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African Banditry Revisited

Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits* is a powerful and beguiling work of historical imagination attentive to the rural poor, their capacity for political action and their potential as participants in larger processes of social change.¹ It combines an enthusiasm and affection for popular heroes of the countryside with an extraordinary range of examples across space and through time. Central to Hobsbawm's argument is that, from time to time, bandits rise from the level of criminality and vendetta to become vital articulators of the cause of the rural poor and actors on their behalf. In short, they become *social* bandits, the prototype for which, in the anglophone world, is Robin Hood, who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Criticism seems pedestrian by contrast with Hobsbawm's sweep and verve. However, as Hobsbawm points out, in the introduction to the first two editions of the book, Africa is conspicuously absent from his gallery of heroes, a shortcoming which he addresses by reference, in the first paperback edition, to the antics of Ghanaian cocoa smugglers in the 1960s, and, in the second edition, to the careers of the Mesazghi brothers, Eritrean bandits who found themselves swept up into anti-British politics of the 1940s.²

There was no great rush of Africanist scholarship to respond to Hobsbawm's invitation and challenge. Ed Keller was pretty quick off the mark with a 1973 article

in the *Kenya Historical Review*,³ and Allen Isaacman followed in 1977 with an article in the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.⁴ They were isolated figures until the publication in 1984 of Richard Caulk's "Bad Men of the Borders: *Shum* and *Shifta* in northern Ethiopia in the 19th Century,"⁵ and in 1986 of *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*.⁶ *Banditry, Rebellion* attempted to assess the state of the field, to locate banditry and social banditry within a context that included African historiography's standing interest in protest and rebellion, to make some contributions to the literature, and to suggest some programmatic directions. How does its assessment look after thirteen years?

In the introduction I asserted the criminal character of unreconstructed banditry and suggested that Africanists would do well to follow the lead of the literature on the social nature of crime in eighteenth-century England and take more seriously the issue of criminality. The introduction also encouraged Africanists to take up Hobsbawm's challenge and engage with banditry. It suggested, on the basis of the case studies that followed, that banditry was, indeed, a significant African phenomenon, but that approaching it, initially, as rural social criminality would prove more productive than privileging the concept of the social bandit. It appeared then that there was evidence of social banditry in Africa, or at least of its myth, but *Banditry, Rebellion* argued that it would be unproductive to assume social banditry at the beginning of any research project.

I think that those judgments have stood up well to such literature as has emerged since 1986. I would like, first, to review the arguments contained in *Banditry, Rebellion*, then look at subsequent advocates of the analytical utility of social banditry, and finally review the material which has appeared since 1986 bearing on banditry and heroic criminality in Africa.

The contributors to *Banditry, Rebellion* were less dismissive of the social bandit than some of the collection's critics have suggested, but, for the most part, did express difficulty in retrieving social banditry from their recalcitrant sources.⁷ They were not reluctant to engage with the concept. Moreover their views on banditry were rather more nuanced than has generally been recognised. Hobsbawm's strongest critic in the collection was probably Ralph Austen. Austen argued that the social bandit concept was essentially inapplicable to African conditions, but proceeded to suggest that Hobsbawm's emphasis on the social meaning of criminality had been unduly neglected by Africanists and laid out some new ways in which they might more aptly conceptualise it.⁸ At bottom his analysis rested on the view that, historically, African societies are best seen as segmentary, and lacking the internal or external frontiers which make banditry possible. He noted that the European language of conquest often construed African resistance as forms of banditry, but that it would be wrong-headed to take that language at face value. On the one hand, we already have the concept of "primary resistance" to deal with the phenomenon, and, on the other, the contesting parties shared "no institutions or repertoire of values," an essential pre-condition for banditry of any kind.⁹ Yet Austen stood alone among the contributors to *Banditry, Rebellion* in the extent to which he separated himself from Hobsbawm and in arguing that Africanists needed a new typology for understanding the political significance of social deviance.

At the opposite end of the analytical spectrum, and closer to the ground which I occupy myself, Ray Kea argued that the frontiers denied by Austen in fact characterised a succession of states and societies on West Africa's Gold Coast, at least from the fifteenth century, and demonstrated that both the European and African language sources available for the region contain a rich vocabulary of banditry.¹⁰

Nevertheless, he, too, found few heroic examples and concludes with a reference to Gramsci, “Every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian,” which I take to be an endorsement of the view that the social context and meaning of criminality are valuable terrain for the historian to explore.

Rob Gordon, like Ray Kea, had no problem in finding bandits, in his case in twentieth-century rural Namibia, and he demonstrated persuasively that rural crime is an illuminating prism through which to approach the various stages of German and South African incorporation of the people whom they called Bushmen.¹¹ Each stage was marked by changing forms and incidents of crime in the countryside. Bushmen appear in early colonial legal records primarily for their offences as farm labourers. However, starting around 1911, the incidence of stock theft and other kinds of rural crime swell to a high in the 1920s, and Bushmen appear as the principal culprits. Thereafter, Bushmen stock offences slowly decline. Gordon argues that the rise in stock theft coincided with and was a response to European settlers increasingly occupying Bushman land and turning it into cattle ranches. The slow subsequent decline in stock theft Gordon connects with the steady assimilation of Bushmen as farm labourers. Banditry, in twentieth-century Namibia, was indeed a form of social crime.

