The Interlacustrine kingdoms represent one of African history’s finest examples of its greatest difficulty. Here is a cluster of polities that were only described in the middle of the nineteenth century and which had no written documentation. They were densely populated, highly complex, and integrated into a complex web of relationships. Early visitors marveled at what appeared to be a great civilization, presumably of considerable antiquity, cut off from outside contacts yet fully developed. Its people were cultivated and the leaders seemingly civilized in the way nineteenth-century Europeans considered an ancient if now backward a civilization would be.

Yet the region’s past seemed reachable despite the absence of a written record. The earliest visitors learned of a vivid orally transmitted history, which they recorded in tens of pages of text. Within a short period of the region’s elite became literate and began writing this history down in great detail in their own vernacular languages. Ruins of apparent antiquity were discovered quite early in the colonial period and eventually archaeology entered in reconstructing the region’s past.

Histories in European languages also appeared, and the Interlacustrine region had its place in the world of anthropology. This is the background against which David Schoenbrun places *Names of the Python*. The book is not dedicated to the whole Interlacustrine region but only to Buganda, its most famous and most important kingdom.

Schoenbrun approaches this history with all the tools that modern Africanist historiography has before it—a thorough knowledge of the Luganda histories, the latest manifestations of archaeological research, and, most important, his own expertise in the use of linguistics to discover and explore the chronology of both culture and society. His earlier book on the region, *A Green Place, a Good Place* (1998), had made extraordinary use of linguistics to show how one could document cultural changes and reveal much more than many readers might expect about changes in the more distant past.

In *Names of the Python*, Schoenbrun expands the linguistic base of his work and adds the oral traditions. In this book, it is oral tradition that takes the lead in presenting the past, followed by the linguistic material and archaeology. He has also added a good deal of anthropological research into contemporary Buganda society and insights into deeper trends.

In the Africanist historiography of the late twentieth century, oral tradition was king and was often accepted more or less at face value. Indeed, in other parts of Africa that had relatively long contact with Europe, oral tradition was occasion-
ally given greater analytic weight than written evidence, at least in some areas. But skepticism emerged in the later part of the century: anthropologists suggested that many tropes and themes in oral tradition were in fact culturally laden and not truly historical. Others again suggested that political struggles during the time that traditions were collected caused distortions and perhaps even falsifications in the oral history.

In fact, the Interlacustrine region is ripe for such criticism. Competition, particularly between the rising Buganda and declining Bunyoro lay behind some competition in the lengths of royal genealogies, which produced genealogy-based chronologies reaching back to the fourteenth or fifteenth century. But much of it was more linked to the leadership of Bunyoro claiming greater antiquity and higher prestige than Buganda], who had engrossed parts of Bunyoro dubbed the “lost counties” in Bunyoro politics.

Archaeological sites like Bigo, dated to the sixteenth century, were reinterpreted as more cattle pens than major cities. The idea of a mega-state or empire called Bunyoro-Kitara, it was argued, was actually a sort of composition of real kings and deities making up a Chwezi dynasty in that distant time. The roots of the kingdoms that the early European explorer visited lay rather more in the eighteenth century that the fifteenth or sixteenth.

A second problem in oral tradition came from the publication in the first decades of the twentieth century of clan traditions, again in vernacular languages. The colonial period caused competition over access to land, and clans competed with each other over that land; the competition produced rival traditions, including claims of some clans that they had hidden in others to protect themselves against persecutions in the past. Here too, the politicized nature of the oral traditions set to writing, raises problems of veracity.

These developments would give many readers pause in applying the oral traditions linked to the lengthy genealogies or to the clan histories. One might propose, given their many problems, that the whole edifice of oral tradition simply be thrown out. Schoenbrun outlines all these political issues in both the opening sections and again in the final parts of the book, and in the end decides that they can still be used.

In short, *Names of the Python* is a carefully crafted attempt to use the oral traditions, and to check and modify tradition to conform to ideas coming from archaeology and historical linguistics. The book recognizes the problems and proposes a more nuanced reading than had been done by earlier scholars. Schoenbrun does an admirable job of presenting the case for using the traditions actively while constantly checking them against other evidence, and situating them in environments that are discoverable outside of tradition.

Thus, the earlier part of the book outlines the social ecology of the shore of the Lake Victoria Inland Sea. Drawing on archaeological work on human-induced ecological change and his earlier work using linguistics to outline crops and economic regimes, he creates a wholly convincing picture of the complex interaction between cultivation and marine resources as a food base. In this environment, Schoenbrun sees an expansion of face-to-face societies becoming “groupwork,” a term which might relate to social complexity in archaeological terminology. At this point, however, and citing modern anthropology, Schoenbrun breaks from the idea of ancient social complexity and contends that political organization was more heterarchical than hierarchical.

One of the anchor points of this further development is the displacement of kinship groups by territorial groups based on shrines. Archaeology does indeed show a deep, perhaps even thirteenth-century, chronology for the building of shrines, even ones that still exist or are known by a tradition. Showing that mediums of these shrines, some of which are called *cwezi kubandwa*, represent the mobile and territorial shrine, he
accounts for the claims of earlier historiography for a Chwezi dynasty. This is skillfully argued against a historiography that has dismissed the Chwezi as ahistorical.

Eventually these moving parts coalesce into the early form of states in the region, in the sixteenth century. Here the traditions become more concrete, kings are associated with specific graves that are still maintained and datable, and while the actual stories associated with kings are drawn from the royal record, the region is on firmer ground as far as relative events are concerned.

The Mukasa shrine and the royal family mutually construct and then challenge each other in the period as Buanda emerges as a serious political entity; this period then follows an eighteenth-century period of contestation, or “misrule.” Eventually the Ganda kingdom encounters the Indian Ocean trade and European contact, and full eyewitness documentations permits the story to be told in more familiar terms. The final section sets out quite frankly the contestations of the colonial period that would cause one to doubt the whole edifice.

*Names of the Python* is a fascinating and compelling book. It offers a new and convincing interpretation of Ganda history for those willing to accept Schoenbrun’s basic premise that the existing oral tradition is not entirely political and perhaps created. Probably the most problematic component of Schoenbrun’s proposed history is the relative absence of Bunyoro. Granted, Schoenbrun should be granted permission to consider only one kingdom and not the whole region, but there is at least some reason to consider that Bunyoro cannot be ignored. There were claims made even in the nineteenth century before oral tradition had become politicized that Bunyoro was senior to Buganda and ruled a larger area.

More to the point, perhaps, is that Bunyoro was a center of a cattle-oriented, complex society whose base was different from that of Buganda. There is no doubt that Buganda and Bunyoro interacted substantially, as Schoenbrun demonstrates occasionally, but he might have addressed the greater region more fully. But the point is a quibble, on an excellently framed and argued book.
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