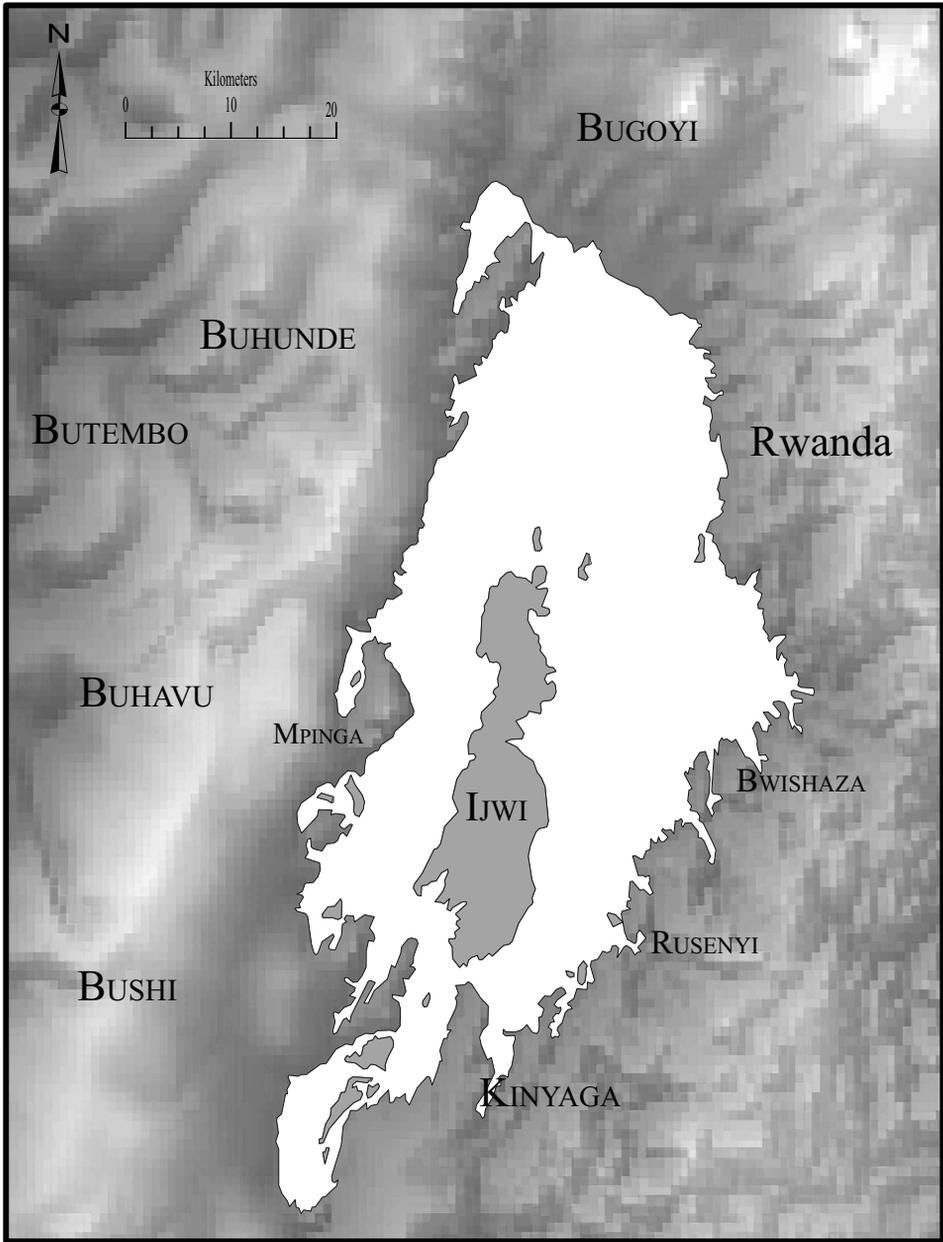


INTRODUCTION

Peering through the Mists

RWANDAN TRADITIONS SOMETIMES refer to the islands in Lake Kivu as “the land beyond the mists.” Indeed, morning mists are common in this area, and when they arrive they affect our vision of the landforms in interesting ways. Through the mists we see those lands only dimly and in altered configurations: there is mystery in the mists, and intrigue in their changing artistry. But the phrase is not only a meteorological description of the lake at dawn: it is also a metaphor. It refers not just to a transitory moment but also to an understanding of culture and of history. For the past, too, is “a land beyond the mists,” and the metaphor perfectly captures our vision of history in this area.

This collection refers to the lands contiguous to Lake Kivu, a beautiful high-land lake in the western Rift Valley of Central Africa that today forms the boundary between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. On each side of the lake, the terrain rises sharply—in some places to five thousand feet or more above the lake surface. Across the summits to the west, the land descends into the vast Congo River basin, and the waters draining from the western slopes of these mountains eventually flow into the Atlantic. (By a more circuitous route, so too do the waters of Lake Kivu itself, first flowing south into Lake Tanganyika, then west into the Congo River, and eventually through the great arc of the Congo to the Atlantic.) To the east of Lake Kivu the mountains form the Congo-Nile watershed; beyond that divide the mountainous terrain first dissolves



Map 1.1. The Lake Kivu Rift

into a plethora of rolling hills—the characteristic landform of central Rwanda—and then gradually opens onto the grasslands on both sides of the north-flowing arm of the Kagera River (see map I.1). From there the waters flow into Lake Victoria and eventually to the Mediterranean.

