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A PAST WHOSE TIME HAS COME:
HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND HISTORY IN
EASTERN AFRICA'S GREAT LAKES

DAVID L. SCHOENBRUN

ABSTRACT

The essay examines precolonial, colonial, academic, and post-independence African voices that describe and promote special versions of the past in one part of eastern Africa. By studying the connections among African intellectuals, local discursive and political constraints, and overseas discursive and political constraints that emerged between 1890 and the present, the article outlines many of the themes of academic African history.

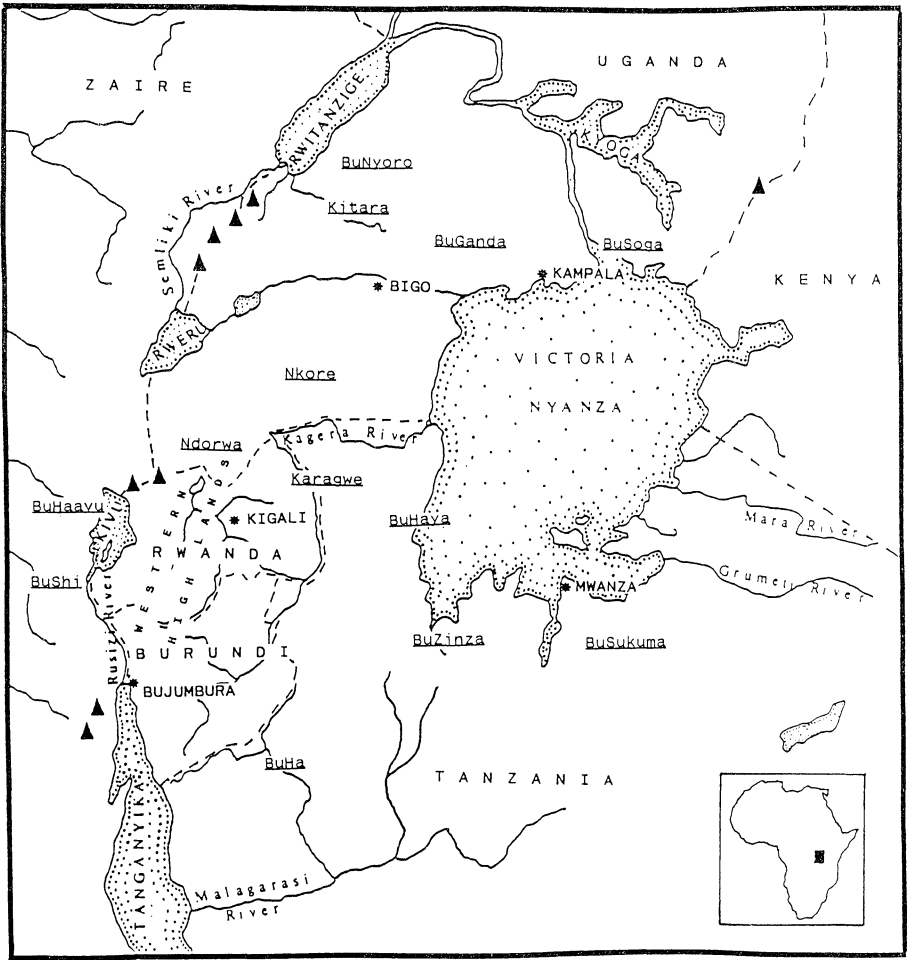
From this critical historiography, we may see how struggles for control of discourse on the African past are breaking free of an essentially European-derived conceptual framework by attending to local and regional forms of historical action. Both male and female speakers participate, often in radically different ways. Studying them, and those who listen to them and support them, will return to historians of Africa a sense of African actors' historical creativity as well as their arts of resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will examine precolonial, colonial, academic, and post-independence African voices that describe and promote special versions of the past in one part of Africa. The categories in which I place the speakers often overlap and enfold one another. Within and between them occur struggles over discursive forms and power. By studying the negotiations of historical meaning, we draw near to a central question in the philosophy of history: what relations exist between the makers of the past and the makers of stories about the past?

The answer to this question lies at least partly in unraveling the links between African intellectuals, local discursive and political constraints, and overseas discursive and political constraints. From these elements the content of African history has in part importantly been shaped. A related concern is the issue of the impact of gender and power in the past, a subject fairly new in African historiography.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries several kingdoms emerged in the Great Lakes region, displaying a broad spectrum of economic and institutional forms. Rwanda and Buganda perhaps epitomize two ends of this spectrum (Map—Figure 1). Rwanda developed a strongly hierarchical society knit to-



- Modern Political Boundaries
- * Cities or Sites

FIGURE 1
The Great Lakes Region, East Africa.

gether by patron-client contracts for use of land and cattle. In this mountainous kingdom, control of land and cattle and the consumption of pastoral products supported ruling class power. Kings, who came from royal clans, collected at their itinerant courts supporters, advisors, and ritual specialists. In the Ganda area, by contrast, banana farming and fishing formed the backbone of the economy. With valuable labor invested in banana plantations, clan control over land allocation was strong. Thus, in order for royalty to emerge and to survive, kings had to expand the territories directly under their control. They did this largely through warfare. Kings appointed royal proxies who, beholden

to the king for their positions, provided the court with local support independent of clan leadership.

In the nineteenth century, demand in the Indian Ocean world for slaves and ivory from the hinterland led the Rwandan and the Ganda states to play a rather imperial role in the Great Lakes region. Monarchical rule was strengthened through increased clientship, bureaucratization, and centralized administration. Military action, long-distance trade, or food production for caravan provisioning increasingly drew men away from household production, thus placing heavy burdens on women. Women moved in greater numbers to spirit-possession and mediumship as they sought relief from the onerous exactions of king and family.

Beginning in the 1890s, the Germans and British jockeyed for control of the Nile headwaters. After the German defeat in World War I, the Belgians entered Rwanda and Burundi and the British took over in Tanganyika. Two factors insured the colonialists' involvement in local politics. First, the potential for the production of cash crops such as cotton and coffee required the extension of communications and the securing of administrative control through conquest and the building of roads and railways. Second, colonial development caused a labor shortage and would-be laborers in land-starved Rwanda, Burundi, and northwestern Tanzania went off to earn cash on the cotton or coffee plantations in Uganda. This drain placed a new and correspondingly heavier burden on those women who remained on the land. Colonial taxes, legal codes, and systems of land-tenure were created in order to "rationalize" peasant production, distribution, and farm labor.

After the disruption of World War II, local African resistance, linked to broader nationalist movements across the continent, hastened the end of the colonial moment in the Great Lakes region. Ethnic violence marked independence from Belgium for Rwanda and Burundi. Tanzania moved toward "African socialism" under Julius K. Nyerere, and Milton Obote's Uganda drifted toward authoritarianism, after the abolition of Uganda's monarchies in 1966. Late in the 1970s and early in the 1980s, difficult economic times set in, laced with violent opposition to autocracy throughout the region. Declining production of both food and cash crops, combined with declining prices for cash crops in metropolitan markets, brought on a crisis that threatened the food security of rural and urban dwellers alike.

This century, stretching from late precolonial times to the present, forms the backdrop against which I shall discuss the meeting and mixing of all the different discursive and political constraints that shaped the emergence of the themes I shall cover in this essay. I attempt to reveal the contexts which fostered certain master narratives and to suggest how that context also generated alternative discourses.¹ These alternatives grew up within different social fields in the

1. See Terrence O. Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa," in *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa*, ed. Terrence O. Ranger and O. Vaughan (London, 1993); see also Nicholas B. Dirks, "Introduction: Colonialism and Culture," in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor, 1992), 1–25.

Lakes region: the family, the royal court, shrines, churches, universities, and so on. Most importantly, they often assumed new, often nonliterate (and even nonverbal) texts; in this way they often differ from other, Western, historical discourses and require new modes of historical analysis.

