Theories and Methods of African Conceptual History

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What does it mean to do conceptual history? And what is particular about doing conceptual history in Africa? Some forty years ago, Terence Ranger described conceptual history in Africa in the following terms: 'Conceptual history is … the difficult study of ideas of causation in each region over the past decades'.[1] In this he was largely in agreement with Reinhart Koselleck and the other editors of the monumental *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (*Basic Concepts in History*), who argued that concepts are far more than merely 'indicators of change', marking historical shifts that have already happened. Rather, concepts 'affect political and social change because it is through concepts that a horizon is constituted against which structural changes are perceived, evaluated, and acted upon'.[2] Conceptual history thus offers an opportunity to take seriously peoples' intellectual activity as part of historical processes; it is a way of expanding the horizons created by social, environmental and economic history. And it is an approach that has not been much taken advantage of in African history.[3]

A central motivation for Koselleck and his co-editors was to move beyond the elite circles of intellectual history and understand the use and meaning of different concepts across all levels of society. To achieve such an understanding, conceptual historians need to search for usages of these concepts in as wide a range of sources as possible.[4] This is a particularly compelling approach for historians of Africa on two grounds. First, because the available source base so often requires a catholic approach, ranging from the written to the oral to the material. This need for eclecticism becomes ever more acute the further back in time one wishes to research. Second, because the dominance of social history in

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African history over the past decades has richly documented the manifold ways in which people from all strata of society have shaped that history.[5] Conceptual history enables us to build on this work by offering the opportunity to engage with people's intellectual lives and explore how their ideas shaped their history without the reductionism of exclusively studying elite thought.

But before going further, let us start with the 'us': we are scholars based in Eastern and Southern Africa, Northern and Southern Europe and North America; we come from a range of disciplines: history (conceptual and otherwise), linguistics, philosophy, literature and sociology; our work (at least for this project) spans sub-Saharan Africa from Ghana and Equatorial Guinea to Uganda and Tanzania to South Africa. We have been exploring how to do conceptual history in Africa since February 2010 when we first gathered as a group at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study. Since then, over the course of three meetings and a series of workshops dealing with individual chapters, we have collaborated to bring our different perspectives to bear on this project. We have sought to develop a new methodology for conceptual history in the frequent absence of the conventional extensive written sources used by Koselleck and others in Europe and Asia. The chapters that emerged from this do not follow a single methodological approach, but all are informed by the collaborative spirit of our attempt. The historians among us most comfortable with documentary sources have taken seriously linguistic questions, the literary scholars have engaged with historical perspectives and the linguists have analysed their data with the constant objective of relating them to historical time and space. The epistemological and methodological differences between our disciplines are considerable, and collaboration across these boundaries has proved challenging yet immensely enriching. In this introduction we set out the theoretical and methodological basis of our cross-disciplinary endeavour.

The concepts we decided to explore in this research network are ones that exist at the interface of the social and the economic and which, as a result, have been sites of contestation and struggle. But they also reflect important continuities, thereby anchoring them in historical perspective. The initial impetus for the focus on the social and economic came from Bo Stråth, who instigated the 'ConceptAfrica' research network as part of a broader effort to expand conceptual history beyond its primary habitat in Western Europe in a manner that pushed back against 'the economic reductivism of the globalisation narrative since the early 1990s'.[6] This volume includes histories of the concepts 'poverty', 'wealth', 'work', 'marriage', 'circumcision', 'land', *ujamaa* and 'decolonization'. Over the course of our meetings we explored several other concepts: 'communication', 'water', 'citizenship', *umkhosi womhlanga* ('reed festival'), 'knowing', 'belonging' and 'national identity'.[7] Our discussions on how to think historically about these concepts were invaluable in pushing those of us represented in this volume to consider more critically the ways in which historical actors worked both to contest meanings and to ensure continuity of meaning.

Language and Conceptual History in Africa

In its original context of continental Europe, conceptual history relies on a specific method and set of sources: a reflection on key concepts used in public debate, concepts that proved significant in galvanizing popular support for certain views and actions. The questions pursued in the European context focus predominantly on the debates and contestations over concepts, and on how concepts that seemed clear to every actor – but could in fact be understood in different ways – have shaped political debate.[8] Identifying and describing similar debates (representing different historical actors' expectations and illusions) in African history helps foreground the ways in which the intellectual work of Africans shaped their worlds. A conceptual history approach ensures that those actors – even when their names are lost to us – are seen as having performed that intellectual work and are not relegated to a reactive position. As with social history and intellectual history, conceptual history places Africans at the centre of their own history, but it does so by emphasizing language as a historical source.[9] And while it is not alone in this, other approaches – such as the history of ideas and studies drawing on evidence from historical linguistics – use language in rather different ways from us. Since we both draw on and diverge from these approaches, a discussion of our methodological underpinning is necessary.