But in addition to serving as a hydrological divide, the Kivu Rift Valley also serves as a cultural divide distinguishing two vast culture zones: to the west are the forest cultures of the Congo basin; to the east, the highland states of the Great Lakes cultures. Yet this cultural divide is not definitive: historically, as still today, the islands in Lake Kivu and the lakeside communities on both sides of the lake saw much interaction with both forest cultures and highland states, and those interactions took place at many levels—political, economic, social, military, religious, and cultural. Indeed, before the nineteenth century the peoples of the Rift Valley formed an intensely interactive community of their own, and right through colonial rule the Rift’s kaleidoscopic history vastly complicated the efforts by both African and European authorities to define precise political boundaries, where before there existed only ambiguous cultural frontiers. In short, around Lake Kivu the Rift Valley formed what some scholars refer to as a “middle ground”—a meeting place of many cultures, dynamic in themselves and fluid in their interaction.

The concept of a “middle ground” expands our vision and raises important questions of how we understand social process. Many states were involved in this region over the last two hundred years—but this book is not primarily about states. Human settlement here covers at least three thousand years—but this book is not about enduring social patterns. Distinct forms of political hierarchy marked this region—but this book does not adopt the vision of powerholders alone. Instead, these essays question assumptions of power, they dissolve the durability of social forms, and they temper ideologies with lived experience. While empirical data are essential to historical analysis (and we will engage with many individuals and events), this is not a simple narrative. Rather, these collected essays are about concepts—about decentering our vision of social dynamics in a region where in the past outsiders’ focus on the “center” has been so important.

These essays provide diverse entry points to social formations where lived experiences took many forms. Their purpose is to place in historical context the protean character of the institutions and mental constructs that observers often assume to be fixed and permanent. We will explore the nature of frontiers, not boundaries; of personal experiences, not state histories; of multiple agency, not

defining centers of historical legitimacy; and of local initiatives, not only central policies. While state power was important in this area, most people, most of the time, were not preoccupied with court politics or with state norms; their lives were lived outside of those familiar institutions that outsiders rely on to structure their knowledge. To understand their lives, therefore, we, too, need to venture beyond the conventional lines of inquiry to ask different questions, and to adopt different perspectives on conventional topics.

In fact, adopting the perspective of the middle ground accords more closely to the empirical record, for in this area, even with the arrival of competing colonial powers (Germany, Britain, and the agents of Leopold II of Belgium), the political boundaries were contested. And well they might have been, for in cultural terms, these heterogeneous societies were never bounded. Social networks and even political loyalties were never clearly distinct—and when such distinctions were defined by one party or another, it was not for very long: clear-cut political distinctions in this area were fleeting phenomena.

But that is not to say the inhabitants lived without cultures of their own; it is only to suggest that these were self-created and locally generated identities. Nestled between the Mitumba Mountains to the west (in what is now Congo) and the Congo-Nile divide to the east (in what is now Rwanda), the people of the Rift Valley had carved out ambiguous relationships to larger cultural units—and often found that there were benefits in cultural ambiguity. Nonetheless, there were drawbacks: such ambiguous relations at times implied contested relations. Well into the nineteenth century, for example, the royal court of Rwanda had an unsure presence in regions of this lacustrine littoral in what is now western Rwanda (including the areas of Kinyaga, Rusenyi, Bwishaza, Budaha, and Bugoyi). Whatever court presence existed remained superficial, and this condition persisted right up to the reign of Rwanda's powerful king Rwabugiri, in the late nineteenth century.

But from at least the late eighteenth century there were state overtures into these frontier regions. Indeed, the fertile lands on the eastern shores of Lake Kivu provided an area of intense interest for Rwandan expansion, and Rwabugiri was the military exemplar who most represented that expansionist vision: his presence—and his armies—dominated the region in the last half of the nineteenth century. He began his renowned military career by reinforcing a previously tenuous Rwandan political presence in Kinyaga—the area of extreme southwest Rwanda today (and still seen by some in the central areas of the country as not truly “Rwanda,” being populated by “Banyabungu,” a derogatory term for

people from the west, from Congo). From Kinyaga some of Rwabugiri's first major campaigns were directed against the Shi kingdoms west of Lake Kivu and the Rusizi River. So were his last campaigns: almost thirty years later (after multiple military expeditions elsewhere), Rwabugiri was to die in his fourth assault on Bushi. In the interim he established army camps in the Rift region; he executed some sovereigns (and drove others away); he occupied land by force and extorted taxes and prestations (seizing cattle, small livestock, and food stocks); and he entered deeply into the local politics of the Rift (influencing succession disputes, among other effects). Despite this persistent presence, however, Rwabugiri was never to gain broad allegiance in these areas. Rwanda was always seen as an occupying force by the people of the islands in the lake and of the lands west of Lake Kivu, and with the withdrawal of Rwandan troops on Rwabugiri's death in 1895, nothing permanent was retained of Rwandan political power west of the Rwandan shores of Lake Kivu. Rwabugiri was seen as a scourge, not as a sovereign; his power was but an impermanent presence.

Even in areas east of the lake, the record was mixed: central court allegiance and local cultural affinities were seldom aligned. Indeed, the hegemonic views of an expansionist state only intensified the power holders' social distance from the people of the region: incorporation only transposed the axis of social distance from a horizontal scale (culturally defined) to a vertical scale (class-defined). In the southwest, Rwanda's firm control over Kinyaga was achieved only during the reign of Rwabugiri; from that time it became a prized administrative terrain of one of the most influential lineages in Rwandan court politics, the Abakagara lineage of the Abega clan—the lineage which, through various machinations, assassinations, and outright slaughter of its political opponents, effectively ruled Rwanda at the time of European arrival.

