measures wealth disparities has been increasing in some countries, even as it decreases in others. Any visitor to Uganda's capital city in the twenty-first century would be struck by the profound and jarring difference between the shopping malls with their Belgian patisseries and multiplex cinemas and the experience of so many of Kampala's residents who live in informal settlements without sanitation or electricity. Yet recent developments are not the first major economic transformation in Ugandan societies. The modern era saw the introduction of cash crops and the construction of railway and road infrastructure to facilitate transportation to global markets in the twentieth century, colonial conquest and the pillaging and taxing that accompanied it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the nineteenth-century extension of direct East African and Indian Ocean trade networks to Buganda and eastern Uganda. A little earlier, in the eighteenth



MAP I.I. Relief map of eastern Uganda with modern languages. Map created by Nat Case.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

century, we might consider the wars of expansion in Buganda and Bunyoro, which led to what historian Nakanyike Musisi has termed “elite polygyny” as chiefly and royal households overflowed with captive women—women who constituted wealth for those who laid claim to them.⁴ Each of these developments led to an intensification of inequality and a reconceptualization of wealth, and each was in turn challenged by those who were not the beneficiaries of the new socioeconomic reality. In the deeper past, periods of state formation, new kinds of control over land and resources by clans and lineages, or migrations to settle in unfamiliar areas would have had similar effects, as would have economic and social responses to climate change. *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* explores how communities made sense of these dramatic changes, as well as more modest yet no less consequential ones, through the words and concepts that people drew on to talk about the wealthy and the poor and about wealth and its absence.

Both poverty and wealth have histories in eastern Uganda and those histories are of significant antiquity. Yet, despite scholarship showing the dynamism of Africa’s economic history, the continent continues to be depicted as having always been impoverished.⁵ Such ahistorical projections about poverty and about local understandings of poverty in Africa remain problematic. This depiction, in part, grows out of colonialism. Colonial officials, at the start of the twentieth century, argued that the only way to overcome poverty was to more effectively exploit Uganda’s natural wealth by coercing its people into various forms of labor. The explicit racism of colonial officials shaped their belief that poverty was a product of indolence. Scholars, by contrast, have shown how colonialism contributed to the impoverishment of entire communities, causing them to enter into structural poverty, the kind of poverty from which it was almost impossible to escape because the prior mechanisms available to remedy that poverty no longer existed or no longer functioned.⁶ This is also true in eastern Uganda. Communities in the region have certainly not always been poor. We know this, not least because they have an ancient vocabulary for wealth, but also because they have long had distinct ways of classifying the poor, something that would not have been necessary if everyone was equally impoverished. That is, it is neither the case that everyone was destitute, nor that no one was. And just as the material conditions of poverty and wealth have long histories in eastern Uganda, there are also long intellectual histories of those conditions, ones that can be recovered through a conceptual history approach.

Despite this, in parallel with the continued depiction of Africa as eternally poor exists the perception that life in precolonial Africa was largely egalitarian and that mechanisms of poverty alleviation were generally effective.⁷ It is easy

to counter this with examples of fundamental socioeconomic inequality in the stone-towns of the Swahili coast, the royal capitals of Buganda and Rwanda, and, further afield, in Great Zimbabwe and Asante. Inequality could also be found in Mali, whose fourteenth-century ruler Mansa Musa is frequently given as an example of such extreme wealth that his spending on the hajj led to inflation and an economic crisis across the Mediterranean world. But economic and social difference were not historically limited to these cases that saw the large-scale centralization of wealth and power. Indeed, linguists who have carefully reconstructed vocabulary to Proto-Bantu (a language spoken some five thousand years ago in what is today the borderlands of Cameroon and Nigeria) identified words both for poverty and for being rich.⁸ That this vocabulary was created and used by speakers of Proto-Bantu, people who farmed without iron tools and who lived in small communities, tells us that they must have understood there to be differences in economic status of some significance. What precisely those differences meant, however, is a different and, to my mind, more compelling question. It is that question, one grounded in the intellectual work done by people in eastern Uganda as they conceived and reconceived of what it meant to be poor and to be rich, that I address here.

Poverty and Wealth in Eastern Uganda

Modern evidence provides a glimpse into the diverse ways in which people in eastern Uganda have understood what poverty and wealth meant and also reflects the historical complexity of these concepts in the region. In Bunyole in the 1970s, the anthropologist Susan Reynolds Whyte observed prayers offered by men to their ancestors at a funeral ceremony:

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. Let us be well, you give us life and let us be free from cold.⁹

The prayer began with a plea for wealth, specifically for kinds of wealth that could not have been conceived of in the region before the twentieth century: formal education and cars. Because these were not ubiquitous in Bunyole in the 1970s, they served as clear markers of high socioeconomic status. But the men's

prayer quickly moved onto pleas for other forms of wealth, ones that would have been familiar to their ancestors who lived in the nineteenth century and, indeed, much earlier still. These were pleas for plentiful harvests; in this case the pleas were for the staple crops millet and sorghum and for the cash crop sesame. These requests represented a melding of old forms and concepts of wealth with new ones. The prayer for a successful growing season of millet and sorghum reflected the need to sustain a household through unreliable harvests and, ideally, a season that generated a surplus which could be converted into other forms of wealth, such as livestock or a fishing boat. Sesame, however, although long cultivated in East Africa, was grown in the twentieth century as a cash crop and thus represented a more recent form of wealth, one that could be transformed into education, cars, and other newer markers of status.

The men's prayer then shifted to marriage and childbirth, with a request for wives married through elopement and, therefore, without, seemingly, the transfer of bridewealth (the wealth transferred to the woman's family from the man's family) that formalized marriage. Bridewealth could be a point of tension between younger and older men, especially if fathers chose to use livestock to marry additional wives themselves, keeping sons in the limbo of junior status. Elopement was a means for younger—and poorer—men to circumvent the restrictions bridewealth placed on their ability to marry and thus begin to build their own wealth in a form that will be familiar to many—namely wealth in people.¹⁰ In asking their ancestors for fertility, these men specifically requested twin births, suggesting that normal rates of reproduction would not allow them to become wealthy at the pace or in the ways that they desired.