The challenge is to transform the analytical tools of historical analysis inherited from the experiences of colonialism. These tools often sought "objectivity" and offered analyses reducible to fundamental oppositions. New alternative histories will not employ standard Western divisions between reality and representation, the concrete and the concept.² To find these alternatives, historians will have to look elsewhere than written texts. They might search out, for example, the nonverbal distinctions residing in arts like house wallpaintings or pottery decorative styles, or the visual grammar of ritual. A major shift in this respect has been the oral historiographic criticisms of royal traditions underway since the 1960s. These have sought to reclaim the rich contested meanings of oral family traditions as opposed to traditions produced within the locus of the royal court.³ They have also criticized the African Lakes intellectuals who helped to construct the emerging categories of colonial and postcolonial reality.⁴ Terrence Ranger has assayed brilliantly the overall context for the "invention of tradition," as African intellectuals came to terms with colonial power and sought to turn it to their use, or to check its most debilitating and violent aspects.⁵ For example, they produced lists of kings, to be used as chronological markers and, thus, to buttress their new powers by asserting their linear chronological primacy. They, no less than colonial observers, are the subjects of critical analysis in the historical thought now emerging in the Lakes region.

Does historical knowledge serve more than to support or to separate the dominant from the dominated? Specific ideas of power have been used to exclude certain groups from the forms historical knowledge has taken in this century, and they have incited members of the excluded groups to compose collaborative or resistant versions of their history. This dialectic reminds us that historical knowledge cannot eclipse the power that creates it. It is either a dominating or a resisting knowledge.

Lakes historians have most conspicuously tackled the problems of centralized power and resistance to it, in both colonial and precolonial contexts. Their findings form the basis of this essay. But, to appreciate their achievements, I discuss them as entwined with the major themes of historical study that grew out of the early colonial encounter in Great Lakes eastern Africa: states, ethnicities, and technological development. These are grand topics and continue to

2. John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (Chicago, 1991), 34.

3. Jan Vansina, "Knowledge and Perceptions of the African Past," in *African Historiographies*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David S. Newbury (Beverly Hills, 1986), 28–41; Jean-Pierre Chrétien, "Confronting the Unequal Exchange of the Oral and the Written," in *ibid.*, 75–90.

4. For a historical vision that both sees and sees through the reconfiguration of historic-ethnic units of study in northeast Tanzania see Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, 1990), especially chapters 4, 5, and 6.

5. Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited"; Dirks, 5–10.

furnish captivating stories. To see what they obscure by their sheer importance—above all, the role of gender—and, then, to add to the histories of the Lakes pasts those hidden agents and their actions, I must retrace critically the development of these monolithic issues. I begin with the period between 1890 and 1940, the colonial prologue and histories of the great monarchies of the region.

II. THE STATE AND THE HISTORIANS

The birth of the colonial state gave birth to the Great Lakes kingdoms in historical texts by fixing their chronologies. The specificity of these chronologies also bestowed authority on certain Lakes African groups and individuals within the new world of colonialism. In one sense, because colonial order was to be articulated through local institutions, the study of the state in Africa flowed from the colonizers' need to know how power and authority were created and transformed in African societies.⁶ But studies of early state formation and functioning continue today within new contexts of power and politics,⁷ and this has often meant a continuation of the colonial focus on centralized forms of power.

In 1939, the Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique (founded by Cardinal Lavigerie in Algeria in 1867) invited Canon Louis de Lacger to synthesize the available ethnographic and historical sources for Rwanda that had been collected by missionaries.⁸ His work illustrates the European requirement to "'civilize' the other."⁹ De Lacger studied court traditions from Rwanda to reconcile contradictions and disagreements in the testimony. He achieved this, in part, by employing the history of France both as an organizing principle and as a pedagogical technique. His students were the colonial and missionary elite of Rwanda. He traced the evolution of Rwanda from its origins, an analogue to the feudal "Île de France," to a monarchy comparable to eighteenth-century European states. This was as far down the road to the colonial present as Rwanda could get! For its European chroniclers, Rwanda's kingdom was "ancient," but it had strangely fallen asleep at a critical stage in its development.

Precisely the same historico-evolutionary stage that was to propel a European cultural-historical consciousness to the height of its powers, the eighteenth century was as close to Europe that Rwanda could get on her own. Having begun to civilize "the other," by granting great time-depth to their political superstructures, these early colonial historians created a body of texts that could

6. Gillian Feeley-Harnik observes that scholars' "focus on social structural solutions to political stability was related to European preoccupations about power of appointment to centralized colonial states." See Feeley-Harnik, "Issues in Divine Kingship," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 14 (1985), 276.

7. See Christine Ward Gailey, "The State of the State in Anthropology," *Dialectical Anthropology* 9 (1985), 65–89.

8. Jan Vansina, *L'évolution du royaume rwanda des origines à 1900* (Bruxelles, 1962), 6–7.

9. Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "The Production of History and Social Science, or How to 'Civilize' the Other," *History in Africa* 8 (1981), 75–87, especially 80ff.

abet the ideological labor of language study and missionary education.¹⁰ The early written histories of states such as Rwanda created the “symbolic capital” necessary to resolve a contradiction that beset the colonial enterprise. How could the colonial state reshape the productive capacities of Lakes Africans, make subsistence farmers into wage-earners or cash-croppers, and still hope to control them? For, having entered the emerging cash economy of colonialism, what would keep Africans from becoming Europeans? Weren’t Europeans rich? European colonial intellectuals thus sought to control the idiom of historical, linguistic, and curricular communication, by introducing a new set of distinctly European ideas about history, language, and education. The battle over the terms and conditions by which an African culture was to become historical, by which an African dialect was to become a language, and by which the content of mission and colonial schools was to be determined was the struggle, at one and the same time, wherein the state sought labor power and the mission sought the ideological assent of “the other,” in the persons of new African elites, lettered or unlettered.

In order for the project to succeed, Europeans could not be the only ones to employ a European vision of the world: African intellectuals had to domesticate this vision and bring it to the countryside. In this respect, the Rwandan intellectual and clergyman, Alexis Kagame (1912–1981), played an important role. As a member of both upper class Rwandan society and the Catholic Church in Rwanda, he acted as a broker between the two social worlds. Throughout his voluminous writings he sought to narrow the focus of Rwanda’s history to the actions of its ruling class and thereby to aggrandize its claims to supremacy in Belgian eyes. Where such claims had been, in the nineteenth century, far from hegemonic, Kagame hoped to render them absolute in the twentieth century. He hoped to promote one of Rwanda’s class fragments to the status of official spokespersons for the whole of Rwanda to the colonialists and missionaries.

Historical knowledge in the hands of Europeans thus had more than an instrumental value; it incorporated into nineteenth-century historical epistemology the pasts of different administrative and missionary spaces. “Indirect rule” was not merely rule by proxy. It brought into intimate contact with rural Africans the very ideas about “civilization” that had been constructed by Europeans and their African counterparts. These two groups watched each other carefully. The European was certain of what “the native” was, while the Africans sought to learn just what they were in the European’s eyes in order to salvage what could promote their interests and to reformulate what could stymie them. Even to have a history meant to be like Europe, meant to be partly intelligible to Europeans. Rwandan tellers of these tales, such as Kagame, and their colonial audiences negotiated the status of which Rwandans were to have control over the content of the stories.

The struggles joined over constructing Rwandan and other Great Lakes histories thus posed a fundamental challenge to Lakes historical actors. How

10. See Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, 1986), 74–84.

could they recapture control over their pasts while at the same time learn to communicate their visions of their pasts to those in colonial power, intending such visions to win them legitimacy within the colonial world? In this struggle, some recognized their dependency on and closeness to their people, and used their historical knowledge to resist colonial control.¹¹ Though just who echoed whom might be unclear, in either case the terms of the debate flowed from nineteenth-century European discursive constructs and took shape in twentieth-century contexts of political competition.¹²

A fine example of this struggle comes from Busoga, in southern Uganda (Map). The Soga historians and informants later used to construct Soga histories within Western paradigms were born in the 1890s amid competition and conflict between the Soga states, an expanding militaristic Ganda kingdom, and the Imperial British East Africa Company. In this period literate Soga gained both monetary rewards and new forms of legitimacy. Government courts, for example, sought linguists who could translate and codify Soga historical knowledge in order to assist courts in settling legal matters to do with land, succession to office, and divorce.¹³ Where disputes about property and politics had formerly included both a wider range of voices and a wider range of topics, there now grew up a narrower set of authorities who might speak authoritatively to the colonial state about the topics that concerned it.