One of the more interesting references to banditry in *Banditry, Rebellion* was by Alison des Forges in her study of a 1912 rebellion in Rwanda.¹² Rwandan society in 1912 recognized three major groups—the Abahutu cultivators, the Abatuutsi pastoralists, and the Abatwa hunting people. Des Forges finds the category of bandit useful in discussing the political and social role played by a group of Abatwa led by one Basebya. Basebya and his followers, skilful archers, had become the personal

guard of Rwabugiri, a formative ruler who died in 1895. Basebya opposed Rwabugiri's successor and withdrew his men into a vast swamp in northern Rwanda where they lived by hunting and plundering the local cultivators, their power and influence increasing following a famine in 1905. By 1907 the demands of German colonialism, channelled through the Rwandan court of Rwabugiri's successor, was generating increasing opposition in northern Rwanda, and substantial numbers joined Basebya. "He and his group proclaimed no political goals and attacked all who had not paid for their protection, elite and ordinary people alike. But their life outside the law made them by definition enemies of the ruler ..."¹³ In 1912 Basebya hitched his wagon to the rising star of a religious medium turned royalist pretender and became his key supporter. Basebya now organised his growing band into two groups, one of Abatwa, one of cultivators and pastoralists. Des Forges reflects that it is impossible ultimately to determine the motivations of the Abatwa in supporting rebellion against colonial oppression, for, while they had good reason to hate the European-supported Rwandan court, they plundered other supporters of the pretender. In April of that same year the Germans successfully attacked the pretender and a few days later captured and executed Basebya. His band passed from the record. Des Forges is persuasive, *pace* Austen, that "bandit" usefully describes the role that Basebya and his followers came to play. Moreover, social banditry seems at least possible as an interpretation of their participation in the rebellion of 1912.

Terence Ranger explored the meaning of banditry within the framework of Zimbabwe's guerrilla war for independence which started in the late 1960s and led to independence in 1980.¹⁴ He noted that there was some background to social banditry in earlier colonial Southern Rhodesia, primarily through the existence of independent bands which haunted the eastern borderlands with Mozambique. He also noted that

poaching flourished in “Crooks’ Corner,” the borderlands linking Southern Rhodesia, South Africa and Mozambique, evidence documenting the South African side of the border bearing on the first three decades of the twentieth century and on the Rhodesian side for the late 1950s. Here we have rural folk, criminals in the eyes of the state, and, apparently, heroes in the eyes of their farming neighbours. One of them achieved the status of a social bandit, “Rhodesia’s Ned Kelly,” who “frequently presented meat to his temporary African neighbors.”¹⁵ However, most of Ranger’s chapter dealt with the period of guerrilla warfare, which he used to explore the differing forms of legitimacy which armed bands achieved or failed to achieve. Bandits are armed bands—guerrillas—without the sanction of a political party, whose legitimacy is recognised by the peasants. These bandits achieve social status if and when they acquire legitimacy in the eyes of those same peasants. Ranger claimed that such groups existed, their exemplar being Obert Dhawayo, who plundered only European property and who was viewed by local people “as a sort of Robin Hood.”¹⁶

Fernyhough, Caulk and I all explored Ethiopia, an African example rife with banditry, an institution embedded in an agrarian, hierarchical, class-divided society. Indeed, Ethiopia has given us the vernacular term by which bandits are known throughout north east Africa—*shefta*—a term which I parse below. Bandits are commonly encountered in the literature, both indigenous and foreign, dealing with the Ethiopian highlands in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ethiopia, particularly in the later nineteenth century, was going through the strained process whereby the monarchy re-asserted itself as a central actor on the national political stage. European imperialism was an ever-intensifying force in the region, but it impinged little on the Ethiopian countryside, with few exceptions apart from Eritrea,

until far into the twentieth century. The forces generative of banditry in Ethiopia were primarily indigenous and the cultural understanding of *shefta* entirely so.

Caulk first drew attention to Ethiopian banditry in a 1984 article.¹⁷ He reviewed the evidence concerning *shefta* in the Tegrēñña-speaking areas of northern Ethiopia in the nineteenth century, starting with the case of one *Balgada Araya* of the 1840s. He noted that most *shefta* also received appointments (*shum* = appointee), that one of them actually seized the throne, becoming Emperor Yohānnes IV, and argued for an intimate relationship between the Ethiopian nobility and the institution of banditry or *sheftenät*. On the political motives of noble Ethiopian *shefta*, Caulk cited the revealing letter written by Däbbāb Araya to the British at Aden in 1888. “I treated with the Italians and I submitted to them thinking that all other Abyssinians dependent on them will be under my orders. I wished to be the only Chief without having other Chiefs on my side; they made other Chiefs, that made me angry, and I decided to desert them.”¹⁸ Nor did Caulk’s sources paint a more favourable picture of common bandits, who made their livings by cattle rustling and raiding caravans. “Popular culture did not make any pretense that their exploits served social justice by settling accounts (*pace* Hobsbawm).”¹⁹

In his contribution to *Banditry, Rebellion*, Caulk dealt with the rich case of Bahtā Hagos, leader of an 1894 rebellion against the Italians in Eritrea, who started his career as a bandit (the term *shefta* is used in both Amharic and Bahtā’s native Tegrēñña), driven by a blood feud to take refuge in wild country. He formed a band and proved adept at raiding and plunder. Nevertheless, the position from which Bahtā led his revolt was an Italian-appointed one.²⁰ In 1889 he started a connection with the Italians, then still based at the coast in Massawa, and not long after received their appointment as a local ruler. In 1894 he revolted. Originally motivated by a growing

sense of his own political insecurity, he soon found himself articulating a host of local discontents against Italian high-handedness, no longer as a bandit, but as rebellious appointee.