But outside Kinyaga the record was different. Large areas of Bugoyi in the northwest and Mulera in the north, and several smaller regions in the rugged mountains along the divide, all resisted rule by the Rwandan central court well into the period of colonial rule. Indeed, both before and after European arrival broad areas in what is now northwestern Rwanda actively resisted the imposition of court power. Associated with the intrusion of the court to this area, the first Christian martyr was murdered in Bugoyi in 1900, and a European priest representing the central court in a local dispute was killed in Mulera in 1907. Across this zone, mission diaries refer often to the attempts of armies of the court to raid and plunder such areas of resistance—in places like Bushiru, Bukunzi, and Kingogo—long into the 1920s. On the other side of the lake, the areas of Bushi,

Buhavu, and Bunyungu also resisted both Rwandan court penetration and European colonial imposition. Thus throughout this region during the nineteenth century (and well into the twentieth), territorial claims and political allegiance remained fluid. This was a zone autonomous of any enduring hegemonic power, one where formal structures and popular culture were only intersecting, but separate, domains of activity. This was a frontier zone—an area of poorly defined contours and quickly changing perceptions: a “land beyond the mists,” politically as well as poetically.

Thus it is no wonder that this has been an area neglected by people who rely on a mental map defined by formal politics. In the Lake Kivu littoral, relying on formal state politics as a lens, and on fixed political affiliation as a defining feature, can distort one’s understanding (at least until quite recently, when political and cultural identities became more closely aligned). Even during colonial rule the lines were blurred by the colonial imposition of fixed boundaries that had contradictory effects at several levels. Seeking to rigidify external differences and homogenize internal ambiguities, colonial policies bifurcated existing cultural identities. But these policies also introduced further political ambiguity, and the colonial power itself then abrogated those clear-cut boundaries. During colonial rule tens of thousands of people were affected by the forced displacement of Rwandans to the Congo, by the “recruitment” of Rwandans to work in the Congo, and by harsh policies that led others to flee to Uganda and Tanganyika to escape the requisitions of both Rwandan authorities and colonial administrators. In short, colonial power sought to resolve the ambiguities of the area by establishing fixed boundaries, intended to arrest social flow and harden a fluid cultural landscape. But even their own policies belied the fixed nature of those boundaries.

SUCH WAS the cultural context within which these essays are situated. From afar the Lake Kivu Rift would seem to articulate a clear geographical division. But clear geographical landmarks do not always translate easily into clearly defined administrative domains or political allegiances; in this area the transition from “frontier” to “boundary” was often an inconsistent and hesitant process, one poorly defined and capricious. Yet surely these so-called peripheral zones were important to the people who lived there; they were important to the colonial powers that argued over them (and that threatened to fight over them); they were important to Rwabugiri (and others from the Rwandan central court) who fought and died there; and, by the complex issues they raise and the competing conceptual frameworks they engender, they are important still today to those

who seek a deeper understanding of social process—in this area and elsewhere, and in more recent times as well as in the past. Those realities—that historical complexity matters, and that peripheral zones can be important—define the vision behind this collection of essays.

Outsiders' struggles to define this area, and the local resistance to the imposition of such external definitions, suggest that this middle ground was important for more than its role as a divide. To be sure, the people of the Rift drew heavily on their strong opposition to court institutions encroaching from east of the lake. But there was also a strong legacy of interaction by Rwandans with the people in those same regions: people east and west of the lake were both linked and autonomous, and both those ties and that autonomy were important in the development of the identities and polities of the Rift Valley. Similarly, in developing their political and social constructs, the people on the mainland east of the lake had historically drawn on ideas and concepts from the western cultures, as well as on material items introduced through the vast commercial networks that worked their way through the region. The Rift Valley cultures were an integral part of the historical dynamics of this region of interlinked, but separate, cultures.

So frontier zones matter, not only as zones of separation and as zones of interaction but as interesting in themselves; areas disdained in the centers of political power sometimes emerge as zones of creativity. Indeed, in historical terms regional social innovations were derived as often from the perimeter—from the marginalized, those thinking and acting outside of prescribed conventional norms—as from the center. Yet it is a near-universal assumption of the powerful that power and knowledge are fused, that intellectual authority is the monopoly of the state, and that state actors are uniquely well placed to interpret events. And such claims are powerfully reflected in the historiography of the region. To the powerful, their superior status is nearly always presumed to derive from superior knowledge; for them (and their allies) there is no need to be informed of the history or culture of those outside the realm of power holders. However, by silencing other voices such assumptions reduce our awareness of the complexity of historical process and lead to misrepresentations of history. They also mark the earlier historiography of this area of Africa in a particularly dramatic fashion (as illustrated in the narratives of both colonial and local power holders).

The essays collected here explore the effects of such elitist assumptions on the historiography of the region. But they go beyond simply identifying the ideas that guide the presentation of history; they argue that familiarity with local testimony and analytic interpretations different from the state-centered models

forces us to revisit, review, and rethink the subtle and complex histories of this area so deeply marked by ambiguity and flux. In short, they respond to what Feierman terms “the ethnographic impulse”—the attempt “to interpret ways of thinking . . . radically different from [our] own.” Although these essays draw on neglected sources, relate to different locales, address various periods, and consider diverse issues, they do share a single vision: that to peer through those mists of past historiography—and to reconfigure our understanding—historical work must be empirically based, locally informed, and broadly inclusive; as Geertz phrases it, “the shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local.”

