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Stephen, Rhiannon, *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa: A Conceptual History*.
Publisher: Duke University Press, 2022. 312 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1478018827.

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Introduction:

Rhiannon Stephens' book *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* provides a systematic analysis of the concepts of wealth and poverty in the tradition and life of East Africans before colonialism or the integration of Africa into the international economic and trade system. The book is a conceptual history of poverty and wealth in eastern Uganda—a region that encompasses thirteen modern languages from the Bantu and Nilotic language families and covers a wide range of communities and their unique perspectives spanning over two millennia. This extended timeline provides valuable insights into the continuity and transformation of ideas on poverty and wealth, enriching our understanding of how these concepts are shaped and have evolved in the region. This book places a significant emphasis on indigenous perspectives on poverty and wealth, challenging dominant narratives influenced by colonialism and global trade networks. By giving a voice to often overlooked historical and cultural perspectives, *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* uncovers the complexity of people's intellectual engagements with these concepts and how they have been shaped by socio-material, economic, and political conditions in the region.

The structure of the book:

The book is structured into 6 chapters. In Chapter 1, Stephens outlines the book's unique approach to studying poverty and wealth in oral societies over a long historical period. Stephens introduces historical linguistics as a key methodology, provides a genetic classification of the languages in the study, and discusses different forms of evidence used such as historical linguistic reconstructions, climate data, archaeology, oral traditions, and ethnographic materials. Chapter 2 examines the earliest concepts of poverty and wealth found in languages ancestral to those spoken in eastern Uganda today. The chapter focuses on Proto-Greater Luhya, Proto-West Nyanza, Proto-Eastern Nilotic, Proto-Western Nilotic, and Proto-Southern Nilotic to understand the development of these ideas over time. Subsequently, Stephens added a small interchapter to discuss various climate changes in the region and their impact

on agriculture, pastoralism, hunting, and fishing. This interlude demonstrates how climate fluctuations influenced economic practices and the conceptualization of poverty and wealth. In doing so, Stephens helps explain that the movement of people, language, and language interaction are part of the dynamics of wealth and poverty. In chapter 3, Stephens continues her exploration of these two concepts in languages that emerged from Proto-Greater Luhya—highlighting the changing attitudes towards poverty and associations of wealth with gender, material abundance, and power. Chapter 4 examines concepts of poverty and wealth in Proto-North Nyanza and the languages that emerged from it. It analyzes economic uncertainties during arid periods and gendered aspects of wealth and poverty. Chapter 5 explores how communities perceive poverty and wealth, considering orphanhood, livestock ownership, suffering, punishment, and skillfulness. The final chapter investigates the impact of wider trade networks and European imperialism on poverty and wealth in eastern Uganda. It examines how droughts, epidemics, and colonial rule disrupted communities and influenced their understanding of economic disparity.

Main themes of the book:

Stephens's research challenges preconceived notions about the nature and existence of economic and social inequality in East Africa's past. Using Eastern Africa as a research context, this study provides evidence that precolonial Africa was neither a poor nor egalitarian society. Focusing on eastern Uganda, a region rich in linguistic and cultural diversity, Stephens's analysis offers a nuanced understanding of poverty and wealth across communities with varying historical trajectories. It reveals that people in eastern Uganda held intricate and dynamic understandings of poverty and wealth long before colonial influence or global trade networks and uncovers how people's intellectual engagement with these ideas shaped their societies and influenced social and political change.

Poverty and Wealth in East Africa reveals how these two concepts have been understood socially, emotionally, and materially. One of the primary themes explored in the book is the social aspect of poverty and wealth. Stephens illustrates how social norms, kinship ties, and marriage played crucial roles in determining economic status. Concepts of poverty included ideas of kinlessness and the inability to marry. The poor were sometimes seen as posing threats to the community due to their demands on resources or disruptive behavior. Gender also played a significant role in framing poverty and wealth, with distinct concepts for poor women and wealthy women. Additionally, the book explores how wealth can be framed as power and leadership, often represented through specific insignia or symbols. Another theme examined in the book is the material aspect of poverty and wealth. Stephens highlights how material possessions, land, crops, and livestock formed

critical components of wealth. Concepts of wealth in different forms coexisted, with wealth in crops transforming into wealth in livestock, and vice versa. The boundaries between social and material concepts of poverty and wealth were fluid, reflecting the complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors. The emotional dimension of poverty and wealth is also explored in-depth. Concepts of poverty were often linked to suffering, bereavement, and emotional hardships, while wealthy individuals were associated with honor and respect. Emotional perceptions of wealth were positive in general, but negative emotions towards the wealthy were also evident in some cases.

This study takes a regional approach—covering multiple languages, economic activities, and political structures to provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse and evolving conceptions of poverty and wealth in eastern Uganda. By examining historical linguistic evidence, Stephens showcases the intellectual history of the region, challenging conventional views and emphasizing the importance of understanding local perspectives and historical contexts. Stephens has done remarkable work in examining poverty and wealth with historical construction and linguistic analysis. However, there are inherent limits to historical reconstruction regarding the accuracy and reliability of the interpretations made based on linguistic and limited material evidence. Skeptics may question the extent to which linguistic analysis can genuinely capture ancient economic ideas and might advocate for more diverse sources of evidence. To provide a more comprehensive understanding, some might suggest that this study should encompass a broader geographic scope or include a comparative analysis with other regions in East Africa including countries with a longer tradition of written languages such as Ethiopia and Eritrea. This analysis could help to trace the dynamics of the intellectual engagement of the people with rich evidence and complement the findings of this great work.

Furthermore, understanding the intellectual engagement of individuals with wealth and poverty, as well as their evolving dynamics over time, can play a pivotal role in transforming the socio-economic conditions within a region. This book understandably lacks a thorough exploration of how this comprehension can shape the crafting of policies to address poverty and inequality, while also promoting the growth of wealth and its fair distribution in the region.

In conclusion, *Poverty and Wealth in East Africa* is an extensive and meticulously researched work that sheds light on the multifaceted nature of poverty and wealth in eastern Uganda. By exploring the social, material, and emotional dimensions of these concepts, this book offers a nuanced and holistic view of economic inequality in the region, providing a valuable resource for scholars and researchers interested in African history, anthropology, and development studies.

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