My chapter in *Banditry, Rebellion* explored themes first established by Caulk in his 1984 article. My point of departure was semantic, an analysis of the words *shefta* (= bandit) and *sheftenät* (= banditry), which, as I pointed out, derive from the Amharic root *shäffätä*, “he rebelled.”²¹ A *shefta* then is a rebel, in some respects a “primitive rebel,” although in a sense somewhat different from that intended by Hobsbawm in his earlier work, *Primitive Rebels*, out of which *Bandits* emerged.²² Hobsbawm’s rebels were primitive by reference to the more secular, centrally focused rebels of the developing socialist movements of the European world. Mine were “primitive” in lacking all but the most elemental ideological motivation and in rebelling, primarily, in the interests of their own social and political advancement. The article noted that both the Ethiopian and European language sources supported the view that *sheftenät* covered much the same linguistic terrain as the English “banditry,” and went on to discuss two of the most famous *shefta* of nineteenth-century Ethiopia, the future emperors Téwodros II and Yohannes IV. *Sheftenät* in the nineteenth century, it thus appeared, was most saliently an institution for career mobility of the Ethiopian nobility.

Yet the interest and challenge of Hobsbawm’s *Bandits* is to illuminate the obscure dynamics of rural protest and resistance. My chapter took up this issue, exploring peasant political behaviour as revealed by the same sources. I ought to have been more explicit about the language involved. The European references are unproblematic. In my review of the Ethiopian language sources, I looked for references to what, in Amharic are called the *balagär*, “farmer,” “country person,”

“peasant.”²³ To be sure, the term is used loosely, but, then, so is “peasant.” The nineteenth-century sources give us a number of examples of “peasant/*balagär*” political behaviour, but establish no meaningful progressive connection between peasants and the institution of banditry.

Fernyhough’s review, although replete with colourful incidents and characters, yielded much the same result.²⁴ The twentieth-century information is much richer than the nineteenth, leading to subtler observations, and Fernyhough found the involvement of all social groups in banditry. Whereas my nineteenth-century sources bore primarily on the leadership of *shefta* bands, Fernyhough had more information on their membership and found a significant proportion of it to be of peasant origin. He noted how banditry particularly flourished on the national borders, in and around internal administrative boundaries, and in rugged terrain. He also drew attention to the extraordinary amount of banditry around Lake T’ana. Fernyhough explored the social and political conditions which fostered banditry, pointing out the potent coincidence of natural disasters and internal military conflicts in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. He suggested that soldiers disbanded following the Battle of Adwa and that the suppression of internal revolts was a prime source of bandits. Bandits rustled cattle, raided for slaves, and plundered caravans, and even bandits of lowly origin plundered indiscriminately. Banditry also served career mobility. Whereas in the nineteenth century the very throne was at contest, in the twentieth century the political ambitions of the *shefta* now focused at the provincial level and lower.

On the issue of social banditry, Fernyhough noted how bandits in both Eritrea and Ethiopia became caught up in political struggles, starting with the Ethiopian resistance to the occupation which followed the Italian invasion of 1935. In the 1940s,

the Mesazghi brothers committed themselves to the struggle to rid Eritrea of British rule. Thus, in the epic national struggles against twentieth-century European imperialism Ethiopian bandits played out the role of the social bandit. But Fernyhough's summary judgment on Ethiopian banditry was harsh: "For most peasants, *sheftenät* was a burden of tribute and fear."²⁵ Nor does the evidence which Caulk and I reviewed lead to a significantly different conclusion.

The aura of social bandit *does* surround Kassa Haylu who seized the imperial throne as Téwodros II in 1855.²⁶ Kassa was the son of a titled nobleman and half-brother of a powerful nobleman of the 1830s. Sources closest in time to Kassa's early career describe a rebellious nobleman, who in the early 1840s launched his career on Ethiopia's western frontier, supporting himself as a highwayman and plunderer of folk who lived beyond the pale of Ethiopian society. He raided these same people for slaves and reduced them to the status of serfs. He entered a bandit subculture, marrying the daughter of another *shefta* (whom he subsequently divorced), and leaguings with yet others. His official chronicler recounts an incident from these early years in which Kassa provided relief to Christian peasants suffering from natural calamity. He gave them "lots of money" and directed his soldiers to clear the forest and break land on behalf of the peasants. It seems much more an act of *noblesse oblige* than of social banditry, given that Kassa went on to assume the imperial throne. A later source has glossed this incident, claiming "The peasants of Qwara loved him... all the peasants became *shefta* with *Lej* Kassa, and young men joined him from as far away as Dämbeya and Ch'elga."²⁷

The aura of Kassa as social bandit increases in direct proportion to the distance we remove ourselves from what we actually know about his career. If this is not the case with all social bandits, it is certainly the case with many. Hobsbawm's

prototype, Robin Hood, may be taken as a case in point, his very historical existence uncertain, his personage and role the construct of generations of tradition. Yet surely this is a phenomenon—the remarkable tendency for agrarian societies through time and across space to construct models of heroic vindication and redistribution—in itself worthy of attention. Yet such figures are *not* widely manifest in the literature about Africa.