Historical knowledge of the Soga states produced in this context were “official histories.” One example, the work of Y. K. Lubogo,¹⁴ demonstrates the narrowing of the battle over official histories that would promote rights to precolonial offices and authority under the aegis of the colonial state. Lubogo was a powerful member of the colonial administration of Uganda, both as a member of the Busoga District Council and as a founder of the Young Basoga Association in 1921–1922. He conducted historical research throughout the Soga states in the 1920s and 1930s. He presented his syntheses of oral testimony to public meetings, often attended by more than 500 persons, seeking a hard won approval. The stakes were high because some Soga resisted “opening” their political lives to European colonial eyes, while others sought precisely to establish themselves in European colonial eyes. The latter group, among whom Lubogo certainly counted himself, possessed “preeminent positions in local politics and the economy [that] were rooted in the claims to authority made by members of the old ruling houses in Busoga.”¹⁵ The legitimacy of their positions was to

11. Feierman, 138–154.

12. Small-scale, politically decentralized societies between the Great Lakes missed this particular scramble for legitimacy. Consequently, their stories did not gain wide audiences. They remained enmeshed in local cultural politics – just what the colonial view of bounded ethnic space intended. See Feierman, 135–136.

13. David William Cohen, *Towards a Reconstructed Past: Historical Texts from Busoga, Uganda* (Oxford, 1986), 1–20 *passim*, especially 6ff.

14. Y. K. Lubogo, *A History of Busoga* (Jinja, Uganda, 1960, 1962). The example in this paragraph is drawn from Cohen, 67–72.

15. Cohen, 68.

be achieved by ensuring not only that this or that Soga genealogy was included in Lubogo's book, but that the specific version established an individual's or a family's right to a certain office.

The stakes which the colonial state had in the history of African Lakes states emerge most clearly in works that describe the political powers of Lakes kingship. This inquiry generated a set of questions about chronology, power, and economy that shaped much historical discourse in the region from late colonial times to the present. Benjamin Ray has recently shown the important ties, in the late 1890s, between the ethnographer-missionary John Roscoe and Sir Apolo Kaggwa, the Ganda Prime Minister, and Sir James Frazer, the anthropologist. Frazer sought evidence for his general theories on regicide and divine kingship in other people's field notes.¹⁶ Roscoe, who deeply respected Frazer and wanted to help him, therefore stressed evidence for regicide and royal divinity among the Ganda out of proportion to other royal attributes. His highly influential works, in turn, bolstered the power of the Ganda state under colonial rule.¹⁷

Beyond divine kingship lay the histories of Lakes kingdoms. Lists of rulers from the Lakes states had been produced in the early twentieth century. Many of those collected from western Uganda and northwestern Tanzania mentioned a curious group of leaders called the *Chwezi*. One of their European chroniclers, Julien Gorju, a White Fathers missionary resident in Uganda in the 1920s, believed they were historical leaders. He sought to establish their historicity by connecting them to one of several earthworks sites found in southwestern Uganda, a place called Bigo (Map). The issue of linking Bigo to the *Chwezi* was of no consequence to Lakes intellectuals¹⁸; they wrote about the *Chwezi* as ancient kings, a source for their long tradition of statehood that legitimized their claims to authority in colonial eyes. The need to find a single place from where the *Chwezi* ruled, the requirement to concretize their existence, was a European concern.

The *Chwezi* occupied precisely that liminal position between "myth" and "history" which attracted the attention of both detractors and defenders of the possibility of a precolonial African history based on nonliterate sources.¹⁹ The

16. Benjamin Ray, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship in Buganda* (Oxford, 1990), 30ff.

17. These versions did not go uncontested. Other Ganda historians busied themselves correcting Sir Apolo Kaggwa, or covering periods that Kaggwa may have considered unhelpful to his goal of establishing the Ganda kingdom as preeminent between the Great Lakes. See M. Semakula Kiwanuka, *A History of the Kingdom of Buganda* (New York, 1971), 94ff; John Rowe, "Myth, Moral Admonition, and Historical Writing in Buganda," *Uganda Journal* 33 (1969), 17–40.

18. Described by David P. Henige, "'The Disease of Writing': Ganda and Nyoro Kinglists in a Newly Literate World," in *The African Past Speaks*, ed. Joseph C. Miller (Folkestone, Kent, 1980), 240–261.

19. A considerable literature has grown up around these early fixtures in king-lists from the central part of the region. For references see notes and bibliographies in Iris Berger, *Religion and Resistance: East African Kingdoms in the Precolonial Period* (Tervuren, 1981), 153–181; Renee Tantalala, "The Early History of Kitara in Western Uganda: Process Models of Religious and Political Change" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1989), 894–940; and Jean-Pierre Chrétien, "L'empire des bacwezi: La construction d'un imaginaire géopolitique," *Annales Économique, Société, Civilisation* 40 (1985), 1368–1377.

lists of rulers that included the *Chwezi* had been produced in the early twentieth century in contexts similar to that of the post-independence intellectuals who studied them. These intellectuals hoped to settle on a region-wide chronology for Lakes states, despite the doubts of scholars like David Henige who warned that “comprehensive hypotheses” were impossible.²⁰ The comprehensive dating of a Lakes past, its initiation into the colonial and postcolonial communities wherein the possession of a linear chronology was a badge of “historicity,” would have to wait.

Between the 1890s and the 1950s the reality of precolonial states came to be firmly established in the eyes of the colonial state. Lakes African intellectuals established their claims to power in the eyes of the colonial state through projects like Lubogo’s *History of Busoga* and the numerous king-lists. These achievements cut out from their histories the actors at the margins of centralized power. We do not hear from those at the fringes of Lubogo’s public meetings, whose voices were drowned in the melee of producing an “official history” of the Soga. Nor do we hear from those beyond the courts of the ancient chiefdoms ruled by the *Chwezi*. We hear only the imposing voice of “official history.”

Presentations of power as both enabling and constraining reveal the work of hitherto voiceless actors and imply historical perspectives different from those of the courts. For example, the informal, but public, political powers of Lakes female ritual leaders did not survive the colonial concern with African kingdoms.²¹ Those formal and familiar public structures of political power were to be remade under colonialism and men were to play all the roles. Ritual power, dispersed and diffuse, had to be severed from political power, which was seen as concentrated and increasingly secular. This process, the object of considerable struggle, slowly came to achieve a certain hegemony; a consensual, submerged power that constrained thought or action by serving the interests of certain class, age, or gender fragments emerged preminent. However, its historical specificity must not conceal its reflexive relationship to the administrative goals of the colonial project: centralization.

III. THE OUTSIDERS AND THE HISTORIANS

Beginning in the 1960s, as decolonization swept the continent, and as more populist forms of historiography emerged in Western universities, some scholars began a serious critique of Lakes histories by focusing on the conditions under which such histories were produced. For example, Iris Berger studied not only the ancient *Chwezi* figures but also their spokespersons, the *embandwa* spirit-mediums. Aware of the ideology contained in traditions about the *Chwezi*, she

20. David William Cohen, “A Survey of Interlacustrine Chronology,” *Journal of African History* 11 (1970), 199; for general overviews see Chrétien, 1337–1341, 1356–1363; Berger, 27–43; Tantal, chapter II, especially 136ff.

21. Steven Feierman, “Struggles for Control: The Social Roots of Health and Healing in Modern Africa,” *African Studies Review* 28 (1985), 113–120.

asked who conserved the traditions about these persons and their activities and why their stories should be told and retold. She and others aimed to reclaim the contexts in which the traditions were produced, and discovered that they had served to reinforce earlier precolonial ruling classes.²² For example, Jean-Pierre Chrétien, studying stories about an ancient *Chwezi* "Empire," argued that they had been composed by nineteenth-century Lakes historians reacting to the cultural and political-economic imperialism of the Gandan and Rwandan states. These historians, Chrétien showed, developed two positions at once. On the one hand they recalled the halcyon days when the people were independent from Gandan and Rwandan hegemony. On the other hand, they responded to the early travelers' interest in African monarchy.²³ Either way, the central story unfolded around king and court.