Further north, but still in eastern Uganda, historians collecting oral histories in Teso communities, in the late 1960s, interviewed three men, Nasanairi Arugai, Omodoi, and Toroma, who offered their thoughts on trade and wealth. They talked about a man named Ibwala: "The hoe trade was before the war with Ocopo [1890s]; the war didn't interfere with the trade. Ibwala became wealthy on this trade and his family is still wealthy, has many cattle."¹¹ In the nineteenth century, Ibwala had managed to translate the wealth he had acquired through trading iron hoes into wealth in cattle. His descendants remained wealthy long after Ibwala's original trading success: as much as a century later, they still had many cattle. Wealth was understood as the possession of cows, bulls, and calves. But why would people who understood wealth to take the form of livestock seek to acquire hoes through trade? Iteso women and men did not understand there to be a single form of wealth nor did they view forms of wealth as immutable. By the seventeenth century, early Ateso speakers had developed a concept of wealth

in crops or wealth in food (using the Ugandan English meaning of food as a staple starch, like millet bread) which they called *amio*. Hoes enabled them to grow millet and sorghum, both crops that were understood to form *amio* wealth.

The trio also talked about the hoe trade itself: “The red hoes were brought by Basoga passing through Opiu from Mbale side. Basoga came in groups of twenty and carried the hoes and carried away the tusks. They went to all homes which had ivory.”¹² Here we find different ideas about what constituted wealth, at least in terms of the material forms it took. The Basoga traders had an abundance of hoes and so valued them primarily for their trade value, notably for the ivory for which they could be exchanged. For Iteso women and men who did not produce their own metal tools, however, the iron hoes brought by Basoga traders were of greater value than the ivory tusks they traded for them. This was the case, in part at least, because Iteso used the hoes to generate *amio* (wealth in crops) that they could then translate into *abar* (wealth in cattle)—as was the case for Ibwala who managed to pass his substantial *abar* wealth on to his descendants. From an outside perspective, trading ivory tusks for iron hoes may seem to have been a short-sighted decision on the part of Iteso women and men—after all, demand in Europe, the Americas, and South Asia for elephant ivory in the nineteenth century was very high.¹³ But this outside perspective does not account for the different ways in which people in eastern Uganda historically conceived of wealth, value, and what it meant to be rich—and conversely, how they conceived of poverty and what it meant to be poor.¹⁴ A conceptual history approach allows us to not only understand what poverty and wealth meant to people in eastern Uganda in the nineteenth century, but also how people’s concepts of them changed over time to accommodate shifting social, political, and material realities.

Conceptual History of Poverty and Wealth

Conceptual history foregrounds the intellectual work of ordinary people.¹⁵ But it goes further by understanding that concepts are not mere indicators. As Melvin Richter wrote, concepts “affect political and social change because it is through concepts that a horizon is constituted against which structural changes are perceived, evaluated, and acted upon.”¹⁶ In this, it offers “an opportunity to take seriously peoples’ intellectual activity as part of historical processes.”¹⁷ Language not only serves as a possible historical source; it is a critical source for history, because it helps us understand how people made sense of and reshaped their worlds. Conceptual history thus places eastern Ugandans at the center of

their own history, instead of centering those outsiders who wrote about them and their homes. As was the case in my and Axel Fanego Palat's previous work, *Doing Conceptual History in Africa*, I am working from the assumption that language is inherently social and produced by people. The concepts that people hold in the language or languages they speak, and even the grammatical structures that they use, may contribute to shaping what is possible for them to conceptualize. At the same time, language offers people the possibility to reshape those concepts and structures and thus move the horizon Richter described.

The categories of poverty and wealth, of the poor and the rich, are not only about economic status, just as economics cannot be isolated from society, culture, and politics. These categories are in a dynamic relationship with the social and political, with social status creating or reinforcing economic status and vice versa. The work of defining who is poor and who wealthy—and struggles over that work—is as much about the ideological basis for these categories as it is a question of quantification based on clear metrics. Poverty, poor, wealth, and wealthy are thus concepts that can be—and have been—contested within and across communities. Terence Ranger wrote several decades ago, “An answer to the problem of poverty [in Africa] is not to be found by means of an exclusive concentration upon production history. The study of changing concepts is also very relevant. African history needs to make a connection not only with the material way of life of the people but also with their modes of thought.”¹⁸ Whether or not a conceptual approach to poverty will help answer the problem of poverty is a question I set aside. A conceptual history approach can, however, bring to light the complexity of people's understandings and ideological views of poverty and wealth. Indeed, it is in the complexity of a concept that history can be found. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote with reference to punishment, “all ideas, in which a whole process is promiscuously comprehended, elude definition; it is only that which has no history, which can be defined.”¹⁹ As will become clear in the following chapters, both poverty and wealth are complex concepts that “elude definition.” Starting from their multiple meanings across communities—rather than any external definitions—allows me to bring to the fore the complexity of the concepts, as they were understood and remade by people in eastern Uganda.

This is a book about a remarkably diverse region, even by African standards. Eastern Uganda, defined here as stretching from the Nile to the Nzoia River and from Lake Victoria Nyanza to north of Mount Moroto, is an area of some 41,000 square kilometers (16,000 square miles). The languages spoken there belong to two major language families: Bantu and Nilotic—although English is today also predominant given its status as the official language of Uganda.

The Bantu languages are further divided between Greater Luhya Bantu and North Nyanza Bantu, both of which are branches of Great Lakes Bantu. The Nilotic languages are divided between Eastern Nilotic (represented by the Ateker branch), Western Nilotic (represented by the Southern Luo branch), and Southern Nilotic (represented by the Kalenjin branch). As a result of this diversity, the reconstruction of relevant terms to protolanguages, and hence to different moments in the past, is complicated. That complexity is productive, because it allows us to trace concepts that have been borrowed across linguistic, social, and economic frontiers and to see commonalities and differences across and between speaker communities. In eastern Uganda, most people are and historically have long been multilingual; they have traded across ecotones and economic specializations, they have married outside of their immediate communities, and they have gone to war over control of resources or people. Words and concepts have migrated across languages through these processes. Understanding how and why that happened is an important part of this story.

How eastern Ugandans understood poverty and wealth, and how they made sense of what it meant to be poor or rich, has varied widely across time and space. That variation speaks to the dynamism of the concepts and, in particular, to the intellectual engagement of the speakers of the languages covered in this book with questions of economic and social difference. In parallel with the dynamism and diversity, it is also evident from the linguistic record that some ways of understanding poverty and wealth have proved highly durable, remaining in place, although not entirely unchanged, across millennia of human experience. And for all the variety, it is possible to discern three broad themes among the many conceptualizations of poverty and wealth that cut across time and across linguistic divisions, albeit in tangled and overlapping ways: people understood poverty and wealth in social terms, in material terms, and in emotional terms.