Historians of Africa have long recognized the value of language as a source and the value of evidence drawn from linguistic data.[10] Conceptual historians, too, rely strongly on language in their approach because language offers us access to concepts that have characterized historical political debates. In this sense, then, African historians and conceptual historians working elsewhere appear to be close in spirit and stance. Yet conceptual historians have usually focused on a specific kind of context, namely language cultures and nation states. Even if in practice the notion of coinciding national and linguistic boundaries was more often an ideal rather than a factual situation in, for instance, nineteenth-century Europe, the idea serves as a heuristic starting point for conceptual historians. Such an isomorphism – even if idealized – between language, culture and nation state is almost entirely absent on the African continent.[11] Most modern nation states on the continent are relatively young. Their citizens use several languages in different functional domains. The languages have different geographic ranges. Some might be restricted to a single town or even village, others (like Kiswahili) stretch across thousands of kilometres and some (like English) reach across the world. While language certainly plays a role in identity politics in Africa as it does elsewhere, the ways in which this happens are considerably more complex than the simplified model originating in nineteenth-century European nationalism. In order to assess the possibilities and limits of a conceptual history approach, a sense of these linguistic realities in Africa is necessary.

The linguistic landscape in Africa is rich and diverse. Based on models developed in and for the context of European language studies, linguists have devised genealogical family trees that indicate long-term histories for the demographics and settlement of Africa. Two main phyla are widely accepted among African linguists: Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic. Both are very large families in terms of speaker numbers with estimates of over 435 million speakers for Niger-Congo and nearly 375 million speakers for Afro-Asiatic.[12] The more than 1,500 Niger-Congo languages are used in a geographic area stretching from Senegal in West Africa across to Kenya in East Africa and all the way to South Africa, while Afro-Asiatic spreads beyond the African continent into Southwest Asia. A third phylum is Nilo-Saharan, although there is ongoing debate about its status as a genealogical entity and, especially, about the exact historical links among the two hundred or so languages classified under it. Finally, there are the languages spoken in Southern Africa (with outliers in Tanzania) that used to be grouped together as Khoisan, but that are now considered to be several unrelated families. The sociolinguistic settings across Africa are also varied. Some areas are relatively homogenous in linguistic terms and some languages have millions of speakers (such as Gĩkũyũ, Wolof and Hausa). The more typical scenario, though, is of smaller speaker communities numbering from just a few hundred people up to hundreds of thousands. Multilingualism is common, both at the societal and the individual level. People usually speak several African languages and often know one or more Indo-European languages, the latter being a legacy of colonial rule. Furthermore, most language use remains oral rather than written, although this fact should not be overstated; after all, literacy in the European context has not made oral communication less significant. Moreover, there is a long tradition of writing in African languages in several places on the continent and the practice has become increasingly common since the nineteenth century.

For a conceptual history approach, this diverse language scenario and the primacy of orality hold particular challenges, but they also open up new possibilities. With regards to orality, the main challenge lies in sources. Conceptual history has relied on written documents from the public sphere – on pamphlets, newspapers and parliamentary records – to trace emerging conflicts and contestations within concepts, whether the concept of tyranny during the French Revolution or that of democracy in interwar Sweden.[13] Similarly, in this volume, Stråth is able to use the documentary record of political speeches, etc., to trace the contested meanings of *ujamaa* and its translations. And Pieter Boele van Hensbroek can demonstrate the radical shifts in the meaning of 'land' for members of the Gold Coast elite. By contrast Ana Lúcia Sá, facing a shortage of written texts in Bubi, the language of the people of Bioko in Equatorial Guinea, has turned to transcribed oral literature, including songs, as a means of accessing a fuller conceptual history of 'land'.[14] Rhiannon Stephens, writing about a period for which we have no contemporaneous documentation, draws on comparative historical linguistics and diachronic semantics to uncover the

history of peoples' concepts of 'wealth' and 'poverty' in Uganda over the past millennium. Offering another approach, Axel Fleisch draws on both historical linguistics and the analysis of contemporary written corpora, to trace long- and short-term patterns in the concept of 'work' among Nguni speakers.

Translation

Koselleck was sceptical about the translatability of concepts between languages that shared European cultural historical legacies;[15] the African linguistic landscape presents yet more complications. Does this complex linguistic landscape offer merely a highly fragmented picture with manifold local traditions? Or does it provide exactly those examples in which conceptual trends and ideas transcend language boundaries and afford the possibility of studying concepts that are constantly being translated? Viewing individual languages as essentially different systems leads to the question of what happens when communication crosses language boundaries. And ultimately, translation is not just a matter of language, but also of cultural or temporal distance between people. (Even within the same community and linguistic tradition, using anachronistic terms is a common error.) We do not see translation simply as a conversion process between two linguistic systems; that is, we do not believe that a translation simply expresses the exact same content in different words. Rather, translation always involves understanding and interpreting a text and re-expressing it in a different language.[16] In this sense, meanings are always renegotiated in the process of translation – as they are in historical interpretations that aim to explain past situations. Since our approach relies so fundamentally on language data and their historical interpretation, a closer look at what is involved in translating is apt.

　　Full equivalence in translation is impossible; a certain degree of mismatch cannot be avoided. Denotational meaning (the informative content), connotations, metaphors and pragmatic usage patterns of translation equivalents will often not match perfectly: Koselleck, Ulrike Spree and Willibald Steinmetz grappled with the English 'citizen', German *Bürger*, and French *citoyen*, whose meanings correspond to one another, but are not entirely co-extensive.[17] The connotations of words like these differ between languages, as do their pragmatic usage patterns, including the aesthetic values speakers attach to them. It is often possible to remain loyal to one of these layers in translation only for it to be necessary to compromise on another. Linguists have proposed models to help us analyse these translation mismatches. Anna Wierzbicka, for example, breaks lexical meaning into what she considers the smallest constituents of meaning, that is, parts of meaning that cannot be further analysed and are, in her analysis, universal.[18] She claims that even concepts that appear to be highly language- and culture-specific can thereby be transferred and analytically replicated into any target language. Yet although her approach aims for universality