What of those beyond the court? How did they employ historical knowledge and to what ends? Alison des Forges,²⁴ in her work on northern Rwanda (Map), revealed that the cleavages within precolonial society opened up or frozen by the colonial moment offered opportunities for new leaders to use history to promote new causes, to resist colonialism, or to explain colonial conditions. Several categories of intellectual leaders operated on both the geographical and the discursive frontiers between court and colonial hegemony. They included Rwandan royal court leaders, local allies of Rwanda's central court, local leaders opposing the court, and leaders who, royal or not, used alliances with Europeans to strengthen their power. Virtually all of these intellectuals employed historical arguments about sovereignty and the proper content of the social contract between leader and follower to emphasize a leader's responsibility to protect land and people from attack and disease. But this obligation cut both ways. Some leaders reworked the equation into an instrument of resistance. This was the case with Muhumusa (active circa 1905–1912), a leader whose legitimacy flowed from her intimacy with the spirit of Nyabingi, a powerful woman at the court of Ndorwa, a kingdom that had resisted Rwanda until the later eighteenth century (Map). Muhumusa used her standing to catalyze action by farmers against both the older imperialism of Rwanda's central court and the new German imperialism. She forged historical interpretations of spirit-mediumship into an instrument of anti-royal action.

This search for historians outside the centers of power—above all spirit-mediums—gained currency within the larger historical discourse of decolonization.²⁵ Such historians, intending their narratives to oppose those of the court,

22. Berger, 29–35; Peter R. Schmidt, *Historical Archaeology* (Westport, Conn., 1978), 44–46; Tantala, 130–256.

23. Chrétien, 1368.

24. Alison des Forges, "The Drum Is Greater Than the Shout": The 1912 Rebellion in Northern Rwanda," in *Banditry, Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa*, ed. Donald Crummey (London, 1986), 311–333.

25. See Alan Isaacman, "Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa," *African Studies Review* 33 (1991), 1–120, especially 5–10; and Terrence O. Ranger, "Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa," *African Studies Review* 29 (1986), 1–69, especially 41–50.

had a distinct notion of power—that it either constrained others or resisted constraint. Views such as these flourished among scholars who saw colonialism as a historical process requiring of its actors one of three choices: domination, collaboration, or resistance. Because resistance to colonialism had hastened decolonization, it was now time—the historians said—to write histories of resisters, both in the past and in the quickly receding colonial “present.”

Though these academic historical writings emerged in the context of newly independent Lakes nation-states, they pointed to a similar process of the production of historical knowledge in an earlier past. They helped uncover the alternative visions of history expressed by religious ritual and practice and intended to combat a contemporary royalist discourse. By studying and comparing several states, these pioneers transcended the ethnic boundaries generated by colonial rule to reveal the widespread and enduring force of religious ideas in challenging court- and later colonial-centered ideological forces.

Contextualized genealogies of historical discourses reveal not only transitions in Lakes pasts, but also shifts in the historical language used by ancient Lakes peoples. This is more than a colonial phenomenon. If we take as a starting perspective the relations of domination and discourse developed by farmers and herders while they elaborated intensive food production systems over 2,500 years ago, they would contain a reworking or displacement of older ideas about politics, economics, the family, and so on. These preexisting ideas might have seemed reborn in the hands of the smelters, the lineage heads, and the healers who controlled access to tools, land, and serious speech acts. What often seems swift—farmers where before there had been only gatherers and hunters—is a trick of evidence. Processes of change in food systems in fact were gradual. They appear to proceed as a series of stages because of the discreteness of comparative linguistic and archaeological data, a sharpness that reveals “innovations” as heuristically sudden. The rebirth of cultural meaning to increasingly agricultural societies was a continuous process, the understanding of which should help to smooth the hops, skips, and jumps in histories of ancient agricultural societies between the Lakes.

Renee Tantala draws this out most elegantly in unraveling the strands of religious and oracular discourse that shaped the epic traditions within Kitara, in western Uganda (Map).²⁶ Tantala came to see religious powers as gathered near a place of creative power—a shrine, a tomb, a sacred tree or hill. As institutions of healing and divination succeeded each other in prominence, their spokespersons (priests or mediums) articulated new values that incorporated elements from their predecessors’ store of cultural capital. Thus, groups that had once resisted a central power but later overcame it attached to their traditions elements from their previous rulers in order to win the confidence of their followers, new and old. The complex epic traditions of precolonial kingdoms between the Great Lakes thus contain several layers of discourse, at once resis-

26. Tantala, chapter 10.

tant and hegemonic, at once concentrated and dispersed. Tantala's conception may have been partly inspired by the recent, postcolonial contexts for her research, especially the general failure of the independent Ugandan state during the civil war and resultant rural misery, in which the "center" of power dispersed throughout the rest of the country in the persons of soldiers, bandits, middle-level civil servants, and "resisters." If Lakes peoples in the past could co-opt center after center, perhaps they could do so again in the present.

Similarly, David S. Newbury analyzed the sociopolitical characteristics of two clans on Ijwi Island in Lake Kivu (Map), both of which explain their origins by claiming ties to royalty. His work exposes the differing contexts for expressing historical knowledge, one clan with strong political ties to neighboring Rwanda, the other with no power base beyond the island's ruling dynasty. Playing Rwandan off against Ijwi royal legitimacy, the two clans lay separate claim to authority in composing their own views about their historical ties to the two centers of power.²⁷ By employing a conceptualization of power as enabling as well as constraining—a notion derived in part from recent studies of African agency in the colonial and postcolonial periods²⁸—scholars like Newbury and Tantala gradually come to see actors beyond the courts. Because postcolonial scholars learned that African theories of power involved ideas about creativity, they rediscovered for Lakes historical intellectuals what they themselves had well understood: the power to resist and to rule may have as much to do with speech as with action.

Studies of the contests involved in constituting and interpreting genres of oral expression develop this point potently.²⁹ Benjamin Ray's detailed analysis of the historical and social content of two Ganda oral genres, *èngero* ("stories, proverbs") and *èbyafaayo* (literally "things that have taken place"), reveals the dispersed nature of power in Lakes societies.³⁰ The Ganda differentiate between the two categories, *èngero* referring to "myths, legends or stories" and *èbyafaayo* composed of "historical narratives." *Èngero* are didactic; they carry moral lessons. *Èbyafaayo* are full of clan names, place names, and royal names. The messages and meanings of *èngero* are hegemonic to the extent that the *èngero* form is orthodox, beyond dispute.³¹ The ideology in *èbyafaayo* is apparent in the shrill contests over the content of their variant forms.

27. David S. Newbury, *Kings and Clans: Ijwi Island and the Lake Kivu Rift, 1780–1840* (Madison, 1991), 178–199.

28. For a discussion and recent examples, see *Creativity of Power: Cosmology and Action in African Societies*, ed. William Arens and Ivan Karp (Washington and London, 1989), xi–xxi; Feierman, chapter 5.

29. See Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985), especially 79–83.

30. Ray, chapters 3 and 4. The words *òlùgero* (singular) and *èngero* (plural) are derived from a verb *òkùgera* which has three separate but overlapping semantic domains in Luganda: 1. to weigh, measure; 2. to flow; 3. to tell a story. The inclusion of the meanings "measuring" and "flowing" imparts the wider context of recurrent interpretation implicit in the performance of storytelling. See R. A. Snoxall, *Luganda-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1967), 88–89, 183. Luganda is a Bantu language; Bantu languages mark singular and plural nouns through prefixation.

31. The clearest statements contrasting hegemony and ideology are made in Comaroff and Comaroff, 24–27; see also Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford, 1987), 24–26.

Even the early Ganda court tellers of *èbyafaayo* felt the influence of European penetration in the late nineteenth century. These courtiers made a quick study of the minds of their inquisitive visitors — missionaries, captains, and merchants — in order to gain access to mission education, or to weapons for war and the elephant hunt. Kampala's beautiful hills lent a dramatic physicality to these competitions for new forms of power. From the commanding heights of Mengo hill, the Kabaka ("king") directed each group of strangers to its new home, each on its own hill, in part so that he and his court might best keep their eyes on them.³² Such a viewpoint conferred advantages on the Kabaka's court as it sought to capture primacy in the emerging colonial hierarchy. The Ganda court class told to each other and to the newcomers a story of its total power over large chunks of the Lakes region, as well as within the Ganda kingdom itself. Some segments of the precolonial ruling classes hoped to reproduce that condition in the new world of colonialism.