Some of these essays were published long ago (although the issues they address are often still in play). Some were published in outlets not easily accessible (sometimes outlets since discontinued). Some deal with episodes now largely neglected in the wake of more recent events demanding attention. But while compelling and important, events directly associated with the recent cataclysms are not the only issues to have marked the history of the area. It is for good reason that the genocide in Rwanda and the subsequent events in the Congo have become focal points for recent research, but such intense inquiry can also obscure other important issues, themes, and processes—issues that themselves are often essential in understanding contemporary events.

This selection of essays is presented in four interrelated sections. The first addresses historiographical issues, exploring some of the conceptual groundings that have molded the understanding of outsiders—and sometimes of insiders as well—in this intellectual arena. The second section consists of empirical work on the Rift Valley societies of Congo. These essays (augmented by the research of many colleagues working in the region) illustrate the expansion of historical interest in the region over the past decades. The third section poses questions specifically related to Rwandan history but directed at institutions and interactions outside the parameters of the central court. Building on the approaches and data explored in the earlier essays, the chapters in this section revisit established issues in Rwandan historiography to suggest new perspectives on material exchange, social identities, and political culture. The fourth section—a summary chapter—draws on these sources and methods to provide a new understanding of precolonial history based on the frameworks of inquiry explored here and on the empirical foundations to result from such research. The work of many people over the generation since colonial rule has made a monumental difference.

Part 1: Historiography

Historiography is an essential starting point for understanding “how it is we understand understandings not our own,” as Geertz phrases it. The first section of this collection consists of two essays; one examines the intellectual foundations of earlier representations of history in the region, the other provides an overview of research carried out in the years immediately after decolonization.

“Bushi and the Historians” grapples with the distortions of the record introduced by colonial and missionary assumptions that “history” derives from state actors alone. Located southwest of Lake Kivu, and including seven distinct kingdoms, Bushi was home to by far the most populous cultural group in the area west of the lake. In addition to its demographic importance, it was also strategically located: encircling Bukavu (the colonial administrative center of the region), Bushi became a pole of attraction for administrators and missionaries. Drawing on the written sources on Rwanda, their early writings on Bushi often assumed that the history of the Rift area was derivative from (rather than interactive with) Rwandan central court actors. Yet from the perspective of the local level, it is clear that history takes shape from multiple interactions and conversations: the history of the Rift Valley region cannot be defined by Rwandan court initiatives alone, nor exclusively from the actions of people of western (Rift Valley) cultures; it can only be understood by accounting for the subtle webs of interaction among diverse arenas. To account for these changing interactive fields, we need to explore such activity where it has been neglected; we need to enter into and to look more closely at the “lands beyond the mists,” in all their complexity.

To assess the lasting influence of these earlier paradigms, “Bushi and the Historians” examines the intellectual foundations of four influential colonial works. These drew essentially on racial assumptions of history and reified them through time: they identified culture with race, they assumed that broad cultural/racial groups acted as single (internally homogeneous) units of historical agency, and they took it for granted that racial/cultural groups were organized in a hierarchical fashion. There is an implicit assumption in these works that the structures of African societies observed during colonial rule could simply be extrapolated into the distant past, thus effacing the effects on African societies of both colonial influences and African agency within that colonial context. But in examining these works, what is most surprising is that these assumptions

seemed to intensify over time, as researchers became further removed from local testimony: the early (missionary) researchers, working through the local language, were actually closer to their sources than those who came later. Each successive writer narrowed the vision, distilled the data, and condensed the arguments of his predecessors. Thus over time these works showed progressively simplified histories and increasingly narrow conceptual frameworks. In short, a rigid intellectual framework (which also increasingly reinforced colonial administrative thinking) became self-perpetuating.

Only after decolonization was this framework challenged by new research based on oral data derived from local sources. With decolonization, new approaches emerged. The second chapter in this section highlights the new historiographical issues to emerge in the wider arena over the period 1960–80. Jointly written with Bishikwabo Cubaka, a colleague at the Bukavu campus of the National University of Zaire, “Recent Research in the Area of Lake Kivu” surveys historical writing on Rwanda and eastern Congo produced by the first generation of postcolonial historical inquiry. It sets out the major themes of this research and highlights the enormous productivity of the period—and the prodigious effort that lay behind it. One conclusion to emerge is in sharp contrast to the period of colonial historiography. Then, writing on the history of the Congolese Rift societies had been largely derivative of Rwandan historiography—that is, the colonial writings on Congo societies showed a surfeit of interaction with earlier written work on Rwanda—to the point of intellectual dependence. After decolonization, however, the opposite problem emerged: there was perhaps too little interaction between historians working in the two arenas (Rwanda on the one hand, and the Lake Kivu Rift societies on the other), and the degree of separation between the two fields even intensified over time.

Though it is amply evident that historical influences did not respect political boundaries, the two fields increasingly represented discrete arenas of research, in part to respond to nationalist impulses, and in part because the technical demands of historical research were different on the two sides of the Rift. Historical research in Rwanda had to account for (and critique) a vast existing historiography, while research west of Lake Kivu had to account for historiographical neglect—researchers in the west needed to establish the empirical foundations of historical understanding. Thus, on both sides of the national boundary, historical interactions across the Rift Valley were downplayed. Historians in the Congo, west of the Rift, shunned regional contacts in the name of establishing the integrity of local agency, while those in Rwanda, to the east, essentially contradicted

that approach, working from an impressive baseline of existing Rwandan historiography and privileging Rwandan court representations of neighboring societies. Consequently, in addition to paying tribute to the work accomplished in this extremely productive period (1960–80), one motivation for writing “Recent Historical Research” was to acquaint each set of historians with the work of the other.