Social understandings of poverty included concepts that referenced kinlessness or ones that emphasized that the poor lacked the ability to marry, and hence engage in socially recognized reproduction. But they also included perceptions of the poor as posing a threat to the collective, whether through their demands on resources, their disruptive behavior, or their inability to contribute to the social reproduction of the community. Social anxieties about the presence of poor people in communities resulted in some framing the poor as not fully human and others framing them as cheats. Gendered concepts of poverty and of the poor also fit into the broad framework of the social. Women who contravened social norms of appropriate gender behavior as a result of poverty, for example, could be named with words not used for poor men and that were often

condemnatory. The particular implications for a woman who married into a poor household were also marked through specific terms for poor women.

Gender and the gendered division of labor were similarly fundamental to many social concepts of wealth. Tracing the etymologies of words for bride-wealth shows how some wealth was explicitly conceived of as taking the form of girls and women. The same root that was used to form the word meaning bridewealth, for example, was used to form the word for a widow, a woman who would be inherited by her husband's heir on his death. The root was also used to describe women and girls abducted in warfare and distributed as spoils by the victorious side. But this is not to say that the concept of wealth in eastern Uganda was such that only men could be wealthy. Indeed, one speaker community coined a new word to describe wealthy women specifically. Along with naming wealthy women, that speaker community also added a new definition of wealth that was grounded (quite literally) in the fields worked by women and the crops they harvested. Social concepts of wealth also included the framing of wealth as a result of composition, of threading together distinct pieces into a new whole. While that composition involved material wealth and livestock, creating compositions of people was an integral element as well. Connected to that were concepts of wealth as power and as leadership. However, while some concepts of wealth fit, directly or indirectly, into the theoretical framework of wealth in people, for the most part this was not how the historical speaker communities of eastern Uganda talked about what it meant to be rich.

Concepts of poverty grounded in material understandings focused in large part on the absence of necessities; that is, they focused on lack. This concept is an ancient one in eastern Uganda, and it emerged during a period of prolonged drought when people who came to speak Proto-Greater Luhya established new communities in the region some two thousand years ago. The form that lack took in people's concepts of poverty was not uniform. But one example is that those who placed great economic and social value in livestock began to understand poverty as the absence of cattle, goats, and sheep. For some, poverty was hunger and the physical manifestation of hunger on the human body. But, perhaps surprisingly, this was by no means a universal conceptualization of the condition. It may have been one that fluctuated with changes in climate, as there is some evidence to suggest that concepts of poverty as emaciation emerged during periods of pronounced climate stress. Elsewhere and at other times, people began to envision poverty as a natural phenomenon and not the consequence of political choices, again emphasizing its material rather than social aspects.

Wealth was understood as taking material form when speakers of different languages articulated concepts of it as material possessions, as land, as crops,

and as livestock. At times and in some speaker communities, these concepts coexisted with the concept of wealth in people, but the latter was by no means dominant. At the same time, wealth in one form could be transformed into wealth in a different form, whether that involved wealth in crops being transformed into wealth in livestock, or wealth in land being transformed into wealth as power. The reality of wealth as power could be displayed through insignia, such as copper or brass armlets, that were named with the same root used to name both a wealthy person and a powerful person. The boundaries between social and material concepts of poverty and wealth were porous, as were their boundaries with emotional concepts.

Both poverty and wealth were conceived of in emotional terms across the linguistic communities of eastern Uganda and across the centuries although in a wide range of ways. Among the oldest concepts of poverty was one that framed it as suffering, placing it alongside other experiences such as bereavement and sickness. Other conceptualizations foregrounded bereavement in particular, emphasizing the economic as well as emotional consequences for those whose parents died when they were still young or women whose husbands died, leaving them vulnerable. This was a concept that cut across the division of languages into Nilotic and Bantu, and across economic classifications into pastoralist and agriculturalist. In general, emotional understandings of wealth were positive, framing the wealthy as honorable or worthy of respect. But more negative emotions toward the wealthy also made their way into the language people used to talk about them.

Sources and Methods

In the East African interior—and in eastern Uganda in particular—written sources go back a little over a hundred years. To write this history for societies without written records before the late nineteenth century, therefore, requires an interdisciplinary approach. I drew on a diverse range of sources and methods to reconstruct the conceptual history of wealth and poverty, as well as the contexts for that history. I started with the words themselves and the methods of comparative historical linguistics.²⁰ These methods have allowed me to reconstruct the words and meanings used by people in the past to talk about poverty and wealth and about the poor and the rich. The first step in this process involved the genetic classifications of modern languages—that is, which languages emerged from a common ancestral or protolanguage and the particular sequences by which related languages diverged. The next step was to look at cognate words (those inherited from a common ancestral language) across modern languages and use established sound changes to posit the form (in terms

of sounds or phonemes) that words had in the protolanguage. Alongside determining the form of words, it was necessary to look at the range of meanings the cognates hold and use insights from diachronic and cognitive semantics to posit the meaning attached to the form in the protolanguage. This approach is often referred to as words-and-things. It is worth emphasizing the plurals in this phrase because in any language there are often many words for the same thing (or meaning) and many things (meanings) for the same word. For conceptual history, this reality is highly productive. By tracing, to the fullest extent possible, all the meanings associated with a word that also meant wealth, poverty, rich person, or poor person, we can see the intellectual work that went into the naming of these concepts. Similarly, by tracing all the synonyms for each of these concepts we can see reflected in them competing ideas within a single speaker community about socioeconomic difference and its causes and consequences.

With the evidence from comparative historical linguistics in place, I turned to other sources and approaches. These are archaeology, climate data, oral traditions and literature, local histories, and ethnography. Each of these offers a particular form of evidence that speaks to different aspects of socioeconomic inequality in the past. Archaeology, for example, is very useful for understanding changes in the material cultures and economies of societies, although an archaeology of poverty remains to be developed for eastern Uganda and, indeed, Africa.²¹ Climate data can help suggest ways in which long-term ecological pressures and opportunities might have reshaped socioeconomic dynamics or strained mechanisms for aid within a community. Oral traditions can offer insight into social and political dynamics as well as into economic changes. Ethnography, when used comparatively and very carefully, can help us explain the contexts in which particular words were used. Each of these, thus, forms its own layer of evidence that I overlay on the linguistic data to see whether, for example, I can correlate a new settlement or a change in political organization with the adoption of a new word for poverty. Or whether emergent tensions around wealth might have happened at the same time as a multidecadal drought, excessive rainfall, or the adoption of a new crop.