at the deepest analytical level, there remains ample space for cultural relativism engrained in language. This has a simple explanation: the level of linguistically-mediated cognition is not that of the smallest building blocks of meaning, but rather of bigger segments of meaning. Even words like 'fairness' in English or *Schadenfreude* in German are not understood through an analysis of their component parts, but – if they are known to speakers of other languages – as holistic concepts. They are more generic cultural scripts and semantic concepts and constitute the generic level of linguistic meaning. It is at this level that speakers access semantic meaning, that they try to translate and make meaning more explicit; this is also the space for the engrained cultural differences that make the translation process a challenging task. This is the case not just for the analyst, but also for speaker communities who constantly mediate between languages in the linguistically-diverse African context. Indeed, psycholinguists offer a growing body of evidence in support of the view that languages can be so incommensurate that translation becomes next to impossible in some areas of human experience, cognition and some cultural domains.[19]

Yet people translate constantly. In this sense we cannot speak of the impossibility of translation, since it is a practice that almost everyone is engaged in. It is precisely because of that permanent and continual practice of translation that concepts are debated and contested and so subject to change in a way that the uncontested is not. Some contributions in our volume focus on historical actors who chose to use a language other than their own. Boele van Hensbroek focuses on nineteenth and early twentieth-century Gold Coast intellectuals and nationalists who chose to speak, correspond and publish newspapers in English, rather than Akan or any other of their 'mother tongues'. He looks precisely at the continual acts of translation of this group of political actors in their articulations of the concept of 'land' against growing colonial encroachment. These articulations drew on 'indigenous' concepts of 'land' found in the various languages spoken by these intellectuals, as well as on concepts they encountered in European texts. Their articulations of these concepts in English thus underscore the possibilities, rather than the limitations of translation. Another example can be found in the chapter by Stråth, which looks at how Julius Nyerere used Kiswahili – not Ekizanaki, his first language – in promoting the ideas of *ujamaa*, itself a word of Arabic origin. *Doing Conceptual History in Africa* thus offers a glimpse into the possibility of acknowledging linguistic relativity without essentializing languages and without attempting to corral historical actors into ethnolinguistic boxes.[20]

Temporal Layers: Conceptual Shifts and Continuities

The overall linguistic complexity in Africa may appear daunting, yet it is exactly this complexity that holds the key to alternative methodological opportunities

that can be explored for tracing conceptual continuities and changes. One method that has long been used to write history using language evidence is 'words-and-things'. In its origins, this method relied on lexicography and the endeavour to comprehensively record and reflect conventionalized word meanings. The focus, thus, is on the shared meaning of relevant terms, assuming mostly shared understandings among members of the same speaker community. By identifying the terminology that was available to speakers of earlier languages, we can learn about their material culture, technological innovations and also their social institutions and political organization. Two of the pioneers of this methodology in African history, Christopher Ehret and Jan Vansina, have worked to write histories of religion and political traditions as well as of agriculture, pastoralism and other economic activities.[21] Subsequent generations of historians have explored histories of political authority and social identity, of the creation of ethnicity and of gender.[22] Even where the linguistic picture is highly fragmented, such as in coastal West Africa, this methodology offers the possibility to, at least partially, reconstruct knowledge about the past, as Edda Fields-Black demonstrated in her work on rice farming and its broader cultural and economic ramifications.[23]

By their nature, the reconstructed vocabularies that form the basis of these histories tend to pick out enduring conventional meanings, thereby stressing the long-term and the collective. Enduring meanings – sometimes in the face of dramatic historical developments – are a key component to conceptual history. But changes, including rapid, short-term changes that emerge out of immediate conflict, changes that may become long-term or may simply disappear, are also an essential element, and one that must be addressed if we are serious about bringing in the intellectual input of historical actors. Enduring conventional understandings emphasize linguistic legacies and continuities that are a product of both conscious decisions to assert continuity and less conscious inertia; episodes of more rapid change and crisis point to different historical forces at work, whether efforts to change from within or new engagements with another speaker community. Both mechanisms – endurance and change – are at work at the same time.

It is therefore important to pay attention to how different temporal layers can be at work simultaneously. Longer trends and stable conceptual conventions (as favoured by conventional historical linguists) do not preclude rapid change and dramatic events. For us, the integration of cognitive semantic insight with a conceptual historical approach is an important methodological advance. Cognitive semanticists understand lexical meaning as an encyclopaedic repertoire that speakers draw on when they construe actual meaning during a specific speech event or act of writing.[24] The lexical repertoires of speakers (i.e., historical actors) are not best understood as a mental lexicon containing a list of well-defined entries with clear denotations. Speakers may have acquired such technical knowledge for some lexical items, but this is

clearly not what characterizes the mental lexicon at large. Furthermore, there is no difference in principle between different kinds of meaning: lexical-denotational, historical, connotational and so on. Even 'stable meanings' do not have to be agreed on in lexicographic fashion by the members of a speaker community; they do not need to be crystallized through inclusion in a dictionary. In fact, the contrary often applies: inherent contestation serves to keep concepts alive and allows for different temporal layers of meaning to coexist. It is therefore important not to choose one temporal granularity at the expense of the other, not to choose between the long and short term. Rather we need to view these together. Various methods for the analysis of linguistic data afford this possibility.

