
Conjuring the Modern in Africa: Durability and Rupture in Histories of Public Healing between the Great Lakes of East Africa

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THE VALUABLE EMPHASIS ON MODERNITY in colonial and postcolonial African studies has profoundly divided precolonial African history from what comes after. But the depth and complexity of African aspirations for moral community and the forms of collective action they inspire, often in the face of severe material constraints, exceed the explanatory power of narratives of modernity oriented toward the history of capital, colony, and commerce. Long-term regional histories of durable bundles of meaning and practice grounded in Africa address these matters in part by working across tight spaces of ethnicity and beyond shallow chronologies. In particular, a history of public healing reveals compelling notions of public health and forms of power that cut across the colonial period but were transformed by colonialism. Public healing has wrestled with shifting boundaries between a porous social body's moral communities and the starker outline of an embodied, autonomous individual. Modes of power and authority central to politics and to healing practices, public or private, have moved uneasily but productively against each other over the last millennium, as agricultural systems changed, as centralized states formed, and as commodified economies grew. Over the last century, they have moved against the forms of power and authority embodied in a colonial state or in biomedicine. In the context of public healing between the African Great Lakes, the historical complexity of relations between these entangled aspects of life reveals a heterotemporal modern Africa beyond the hybrid or the alternative forms of modernity so prevalent in the literature.

Since the 1990s, work in African colonial history has emphasized African appropriations of European forms of knowledge and practice in a single field of culture inflected by political economy. These ethnographically dense explorations of what has been called "the colonial situation" push beyond a paradigm of "encounter" into a contingent history of colonial and postcolonial modernity. One scholar, Nancy Rose Hunt, finds valuable sources for her analytical categories in a precolonial Cen-

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tral African history of bodies, gender, aspiration, and mobility by focusing on “colonial middle figures” such as nurses.¹ The historian Florence Bernault argues that a single field of violent struggle over power enveloped Europeans and Africans in a common set of practices related to the body, some of which have roots in pre-colonial African histories.² Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff also focus on middle figures and power, but precolonial historical trajectories play an inconsistent role in their analysis. Sometimes, they condense them in the moment just before Europeans arrived in the interior of southern Africa.³ Other times, they speak of a steadfast continuity in the trajectory of African practices: “the will to assimilate the knowledges of alien cultures was inherent in the epistemes and ethnopractice of these peoples even before the arrival of the Europeans, and has remained so ever since.” Mostly, the Comaroffs explore the ways in which precolonial African cultural practices were utterly transformed by encounters with Europeans.⁴ Must their valuable focus on transformation sustain an analytical divide between the “much more” of what came before and all that did get drawn into “the colonial encounter”? If some of the terms on which the colonial transformations unfolded have their roots in what came before, their earlier histories need study.⁵

Steven Feierman doubts that framing colonial history in terms of appropriation

¹ Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, N.C., 1999); see also Filip de Boeck, “Postcolonialism, Power and Identity: Local and Global Perspectives from Zaire,” in Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger, eds., *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London, 1996), 100.

² Florence Bernault, “Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa,” *Journal of African History* 47, no. 3 (2006): 207–239; see also Bethwell Allan Ogot, “British Administration in the Central Nyanza District of Kenya, 1900–1960,” *Journal of African History* 4, no. 2 (1963): 249–273; Karen Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton, N.J., 1985), 62–78.

³ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1: *Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991), chap. 4.

⁴ Notwithstanding the fact that “there is much more to the historical anthropology of the Tswana world, c. 1820 to the present, than the colonial encounter”; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Revelations upon *Revelation*: After Shocks, Afterthoughts,” *Interventions* 3, no. 1 (2001): 117. See also Elizabeth Elbourne, “Word Made Flesh: Christianity, Modernity, and Cultural Colonialism in the Work of Jean and John Comaroff,” *AHR* 108, no. 2 (April 2003): 444–445, 449–450, on the impact of colonialism arriving before colonialists and on the appropriate scale and cultural makeup of the regional setting for “Tswana” and “Missionary” interactions; Greg Denning, “The Comaroffs Out of Africa: A Reflection Out of Oceania,” *AHR* 108, no. 2 (2003): 471–478, warns against the *imperium* of a divide between the moment before and moment after colonial contact; Steven Feierman, “The Comaroffs and the Practice of Historical Ethnography,” *Interventions* 3, no. 1 (2001): 27–28; Donald Donham, “Thinking Temporally or Modernizing Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist* 103, no. 1 (2001): 139, 143–145; and Paul Landau, “Hegemony and History in Jean and John L. Comaroff’s *Of Revelation and Revolution*,” *Africa* 70, no. 3 (2000): 501–519.

⁵ Relations between “traditional” monarchies and political culture today, the ethnic roots of political violence, and to a lesser extent the cultural politics of health have sustained an interest in the precolonial dimensions of these issues; see David Newbury, “Precolonial Burundi and Rwanda: Local Loyalties, Regional Royalties,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 2 (2001): 255–314; Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, trans. Scott Straus (New York, 2003); Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom* (Madison, Wis., 2004); Holly Elisabeth Hanson, *Landed Obligation: The Practice of Power in Buganda* (Portsmouth, N.H., 2003); Peter R. Schimdt, “Historical Ecology and Landscape Transformation in Eastern Equatorial Africa,” in Carole Crumley, ed., *Historical Ecology* (Santa Fe, N.Mex., 1994), 99–125. The cultural politics and political economies of trade, especially of slavery and commodification and diaspora, engage the precolonial with what came after; among many others, see Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, Wis., 1988), 3–164; Thomas Spear, “Early Swahili History Reconsidered,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, no. 2 (2000): 257–290; Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, 2002). Regional leg-

opens up “how patterns of action and forms of signifying practice within African societies came to be understood as fragmented and partial” and reveals “the process by which important cultural domains came to disappear.”⁶ He worries that the specificities of colonial-cultural mixtures tend to make historical sense in terms of layered narratives that “originate in Europe,” particularly the narratives of capitalism and of Protestantism and the implicit, general sense of their historical relations to each other. They offer “a certain coherence” of historical imagination concerning the African past, even though “we can expect” each of these stories “to exist in creative tension with larger historical narratives . . . the central question is, which larger narratives?”⁷ The missing narratives are long regional histories of Africa, flawed and compressed and dependent upon concepts whose explanatory status must be contested.⁸ This regional history “has a necessary role to play if historical knowledge in the aggregate is not to do violence to understandings which grow out of microhistorical study” of what Africans did and what they thought they were doing when they began to engage the currents of capitalism.⁹

One of these creative tensions lies in recognizing that something is entangled with the modernity of the moral communities through which Africans pursue their aspirations and address issues of need.¹⁰ This something else, which I hesitate to name, comes to light in regional historical processes with African roots. Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that European narratives of capital and colony, and the European thought they fostered, are “both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical.”¹¹ Chakrabarty writes about India, but the provision here of a historical narrative of public healing engages his conundrum by serving as the something else

acies shaped which historiographies the African precolonial inflects; see Joseph C. Miller, “History and Africa/Africa and History,” *AHR* 104, no. 1 (February 1999): 1–32.

⁶ Steven Feierman, “Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories,” in Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 186; expanding on ideas first set out in Steven Feierman, “African Histories and the Dissolution of World History,” in Robert H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O’Barr, eds., *Africa and the Disciplines* (Chicago, 1993), 167–212, esp. 197–199.

⁷ Feierman, “Colonizers, Scholars,” 206; Feierman, “African Histories,” 197–199.

⁸ For a rich exploration of the constitution of a conceptual archive from the guild of Central African studies, see Wyatt MacGaffey, “Changing Representations in Central African History,” *Journal of African History* 46, no. 2 (2005): 206–207; on “the region,” see Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, “Concepts for the Study of Regional Culture,” *American Ethnologist* 18 (1991): 195–214.

⁹ Quote from Feierman, “Colonizers, Scholars,” 207; see also Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 82–83. Temporally deep African regional histories alter the cumulative impact and structuring of microhistories while relying on them for their very possibility; see Thomas C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village, 1850–1950* (London, 2000), 19–23; David W. Cohen, *Womunafu’s Bunafu: A Study of Authority in a Nineteenth-Century African Community* (Princeton, N.J., 1977), 16–19.

¹⁰ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); Johannes Fabian, “Culture, Time, and the Object of Anthropology,” in Fabian, *Time and the Work of Anthropology: Critical Essays, 1971–1991* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1991), 198; Timothy Mitchell, “Introduction,” in Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2000), xii–xiii; Lynn Thomas, *The Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley, Calif., 2003), 18–19; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), 131–135; Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington, Ind., 2005), 5.

¹¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 6; see also Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 245–268, esp. 250–257.

necessary to making new sense of East African modernity. Africanist historiography has long been concerned with this new perspective. But even a brief tour of it reveals that the boundary between the modern and this something else can easily be over-drawn.

THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE CREATED AFRICANISTS by rendering Africans historyless, traditional people.¹² Tradition was the shadowy space that Europeans and Africans used to figure their emergence as “moderns” in colonial settings.¹³ Africanism and Africanists—especially historians—engaged this divide by demonstrating that African pasts were full of change and dynamism.¹⁴ Two branches of historical scholarship on Africa grow from these demonstrations. One studies the periods just before and including colonial conquest, colonial rule, independence, and postcolonial issues. The second engages the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, when African economies and societies were drawn into a world of slavery, mercantilism, and industrialization. To some extent, histories of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa cut across these themes, but even they keep largely to the centuries after 1500.¹⁵ The work of two leading scholars in African history—Jan Vansina and Steven Feierman—reveals the value of linking these branches of Africa scholarship both to each other and to the history of Africa before the sixteenth century.¹⁶

Jan Vansina explores the nature of tradition and assesses the conditions for its survival through transformation in his book *Paths in the Rainforests*.¹⁷ He narrates three thousand years of historical change in what he calls the Equatorial African political tradition, a version of tradition that emphasizes both enduring continuities

¹² Abiola Irele, “The African Scholar,” *Transition* 51 (1991): 59–60, 62. Jacob F. A. Ajayi refused the causal force of this conundrum, insisting that historians study how African institutions “have been adapted to the changing circumstances” of colonial conquest; see his “The Continuity of African Institutions under Colonialism,” in Terence O. Ranger, ed., *Emerging Themes of African History* (Dar es Salaam, 1968), 189–200.

¹³ See Peter Ekeh, “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 1 (1975): 97; Merrick Posnansky, “Foreword,” in Christopher R. DeCorse, ed., *West Africa during the Slave Trade: Archaeological Perspectives* (London, 2001), xi–xiv; Feierman, “African Histories,” 167–199; Miller, “History and Africa/Africa and History,” 1–32; and Frederick Cooper, “Africa’s Pasts and Africa’s Historians,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34 (2000): 298–336.

¹⁴ Feierman, “Colonizers, Scholars,” 183–187; Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, Calif., 2001), 1–23; Stephen Ellis, “Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa,” *Journal of African History* 43, no. 1 (2002): 24–26; Donham, “Thinking Temporally,” 144; David Newbury and Catharine Newbury, “Bringing the Peasants Back In: Agrarian Themes in the Construction and Corrosion of Statist Historiography in Rwanda,” *AHR* 105, no. 3 (June 2000): 835–836.

¹⁵ For exceptions, see Randall Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800–1900* (Cambridge, 1987); Paulo F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles, and Songhay-Tuareg History* (Oxford, 2003); Rudolph T. Ware, “Knowledge, Faith, and Power: A History of Qur’anic Schooling in 20th century Senegal” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 37–52.

¹⁶ This section owes much to Terence O. Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Africa,” in Terence Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan, eds., *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa* (London, 1993), 62–111; see also Thomas Spear, “Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,” *Journal of African History* 44, no. 1 (2003): 5–8.

¹⁷ Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, Wis., 1990); see also Kairn A. Klieman, “The Pygmies Were Our Compass”: *Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900 C.E.* (Portsmouth, N.H., 2003); Jan Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville, Va., 2004).

in its institutional and intellectual constituents and continuous change in their interrelationships.¹⁸ The book refutes persistent suggestions that Equatorial African societies before 1500 were changeless, opening the way for the comparative study of traditions the world over.

But Vansina also argues that between the 1880s and the 1920s, the violence of colonial conquest extinguished the equatorial African tradition.

As a result [of conquest], the peoples of the rainforests began first to doubt their own legacies and then to adopt portions of the foreign heritage. But they clung to their own languages and to much of the older cognitive content carried by them . . . , striving for a new synthesis which could not be achieved as long as freedom of action was denied them.¹⁹

The particularly violent conquest of the Inner Congo Basin destroyed the premise of autonomy at the core of an Equatorial African political tradition. But loss and extermination—familiar themes in Central African history—are not the only fates for “tradition” after colonial conquest.²⁰

In his book *Peasant Intellectuals*, Steven Feierman argues that fragmentation lies at the creative heart of a tradition. Feierman emphasizes the role of discourse in the creative uses of tradition by its makers. He understood this creativity as acts of selecting and composing arrays of cultural material to meet particular challenges. The creative and selective use of tradition, shaped by an aggressive colonial rule, reveals how certain things, such as forms of political language, remain in play across the divides between precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial experience.

When people select a particular form of discourse, when they shape a political argument in a particular way, this is by no means a passive act. The social analysis of peasant discourse in this book will show that long-term continuities in political language are the outcome of radical social change and of struggle within peasant society.²¹

The appeal of Feierman’s conclusion lies in seeing precolonial cultural legacies as provisional and under construction by historians, but as forming part of Africans’ “resources and modes of empowerment in seeking to act effectively in and upon a changing world.”²² They open up the logics of African ideas and actions in colonial and postcolonial settings as part of an ongoing program of effective moral action, the work of people who use bundles of durable language to confront circumstances of real material struggle, shaped by both African and external historical processes.²³ As others, including Vansina and Feierman, have argued, the ruptures of social and political institutions and of intellectual traditions in Africa during the nineteenth

¹⁸ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 6–7, 257–260; Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*, 265–272.

¹⁹ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 247.

²⁰ Vansina has offered “collective memory” as a means to think about this; see his *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 200.

²¹ Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, Wis., 1990), 3.

²² Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 2: *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago, 1991), 38.

²³ See Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), x; Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 28–29, 423 n. 43; Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 10–11, 28; Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 16–19, 152–154.

century were not the first radical transformations shaped by African *bricolage* and durability.²⁴ The multiple transformations of meaning and practice in public healing have moral and collective legacies that are especially clear in East Africa today.