Histories of Poverty, Histories of Wealth

This book is the first conceptual history of poverty and wealth over the *longue durée* in Africa. Indeed, it is a rare African history of these concepts in any time frame.²² Earlier generations of historians of Africa have demonstrated the longevity of economic inequality on the African continent. K. O. Diké wrote

in the 1950s of “land hunger” in Igbo-speaking regions spurring migration to the city states of the Niger Delta in the nineteenth century.²³ In the 1970s, A. G. Hopkins, while focused on economic history questions of production and distribution, nonetheless noted that wealth was not equally shared in precolonial West Africa.²⁴ Robin Palmer, Neil Parsons, and the contributors to their edited volume on central and southern Africa were explicitly focused on the question of poverty and its transformation over the *longue durée*, as the region was ever more entangled in global trade networks.²⁵ And in the 1980s, John Iliffe surveyed the history of poverty across the continent, often through the lens of charity and almsgiving. While limited in the most part to areas with written sources prior to colonial conquest, Iliffe clearly demonstrated the breadth of poverty across the continent and of the existence of people who lived in persistent and deep poverty.²⁶ The transatlantic slave trade and colonial conquest marked important turning points in the economic history of Africa writ large, as was documented decades ago by scholars such as Samir Amin and Walter Rodney, and as has been the focus of much subsequent study.²⁷ These turning points did not, however, mark the origin of poverty or economic inequality. Jan Vansina traced the emergence of concepts of wealth and poverty in West Central Africa back some two thousand years.²⁸ Palmer and Parsons, meanwhile, argued that it was possible to “begin to distinguish between rich and poor, in a class sense, within the same society” as long ago as the Early Iron Age.²⁹

Some who have argued that poverty did not exist in Africa prior to colonial conquest recognized the possibility of scarcity, but asserted that those who were without the basic necessities to survive were always given aid by others in their community. Julius Nyerere, for example, believed that whatever poverty may have existed in Tanzania before colonialism was egalitarian, in that “all the basic goods were held in common, and shared among all members of the unit . . . no one could go hungry while others hoarded food.”³⁰ This perception is enduring. Elizabeth Amoah has argued that “the African traditional way of land use has its own internal mechanism for ensuring that no one lives in abject poverty” and that “the community’s resources (material and nonmaterial) are mobilized to ensure the welfare of all the members of the community.”³¹ But there are powerful counterexamples to this narrative, including from East Africa. John Lonsdale, for example, drew on proverbs to argue that “the rules of social obligation” in nineteenth-century Gikuyu society “scorned charity” and disparaged the poor as having “no heart, no friends and would have no posterity.” Indeed, their “hunger kept nobody else awake.”³² Even in contexts where the poor were given aid, the reciprocity expected in labor or other payments in kind and the long-term

obligations aid entailed suggest that, as elsewhere, charity was self-interested and created new hierarchies.³³

The wealthy leave much more behind them in the way of historical evidence than the poor, whether documentary, material, or oral, and the scholarship reflects this. Historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have written about currencies, whether copper-cross ingots, cloth, or iron bars, that circulated in precolonial Africa.³⁴ Others have focused on the exportation of wealth from Africa through the Indian Ocean, Atlantic Ocean, and trans-Saharan trades, whether gold, ivory, tortoiseshells, grains, or—infamously and tragically—people.³⁵ Christopher Ehret, noting that exports from Africa were primarily raw materials while imports tended to be manufactured commodities, argued that the imbalance in trade between raw and manufactured goods, so visible in modern economic history, already existed in the last millennium BCE.³⁶ Still, Jane Guyer's question from "Wealth in People, Wealth in Things—Introduction" remains relevant: "What were people's own concepts for wealth?"³⁷ *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* offers many answers to this question and shows that whatever frameworks we may use to help ourselves make sense of wealth in the past, the reality is that there were myriad ways in which people conceived of wealth. This is, then, one response to the late historian Ogbu Kalu's call for scholars "to define poverty and wealth from an indigenous African perspective."³⁸ Even so, as dynamic concepts, they elude any attempt at definitive definition.

It is anthropologists who have been at the forefront of developing theoretical frameworks for wealth in Africa. Wealth in people is the most important of these and the most ubiquitous in the literature. Initially developed in the context of slavery and then applied to the context of marriage and household composition, wealth in people has been used widely in varying contexts and for varying periods across the continent.³⁹ As Guyer and S. M. Eno Belinga neatly summarize, the phrase "offers a useful descriptive term for the well-appreciated fact that interpersonal dependents of all kinds—wives, children, clients and slaves—were valued, sought and paid for at considerable expense in material terms in pre-colonial Africa."⁴⁰ Historians have adopted wealth in people to explain perceptions of wealth in precolonial Africa, sometimes in categorical terms. For example, Joseph Miller argued that "Africans' unwavering view of wealth as people, if increasingly also as trade goods, complemented an equally set Portuguese view of wealth as money, specie and currencies, in the eighteenth century."⁴¹ Guyer and Belinga, in applying the model to Equatorial Africa, argued that it needed nuancing, in particular to pay attention to the different qualities that made or make people valuable. Furthermore, attention should be

paid to how those who were able to do so chose to compose the various people who made up their wealth.⁴² Drawing on this approach, Kathryn de Luna has used “wealth in people as wealth in knowledge” to “imagine why local leaders and peers recognized and celebrated distinctive hunters for the meat, skins, excitement, and renown they brought to the community” between the eighth and thirteenth centuries in South Central Africa.⁴³

Poverty and Wealth in East Africa builds on this scholarship, but I take as my starting point the particular and varied meanings with which historical communities have imbued wealth and demonstrate that wealth in people was only one of many meanings. Crucially, this approach allows for the interaction of locally developed concepts with regional and global notions. In this, I take inspiration from work by Parker Shipton, who has unpacked meanings of credit, debt, and land in western Kenya to show how these global economic ideas have particular and locally embedded meanings.⁴⁴ Thus, at the book’s core, *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* explains the effects of large-scale changes, such as long-distance trade or zoological epidemics, and of local dynamics, such as gender and generational conflicts, on people’s concepts of wealth and poverty. But also inspired by Shipton’s work, alongside that of Guyer, I do not take a narrow economic approach to the concepts of wealth and poverty. Shipton’s work on debt in Luo communities of western Kenya demonstrates that a primarily economic approach, even to concepts like land and money, is inadequate because social relations and ideology structure these concepts just as much as does economics. Development plans in those communities that were based on a market in land failed because they did not account for “ideologies of attachment.”⁴⁵

Historians of Europe and the Middle East have engaged the concepts of poverty and wealth more extensively, especially with reference to the deeper past. Histories of the conceptualization of poverty in ancient Rome and in medieval Europe have shown how major historical events, such as the adoption of Christianity or the large-scale migration of the rural poor to urban areas, changed social perceptions of the economically marginal.⁴⁶ Whether in oral or literate contexts, in ancient or modern times, the poor have tended to leave little trace in the historical record. Historians thus have “to identify the empty spaces, the gaps and cracks in society” that were inhabited by the poor.⁴⁷ A number of historians of Europe and the Middle East facing this difficulty have turned to linguistic evidence as one method of identifying those gaps and cracks and overcoming the limitations of the archives. Michel Mollat, for example, in his landmark studies of poverty in the European Middle Ages, showed how changes in the usage of terms, including antonyms, synonyms, and related words, reflected “deep-seated

alterations in the notions they designate.”⁴⁸ These scholars have turned to linguistic evidence in literate contexts, even while literacy was limited to elites.⁴⁹ Here, I offer an approach to writing about changes in people’s understandings of economic inequality in the absence of a long documentary record. In so doing, I build on scholarship that takes an interdisciplinary approach to the history of precolonial Africa.⁵⁰ The focus on the history of concepts, however, is a move in a new direction and the methodological discussion in chapter 1 addresses this.