Some of our core techniques are well-developed instruments: the comparative method enabling the historical linguistic reconstruction of lexical items and the careful semantic analysis of relevant vocabulary. There is, however, a crucial difference between our approach and how these techniques are used by philologists, historical linguists and even in the original words-and-things approaches: we are less interested in clearly conventionalized meanings that can be rendered with a definition. Our emphasis is on those items that defy clear lexicographic characterization.[25] Reconstructing history on the basis of lexical items that are the loyal reflexes of past experience is one necessary component of this, but it does not end there. It is also necessary to flesh out the competing meanings that the key terms under study may have had, because it is in those competing meanings that the potential for active contestation lies. When speakers draw fundamental and significant concepts and ideas to the level of conscious debate, or act with them in new ways, or juxtapose them with new kinds of material or bodily practice, dissonance is part of the very make-up of such concepts.[26] They can thus serve as pointers to historical dynamics not readily accessible through static understandings of word meaning.

Marné Pienaar, in her chapter on 'marriage' in Afrikaans, points to these various layers. On the one hand, 'marriage' is a clearly defined, legal concept. As such, it should lend itself to conventional reconstruction and, indeed, the historical comparative methods she draws on shed light on the etymologies of relevant terms. On the other hand, Pienaar shows how problematic it is to assume a consensual understanding of what 'marriage' is. Taking a theoretical impetus from innovative cognitive semanticists allows her to establish conceptual links to terms less engrained in the language of marriage that were, and still are, nonetheless meaningful concepts for Afrikaans speakers and that clearly pertain to the domain of 'marriage'. Through this approach, Pienaar opens up conventional lexicography towards pragmatics and towards a discourse-oriented construal of meaning. In their chapters, Fleisch and Stephens use a similar approach to write the history of the concepts 'work', 'wealth' and 'poverty' and to push beyond the limits of the lexicographic record.

Mechanisms of Language Change

Pienaar's study of 'marriage' illustrates how attempts at reconstructing past meanings can benefit from recent insights in cognitive linguistics, in particular cognitive semantics. Many cognitive linguists have abandoned the distinction between lexical and encyclopaedic knowledge; indeed George Lakoff and Mark Johnson questioned the usefulness of this distinction back in 1980.[27] Their work helped catalyse diachronic interest in linguistics by countering the predominant synchronic formal approaches in the linguistic mainstream at the time.[28] Linguistic approaches such as grammaticalization theory rely on ideas of language change driven by pragmatic requirements (the things one needs to do with language in particular circumstances of communication), but constrained by our nature and physiology – our perceptual-cognitive apparatus. These are admittedly 'outside language', but since the cognitive constraints are universal, they necessarily lead to systematic patterns of linguistic change seen in language after language.[29] In this view linguistic change is a product of features in languages, rather than a product of human thought and action, implying that language-internally motivated change is universal and hence not historically relevant. As long as this was the dominant view of language, the only real possibility for language change resulting in linguistic data that could serve as a historical source was through external contact. That is, change resulting from contact with the speaker community of a different language.[30] This somewhat limiting view changed only with a more wholehearted adoption of the important insight that the trigger of language change is located outside of language. As such, language change internal to a speaker community is also a historical phenomenon.

   Let us illustrate these thoughts with a more detailed example. Someone tells her assistant: 'Please find a better copy of this book!' The use of the verb 'to find' instead of 'to search', or 'to look for' is motivated by the speaker's interest in the outcome, rather than the search conducted by the assistant. Linguists would interpret this as an instance of subjectification. In an instruction, a result-oriented verb is preferred over a process verb, even though this forces a sense onto the verb 'to find' which is not part of its original semantic make-up. Its meaning changes from an accidental event to 'making something happen'. Note that the goal-oriented, non-accidental sense of 'to find' applies most often in phrases where it is accompanied by a beneficiary: 'Find me a better copy!' sounds even more natural. Such constructions that orient the action toward a beneficiary are arguably the starting point for this semantic extension. What subjectification means then is that a subjective interest in a situation is expressed by a term that originally has, in terms of semantic denotation, a slightly different meaning. The subjective interest is a sufficient pragmatic trigger to make the semantic change effective. While this trigger is external to the grammatical system of the language, as a mechanism it is

arguably regular, and we can expect other languages to show similar semantic developments. A comparative linguist or historian might reach similar insight, but would typically follow a different path. For instance, coming across the words 'finds' or 'findings' for archaeological remains in a given language would indicate that the speakers must have engaged in archaeological research. For comparative semanticists, this indexical level is not the endpoint. Instead, the history of the terms would be traced by comparing them with the semantic extension of cognate terms in related languages. Such careful philological and comparative work can lead to a rich history of the ideas behind the term, and some of the contributions in our volume rely on this methodology as well.

In his study of the concept of 'work' in the Nguni languages of Southern Africa, Fleisch draws on a range of linguistic methodologies, including synchronic corpus analysis and comparative semantic reconstruction. This enables him, for example, to show how in isiNdebele, it is *ukuberega*, the term borrowed from Afrikaans (< *werk*), that captures the everyday notion of 'work' (such as performing chores), whereas *ukusebenza*, inherited from their Nguni-speaking ancestors, is more closely associated with employment or paid labour. The etymological origins are thus reversed compared to the expected range of meaning. This suggests both a persistence in the need to distinguish between different modes of 'working' and that contact with Afrikaans was more complex than an intense one-time episode during the 'colonial encounter' between isiNdebele speakers and Afrikaans speakers. In a similar manner to the example of 'finds' and 'findings', philological work, comparison across language boundaries and high-resolution semantic analysis of actual language use can identify cases like these, cases that highlight continuities as well as semantic change not necessarily reflected in the actual word form (e.g., *ukusebenza* has different meanings related to 'work' in other Nguni languages).

