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## Book Review: Doing Conceptual History in Africa by Alex Fleisch and Rhiannon Stephens

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**Fleisch, Axel and Rhiannon Stephens. *Doing Conceptual History in Africa*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016. vii + 243 pages. Hardcover, \$120.**

*Doing Conceptual History in Africa* is a pioneering effort to apply the methods of conceptual history to the languages of Western, Eastern, and Southern Africa. The interdisciplinary contributions in this volume, edited by Axel Fleisch and Rhiannon Stephens, explore language as a historical source. In their introduction (“Theories and Methods of African Conceptual History”), Stephens and Fleisch note that “Conceptual history is about understanding discursive formations at a given point in time. It is about the prevalent views held and interpretations made by people at that time, including the expectations upon which they acted” (p. 16). The editors recognize the salience of the methodological tool of conceptual history and linguistics in pushing back into the history of a region beyond two centuries, even in the absence of extensive documentation. Given the pejorative notion that Africa had no history before its encounter with Europe, conceptual history and linguistics help to go beyond the divergence between postcolonial, colonial, and precolonial. Although the volume examines the application of conceptual history, the chapters offer various scope in tackling methodological challenges in analyzing categories like wealth, work, marriage, circumcision, land, Ujamaa, and decolonization.

In the first chapter, Stephens focuses on the concepts of ‘wealth’ and ‘poverty’ among Nilotic language speakers in Eastern Uganda from 1000 CE. There is a phenomenal diversity of words, according to Stephens, people use to talk about ‘wealth’ and ‘rich person’ and for ‘poverty’ and ‘poor person’ across the Eastern Nilotic and North Nyanza languages. She notes there are at least fourteen separate roots for poverty and poor person, including the following: lacking in cattle, pauper, has no home, not established, no women, misery, beggar, lives on others, etc. These terms suggest a distinguishing gradation of poverty. Contrastingly, there is no

Eastern Nilotic term for ‘wealth’ or ‘wealthy person,’ but Stephens found diverse linguistic derivations that imply wealth: livestock, cattle, affluence, property, successful in business, luxury, riches, generosity, happiness, etc. Thus, a conceptual history approach reveals “the ways in which people have understood, and so have responded, to the rich and to the poor in their societies” (p.43).

Axel Fleisch and Anna Kelk Mager (Chapters Two and Three) track the concept of ‘work’ and ‘labor’ among Nguni-speaking communities (isiXhosa and isiNdebele) in Southern Africa. Conceptions of ‘work’ in colonial South Africa conflicted with indigenous values and notions of work in the cattle economy. Over time, with the cooption of indigenes in the sphere of missionary and colonial orbit through labor tax, Nguni terms such as *ukusebenza* and *ukuphangela* in their contemporary usages overlapped with precolonial notions and colonial experience of work (i.e. paid work in the modern sector).

Marné Pienaar (Chapter Four) discusses the contested domain of ‘marriage’ in Afrikaans. That there are three laws regulating marriage points towards a history of tension, dispute and varying practices in South Africa. The three conflicting ideas concerning marriage were linked to Christianity (monogamy), civil union, and polygyny. While South African law recognizes all three forms of marriage, the concept of ‘marriage’ remains contested among the Afrikaans speech community. Pamela Kanakwa (Chapter Five) reflects on male circumcision among the Bagisu of Eastern Uganda. Teenage boys aged between sixteen and eighteen undergo circumcision in the open and without anesthesia to test their masculinity, which is pertinent to their attainment of ideal manhood. A circumcision candidate who displayed any sign of fear or even involuntary trembling and blinking was deemed to be a sissy. Presumed ‘cowardice’ carried life-long consequences of mockery and ostracization. Missionaries considered circumcision

without anesthesia and associated dance, beer drinking, and relevant rituals as barbaric and obstacles to European civilization.

Ana Lúica Sa and Pieter Boele von Hensbroek (Chapters Six and Seven) discuss the concept of 'land' in Bioko (formerly Equatorial Guinea) and early Gold Coast (Ghana). The conceptualization of 'land' and 'property' in the export-oriented plantation economy by the Spanish colonizers created tensions with the indigenous Bubi concept of 'soil' and 'country.' This had implications for the way the Bubi reclaimed access and ultimately possession of their land. Similarly, in the Gold Coast, conceptualization of 'land' took many forms: terrain one can stand on, where ancestors dwell, natural resource, and a geographical/administrative division. Thus, 'land' relate closely to power, including the authority to allocate land by power holders. Furthermore, 'land' subsumes the idea of nationality, as in Fantiland or Gold Coast as a nation.

Bo Strath and Pierre-Philippe Fraiture (Chapters Eight and Nine) are concerned with post-colonial policies and decolonization. In Tanzania, *Ujamaa* (translates as 'community' in Kiswahili), according to Nyerere, was a call to African values, based on self-reliance, self-determination and equality. Hence, concept encapsulates a system designed to shake off parasitism and exploitation. As policy, the central government would "coordinate the economic activities at the village level through its ownership of the land and means of production" (p.191). Nwalimu Nyerere, the unifying father of the nation, adopted words that came closer to European socialism. The success of the experiment of African socialism in Tanzania had mixed reviews. Fraiture reminisces on decolonization and the literary critiques of Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, Achille Mbembe, and Patrice Nganang. The three authors tap into the same anticolonial ideas: they think deeply about colonial exclusions, indicate their disappointment with the African present, and wondered about the extent and limitations of the present and the future. Further,

they reflect on the understanding of decolonization as a process in which ‘withdrawal’ is followed by ‘independence.’ Mudimbe, Mbembe and Ngunang agree on the ability of the West to canonize and universalize not only its languages and literatures, but also European thought among humanities and social science academics in erstwhile colonies. While contributions in this volume by linguists are peppered with discipline-specific jargons, the book provides an informative and academic resource. Also equally important, being the first book to examine conceptual history in Africa, it has set the stage to guide progress towards the application of the methods of conceptual history in the region.

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