Historians of East Africa have written about communal attitudes toward the poor and the wealthy, whether among speakers of Gigikuyu, Luganda, or Kiswahili. Because of the sources they drew on—notably proverbs transcribed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and dictionaries—they offer synchronic snapshots of indigenous attitudes in the mid- to late nineteenth century.⁵¹ Those snapshots are useful in developing a baseline for understanding changes from the late nineteenth century onward as the region was subjected to colonial conquest and rule by European powers. Laura Fair, drawing on songs performed by Siti binti Saad and her band in the 1920s, explored the enduring nature of hierarchical attitudes toward the poor in post-abolition Zanzibar. Abolition changed some things, but disdain for the poor remained a powerful force, as captured in the song “The Poem of What Poverty Does”: “Poverty is powerlessness . . . You are always treated as dumb and useless.” The wealthy, by contrast, were granted respect: “A rich person is always among those who are counted without even having to speak.”⁵² The continuities with 1880s Mombasa, as written about by Jeremy Prestholdt, are striking. Drawing on the poetry of Muyaka bin Haji and Johann Krapf’s dictionary of Kiswahili, Prestholdt noted that residents of Mombasa conceived of poverty as “the condition of a lack of respectability and its signifying objects.”⁵³ The archaeological record brings to light a different perspective on wealth from that offered by Siti binti Saad, highlighting the multiplicity of concepts in play. Stephanie Wynne-Jones has argued that the material evidence indicates that “the accumulation of material wealth seems to have been subordinated to the social prestige and power available through its appropriate usage.”⁵⁴ The wealthy may have been counted but they were nonetheless subject to social expectations that inhibited their ability to accumulate without limits. As these examples show, drawing on diverse sources of evidence makes possible a dynamic history of concepts of poverty and wealth, an approach that is foundational to *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* and its exploration of continuities and transformations in eastern Ugandan people’s concepts of poverty and wealth.

Chapter Outlines

This study differs somewhat from many other histories of precolonial Africa that draw on evidence from comparative historical linguistics in that it focuses closely on concepts of poverty and wealth across a broad and diverse set of languages. Chapter 1, “Methodologies and Sources for a Conceptual History of Economic Difference over the *Longue Durée*,” addresses my approach. In it, I set out the methodological and evidentiary basis for writing a conceptual history of oral societies over the *longue durée*. It presents the genetic classification of the languages in the study, including my own classifications of the North Nyanza and Greater Luhya languages. As part of the genetic classification of each language family (North Nyanza, Greater Luhya, Eastern Nilotic, Southern Nilotic, Western Nilotic), the chapter provides contextual information on the communities that spoke the protolanguages, locating them in space and time as the evidence allows. Chapter 1 also explores the different forms of evidence used in *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa*—historical linguistic reconstructions, climate data, archaeological evidence, oral traditions, ethnographic material—and addresses what each of them does and does not allow us to say about the past. Because this is a conceptual history, the chapter sets out how the methods of diachronic semantics can help us better understand how the meanings attached to particular words—or clusters of sounds—can change over time.

After this methodological overview, the book moves in chapter 2, “Excavating Early Ideas about Poverty and Wealth,” to some of the oldest concepts of poverty and wealth held by people who spoke the languages ancestral to the ones spoken in eastern Uganda today. The chapter serves as a baseline, setting out the concepts of wealth and poverty in Proto-Greater Luhya, Proto-West Nyanza, Proto-Eastern Nilotic, Proto-Western Nilotic, and Proto-Southern Nilotic. It shows how, for example, people speaking Proto-Western Nilotic did not distinguish between poverty and other kinds of suffering. And, while we can assume that they had terms for forms of wealth, none of those can be reconstructed today. The chapter also sets out how people speaking Proto-Greater Luhya invented an entirely new vocabulary for poverty, even though they drew on words that they had inherited to do so. By contrast those who spoke Proto-West Nyanza continued to use older vocabularies of poverty and wealth alongside their innovations of new words for, and concepts of, these economic binaries. Drawing on archaeological evidence and evidence from climate science,

the linguistic reconstructions are contextualized in the changing physical and social landscapes inhabited by speakers of the various protolanguages.

I then pause to explore in more detail the evidence for historical climate change until the late nineteenth century in the interchapter, “Overview of Climate Developments.” We know only too well the devastating consequences of an unpredictable climate for communities in East Africa and elsewhere in the present.⁵⁵ The communities of eastern Uganda in the centuries covered by this book lived by growing food, raising livestock, hunting and fishing, and gathering wild foods. All of these activities required intimate knowledge of their local environments and the seasons if they were to be successful. Changes in rainfall patterns, a shift from reliable rains in the short and long rainy seasons to multidecadal failures of rains interspersed with intense, destructive precipitation, for example, fundamentally challenged established ways of life. But the inverse was also true, as more reliable rains enabled people to expand into areas that were previously uncultivable or unable to sustain livestock. This is categorically not to argue that climate determined the history of the people of eastern Uganda any more than their environment did. What fluctuations in climate did do, however, was change the range of the possible. How people responded depended on multiple factors, including whether they prioritized—economically and culturally—certain crops over others, or pastoralism over agriculture, or fishing over hunting. Their responses also depended on how they organized the work of producing food in their households and communities. Drawing on a wide range of scholarship that has examined changes in East Africa’s climate over the past two thousand years and more, the interchapter offers a synthesis of this research, setting out the major patterns it has discerned.

The next three chapters, respectively, trace the concepts of poverty and wealth for the languages that emerged from Proto-Greater Luhya, Proto-West Nyanza, and the three Nilotic protolanguages: Southern, Eastern, and Western. In all three of these chapters, I focus on the languages that are spoken in eastern Uganda today and their protolanguages. While evidence from related languages spoken elsewhere in Uganda, as well as in Kenya and beyond, is included—as it must be for the purposes of reconstructions—I have stuck with this regional focus. Doing so makes it feasible to look across a wider range of languages, both Bantu and Nilotic, and understand how these economic concepts moved across linguistic, cultural, and economic divides—and how they did not.