IN 1996, GEOFFREY KAMALI, a reporter for Uganda's government-sponsored newspaper, the *New Vision*, wrote a story about visiting the shrines of ancestral spirits, based on a conversation with an anonymous woman. She told him that she went out in the middle of the night in a fleet of seven taxis filled with people following someone called *Jjajjà* ("grandmother, grandfather, ancestor, founder" in Luganda, a major language in Uganda), who knew how spirits behaved and what sorts of things their would-be supplicants should and should not do. The taxis carried mostly women. They sought a shrine on a hilltop outside Kampala, Uganda, famous for its three nearby caves. They carried cash and coffee berries to give to the *omusámbwa* of that place, the spirit of the caves. When they reached the shrine, they were told that they could not wear their overcoats because they should not imitate the spirit, who liked to wear an overcoat. They were told that they would see the *omusámbwa* in a cave, after they left their coffee berries and cash as offerings. Only one visitor, a man, claimed to have seen the spirit of the place, a man-like, very tall *omusámbwa*, waving a burning tree in his hands. After this sighting, a bonfire was lit around which people danced and drummed, asking for money, a better job, education, and fertility. Some visitors became possessed by spirits. *Jjajjà*, the grandparent-ancestor guide, moved through the huge fire without being burned. After this, *Jjajjà* got everyone back in the taxis and conducted them to the shores of Lake Victoria. At her house, she tattooed the visitors' right arms, asked them to confess their bad deeds, and gave each person a number of coffee berries to swallow.²⁵

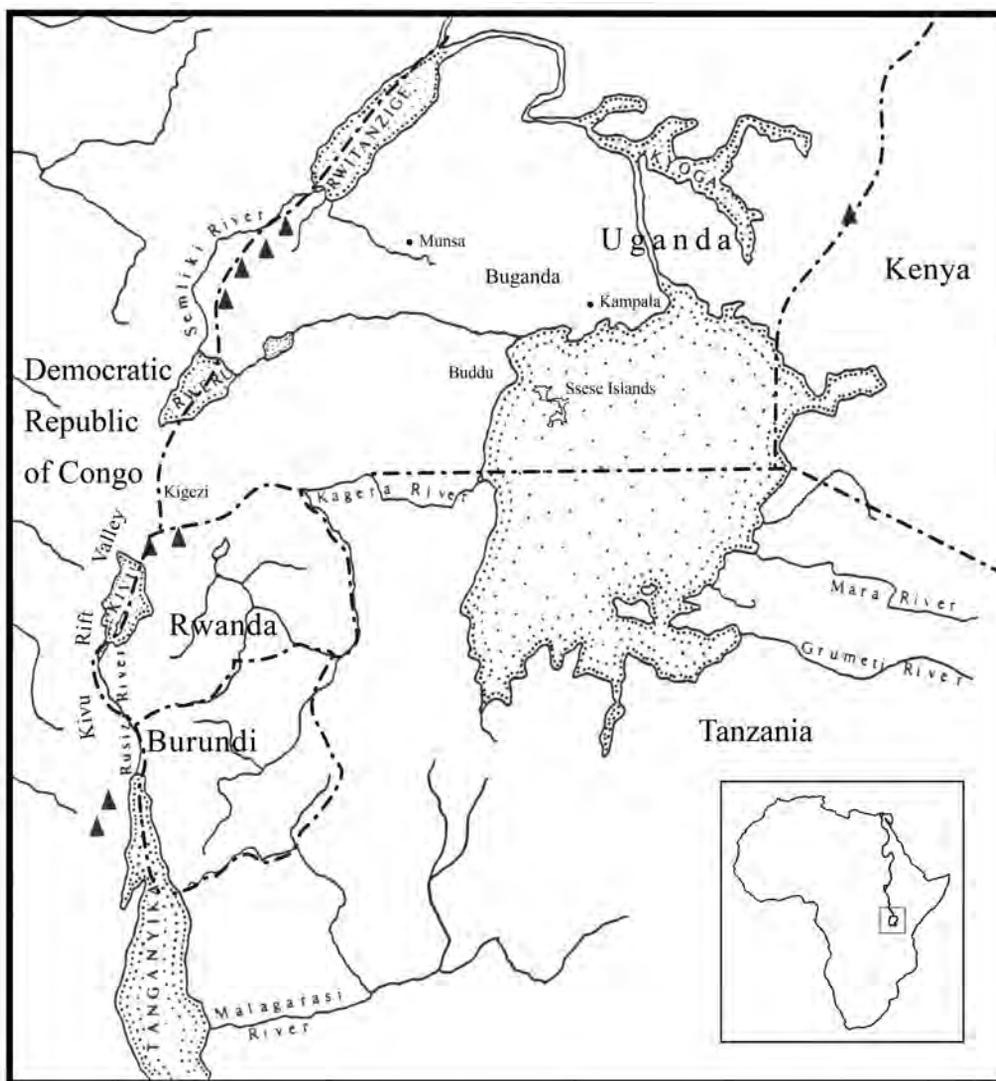
The people in this scene want more money and better skills in order to compete in a tight labor market and to have more choices as consumers. Scholars commonly analyze these desires in terms borrowed from the histories of economies and cultures and religions with deep and broad roots in Europe or North America.²⁶ But grasping how the supplicants conceptualize and go about their business—the things and practices they use and the ideas with which they debate possibilities and desires—exceeds the explanatory power of the history of the impact of capitalism, even while they cannot be explained without it.²⁷ The logics of collective action and moral community at work in Kamali's story lie beyond an African history of capitalism at the same time

²⁴ See Roderick J. McIntosh, *Peoples of the Middle Niger: The Island of Gold* (Oxford, 1998), 294–303; MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 5–7, 18–23; Jean-François Bayart, "Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion," *African Affairs* 99 (2000): 218–222, 231–237.

²⁵ Geoffrey Kamali, "Kampala's Night Secret Movement," *New Vision*, Sunday Edition, September 14, 1997, 17.

²⁶ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 1: 49–125, and 2: 36–39, 166–217; and Comaroff and Comaroff, "Of Fallacies and Fetishes: A Rejoinder to Donham," *American Anthropologist* 103, no. 1 (2001): 155; Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars," 182–216.

²⁷ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), 187–200; Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville, Va., 1997); Francis Nyamjoh, "Comment on Mikael Karström, 'Modernity and Its Aspirants,'" *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 5 (2004): 612; Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago, 2005), 11–19.



MAP 1. The Great Lakes Region of East Africa. Map made by Tom O'Connell, Digital Media Services, Northwestern University.

that they helped shape the transformative experiences of capitalism in Africa.²⁸ They also lie beyond the explanatory power of “a generic colonialism” that has been “given the decisive role in shaping a postcolonial moment.”²⁹ Regional histories of healing practice broaden explanations of this public business of seeking burning elders by

²⁸ Feirman, “Colonizers, Scholars,” 185; Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 5, 19–22.

²⁹ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 13. A full accounting of how Africans reconfigured social practices related to public healing during the twentieth century lies beyond the scope of this essay, but see Feirman, “Colonizers, Scholars,” 186–194, 196–206; Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford, Calif., 1991); Susan Reynolds Whyte, *Questioning Misfortune: The Pragmatics of Uncertainty in Eastern Uganda* (Cambridge, 1997); and Sheryl McCurdy, “Transforming Associations: Fertility, Therapy, and the Manyema Diaspora in Urban Kigoma, Tanzania, c. 1850–1993” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2000).

shifting the burden of analysis from a focus on capitalism, colonialism, and religions to the historical study of kinship, royalty, spirits, and fertility.³⁰ These themes help historians “examine how indigenous peoples struggle to integrate their experience of the world system in something that is logically and ontologically more inclusive: their own system of the world.”³¹

The shape of such a system hides in plain sight in Kamali’s scene as people pursue their aspirations with techniques and ideas of both great antiquity and more recent vintage.³² The figure of the unburned ancestor (called *Jjajjà* here) turns up in oral narratives far to the southwest, on the border with Rwanda, before, during, and after the course of colonial conquests there.³³ The category of *omusámbwa*, a territorial spirit, occurs in societies around the entire circumference of Lake Victoria and has a life in the region many centuries old.³⁴ Coffee berries have been used in contracting blood friendships, a common way for people in the Great Lakes region to build ties that supplement kinship.³⁵ Dancing, drumming, and possession by disembodied spiritual personae are found together across Bantu-speaking Africa, from Angola to Zimbabwe, and have a history several millennia in depth.³⁶ Cash and coats in the region are deeply intertwined with the slaving and violence and mission work of the nineteenth century.³⁷ Kamali’s scene contains a historical iconography of discourse and practice that conjures precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial contexts in multiple ways. This *bricolage* blurs the “radical disjuncture” between “an inferior past” and “a superior future” implicit in a modern temporal ideology of aspiration.³⁸ These entangled times—or heterotemporalities—are central to Chakrabarty’s call to “contemplate the necessarily fragmentary histories of human belonging that never constitute a one or a whole.”³⁹ If one of the effects of modernity on “traditional” worlds

³⁰ 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, N.H., 1998), 4–6; Bayart, “Africa in the World,” 217–222, 264–267.

³¹ Marshal Sahlins, “Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of ‘the World System,’” in Marshal Sahlins, *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays* (New York, 2000), 417. Dismantling assumptions about the continental formulations informing this move lies beyond the scope of this essay, but see Fernando Coronil, “Beyond Occidentalism: Toward Non-Imperial Geohistorical Categories,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (1995): 51–87; Kåren Wigen and Martin Lewis, *Myth of Continents* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999).

³² On the complexities of representing “social processes with very different temporalities,” see William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 9–12.

³³ Jim Freedman, *Nyabingi: The Social History of an African Divinity* (Butare, 1984); Feerman, “Healing as Social Criticism in the Time of Colonial Conquest,” *African Studies* 54, no. 1 (1995): 73–88.

³⁴ Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 199–202, 204–206; David L. Schoenbrun, *The Historical Reconstruction of Great Lakes Bantu Cultural Vocabulary: Etymologies and Distributions* (Cologne, 1997), 226–228; Neil Kodesh, “Beyond the Royal Gaze: Clanship and Collective Well-Being in Buganda” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2004); Audrey Wipper, *Rural Rebels: A Study of Two Protest Movements in Kenya* (London, 1977); Sloan Mahone, “The Psychology of Rebellion: Colonial Medical Responses to Dissent in British East Africa,” *Journal of African History* 47, no. 2 (2006): 241–258.

³⁵ Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 26, 182, 211 n. 47; Luise White, “Blood Brotherhood Revisited: Kinship, Relationship and the Body in East and Central Africa,” *Africa* 64, no. 3 (1994): 359–372.

³⁶ John Janzen, *Ngoma: Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992), 57–84; Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 106.

³⁷ Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, 10, 95, 97; Richard Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda* (Oxford, 2002), chap. 8.

³⁸ Mikael Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants: Moral Community and Developmental Euto-pianism in Buganda,” *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 5 (2004): 596–597.

³⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 255.

is to bring history to them, heterotemporalities return the gift by pushing beyond “the empty and homogeneous time” of modernity.⁴⁰

Existentially poetic stories of the fragmentary are also stories of struggle. Flawed and freighted, the history of public healing emphasizes the discourses and practices that people have used in “the boundary-crossing struggle over the conceptual and moral bases of political and social organization.” It reveals in the depth of these discourses and practices a thread of struggle that Frederick Cooper says is often “lost in opposing European, capitalist, imperialist ‘modernity’ to ‘alternative modernities’ or a space of the nonmodern.” As Cooper goes on to argue, the power to create and establish claims “and to alter definitions of what is a debatable issue and what is not” is unequal in any historical context; it is therefore crucial “to keep one’s focus on how such concepts were used in historical situations.”⁴¹ Constituting the sources to meet these challenges—and asking how the sources have been constituted—is a necessary first step in exploring the multiple temporalities recognizable today in the moral community and collective action at the core of public healing in Africa.

SUCH HISTORIES HAVE UNUSUAL TEXTURES AND CONTENTS because they rely on oral, linguistic, ethnographic, archaeological, and environmental evidence and because they work with unconventional units of historical agency and subjectivity. Their time frames are broad, covering centuries and even millennia. Archaeological sites, speech areas, or vegetation zones define different spatial units of analysis.⁴²

Environmental studies of the Great Lakes region focus on climatic and vegetation change, seeking to distinguish human from other causes.⁴³ Oral traditions often mention droughts and famines, supporting inferences about the strains of political economic change as well as the conditions that valued such historical memories.⁴⁴ In the second half of the nineteenth century, as the suite of supporting sources grows denser in number and kind, the conceptual complexity of environmental histories of the region grows increasingly rich. The apparently straightforward nature of environmental evidence can then be read through, as well as read into, regional histories of demography and health.⁴⁵

Archaeologists study material culture, spatial patterns, and technological change.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 49, 249.

⁴¹ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 149; see also Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity,” 255–257, for a gloss on such struggles that puts race at the center of contests over the appropriation and control of the use and meanings of time.

⁴² Miller, “History and Africa/Africa and History,” 9–19.

⁴³ David L. Schoenbrun, “The Contours of Vegetation Change and Human Agency in Eastern Africa’s Great Lakes Region: ca. 2000 BC to ca. AD 1000,” *History in Africa* 21 (1994): 269–302; David Taylor and Peter Robertshaw, “Sedimentary Sequences in Western Uganda as Records of Human Environmental Impacts,” *Palaeoecology of Africa* 27 (2001): 63–76; Sharon E. Nicholson, “Historical Fluctuations of Lake Victoria and Other Lakes in the Northern Rift Valley of East Africa,” in John T. Lehman, ed., *Environmental Change and Response in East African Lakes* (Dordrecht, 1998), 7–35.

⁴⁴ J. Bertin Webster, ed., *Chronology, Migration, and Drought in Interlacustrine Africa* (London, 1979); Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 120–121, 127.

⁴⁵ Shane Doyle, *Environmental Crisis and Population Decline: A History of Bunyoro, 1860–1955* (Oxford, 2006); Jean-Pierre Chrétien, ed., *Histoire rurale de L’Afrique des Grands Lacs: Guide de recherches: Bibliographie et textes* (Paris, 1983); C. de l’Epine, “Historique des famines et disettes dans l’Urundi,” *Bulletin Agricole du Congo Belge* 20, no. 3 (1929): 440–442.

The patterning and variability of material culture change over time, revealing much about demographic and social processes, but cultural meanings are inferred by analogy from better-documented contexts, often at a great remove in time from the archaeological context itself.⁴⁶ In considering the practice of analogy, Alison Wylie argues that information exchanges may move in both ways; the archaeological record may subvert conventional wisdoms used to construct ethnographies and historical documents.⁴⁷ In the Great Lakes region, archaeologists have excavated a number of earthworks sites and explored their associations with oral traditions about departed royal dynasties.⁴⁸ Some scholars have situated their interpretations of the function of these sites in a hermeneutics of power and authority drawn from the oral sources, while the dating and structure of the sites suggest older, not necessarily royal associations.⁴⁹

Oral traditions usher in actors as composite figures of persons or groups.⁵⁰ This is especially true in dynastic histories purporting to speak of very early periods in narratives of the actions of royals and nobles, and perhaps of mediums, but not of everyone else.⁵¹ In some parts of the Lakes region, Feierman has observed that the unfolding of genealogies dominates such dynastic traditions, and that genealogies express a sort of time weighted strongly in the direction of masculine forms of authority.⁵² Such traditions highlight change and continuity in particular formulations of the masculine; other historical tales reveal even more about gender dynamics.⁵³ But separating heard from read and uttered from written messages and testimony

⁴⁶ Jan Vansina, "Historians, Are Archaeologists Your Siblings?" *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 369–408; Peter Robertshaw, "Sibling Rivalry? The Intersection of Archaeology and History," *History in Africa* 27 (2000): 261–286.

