Violence and Vulnerability in East Africa before 1800 CE: An Agenda for Research

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Abstract

Little is known about the history of violence and vulnerability in east Africa before 1800 CE despite its obvious importance to virtually any larger theme in the region's history. This essay suggests that although the fraught moral valences of violence and vulnerability – especially with respect to their importance in modern African history – may explain this state of affairs, historians must meet the challenge of studying the earlier histories of violence and vulnerability as part of a full-fleshed sense of the African past. With a focus on east Africa before the nineteenth century, the essay considers some of the particular transitions which a regional history of violence and vulnerability might cause us to rethink. It closes with a broad definition of violence crafted in the light of the value of a long-term regional history of such fraught categories.

I

In much of the rest of the world, violence and vulnerability are central themes in explaining historical change.[1] In sub-Saharan Africa, this is largely true only for periods after 1850, although several scholars have written on warfare in the African Early Modern period.[2] African nationalist, anti–imperialist, and antiwar sentiments, together with the dire struggles with failed states and their violence have limited scholarly work on these themes to the recent past. With the single important exception of slavery and the slave trades,[3] work on precolonial violence has been scanty and unsystematic.[4] The analytical and narrative challenges of working with nontraditional sources for precolonial African history may explain why we lack even a basic understanding of the weapons, strategy and tactics, and organization and logistics of violent actions in many parts of Africa before 1800.[5] But the fraught moral valences attached to modern violence over the last few centuries perhaps go farthest of all in explaining this curious state of affairs.

The association of violence with Africa has become a conventional part of a stereotype about the continent currently known as "Afropessimism." This notion – that Africa is doomed to economic underdevelopment, weak governance, and endemic violence – has roots that run through colonial

notions of burdens, barbarisms, *evolués*, apartheid and colonial practices of conquest and "pacification" and into a more distant past of enslavement and commerce. It is not hard to see in these compressed claims the depth of essentializing notions of Africa's past as one soaked in blood and why it is difficult to set out the contours of a history of violence in Africa. Readers may too easily see it as complicit in that stereotyping. It is therefore perhaps less objectionable to leave the study of violence to the last five centuries, at most, when we may place it into direct dialog with the better known threads of African history: slavery and slave trading, colonial conquest and resistance to conquest, nationalist resistance to colonial states, and the many faces of postcolonial violence, from coups to famines to armed capitalisms and resistances to them.

To approach the study of violence in such a manner perhaps grants too much power to the binary that works in the shadows of those themes. We must not take for granted that we know how Africans thought about violence, practiced it, and disciplined it over long spans of time and in particular historical contexts. This essay engages these issues by offering reflections on the nature and scope of violence and vulnerability and then suggesting how to frame its historical study for the millennium before the 19th century in east Africa. Next, I suggest how such a history of violence and vulnerability will recast particular aspects of current east African historiography. A final section explores the unconventional sources of evidence historians must use to write a long-term regional history of violence and vulnerability.

II

Violence trades on the value of political agency and on the moral contests over its legitimacy, both of which are integral to the workings of the technologies of violence and the outcomes they yield.[6] These currents of violent cause and effect can be most fully explored together with an understanding of the shapes of the currencies of the meanings and struggles over the legitimate uses of violence in the past. Historicizing these intertwined threads will cause us to recognize the many ruptures their pursuit has precipitated across the familiar periods in African history. It will also clarify what is novel about histories of relatively recent violence in Africa.

Before 1800, conflict and marginality in east Africa took familiar enough forms as battles or as unfavorable legal judgments. But the sense east Africans made of the causes and consequences of fighting and disputing drew on diverse fields of knowledge and categories of existence. For example, what might today be called religious ideas and practices – matters of belief, theories of disembodied power, and codes and practices of moral action – had force not only for the individual but also through the political dimensions of public life where status and power were challenged and defended.[7] Winners here became leaders (priests and/or chiefs) and losers became socially marginal,

like slaves.[8] Cosmological principles invigorated theories of power but also invigorated trade associations, healing institutions, and festival calendars.[9]