I would summarise the contributions of *Banditry, Rebellion* to the question of banditry and social banditry in Africa as follows. Most contributors took precisely the line which Austen argued against. Kea and des Forges found banditry in the hierarchical societies with which they deal, the one on the West African coast and its hinterland, the other in the East African Great Lake region. Southern Africanists, dealing with states which radically alienated African property and delegitimised African values and customs, reported banditry in Namibia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Ethiopianists found it throughout the northern Ethiopian highlands as a product of historic Ethiopian society and its state. Social banditry they all found elusive, although the Southern Africanists, Ranger and Gordon, found the concept of considerable utility. Des Forges showed how a bandit leader provided critical support for one of the leading rebels against the oppression of early German rule. The Ethiopianists reported the myth at work in the nineteenth century and noted that in the crises of the 1930s and 1940s involving questions of national survival and independence, bandits did participate in political resistance, lending their support to the emperor, in one case, and to a secular political party in the other. Enough self-justification; what have Africanists had to say about banditry following the publication of *Banditry, Rebellion*?

First of all, banditry remains a popular pejorative with which people seek to discredit others. A typical example is the *Economist*, which on August 8, 1992 published a story entitled “Banditry versus politics,” which argued that, in those days of transition in South Africa, no one was really ruling the country. The larger event was a general strike called by the African National Congress, but within that epic contest, the *Economist* chose rather to focus on the story of two journalists who, their car having been hijacked, were left for dead by their assailants. Neither the government, whose security forces were in the area, nor the ANC, who had instructed its followers to help journalists, were able to protect them: “Banditry, not politics, rules.”²⁸

Allen Isaacman, in a major review article dedicated to peasants and rural social protest in Africa, addressed social banditry.²⁹ He suggested that there were two schools of thought on this question. One school of thought “rejects the penchant of colonial regimes for dismissing most forms of rural protest as deviant criminal behavior.” The other school of thought, partially, but not wholly associated with *Banditry, Rebellion*, was not so clearly characterised. Isaacman noted that Austen dissociates himself from the concept but that some contributors to the volume did find social banditry useful. Isaacman did not come to terms with those chapters of *Banditry, Rebellion*, particularly the Ethiopian ones, which document African banditry, but which find little incidence of social banditry. He comes close to suggesting that any rural phenomenon which the European colonial rulers of Africa called crime counts as social banditry, which, in turn, would lead to the odd position of having social bandits without really having bandits in the first place. The introduction, and most (probably all) of the contributors to *Banditry, Rebellion* rejected “the penchant of colonial regimes for dismissing most forms of rural protest

as deviant criminal behavior.” Indeed, one of the main contentions of the introduction was precisely that we should be sceptical of claims of criminality in the context of colonial Africa, and that, where it might reasonably be held to exist, we should explore its social content and meaning. Banditry is a special case, prior to, and inclusive of, social banditry. Banditry, the institution addressed by Hobsbawm, is embedded in rural societies, and bandits are recognised as such by rural folk. Local languages have specific terms for bandits and if the “criminals” in question are not locally recognised as bandits, and labelled as such in an African language, then bandits they are not, but something else again. *Banditry, Rebellion* argued that banditry pure and simple did exist in Africa and that we should be attentive to it and to its social meaning. If this institution came to serve some larger social or political end, well and good, but its prior existence had first to be established.

Isaacman cited Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and her 1988 book, *Africa: Endurance and Change South of the Sahara*, to suggest that social banditry was a fairly widespread phenomenon in Africa. I find the reference unpersuasive, at least so far as her case is revealed by her index for banditry.³⁰ She, too, moved directly to social banditry without first passing through banditry.³¹ Her book has a section (pp. 183-8) on “Passive Resistance and Social Banditry.” Noting that standard anthropological treatments of Africa have “eliminated the concept of marginality from the history of Africa,” she continued, “This amounts to a claim of uniqueness for African societies, since social banditry exists throughout the rest of the world, from Sardinia to the Ukraine, from Java to Brazil.” Since social bandits are a universal phenomenon then they must be found in Africa, a syllogism which assumes what it should demonstrate. She then proceeded to collapse the categories of social banditry

and banditry, drew prominently on Isaacman's 1977 article, and referred in large part to the same incidents as did Isaacman himself.