In the absence of contemporary language corpora for the period studied, Stephens explores the ways in which the comparative historical linguistic data can be approached in a manner that draws on cognitive semantics to write conceptual history. This involves looking for the widest possible sets of meanings for a particular word that has, as one of its glosses, the meaning 'wealth' or 'poverty' or 'rich person' or 'poor person'. Tracing all of those across the relevant languages of Eastern Uganda, and their ancestral or proto-languages, brings to light important changes in the concepts that reflect conflict or struggles within the speaker communities. This approach also enables us to see continuities in these concepts, continuities that endured radical changes in terms of environment, economy and social relations. The continuities allow for shifting semantic meanings that over time reflected those radical changes. One might say, the concepts remained but their meanings changed. For example, the concept of 'poverty' for Nilotic speakers represented by the root *-can-* retained its negative associations across very long stretches of time. But the nature

of those associations – part of the meaning given to the concept – changed sharply; speakers shifted their negative views from recognizing the impact of poverty on the poor to expressing anxiety about the impact of the poor on the wider community. This suggests moments of confrontation around wealth inequalities in communities, confrontations that challenged the meanings of key concepts like 'poverty'.

Ultimately, then, we are interested in the contestations around the ideas behind the word. The German adjective *findig* 'resourceful' relates to the verb *finden* 'to find' and refers to a person who can rely on her abilities to find a solution to problems when they occur, or find an easy way to avoid them. Labelling a candidate as *findig* in an interview is ambiguous: some would interpret this positively as resourcefulness, others would think of the person as imaginative, but also insufficiently conscientious. What comes into play here is the accidental aspect of being lucky that is evoked by the verb 'to find'. These different understandings can remain implicit, but can also be drawn to the level of conscious debate. Higher-level concepts ('marriage', 'masculinity', 'decolonization', etc. – the kinds of concepts that our contributions address and that are intrinsically contested) carry the potential of greater historical currency. Their contested meanings are laid bare by those engaging in open debate. This is what a conceptual approach to history targets, and what determines its way of drawing on linguistic sources for the writing of history.

Addressing the semantic domain of work and labour, Anne Kelk Mager's chapter shows a competition for semantic ground between two main concepts pertaining to the domain of 'work' among isiXhosa speakers. This competition takes place against the backdrop of their being increasingly affected by European notions of 'work' and 'labour'. As Mager's analysis demonstrates, the renegotiation of ideas of 'work' in isiXhosa was a much more complex process than colonial notions unilaterally affecting pre-existing concepts. Indeed, labour and employment are not just abstract ideas, but concrete arenas of negotiation of economic conditions. Mager shows how linguistic understandings of concepts of 'work' were shaped by the events of the nineteenth century, including the expansion of colonial rule, but also how these concepts themselves influenced isiXhosa speakers' decisions and actions during this period. This bidirectional view was possible because Mager adopted three different perspectives: the cognitive/linguistic, the historical and the conceptual. Cognitivists tend to focus on the systematic aspects of change; human agency is viewed as relevant (pragmatics triggers all change), but constrained. Historians explore in great detail the indexical possibilities that the lexicon affords.[31] Language in this perspective is mainly viewed as pointing to past experiences, but not so much as a tool that could be used to discover how these experiences were brought about. Our approach in *Doing Conceptual History in Africa* adds precisely this idea of the actively pursued debate, of the contestation of key concepts as a trigger for change.

Stråth's chapter examines *ujamaa* as a key concept, the struggles over which not only reflected a specific social, political and economic model in Tanzania at a particular moment, but themselves helped shape the period since independence. When first used by President Julius Nyerere, *ujamaa* was more than a newly-coined term applied to what was then a novel and revolutionary model. It carried in it the semantic heritage of an old word, of Arabic origin, with a complex structure of semantic field relations evoking associations and connotations of various kinds. *Ujamaa* was not understood in the same way by all Tanzanians, and the history of contestation of the term – less so of the political model that was defined – is what made it possible for the term to outlive its application to a political model, and even gain in popularity since the demise of the particular model it named.

These conceptual conflicts can be made explicit; intellectuals can scrutinize them and in so doing further challenge the concepts at stake. Pierre-Philippe Fraiture's chapter is a case in point. Taking 'decolonization' as a key concept that has preoccupied intellectuals and philosophers since the mid-twentieth century, Fraiture shows how far the concept is from its denotational meaning, which attributes agency to colonial powers. Valentin Mudimbe, Achille Mbembe and Patrice Nganang, in their often conflictual writing, contest the notion that 'decolonization' is a process whereby withdrawal results in independence, with a clear end point and a neat reversal of the act of colonizing. Instead, it falls as much on the formerly colonized and subsequent generations to decolonize themselves, a process that is ongoing and that includes the appropriation of European intellectual production for Africa's own ends. What exactly 'decolonization' means and what it looks like, however, both remain the focus of intense debates, particularly so in the wake of some of the important disappointments of independence.