The persons through whom such power flowed were composed of bodies and things[10] and "lived" at different times and in different places.[11] Power could work in a fractal and metonymic fashion. This comes across clearly in the notion that the objects or tools through which power flows were "empty" until connected to a person through powerful action, including speaking.[12] When filled with things, including specific parts of human bodies such as hair, nails, or excreta, their potential power is defined by understandings of the inherent capacities of each of those things, separately and together. These capacities are actually complex theories of action that trade in the symbolic currencies of meaning attached to the things in the "medicine" and in the powers of persons in a hierarchy who activate and use the medicines.[13] Words expressing violent actions animated these medicines or ritual objects and entered into them "because the objects are chosen for linguistic reasons, puns being built on their names,"[14] because the person speaking the violent words was powerful, and because the object was made from powerful materials, like earth (a medium of contact with spirits in the land of the dead). An animal horn, stuffed with powerful medicines, could kill a person when a vengeful or jealous person's words "filled" the horn with activated medicines. Such a horn protected a person when its medicines were activated by the speech of a respectful and knowing healer. Histories of violence in east Africa that take seriously the challenge of specifying the contexts for potential acts of violence must depict the theories of action that frame imaginary violence, the ever-present double of "real" violence.[15]

In many parts of eighteenth-century Africa, new kings demonstrated their control of patronage networks by justly conquering their predecessors in taking the throne or by displaying a capacious concern for their followers' well being in killing one or more of them in a morally legitimate act of power in an appropriate ritual setting.[16] What seems violent today was seen as such in the past, but the violence conveyed a particular moral valence weighted in favor of royal legitimacy. On the other hand, what seems an article of faith in disembodied spiritual power – the activated "medicine horn" with its complex concatenation of powdered and other capacities – was (and is) understood by some people as perfectly capable of violence. And it could be a violence of the worst sort in east and central Africa because the medicine was capable of anything in the absence of any possible knowledge of a perpetrator's motives.[17] Histories of violence must grapple with the development of such forms and theories in their own terms as well as in light of other processes related to vulnerability.

But we hardly even know the answers to the most basic questions about the shapes of violence. What were the technologies of violence and modes of vulnerability and the contours of protective social organization in greater east Africa between 800 and 1800 CE? Violence included the organized use

of force – in warfare, vendetta, banditry, forms of witchcraft, and forms of ritual – and its social consequences. It relied fundamentally on a social logic of substitution, in which retribution for a prior act could be visited on any member of the perpetrating group and for which any member (or any member of a class of people) from the suffering group was enjoined by moral sanction to retaliate.[18] The scope of retaliation, however, exceeded a simple balancing of accounts. Retaliation included strategies of social addition – such as pawnship or slaving – and subtraction – such as witchcraft accusations and other modes of criminalization. What is more, subjective realities such as honor, modesty, love, and hospitality served as motives and means to pursue these additions and subtractions.

Substitutability, logics of social addition and subtraction, and their subjective dimensions all changed over time. Vulnerability, in changing ways, reflected the relative social standings, hierarchies of material circumstances, and exclusionary moral orders – inflected by gendered forms of work, generational forms of authority, and complex webs of reciprocal obligation. These are the relationships that exposed or drove persons into social and physical forms of marginality. They lie at the center of the larger story of violence because violence, vulnerability, and subjectivity are closely connected. As they change we can expect changes in the modes of experience, fields of power, and the aspects of political culture that they shaped.[19] Research on violence in early African history must explore the development of these categories of action and experience using all the available evidence, including historical linguistic, archaeological, oral, and documentary sources.

For example, analysis should focus on the moral orders, expressed by indigenous versions of notions like "shame," "scorn," "honor," "hospitality," and "courage." These notions generated, reflected, and legitimized violence and vulnerability.[20] Pursuing mutual historical interactions between these themes, in the light of existing knowledge of environmental and agrarian, political, and economic change, will facilitate historical study of these modes of promoting or contesting the legitimacy of violence. As a result, the radically new spectrums of inequality and hierarchy, familiar in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – including new types of slaveries, new scales and technologies of organized violence, and forms of subjectivity expressed through durable affective language – can be studied as particular modes of historical rupture by reference to a deep history of violence and vulnerability rooted in Africa. Scholars of more recent periods can use this history to reexamine specific entanglements of African, Islamic, and European technologies, moralities, and desires in the fields of violence and vulnerability.