Chapter 3, “The Bereft and the Powerful: Greater Luhya Concepts of Poverty and Wealth through the Nineteenth Century,” covers developments in these concepts in the languages that emerged from Proto-Greater Luhya after

the sixth century. The chapter opens with Lunyole, one of four languages to emerge from Proto-Greater Luhya, the others being Proto-North Luhya, Proto-Gwe-Saamia and Proto-Luyia. Over the many centuries that Lunyole has existed as a language, its speakers developed an extensive vocabulary for poverty and wealth. Some of that vocabulary represented a continuation from earlier concepts, and some reflected new—and more negative—attitudes toward the poor in particular. Wealth continued to be understood in gendered terms as intimately associated with marriage and reproduction through bridewealth. At the same time, it was increasingly conceived of in material terms and in terms of the ability to eat without restraint. The chapter then moves on to Proto-North Luhya and two of the modern languages to emerge from it: Lumasaaba and Lubukusu. Here, too, a more negative concept of poverty and of the poor emerged, this time of the poor as selfish and disruptive, even while poverty was understood as a condition of a lack of essentials. In marked contrast, speakers of Proto-North Luhya conceived of the wealthy as honorable and worthy of respect; indeed, they drew a connection between wealth and leadership. Suggesting tensions regarding economic disparities within their communities, however, Lubukusu speakers later added a concept of the rich as those who had displaced others. Finally, the chapter turns to Proto-Gwe-Saamia, whose speakers focused on a material conceptualization of poverty, but who understood wealth as accruing to elders and understood the wealthy as powerful.

In chapter 4, “Gender and Honor: North Nyanza Concepts of Poverty and Wealth through the Nineteenth Century,” we turn to Proto-North Nyanza and the languages that emerged from it after around 1200 CE: Proto-South Kyoga, Proto-East Kyoga, Lusoga, and Lugwere. Speakers of Proto-North Nyanza appear to have been especially sensitive to gradations of poverty, perhaps a consequence of more people experiencing profound economic uncertainty during a time of pronounced aridity across much of the region. At the same time, they coined a new word in such a way that it marked poverty as both having physical consequences for the poor and described it as a natural phenomenon, rather than a product of political decisions or human actions. The Proto-North Nyanza speaker community conceived of wealth as gendered and as acquired through violence, but they also conceived of it in more generic terms as something obtained. Reflecting new connections with neighboring communities, people who spoke Proto-South Kyoga—one of the languages that emerged from Proto-North Nyanza along with Luganda—borrowed words from their neighbors to expand their vocabulary for poverty. And in a sign of an altered political context, they no longer conceived of wealth as the product of plunder. Lusoga speakers, after the

dissolution of Proto-South Kyoga, emphasized the naturalness of poverty, but also recognized it as part of a broad spectrum of suffering. Wealth was highly gendered for the Lusoga speaker community and it is also only there that we find the concept of wealth in people expressed through specific vocabulary. In Proto-East Kyoga, the other language to emerge from Proto-South Kyoga, we see its speakers narrowing their concept of poverty to focus on the distinction between the poor and the very poor. Finally, speakers of Lugwere made several changes to their vocabulary for poverty, reflecting their shifting conceptualizations of the condition. They expanded their vocabulary for the very poor or destitute and borrowed other words to express new concepts of poverty.

The last of these three chapters is chapter 5, “Orphans and Livestock: Nilotic Concepts of Poverty and Wealth through the Nineteenth Century.” It looks at how people speaking languages that emerged from Proto-Southern, Proto-Eastern, and Proto-Western Nilotic conceived of the poor and the rich. The speaker community of Proto-Kalenjin, a language that emerged from Proto-Southern Nilotic, understood poverty as connected with both being an orphan and being a beggar. But they also chose to name, in particular, the kind of poverty involved in not owning cattle and they connected this with death. Later, people speaking Proto-Elgon-Mau Kalenjin borrowed a word from their Bantu-speaking neighbors that allowed them to connect wealth with elderhood. Those who spoke Eastern Nilotic languages emphasized suffering and punishment in their concepts of poverty and the possession of livestock in their concepts of wealth, as we see for the Proto-Ateker speaker community. Later, Ateso speakers coined a new word to specify a poor woman and held a highly negative concept of the poor in general. They also understood poverty to be a condition of misery. The Ateso speaker community specified forms of wealth by distinguishing between wealth in food crops and wealth in livestock. And they connected wealth with skillfulness. People speaking Ngakarimojong, another Ateker language, placed greater emphasis on the possession of livestock, or lack thereof, in their concepts of wealth and poverty, reflecting the cultural and economic role of transhumant pastoralism in Karimojong communities. For those speaking the Western Nilotic language Dhopadhola, poverty was a condition of suffering, but one that also disturbed those who lived alongside the poor. They conceived of wealth, by contrast, in positive terms, connected as it was for them with visiting and gift exchange.

In the last chapter of the book, I focus on the developments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when eastern Uganda was integrated into wider-reaching trade networks and came into the purview of European imperial

ambitions. Chapter 6, “Wealth, Poverty, and the Colonial Economy: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” thus moves away from a focus on particular groups of languages and their speakers to look at the region more broadly, drawing on examples from specific speaker communities to illustrate larger developments. It traces how some concepts of poverty and wealth continued despite some of the profound disruptions of this period, including prolonged, severe drought at the start of the nineteenth century and shorter, but pronounced drought at its end. The period of more regular and plentiful rainfall in between these events brought abundant wealth to some, but also saw the arrival of coastal traders seeking primarily ivory and slaves. The devastation wrought by the rinderpest epidemic at the end of the nineteenth century, following as it did on the heels of other livestock diseases and drought, posed a clear threat to concepts of wealth in both pastoralist and agricultural communities, with gendered overtones. Colonial conquest and rule further disrupted and undermined communities, but introduced new ways to acquire wealth—and hence speaker communities adapted their concepts of it. At the same time, older concepts endured and colonial officials found themselves working within those concepts, even if they did so unintentionally.

DUKE**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

Introduction

1. Jane I. Guyer has pointed out how recently it is that this happened, in Guyer, “Pauper, Percentile, Precarity: Analytics for Poverty Studies in Africa,” *Journal of African History* 59, no. 3 (2018): 437–48.