Nonetheless, interesting writing on banditry and on the social dimensions to criminality in Africa there has been. Fernyhough has revised the views he put forward in *Banditry, Rebellion*, now arguing that Ethiopian banditry was less dominated by the noble class than the papers in the 1986 collection allowed, and evinced more explicit peasant participation, that it was an institution more subversive of the social order. It is worth quoting his conclusion at some length. His earlier interpretation, he now argued:

diminishes the extent to which peasants turned outlaw to escape the worst hardships of their rural milieu. Secondly, peasants played leading roles as *shifita* and were not always subordinate to nobles and gentry. Thirdly, the stress on the interdependency of nobles and peasants within *sheftenat* deprecates the very close links between peasant brigands and local communities. The latter assisted bandits and in turn the authorities demonstrated their recognition of this support in the ways they tried to suppress brigandage. Rural support was particularly assured when peasants could see no crime in the incident, which led the *shifita* to his new calling, but it collapsed, as Bahta Hagos discovered, when the bandit was repressive. Fourthly, peasant bandits were often so explicit about their grievances and the "unjust" demands on their communities that their protest, though couched in terms of familiar moral claims, edged towards being reformist. As bandits joined successive peasant revolts after 1941, that protest became clearer and more radical, though often the peasant-bandit voice remained contradictory, and one among many. Nevertheless, active *shifita* involvement in rebellions in the latter years of imperial Ethiopia cannot be squared with the assertion that banditry helped diffuse revolt, not least because the number of bandits who made it into the ruling elite after 1900 was trifling, and their example exceptional.... Ironically, by igniting peasant resentment even the coopted, repressive, bandit may have played his part in politicizing the weak and humble.³²

Outside of Ethiopia, scholars of North Africa have paid the most serious attention to banditry. David Hart's *Banditry in Islam* looks at five cases from Morocco and one from Algeria as well as one from Pakistan.³³ While he had no problem in finding bandits, he found practically no redistributors, the only case being reported in sources

at several removes from their original. On the other hand, banditry in both Morocco and Algeria could not avoid being caught up in struggles to resist European colonialism, and, in this sense, assumed social dimensions.

Banditry in Morocco was localised in two mountainous regions, the Jbala in the north, and the Atlas, in the centre and south. The Jbala gave rise to one Ali I-Bu Frahi, “Ali the Six-Fingered,” in the first decades of the nineteenth century.³⁴ Hart’s account here rests, in turn, wholly on the account of the Englishman, John Drummond-Hay. Ali was a very physical man and found himself in a number of scrapes, eventually emerging as a highwayman leading a gang which waylaid caravans on the main road between Tangier and Tetuan. The sources attribute to him an eloquent defence of his activities, in which he compared himself with the sultan, who also broke the Prophet’s law by rapine and extortion. Ali enjoyed a Robin Hood reputation. He never molested the poor and enjoyed the active support of local villagers who fed him and invited him to their weddings. However, he achieved such eminence as to warrant a sultanic edict against him and he was eventually betrayed, punished, and killed. Finally, as Hart notes, Ali was already becoming legendary when Drummond-Hay recorded his story.

Other Moroccan bandits reveal fewer redeeming features. Bandit gangs operated in the same area as Ali at much the same time. They robbed travellers, raided livestock, and enslaved children.³⁵ The poor, because of the feebleness of their resistance, were favoured targets. The most famous of these bandits was Mawlay Ahmad al-Raysuni, ruthless and very successful.³⁶ In the first decade of the century he made a profession out of kidnapping Europeans (and Americans) for ransom. This made him not only rich, but also famous, and he was appointed governor of Asila. In the circumstances of rising European colonial pressures in the area, Raysuni

temporised, refusing to join the resistance led by bin ‘Abd al-Krim, who eventually defeated and incarcerated him in 1925, when he died.

Raysuni and his fellow bandits of the Jbala were Arabic speakers. The Berber of the High Atlas also put forth some bandits of their own. None evinced a redistributive ethic, although one did involve himself in the Moroccan struggle to rid themselves of the French. Bandits were known as *iqatta’em n-ibriden*, “cutters of the road,” and around 1930 two of them became particularly famous, w-‘Abbu and u-Khuya. They bound themselves together by a socially recognised covenant and then set about robbing and murdering, their victims being all from neighbouring tribes. Eventually, u-Khuya betrayed w-‘Abbu, leading him into an ambush, from which he himself did not escape alive, the ambushers punishing him for breaking his covenant with his fellow.³⁷ A few years later, in 1933, the nearby Ait Murghad were brought under French rule. One of them, Zayd u-Hmad, refused to surrender and took to the hills. He had already for some years established himself as a raider, and in the summer of 1934 he began to waylay colonial officials, plundering them of payroll money. However, he found that his own people would no longer provide him with refuge, so he turned to *jihad*. Again he attacked officials of the French administration, killing a few, before he turned to attacking Muslims who were collaborating with the French. His attacks were successful enough to provoke a manhunt, and at the beginning of March 1936, he was killed by one of his former companions.³⁸ The resistance of Zayd u-Hmad was reflected twenty years later in the career of yet another Berber bandit of the Atlas, Hmad Uhansal, whose brief career, in mid-1953, took place in a larger atmosphere of nationalist agitation. Hmad killed a number of Frenchmen before the French secured his betrayal by offering a large reward. Like

most of the other Moroccan bandits, there is a national edge to the story of Hmad, and in that sense he touches on social banditry.

Neighbouring Algeria, with its large population of French settlers and extensive alienation of the lands of the indigenous, might be supposed to be more fertile ground for social banditry. Banditry there was, and with social overtones. The first noted bandit, Muhammad u-l-Hajj ‘Abdun-Kabylia, emerged in the aftermath of a great rebellion of 1871 in the Kabylia.³⁹ w-‘Abdun was convicted of murdering the president of a local council. In 1884 he was condemned to imprisonment on Devil’s Island, off the coast of South America, from which he escaped and returned to Algeria, where he entered the forest. In 1891 he was joined by a brother and a nephew. His main targets were Algerians who acted against them. The French attributed multiple murders of other Kabyles to him. Multiple attacks in 1892 and 1893 meant that it was harder and harder for the French to staff local offices or to recruit Algerian police. W-‘Abdun did enjoy substantial support from local people, but he also multiplied his enemies among them, and early in 1894 his nephew was captured, and in 1895, w-‘Abdun himself went on trial in Algiers. He was publicly executed in May 1895.