Conceptual Affordances and Constraints

Conceptual history offers an approach to Africa's past that can also foreground the intellectual work of ordinary people; it is about all kinds of people shaping powerful concepts, such as 'land' or 'wealth', and doing so through language. Because in *Doing Conceptual History in Africa* we work from the assumption that language is inherently social and produced by people, we place human agency firmly at the centre of the narrative. Here then, people are not constrained by hegemonic discourses that limit their agency, nor are they instrumentally acted upon by lineage systems or traditions or the fact of living on a frontier. Neither does the 'harsh environment' or 'rich volcanic soil' determine their life trajectory from start to finish. Rather we see them creating, contesting and reshaping key concepts, sometimes in a context of struggle and hardship, sometimes not.

Placing language at the centre of our analysis, especially as we emphasize translation, necessitates a discussion of our stance towards linguistic relativity. Language is not only a reflection of lived experience, not just a record of events that have left their imprint in language as a conventionalized inventory. It is this, to some extent: we can trace changes in agriculture from linguistic evidence because the adoption of new crops is marked in language yet does not entirely displace the language for older forms of food production. But language serves also to enable speakers both to make sense of the world and to shape the world. Key concepts are those that enable speakers to do the latter; they are those concepts that drive actors towards a certain course of action. People's expectations are phrased in these concepts, and so language becomes a tool for manipulating debates in particular directions. Of course, this does not always work. Others are also seeking to use language in this way and ultimately a certain consensus must emerge if one interpretation of a key concept is to become dominant and hence effective.

In her chapter on the concept of 'land' in colonial Bioko (Equatorial Guinea), Sá offers a powerful example of a concept enabling speakers – and writers – to shape the world they inhabit, or at least to make a concerted effort to do so. By tracing the ways in which the concept of 'land' shifted from one grounded in the specificity of life on Bioko to include core colonial concepts, such as the plantation, her chapter offers another example of the entanglements and contestations wrought by colonialism in Africa. But she goes further. Writing about a group of Bubi farmers who named themselves collectively as 'sons of the country' and who submitted a petition to the colonial government, Sá shows how they appropriated the colonial concepts of 'land' and *indígenas*. They did so to assert their rights to land expropriated from them and given to settlers and to assert their vision for a different future in which past and ongoing abuses would be undone.

Language is created through speech and through social interaction and so the creating, contesting and reshaping of key concepts is done performatively. Speech necessarily occurs within a context and that context can determine the kind of speech that is acceptable or appropriate or even possible. What is more, certain kinds of actions can form part of the struggle over the meaning of concepts. For example, a person officiating at the marriage of two men, through her actions, engages in the ongoing debate over the concept of 'marriage' in South Africa.

Pamela Khanakwa's chapter effectively demonstrates the ways in which actions as well as language form part of the debate over particular concepts, in her case concepts of 'circumcision', of 'group identity' and of 'masculinity'. Indeed, the key concept in the chapter – *imbalu*, with circumcision as the central event – is a ritual rather than a lexical concept. The performance of that ritual, and efforts to control the nature of that performance, established a number of other highly significant contested concepts, such as 'masculinity'

and 'ethno-national belonging'. The shape of the scar left by a surgeon per-forming circumcision in colonial Bugisu mattered, as did the stance of the person being circumcised, whether he was lying down or standing upright. Struggles over these kinds of aspects were central to debates over the meaning of 'circumcision' and all its related concepts in Eastern Uganda, especially from the 1930s to the 1960s. When bands of men abducted and forcibly circumcised Bagisu and non-Bagisu men, they violently contested the notion that 'being Bagisu' could involve not being circumcised. At the same time, the public performance of circumcision during *imbalu* established a particular concept of 'manhood', one that was continually challenged and reframed over the course of the twentieth century. Khanakwa's chapter offers a striking example of ritual as the expression of a concept and thus of ritual as history. This is internal Gisu history, but it is also the history of cultural encounters, of missionaries seeking to recreate rites in a manner compatible with their interpretation of Christian values. This approach does not reify the cultural encounters as a simple binary between Gisu and Western, but demonstrates the plasticity of such encounters and the malleability of contentions over the meaning given to rituals and the appropriation of their interpretive power.

This inclusion of ritual practice as an expression of a concept brings us back to the questions of what constitutes a key concept and what concepts have been significant in African history. Historians of Africa, and other schol-ars, have long grappled with the latter question. For example, histories of public healing make the case that it is a key concept. Steven Feierman's work speaks to this with his argument that the dual concepts of 'healing the land' and 'harming the land' are the lens through which we can understand Shambaa history over the past two centuries or more.[32] John Janzen meanwhile shows how *ngoma* healing helped structure economic and social life across central and southern Africa.[33] Because we came at this as a group of scholars focused on exploring how to do conceptual history in Africa, we are not claiming that the concepts set out here represent all the fundamental concepts of African history, but they are among them. They are at once universal and specific and, after Nietzsche,[34] they are all undefined, or at least resist any straightforward definition, no matter what dictionaries may tell us to the contrary. Concepts that have a history are, according to Nietzsche, not possible to define from some overall 'objective' point of view, since *history* means that they are con-tinuously contested. Starting from the framework of the social and economic, the concepts we explore here tend towards those that transcend ethnolinguis-tic, even regional, boundaries.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, much focus is on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their history of colonialism and independent nation states. But this is less about the 'colonial encounter' and the reification of that experience (as one between two coherent and bounded sides) as it is about showing how colonialism and missionary Christianity contributed to the contestations over