III

A research program on histories of violence and vulnerability in east Africa must not only redress historiographic imbalances but must also ask how such

histories reshape the basic narrative of the precolonial east African past. The central question asked about east African history before the sixteenth century is about the rise of social complexity in the region. Whether studying early urbanism,[21] commerce,[22] Islam,[23] or the formation of states,[24] scholars build on theories about this historical process that model different notions of power strategies beyond deterministic causes located in demographic or climatic dynamics to allow more subtle analyses of social agency.[25]

Yet these same models flatten the significance of violence and downplay vulnerability and social marginality in explaining the rise and character of social and political complexity, even though an earlier generation of scholarship pointed at the instrumental causal relations between warfare and state formation.[26] Scholars of violence and vulnerability in east African history must test hypotheses concerning the importance of these themes to political culture in settings of peer–polity competition and cosmopolitan consumerism, including slaving.[27] Histories of violence should address how conflict shaped these competitions, but this will not be only a matter of writing about weapons and battle tactics.

The growth of complex society and the elaboration of commodification, two major historical transformations, could bracket the study of violence in early east African history. Cosmopolitan urbanisms developed at the coast of east Africa and early chiefdoms emerged in the uplands around the Great Lakes after 800 CE. By the eighteenth century, both regions were part of a far–flung field of commodification in which slaving, raiding, and patronage were central to African production and consumption. During the millennium in between, territorially expansive states formed in parts of the Great Lakes region and highly self–sufficient, increasingly Islamic and competitive city–states dotted the coastlands from Muqdishu (Somalia) to Chibuene (Mozambique).

The broad sweep of intensified agrarian, commercial, and technological changes, after 800 CE in the two settings, shaped and flowed from the emergence of new forms of violence, vulnerability, and moral imagination. Before about 1000 CE, the politics of marriage and patronage produced social vulnerabilities in both regions that could stimulate small–scale raiding and pillaging.[28] Infertile persons, newcomers to villages, and pawns held in the service of chiefs were the most common sorts of vulnerable persons during this period. From the twelfth century, a measurable demographic increase in the number of Muslims living on the coast created conditions perhaps conducive to generating new categories of ethnic identity.[29] Perhaps as early as the fifteenth century, in both regions, organized warfare supplemented the raid as a means to secure people and livestock. But, over the course of the next few centuries, notions of ethnic difference and hierarchy emerged and changed the terms on which vulnerable persons could negotiate improvements in their standing.[30] At the coast, struggles over access to social and economic capital increasingly occurred in and through the arena of religious practice, as Islam, ethnicity, and wealth became

intertwined.[31] Legal and social strategies for reducing one's vulnerability, much more open in the first half of the period, narrowed as royal warring in the Great Lakes region produced larger numbers of refugees and politically disenfranchised persons.[32] At the coast, the logics of ethnic, religious, and mercantilist interests also narrowed a vulnerable person's strategies for amelioration, inviting outsiders to craft multigenerational strategies for realizing their aspirations.

Change in the worlds of violence and vulnerability and moral imagination was shaped by large-scale historical processes, including the growth of states and the intensification of commodification and consumer demand in the Great Lakes region and in coastal settings from the ninth century.[33] It will be particularly valuable to track how modes of violence, forms of vulnerability, and the content of moral imagination were legitimized, criminalized, or criticized. Engaging these neglected themes in African history before the eighteenth century will push current theories of state formation, commodification and consumption, and social marginalization beyond merely asserting roles for violence and vulnerability to exploring the complexities of their historical development and the importance of moral imagination to that process.[34]

IV

Research along these lines promises new perspectives on the social history of precolonial Africa by exploring strategies of violence and the conditions of vulnerability as factors in these historical transformations. By understanding these factors as indigenous, but old and widespread elements in theories of power, moral imagination, and social justice, this history will help scholars to think locally and translocally about the character of vulnerability – including related but not equivalent forms of dependency, slavery, slaving, and enslavement – in the context of changing intercontinental relations during this period. It will help us explore the durable contents of – and innovative additions – to pools of practice and knowledge related to vulnerability and dependency that Africans drew upon when engaging, ignoring, or negotiating the historical transformations of the millennium under study.[35] And it will open up the changing moral frameworks – including moral dimensions of gendered and generational power – that underpinned and channeled modes of vulnerability and forms of violence. These African histories of violence and vulnerability will deepen scholarly explorations of the sources of African agency in the eras of enslavement, conquest, colonial rule, and postcolonial political instabilities. This substantive historical narrative promises critical revision of theoretical approaches to the rise and character of social and political complexity in east Africa by integrating violence, vulnerability, and moral imagination as fully-developed historical processes rather than powerful but flat historical causes.