Part 2: The Lake Kivu Arena

The second section consists of five essays that respond to some of the historiographical challenges outlined above. Drawing extensively on oral sources and incorporating local perspectives, they represent, in truncated form, the essential methodological turn away from colonial historiography. They also focus on societies almost entirely neglected in earlier writings. Though these analyses have regional implications, the central focus is on Ijwi Island, a densely populated island about twenty-five miles long located in Lake Kivu, with a royal dynasty dating from the early nineteenth century. Home to population segments deriving from (and maintaining continuing contacts with) many mainland areas, this kingdom became a nexus of Rift Valley interactions.

Illustrating the broad range of personal mobility and cultural interchange that marked this region before colonial arrival, the first of these essays examines the historical patterns associated with the production, transfer, and usage of but a single commodity, a bracelet-anklet fabricated of forest vines—a modest item in itself but one with important ramifications and associated with cultural interaction on a vast scale. These commercial networks connected Rwandan consumers with commodity production west of the Kivu Rift—in societies often disdained as “uncultured” by Rwandan court actors. The essay explores how these traders from west of the lake (and the social life of the commodities they traded) constructed networks of friendship, alliance, and reciprocity ramifying throughout this vast and varied region. (And the commercial networks highlighted here represented only one of several interrelated trade networks; two of the most important included salt from the northwest and iron implements from the southwest.)

In exploring this commercial history, the analysis introduces three features previously neglected in the historical literature on this region. First, it addresses an aspect of economic history (long-distance commerce) almost entirely ignored

in earlier presentations. Material transfers within Rwanda were assumed to be entirely subsumed within the clientship system ultimately connected to the central court; those in other areas were deemed unimportant. Only by analyzing the system as a whole—as this essay tries to do—was a new vision possible. Second, the essay addresses the importance of commercial agency outside the control of powerful political centers. In Rwandan historiography such activity was rendered invisible (or unimportant) because beyond the reach of the central court; for areas outside Rwanda commercial activity was assumed to be unstructured, informal, and haphazard. (When considered at all, it was characterized as “exchange,” not “commerce,” therefore neglecting the scale and complexity of this commercial network and its significance as social text.) This analysis challenges such assumptions. Third, this essay underscores the importance of interaction across Rwanda’s western cultural divide, where previous Rwandan historiographical interest focused almost exclusively on relations with areas to the east and north of Rwanda (areas of a common Interlacustrine culture zone with that of Rwanda). “Lake Kivu Regional Trade,” by contrast, explores the initiatives of people from western cultures, the nature of their interaction with Rwandan commoners, and the transformation of trade patterns in response to attempts by court powers to control or channel such trade. Despite royal pretensions to the contrary, it is clear that such commercial interaction occurred mostly—and most effectively—outside the control of political power.

The second essay in this section is methodological in its focus: it addresses some of the paradoxes embedded in oral sources, particularly in what are referred to as “genesis traditions”—that is, traditions relating to dynastic origins. By providing detailed analysis of two contrasting traditions reporting on the same episode—the establishment of the royalty on Ijwi Island—it illustrates the depth of analysis necessary to derive historical understanding from such oral sources. Narrowing the broad vision of the first essay both geographically and chronologically, “Kamo and Lubambo” focuses on a single social community—and particularly on the conflict that eventually introduced a royal dynasty to the island. Unlike the two traditions, the essay does not present the installation of royalty in simple narrative form. Instead it compares competing oral traditions—sources that seem to disagree, to contradict, and to subvert each other, but that are today (somewhat surprisingly) almost entirely neglected on Ijwi itself. The import of the essay is found not in the dramatic content of the tale but rather in the competing forms of its presentation, illustrating an analytic approach to addressing conflicting voices and historical uncertainties.

Four levels of paradox characterized these particular sources. First, there was no generalized genesis tradition narrated on Ijwi—not even, surprisingly, among members of the royal family itself; only brief references to royal arrival existed among members of two social segments. But—and this is the second level of paradox—the two groups to recount such narratives are among the smallest, most geographically peripheral, and most socially marginalized of the clan units recognized on Ijwi today. Third, the traditions they recount are almost completely distinct from each other, both in substance and structure. Yet—and this is the fourth paradox—both appear to represent valid historical perceptions and relate to actual empirical events: rather than competing traditions, as their forms and content might suggest, they are complementary.

In short, knowledge of the arrival and establishment of royalty was not widespread on Ijwi, and even those who held such knowledge retained only fragmented references—just as they were socially segmented from the rest of the island’s population. “Kamo and Lubambo” explores such paradoxes; it explains the historical use of divergent accounts; and it concludes that one can understand them only by careful attention to the specific social context of the social unit narrating them at the time the events occurred. Thus this essay illustrates the importance of the social contextualization of knowledge—or at least of narrative—relating to royal establishment on Ijwi in the second decade of the nineteenth century. It shows why peripheral voices and apparently contradictory testimony can be essential: these provide the only empirical sources we have on the establishment of kingship in this society—and through their analysis there emerges a process far different from that assumed in an ideology of divine origins: on Ijwi the origin of the royal family is portrayed in distinctly unheroic terms.

While “Kamo and Lubambo” addresses events at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, “The Campaigns of Rwabugiri” and “Rwabugiri and Ijwi” focus on the last three decades of the century. Though originally published separately, the two essays complement each other. Setting out a complete chronicle of the military expeditions of Kigeri Rwabugiri, a renowned warrior-king of late-nineteenth-century Rwanda, “The Campaigns of Rwabugiri” establishes the broad military context of his reign. By contrast, “Rwabugiri and Ijwi” provides a case study of his several campaigns directed specifically at Ijwi over a twenty-year interval. As the only case study available on Rwabugiri’s wars that draws on data from the target population as well as from Rwandan sources, the essay both examines the tactics of Rwandan military units and explores the local effects of these campaigns. Some Ijwi authorities resisted Rwandan military initiatives,

but others collaborated with the occupying forces, and these different relations to external power were to have enduring effects on the politics of the island (as explored in the next essay).