concepts – whether 'work' among isiXhosa speakers (Mager, and also Fleisch) or 'circumcision' among Lugisu speakers (Khanakwa) – and the continuities in those concepts despite the profound ruptures of the last centuries. Or the ways in which Africans sought to mobilize concepts such as *ujamaa* (Stråth) or 'decolonization' (Fraiture) or 'land' (Sá and Boele van Hensbroek) to bring about the future they imagined for themselves at independence or to navigate the disappointments of the years since. But these conceptual histories are not limited to the relatively recent past. People have debated, for example, the meaning of 'wealth' or of 'poverty' for the past millennium and more (Stephens). Such debates continue, as struggles to redefine 'marriage' in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries demonstrate (Pienaar). The utility of the key concepts that we chose to explore in our chapters stems from this double-sidedness: they result from past experiences, but are also reshaped in order to better explain past experience. And they contribute to people's visions of future possibilities, thereby influencing historical actors whose actions are built on their expectations for the future, rather than emerging mechanically from past experiences. We must bear these thoughts in mind when returning to Ranger's statement: 'Conceptual history is … the difficult study of ideas of causation'.

Conclusion

In *Doing Conceptual History in Africa*, we adhere to a view of temporality that goes beyond a plain sequence of cause and effect, and two aspects of temporality are particularly important to us. The first has to do with the moment of the colonial encounter, without doubt a highly significant moment for African history, but one that has gained an unjustified currency as a foundational moment for the entire enterprise of writing history in Africa. The second has to do with the understanding of time and temporality for the writing of history. Both help us to clarify where we see the novelty and additional explanatory force of a conceptual history approach in the African context and beyond.

Relying on linguistic data in addition to the more conventional historical documentary sources enables us to overcome the enshrined divide of precolonial versus colonial and postcolonial.[35] This is about more than simply developing a richer understanding of the interface at which precolonial becomes colonial. It is also about more than finding new ways to push further back in time, given the limitations of sources for Africa's history beyond the past two centuries. We do not write back into the past; the histories included here are not about explaining how the world today came into being, but rather explore different sets of expectations at historically significant moments, to study the past futures in the sense offered by Koselleck.[36] Broadening the range of instruments available to us, by adopting theoretical impetus and methodological aid

from conceptual history and linguistics, is not aimed at improving our analysis of the impact of colonialism on African societies. Instead, a conceptual historical approach opens the possibility for a more radically different way of writing history, one closer to what scholars of the subaltern studies collective have long debated.[37] This includes the possibility of placing the colonial relationship in its wider and deeper historical context. Conceptual history is about understanding discursive formations at a given point in time. It is about the prevalent views held and interpretations made by people at that time, including the expectations upon which they acted. As such it emphasizes the contingencies and contestations that surround historical events, asserting an explicitly anti-teleological approach.

The methodological tool of conceptual history not only helps to transcend the divide between postcolonial, colonial and precolonial. It also holds the opportunity to transcend the distinction between African history and the history of other regions. The methods invoked here are certainly not restricted to their application in an African context. We chose the continent because of our familiarity with that context, and also because of the often-reiterated specificities (scarcity of written sources, specific socio-political settings, diversity, etc.) that are used to question the feasibility of doing this kind of African history, hoping that thereby the possibilities, and perhaps limits, of our methodological proposals would become most evident. There is not anything intrinsic to our approach that would necessarily confine it to being applied exclusively to African history. In fact, transporting it to, for example, an Asian or European setting is tempting. There is a clear potential for this approach to enhance our knowledge about non-elite intellectual thought in contexts where the availability of written sources may have led to specific biases. In this sense, our methodological proposal ties in with the renewed interest in global history, but a global history without a Western centre, and without elite actors as its necessary protagonists.

Notes

1. T.O. Ranger, 'Towards a Usable African Past', in C. Fyfe (ed.), *African Studies since 1945: A Tribute to Basil Davidson* (London: Longman for the Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh, 1976), 26.

2. M. Richter, '*Begriffsgeschichte* and the History of Ideas', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48(2) (1987): 255.

3. Although they have not explicitly taken a conceptual history approach, Africanist historians have written histories that examine particular concepts, some of which are discussed below.

4. Although for Koselleck and his colleagues these were limited to written sources. Richter, '*Begriffsgeschichte* and the History of Ideas', 253.

5. The list is far too long to include here, but see the many contributions in the Social History of Africa series published by Heinemann and the New African Histories series published by Ohio University Press.

6. Bo Stråth, 'Towards a Global Conceptual History', keynote address at National and Transnational Notions of the Social Seminar, Helsinki, 21 August 2008. Retrieved 12 May 2015 from http://www.helsinki.fi/conceptafrica/theory_method_literature/towards_a_global_conceptual_history.html. See also H. Schulz-Forberg (ed.), *A Global Conceptual History of Asia, 1860–1940* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014).

7. These were in papers by Inge Brinkman, Lwazi Lushaba, V.Y. Mudimbe, A.A. An Na'im, Terje Østigård and Holger Weiss, as well as members of the group represented in this volume.

8. Carol Gluck, drawing on Wittgenstein, describes this as seeing either the rabbit or the duck in the entwined gestalt; both are there but cannot be perceived simultaneously. C. Gluck, '*Sekinin*/Responsibility in Modern Japan', in C. Gluck and A.L. Tsing (eds), *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 90–91.