Sometimes following paths first cleared by scholars of Latin America, historians studying the nature and causes of eighteenth and nineteenth century forms of enslavement and vulnerability in east Africa have privileged international economic and cultural forces surrounding commodification and, later, conquest.[36] They have only very rarely been able to explore those causes in detail by reference to historical narratives and sensibilities with African roots.[37] Historical narratives such as those called for here, will help scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries grasp both the durability of certain forms of violence and vulnerability across major ruptures in east African history and the ways in which east Africans understood those ruptures as they created radically new kinds of violence, vulnerability, and dependency, including slaving and organized warfare.[38] But making these histories requires facility with some unconventional sources of evidence and a revisiting of some well-known material.

V

Historical evidence for interior east and central Africa between 800 CE and 1800 CE comes from historical linguistics, archaeology, environmental studies, oral traditions, comparative ethnography, and documentary records. At the coast, local and foreign written sources grow in abundance across the period. Scholars working with these sources have developed innovative methods of historical analysis and modes of historical narrative.[39] Comparative linguistic work in the relevant Bantu languages is highly advanced for both regions.[40] The comparative study of contemporary – but historically related – subgroups of Bantu languages underlies efforts to reconstruct vocabulary for the social organization of violence and its technologies, categories of vulnerability and marginality, and the nature of subjective experience expressed by glosses such as "refugee," "captive," "pawn," "doctor," "witch" or "sorcerer," and "infertility," "honor," "scorn," "fear," and related glosses.[41] No speech acts may be reconstructed from such evidence, but the semantic histories of the Bantu words that describe these categories tell us much about the pools of meaning into which people could dip when they spoke and when they listened. Material things, social actions, and subjectivity cannot be associated with named individuals nor may they be directly associated with each other in precise times and places, but the speech communities inside which the names of these things, actions, and feelings had force may be ordered in a relative chronology. They may be brought into bolder relief by making the webs of reconstructed vocabulary that partially constitute each subgroup of related languages as dense as possible. The denser these webs are the more we may grasp the shapes of systems of distinction between terms that sustain the utility of meanings. And the more we may do that, the more we may recognize something about the architecture of the normative values used by east Africans to make moral, phenomenological, and political distinctions.[42]

Studies of environmental change and of disease open up the very largest-scale historical dynamics shaping these issues.[43] Over the long term, climate and vegetation change framed some of the instrumental contexts for the elaboration of violent practices and their imaginaries,[44] because they altered the terms on which individuals and groups competed for resources. The contours of environmental changes in the region are fairly well known for the period before 1800.[45] Texture and chronological detail grows for the more recent centuries, as documentary evidence is brought into a picture painted largely in the broad strokes of lake-level and pollen studies.[46] These environmental processes provide the largest scale shaping social and intellectual histories of violence and vulnerability.

The functionalism hiding in such an approach to relations between violence, vulnerability, and environmental change may be restrained and complicated by drawing on other sources of evidence. Archaeological studies of material culture and spatial organization provide evidence for technology, trade, urban, and social complexity. Archaeologists assume that the patterns they record "reflect the organization of the human activities that produced that record."[47] But they approach and interpret these "reflections" through a complex array of not entirely concatenated lenses for viewing archaeological materials. They all involve some form of drawing on observations made in an ethnographic present in the service of interpreting the significance and meaning of archaeological material. Such applications rely on a variety of formal or relational analogies between ethnographic and archaeological records.[48] And they have come to include ethnoarchaeological research into how material objects become part of the archaeological record and how "objects, technologies, spaces, and landscapes" carry symbolic meaning, stylistic attributes, and cultural value.[49] Both regions, but especially the east African coast, have produced well-dated and carefully analyzed archaeological evidence for the last twelve centuries, including evidence for prestige goods and spatial organization which reveals the material forms of different modes of power.[50]

These streams of evidence converge where their chronologies and geographies overlap. The fact that people in both regions speak related languages and practice related cultures strengthens these convergences. Direct, substantive tie-ins between the streams sharpen those convergences still more. For example, if the word for a heavy iron spear used by people living in the highlands of Rwanda, Burundi, and Northwestern Tanzania is present in Rwanda and Rundi (with regularly corresponding sounds) but is not in Ha, it may be argued that the term was invented sometime before Rwanda and Rundi became separate languages and sometime after the Ha language had diverged from the common linguistic ancestor of all three. If archaeologists then excavate the remains of heavy iron spears from sites in the region where Rundi and Rwanda are spoken today and those remains produce radiocarbon dates in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, linguistic and archaeological evidence mutually support each other.