The First World War was the setting for the career in the Aures of Misa’ud bin Zilmad, who headed up a band of army deserters and malcontents.⁴⁰ He took over this role from his brother. On the night of 14-15 October 1917, bin Zilmad’s band attacked the village of Fum Tub, an attack which drew the attention of the French. Until 1919 bin Zilmad confined his activities to attacking Algerians, some of them in revenge for his brother’s death. In that year, the French began large-scale operations against him and other bandits. Although he survived at least one battle, he was eventually tracked down and killed in March 1921. Bin Zilmad did show a concern for justice, “curbing

the exploitation of the poor by the rich and by limiting the liberties taken by local power holders,” but he paid little attention to French settlers in the region. So, of the two Algerian bandits, bin Zilmad more clearly demonstrates a social dimension.

Nathan Brown takes up the question of banditry in modern Egypt, arguing that, essentially, it was an invention of the Egyptian state as it struggled to strengthen and “modernize” its position *vis à vis*, on the one hand, the recalcitrant Egyptian countryside, and, on the other, the occupying British.⁴¹ To be sure, banditry was not wholly a state invention, rather an increase in rural crime was turned by the Egyptian state into a national crisis justifying new institutions, Commissions of Brigandage, for intervention in the countryside, institutions outside the control of the British. In the 1880s there does appear to have been one of a number of upswings of robbery and plundering in the countryside. Rather than the classical fellaheen, the perpetrators seem to have been, firstly, bedouin, and secondly, immigrants from Upper Egypt, Nubia and the Sudan. These bedouin had long ceased to be nomads but retained a social identity distinct from that of the ordinary countryfolk. The robbers of the 1880s operated in gangs ranging from as few as six up to sixty members and took part in highway robbery, estate raiding and rustling. Some set up protection rackets targeted at the peasantry. Brown claims that there is no evidence that these bandits enjoyed a privileged relationship with the peasants or acted with any consciousness of the needs and interests of the peasantry. Nor is there evidence that they achieved heroic status in the eyes of the peasants. Rather, such evidence as we have, suggests that peasants looked on bandits with fear. Not unlike the Ethiopian situation, Egyptian banditry “was a weapon not of the weak but of the strong...”⁴² And it proved, ultimately, to be a weapon whereby the British extended their control in Egypt, seizing control of the

Commissions of Brigandage from the Egyptian government and taking them into their own hands.

Gwyn Campbell writes of the importance of banditry in nineteenth-century Madagascar, depicting an institution arising from the dynamics of indigenous societies and their interactions much as the Rwandan and Ethiopian kingdoms also generated banditry.⁴³ Banditry in Madagascar was intimately bound up with resistance to incorporation by an indigenous state. Not the least of the strengths of Campbell's account is the rich Malagasy vocabulary for banditry which he reports. Madagascar banditry clearly had a social dimension, but that dimension was originally generated by the oppressive actions of the Merina kingdom, and only at the very end of the nineteenth century did it engage with European imperialism. Campbell identifies three distinct strands of indigenous banditry: "traditional cattle-stealing, anti-Merina resistance, and the reaction of ordinary farmers within the Merina empire to oppressive taxation."⁴⁴ Cattle-stealing and slave raiding were institutionalised activities of two non-Merina ethnic groups in Madagascar. Anti-Merina resistance generated a different kind of banditry along the external and internal boundaries of the Merina state, which, by the mid-1820s, had assumed its definitive shape, controlling the island's central plateau and corridors leading through tropical rainforest to the principal port on the island's north-west coast. Bandits haunted the *efitra*, "a no-man's land ringing the plateau." The *efitra* had historically been the home of bandits and their bands were swelled in the nineteenth century by refugees fleeing imperial Merina rule. Finally, Campbell argues that brigandage arose within the Merina state as a protest against the state's forced labour policies, starting in the 1820s, and expanding with the escalation of forced labour in 1869. The "Merina

state played a crucial role in determining both the nature of brigandry and its timing”⁴⁵ by its efforts to monopolise land and labour.

The policy of forced labour, *fanompoana*, coopted young men into either the army or factories. Terms of service were harsh and disruptive of local agricultural production. Protest in turn was met with harsh repression that fed the flight to the *efitra*. The state’s role in stimulating banditry, in Campbell’s view, is reflected by the fact that “brigandry tended to reach epidemic proportions during and immediately following any period of major or prolonged military conflict, for war both produced and left behind armed bands of uprooted individuals.”⁴⁶ However, he notes in addition that banditry also increased at moments of state strength, which in turn meant increased *fanompoana*. Banditry drew young men from agricultural societies during the off-cycle of the agricultural year, one that coincided with an increase in commercial activity. Bandits rustled cattle, enslaved, and destroyed rice silos. There is little evidence that they re-distributed their plunder to local villagers, in spite of the fact that they maintained close ties to them, but they did express resistance to the overweening demands of the Merina state. Through most of the century their focus was the Merina state. However, from the late 1880s the plateau bandits were transformed into guerrillas fighting a state that “violated ancestral values” and allied itself with foreign missionaries and mining firms. French imperialism tried to prop up this regime, and, in so doing, ignited the Menalamba revolt of 1895-97, in which former bandits played prominent roles.⁴⁷ Here then is a persuasive example of banditry, generated by indigenous dynamics, evincing the venality of ordinary banditry, but at the same time embodying social protest and feeding into rebellion.