⁴⁷ Alison Wylie, *Thinking from Things: Essays in the Philosophy of Archaeology* (Berkeley, Calif., 2002), xiv–xv; Ann Brower Stahl, *Making History in Banda* (Cambridge, 2001), 27–40. On "correlating" inferences resting on archaeological and linguistic evidence, see Roger Blench and Matthew Spriggs, eds., *Archaeology and Language*, vol. 1: *Theoretical and Methodological Orientations* (London, 1997), and vol. 2: *Correlating Archaeological and Linguistic Hypotheses* (London, 1998).

⁴⁸ Peter Schmidt, "Oral Traditions, Archaeology, and History: A Short Reflective History," in Peter Robertshaw, ed., *A History of African Archaeology* (London, 1990), 252–270; Robertshaw, "The Age and Function of the Ancient Earthworks of Western Uganda," *Uganda Journal* 47 (2001): 20–33.

⁴⁹ Schmidt, "Oral Traditions," 255–256, 268–270; Robertshaw, "The Age and Function of the Ancient Earthworks," 29–30.

⁵⁰ See David W. Cohen, Stephan F. Miescher, and Luise White, "Voices, Words, and African History," in White, Miescher, and Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, Ind., 2001), 4–16. See also Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wis., 1985); Farias, *Inscriptions*, lxxxv–cvi; Bethwell Alan Ogot, "Luo History and Identity," in White, Miescher, and Cohen, *African Words, African Voices*, 48–50.

⁵¹ "Dynastic" or "court" traditions foreground royal figures or figures linked to royalty. "Clan" traditions foreground the activities of important clan ancestors, sometimes mentioning royal figures. Formal oral and kinesthetic modes of representation facilitate transmission. For approaches to analyzing these sources, see Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 5–13, 207–220; Steven Feierman, *The Shamba Kingdom* (Madison, Wis., 1974), 40–90; Ogot, "Luo History and Identity," 32–50; Neil Kodesh, "History from the Healer's Shrine: Genre, Historical Imagination, and Early Ganda History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (2007), forthcoming.

⁵² Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars," 192.

⁵³ Iris Berger, *Religion and Resistance* (Tervuren, 1981), 32–43; and Berger, "Fertility as Power: Spirit Mediums, Priestesses and the Pre-Colonial State in Interlacustrine East Africa," in David Anderson and Douglas Johnson, eds., *Revealing Prophets* (London, 1994), 65–82; Renee Louise Tantal, "The Early History of Kitara in Western Uganda: Process Models of Religious and Political Change" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1989), 322–329; Nakanyike B. Musisi, "Transformations of Baganda Women: From the Earliest Times to the Demise of the Kingdom in 1966" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1991), 50–113.

is often misleading, and not infrequently just plain impossible. The contents of a written source draw on other types of sources, and any source of one type or another can be put to use in other contexts.

Reconstructed language histories and comparative ethnographic evidence support much of the narrative offered below. One begins by classifying related languages, determining the nature of those relationships, proposing sequences of linguistic divergences, and establishing the basic similarities and differences in vocabulary, phonology, morphology, and tone systems.⁵⁴ The goal is to reconstruct the vocabulary of earlier “proto-languages.”⁵⁵ A proto-language is a historical archive of the continuities and innovations in words and meanings, constituted by their transmission across the generations and representing the durability of speech communities over time.⁵⁶

Hypothetical earlier meanings may be built on the nature of their distributions in the region’s languages and on a set of assumptions about the direction of semantic change. If a word with the same form and the same or similar meaning occurs in a set of contemporary languages “known to be related, it is most probable that all variations were inherited from their common ancestral language.”⁵⁷ Words such as *mugàngà*, “healer, doctor, operator of medicine objects,” whose meanings are very widely distributed, reflect this sort of situation. (See Semantogram 1.)⁵⁸ If the distribution of the variations in meaning that constitute a widening or a narrowing of a word’s semantic field confines itself to a subgroup of a set of related languages, then it is most likely that those variations emerged when the language ancestral to that subgroup was spoken.⁵⁹

The plausibility of these inferences depends on the strength of the genetic clas-

⁵⁴ Terry Crowley, *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1997); Mark Durie and Malcolm Ross, eds., *The Comparative Method Reviewed: Regularity and Irregularity in Language Change* (Oxford, 1996), esp. 3–38; Christopher Ehret, “Language and History,” in Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse, eds., *African Languages: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2000), 272–297. For historical classifications, see Ehret, “Bantu Expansions: Re-envisioning a Central Problem in Early African History,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 1 (2001): 5–41 and “Comments,” 43–87; Felix Chami, “Comment,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 3 (2001): 647–651; and David Schoenbrun, “Representing the Bantu Expansions: What’s at Stake?” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–4.

⁵⁵ Crowley, *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics*, 22–26. In the Great Lakes region, the raw data concerning words and meanings come from archival and published sources, as well as field collections, made since the 1850s. On the complexities of authorship lying behind the creation of early dictionaries, see Derek Peterson, “Translating the Word: Dialogism and Debate in Two Gikuyu Dictionaries,” *Journal of Religious History* 23, no. 1 (1999): 31–50.

⁵⁶ Thilo C. Schadeberg, “Historical Linguistics,” in Derek Nurse and Gerard Philippson, eds., *The Bantu Languages* (London, 2003), 160–163; Crowley, *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics*, 19–26; Malcolm Ross, “Social Networks and Kinds of Speech-Community Event,” in Blench and Spriggs, *Archaeology and Language*, 209–261; Edward Sapir, *Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture: A Study in Method* (Ottawa, 1916); William N. Fenton, “Ethnohistory and Its Problems,” *Ethnohistory* 9 (1962): 1–23; Ehret, “Language and History,” 272–297. Critiques of historical narratives based on these unconventional sources include Stahl, *Making History in Banda*, 1–40, and MacGaffey, “Changing Representations,” 189–207.

⁵⁷ Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*, 5; the notion of regular sound change—“the sound change in any particular language proceeds on the whole according to regularly formulatable rules”—underwrites arguments about linguistic relatedness; Ehret, “Language and History,” 273–275, 277–278.

⁵⁸ The “semantogram” is my invention, designed to display the most significant relationships between the key data supporting historical inferences from comparative linguistics. Their form and function are explained further, below.

⁵⁹ This circumstance is represented below in the semantograms through notation of the new or

sification of the languages included in the comparison; strong overall classifications produce clear subgroups of languages within them.⁶⁰ The genetic classification of Great Lakes Bantu—the earliest genetic unit in play here—is fairly secure. Therefore, the historical relatedness of the major subgroups at the core of the early parts of the history of healing practice is well-attested, generating confidence in the shape of reconstructed words.⁶¹ (See Figure 1.)

Their etymologies constitute a major source of historical evidence. Etymologies are based on common derivational processes in Bantu languages and on the distributions of forms and meanings.⁶² The verb *kusamba* occurs in regularly corresponding form carrying the same meanings—“judge” or “bless”—in many, many Bantu languages. It arguably formed part of the proto-Bantu vocabulary. A passive form of the verb, *kusambwa*, meaning “to be judged, to be blessed,” conforms to the same criteria. But a noun, *musámbwa*, referring to a territorial spirit and the physical form such a spirit might take, occurs as a regularly corresponding form and meaning in a limited number of languages belonging to constituent branches of Great Lakes Bantu. The noun and its new meanings were apparently invented by people who spoke Great Lakes Bantu.

Semantic histories reconstructed in this manner lack the contextual nuances that listeners and speakers draw on to communicate. The meanings attached to reconstructed vocabulary are also culturally flat, because they collapse competing forms of meaning. But they are not agentless abstractions, because the distinctions sustaining meaning result from action and reflection in specific contexts.⁶³ In other words, the abstractions of meaning, given in a “gloss,” represent the durable intellectual and practical contents of the social worlds inside of which people acted. We have no acts, no disagreements over values and strategies. Not a single utterance can be reconstructed. Instead, the results of past actions, disagreements, and speech take the form of inherited and innovated words and meanings. The stability, narrowing, and broadening of fields of meaning referred to by the terms in the semantograms reflect people’s work in achieving continuity and change.⁶⁴

This rich pool of sources tries conventions of historical narrative. Dating and region are vague, gaps in content are common, and chronologies are imprecise. While such narratives of the *longue durée* are flawed and provisional, they are also clearly amenable to exploring durability and transformation in fields such as collective well-being and moral community. These categories, and some of the settings

additional meanings in the row opposite the subgroup in which they occurred. The semantograms thus display historical information about the shape of words and about inherited and innovated meanings.

⁶⁰ Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*, 6.

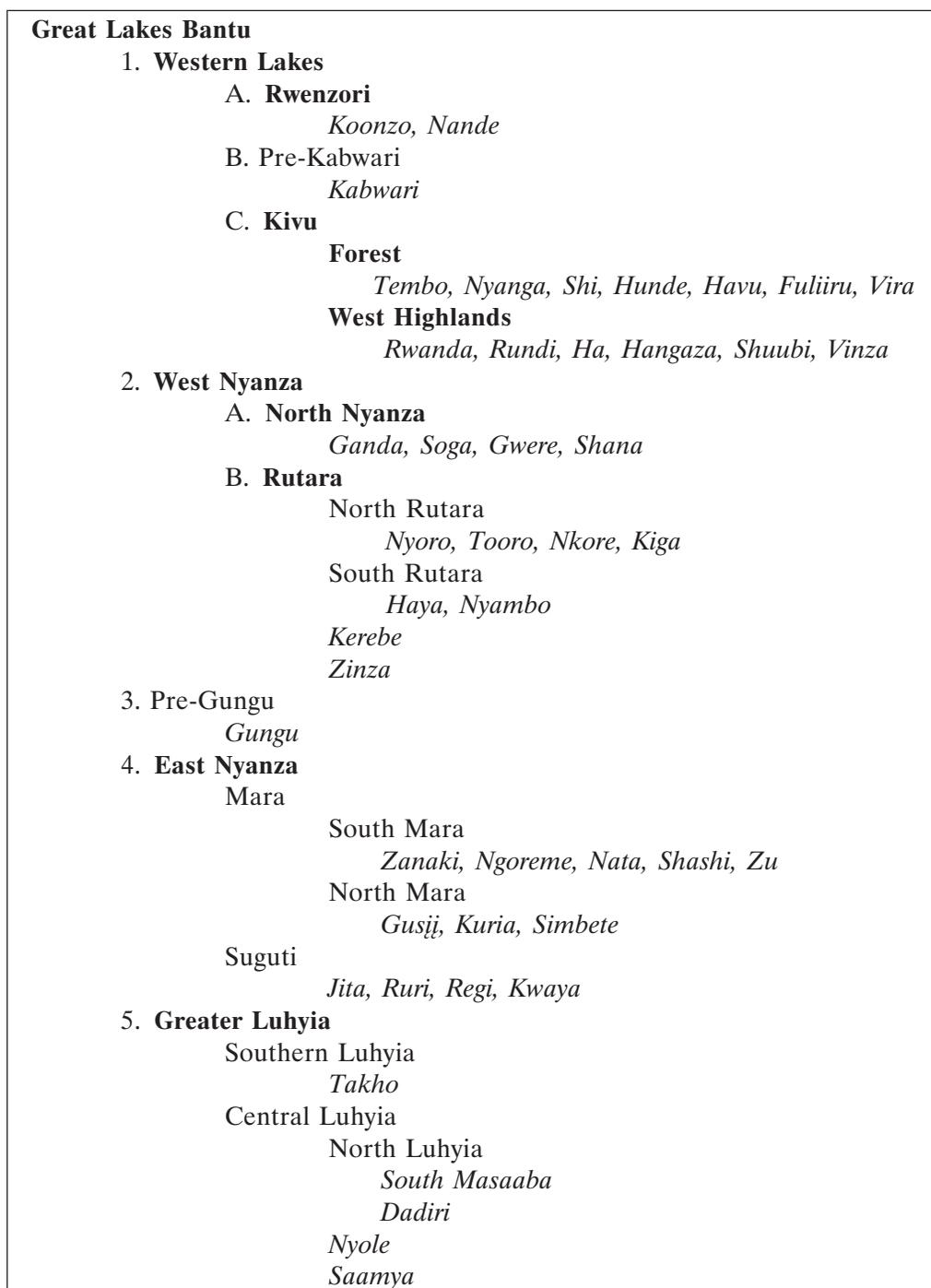
⁶¹ On the historical reality of the different subgroups of “Great Lakes Bantu,” see David Schoenbrun, “Great Lakes Bantu: Classification and Settlement Chronology,” *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika* 14 (1994): 1–62; Derek Nurse, “Historical Classifications of East African Bantu Languages,” in Jean-Marie Hombert and Larry M. Hyman, eds., *Bantu Historical Linguistics: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives* (Stanford, Calif., 1999), 7–10, 27–29.

⁶² Thilo C. Schadeberg, “Derivation,” in Nurse and Philippson, *The Bantu Languages*, 71–89; Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*, 7–8.

⁶³ As translations, word reconstructions and meanings given in English create differences in meaning that seem mediated by notions of equivalence, when, in fact, the very notion of equivalence muddies the waters; see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 17–18. For struggles over the creation of third terms of meaning in the construction of dictionaries, see Peterson, “Translating the Word,” 32, 38–50.

⁶⁴ For an extended example of this, see Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 265–269.

Figure 1. Outline Classification of Great Lakes Bantu¹



¹Many dialects in some of these languages exist or existed. See Schoenbrun, "Great Lakes Bantu," fn. 1.

in which they have force, push past the binary of the antique and the modern in analyzing current struggles over social justice.

COLLECTIVE WELL-BEING AND MORAL COMMUNITY lie at the heart of scholarship on what Mikael Karlström calls the dystopian spirit of witchcraft and the critique of contemporary capitalist relations and political life that it is said to express.⁶⁵ Karlström argues that the “moral community” brought to life in monarchy and in rituals of social reproduction represents the dynamic obverse of the revenge and greed at the heart of witchcraft in Buganda, a monarchy on the north shore of Lake Victoria. The power of witchcraft discourses, Karlström argues, seems “to lie overwhelmingly in their capacity to objectify the perils of illicit power and the antisocial dangers of exploitative accumulation and self-interested consumption.”⁶⁶ If witchcraft is “the force that both generates and feeds upon violations of the fundamental norms of kinship solidarity”—kinship, social prosperity, reciprocity, and hospitality—then “forms of moral community and their modes and nodes of reproduction” should be explored as arenas that Ganda people use to keep their aspirations in play in a world stacked against them.⁶⁷ Ganda use their kingdom as one means to think about moral communities.

Buganda is a famous monarchy on the north shore of Lake Victoria. It is commonly held to have been created when a first king integrated clans into a project of building wealth and order through overlapping networks of reciprocal obligation with himself, a Queen Mother, a Queen Sister, and their courts at the center.⁶⁸ When they talk today about their monarchy, Ganda people insist that moral communities exist because a king exists: “without a king, no clans or lineages, no history or meaning, no morality or culture” would exist.⁶⁹ A complex history informs this compact equation and lies beyond our scope here.⁷⁰ But the claim points to how people draw on indigenous social and historical imaginaries while appropriating Western models of social, religious, and economic life in the name of “tradition.”⁷¹

Karlström shows how, in the 1920s, Ganda articulated “a hybrid sociotemporal consciousness” through a revaluation of custom aimed at “securing a moral collec-

⁶⁵ Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 595–597, 614–616; Nyamjoh, “Comment,” 611–612. For more on this debate, see Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*, 1–3, 15–19, 243–248; Diane Ciekawy and Peter Geschiere, “Containing Witchcraft: Conflicting Scenarios in Postcolonial Africa,” *African Studies Review* 41, no. 3 (1998): 1–14.