For the east African coast, the documentary record reaches into the very early first millennium CE,[51] grows richer after the tenth century CE, when urban centers attracted and sustained regular commercial relations with the Arabic-speaking, Hindi-speaking, and Chinese-speaking world.[52] It grows richer still after the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century CE.[53] This long, rich, and often underutilized record of written sources – some of which have been translated and annotated as editions of Arabic and Portuguese documentary sources (and many of which contain versions of oral traditions and descriptions of violence, vulnerability, and political culture) – promises discursive texture for researchers.[54] These sources have been read into and through archaeological evidence from the coastal regions and their immediate hinterlands.[55]

For the interior of the region, a similarly rich and complex body of oral tradition exists that could be reread through the grids developed from these other sources. In the Great Lakes region this project promises special rewards for periods after the sixteenth century, when oral traditions associated with the numerous monarchies that took form between the Great Lakes begin to tell of violence and vulnerability.[56] Scholars working on these materials have already begun to open up issues of the violence of monarchies and the vulnerabilities of subjects in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[57] But more can be done for the immediately preceding centuries. And the rich seams of struggle over the legitimacy of violence, which increasingly occupy dynastic traditions from different Great Lakes monarchies purporting to tell of events in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, should be compared and contrasted to each other.

VI

This brief overview of a long and complex project suggests that scholars might think about violence as an operation of addition or subtraction in the service of an end and as an extension of the wills of perpetrators at odds with the intended victims. Violence therefore often invites return acts. Thus, depicting modes of revenge are central to this project of writing deep regional histories of violence.[58] The ends at stake in chains of violence can be conceptualized as a resource, but only if we allow intangible but embodied dimensions – such as honor and love – to count.[59] Forms of vulnerability made particular persons and groups subjects of violent operations, and modes of authority legitimized violent operations or condemned the conditions and experiences of violence. But from the largest frame of environmental disaster to the most intimate experience of bodily harm, the operation was suffused with will and aspiration, frustrated or realized.

Once scholars understand the central roles played by the performance, witnessing, and experience of historically specific forms of violence, they can set recent trends and forms of social unrest inside a larger frame.[60] The scope of this new "violence history" must integrate "real" and "imaginary"

forms of violence without losing sight of their epistemological, phenomenological, and historical variability.[61] This will not only go a long way toward enriching African history by exploring some of the voids left in the last 50 years of African historiography by nationalist projects tinged with the vindicationist urge. It will also usher African history into current debates over justice and health with the benefit of a broader and deeper set of narratives concerning past African efforts (and the conceptual tools and material limitations with which Africans tried) to wrestle with such issues.

Short Biography

David Schoenbrun received his Ph.D. in 1990 from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) where he studied with Christopher Ehret, Merrick Posnansky, and Ned Alpers. He has since then worked closely with Steven Feierman and Jan Vansina. After teaching African history at the University of Georgia, he moved to Northwestern University in 1999, where he was the Interim Director of the Program of African Studies from 2001 to 2003. His first book, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Organization between the Great Lakes to the 15th century* (Portsmouth: Heinemann Publishers, 1998), was named a Choice Outstanding Academic Book in 1999. He has published articles in the *American Historical Review, History and Theory, Journal of African History, African Studies Review, African Archaeological Review, History in Africa, Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika, Azania*, and the *Uganda Journal*. He is working on a book manuscript on violence between the Great Lakes over the last millennium.

Notes

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[13] MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 79–80.

[14] MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*, 107.

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[17] MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 30–4; on the ubiquity of envy and jealousy as motive forces for witchcraft, see A. Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 12–15, 63–87, 120–5. The analytical compass applied to a history of violence must include forms of witchcraft because the envy, jealousy, hate, and fear enacted through witchcraft are central to the practice of adding and subtracting members of social groups.

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