

Farewell, then, to the *Chronique du chercheur*, which must henceforth be considered an apocryphal Timbuktu chronicle. Some may lament that we have lost a major monument of African literature. However, thanks to Mauro Nobili's groundbreaking book, we now have a set of securely attributable historical documents, instead of a mishmash of plagiarism and forgery. Historians will appreciate this achievement, and be grateful for a much better understanding of how political agency and narrative creativity were deployed within a precolonial African state.

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'Groupwork' and Community in the East African Past

The Names of the Python: Belonging in East Africa, 900 to 1930

By David L. Schoenbrun. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021.
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This book is a masterclass in the reconstruction of Africa's deeper past. It is also a reminder that some of the best work on what we term 'precolonial' history is being done in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. David Schoenbrun is both pillar and pioneer in this field. Scholars have firmly positioned the lacustrine region at large and Buganda in particular as a laboratory for understanding the development of ideas about the collective: ethnicity, nation, family, what it meant to be involved in 'groupwork'. While it is true that Buganda might be considered closely scrutinized intellectual territory, Schoenbrun's work demonstrates that much remains to be explored. Some of this volume's core themes are familiar enough to historians of the region — including the foundations of community, the creation and operation of the state, the expansion in economic scale, the role of Lake Victoria or the 'inland sea' (Chapter Two) — each of which Schoenbrun's dexterity and eye for nuance greatly enriches.

In large part this is down to his brilliant handling of a dazzling array of sources. Through a fine-grained examination of semantics and change over time, Schoenbrun extracts riches from many sources that Bugandan historians thought they already knew. These sources include archaeology and historical and comparative linguistics — on which, roughly, the first half of the book is predominantly drawn — as well as ethnography, vernacular histories, newspapers, and various European accounts, on which Schoenbrun bases his analysis in the second half of the book.

His account is organized around the python, in its various manifestations in local culture and politics, because 'words for the great snake may be associated with each sort of groupwork in the region's history' (5). Using that potent emblem, Schoenbrun traces the development of overlapping networks of belonging and reciprocity ('groupwork') over the course of a millennium. Groupwork is at the center of the story Schoenbrun is telling. That story complicates neat and linear assessments of, most notably, ethnicity — and the author eschews the kind of teleological interpretation of ethnicity which has long characterized a great deal of work on the region, and indeed elsewhere in Africa. Schoenbrun, in other words, starts not in the present, but at the beginning, delicately

weaving together the story of how communities come to share language, material culture, knowledge, and belief.

In addition to the dynamic sphere of groupwork, the inland sea is at the heart of Schoenbrun's story, which opens with an account of how clanship was formed to incorporate people who used large canoes to travel considerable distances, and how this was made possible by new ideas about spirit mediumship. This is an early example of how community and connection were possible among people who would never meet, but who nevertheless could form networks of belonging beyond the interpersonal. The figure of Mukasa — the spiritual authority or *lubaale* long associated with the inland sea — was key to the process by which a dynamic, expansive community of people who fished and travelled by canoe came into being. Shrines helped to forge long-distance relationships between people, while an array of interested parties tapped into Mukasa's beneficence, as communities evolved their links to the mass body of water that gave life — materially and, in terms of Mukasa's association with fertility, literally.

By the late seventeenth century, Buganda's state-builders were also investing in their relationships with those groups intimately linked to the lake, and they did so with a view to the kingdom's well-documented territorial expansion. Schoenbrun's close reading of vernacular sources in conjunction with contemporary European accounts, especially enriches our understanding of the gendered dimensions of new forms of belonging, drawing attention to the importance of biological fertility and the cultures around it, which undergirded new forms of Ganda ethnicity at a time of heightened violence (and in particular the influx of captive women). The book concludes with an exploration of the intellectual work undertaken in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period in which, through the new medium of print culture, authors drew moral lessons from the past in thinking about how groupwork might best succeed — and identified an exclusive emphasis on descent as especially problematic. Schoenbrun's intricate historical reconstruction demonstrates that community is formed in rather more complex and multilayered ways than that.

No one working on Buganda can ignore this book, and all future work on the political, cultural, and social past of the region will need to take account of it. Schoenbrun has deepened and complicated our knowledge of how societies are formed, how belonging evolves, and how numerous layers of community are involved in it, especially once people move across longer distances and are no longer able to meet one another face-to-face. Buganda's story can no longer be said to be solely that of the royal elites; as such, the kingdom's rise offers historical lessons — about community, about imagination, about historical solidarities — that might be broadly applied.

For all his methodological strengths, it is unfortunate that Schoenbrun's writing isn't always as accessible as it might be. At times the book's strength — its granularity — can become something of a liability, and the reader can become lost in the thickets. This is a deeply earnest book — a feature of much writing on Africa's deeper past — in which the prose is occasionally a little cryptic, even abstruse, and at times the telling of the story lacks the verve that the story itself merits. But perhaps the problem is with the reviewer, not the author. Questions of style aside, students of African history, whatever their period, should relish the substance of this book, and be grateful to its author.

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