⁶⁶ Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 596, leaves aside the epistemological conundrum at the core of witchcraft, stated nicely by Adam Ashforth as “the presumption . . . that the people among whom one lives have the capacity for extraordinary action in the form of witchcraft”; *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*, 13. Because one cannot know who has a motive for such action, the means to act in that manner are also secret; one can therefore only presume that the capable witch is capable of anything. See also T. Luhrmann, “Witchcraft, Morality, and Magic in Contemporary London,” *International Journal of Moral and Social Sciences* 1 (1986): 77–94.

⁶⁷ Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 595–596, 604–608; see also Ekeh, “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa,” 91–112, Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*, 15–19, 66–72.

⁶⁸ Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, 25–53; Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*, 95–132.

⁶⁹ Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 605.

⁷⁰ M. Semakula M. Kiwanuka, *A History of Buganda from the Foundations of the Kingdom to 1900* (New York, 1972); Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge, 1996); Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, 59–87; Kodesh, “Beyond the Royal Gaze,” 254–331.

⁷¹ Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, 165–197; Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 600–604.

tivity” against the fractious threats of antisocial individualisms. In the 1990s, this gave way to a cultural revivalism of their monarchy aimed at protecting a moral collectivity from an unstable postcolonial state.⁷² Both of these efforts rested on redefining and reusing existing languages of moral community. However, Kamali’s scene—which unfolds inside Buganda—does not fit with Karlström’s picture of a Ganda cultural royalism “concerned with constituting visible and circumscribed, hence legitimate, relations of authority and hierarchy”; nor does it fit with conventional views which hold that witchcraft practice “expresses and generates intergenerational antagonism.”⁷³ People worry about power and wealth—but not as something “socially divisive, destructive, secretive, parasitic.” They articulate individual needs and desires, but they do so in a public setting not clearly circumscribed by hierarchy and authority. The practices of social reproduction in Kamali’s scene refer literally to a topos of “moral sociality”: the *omusámbwa* spirit and its abode. The sociality of the scene is unstable, and the authority of *Jjajjà* is fleeting. Studying the regional historical trajectories of the different ideas that people used to think about health and to practice healing repositions the contents of moral communities, moral behavior, and the changing institutional and conceptual sources for these vectors of action in Africa. To appreciate why this is so, one must be familiar with the social basis of health and healing practices in African history. Only then can one understand how the history of public healing is central to larger themes in the history of the Great Lakes region.

HEALTH IN AFRICAN HISTORY implicates histories of the environment, of the state, of gender; it is a social history. Healing in African history implicates other histories, too—of morality, of the body, of the person, of relations between life and death, of notions of efficacy and capacity. They are histories of practical reason—in intimate as well as in public life—as much as they are histories of the forces that cause illness and sustain wellness.⁷⁴ African histories of healing intersect with these larger narratives, but they must grapple with concepts of causality not easily translated across cultures and forms of action greatly concerned with “the social embeddedness” of suffering and misfortune.⁷⁵

Scholarship on precolonial healing in eastern Africa has concentrated on the nexus of causation binding therapeutic approaches to illness. In Feierman’s formulation, diagnoses move between two relatively stable categories: illnesses of God and illnesses of people. Illnesses of God just happen, but illnesses of people are caused

⁷² Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 604, 605.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 609.

⁷⁴ Steven Feierman and John M. Janzen, “Introduction,” in Feierman and Janzen, eds., *The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992), 1, 12; Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 2–22. The question of how African healing has been read into and through “religion” in Africa lies beyond the scope of this essay, but see Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago, 1985); Rosalind Shaw, “The Invention of ‘African Traditional Religion,’” *Religion* 20 (1990): 339–353; Paul Landau, “‘Religion’ and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model,” *Journal of Religious History* 23, no. 1 (1999): 8–30, esp. 19–29.

⁷⁵ Steven Feierman, “Explanation and Uncertainty in the Medical World of Ghaambo,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 74 (2000): 320–334; Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 64–106, 163–179; Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*, 10.

by human action, especially the vengeful and antisocial actions of people labeled “sorcerers” or “witches.” For example, people in many parts of eastern and southern Africa often explained droughts as the work of an enemy; “in a sense,” a drought was “an illness of humanity raised to a public level.”⁷⁶ Yet, not all droughts were understood in this way. Some just happened, especially those which exceeded the territorial reach of a given healer. Illnesses of people precipitated actions involving “counter-sorcery” by a healer or a rainmaker greater than the one creating the illness or drought. By this causal logic, people approach treatment through trial and error rather than through a differential diagnosis.⁷⁷

These formulations of causality defined the scope of public health practices. Scholars distinguish offerings and sacrifices to the ancestral figures of a particular group of kin from propitiating figures linked to larger communities with spheres of efficacy beyond those of families or close kin.⁷⁸ The powers of kings, court ritualists, chiefs, certain mediums, and rainmakers—common actors in the domain of public health—are often understood to work in this expansive scope. Spirit possession activities cross these boundaries; a family spirit may be the source of public dancing in which participation was elective.⁷⁹ Epidemic crises precipitated efforts to control people’s movements and quotidian activities, although these issues have been little studied before the nineteenth century.⁸⁰

Healers and patients relied on medicines, “substances with powers to transform bodies,” in order to achieve health.⁸¹ A medicine’s transformative capacities came from its substance, from speech, and from the individuals and collectivities who made and used it. Some medicines—such as those given for upset stomach—transformed bodies solely because of their substance. But other medicines—including those used to keep thieves out of a field of ripe crops or those used to keep hail from falling—transformed material realities (not just bodies) because of their substance, because of their activation by the speech of a powerful person or persons, and because of other actions of persons and collectivities.⁸² Substances used in complex, protective “medicines” (often called “charms” or “amulets” in European languages) were often central to “completing the metonymic chain from the original power source to its specific beneficiary.”⁸³ Understanding how medicines work redraws the boundaries between materiality, speech, the existential, and the social, depending on the nature of the outcome that supplicants seek to bring about or to forestall.

⁷⁶ Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, 253.

⁷⁷ Such distinctions and causality are quite old in the region; see Janzen, *Ngoma*, 65–67; Svein Bjerke, “Witchcraft as Explanation: The Case of the Zinza,” in Anita Jacobson-Widding and David Westerlund, eds., *Culture, Experience, and Pluralism: Essays on African Ideas of Illness and Healing* (Stockholm, 1989), 219–233; Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 73–90.

⁷⁸ Gloria Waite, “Public Health in Precolonial East-Central Africa,” in Feierman and Janzen, *The Social Basis of Health and Healing*, 214–216; Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 73–86; Berger, “Fertility as Power,” 68; Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, 253–256.

⁷⁹ Waite, “Public Health,” 215; J. Matthew Schoffeleers, *River of Blood: The Genesis of a Martyr Cult in Southern Malawi, c. A.D. 1600* (Madison, Wis., 1999).

⁸⁰ Doyle, *Environmental Crisis and Population Decline*; McCurdy, “Transforming Associations.”

⁸¹ Susan Reynolds Whyte, Sjaak van der Geest, and Anita Hardon, *Social Lives of Medicines* (Cambridge, 2002), 5.

⁸² Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967), 350; cited in Whyte, van der Geest, and Hardon, *Social Lives of Medicines*, 10.

⁸³ MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 86–87; for more on metonymic chains and the power of medicines, see 78–81.

The illnesses on which medicines were designed to act were matters of experience and reflection as well as of biology. They were a “syndrome of experience” and not a “mirror of nature.”⁸⁴ As the historian Julie Livingston has argued, this means that diagnosis and treatment tended to reinforce “the overarching unity of the natural, cosmological, and social realms—all of which were in flux.”⁸⁵ Even with the richest imaginable collection of historical evidence, it is difficult to untangle the particular changes in the relations between these realms. But because the language of illness was socially constructed, authorized, and contested, historians of precolonial Africa can probe aspects of the role of language in these processes when they compare the evidence of vocabulary in reconstructing the shape of interlocking ideas, practices, and things that “run together for members of a society.”⁸⁶

The institution called *ngòmà* exemplifies some of these issues. The term *ngòmà* means “drum” in Bantu languages from Cameroon to Namibia and from Kenya to Zimbabwe. It also means a sort of musical performance in a long swath of languages east of the Central African forest zone, reaching to South Africa.⁸⁷ *Ngòmà* is a set of public healing practices, materials, and settings that people use to pursue health, wealth, and protection of entire communities and of evanescent collectivities from natural or spiritual social dangers, and to commemorate departed persons. Through *ngòmà*, people make sense of misfortune, manifested in disease or symptoms of disease, attributed to various sorts of disembodied spiritual beings. Treatment provides them with a name for their misfortune and incorporates sufferers into a larger community of afflicted persons.⁸⁸

In general, *ngòmà* involves one or more sufferers, one or more healers, a group of dancers or singers and musicians, and their musical instruments (drums and rattles, and often whistles, clappers, zithers, and harps). *Ngòmà* involves invoking ancestral, nature, or territorial spirits, sometimes by a medium, who may or may not belong to the group of healers. The kinesthetics of drumming and dancing centers public performance and staging in healing through *ngòmà*.⁸⁹ All across the territory of *ngòmà*, the sufferer sings to the assembled group of supporters and healers, who sing back. When the public healing of drumming and possession dances occurs beyond royal, colonial, or police surveillance, it may embody a refusal of the com-

⁸⁴ Byron J. Good, *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, 1994), 2, 5, 65–115. Some of the meaning carried by words corresponds regularly to empirical realities—people use them to speak about what exists and how things happen—while other meaning is embroiled in issues of why some things exist, or cease to exist, and why things happen.

⁸⁵ Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 163.

⁸⁶ Byron J. Good, “The Heart of What’s the Matter: The Semantics of Illness in Iran,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 1 (1977): 27. But experience introduces inconsistencies and innovations into what scholars routinely treat as a medical “system” to render it effectively a non-system for patients who nevertheless rely on it; see Murray Last, “The Importance of Knowing about Not Knowing: Observations from Hausaland,” in Feierman and Janzen, *The Social Basis of Health and Healing*, 393–406.

⁸⁷ Janzen, *Ngoma*, 69–71, 197. Although *ngòmà* cults are present across this large zone, they are not necessarily the most prevalent form of healing; see Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*, 50–61.

⁸⁸ Janzen, *Ngoma*, 77–79, 83. The political economy of *ngòmà* is explored in Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry and Rebellion on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1995); Terence O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa: The Beni Ngoma* (London, 1975); Rebecca Gearhart, “Ngoma Memories: How Ritual Music and Dance Shaped the Northern Kenya Coast,” *African Studies Review* 48, no. 3 (2005): 22–35. The focus on public healing underestimates the centrality of familial care-giving to achieving health. See Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 235.

⁸⁹ Amandina Lihamba, “Health and the African Theatre,” *Review of African Political Economy* 36 (1986): 35–40.

monsense view that force leads to control.⁹⁰ The therapeutic core of the institution might be understood as leading to the “consolidation of substantial resources, material and human,” and as aiding “the long-term reordering of institutions of redress, economic redistribution, and ideological change.”⁹¹ The flexibility of these healing practices in treating afflictions of radically different scales and phenomena follows from *ngòrà*’s modular form, a form that facilitates innovation.⁹²

Healing practices in East Africa change as people assess the efficacy of treatments in terms of practical reason and moral principles. People in Uganda embraced injections because they perceived the effectiveness of the medicines delivered by that technique, and “efficacy provides evidence that changes the culture of health.”⁹³ When people say that an elder’s capacity to curse her juniors has caused an illness, they represent both the cause and the effect of cursing in terms of social relations and moral power. Her moral capacities contrast with the vengeful, greedy desires behind the immorality of witches. The contents of morality and immorality change as environmental, agricultural, and political processes engender struggles and debates over them, closing down and opening up what it is possible to argue about and what it is possible to envision as “a morally better or worse world than the one in which” people lived.⁹⁴ The substance of an African regional history of durability and rupture in the tense relation between existential uncertainty, the challenges of providing care, and healers’ attempts to manipulate reality raises questions about how that history reconfigures approaches to more recent moralities and modernities.

WHAT PRACTICES RUN THROUGH the history of public healing between the Great Lakes?⁹⁵ Spirit possession and mediumship have been in play from earliest times, as revealed by the historical development of the meanings attached to the term *ku-bándwa*. (See Semantogram 1.) Today, the verb means “to be possessed by or consecrated to a spirit,” in a discontinuous distribution that includes languages in all branches of Great Lakes Bantu, except East Nyanza.⁹⁶ (See Figure 1.) The meaning represents an innovation from the verb *kubánda*, which means “to press down or knock down” in a still wider contemporary distribution.⁹⁷ Great Lakes Bantu-speaking healers and patients likened the experience of being possessed by a spirit to the feeling of being overwhelmed or knocked down. They made a noun from this verb to name the spirit who did the possessing and the medium who had been possessed.

⁹⁰ Feierman, “Colonizers, Scholars,” 199, emphasizes the radical difference between the evanescent power in public healing and the stable power of states; Janzen, *Ngoma*, 75–77, and Berger, *Religion and Resistance*, emphasize public healing as opposition to state power.

⁹¹ C. H. Stuart, “Review of *Lemba 1650–1930*,” *Africana Journal* 13 (1986): 235–237.

⁹² A point gleaned from discussions with Steven Feierman, Kathryn Geurts, Nancy Rose Hunt, Murray Last, Julie Livingston, Sinfree Makoni, and Lynn Thomas.

⁹³ Whyte, van der Geest, and Hardon, *Social Lives of Medicines*, 113.

⁹⁴ Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 19.

⁹⁵ For the broader context in the Great Lakes region, see Bethwell Alan Ogot, “The Great Lakes Region,” in Djibril Tamsir Niane, ed., *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* (Paris, 1984), 498–524; Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*; Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*.

⁹⁶ Berger, *Religion and Resistance*, 67–70; Schoenbrun, *Historical Reconstruction*, 178–179; Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 112, 202–204, 233–234; Tantalá, “The Early History of Kitara,” 313–315.

⁹⁷ See Schoenbrun, *Historical Reconstruction*, 178–179, 46–47, 109–110; Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 266–269; Claire Grégoire, “Le champ sémantique du thème bantou *-bánjá,” *African Languages/Langues Africaines* 2 (1976): 1–12.

SEMANTOGRAM 1.