But recent work³³ shows a more complex reality. Through a careful study of both the *èngero* and *èbyafaayo*, Ray reveals tensions among royal kin, clan-heads, priests of important non-royal spirits, and royal shrine guardians that led to the genesis of the kingship. Whereas the more formal historical narratives (*èbyafaayo*) express ruling class struggles over legitimacy and symbolic domination, differing interpretations of myths and legends, such as the *òlùgero* concerning Kintu (the first Ganda king), are resources for the production of local cultural forms. They express at once a sense of autonomy from the court and a sense of dependence or domination within dispersed social institutions like marriage and descent systems. Ray explains that we may understand this *òlùgero* as a sort of charter myth for the perpetuity of patriliney (descent in the male line),³⁴ the telling and retelling of which reasserts patriarchal authority in the homestead, often in opposition to the court. However, the story of Kintu also expresses conflict between kin who choose the maternal line and kin who choose the paternal line in their search for political support, thus subverting claims to absolute patriarchal power.³⁵

Patriarchal ideologies embedded in the stories downplayed the oppressive nature of precolonial gender hierarchies, and thus served to solicit consent from women who bore the weight of the household as men were forced to work growing cash crops and for wages in twentieth-century colonial Uganda. However, some recent studies of ancient Lakes states have made gendered identities

32. This is described in Sir Henry Colville, *The Land of the Nile Springs* (London and New York, 1895), 48.

33. Ray, 101–104; Michael Twaddle, "The Emergence of Politico-Religious Groupings in Late Nineteenth-Century Buganda," *Journal of African History* 29 (1988), 81–92.

34. Ray, 72; Nyakanike B. Musisi, "Women, 'Elite Polygyny,' and Buganda State Formation," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16 (1991), 767.

35. Ray, 67, discussing Lucy Mair's *An African People in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1934), 80. Discussing princesses, Musisi locates a source of tension between maternal clans and paternal clans in the contradiction between the lack of a royal clan in Buganda and the "rule" that kings must have royal blood from the father's line; Musisi, 775 n67, 780.

foci of analysis,³⁶ thus laying bare the dangers of equating “historical discourse” with androcentric discourse. These histories portray women as agents despite a gendered discourse that constructs separate spheres of action for men and women (spheres distinct from the standard Western oppositions between “public” and “domestic” domains). For example, in the upper levels of nineteenth-century Ganda society, a society with a strongly hierarchical sense of political status, royal “women were the crux of political alliances between the lineages and to the kabaka”³⁷ (the Ganda king). On the other hand, where class divisions cross-cut gender divisions, the latter commonly were breached by members of the lower classes: “it was not uncommon for peasant women to participate in the male side of the division of labor and vice versa.”³⁸ It seems that the discursive framework of gender spheres applied only to the ruling class, its principal architect.

Western intellectuals are coming to realize what many Lakes intellectuals have long known; both inside and beyond the “domestic sphere” women’s actions carry political weight; they marshal considerable creative power. But “their” history was missed as newly gendered divisions of labor grew up in the later colonial economies that excluded women from the powerful roles of trader, cash cropper, and wage earner.

This brief look at genres of oral expression and gendered social identity reveals the differing goals of African and Western (academic) intellectuals. African writers in the late nineteenth century and beyond, who were almost entirely male, sought to implant precolonial patriarchy and power in the emerging colonial order. They hoped to achieve this by writing books and memoirs that reduced women to purely domestic actors. On the other hand, scholars in the academy of the late twentieth century comment on Western struggles over gender relations by identifying powerful roles for both men and women in precolonial Africa.

Thus, Sir Apolo Kagawa produced texts partly with the intention to make room for Ganda kingship in the emerging colonial view of African power structures. These same texts formed the spoken and unspoken background against which Benjamin Ray’s informants formed their own texts because they wished to reunite the ritual elements of leadership with the political and administrative features. To the extent that ritual power has long been a province for female political power, historians sensitive to gender may read these same texts “against the grain” in order to bring into contemporary historical consciousness the

36. Karen Sacks, *Sisters and Wives: The Past and Future of Sexual Equality* (Urbana, Ill., 1982), 198–215; Elinor Sosne, “Of Biases and Queens: The Shi Past Through an Androgynous Looking Glass,” *History in Africa* 6 (1979), 225–252; Laurence D. Schiller, “The Royal Women of Buganda,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23 (1990), 455–473; Musisi, 757–786.

37. Schiller, 472.

38. Musisi, 772, n52; also Sacks, 111.

agency of women such as queen mothers, elite wives, royal women, and spirit-mediums.³⁹

IV. HISTORICAL ETHNICITY, COLONIALISM, AND VIOLENCE

The colonial construction of African states and of African gender relations required African, colonial, and other Western intellectual contributions. But a critical historiography of the worlds of state and gender takes on new urgency when reunited with two other hallmarks of colonial experience: ethnicity and violence. Nowhere does a critical approach to the invention of ethnic categories have more pressing utility than in Rwandan and Burundian history.

Rwanda and Burundi, two tiny nations perched on the crest of the Nile-Zaire divide, both had precolonial kingdoms. These states grew up around a patronage system of use rights in land and cattle that, in the nineteenth century, created an increasingly hierarchical society. The most well-known groups today are the Tuutsi and the Hutu, whose struggles with each other in the late 1950s deteriorated into deadly violence, taking hundreds of thousands of lives.

Two different views of ethnicity in these societies have emerged. A “constructivist”⁴⁰ approach insists that current categories of ethnic difference are very recent creations, with their genesis in the late colonial period. An “historical”⁴¹ approach finds the roots of that same violence considerably farther back in time, during and before the nineteenth century, and embedded in other fields of social and economic conflict. Either way, ethnic violence in contemporary Rwanda and Burundi resonates with Western racist images of Africa as a savage land and alien continent.

Statements about the Tuutsi and Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi are tightly interwoven into textual and oral narratives from Rwanda, Burundi, and neighboring areas. Alexis Kagame’s 1943 publication of *Inganji Kalinga*⁴² (“the drum of victory”) incorporated a bewildering amount of oral material into a historical statement about Tuutsi supremacy over Hutu. Kagame asserted that the antipathy was ancient. He reaffirmed Tuutsi supremacy when *Inganji Kalinga* reappeared in 1959, when such supremacy in Rwanda was under violent attack.⁴³

39. For queen mothers see Ray, 137–138; Sacks, 210–211; Schiller, 458–463. For elite wives and royal women see Schiller, 466–470; Musisi, 777–782. For spirit mediums see Tantala, 281–291; Sven Bjerke, *Religion and Misfortune* (Oslo, 1981), 140; Berger, 21, 69; and Jim Freedman, *Nyabingi* (Butare, 1984), 27–59.

40. René Lemarchand, “L’école historique burundo-française: une école pas comme les autres,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 24 (1990), 235–248.

41. Jean-Pierre Chrétien, “Hutu et Tuutsi au Rwanda et au Burundi,” in *Au coeur de l’ethnie: Ethnies, tribalisme et l’état en Afrique*, ed. Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M’bokolo (Paris, 1985), 129–165; *Idem.*, “Burundi: Le Métier d’historien: querelle d’école?” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25 (1991), 450–467, especially 453–455, 459–463; see also Ian Linden, *Church and Revolution in Rwanda* (Manchester, 1977).

42. Alexis Kagame, *Inganji Kalinga* (Kabgayi, Rwanda, 1943).

43. Chrétien, “Confronting,” 84–85; For a full treatment see Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860–1960* (New York, 1988), especially chapter 9 and 209–215.

