African Studies Review (2024), **67**: 2, 492–493

BOOK REVIEW

David L. Schoenbrun. *The Names of the Python: Belonging in East Africa, 900 to 1930.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021. 339 pp. 4 maps.16 illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $79.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9780299332501.

Pythons are not like people. They slither to move, they encircle and slowly squeeze the air out of the lungs of their prey, and their jaws open many times larger than their bodies to ingest what they have killed. A female incubates her forty or more eggs by wrapping herself around them until they hatch. Pythons are manifestly in-between beings: they have vestigial hind leg bones, and they live between land and water. Over many centuries in eastern Africa, people associated pythons with ancestors and realms beyond the human, and the meanings people attached to these huge snakes found expression in ritual, in art, in the stories people told, and in arguments over belonging. In this erudite longue durée intellectual history, David Schoenbrun shows how people thought with pythons to make a social world.

The book recounts a sequence of strategies for building community on larger and larger scales. In Schoenbrun's telling, people make collectivities through creative imagining and strategic connection, and those varied groups do not endure in one fixed shape once they have been created. This argument against both popular and academic conceptions of ethnicity is made through a series of intricate stories of groups of people drawing others in at some times, and creating sharp lines of insider and outsider at other times. The book relies on remembered (and contested) oral narrative, early ethnography, the work of historians and archaeologists of East Africa, and historical linguistics. Those familiar with elements of the argument from the work of other scholars will find freshness in the rich evidence concerning the material bases of social life, and Schoenbrun's wide-ranging use of the work of social theorists will widen the range of conceptual tools used in thinking about the East African past. Readers not well acquainted with the history of the region will find it useful to flip back frequently to pages 27 to 31 of the introduction, where Schoenbrun sketches the larger movements of political power, which are the context for the immensely detailed explorations of how people were thinking about groups, and how their thought was changing. The clear key to decoding traditions and king lists, on pages 26 to 27, allows the reader to follow arguments made with these materials throughout the book.

The seven substantive chapters describe how people are thinking with each other to make connections, which Schoenbrun calls "groupwork," from the ninth century to the twentieth. In Chapter One, which covers the period from 800 to 1200, networks of spiritual practice and the connections among people called

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of African Studies Association.

clans emerged; Schoenbrun shows a material base for the movement of people by reconstructing the vocabularies for catching and transporting the varieties of fish that spawned in the rivers and grew mature in various parts of Lake Victoria. Chapter Two traces the transformation of the spiritual being Mukasa over the centuries from 1200 to 1400: this figure starts as a territorial python spirit, then becomes a deity worshipped on island shrines, tended through the contributions of many clans. Chapter Three covers the period in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when kingdoms, which Schoenbrun calls "sovereign knots" to emphasize the multiple threads of power that contribute them, become a factor in the region. He describes people seeking wealth, knowledge, and belonging from a Mukasa deity that is both male and female, and how carefully distinguished royal contributions to Mukasa join those made by individual women and men, and many clans. Schoenbrun sees the violent eighteenth century, which is the subject of Chapter Four, as a time when groups became more focused on excluding others rather than drawing them in. Some of the arguments in this chapter could have been strengthened with more evidence, but it convincingly draws attention to the legal dimension of Buganda's growing royal power, in showing how the snake-shaped god Mbajwe always decreed the deaths of those who appeared before it. Chapter Five suggests that stolen women might have enhanced ethnic distinctions in the ways they sought to incorporate themselves and their children into the clans of their captors, as enslavement deranged the Lakes region in the nineteenth century. Chapter Six brings the story to the early twentieth century by explaining how aspirations for a just moral future can be seen in debates about clan belonging in the Catholic newspaper *Munno.*

In order to ensure that everyone who would want to learn from this book has access to the humane vision of Ugandan history it unfolds, *The Names of the Python* should become a mini-series on Ugandan television. This is a serious suggestion. Each element of the argument of the book could be illustrated with stories people devised and debated which are inherently, essentially dramatic. The fascinating illustrations could be dynamically explored with visual storytelling, as could the four maps, which highlight twenty-five-mile sight lines that contributed to making the lake a highway, identify the islands which became the nodes of sociality and information exchange where people built groups, locate the eighteen shrines on the mainland and the islands that are specifically mentioned in the text, and show the language families of the peoples living around the lake. This book is the product of decades of thinking and learning, and it conveys insights about Ugandan's history that ought to reach an audience of tens of thousands.

Holly Hanson
Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts
hhanson@mtholyoke.edu
doi:10.1017/asr.2023.119