An article by George Simpson returns the discussion of African bandits to north-east Africa and to Ethiopia.⁴⁸ Bandits are really incidental to Simpson’s paper,

the primary focus of which is on colonial decision-making; nonetheless it does confirm the importance of Ethiopia as a generator of bandits in the African Horn.⁴⁹ Following the definition in the early years of the twentieth century of the borders of north-east Africa through a series of bilateral treaties between Ethiopia, on the one hand, and Britain, Italy and France on the other, the governments of the region were slow to establish administrative control of their outlying territories. Ethiopian territorial expansion, unlike that of the European powers, involved the settlement of garrisons of Abyssinian peoples in newly-subjugated territories, garrisons only loosely controlled from Addis Ababa and supported, not by salaries from the national government, but by levies on the local populations.

The establishment of borders meant the creation, in the European colonial territories, of lush fields adjacent to Ethiopia, only nominally policed, open to the Ethiopian border garrisons, who plundered them for cattle, ivory and slaves. Northern Kenya and eastern Sudan proved temptations which the Ethiopians could not resist.⁵⁰ These plundering bands, with more than a little justice, were looked on as banditry by the administrations of Kenya and the Sudan. Simpson addresses a crisis of cross-border raiding occasioned in 1913 by the terminal illness of Emperor Menilek and the consequent weakening of central control from Addis Ababa, but, in truth, the regional problem was broader and more longstanding. The British consul in southern Ethiopia, Arnold Hodson, described the situation as follows: "Since 1920 the inroads of poachers and raiders from Abyssinia into the East Africa Protectorate had become more and more frequent, and had made life intolerable both for the natives, who were robbed of their cattle and often murdered into the bargain, and for the administration."⁵¹ Simpson argues that persistent Ethiopian cross-border raiding led eventually to the strengthening of the British imperial presence in Kenya's Northern

Frontier District. However, at the same time, his article draws our attention back to the association of banditry with Ethiopia and to the venal, rather than heroic, dimensions of banditry.

At the same time as bandits have received modest attention in the literature dealing with Africa, African historians have also explored social dimensions to criminality.⁵² Space precludes an exploration of these contributions, but I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of poaching, a highly social form of rural “criminal” activity, and one of particular salience in East and Southern Africa in an era of heightening environmental consciousness. There have been two particularly useful contributions.

Ed Steinhart explored traditions of hunting in Kenya during the twentieth century, establishing hunting to have been an activity of greater economic and cultural importance among the peoples of eastern Kenya than has hitherto been recognised.⁵³ He went on to discuss the rise of big game hunting in Kenya, in the early years of the century, and the institutionalisation in the interwar years of the “white hunter.” Hunting brought to world attention East Africa’s remarkable resources of large mammals, which eventually became a cornerstone of Kenya’s lucrative tourist industry. In the 1930s, with a remarkable rise in conservationist thinking in colonial circles, stimulated in part by the American Dust Bowl, the foundations of a national park system were laid. The system itself came into existence in the years immediately following World War II. Up to this time, African hunting had survived, in rather more limited form. But the creation of the national parks meant the criminalisation of African hunting and major campaigns to eradicate it. In a classical irony, an important device for undercutting the economic attraction of hunting was the hiring of poachers as salaried gamekeepers. An activity which had provided protein for the diet of local

people, and revenue through the sale of game trophies and ivory, now became illegal in the eyes of Kenya's rulers. These rulers, in the 1950s, were, of course, European colonialists, but their policies were embraced holus-bolus by their African successors, who found themselves with their own poaching wars to wage.

Kenneth Kaunda, president of the independent African republic of Zambia, was an avid conservationist and promoted policies similar to those of Kenya's, but without success. Clark Gibson has explored the collapse of anti-poaching legislation in Zambia from the standpoint of national institutions. His point of departure is the anomaly that Zambia was an authoritarian one-party state with an executive leader with strong conservationist views, but nonetheless failed to pass legislation reflecting those views.⁵⁴ The economy of colonial Northern Rhodesia and the early independent state of Zambia was based on the mining and exporting of copper, but the creation of the one-party state in 1972 coincided with a collapse of copper prices. Local people turned to the one resource still accessible to them of value on the world market—ivory and rhinoceros horns—and through the 1970s and 1980s poaching ran at a very high level, with local markets in game meat also springing up. The activity was a criminal one, but Kaunda's attempt to enact laws which would carry punishments sufficient to deter it, ran aground in the national legislature, where politicians reflected local values and refused to cooperate. The scale of poaching was prodigious—75% of Zambia's elephants were killed off between the late 1960s and 1989, and the black rhinoceros population of the Luangwa valley went from an estimated 50,000 in 1972 to fewer than twelve in 1992. Thus, in the latter half of the twentieth century poaching in Africa has increased exponentially. World attention so far has focused on the effect on wildlife, but it is not difficult, at the same time, to perceive the social dimension to this expression of rural criminality.