Kagame's dual role as literate historian and informant positioned him strategically as both teller of a Rwandan past and its translator to European historians.⁴⁴ He projected onto the past of the entire colony of Rwanda a vision of Tuutsi as a "caste" that had wrung a monopoly on power from its control of cattle. Chrétien reminds us that this, and later texts building on it, were all parts of strategies for power employed by particular fragments of Tuutsi aristocracy under Belgian colonialism.⁴⁵

Kagame's perspective placed ethnicity firmly within the history of the Rwandan state, promoting ethnicity and the Rwandan state as the keystones for present-minded and past-minded commentaries on the social history of Rwanda. Thus, the violent events of 1972, 1988, and 1991 in Burundi, and 1959–1961 in Rwanda, in which hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, have been cast in decidedly ethnic terms. The somewhat acrimonious debate that sprang up in 1989 in the journal *Issue*,⁴⁶ published by the African Studies Association, underlines the importance of struggles over the control of "collective memory" and the high "stakes of power"⁴⁷ over a discourse situated in social fields that determine life and death. Two scholars wrestled there over the question of how old are the divisions between Tuutsi and Hutu, both claiming the deadly aspects of difference are recent developments, but disagreeing over the nature of their historical roots.

Students of ethnic conflict in Rwanda and Burundi divide into two schools. Those with the "fixed text" approach believe it worthwhile to specify the identity implied by the terms Tuutsi and Hutu, though they concede that the meaning of such terms will change.⁴⁸ The advocates of the "variable text" approach—the majority of scholars in the last fifteen years—begin with the premise that variability must be traced in detail through time.⁴⁹ They criticize the colonial epistemology⁵⁰ which essentialized race; they insist that the premise of ethnicity be deconstructed.

The variable text enterprise does not deny the force of the ethnic category as a tool of domination for at least the last two centuries. But it does expose the social consequences of the manipulation of ethnicity, whether in the early

44. Claudine Vidal, "Alexis Kagame entre mémoire et histoire," *History in Africa* 15 (1988), 493–504.

45. Chrétien, 85.

46. *Issue* 19 (Winter, 1989) and more recently, Lemarchand, "L'école historique," and Chrétien, "Burundi."

47. Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Collective Memory and the Stakes of Power: A Reading of Popular Zairian Historical Discourses," *History in Africa* 13 (1986), 195, 219.

48. René Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi* (London, 1970), 4ff, 18–25, 36–41. Still he realizes that the categories are not fixed; Lemarchand, "The State and Society in Africa: Ethnic Stratification and Restratification in Historical and Comparative Perspective," in *State versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas*, ed. Donald Rothchild and Victor A. Olorunsola (Boulder, Colo., 1983), 50.

49. For an excellent discussion see Chubaka Bishikwabo and David S. Newbury, "Recent Historical Research in the Area of Lake Kivu: Rwanda and Zaire," *History in Africa* 7 (1980), 23–45, especially 26–29.

50. Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *Histoire rurale de l'Afrique des grands lacs* (Paris and Bujumbura, 1983), 16ff.

nineteenth century, during the German and Belgian periods, or today; thus it offers the chance for change. It aims to dissolve the apparently ancient equivalence Tuutsi = pastoralist = ruler and Hutu = farmer = subordinate.⁵¹ Once Lakes peoples reject the magnetic attraction of these equivalents as presented in “le discours ‘scientifique’ colonial,”⁵² then a new social contract may emerge based less on fear of ethnic violence and more on ambitions for economic improvement.

Thus, listening to and publishing local voices could not be more important than in the histories of pastoralism and farming in Rwanda and Burundi. Local voices retool the semantics of ethnicity by being specific.⁵³ Their specificity defeats the manipulation of ethnicity, itself a nexus for power. Failing to hear subaltern voices, still newer forms of oppression may masquerade as “ethnic,” and be promulgated as such by intellectuals. For example, Tuutsi who manipulated their economic and political patron-client relations with other Rwandans in order to provide labor to Belgian coffee growers, positioned themselves better to take over in the 1950s. Similarly, those who had participated in the reconstruction of an ethno-feudal view of Rwanda’s past were poised to emphasize, yet again, the coincidence of their ethnic and ruling statuses:

[C]olonialism in Rwanda fostered not just the emergence of new forms of competition and new ideologies, but also the creation of new forms of oppression and exploitation, as well as the intensification of older ones. For many Rwandans, social, economic, and political changes under colonialism meant loss of land, loss of security, and extraction of new forms of taxes and requisitions for labor. The group awareness that emerged among the victims of these processes (most of whom were Hutu) came as a response to the ways in which Tuutsi used the state apparatus to forward their own interests.⁵⁴

V. PROGRESS, REVOLUTION, AND METHOD

The violence in Rwanda and Burundi revealed the profound contradictions bequeathed to modern Africans from their late colonial experiences. It occurred just as scholars and politicians began to debate the strengths and weaknesses of “radical” and “liberal” paradigms for the development of a postcolonial Africa. In this essay I shall consider only the “radical” in any detail, but both views looked to the state as the agent of transformation, and both gave birth to renewed interest in the deeper past of Africa. Scholarly arguments over the emerging colonial order, defined and promoted through the appropriation of

51. Pierre Bonté tries to separate these sets by proposing that they emerged historically from the ritual power of sacred kingship. However, without examining how the power in sacred kingship is transposed in colonial times, his explanation falls short of its potential. See Pierre Bonté, “To Increase Cows, God Invented the King?: The Function of Cattle in Interlacustrine Societies,” in *Herders, Warriors, and Traders*, ed. John Galaty and Pierre Bonté (Boulder, Colo., 1991), 62–86.

52. Chrétien, “Burundi,” 460.

53. This specificity is at the heart of what is best in the “Histoire Rurale” project in Burundi. See Chrétien, “Burundi,” 453–455; and Ndaywel è Nziem’s plea for local history in his “African Historians and Africanist Historians,” in *African Historiographies*, ed. Jewsiewicki and Newbury, 20–27.

54. Newbury, 207.

a precolonial “heritage” now moved to focus on a rather deeper past in order to understand the forces shaping postcolonial development. Technology, the peasantry, and women came to the fore as objects of historical study *within* the structures and events that would limit their activity: environment, revolution, and gender relations. All these topics emerged within the political and discursive context of postcolonial, independent Africa.

One major strand of Lakes historical discourse revolves around the role of technology (stone or iron) in shaping social change in the distant past. Debates over ancient technology have echoed discussions about the contradictory role of technology in postcolonial economic development and underdevelopment. The classic periodizations of the distant past according to “ages” of stone or metal partly reflected the technological determinism of both the radical and the liberal development paradigms, which gave pride of cause to the transformative capacity of labor or capital, depending on the perspective.⁵⁵

In part, these themes grew out of a desire to represent Lakes historical achievement as innovative, as having been undertaken by technically skilled persons similar to those on whose shoulders lay the tasks of postcolonial development. This was a far more sophisticated story than one merely of settlement and cultural contact.⁵⁶ It led academic historians of Africa to interweave the separate chains of inference based on oral traditions, historical linguistics, and the spread and development of the material culture of ironworking and pottery making. These interdisciplinary methodologies have been widely hailed as advances on traditional historians’ reliance chiefly on written sources.⁵⁷ But their promotion as such can also be criticized as a narrow self-justification for the uniqueness of Africanist history within the European practice of history, rather than as any specifically “African” history.

The divisions between the disciplines in the academy are not the only manifestation in Africa of a colonizing nineteenth-century epistemology. The search for indigenous history using foreign categories and oppositions hatched from an evolutionary perspective shapes Lakes histories in certain ways. For example, Wyatt MacGaffey warns us that “religion, politics, and economy, inescapable though they may be, are folk categories only awkwardly applicable to non-European societies.”⁵⁸ The “economic” may be a flawed category because it does not contain all that might be defined as “economic” in the past. The “economic” can rather be used as a power/knowledge/truth strategy when it

55. Vansina, “Knowledge,” 39.

56. Christopher Ehret, “The East African Interior,” in *General History of Africa*, Volume III, *Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, ed. Ivan Hrbek (Paris, 1988), 616–642; David L. Schoenbrun, “We Are What We Eat: Ancient Agriculture between the Great Lakes,” *Journal of African History* 34 (1993), 1–31.

57. Wyatt MacGaffey has described African history as the “decathlon of the social sciences.” See his “African History, Anthropology, and the Rationality of the Natives,” *History in Africa* 5 (1978), 103.

58. Wyatt MacGaffey, “Epistemological Ethnocentrism in African Studies,” in *African Histories*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David S. Newbury (Beverly Hills, 1986), 45.

is separated from and opposed to such categories as religion, with which it was often united in pre-European Lakes discursive formations. Such inappropriate distinctions can lead to confusion over the material and ideological bases for institutions such as sacred kingship.