Social Sources of Health and Illness

[Read from top to bottom in order to go from the past to the present and perceive meaning retentions and shifts]

	*-zimu n. 1/2 ¹ From *-dima 'to extinguish'	*-bándwa v. From *-bánda 'to split' (tr.) [plus passive suffix]	*-sámbwa n. 3/4, 5/6 From *-samba 'judge, render justice, bless' [plus agentive noun suffix]	*-cwezi n. 1/2 From -cwerwa 'to spit'	*lubaale n. 11/2 From *-baale 'stone'
Proto-Bantu ↓ ↓ ↓	'Ghost of long-departed person; form spirit might take'	'Split or cleave' [not in passive]	'Be judged, have justice rendered, be blessed' [with passive suffix]	Not present	Not present
Proto-Great Lakes Bantu ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓	Retained; may become a *-sámbwa In class 17 'land of the dead'	'Be seized in head by spirit' (*-zimu, *-sambwa, others?) [plus passive suffix] 'Be consecrated to spirit'; n. 'spirit type; medium'	'Lineage spirits, the territory they control, form spirit might take' (python, whirlwind, stone, tree, stream, spring, pool of water)	Not present	Not present
Proto-West Nyanza Bantu ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓	Retained	Retained	Retained; but included named, portable spirits (such as Mukasa) controlled genres of experience and environmental categories	Not present	Not present
Proto-North Nyanza Bantu	Retained; but seen as harmful?	'Be possessed by lubaale spirit or by muzimu, be consecrated to such spirits'	Retained	Not present	A sort of mbándwa spirit or its medium; later, Ganda 'national' deities
Proto-Rutara Bantu [Descended from Proto-West Nyanza Bantu]	Retained; but seen as harmful?	Retained plus 'be possessed by *-cwezi spirit' Forms: mbándwa eziragura ('black spirits'), mbándwa ezeera ('white spirits')	Retained only in languages along Lake Victoria's coast (Haya dialects, Zinza)	'Spirit with no heirs, its medium' From mbándwa ezeera category; later included named spirits of departed leaders	Not present
Proto-Western Lakes Bantu [Descended from Proto-Great Lakes Bantu] ↓	Meaning from Great Lakes Bantu retained; no relation to *-sámbwa	Meaning from Great Lakes Bantu retained	Not present	Not present	Not present
Proto-West Highlands Bantu	Retained	'Be consecrated to special cult (Ryángombe, Kiranga, Nyabingi)'	In Ha (Heru) refers to Zinza spirits	Not present	Not present

¹The numbers following the root refer to a system of classifying noun prefixes denoting singular and plural forms; see Francis Katamba, "Bantu Nominal Morphology," in Nurse and Philippson, *Bantu Languages*, 104.

Travelers' accounts from the nineteenth century describe spirit possession as tackling personal health concerns, concerns for the health of entire communities (defined by a particular locality or set of relatives), and concerns with the health of entire territories (mainly with ensuring or restoring their fecundity).⁹⁸

The specialists mentioned in Semantogram 2 integrated the social basis of knowledge relevant to health and healing with the power of speech, most clearly in public forms of healing such as possession (*kubándwa*), offering sacrifices (*kutámbe*), and divination (*kulågula*).⁹⁹ Descriptions of these forms of healing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries repeatedly mention the presence of numerous participants, patients, their families, onlookers, mediums, and priests and doctor-diviners themselves.¹⁰⁰ Spirit possession and propitiation, often organized by specialists, created large evanescent publics.

Healing practice relied on powerful speech, clearly expressed in the meaning of "to divine" or "divination." The West Nyanza and Western Lakes word for these acts was derived from a verb that meant "to promise" or "to teach." By adding a reversive suffix to that verb, speakers of these languages expressed the act of promising or teaching things and ideas to or for others. This morphological innovation is widely distributed in eastern Bantu languages and is quite old. Its retention in proto-Great Lakes Bantu reflects key aspects of being a healing specialist between the Great Lakes in the latter centuries B.C.E., when Great Lakes Bantu existed as a speech community. Diviners were master speakers, and they were master listeners. Their ability to "divine" the cause of an individual's, a collective's, or a territory's misfortune relied on eliciting and reframing information.

Great Lakes peoples thought about health and prosperity together. Their diviner-healers, the *bafúmú*, possessed a variety of powers, among them the power to heal or cure, *kukíla*, which also meant, for Lakes peoples, "to prosper." They used an even older word, *mugàngà*, to name doctors.¹⁰¹ But they understood a *mugàngà* to be

⁹⁸ Steven Feierman, "Struggles for Control: The Social Roots of Health and Healing in Modern Africa," *African Studies Review* 28, nos. 2/3 (1985): 73–147, 82; Janzen, *Ngoma*, 63–74; Gloria Waite, *Traditional Medicine and Health Care* (Lewiston, Maine, 1992), 11–19; Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 107–113.

⁹⁹ On divination and sacrifice, see Schoenbrun, *Historical Reconstruction*, 207–208, 239–241; on the relationship of speech to a medicine's healing capacities, see Feierman, "Explanation and Uncertainty," 324–326; on public healing, see Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars"; on efficacy more generally, see Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 107–115; Whyte, *Questioning Misfortune*, 87–152; Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*, 57–61.

¹⁰⁰ James Augustus Grant, *A Walk across Africa* (London, 1864), 266–267; John Hanning Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Sources of the Nile* (Edinburgh, 1863), 261; Harry H. Johnston, *The Uganda Protectorate*, 2 vols. (London, 1902), 2: 587–590, 631–632, 678; G. Schweinfurth et al., *Emin Pasha in Central Africa: Being a Collection of His Letters and Journals* (London, 1888), 92, 285; Samuel W. Baker, *The Albert Nyanza* (London, 1866), 444–445. On the antiquity of popularizing mediumship, see Berger, *Religion and Resistance*, 68–73; Tantala, "The Early History of Kitara," 319–322.

¹⁰¹ Janzen, *Ngoma*, 67–68; Schoenbrun, *Historical Reconstruction*, 139, 186–187, 201–202, 203; Christopher Ehret, *An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Charlottesville, Va., 1998), 158–160; Catherine Cymone Fourshey, "Agriculture, Ecology, Kinship and Gender: A Social and Economic History of Tanzania's Corridor, 400 BC to 1900 AD" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 2002), 148–150; Rhonda Gonzales, "Continuity and Change: Thought, Belief, and Practice in the History of the Ruvu Peoples of Central East Tanzania, 200 B.C. to A.D. 1800" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 2002), 78–98. On the earlier history of **-kúmú*, see Jan Vansina, "Deep Down Time: Political Tradition in Central Africa," *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 341–362.

SEMANTOGRAM 2.

Practitioners and Practices

[Read from top to bottom in order to go from the past toward the present and perceive meaning retentions and shifts]

	*-lāgula v.; *-lāgudj n. From *-dāg- 'teach; promise' plus reversive suffix, giving v. 'exchange teachings or promises'	*-kūmú n. Etymology uncertain	*-gàngà n. From *-gàngà v. 'to tie up'	*-tāmba v. From *-tāmba 'to set a trap' or 'to walk, travel'
Proto-Bantu ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓	Not present; in Proto-Mashariki: v. 'Divine, prophecy'; n. 'divination specialist'	'Leader, person of wealth'	Not present? In Proto-Mashariki: 'healer, doctor'	Not present; in Proto-Mashariki: 'offer, sacrifice (by slaughtering) in order to heal'
Proto-Great Lakes Bantu ↓	Retained	'Doctor-diviner, general practitioner'	Retained	Retained
Proto-West Nyanza Bantu ↓	Retained	Retained included diagnosing spirit possession	Retained	Retained
Proto-North Nyanza [Descended from Proto-West Nyanza Bantu]	Retained	Retained in Proto- West Nyanza meaning	Retained	Retained, in Proto-West Nyanza meaning. Later, may have included human sacrifice in Buganda
Proto-Rutara Bantu [Descended from Proto-West Nyanza Bantu]	Retained; now included <i>mbāndwa</i> <i>eziragura</i> spirits	Retained in Proto- West Nyanza meaning; later they might be present at royal courts	Retained	Retained in Proto-West Nyanza meaning
Proto-Western Lakes Bantu ↓	Retained	Retained in Proto- Great Lakes Bantu meaning	Retained; added meaning in class 14 'good health'	Retained
Proto-West Highlands Bantu	Retained	Retained in Proto- Great Lakes Bantu meaning	Not present; replaced by <i>mufumú</i> n.	Retained; now included dancing

particularly gifted in one or another area of the larger territory of healing practice, including divination.

The spirits, specialists, medicines (see Semantogram 3), or concepts that healers and patients used over the last fifteen hundred years exceed the groupings given in the semantograms, but they represent a basic, generative architecture within which people innovated and revised healing practices during various periods of rupture in

Great Lakes history. These terms, which have been confidently reconstructed as parts of the vocabulary of West Nyanza and Western Lakes speech communities, formed the practical and theoretical material with which later speech communities created new modes of public healing. They used other words to name grain crops, domestic animals, and farming techniques either directly or indirectly attested in the region's archaeological and paleoecological records. Both glottochronological and radiocarbon dating methods point to the middle of the first millennium C.E. as the time during which these speech communities of farmers and herders (and their grains and cattle) and public healers existed.¹⁰²

The semantic histories of words for medicines, spirits, specialists, and techniques underscore the close relations between ideas of health and conditions of prosperity, implying that healing practices existed in creative tension with social organization and political culture. These two large domains of life disrupted or ensured conditions of prosperity, rendering the practical aspirations of persons, communities, and leaders in social life the proper territory of healing. Healing institutions were designed by their practitioners to cure illness, end famine, remove epidemics, and so on. They were about action, the capacity for action, and the particular moral and social conditions that shaped action.

IN THE MID-FIRST MILLENNIUM of the Common Era, West Nyanza, Greater Luhya, and East Nyanza societies, living around and near to the shores of Lake Victoria, drew on the concept of ancestral ghosts (the *bazimu*) to invent a new category of spirits that could reside in natural locales, such as caves, springs, lakes, or rivers, and whose range of efficacy had clear territorial dimensions. They worked out the meanings and capacities of these novel territorial nature spirits during a time of agricultural specialization. Productive pastoralism, grain and banana farming, began to generate conditions that induced leaders to create the concept of primacy in a region and to develop patronage systems designed to compose communities of diverse followers while at the same time controlling access to productive forms of wealth such as cattle herds and banana gardens, through exclusionary inheritance systems based on descent.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 107–115; Taylor and Robertshaw, “Sedimentary Sequences in Western Uganda,” 72–74; on glottochronology, a technique used to measure in years the patterned accumulation of new vocabulary items, and thus the dates at which various speech communities formed and dispersed, which may then be correlated with various archaeologically attested pottery traditions, see Christopher Ehret, “Testing the Expectations of Glottochronology against the Correlations of Archaeology and Language in Africa,” in Colin Renfrew, Alison McMahon, and Leonard Trask, eds., *Time Depth in Historical Linguistics*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2000), 2: 373–399; for a critique of glottochronology and a suggestion for direct associations between the archaeological and historical linguistic records, see Vansina, *How Societies are Born*, 4–11.

¹⁰³ On livestock and bananas between the Great Lakes, see Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 70–83; Ehret, *An African Classical Age*, 77–88, 133–136; Gerda Rossel, *A Taxonomic-Linguistic Study of Plantain in Africa* (Leiden, 1998), 183–188; B. Julius Lejju, Peter Robertshaw, and David Taylor, “Africa’s Earliest Bananas?” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 33 (2006): 102–113; Peter Robertshaw and David Taylor, “Climate Change and the Rise of Political Complexity in Western Uganda,” *Journal of African History* 41, no. 1 (2000): 1–28; Wrigley, *Kingship and State*, 60–62, 235, 238; Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*, 22–25; Andrew Reid, “The Role of Cattle in the Later Iron Age of Southern Uganda” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1991).

**SEMANTOGRAM 3.
Medicines and Techniques**

[Read from top to bottom in order to go from the past to the present and to perceive meaning retentions and shifts]

	*-komero n. 7/8. From v. *-komera 'be strong, alive' < v. *-kóma 'become finished' + prep. suff. > 'realize potential' ¹	*-sango n. various classes. From v. *-sánga 'find, discover'	-gica/-gico n. 9/10. From v. *-kita 'to do'	*-ti n. 3/4, 14 From n. *-ti 'tree, shrub'	*-sigo n. 1, 7, 14 From v. *-siga 'leave behind, abandon'
Proto-Bantu ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓	?	Not present; in Mashariki as 'charm, consecrated medicine'	'Charm, blessing' (enabled by speech)	'Medicine' Often in class 14 as 'essence' of trees or shrubs'	? 'Offering, vow, sacrifice'
Proto-Great Lakes Bantu ↓ ↓ ↓	'Medicine; Efficacious thing when activated by speech'	'Charm; Efficacious thing when activated by speech or song'	Retained	Retained	Retained
Proto-West Nyanza Bantu ↓	Retained	Not present	Retained	Retained	Retained
Proto-North Nyanza Bantu [Descended from Proto-West Nyanza Bantu]	Not present	Not present	Retained	Retained	Not present
Proto-Rutara Bantu [Descended from Proto-West Nyanza Bantu]	Retained	Not present	Retained; now included specific materials (wood and <i>ntembe</i> seeds) and use by diviners and Mukasa's mediums or priests	Retained	Retained
Proto-Western Lakes Bantu ↓ ↓	Retained	Retained in Great Lakes Bantu meaning	Retained in general meaning 'charm, blessing'	Retained	Retained
Proto-West Highlands Bantu [Descended from Proto-Western Lakes Bantu]	Retained	Retained	Retained	Retained	Retained; comes to mean 'sort of territorial nature spirit' after c. 1500

¹Could also be from a verb meaning 'to hit, strike' (plus prepositional suffix), indicating how words spoken over medicine release or open its capacity to heal.

People thought of territorial spirits, which they called *misámbwa* or *masámbwa* (sg. *musámbwa*), as ancestors of the first groups or lineages in a territory.¹⁰⁴ They were implicated in the fecundity of a territory and the prosperity of its residents. This range of efficacy differed from that of ancestral ghosts, whose interests extended only to members of a particular family or of an extended lineage. Firstcomer groups drew on the knowledge that *bazimu* could return from *okuzimu* (lit. “where ancestral ghosts exist”) or Ghostland as animals or snakes in claiming that their ghosts returned for the good of communities larger than a single lineage or neighborhood. Their ghosts, now called *misámbwa*, resided *in* the territory of the firstcomer lineage, and caring for them ensured fecundity and prosperity in their territory and fertility for all its residents, be they members of the firstcomer lineage or not. Twentieth-century sources report that rocky hills, large trees, or springs were places where people encountered such spirits.

Late in the first millennium, people developed specialized modes of producing food that led to increased competition for key resources such as pasturelands and for control over productive banana gardens.¹⁰⁵ At this time, people began to refer to unilineal descent groups as vessels for defending rights to land established by firstcomers. Such talk was a new way to think about which persons had the legitimacy and authority to enact ritual control over both ancient and newly established zones of settlement. Propitiating the spirits of a territory controlled by a lineage and its ancestors—the *misámbwa* spirits—amounted to a claim by homestead heads that a key thread in residential or territorial social identity ran through them. A group of firstcomers who established new settlements at the fringes of older areas of settlement could have used this ritual expression of solidarity and exclusiveness, either at the moment of new settlement or retroactively, to bolster their community as it grew in wealth. This sort of public healing helped those who managed to establish their firstcomer credentials to create, gradually, a group identity tied directly to the lands in which they had settled.