2. Poverty in Welsh is *tlodi*, a poor woman is a *tlodwraig*, while a poor man is a *tlodwr*. The noun *angen* is also occasionally used for poverty but has the primary meaning “need.” Bruce Griffiths and Dafydd Glyn Jones, *Geiriadur yr Academi: The Welsh Academy English–Welsh Dictionary Online* (Bangor University on behalf of the Welsh Language Commissioner, 2012), <https://geiriaduracademi.org>.

3. World Bank, “Poverty Headcount Ratio at \$1.90 a Day (2011 PPP) (% of Population) – Sub-Saharan Africa,” <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY?locations=ZG>; World Bank, “GDP (Current US\$) – Sub-Saharan Africa,” <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=ZG>; World Bank, “Gini Index (World Bank Estimate),” <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>. Any reading of World Bank or other statistics on African economies should be read alongside critiques of the underlying data. See, for example, Morten Jerven, *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong* (London: Zed Books, 2015). In January 2021, the *Monitor* reported that the Ministry of Finance estimated a ten percentage-point increase in the poverty rate to 28 percent in Uganda due to COVID-19, with eastern Uganda especially hard hit with an increase in its poverty rate from 28.8 percent to 53.3 percent. “Reduce Rising Level of Poverty in Uganda,” *Monitor*, January 30, 2021. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/editorial/reduce-rising-level-of-poverty-uganda-3211864>.

4. Nakanyike B. Musisi, “Women, ‘Elite Polygyny,’ and Buganda State Formation,” *Signs* 16, no. 4 (1991): 757–86.

5. A point also made in the following, among others: Steven Serels, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 10; Morten Jerven, “The History of African Poverty by Numbers: Evidence and Vantage Points,” *Journal of African History* 39, no. 3 (2018): 449–61.

6. The categorization of poverty into conjunctural and structural, at least in the African context, can be attributed to John Iliffe in *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For a recent example showing how the colonial state

created structural poverty in one community, see Serels, *Impoverishment*. This is not, however, a simple narrative, as recent research on living standards has indicated; see Ewout Frankema and Marlous van Waijenburg, “Structural Impediments to African Growth? New Evidence from Real Wages in British Africa, 1880–1965,” *Journal of African Economic History* 72, no. 4 (2012): 895–926.

7. For a good summary of the latter, see Corrie Decker and Elisabeth McMahon, *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 166–68. For a counter perspective, see Rhiannon Stephens, “Poverty’s Pasts: A Case for *Longue Durée* Studies,” *Journal of African History* 59, no. 3 (2018): 399–409.

8. These are *dàndá n. cl.14 ‘poverty’ and *kúm v. ‘be honored, be rich,’ with the asterisk denoting a reconstructed form. Yvonne Bastin, André Coupez, Evariste Mumba, and Thilo C. Schadeberg (eds.), *Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 3/Reconstructions lexicales bantoues 3* (Tervuren, Belgium: Musée Royale de l’Afrique Centrale, 2003), Main 858, Main 2113, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/research/discover/human_sciences/culture_society/blr/.

9. Susan Reynolds Whyte, “Men, Women and Misfortune in Bunyole,” in *Women’s Religious Experience*, ed. Pat Holden (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 183. Whyte notes that while there was no fixed structure for these prayers, they “always cover certain points such as ‘getting wealth,’ ‘getting children,’ and ‘getting wives.’”

10. Jane Guyer noted, “The concept of wealth-in-people was developed in the 1970s, mainly by Miers and Kopytoff, as a less theoretical, more descriptive, looser and therefore more open concept to encapsulate established observations that no one disputed: that human beings could be explicitly valued in material terms in Africa, and that many of the person–thing conversions have been about acquiring and consolidating direct controls over people in a context where indirect controls through land, capital and the threat of superior force are either absent altogether or only intermittently realizable.” Jane I. Guyer, “Wealth in People, Wealth in Things – Introduction,” *Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 86. On elopement and bridewealth in the history of neighboring North Nyanza-speaking communities, see Rhiannon Stephens, “‘Whether They Promised Each Other Some Thing Is Difficult to Work Out’: The Complicated History of Marriage in Uganda,” *African Studies Review* 59, no. 1 (2016): 127–53.

11. Nasanairi Arugai, Omodoi, Toroma, Teso Historical Texts no. 16; quoted in J. B. Webster, “Usuku: The Homeland of the Iteso,” in J. B. Webster, C. P. Emudong, D. H. Okalany, and N. Egimu-Okuda, *The Iteso during the Asonya* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973), 24.

12. Nasanairi Arugai, Omodoi, Toroma, Teso Historical Texts no. 16; quoted in Webster, “Usuku,” 24.

13. On the ivory trade from East Africa at the time, see Edward A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves: Changing Patterns of International Trade in East Central Africa to the Later Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices, and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770–1873* (London: James Currey, 1987); Jeremy Prestholdt,

Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 79–80.

14. Elsewhere on the continent, Toby Green has reminded us of the need to think of forms of wealth as having multiple purposes, which include the entwining of “economic accumulation and religious power,” in Igbo communities in Nigeria. Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 19. He draws on the earlier work of Jane I. Guyer on currency in particular to make the point. Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

15. This section draws extensively on Rhiannon Stephens and Axel Fleisch, “Introduction: Theories and Methods of African Conceptual History,” in *Doing Conceptual History in Africa*, rev. ed., ed. Axel Fleisch and Rhiannon Stephens (2016; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018), 1–20; and Rhiannon Stephens, “‘Wealth,’ ‘Poverty’ and the Question of Conceptual History in Oral Contexts: Uganda from c. 1000 CE,” in *Doing Conceptual History in Africa*, rev. ed., ed. Fleisch and Stephens, 21–48.

16. Melvin Richter, “*Begriffsgeschichte* and the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 2 (1987): 255.

17. Stephens and Fleisch, “Introduction,” 1.

18. Terence O. Ranger, “Towards a Usable Past,” in *African Studies since 1945: A Tribute to Basil Davidson*, ed. Christopher Fyfe (London: Longman for the Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh, 1976), 26.

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Second Essay: ‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience,’ and the Like,” in *The Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Horace B. Samuel (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), 70.

20. See chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of the method and other scholarship drawing on it.

21. Historical archaeologists have, however, started to explore the archaeology of poverty; see the special issue “Poverty in Depth: New International Perspectives,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15, no. 4 (2011).

22. There are studies that look at concepts of poverty in Africa, but they usually are not historical. See, for example, Elizabeth Amoah, “African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Poverty,” in *Religion and Poverty*, ed. Peter J. Paris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 111–27.

