Makerere Historical Journal, Vol 6 no.1 (2025): *82-84*
https://doi.org/10.70060/mak-mhj-2025-128

Book Review:

Poverty and Wealth in East Africa: A Conceptual History

Rhiannon Stephens, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022. Paperback ISBN 9781478018827, $27.95

Rebecca Rwakabukoza[1]
Northwestern University

Historians grapple with ways to understand how wealth accumulation—in people, in knowledge, material resources, or technical know-how—influenced societies' social and political organization. *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa: A Conceptual History* focuses on eastern and northeastern Uganda, a region viewed as a landscape of uneven economic development. The region contributes almost half of Uganda's poverty, despite its mineral wealth and decades of cash crop production.[2]

The book provides a *longue durée* intellectual history of poverty and wealth in eastern and northeastern Uganda, offering historically informed frames for understanding economic and social inequality as well as conceptualisations of poverty and wealth. It demonstrates that, long before colonial conquest, societies not only had varying degrees of access to material and social resources but also developed diverse ideas of poverty and wealth.

The six-chapter book explores the histories of communities who settled in eastern Uganda and western Kenya, with varying economic activities and different political systems. Stephens utilises comparative historical linguistics to explore how people understood poverty and wealth for a period spanning two millennia. Focusing on speech communities from the two largest language groups in Africa (Bantu and Nilotic), Stephens examines word histories of thirteen modern languages emerging from North Nyanza, Greater Luhyia, and Nilotic proto-languages. Stephens uses the method to point out the antiquity of words for poverty and wealth, such as the proto-Nilotic word root **-can-* used as far back as 3,000 years ago to mean a poor person, poverty, being poor, or to suffer. Words do not just get inherited, sometimes they are learnt from neighbours. Stephens shows this happening 500 years ago with the root **-bayi* that the North Luhyia speech community borrowed from proto-Kalenjin's **-pai.* In proto-Kalenjin, it meant 'keep cattle' but the North Luhyia speakers adapted and used **-bayi* to refer specifically to wealth in livestock.

1 The author can be reached for correspondence at: rwakabukoza@u.northwestern.edu
2 By 2019/20, Karamoja contributed 6.5% to national poverty, Busoga 14.5%, Bukedi 10.4%, Elgon 4.1% and Teso at 7.1% (UBOS, 'Contribution to Poverty by Sub-region,' 2021).

The concepts of wealth and poverty, as with the languages, changed with the environment, climate, and interactions between communities. Stephens grounds the word histories in time and place with archaeological data, local histories, and ethnographic material, with oral traditions and literature, and climate data. She devotes the first chapter to a discussion of methods and evidence. The second chapter examines the earliest concepts of wealth and poverty while an inter-chapter explores the region's climatic developments to highlight how environmental conditions shaped both opportunities for prosperity and risks of hardship. Each proto-language group is then given full chapter treatment to show ideas of social and material inequality evolved in each community before merging into modern-day ideas in the nineteenth century with colonial trade and conquest.

Two thousand years ago, communities related poverty to suffering, bereavement, and sickness; and considered wealth to be gendered and sometimes, heritable. These are the oldest forms of poverty and wealth that form the baseline for change and continuity in the proto-language chapters. In the Greater Luhyia chapter, the cluster speech communities considered poverty as lack and hunger but also thought of poor people as selfish. Greater Luhyia speakers dispersed around 500 CE, and descendant languages include Lugwe, Lusaamia, Lunyole, Lumasaaba, Lubukusu, and Ludadiri. For wealth, speakers distinguished between forms of wealth. For example, Lunyole speakers developed new roots like *omuhombe* for an extremely wealthy person, *omuyaaya* for those who acquire wealth through violence (hunting or warfare), *ohuyaaya* for a greedy grab of food at a communal meal, and *omugerema* for a rich woman. For these Elgon communities, Stephens points out that bridewealth was an important factor in the accumulation of wealth in wives and children.

In the proto-North Nyanza chapter, we learn that the speech community, formed during a period of high rainfall, used root words like **-jolo,* **-yavu* and **-naku* for the poor, and thought of wealth as acquired in the verb root **-fún-* (for example *okufuna* in Luganda and *okusuna* in Lugwere). The community dispersed east across the Nile, and other speech communities were formed. Lusoga formed at the start of the sixteenth century, and in the 1830s, due to famine and conflict, Lugwere and Rushana diverged and became linguistically distinct languages. Gendered wealth remained important for these communities with Lugwere speakers who used *okusuna* to mean prosper but also in reference to marriage where *okusuna mukali/musaiza* meant marrying a woman or man. Gendered wealth would be important for both expanding networks and securing reproduction.

In the proto-Nilotic chapter, the pastoralist communities cultivated grain crops (especially sorghum and millet) and settled in the north and northeast of Lake Kyoga. Here, emotionally, poverty continued to be associated with bereavement as in **-can* and materially, to lack of cattle and physical wasting due to hunger while socially, poverty included ideas of social death and kinlessness. To **-can* inherited from their ancestors, the proto-Ateker speakers added a new meaning for punishment (*aitican* in Ateso and *akisican* in Ngakarimojong). The Ateso speech community, which formed by the end of the first millennium, distinguished between forms of wealth: *amio* for wealth in food and *ibaren* for wealth in livestock. One could convert *amio* into *ibaren*.

The sixth chapter moves into the better-known nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries with increased slave raiding, epidemics, and colonial conquest alongside heavy taxation, missionary presence, and violence. We see some modern-day ideas of wealth as the acquisition of western education and employment in colonial administration; wealth as held in currency, owned individually, and expressed through European dress. As these eastern and northeastern Ugandans form new concepts (individual ownership), they also reinforce older concepts (gendered wealth, wealth as plunder).

African scholars can appreciate this historical understanding of value in this *longue durée.* Stephens offers African ideas of people with material excess, those who lack in more than material ways, whether material wealth must be distributive, and how these ideas develop in different environments over a very long period.

Acknowledgements

The reviewer would like to thank her colleagues, Dr. Chernoh Alpha M. Bah and Shelby Mohrs who patiently responded to numerous drafts. She also thanks the editors, Christopher Muhoozi and Rebecca Glade, for their helpful feedback.