9. In this there is some overlap between conceptual history and the history of ideas. See Richter, '*Begriffsgeschichte* and the History of Ideas', for a discussion of that relationship.

10. One of the earliest historians to embrace the possibilities of linguistic evidence for writing African history was Roland Oliver, the first person to hold a lectureship in African History (specifically 'East African Tribal History') at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. See R. Oliver, 'The Problem of the Bantu Expansion', *Journal of African History* 7(3) (1966): 361–76. While his work has since been superseded, the recognition of language as a historical source has remained important for subsequent scholars.

11. In sub-Saharan Africa potential exceptions to this include Amharic in Ethiopia, an autochthonous imperial language with a long tradition in writing, and countries such as Somalia, Burundi and Cape Verde with a dominant language spoken as a first language by practically all inhabitants. Today, we could also include Tanzania and the Central African Republic, where African linguae francae (Kiswahili and Sango respectively) have developed into nationwide means of communication.

12. 'Statistical Summaries: Summary by Language Family, Table 5. Major Language Families of the World', in M.P. Lewis, G.F. Simons, and C.D. Fennig (eds), *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 17th ed. (Dallas, Texas: SIL International, 2014). Retrieved 21 July 2014 from http://www.ethnologue.com.

13. R. Monnier, 'Use and Role of the Concepts of Tyranny and Tyrannicide during the French Revolution', *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 2(1) (2006), 19–41; A. Friberg, 'Democracy in the Plural? The Concepts of Democracy in Swedish Parliamentary Debates during the Interwar Years', *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 7(1) (2012), 12–35.

14. On the definition of oral literature, see R. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007).

15. R. Koselleck, U. Spree and W. Steinmetz, 'Drei bürgerliche Welten? Zur vergleichenden Semantik der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft in Deutschland, England und Frankreich', in H.-J. Puhle (ed.), *Bürger in der Gesellschaft der Neuzeit. Wirtschaft-Politik-Kultur* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1991), 14–58.

16. Translation can also be 'political argumentation'. D.R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004), 9 (quote), 80–85.

17. Koselleck, Spree and Steinmetz, 'Drei bürgerliche Welten?'.

18. A. Wierzbicka, 'Translatability and the Scripting of Other Peoples' Souls', *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24 (2013): 1–21.

19. S.C. Levinson, *Space in Language and Cognition: Explorations in Cognitive Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

20. On the danger of an ethnographic approach, see V.-Y. Mudimbe, 'Meditations on *Eikones* (Questions on "À Propos un Passe-Vue Conceptuel")', keynote address, ConceptAfrica workshop, Helsinki, 26 May 2011. Retrieved 9 May 2015 from http://www.helsinki.fi/conceptafrica/theory_method_literature/meditations_on_eikones.html.

21. C. Ehret, *Southern Nilotic History: Linguistic Approaches to the Study of the Past* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1971); C. Ehret, *An African Classical Age: Eastern and*

Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998); J. Vansina, *The Children of Woot* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); J. Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

22. D.L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15ᵗʰ Century* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998); K.A. Klieman, *'The Pygmies Were Our Compass': Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900 C.E.* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003); R. Stephens, *A History of African Motherhood: The Case of Uganda, 700–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

23. E.L. Fields-Black, *Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). For other works on the history of economic activities see, for example, R. Klein-Arendt, *Die traditionellen Eisenhandwerke der Savannen-Bantu: Eine sprachhistorische Rekonstruktion auf lexikalischer Grundlage* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004); K. Bostoen, *Des mots et des pots en bantou: une approche linguistique de l'histoire de la céramique en Afrique* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005).

24. V. Evans and M. Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*. (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006).

25. By this, we do not mean dictionary definitions, but rather those terms for which speakers of a language could offer a straightforward definition.

26. These are similar to Gallie's understanding of essentially contested concepts. W.B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), Chapter 8.

27. G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

28. An example of cognitive linguistic work in this tradition that also addresses the question of (pragmatic) triggers for linguistic change is E. Sweetser, *From Etymology to Pragmatics: Metaphorical and Cultural Aspects of Semantic Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); see also E. Closs Traugott and R.B. Dasher, *Regularity in Semantic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

29. B. Heine and T. Kuteva, *Language Contact and Grammatical Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

30. In *Language Contact and Grammatical Change*, Heine and Kuteva go so far as to claim that even in contact situations, linguistic change can only occur according to paths of language change that also apply to individual languages not (or only minimally) influenced by other languages: 'transfer [of grammatical meaning and structures] is essentially in accordance with principles of grammaticalization' (p. 1), and 'grammatical replication is independent of the particular sociolinguistic factors that may exist in a given situation of language contact' (p. 260). That implies that language contact may accelerate the pace of change, but not radically alter its course.

31. This approach is neatly summarized by Vansina: 'Words are the tags attached to things'. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 11.

32. S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 69–93.

33. J.M. Janzen, *Ngoma: Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

34. F. Nietzsche, 'Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift. Zweite Abhandlung: Schuld, schlechtes Gewissen und Verwandtes', in *Philosophische Werke in sechs Bänden*. Bd. VI. (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1980 [1887]), 820.

35. See also F. Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4; S. Ellis, 'Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa', *Journal of African History* 43(1) (2002), 5–6.

36. R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. K. Tribe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985). Original publication: *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

37. D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); R. Majumdar, *Writing Postcolonial History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

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