While numerous accounts of Rwabugiri's campaigns exist from the perspective of the Rwandan central court, we have only few (and fragmentary) accounts from the perspective of those attacked. "Rwabugiri and Ijwi" is based on a rich tapestry of detailed oral accounts; as such, it complements (and sometimes provides a counterweight to) accounts based exclusively on Rwandan court sources. Exploring the agency of the victims as well as of the invaders, the essay tries to illustrate the cunning and courage and perseverance of the actors, as well as the ambition, deceit, and brutality that marked the multiple conflicts sparked by Rwabugiri's invasion and occupation of the island. Illustrative of the contributions of narratives recounted by the victims of such attacks as well as of the victors, it testifies to the value of studying the local social parameters of political conflict.

The fifth chapter of this section examines the sequel to these events, extending the analysis to consider early colonial imposition on the island. Written jointly with Catharine Newbury, "King and Chief on Ijwi Island" explores the dramatic events of colonial establishment on Ijwi, examining the effects of colonial power among both political elites and commoners. It also demonstrates the significant internal restructuring to occur on the island at the time—restructuring brought about as much through the initiatives and ambitions of individuals on Ijwi as from outside policies and powerful colonial personalities. Within the island community, distinct political factions emerged within the royal family—reflecting those apparent during the Rwandan occupation of a generation earlier, with different political strategies apparent in the northern and southern portions of this domain.

In addition to tracing the legacy of Rwabugiri's occupation, however, the main focus of this essay is on Ijwi's internal political culture, showing the failed attempt by colonial agents to invest power with authority. The people of Ijwi understood the intimate interplay of power and authority as central to the political dialectic; they saw authority and power as distinct, but essential features defining the character of politics. However, colonial authorities made no attempt to understand that dialectic. For colonial agents, politics was power, expressed most efficiently through military might: it was sufficient to have delegates appointed by colonial power perform the rituals of enthronement; in their eyes, credulous subjects would blindly follow their "tribal" leader. By contrast, for the people of

Ijwi legitimate power derived only from ritual authority: no claimant to power was considered king except through the appropriate rituals of succession, performed by specific members of the recognized ritual corporations; the performance of these rituals was more important as a social statement—that effective power derived from cultural legitimation from below—than as a symbolic representation of high status or supernatural power. Thus the social consecration of kingship was essential to legitimate royal authority; indeed it was renewed each year in the annual First Fruits ceremony, which reflected the enthronement ceremony: in a sense, therefore, the king was reenthroned each year and the social contract was renewed annually at the time of the first harvest.

To understand the different political perceptions distinguishing colonial agents from Ijwi actors, this essay argues, one needs to understand, in some detail, the social experiences of the people on the island—not just the positions of the “leaders,” but the broader social understanding that served as the foundation of collective identity. Individual leaders were respected only in so far as they recognized such social parameters. Thus the definition of political authority differed between Belgian agents and Congolese actors. But such different interpretations were also reflected in differences between the two major royal factions on the island. Therefore the objective of this chapter is not only to trace out the effects of Belgian impositions on the royal line but also to illustrate the divergent assumptions between two political factions on Ijwi, one in the south, the other in the north. In short, the analysis argues that it is important to account for the social parameters of political dynamics if we are to understand how it is we “understand understandings not our own,” to draw again on Geertz’s apt aphorism. Indeed, that is the continuing thread that knits these essays together.

Part 3: The Rwanda Arena

The third section draws on the analytic issues to emerge from such explorations among the Rift societies, and applies them to various elements of Rwandan historiography. Rwandan historical presentation is highly developed; indeed, Rwanda boasts one of the most extensive written historiographies of any society in Africa. Furthermore, this historiography has developed a distinct character: it often takes the form of fixed, known, and certain elements, closely linked to central court history. Official accounts present Rwandan history as exclusively the history of the kings (augmented by their central court allies and antagonists).

Where fundamental social institutions (such as clan identities) were discussed at all in these “official” accounts, they were presented as fixed and permanent—as social backdrop to the dynamism of the kings and court; where chronology was presented, it was done so in a mechanical fashion: thirty-three years per reign for thirty reigns (from 959 CE). The essays in this section revisit some of these issues, assessing such assumptions and institutions as fully historical constructions themselves and situating them within a historical matrix influenced by many factors.

The first essay in this set focuses on a narrowly defined issue but one with wide ramifications: the changing nature of social identities, in this case that of clan identities. “The Clans of Rwanda” wrestles with a set of paradoxes. In Western thinking, the term “clan” is clearly defined and often seen as marking primordial affiliation: at its most basic, it refers to a group of people united by belief in their common descent from a single ancestor and their shared responsibilities to each other. In Rwanda, however, the concept is much more ambiguous: *ubwoko*, the term that westerners translate as “clan,” is used more broadly as a general term for “category” in Kinyarwanda (the language spoken by Rwandans); the same term refers to ethnic identity, as well as to many other types of categories—with both human and nonhuman referents. (One uses the same term for categories of trees, or animals, or beans, etc.) However, aside from the vague attributes associated with the term for “clan,” this essay addresses a much more specific problem: how is it that in Rwanda clans are seen as determined by patrilineal descent (from a single common ancestor) yet they invariably included members of each of Rwanda’s three major ethnic identities (Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa)—groups that themselves were assumed to be determined by separate lines of patrilineal descent (and therefore seen as biologically exclusive categories)? If clan and ethnic identities were each determined by biological descent, how could each of the multiple clans also incorporate significant numbers of each of the several ethnicities—and (in return) how could each of the ethnic groups incorporate members of each of the clans?

