

BOOK REVIEW

Axel Fleisch and Rhiannon Stephens, editors. *Doing Conceptual History in Africa*. New York: Berghahn, 2016. xi+243 pp. Maps. Figures. Tables. Notes. Index. \$120.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781785331633.

A timely work that showcases historic African perspectives, Axel Fleisch and Rhiannon Stephens' edited volume *Doing Conceptual History in Africa* provides examples and the methodological fine print on how scholars do just that. This book offers a refreshing and highly researched counter to the frequent portrayals of key concepts, from "land" and "work" to "masculinity" and "poverty," categories that are too often universalized based only on recent western history. As the editors underscore, *Doing Conceptual History* reveals diverse Africans at the forefront of creating, debating, and changing core concepts, offering a much-needed missing perspective within the field of conceptual history (3). More broadly, each of the nine research chapters adds to historical understandings of Eastern, Southern, and Western Africa. Contributing authors also discuss their innovative research methodologies, a feature that will particularly appeal to advanced students and researchers interested in adopting similar approaches.

One major contribution of this volume is that it substantially broadens conceptual history's conventional focus, with chapters that move between and beyond public debates, written sources, and recent eras. The volume begins with Rhiannon Stephens' research on changing notions of "wealth" and "poverty" in precolonial Uganda. Far from being static concepts, these and similar terms, in response to major social and economic transitions, have prompted new, debated notions over the centuries. Although this and other chapters illustrate the deeper time possibilities for conceptual history, this book also adds insights for more recent periods. Pierre-Philippe Fraiture narrates the ongoing presence of "decolonization" as concept and effect through the writings of Valentin Mudimbe, Achille Mbembe, and Patrice Nganang, three intellectuals whose works remind us that African lived experiences did not fall neatly into tidy precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial categories. Nor did some Africans necessarily embrace "western" definitions of certain concepts. For instance, Pamela Khanakwa explores contested Bagisu notions of "masculinity" in which various factions within Bagisu society debated whether, how, and in what context male rites of circumcision made someone truly a "man" versus a "boy."

Khanakwa's chapter, among others, reveals the endurance of nonwestern understandings of such concepts as "gender." Other chapters further complicate colonial histories of conceptual translation in ways that considerably enrich debates over continuity and rupture. Ana Lúcia Sá describes the entanglements between the multiple Bioko views of "land." Although some embraced colonial definitions of "land" to contest colonial claims, other historical examples point to deliberate African resistance to colonial translations. Anne Kelk Mager, for instance, traces a history of South African workers who fought to retain their indigenous notion of "work." In still other contexts, translation was an even more complex process. Bo Stråth demonstrates this with his conceptual history approach to writing the history of Nyerere's *ujamaa* "forwards, not backwards" in order to reveal complex shifts in its imagination and application in Tanzania (186).

Throughout this volume, each chapter models ways that scholars can engage in conceptual history, often with examples that pioneer new approaches. Marné Pienaar explores the divergent meanings that coalesced around "marriage" in Afrikaans to trace the shifting debates and stakes surrounding twentieth-century marriage practices. As much as contested lexical meanings animate key social shifts here and in earlier chapters, such as Stephens' on precolonial Uganda, attention to linguistic continuities reveals other new historical insights. In his chapter, Axel Fleisch uses semantic analysis to demonstrate that, despite the intensity of the colonial encounter, isiXhosa speakers retained earlier distinctions between "work" as an activity versus an action. Similarly, isiNdebele speakers used loan words to distinguish between traditional and new, urban types of work. By tracing separately both the evolution of categories of meaning and of the words themselves, Fleisch reveals unexpected social continuities along with a highly useful semantic approach to historical research. New approaches to documentary sources also feature frequently. One example, among many, was Pieter Boele van Hensbroek's systematic quantitative survey of newspaper usages of the concept "land." He places these alongside close reading of key Ghanaian period leaders' works to trace how varied historical actors transformed ideas of "land" and one's right to it from local familial to more abstract European notions (172).

Especially in these times when debates continue over the "relevance" of earlier, nonwestern history, this edited collection offers examples of how African history indeed makes vital contributions to the field of conceptual history. For readers both new and seasoned, this volume provides a very important "explicitly anti-teleological approach," one that lies at the heart of conceptual history (16). In doing so, it provides a payoff valued by many: namely, highlighting the pluralities of African thought and practice found in both the deep past and the recent present.

Yaari Felber-Seligman
City College of New York
New York, New York

yfelberseligman@ccny.cuny.edu

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For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Berry, Sara. 2017. "Struggles over Land and Authority in Africa." *African Studies Review* 60 (3): 105-125. doi: 10.1017/asr.2017.96
- Newbury, David. 2007. "Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon: Jan Vansina and the Debate over Oral Historiography in Africa, 1960–1985." *History in Africa* 34: 213-254. doi: 10.1017/S0361541300009797
- Stephens, Rhiannon. 2016. "“Whether They Promised Each Other Some Thing Is Difficult to Work Out”: The Complicated History of Marriage in Uganda." *African Studies Review* 59 (1): 127-153. doi: 10.1017/asr.2016.6