For example, if the “economic” is restricted to the production, distribution, and circulation of goods, and a ruler’s power is conceived as flowing from divine, “religious” sanctions, we may find it difficult to understand that, for many Lakes subordinates who lived in kingdoms, their contract with their ruler required that he ritually moderate a host of natural forces in order to insure that his lands and people should continue to be fertile and productive. We may imagine that such a king’s ritual power is epiphenomenal, that he rules in fact because the land and people are productive and can supply him with tribute and support for military and political actions. The “economic” here gives birth to the “religious.” But such a view understands only half of the equation. For subordinates the king may rule because he has consolidated his ritual power over the land, and thus has the ability to moderate the relationship between his people and the forces of nature. Should he fail to do so—should he, for example, fail to bring enough rain or stop too much from falling—it would be because he had failed to invite into the process the requisite members of the community, other powerful rainmakers and diviners. Enough of these failures and his ability to rule diminishes in the eyes of his followers. Both an “economic” (production) and a “religious” (ritual services) aspect are at work here. But for leader and follower the two are one.

In the failure to see this we may also fail to recognize regionally specific discursive structures of historical activity.⁵⁹ Neighboring “ethnic” groups may be bound together by their sharing similar ideas about the proper content of a chief’s relationship to his followers (for example, ideas about the proper mix between a chief’s relational power [his ability to secure outcomes through the agency of others] and his creative power [his ability to moderate the relationship between people and wilderness in order to bring on or deflect misfortune]).⁶⁰ To recognize common ideas about ruling power is to look beyond familiar divisions of “ethnic” space, developed during colonial times and often based on linguistic difference and political boundaries. This subverts the old view of Africa as a continent filled with a plethora of sharply differing cultures.⁶¹

Beginning in the 1970s, failures of African economies, the oppressive nature of the world economy, and the peasant revolutions in Asia led to the deployment of a “mode of production” model by structural Marxists and political economists.⁶² Their histories served two purposes: first, to find the origins of the

59. Feierman, 46–49; Ray, 7.

60. Paul B. Roscoe, “Practice and Political Centralization,” *Current Anthropology* 34 (1993), 113–114.

61. Feierman, 38–39.

62. Edward I. Steinhart, “From ‘Empire’ to State: The Emergence of the Kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara: c. 1350–1890,” in *The Study of the State*, ed. Henri J. M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik (The Hague, 1981), 353–370; Mahmood Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (New York, 1976), 17–39; Joseph Mbwiliza, “The Hoe and the Stick: A Political Economy of the Heru Kingdom

objects of their inquiry—ruling classes, peasants, and the forces of production; second, to understand the conditions that constrained the action of those who could undertake real economic development: peasants and women.

Scholars felt confident that a political economy framework that was sensitive to the ecological dimensions of economic growth and to politico-religious idioms of power could reveal the origins of inequality, ethnicity, and politically centralized government. A condensed narrative of the origin of kingdoms in northwestern Tanzania (Map) can illustrate the rewards of materialist insights.

Sometime in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, population growth and shrinking land resources converged in the highlands and led farmers to adopt techniques of intensive cultivation. Their perennial (year-round) cropping practices required a steady supply of manure to maintain soil fertility, thus producing a premium on access to cattle. Intensification also led to consolidation of land holdings within clans. Farmers invited pastoralists to mediate land disputes among clans because they felt herders to be uninterested in heritable, fixed land rights. In the eighteenth century, ecological crises may have sped up this process.⁶³ Institutional innovations, such as clientship bonds between herders and farmers, organized access to cattle and land. These social relations encompassed a complex technical division of labor (in which ironworkers formed another group) which pitted landlords against peasants.

Pastoral-agricultural tensions and the concomitant rise of social inequality in the era of state formation in the Lakes region may have been broadly linked to climatic change. But climatic change proceeds gradually and may itself have been a product of agricultural and ironworking activity which removed more and more forest cover.⁶⁴ In this context droughts may have more often threatened food security and so become more visible in oral traditions.

When structural-Marxist models of history are used to explain inequality and hierarchy, they can gain currency outside the narrow confines of the academy. If, for example, the “origins” of the ethnic/economic cleavages between the contemporary Tuutsi and Hutu of Rwanda and Burundi are explained as a consequence of the political economy of the deep past, the analysis may thus unwittingly reinforce the current “unity” of ethnic and economic status by historicizing it. Unfortunately, this approach undervalues the role of social agents to historical development.

Ethnicity and state structures were not the only objects shaped by the discourse of the revolutionary postcolonial era; a second group of radical intellectuals employed the mode of production model but searched for women’s agency within it. The danger was that such studies would achieve a unity between past and present forms of gender and economic status strikingly similar to that

c. 1750–1900,” in *La civilisation ancienne des peuples des grands lacs*, Colloque de Bujumbura, 4–10 September 1979 (Paris and Bujumbura, 1981), 100–114.

63. Mbwiliza, 101. See also Emile Mworoha *et al.*, *Histoire du Burundi: Des origines à la fin du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1987), 119ff.

64. Schoenbrun, 4–5.

proposed for past and present forms of ethnicity and inequality. As Karen Sacks put it: “Modes are male, but they do not have to be that way. If mode of production is a socially illuminating concept, then it surely can illuminate women’s social places.”⁶⁵ She means that women are also economic actors, and she analyzes women’s productive relations by studying their status as sisters and wives, not by imprisoning them in a “domestic sphere” or reducing them to objects of social relationships.

Later scholars have tried to lay bare the material roots of unequal gender relations. In an excellent study of pastoralism and sacred power in Lakes kingdoms, Pierre Bonté shows that, in pastoralist Nkore society, women must be separated from cattle because female sexuality is deemed dangerous to cattle.⁶⁶ He goes on to “syntax” Nkore gender relations by observing that the exchange of wives, like the exchange of cattle, connects lineages. However, I believe that in this analysis the Nkore “woman” is drained of her agency, her self-created identity, because she is only described as an object of social relationships.⁶⁷ We must move past merely “seeing” women in African history. Women’s *actions* must become a binding focus for historians in and of the Great Lakes region, as they have elsewhere.

All these debates within the political economy framework seek to defuse current ethnic and gender inequalities. Either they provide an ancient heritage to herders and farmers as distinct groups, or they trace the origins of these distinct groups from outside the area, or they establish female agency within the patriarchal social field that covered the Lakes. But the political economists seem to study “pure” groups of specialized herders, farmers, and women as they existed in the nineteenth century, and discover their essentialist origins in an environmental crisis or class conflict during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶⁸ Such views provided a historical echo of the deadly failure of political ecologies in the Sahel (1968–1974), Ethiopia (1980s), and Karimoja (late 1970s), disasters which shortsighted colonial and postcolonial agricultural policies did much to bring about.⁶⁹ Thus, studies of ancient Great Lakes political ecologies may have served to reassure the independent African state of its capacity for survival even as they warned against its overstepping boundaries drawn by environmental limits and class tensions.

These histories that touched on gendered and ethnic questions constituted and promoted political-economic identities—often in direct competition with identities proposed or imposed by the colonial state. Muhumusa, the rebel from

65. Sacks, 111.

66. Bonté, 81.

67. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and G. S. Spivak (London, 1988), 30–31.

68. See especially *Chronology, Migration and Drought in Interlacustrine Africa*, ed. J. Bertin Webster (Halifax, 1979); Steinhart, 360–361; and Tantala, 484–487.

69. The literature is vast, but see Gregory Maddox, “Nga: Food Storage and Famine in Tanzania between the Wars,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 19 (1986), 17–34; and Michael Watts, *Silent Violence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981), chapters 2 and 3.

northern Rwanda, exemplified a peasant leader whose distinct political identity rested on her ability to concretize local ideas of power and to coopt the Rwandan central court's legitimacy in order to resist German and missionary interests.⁷⁰ This is a crucial point. If we ask who had and who now has the authority to produce "true" knowledge of the past in the Lakes region, then other voices and debates will come to the fore, as for example in the current debates about ethnic categories in Rwanda and Burundi.