The answer lies in understanding these as historically constructed identities rather than as fixed, immutable categories. Drawing on data and analytic parameters derived from earlier work in the Kivu Rift societies, this essay proposes a resolution to this problem by viewing such identities as socially defined perceptions (in this case associated with the extension of royal power) rather than as individually defined perceptions (determined by descent). Because identity within Rwandan political culture was defined in part by membership in one of

the eighteen predominant clan affiliations, the penetration of royal power into the social configuration of any given locale was marked by extension of such clan identities into those incorporated regions. Indeed, the reach of central court power correlated (in space and time) with the expansion of the eighteen “official” Rwandan clan categories to areas where they had not before been recognized. Thus the data here argue that clan identities are associated with a conceptual field related to the changing matrix of political power, rather than deriving from empirical realities at the individual level, such as descent.

The second chapter of this section, “Bunyabungo: The Western Frontier in Rwandan History,” continues the focus on Rwanda’s western areas, but shifts the point of reference: it explores how Rift Valley cultures were perceived by members of the royal court. Furthermore, it relates the introduction of these disdainful stereotypes of western peoples to a particular period of central court history in Rwanda: a time of the expansion of royal power toward the west, from the late eighteenth century (during the reign of the Rwandan king Cyilima Rujugira). Drawing on literary sources as well as on comparative social structures, this is an attempt to engage with the intellectual history of a segment of Rwandan society, the culture of the central court. But it relates also to a particular moment in the court’s development—a time of growing self-awareness as an elite segment of society and increasingly self-conscious court etiquette, as social distinctions were taking on new importance.

Rwandan political expansion into the areas around Lake Kivu provoked an intensified awareness of cultural differences at the royal court, and the desire for dominance brought with it a desire to hierarchize those differences—to claim the Rwandan court as the superior culture, and therefore one fully justified in subordinating and dominating (as well as mocking) their neighbors. All these aspects are shown in court literary forms, and explored in this chapter. But they were not only illustrative of such changing norms; in the process of political expansion, these literary characterizations served as a tool of social separation; as geographical proximity with western peoples was narrowed, hierarchy increased. In other words, such literary representations were an integral part of the process of class formation; rather than serving as ethnographic descriptions of neighboring societies to the west, therefore, these literary accounts served as a mirror, reflecting the emerging values of the court itself more than the existing values of the people portrayed. Thus these accounts can be seen as an unintentional “auto-ethnography” of the Rwandan central court at that particular moment—more revealing of the speaker than of the object.

The third essay in this section extends the inquiry to the central feature of Rwandan royalty itself: the royal rituals of legitimation, the “esoteric code of kingship.” Although the focus of “What Role Has Kingship?” is on but one aspect of a much broader ritual complex, it illustrates the multiple layers of interpretation involved. More importantly, it brings into question the autonomous nature of the king’s power. It is no wonder that the message was carried in ritual form—and that large parts of it were in esoteric ritual and not open to the public—for defining the limitations of the king’s powers (even in the name of respecting ritual authority) was politically dangerous.

From this theater, with its careful delineation of the multiple ritual requirements imposed on the sovereign, it is clear that the king was a captive of kingship. But in a broader context—and articulating that context is the burden of this essay—it was not only kingship that encapsulated the king, but also culture that encapsulated kingship. In short, by viewing political structures within their larger cultural context, this analysis suggests that the assumptions of divine kingship (prevalent in much early thinking on African kingship) were indeed but myth—although a myth convenient for both European suzerains and Rwandan sovereigns alike.

But the extension of this myth of divine kingship during colonial rule misrepresented the popular understanding of kingship, undermining its roots in social parameters meaningful to the people. During the colonial period the concept of kingship as a culturally consecrated mediating force was gradually replaced with the concept of kings as divine rulers. That process weakened popular support for kingship, for kingship was now seen as hegemonic power, not as a cultural point of reference. Such a shift in the concept of royal legitimacy held momentous implications for Rwanda’s later history: in the 1950s, as European visions of political order began to change, this “power construct of kingship” (that is, as lacking foundations in popular legitimacy) left kingship (and therefore the kings) vulnerable to the political currents of the day.

The final essay in this section addresses chronology—one of the pillars of royal claims to legitimacy. Asserting antiquity was important, for the older kingship was claimed to be, the more solid, it was assumed, was the dynasty’s claim to legitimacy. Postulating kingship as a permanent feature of Rwandan society (and seeing Rwandan royal forms as the fount of royalty in the wider region) was therefore a central element to the development of a sense of nationalist identity in Rwanda—at least at the central court. So the process of interpreting

kingship as a venerable feature of Rwandan society became deeply embedded in court sources, with official sources situating the origin of the Rwandan dynasty in the tenth century (959, to be precise)—and subsequent kings supposedly succeeding in an unbroken line of father-to-son succession to 1959. Proponents of such antiquity claimed confirmation through comparative chronologies in neighboring societies.