23. K. O. Diké, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 28–30.

24. A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London: Longman, 1973).

25. Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons, eds., *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

26. Iliffe, *The African Poor*.

27. Samir Amin, “The Class Struggle in Africa,” in *Classes and Class Struggle in Africa*, by Samir Amin and Robin Cohen (Lagos: Afrografika, 1977), 28–52; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington: Howard University Press,

1972). A useful overview of the literature to 1990, alongside his own analysis, is offered in Zeleza's sweeping survey, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa Volume I: The Nineteenth Century* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1993). For a more recent intervention, see Green, *Fistful of Shells*.

28. Jan Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 29.

29. Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons, "Introduction. The Roots of Rural Poverty: Historical Background," in *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, ed. Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 10.

30. Julius K. Nyerere, "Socialism and Rural Development," in *Freedom and Socialism/Uhuru na Ujamaa: A Selection from Writings and Speeches, 1965–1967* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968), 337.

31. Amoah, "African Traditional Religion," 119.

32. John Lonsdale, "The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought," in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa. Book Two: Violence and Ethnicity*, by Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale (Oxford: James Currey, 1992), 340.

33. Steven Feierman, "Reciprocity and Assistance in Precolonial Africa," in *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions*, ed. Warren F. Ilchman, Stanley N. Katz, and Edward L. Queen II (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 3–24. See also the discussion in chapter 5 of this work on the nature of the relationship between the wealthy and the poor in Jie and Karimojong communities.

34. Pierre de Maret, "Histoires des croissettes," in *Objets-signes d'Afrique*, ed. Luc de Heusch (Tervuren, Belgium: Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale, 1995), 133–45; Nicolas Nikis and Alexandre Livingstone Smith, "Copper, Trade and Politics: Exchange Networks in Southern Central Africa in the 2nd Millennium CE," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 43, no. 5 (2017): 895–911; Colleen E. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006); Kriger, *Pride of Men: Ironworking in 19th Century West Central Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999); Andrea Felber Seligman, "Wealth Not by Any Other Name: Material Aesthetics in Expanding Commercial Times, ca. 16th–20th Centuries," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 449–69; see also Jane I. Guyer, ed., *Money Matters: Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995).

35. This literature is far too extensive to list here, but it is worth noting that the author of *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* wrote, around the first century CE, that the primary exports from East Africa were ivory, rhinoceros horn, tortoiseshells, and palm oil. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century*, trans. Wilfred H. Schoff (New York: Longmans, Green, 1912), 285.

36. Christopher Ehret, *An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia Press, 1998), 19.

37. Guyer, "Wealth in People," 89. Guyer offers her own answers to these questions, such as in her discussion of the centrality of the possession of titles to being an Igbo man of rank. Guyer, *Marginal Gains*, 68–82.

38. Ogbu U. Kalu, "Poverty in Pre-colonial and Colonial West Africa: Perceptions, Causes and Alleviation," in *Themes in West African History*, ed. Emmanuel Kwame Akyeampong (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 163.

39. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977); Caroline Bledsoe, *Women and Marriage in Kpelle Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980). See Guyer, "Wealth in People."

40. Jane I. Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 92.

41. Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), xx.

42. Guyer and Eno Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge."

43. Kathryn M. de Luna, *Collecting Food, Cultivating People: Subsistence and Society in Central Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 115.

44. Parker Shipton, *The Nature of Entrustment: Intimacy, Exchange, and the Sacred in Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Shipton, *Mortgaging the Ancestors: Ideologies of Attachment in Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

45. Shipton, *Mortgaging the Ancestors*.

46. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, eds., *Poverty in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Peter Brown, *Treasure in Heaven: The Holy Poor in Early Christianity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016); Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History*, trans. Arthur Goldhamer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

47. Neville Morley, "The Poor in the City of Rome," in *Poverty in the Roman World*, ed. Atkins and Osborne, 31.

48. Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, 2. See also his list of Latin keywords related to poverty that were most frequently used in medieval texts in appendix 3 of Michel Mollat, *Études sur l'histoire de la pauvreté (Moyen-Âge – XVI^e siècle)*, vol. 2 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1974), 841–42.

49. Christel Freu, *Les figures du pauvre dans les sources italiennes de l'antiquité tardive* (Paris: De Boccard, 2007); Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*.

50. Among others, see Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Central Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Ehret, *African Classical Age*; Edda L. Fields-Black, *Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998); Rhiannon Stephens, *A History of African Motherhood: The Case of Uganda*,

700–1900 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); de Luna, *Collecting Food, Cultivating People*.

51. Lonsdale, “Moral Economy of Mau Mau”; Jan Kuhanen, *Poverty, Health and Reproduction in Early Colonial Uganda* (Joensuu, Finland: University of Joensuu Publications, 2005); Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*.

52. Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890–1945* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 7–8.

53. Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*, 53.

54. Stephanie Wynne-Jones, *A Material Culture: Consumption and Materiality on the Coast of Precolonial East Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

55. In 2019–2020, for example, the devastation from locust swarms across not only East Africa, but also across the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, was readily connected with climate change. Abubakr A. M. Salih, Marta Baraibar, Kenneth Kemucie Mwangi, and Guleid Artan, “Climate Change and Locust Outbreak in East Africa,” *Nature Climate Change* 10, no. 7 (2020): 584–85.

Chapter One : Methodologies and Sources for a Conceptual History of Economic Difference over the *Longue Duree*

1. Historians also grapple with the challenges of writing postcolonial history in the absence of orderly and accessible archives. For an early discussion of this, see Stephen Ellis, “Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa,” *Journal of African History* 43, no. 1 (2002): 1–26. For a more recent example of the need to pull together sources from multiple locations, see Jean Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive: Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi Pilot Named Hanna, and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History-Writing,” *American Historical Review* 118, no. 1 (2013): 104–29.

2. For a particularly innovative example of this in African history, see David Lee Schoenbrun, “Pythons Worked: Constellating Communities of Practice with Conceptual Metaphor in Northern Lake Victoria, ca. A.D. 800 to 1200,” in *Knowledge in Motion: Constellations of Learning across Time and Place*, ed. Andrew Roddick and Ann Stahl (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 216–46.

3. The research articles in the journal *Contributions to the History of Concepts* are a good example of this, as well as of the range of conceptual history as it increasingly moves beyond European history.

4. For examples of some of the possibilities beyond archives, see the contributions to Axel Fleisch and Rhiannon Stephens, eds., *Doing Conceptual History in Africa*, rev. ed. (2016; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018).

5. Pamela Khanakwa, “Male Circumcision among the Bagisu of Eastern Uganda,” in *Doing Conceptual History in Africa*, ed. Fleisch and Stephens, 115–37; Ana Lúcia Sá, “The Concept of ‘Land’ in Bioko: ‘Land as Property’ and ‘Land as Country,’” in *Doing Conceptual History in Africa*, ed. Fleisch and Stephens, 138–61.