At places such as Munsu, in western Uganda, archaeologists date to the tenth century the earliest phases of settlement surrounding rocky promontories and rock shelters. What perhaps began as a settlement of kin who propitiated ancestral ghosts on the hilltops and in the shelters grew in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries into much larger settlements of people not necessarily related by kinship, with earthworks that enclosed the favored abodes of the new *basámbwa* spirits, and sat at nodes of regional trade, including in exotic goods such as glass beads and copper bracelets.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ The following two paragraphs rely on Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 199–203; additional data appear in Schoenbrun, *Historical Reconstruction*, 226–228; Kodesh, “Beyond the Royal Gaze,” 144–194.

¹⁰⁵ Words for unilineal inheritance rules and for forms of property defined by the presence of perennial crops were innovated at the same time in several parts of the region; see Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 131–146, 171–184, 222–226, 231–234. Robertshaw and Taylor, “Climate Change,” 24–27, warn against privileging cattle over the capacity of grain crops to weather climatic oscillations. See also Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, 72–73, for a brilliant rendering of how people saw a state as a coming together around forms and nodes of authority based on followers, on spiritual power, and on relationships with a king.

¹⁰⁶ On regional trade routes, see John Tosh, “The Northern Interlacustrine Region,” in Richard Gray and David Birmingham, eds., *Pre-Colonial African Trade* (London, 1970), 103–118; Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*, 135–148; Henri Médard, “Croissance et crises de la royauté du Buganda au XIXe siècle,” 2 vols. (Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris 1, 2001), 1: 137–147; on beads and bracelets, see Peter Robertshaw, “Munsu Earthworks: A Preliminary Report,” *Azania* 32 (1997): 15, 17.

The innovations, recognizable in the linguistic evidence, turned on making territorial spirits portable in the zones of older settlement inhabited fifteen hundred years ago by West Nyanza-speaking communities. In building the earthworks, “elite groups both appropriated for themselves and expropriated from their followers the power of the ancestors.”¹⁰⁷ The crucial links in this transformation were the medium (the *mbándwa*) and the institution of *kubándwa*, through which the ancestral ghosts and the territorial spirits could communicate with their communities of rememberers. West Nyanza societies worked with this supple institution to convert *kubándwa* mediums of ancestral ghosts into the mediums of territorial spirits.

FOLLOWING THIS RECONFIGURATION OF MEDIUMSHIP, after the turn of the current millennium, the West Nyanza community fully dissolved into its daughter speech communities of Rutara and North Nyanza. (See Map 2.) And sites such as Munsa grew in size and came to include earthworks. Speakers of Rutaran and North Nyanzan extended the semantic range of the concept of territorial nature spirits tied to a specific firstcomer group by using that term to describe named and mobile spirits responsible for the health of entire genres of experience and environment.¹⁰⁸ As territorial leaders expanded the range of the services they provided to their followers, they drew into their political economies the material sources of wealth that had sustained the smaller-scale firstcomer communities.¹⁰⁹

Individual territorial cults could be widespread across the landscape, a circumstance that limited the ability of any single cult to export or project its power to areas where other cults were already in place.¹¹⁰ Territorial cults and the power to allocate institutions of service and tribute transcended the authority of firstcomers in Rutaran and North Nyanzan societies. Wealthy newcomers to a region could curtail the authority of firstcomer groups by creating new nodes of patronage and of military alliance. They used these new networks of followers to redistribute the material wealth in people and livestock that flowed through the increasingly territorially expansive chiefdoms that had emerged during the era of reconfigured mediumship and lineage ideologies just mentioned. Patrilineal marriage alliances created and monitored redistributive networks. Wealthy newcomers to a territory, as a new chief’s following, could contest firstcomer claims to its wealth in land and people with new arrays of debt and service relations displayed at events such as weddings and funerals.¹¹¹ Drawing on the close connections between a shrine-keeper’s local spirit and its sur-

¹⁰⁷ Robertshaw, “The Age and Function of the Ancient Earthworks,” 29; Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 199–207, 219–226.

¹⁰⁸ On clan networks, see Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 121–132; on clans and therapeutic networks in Buganda, see Kodesh, “History from the Healer’s Shrine.”

¹⁰⁹ Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 131–151, 185–195, 219–226; David Newbury, *Kings and Clans: Ijwi Island and the Lake Kivu Rift, 1780–1840* (Madison, Wis., 1991), 141–142, 209–226; Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 88–94, 170–183; David W. Cohen, “The Political Transformation of Northern Busoga, 1600–1900,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 22, no. 3/4 (1982): 465–485.

¹¹⁰ The following arguments draw on and revise Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 202, 204–206. On territorial cults, see Berger, *Religion and Resistance*, 68–70; Richard Werbner, “Introduction,” in Werbner, ed., *Regional Cults* (London, 1977), xxiv–xxxvi; J. Matthew Schoffeleers, “Introduction,” in Schoffeleers, ed., *Guardians of the Land* (Gwelo, 1979), 1–46; Christopher Wrigley, “The River God and the Historians: Myth and History in the Shire Valley,” *Journal of African History* 29, no. 2 (1988): 367–383.

¹¹¹ David W. Cohen, “The Cultural Topography of a ‘Bantu Borderland’: Busoga, 1500–1850,” *Journal of African History* 29, no. 1 (1988): 57–79.

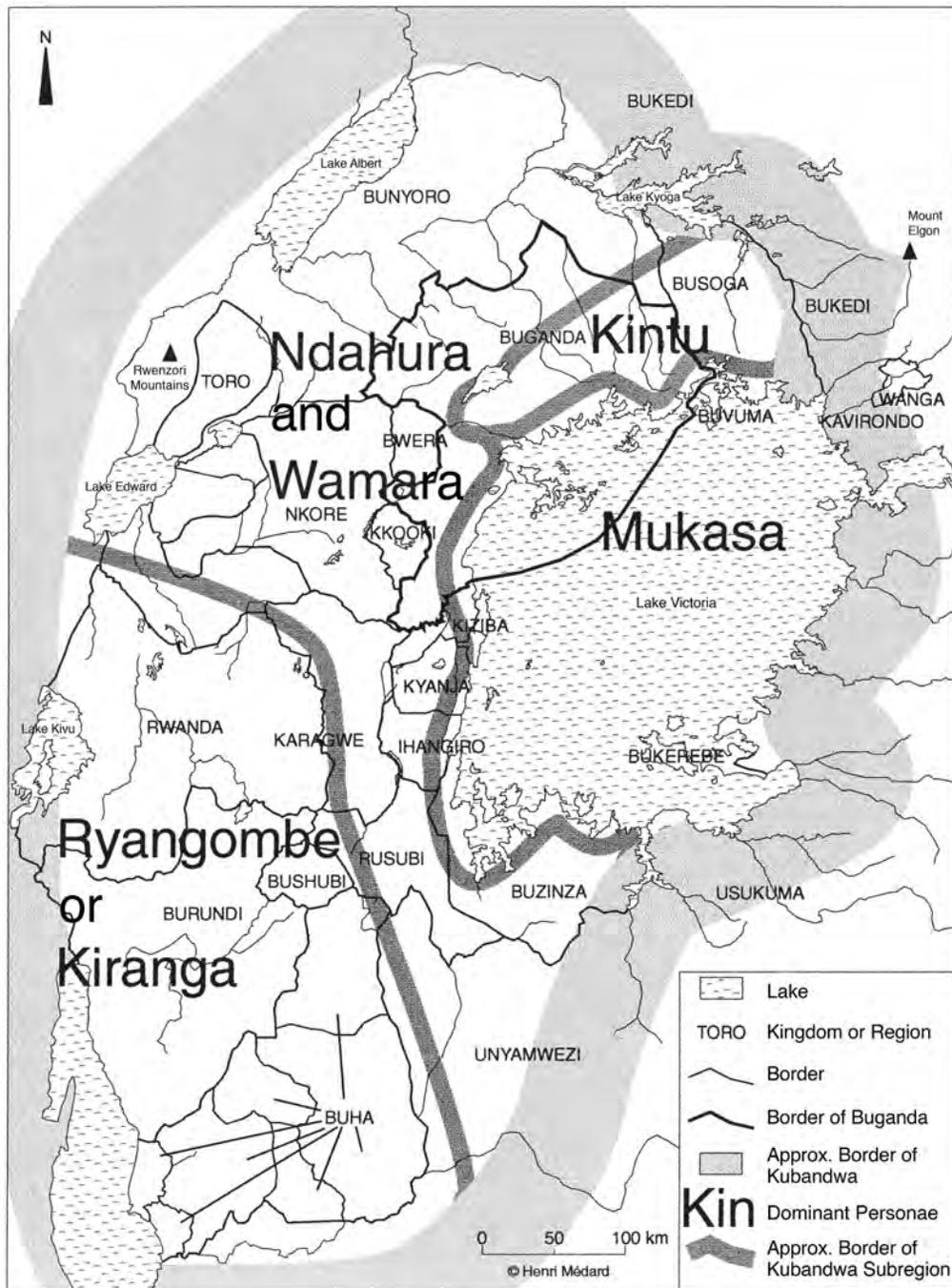


MAP 2. The location of some ancestral speech communities, ca. 1000 to 1500 C.E. See Figure 1 for a partial listing of the languages spoken today in the Great Lakes region that descended from these communities. Map made by Tom O'Connell, Digital Media Services, Northwestern University.

roundings, these assemblies began to think of the spirits' corporeal forms—water-courses, hills, caves, and prominent rock outcroppings—as sources and categories of their power—fertility, fecundity, war-making, controlling rain, hunting, and so on.¹¹² Instead of ensuring prosperity and fertility in a particular territory, the new territorial leaders might have argued that their new spirits could ensure prosperity in entire categories of the environment and of life.¹¹³

¹¹² For Buganda, see Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, 72–75; for southern Lake Kivu, see Newbury, *Kings and Clans*, 156–177; for Busoga, see Cohen, “The Political Transformation of Northern Busoga,” 472; for Rwanda, see Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 44–66; more widely on clan politics and royal ritual, see Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 88–94, 121–130.

¹¹³ These are the newly wealthy chiefdoms at sites such as Ntusi, west of Lake Victoria; see Robertshaw and Taylor, “Climate Change,” 26–28.



MAP 3. The distribution of some prominent figures associated with the *kubandwa* form of public healing. The Nyabingi personae appear in a zone straddling the boundary between Ndahura and Wamara (who, with Mukasa, are *cwezi* figures) and Ryangombe or Kiranga. Reproduced courtesy of Henri Médard, Université Paris I.

The outcome was the creation of named spirits, such as *Irungu* or *Mukasa*, who blended the territorial ritual power expressed in the concept of a *musambwa* with the general healing capacities of experts in *kubandwa* spirit possession. (See Map 3.)

In this new context, leaders struggled over extending their power over people (and the land they made productive) *and* sought to curb the worst impacts of struggle on their own following. The era of ancient state-building had opened with public healing central to its unfolding.¹¹⁴

Traditions about *Mukasa* reveal how transforming the territory of healing from local to exportable forms engaged several important aspirations. *Mukasa* was the spiritual force responsible for healing sickness, giving abundant rain, food, cattle, and children, and ensuring safe passage for fishermen and travelers on Lake Victoria. His shrine was located on the lake's Ssesse Islands. Several items from the ethnographic record suggest clearly that his supplicants, priests, and mediums recognized a connection between *Mukasa* and the *musámbwa* of Buddu (on the coast opposite the Ssesse Islands; see Map 1), a spirit that manifested itself as a python.¹¹⁵ This connection expressed a clear continuity between territorial spirits in general, the *misámbwa*, and named figures such as *Mukasa*. And it underscored the central roles of concerns with fertility and the importance of healers in maintaining collective well-being. The power wielded in *Mukasa*'s name by his medium and her priests offered to commoners and nobles alike the possibility of overcoming the death of the body through the birth and rearing of children.

North Nyanzan and Rutaran societies, where these tales circulated, recognized *Mukasa* as a new sort of *musámbwa* or *mbándwa* who was portable and capable of providing all the many sorts of fertility that people required: rain, children, pasture, and healthy soils. They did so around the turn of the first millennium, as the earliest phases of a period of increased humidity settled over the region, perhaps linked to "the Little Climatic Optimum of more temperate regions."¹¹⁶ During this period, major settlements turned up in the formerly dry interior of the region, west of Lake Victoria, indicating a general increase in population densities after the eleventh century.¹¹⁷ And they used a moral and social logic that would have been very familiar to people living as far away as southern Africa.

THESE CHANGES IN PORTABLE TERRITORIAL SPIRITS shaped a third reconfiguration of healing practice in this region. Near the middle of the present millennium, probably during the fifteenth century, as Rutaran and North Nyanzan societies began to dissolve into communities speaking languages that we know today as Ganda, Soga, Nyoro, and Haya, among others, healers and patients working with spirit possession and as mediums invented an entirely new category of spirits whom they called *bacwezi*. These spirits could return from Ghostland through acts of mediumistic possession, just like *bazimu* or *masámbwa* or *babándwa*. However, the *bacwezi* did not require their mediums to have a descent relation or a territorial identity with them. These spirits had no lineal heirs; they could assist or possess any individual, in any collectivity, in any territory.

¹¹⁴ On violence and state centralization in Buganda, Rwanda, and the Kivu Rift, respectively, see Wrigley, *Kingship and State*, 192–206; Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 67–79; Newbury, "Pre-colonial Burundi and Rwanda," 276–280; Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*, 185–198.

¹¹⁵ Tantalá, "The Early History of Kitara," 607–608; Kodesh, "Beyond the Royal Gaze," 71–100.

¹¹⁶ Taylor and Robertshaw, "Sedimentary Sequences in Western Uganda," 71; Nicholson, "Historical Fluctuations of Lake Victoria," 15.

¹¹⁷ Robertshaw and Taylor, "Climate Change," 6–7; Reid, "The Role of Cattle."

This innovation seems to have been designed to meet a new level of anxiety over fertility. The invention of the term *bacwezi* occurred after the invention of the term *bucweke*, which named the condition of an adult dying with no heirs or children of any sort. This word was invented earlier in the millennium, during the end of the life of the West Nyanza community.¹¹⁸ Together with dynastic and clan histories that speak about *cwezi* spirits—and a long period of pronounced aridity in the region between about 1400 and 1800¹¹⁹—this semantic innovation suggests that during a long fifteenth century, the efficacy of ancestral ghosts, the *bazimu*, and the stability of lineages was under attack. As agricultural systems struggled to meet demands for food, in the face of growing aridity, people encountered social and political bottlenecks that formed increasingly around hierarchies (some of which were gendered) of access to land, security, and collective well-being. This was the likely context in which *cwezi* mediums claimed that they could unblock the flow of social life better than the custodians of lineage spirits.

It is important to emphasize the fact that inventing *cwezi* spirits, building their shrines, and training the personnel who attended to them not only engaged the diminished capacity of lineage spirits to heal, but also enhanced leaders' claims to embody the fecundity and prosperity of their realm, because it offered them a means to extend the reach of their ritual power to a larger community, beyond the language of kinship.¹²⁰ Royal courts sought to co-opt this power of public healing, literally by bringing it inside the royal enclosure.¹²¹ Other royals met this challenge with force, threatening the very existence of independent public healing. These tensions played out in different ways in different parts of the region, but they formed a durable set of poles around which people waged political struggles.

Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, these spirits, and the mediums who could speak for them, came to include departed persons of royal standing, the famous royal *Cwezi* figures. The historian Renee Tantala has analyzed oral traditions about these new *bacwezi* and has shown their content to reflect tumultuous contests between the priests and mediums of *mbándwa* spirits over the importance of ancestral ghosts and the ritual efficacy of kings.¹²² The outcome of these contests

¹¹⁸ Schoenbrun, *Historical Reconstruction*, 111; Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 196–197, 238–240; and Rhiannon Stephens, “Historical Linguistic Approaches to a History of Motherhood in West Nyanza, 500–1500 CE” (Seminar Paper, Northwestern University, 2003), 14–24.

¹¹⁹ Taylor and Robertshaw, “Sedimentary Sequences in Western Uganda,” 72; Robertshaw and Taylor, “Climate Change”; Nicholson, “Historical Fluctuations of Lake Victoria.” From about the 1480s to the 1580s, relative humidity increased. The return to aridity in the later sixteenth century may be a regional expression of the Little Ice Age in temperate latitudes.

¹²⁰ On gendered dimensions to these conflicts, see Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 171–175; Berger, “Fertility as Power,” 79–80; Peter Robertshaw, “Women, Labor, and State Formation in Western Uganda,” in Elisabeth A. Baucus and Lisa J. Lucero, eds., *Complex Politics in the Ancient Tropical World* (Washington, D.C., 2000), 51, 55, 62; Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, chap. 2. On conflict between royalty and healers, see Tantala, “The Early History of Kitara,” 825–829; David Newbury, “‘Bunyabungo’: The Western Rwandan Frontier, c. 1750–1850,” in Igor Kopytoff, ed., *The African Frontier* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), 164–173; Peter Schmidt, *Historical Archaeology* (Westport, Conn., 1978), chap. 5; J. Bertin Webster, Bethwell A. Ogot, and Jean-Pierre Chrétien, “The Great Lakes Region, 1500–1800,” in Bethwell A. Ogot, ed., *Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Paris, 1992), 812–827; Wrigley, *Kingship and State*, 184–187; Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 234–245; Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 132–137. But Wrigley, Kodesh, Vansina, and MacGaffey reject the bifurcation of power smuggled into the discussion by pitting healers or ritualists against royals; see Kodesh, “Beyond the Royal Gaze,” chap. 3.

¹²¹ Kodesh, “Beyond the Royal Gaze,” 257–302; Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*.

¹²² Tantala, “The Early History of Kitara,” 435–439, 671–694; Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*,

shaped the contours of formal dynastic rule in the kingdoms of the central Great Lakes region, surely beginning in the sixteenth century. They led to specialized forms of *kubándwa* emerging in this period: the *cwezi kubándwa* in the northern parts of the region, and *ryángombe kubándwa* to the south. (See Map 3.) By co-opting the ritual practices and priestly hierarchies of these specialized forms of *kubándwa*, new ruling dynasties hoped to bolster their legitimacy while independent centers of *cwezi kubándwa* organized resistance to royal authority.¹²³

Late in the nineteenth century, a young Rundi man told the missionary J. M. Van Der Burgt that the word *cwezi* came from the verb “*kucyēra*, to spit.”¹²⁴ Spitting was a common form of blessing often mentioned in descriptions of practices marking life cycle transitions.¹²⁵ And the Rundi man’s derivation tells us that we can think of the *cwezi* as “the spitters” or “the blessers,” as healers who facilitated difficult transitions in life. They were perhaps most helpful to people who struggled with the challenges of infertility.

In the arid period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, these practices must have been extremely attractive to people settling in the dry central savannahs, under the watchful eye of newly emergent monarchies, far from their roots near Lake Victoria and in the Kivu Rift Valley.¹²⁶ *Cwezi kubándwa* offered childless people a setting in which they could develop skills in healing, in part by translating their own struggles with *obucweke* (childlessness or heirlessness) into succor for others in the same struggle. Although heirless, they were useful people who enjoyed the benefits of being successful healers.

The attractions of this social innovation placed the work and power of mediums (and the priests who managed the shrines where mediums often worked) potentially at odds with the authority of royalty and chiefs. *Cwezi kubándwa* groups relegated ancestral ghosts to the margins of healing practice and created a structure of ini-

121–137; Wrigley, *Kingship and State*, 182–187. This paragraph draws on Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 236.

¹²³ On resistance, see Berger, *Religion and Resistance*, 83–87, and Tantala, “The Early History of Kitara,” chap. 8; Ferdinand Nahimana, *Le Rwanda, émergence d’un état* (Paris, 1993), 159–222. On royal alliances with shrines and their bureaucracies, see Schmidt, *Historical Archaeology*, chap. 5; Wrigley, *Kingship and State*, 182–184; Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 132–137. Using detailed shrine and clan histories from Buganda, Kodesh argues for a very close overlap in responsibilities of shrine-keepers as managers of village affairs and as healers; “Beyond the Royal Gaze,” chap. 3. Onomastics play important signifying roles connecting royals to shrines, their priests, and their mediums. See, for example, Israel N. Katoke, *The Kingdom of Karagwe: A History of the Abanyambo of North-west Tanzania* (Nairobi, 1975), 140–174.

¹²⁴ See Johannes M. M. Van Der Burgt, *Dictionnaire Français-Kirundi avec l’indication succincte de la signification Swahili et Allemande* (Bois-le-duc, 1903), 220.

¹²⁵ See Tantala, “The Early History of Kitara,” 290–291.

¹²⁶ These two paragraphs draw on Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 239; see also Peter Robertshaw, “The Origins of the State in East Africa,” in Chapurukha M. Kusimba and Sibel B. Kusimba, eds., *East African Archaeology: Foragers, Potters, Smiths, and Traders* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2003), 159–163. Luc de Heusch, *Le Rwanda et la civilization interlacustre* (Brussels, 1966), 294–302; and Berger, *Religion and Resistance*, chaps. 5 and 6, place this development squarely within a resistance paradigm. Tantala, “The Early History of Kitara,” chaps. 3, 4, and 8; and Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*, 217–243, emphasize an emerging concern with infertility in general; Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 95–121, 142–153, reads *Cwezi* stories as both religious and political charters against the oppressive impacts of political centralization on the narrower “logic” of clans. See also Webster, Ogot, and Chrétien, “The Great Lakes Region, 1500–1800.” For military success legitimizing royal claims on ritual authority, old and new, see Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 90–95.

tiation that could incorporate large numbers of patients and novitiates. They opened up the politics of prosperity and health in the fissures between courts and their followers. Some royal centers of power appear to have responded by developing a robust military component to emerging state structures.¹²⁷ Where this occurred, it represented the earliest examples of public healing facing threats to its existence.

Figures such as the Nyabingi priests and priestesses appear in tales from Kigezi and northern Rwanda concerned with the growing menace of militarized royal power. Traditions about Nyabingi remark on the fleeting, mobile nature of their power and tell stories about a medium's ability to withstand the most dire force of royalty, and later of colonials.¹²⁸ Steven Feierman has noticed that the image of mediums surviving a firestorm is common in stories of Nyabingi's exploits.¹²⁹ The image appears again, far to the north and east, in Geoffrey Kamali's story of public healing.

TENSIONS BETWEEN ROYAL COURTS and *kubándwa* groups shaped a fourth era of re-configuration in Lakes healing practice, stretching from the later eighteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth century. This was the era in which trade and production—increasingly commodified after the 1830s—underwrote and encouraged the militarization of royal power.¹³⁰ Between the 1780s and the 1880s, trade in ivory, slaves, beads, and guns—initially tied to the Nile Valley and the Indian Ocean world, and later tied also to the Inner Congo Basin and the Atlantic—intensified the use of sheer force by kings and others in pursuit of control over this commerce. Between the 1880s and the 1910s, German, British, and African troops undertook the violent colonial conquest of the region and early attempts to establish colonial administrative power. The period closed with the devastating impact on the southern and western Great Lakes region of World War I, and the establishment of different colonial administrations—Belgian and British—in the area.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*, 185–198; Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 73–79, 181–194; Newbury, “Precolonial Burundi and Rwanda,” 281–294; Webster, Ogot, and Chrétien, “The Great Lakes Region, 1500–1800.”

¹²⁸ For Nyabingi and others similarly concerned with centralized power, begin with A. G. Katate and L. Kamugungunu, *Abagabe b'Ankole (History of the Kings of Ankole, Books 1–2)*, 2 vols. (Kampala, 1953), 2: 530–532; Francis X. Lwamgira, *Amakuru ga Kiziba n'Abakama bamu: The History of Kiziba and Its Kings*, 2nd ed., trans. Ephraim Kamuhangire (Kampala, 1969), 21; Edmond Césard, “Histoire des rois du Kyamtwara d'après l'ensemble des traditions des famille régnante,” *Anthropos* 26, no. 3/4 (1931): 533–543; Jan Vansina, “Historical Tales (*Ibitéekerezo*) and the History of Rwanda,” *History in Africa* 27 (2000): 375–414; Freedman, *Nyabingi*, 27–59; de Heusch, *Le Rwanda*, 344–350; Berger, *Religion and Resistance*, 76–87; and Marcel d'Hertefeldt and Danielle de Lame, *Société, culture et histoire du Rwanda: Encyclopédie bibliographique, 1863–1980/1987*, 2 vols. (Tervuren, 1987), 2: 1807.

¹²⁹ Feierman, “Colonizers, Scholars,” 197.

¹³⁰ See David Newbury, “Lake Kivu Regional Trade in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal des africanistes* 50, no. 2 (1980): 6–30; Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*, 198–248; David W. Cohen, “Peoples and States of the Great Lakes Region,” in Jacob F. A. Ajayi, ed., *Africa in the Nineteenth Century until the 1880s* (Paris, 1989), 273–276, 282–293; Michael Kenny, “Precolonial Trade in Eastern Lake Victoria,” *Azania* 14 (1979): 97–107; Katoke, *The Kingdom of Karagwe*, 60–68, 75–81; Joseph Mbwiliza, “The Hoe and the Stick: A Political Economy of the Heru Kingdom,” in Emile Mworoha, ed., *La Civilisation Ancienne des Peuples des Grands Lacs* (Paris, 1981), 100–114; Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 191–199, 244–251; Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, chap. 3.

¹³¹ Newbury and Newbury, “Bringing the Peasants Back In,” 847; David Newbury, “The Rwakayihura Famine of 1928–1929: A Nexus of Colonial Rule in Rwanda,” in Département d'histoire de l'Université

From the 1850s into the first decades of the twentieth century, travelers' accounts and clan traditions speak in detail about the actions of priests, mediums, and the followers of figures such as *Mukasa* and *Nyabingi*. They describe women as visible leaders of a critical resistance to royal authority, especially after the turn of the century. At that time, spirit mediums began to turn their attentions to royals who collaborated with colonial conquerors or who otherwise took advantage of the chaos and dislocation created by conquest to prosecute their own aims at political expansion, aggrandizement, and score-settling, and they took on some Christian missions, as well.¹³² But the scenes of public healing composed by priests, mediums, and their followers were not concerned only with the shortcomings of royals.

Whether noted in oral traditions, travelers' accounts, or colonial and mission documents, Nyabingi mediums appear in one or all of three contexts. They appear as healers of individual illnesses, and especially of women suffering from barrenness. In this respect, they appear as extensions of the now familiar *kubándwa* complex. They also appear as leaders of bands of rebels fighting royal or colonial conquest. And they appear as heroines from the past or as inheritors of a heroic past who have incarnated new power in their present lives. Rastafarian intellectuals drew the Nyabingi figure into their transnational circuits of political activism in the 1930s, not long after British colonial efforts to suppress public healing in East Africa grew in strength.¹³³

As Feierman tells us, oral traditions about Nyabingi mediums often refer to a person with the same name said to have lived in different times and different places. The example of "Gahu" illustrates the temporal and spatial mobility of single identities. Some traditions say that Gahu lived as an early-eighteenth-century queen in Mpororo (in southern Uganda); others say she died in 1931, in northern Rwanda; and still other accounts, collected in the 1970s, say that she was still alive then, living near Byumba in northern Rwanda.¹³⁴ These traditions refer to mediums such as Gahu dying, returning to life, and dying again only to make possible still another return.¹³⁵ Feierman and the Rastafarians, more than any other historians of

du Burundi, *Histoire sociale de l'Afrique de l'est* (Bujumbura, 1991), 269–285; Bernard Lugan, "Causes et effets de la famine 'Rumanura' au Rwanda, 1916–1918," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 10 (1976): 347–356; Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 214–220, 224–236, 251–263. Droughts and wars, especially when they occurred together, caused famines long before the nineteenth century; see Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 22.

¹³² Alison Des Forges, "'The Drum Is Greater Than the Shout': The 1912 Rebellion in Northern Rwanda," in Donald Crumme, ed., *Banditry, Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa* (London, 1986), 311–333; Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa*, 261; Ian Linden, *Church and Revolution in Rwanda* (Manchester, 1977), 123; F. S. Brazier, "The Incident at Nyakishenyi, 1917," *Uganda Journal* 32, no. 1 (1968): 17–27; Joseph Gahama, *Le Burundi sous administration belge* (Paris, 1983), 383–390; Murindwa Rutanga, *Nyabingi Movement: People's Anti-colonial Struggles in Kigezi, 1910–1930* (Kampala, 1991), 30–36; Freedman, *Nyabingi*, 91–104; Bernard Zuure, *Croyances et pratiques religieuses des Barundi* (Brussels, 1929), 36–98; Njangu Canda-Ciri, "La secte de binji-binji ou la renaissance de la résistance des bashi (juillet-septembre 1931)," in *Lyangombe: Mythe et rites—Actes du 2me Colloque du CERUKI, 10–14 Mai 1976* (Bukavu, Zaïre, 1979), 121–128; Capt. J. E. T. Philipps, "The Nabingi: An Anti-European Secret Society in Africa, in British Ruanda, Ndorwa and the Congo (Kivu)," *Congo* 1/9 (1928), 310–321.

¹³³ Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1994), 43, 164–165, 231–239.

¹³⁴ Freedman, *Nyabingi*, 35.

¹³⁵ The fact that the British saw fit to send the head of Ndochibiri, a Nyabingi "leader," to the British Museum, following a preemptive strike against "Nyabingi leaders" in southwestern Uganda in 1919, reveals the depths of misguided British animosity toward "the" Nyabingi; see Holger Bernt Hansen, "The Colonial Control of Spirit Cults in Uganda," in Anderson and Johnson, *Revealing Prophets*, 148; Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars," 200–201; M. J. Bessel, "Nyabingi," *Uganda Journal* 6, no. 1 (1938): 73–86, 83.

Nyabingi, have teased an important conclusion from these tales about Nyabingi's priestesses. Feierman finds that the tales act as charters for the "instability of authority" and reinforce an old argument in African politics, "that chiefs, lineage elders, and kings hold power because they've seized it."¹³⁶ Nyabingi's power mirrored chiefly and royal power, but it did so in an unstable manner.