We should recognize in these discourses the links among African independence, world revolutions, and historical studies of resistance within the Great Lakes region during the era of the states. However, these studies have not undermined the perception of independent nation-states in the Lakes region as instruments of progress.⁷¹ This failure was born at independence, when intellectuals proved incapable of seeing beyond their own social horizons:

the self-perception of the intellectuals (as 19th-century social products . . .), as the only social group capable of leading the successful revolution toward social justice (seen as an equality of individuals . . .), paradoxically reserves for the nation-state the leading role during the post-revolutionary transition. In the 1970s there was more talk about the capability of the lineage and tributary modes of production in sustaining a state, about the state as a central element in unequal relations inside the capitalist world system and about the revolutionary peasants' state than about the dissolution of the state.⁷²

More recent studies critical of states and their functioning, by contrast, look back to local activity and to local knowledge in order to rescue the valuable core of the radical conception of historical change: transition, transformation, and dissent. They also recover enduring local and regional idioms of historical meaning, specifically at the local levels of political and religious change and at the political practice of women within a gendered hierarchical and ideological system with a decidedly patriarchal cast. A common thread runs through all these works despite their variety. All want to know how different groups' actions shaped the contours of the political system in which they functioned. Many at least mention, or rely on, spirit-mediumship as the critical lens through which to view the relation between politics and religion.⁷³ All describe historically the problems faced by would-be ruling classes in winning consent from the "masses" through appropriating the oral, spatial, and other symbolic capital of religious practitioners. But this process involves the invention of new political and religious language or, at least, the reinterpretation of old language. Sensitivity to such transformations characterizes much current work on Lakes history.

70. See Michelle Wagner's rich study of, among many other issues, the view from its southern frontier of the court power of Burundi, and the changed identities of some frontier persons as that court power was projected south (Wagner, "Whose History Is History?: A History of the Baragane People of Buragane, Southern Burundi, 1850-1932" [Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1990]).

71. Jewsiewicki, "African Historical Studies," 5.

72. *Ibid.*, 14.

73. As do Emile Mworoha and his colleagues in *Histoire du Burundi des origines à 1900*; and Freedman, *Nyabingi*.

VI. CONCLUSION: CURRENT STRUGGLES IN LAKES HISTORY

“Kintu has an *mbuga* everywhere in Busoga. Each *mbuga* is a sacred place.”⁷⁴ Kintu’s *mbuga* (a place where shrines are built) expresses both the dispersed and the consolidated nature of power in the Lakes region. This continuum of power is more realistic than the polarization of self-other, oppressor-oppressed that Jewsiewicki thinks dominates African intellectuals who are trying to see themselves through their European reflection.⁷⁵ The turbulence of *Uhuru* (“freedom” from slavery and then colonialism⁷⁶) led to cultural crisis and renewal. Many Africans critically reinterpreted Western values and argued for a return to their own heritage for principles of meaning. This return created an authentic Africa that mirrored colonial conceptions. Yet the fervor with which some African intellectuals took to this “renewal” led to a crisis in “African” history and to a search for new critical categories corresponding to those of the African actors themselves.⁷⁷

In pursuit of this, Jacques Depelchin has wrestled with conceptual rather than chronological issues.⁷⁸ His political economy of the greater Ruzizi basin, straddling the border between Zaire, Rwanda, and Burundi (Map), is based on the awareness that historical texts are produced in the intellectual and experiential space between a researcher (colonial officer or academic) and an informant. Thus he compared the colonial records of peaceful and orderly succession from chief to chief to the accounts he received from peasants. He found that their stories spoke of conflict and intrigue, as different groups tried to influence the decision of the council of elders (*abaluvi*), the chief-makers. The “double subjugation” of peasants, first by colonial power and then by their African proxies, insured that any historical accounts of chiefship they might relate to outsiders should remain inoffensive to both groups of rulers.⁷⁹ Though Depelchin takes too literally the appropriating capacity of chiefship, and thereby fails to understand the participation of peasants in investing royal power with meaning, his study brings active people, with aspirations and hopes, into the often faceless fields of history produced in the mode of production paradigm.

The future of histories in the Lakes region is to be found in the study of competent speakers within material and discursive structures, sanctioned by local participation, but speaking more and more from inside locations of legiti-

74. Hence a place of power: Kibedi Y. M. Zirabamuzale, in Cohen, 313.

75. Jewsiewicki, “The Production,” 82. For examples of the “continuum” approach, see Tantal, Wagner, and Nancy Rose Hunt, “Noise over Camouflaged Polygamy, Colonial Morality Taxation, and a Woman-Naming Crisis in Belgian Africa,” *Journal of African History* 32 (1991), 471–494.

76. See Feierman, 212–214.

77. The search is for actors, but the findings normally remain actions; our deep-time sources do this. Contemporary studies can avoid this. See Johannes Fabian, *Power and Performance* (Madison, 1991), chapter 1.

78. This is pointed out in Bishikwabo and Newbury, 36. See Jewsiewicki, “African Historical Studies,” 35–37; Jacques Depelchin, “From Pre-capitalism to Imperialism: A History of Social and Economic Formations in Eastern Zaire (Uvira Zone, c.1800–1965)” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 1974).

79. *Ibid.*, 24.

macy such as museums and schools. There is no consensus. Today, historical knowledge is as contested a field of discourse as it appears to have been around cooking fires and beer pots in the deep past. The struggles are subtle and contradictory. For example, a school teacher's orthography of Sukuma, spoken in northwest Tanzania, reduces the phonological variety of Sukuma dialects, the development of which is rooted in past historical processes. This "standardized" Sukuma is taught to foreigners and non-Sukuma-speakers in mission schools. It is therefore produced and transmitted within these essentially nineteenth-century sites of legitimacy and power. In the hands of teachers, such reduction expresses a profound new power/knowledge strategy both resisting and co-opting the Tanzanian government's strategy of nation-building by promoting a single national language, Swahili. If Swahili could be made to serve the nation of Tanzania, then Sukuma could be made to serve a part of that nation. Yet, the language teacher also works on the team of local scholars, missionaries, and craftpersons who aim to conserve and promote the diversity of Sukuma historical knowledge. This discourse of diversity corresponds to major categories recognizable to the Western-trained intellectual: material culture (metallurgy, pottery, basketry, housebuilding); oral culture that recalls the political divisions within Sukumaland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; music; and the healing arts.

Knowledge of the past has a tougher time outside such sites of legitimacy, even if sanctioned by local participation and idioms of status. The local and the regional loci of legitimacy, the homestead and the school, are not always linked. The struggle against AIDS has provided many examples. A case close to me is that of the son of a Koonzo healer from western Uganda who holds a Diploma in Pharmacology from a school in Kampala, Uganda. He imagined his contribution to the treatment and care of those suffering full-blown AIDS in peculiarly linear historical terms, as originating in knowledge with a past: his inherited legitimacy and expertise in herbal medicine. Still, no amount of persuasion from our respective pens could induce government-approved AIDS research projects to appreciate that he might possess valuable herbal knowledge as well as expertise in the social practice of administering therapy that comprises the psychological part of the herbal doctor's art.

Ignorance of the utility of contemporary healers' potent knowledge of the past is echoed in David William Cohen's account of the formation of knowledge about the past in "oral" societies. The very characterization of the text as "primary sources" sets up a fundamental division between "popular and erudite knowledge of past in African societies."⁸⁰ Lakes African authors like Lubogo and others are little studied in the Western academy because they are thought to be "primary" sources of "raw data" that have not yet been processed by our power/knowledge/truth strategies and then made into commodities within the market of ideas that circulates as intellectual capital.⁸¹ This fails to see the

80. Cohen, 12ff.

81. Jewsiewicki, 6.

ability of these texts to reveal cracks in our current “logic of the knowledge of past in societies which might be characterized as ‘oral,’” to quote Cohen.⁸² And it fails to see how, in important ways, many of these sources are indeed secondary, having been produced within specific nexuses of authority and interest.

Struggles for control of discourse about the African past are still shackled in an essentially European-derived conceptual framework. But they are breaking through by attending to local forms of historical action. Both male and female speakers participate, often in radically different ways. Local Lakes intellectuals must listen to local and regional concerns if they are to maintain their roles as competent speakers. Outside scholars would do well to find them and to listen to them and those who support them.

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82. Cohen, 12.