But this returns us to the historiographical process noted above. “*Bushi and the Historians*” showed how the hegemony of Rwandan historical sources in the region brought into question the independence of such neighboring sources. In fact, as colonial interpreters sought to write the history of neighboring societies, they consciously aligned these histories (and their chronologies) with the history of Rwanda—and increasingly so as researchers progressively distanced themselves from local sources over the course of the colonial period. Rwandan sources then drew on those very external sources—themselves derivative of Rwandan chronological claims—to legitimate their own antiquity. And so by a complex tautological process Rwandan sources justified the antiquity of kingship though corroboration from their own claims reflected in the writings of others—and now presented as “independent” confirmation. But the manner of this distortion took different forms in each of the societies, which derived their own claims from tie-ins to Rwandan ideologies of antiquity. Therefore, in order to deconstruct the myth of antiquity, this analysis first had to reconstruct the ways in which the chronologies had been built in each of four contiguous societies. Once again, contextualizing knowledge—that is, historicizing the presentation of history—shows itself to be an essential tool in understanding the fundamental feature of Rwandan royalty.

So the structural parameters of kingship and chronology in Rwanda, like those of clanship and commerce, appear different when examined through the lens of rigorous historical analysis, based on careful attention to the interplay of precise local sources and broad regional influences. Although the simple “accumulation of facts” is not the objective of historical presentation, broader conceptual issues can hardly be advanced without solid evidence and careful analysis. It is hoped that the essays in this section, through both careful empirical data and enhanced analytic rigor, help raise questions about received historical understanding—and also that they help put to rest the accusations that “history” is nothing but the mindless accumulation of cold facts from the dead past. As others have noted, the past is not dead—except in the hands of those who kill it. In fact, it is not

even past—for the issues related to these discussions are very much alive in the world of today, in very important ways. Once again, history may not determine our future—we are not entirely captives of our past—but our pathways to the future are illuminated by an improved grasp of history. And clearing away the mists of past assumptions—or understanding how those histories have been misrepresented, misused, neglected, and abused in the past—is an essential part of the process.

Many of these issues are considered—for a single society—in my earlier work, *Kings and Clans: A History of Ijwi Island and the Kivu Rift Valley*. Though focused on the evolution of Ijwi Island society, that monograph situated local dynamics explicitly within broader regional processes; in a sense it serves as a geographical counter balance to the final essay of this collection. But more precisely, it also shows how the process of political centralization on Ijwi—the creation of a new royal dynasty where none had existed before—was undertaken only within a field of developing ritual power and changing social identities in a complex trialectic where the evolution of each of the three factors (political centralization, ritual power, and the contours of social identities) both resulted from and created the others: the changing contours of each defined the vision of the others. Indeed, many of the themes explored in the current collection find application in that monograph.

Part 4: Perceiving History through the Mists

As noted above, the essays in the third section, on Rwandan history, seek to reassess some of the basic foundations of Rwandan social and political order; they question the permanence, durability, and autonomy of institutions of identity and authority in precolonial society east of Lake Kivu. But in themselves they have only served as the analytic building blocks to a new understanding. The concluding essay brings these insights together to provide a new vision of the precolonial history of the region east of Lake Kivu.

For those working in the period immediately after colonial rule, the process of explaining history east of the lake differed from similar processes west of the lake. West of the lake, little had been published, so the history of this area required familiarizing oneself with new data and establishing a new critical foundation. But east of the lake the situation was different: there, an extensive existing historiogra-

phy meant that revisiting the history of Rwanda (or Burundi) required a different approach. New data (and new perspectives) were always valuable. But moving beyond the goal of simply extending the empirical record, to arrive instead at a coherent understanding of social process, meant moving from “additive history”—accumulating data—to “transformative history”—transforming our understanding of historical process in the region. In part that meant adopting an analytic approach privileging processes, not events alone. And it meant reassessing existing orthodoxies to arrive at new understandings—looking at interactions, not only individuals; at institutional dynamics, not fixed institutions alone; at multiple levels of analysis, not just simple narratives; and at new forms of understanding, rather than simply more knowledge.

The concluding section illustrates this approach through a single extended essay. Drawing on earlier analytic explorations, it proposes a new vision of the precolonial history east of the Rift Valley—a vision that accounts fully for the tensions between particular “local loyalties” and broader “regional royalties” (of which the two most prominent were the Baganwa dynasty of what became Burundi and the Abanyiginya dynasty of what became Rwanda). This essay seeks to move beyond three elements that characterized earlier works. Instead of a predominant focus on the royal court, this account explores regional influences and local loyalties. Instead of an overriding concern with ethnicity, the essay privileges ecological factors and local identities as formative influences on history. And instead of a focus on kings and courtiers, this analysis is interested in the interactions of royal power and rural power, of autonomy as well as incorporation. In seeking to transcend royalty and ethnicity as the principal explanatory features of history in this region, however, this presentation does not deny their importance as historical factors; they were still vitally important features on the political and cultural landscapes. Nonetheless, one can seek to contextualize royalty and ethnicity, to see them as historical constructions in themselves. For royal power was only one type of power—and not always the most important; ethnicity was only one level of identity—and not always the most salient. And each had its own history—histories that varied by region as well as evolving over time (and not always in linear fashion).

In short, this is a work of salvage: in part, recovering neglected histories and lost work, but also in part reintroducing the perspectives that animate those analyses. Whatever the intellectual or empirical limitations of these essays, they are premised on a call to move beyond histories defined by fixed categories and

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fixed assumptions. We need a vision that reaches beyond boundaries, a vision that is informed by multiple (and sometimes contradictory) voices and that celebrates diverse actions and identities. It is hoped that these essays provide examples of how to move in that direction. But even as we peer through the mists of an opaque past, it is also clear that new mists will appear. Unlike meteorological mists that evaporate with the sun's warmth, the mists that obscure the past never entirely dissipate. They may transform themselves—and the work we do moves that process—but they always return in new and intriguing patterns.