Nyabingi's female figures appeal to scholars because they shaped fields of political struggle parallel to and in conflict with royalty, and which colonialists and Christians tried to shape or even to destroy.¹³⁷ Yet the visibility in the colonial archive of public healing such as Nyabingi's cannot be explained solely in terms of conquest and proselytizing. Historians have found that the disastrous epidemics of the 1880s and 1890s and the dramatic rise of sexually transmitted diseases in the 1900s renewed the need for public healing.¹³⁸ The slave raiding and caravan trading of the middle of the century dislocated people, changed the prospects of young men and elite women for engaging in commercial activity and social climbing, and radically altered the capacity of royals to maintain control of the commercial networks that helped underwrite their authority.¹³⁹ Epidemics of rinderpest and sleeping sickness—devastating to livestock and people—broadly accompanied colonial conquest and continued to shape Africans' demographic health and food security long after colonial armies had become colonial police forces. These processes of profound social and ecological rupture framed the actions of Nyabingi mediums and their networks of patients against royal and colonial military force.¹⁴⁰

Acts of public healing directed at individuals, at military power, and at entire collectivities of patients and other mediums elicited efforts by colonial and mission agents to co-opt, suppress, or destroy them.¹⁴¹ By early in the twentieth century, "authority over public efforts to bring health to the populace shifted from African

¹³⁶ Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars," 198, drawing on Philipps, "The Nabingi," 314–317; see also Cohen, *Womunafu's Bunafu*, 157–159, for a poetic reading of the evanescence of authority.

¹³⁷ Hansen, "The Colonial Control of Spirit Cults," 151–160.

¹³⁸ See Shane Doyle, "Population Decline and Delayed Recovery in Bunyoro, 1860–1960," *Journal of African History* 41, no. 3 (2000): 436, 448–451; Schweinfurth et al., *Emin Pasha*, 84–85; Michael Tuck, "Kabaka Mutesa and Venereal Disease: An Essay on Medical History and Sources in Precolonial Buganda," *History in Africa* 30 (2003): 309–325. Naming and tracking sexually transmitted diseases were central to twentieth-century colonial (and postcolonial) efforts to control women's sexuality. See Sheryl McCurdy, "Urban Threats: Manyema Women, Low Fertility, and Venereal Diseases in Tanganyika, 1926–1936," in Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy, eds., *"Wicked" Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H., 2001), 212–233.

¹³⁹ Shane Doyle and Henri Médard, eds., *Slavery in the Great Lakes Region* (Oxford, forthcoming); Cohen, *Womunafu's Bunafu*.

¹⁴⁰ Randall Packard, "Chiefship and the History of Nyavindi Possession among the Bashu of Eastern Zaire," *Africa* 52, no. 4 (1982): 67–86, 90; Gerald Hartwig, "Social Consequences of Epidemic Diseases: The Nineteenth Century in Eastern Africa," in Hartwig and K. David Patterson, eds., *Disease in African History: An Introductory Survey and Case Studies* (Durham, N.C., 1978); Kirk Hoppe, "Lords of the Fly: Colonial Visions and Revisions of African Sleeping-Sickness Environments on Ugandan Lake Victoria, 1906–61," *Africa* 67, no. 1 (1997): 86–104; Helge Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History: The Case of Tanganyika, 1850–1950* (Berkeley, Calif., 1977), 24–25; Doyle, "Population Decline and Delayed Recovery," 437–445; Michele Wagner, "Environment, Community, and History: 'Nature in the Mind' in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Buha," in Gregory Maddox, James Giblin, and Isaria Kimambo, eds., *Custodians of the Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania* (London, 1996), 175–199; Richard Waller, "Ecology, Migration, and Expansion in East Africa," *African Affairs* 84, no. 3 (1985): 347–370; Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 136–137.

¹⁴¹ John Beattie, "Sorcery in Bunyoro," in John Middleton and Edward H. Winter, eds., *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (London, 1963), 28; Wipper, *Rural Rebels*; Hansen, "The Colonial Control of Spirit Cults"; Holger Bernt Hansen, *Mission, Church, and State in a Colonial Setting: Uganda 1890–*

to European hands.”¹⁴² But Nyabingi’s people are not dead. Rumors of their power circulated among colonials in the 1930s, and mediums continue today to direct public healing events in East-Central Africa.¹⁴³

CONSIDER THE EFFORTS of *Jjajja*’s group of supplicants from the perspective of a long-term regional history of public healing, and their social and moral logics blend with historical narratives of capitalism without ceasing to be “fit explanation for contemporary situations.”¹⁴⁴ In Kamali’s scene, people pursue largely individual aims and aspirations, such as personal monetary gain and individual bodily health. The particular forms of individualism that emerged during colonialism are in play here, but their fate is tied up, in part, with the practices of public healing. The political collectivities of Nyabingi’s followers, or, in a still earlier era, of a *mucwezi*’s followers, echo in the crowd of supplicants and gawkers—a moral community of seekers with a public face. They realize their individual aims through a collective action that promises moral continuity and material consequence in the face of “a world gone awry.”¹⁴⁵

Larger changes in economy, society, and polity shape durable motive and action in contemporary public healing. But these changes are not things that have already taken place in Europe, or in the wake of Europe’s history, and which here merely take a local form.¹⁴⁶ Christianity, colonial conquest, waged labor, and electoral violence ushered in modernist African aspirations that appear at once moral and material, spiritual and practical.¹⁴⁷ The motives for engaging a colonial modernism simultaneously lie in long-term regional histories where religion and politics were not distinguished as such until the nineteenth century, and in more recent entanglements with individualized dimensions of producing moral persons. Neither the market’s autonomous individual nor the anxious jealousy of the accusation of sorcery can

1925 (New York, 1984), 280–282; Feierman, “Healing as Social Criticism”; Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 601.

¹⁴² Feierman and Janzen, “Introduction,” 20; for a rich and suggestive exploration of this complex entanglement of healing and medicine, see Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, 66–98, 145–152, 179–195; McCurdy, “Transforming Associations.” The themes of religious mission and conversion in narratives of conquest and colonialism often include aspects of public healing; see Derek Peterson and Jean Allman, “Introduction: New Directions in the History of Missions in Africa,” *Journal of Religious History* 23, no. 1 (1999): 1–7.

¹⁴³ Captain Pitman, Uganda’s Game Warden, remarked that “recently a European planter in Kyagwe came across numerous well-beaten trails leading through dense jungle to a python coiled around a pile of eggs, to which had been made offerings of eggs, vegetables, coffee berries, groundnuts, pieces of coloured cloth, cents, etc. But let any one enquire about python worship, past or present—and, in the terminology of the film world, overwhelming surprise is at once registered, coupled with studied ignorance.” Captain C. R. S. Pitman, “The Mabira Forest,” *Uganda Journal* 1, no. 1 (1934): 8; Packard, “Chiefship and the History of Nyavingi Possession,” 83; Brett L. Shadle, “Patronage, Millennialism and the Serpent God Mumbo in South-West Kenya, 1912–34,” *Africa* 72, no. 1 (2002): 43–48; Mahone, “The Psychology of Rebellion,” 242–243, 250–256.

¹⁴⁴ Ogot, “Luo History and Identity,” 31; Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 608–610.

¹⁴⁵ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 316, 317.

¹⁴⁶ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 39, citing Meaghan Morris, “Metamorphoses at Sydney Tower,” *New Formations* 11 (1990): 10.

¹⁴⁷ Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*, 88–110; Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 600.

explain fully “the eminently public enchantment of legitimate authority and its capacity to crystallize and channel the energies of moral collectivity.”¹⁴⁸ This claim may seem unremarkable, but only because it is often established for contexts in which important themes of historical change—such as Protestantism or capitalism—with origins in Europe are in play. In practice, histories of what motivates the pursuit of health and healing in Africa are very rarely approachable from a position informed by a rich history of deep chronology and great regional extent.

African regional histories offer a means to understand their experiences and assess future actions in a world of flows of people, culture, and capital using discourses and practices whose great antiquity reflects their sustained capacity to articulate and deliver what people want.¹⁴⁹ If forms of reason and practice with roots in the African past have effects upon the present moment, we need not see them as relics from a past whose time lies before the modern. But does their existence disrupt a notion of the present as a holistic time—the culmination of “the useful but empty and homogeneous chronology of historicism” that somehow renders the present free from the past?¹⁵⁰ The historical development of durable forms of power and action across ruptures in the past reconfigures “the conceit that the world expansion of capitalism brings all other cultural history to an end”¹⁵¹ by juxtaposing the expansions of capitalism with theories of power, of objects, and of the social, set in temporal and spatial frames grounded in Africa.¹⁵² Such African regional histories refuse a tendency to totalize the transformations that mark historical periods, even while the new history takes shape inside a particular set of master narrative conventions.¹⁵³ Precolonial African regional history helps portray Africa today as both “modern” and otherwise, but not as the result of some *a priori* difference between Africa and elsewhere.

Traditionalism studies cannot replace modernity studies, if only because the two terms sustain each other. But if scholars unpack select notions of the traditional, implicitly labeled as such by claims to modernity, they open up a curious new perception of the present. Historicizing the social configurations and intellectual underpinnings of, say, “African states” as deeply and broadly as sources will allow reveals a dense mass of “the past” acting as both an “enabling resource and a disabling constraint.”¹⁵⁴ In this project of unpacking, *Jjajjà*’s momentary alternative

¹⁴⁸ Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 607.

¹⁴⁹ See Rosalind Shaw, “The Production of Witchcraft/Witchcraft as Production: Memory, Modernity, and the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone,” *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 4 (1997): 856–876; Neil Kodesh, “Renovating Tradition: The Discourse of Succession in Colonial Buganda,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 3 (2001): 511–541; Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, 233–236.

¹⁵⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 239, 244.

¹⁵¹ Sahlins, “Cosmologies of Capitalism,” 418.

¹⁵² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16; MacGaffey, “Changing Representations,” 201–206.

¹⁵³ Feierman, “African Histories and the Dissolution of World History,” 186–196. Greg Denning insists on writing across “the cliché” of “a Time Before and a Time After in the encounter between first peoples and empires”; see his “The Comaroffs Out of Africa,” 474, 475. On translation, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 17–18, 27–30; Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago, 1999), 22. The break at stake in this project lies in the social reproduction of professional method and not in the historical destruction of “other” intellectual traditions; see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 5–6, 65–66; on narrative conventions, see MacGaffey, “Changing Representations,” 18–90.

¹⁵⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 245; see also MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 6–7. A sustained engagement of these issues in a South African setting today is Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*, 243–318.

public reveals popular debates and struggles over the changing shape of African moral communities in pursuit of social justice. Political and cultural histories of these communities need not “erase the question of heterotemporality from the history of the modern subject.”¹⁵⁵ Rather, they open up how collective action and moral community in forms of public healing are part of a plural present, a present “without the suggestion or promise of any principles—such as dharma, capital, or citizenship—that can or will override this heterogeneity and incompleteness and eventually constitute a totality.”¹⁵⁶ These histories make comprehensible seemingly incommensurable aspects of social and political life in Africa today.

Some Africans use “the agency of gods, spirits, and other supernatural beings” in ways that depart from secular political and legal logics (whether from “elsewhere” or embedded in states), although for many they are evidently commensurable.¹⁵⁷ The historicist urge “to think of history as a developmental process in which what is possible becomes actual by tending to a future that is singular”¹⁵⁸ is unsettled through the exploration of categories such as public healing, whose presence is not anachronistic but represents another way of being in the world that is not “always amenable to the objectifying practices of history writing” because most people are not even aware of the historical contingency of the practices that constitute them.¹⁵⁹ The forms of agency at the heart of public healing grow in webs of power and in notions of moral action. Therefore, people who are given to wonder about their world often wonder about what constitutes moral power and for whom. The long trajectories of public healing told here reveal how Africans between the Great Lakes have debated the nature of community and social network as concrete sources of a better future. They also suggest why Africans pose these questions around these particular themes.

The narrative works against colonial categories of shallow time and the tight spaces of ethnicity. Cultural practices and identities underwent many ruptures a thousand years ago, a hundred years ago, and over the last decade in East Africa. The notion of rupture restrains the homogenizing tendencies of culture to mask social divisions while asking us to think about how people managed radical change in part by attaching novel meanings to durable bundles of meaning and practice. The notion of the speech community as one of the vessels bearing bundles of meaning and practice through time restrains the tendency to see claims of linguistic identity as conterminous with ethnicity. People around the Great Lakes use such bundles to confront conditions of radical fragmentation and to assert critique, continuity, and

¹⁵⁵ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 239, 244; see also Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 124.

¹⁵⁶ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 249. Cooper criticizes Chakrabarty’s emphasis on “incommensurabilities” between abstract modern subjects and “other ways of thinking and other ways of putting together community life”—because it appears to him that the former entails the loss of the latter; *Colonialism in Question*, 122. Yet Cooper also touches on Chakrabarty’s problem of “heterotemporality” in his critique of modernity as a useful concept for thinking about social justice; *ibid.*, 121–127. MacGaffey, drawing on Gregory Bateson (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* [New York, 1972], 64), sees these ways of thinking as “points of view we take in our studies rather than separate realities existing in the world”; MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 7.

¹⁵⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 14, 16, 40, 250, 253; Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (New York, 2004), 142–162, 177–178, 184–187.

¹⁵⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 249. Cooper does not discuss African precolonial histories, apparently preferring to slot them as particularist resources for confronting current issues of social justice; see Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 139.

¹⁵⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 22–23, 250, quote from 251.

aspiration in its face.¹⁶⁰ They achieve durability by creative selection of speech and practice, often under conditions not of their own choosing. Once conjured and analyzed by scholars, notions of moral aspiration and collective well-being may enter debates over African histories, past and present. If treated as beyond the ken, the variety of moral arguments in those debates will be fewer.

This regional history of healing reveals that “capitalist empire . . . turned out not to be so consistently capitalist after all, bureaucratic rule not so consistently bureaucratic, the making of colonial subjects not so consistent in their ideas of what kind of subject was to be produced.”¹⁶¹ Africans, feeling more than malcontented, aspire to health and collective well-being through old means, simultaneously different from a neoliberal logic of capitalism and supple translations of it.¹⁶² That does not mean that public healing is a good model for the future of medicine in Africa. Nor does it mean that “communitarian sentiments” should be promoted as some sort of “antidote to imperialistic universality.” Universalism, as Cooper has argued, was “less universal and less European in practice than it was in theory, shifting in response not only to the particularities encountered in the colonies but to reconfigurations of ideologies and practices some Europeans thought were their own,” and African “communitarian sentiment” was less communitarian and less sentimental in practice than it was in theory, as we have just seen.¹⁶³ Rather, merely having told a story of public healing changes how we understand the historical fates of concepts and moral communities that Africans use today to argue about how to pursue—and what constitutes—a healthier future. With the specific contents of durability across rupture to hand, scholars can “hold in a state of permanent tension a dialogue between two contradictory points of view.” They can recognize in scenes such as Kamali’s the modern histories of capitalism and something else, “the necessarily fragmented histories of human belonging” in a world we provisionally call African.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 604; Carol Summers, “Grandfathers, Grandsons, Morality, and Radical Politics in Late Colonial Buganda,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 427–447.

¹⁶¹ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 239–240.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 19–20; Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants,” 608.

¹⁶³ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 140.

¹⁶⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 254–255.

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