Africanists still have plenty of terrain to cultivate in exploring the social dimensions of rural criminality. Hobsbawm's *Bandits* draws their attention to the phenomenon of the gang, remarkably uniform in its scale and composition over vast stretches of territory and time. While the sources for, and possibly the incidence of, banditry in Africa increase with the advent of European imperialism and the establishment of colonial regimes, Africanists would be mistaken in understanding bandit activity in Africa purely as a function of resistance to European colonialism. They would do well to take seriously the spaces created by earlier states on the continent in which the bold, the disaffected and the ambitious flourished.

¹ This is a slightly revised version of a paper originally delivered to the Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association in Fort Worth, Texas, November 1999, as part of a panel entitled "Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits*: A Thirty Year Retrospective." The principal editions referred to here are: Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, and 2nd ed., 1981). A third edition published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London, 2000) appears to be identical to the 1981 edition. The literature referenced in this revisitation appeared between 1986 and 1999.

² See the Preface to the Penguin editions (1972 and 1981), 14. The 2000 edition repeats the 1972 preface *verbatim*.

³ E. J. Keller, "A twentieth century model: the Mau Mau transformation from social banditry to social rebellion" (*Kenya Historical Review* 1.2, 1973), 189-205.

⁴ Allen Isaacman, "Social banditry in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) and Mozambique, 1894-1907: an expression of early peasant protest" (*Journal of Southern African Studies* 4.1, 1977), 1-30.

⁵ *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 17.2, 1984, 201-227.

⁶ Donald Crummey, ed., *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (London: James Currey, 1986).

⁷ Thoughtful reviews would include: Stanley Cohen's review article, "Bandits, Rebels or Criminals: African History and Western Criminology" (*Africa* 56.4, 1986); Richard Rathbone in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14.1(1987), 167-168; Allen Isaacman in the *American Historical Review* 93.2 (1988), 472-473; John Lonsdale in the *Journal of African History* 29.1 (1988), 111-113; and Tony Emmett in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21.3 (1988), 540-541.

⁸ Chapter 4: Ralph Austen, "Social bandits and other heroic criminals: Western models of resistance and their relevance for Africa."

⁹ Austen, 91.

¹⁰ Chapter 5: Ray Kea, "'I am here to plunder on the general road:' Bandits and banditry in the pre-nineteenth century Gold Coast." The Gramsci quotation is on p.127.

¹¹ Chapter 8: Robert Gordon, "Bushman banditry in twentieth-century Namibia."

¹² Chapter 14: Alison des Forges, "'The drum is greater than the shout:' the 1912 rebellion in northern Rwanda."

¹³ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹⁴ Chapter 17: Terence Ranger, "Bandits and Guerrillas: the case of Zimbabwe."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 377.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 384.

¹⁷ Richard Caulk, "Bad Men of the Borders: Shum and Shifta in Northern Ethiopia in the 19th century" (*International Journal of African Historical Studies* 17.2, 1984), 201-27.

¹⁸ Caulk, "Bad Men," 214.

- ¹⁹ Ibid., 218. Caulk goes on to quote a parody of a prayer which rustlers offered up: “O God, give us the property of old weak men, the property of the blind and limping, the property of orphans and women....”
- ²⁰ Chapter 13: Richard Caulk, “‘Black snake, white snake:’ Bahtä Hagos and his revolt against Italian overrule in Eritrea, 1894.”
- ²¹ Chapter 6: Donald Crummey, “Banditry and resistance: noble and peasant in nineteenth-century Ethiopia.”
- ²² Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959).
- ²³ J. Baeteman, *Dictionnaire Amarigna-Français suivi d’un Vocabulaire Français-Amarigna* (Dire-Daoua, 1929), 449; Amsalu Aklilu, *Amharic-English Dictionary* (Addis Ababa, 1979Eth. Cal.), 102.
- ²⁴ Chapter 7: Timothy Fernyhough, “Social mobility and dissident elites in northern Ethiopia: the role of banditry, 1900-69.”
- ²⁵ Ibid., 163. Fernyhough subsequently revised his conclusion in an undated paper, “Interpreting Ethiopian Banditry: A Revisionist View.” For a summary, see below.
- ²⁶ This passage rests on “Banditry and resistance,” 138-9. The authoritative account of Kassa’s career is Sven Rubenson, *King of Kings: Tewodros of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1966).
- ²⁷ Luigi Fusella, ed., *Yaté Tewodros Tarik* (Rome, 1959), translated as “La cronaca dell’Imperatore Teodoro II di Etiopia in un manoscritto amarico” (*Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, ns, vol. 6, 1957), 3. The author of this chronicle is unknown.
- ²⁸ *Economist*, August 8, 1992, “South Africa. Banditry versus politics.”
- ²⁹ Allen Isaacman, “Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa” (*African Studies Review*, 33.2, 1990), 1-120. He addresses social banditry on pages 38-9, in a section entitled “Getting Even: The Politics of Retribution.”
- ³⁰ The index is actually, “banditry, social,” suggesting either that simple banditry doesn’t exist or that it is a phenomenon of no interest. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Africa: Endurance and Change South of the Sahara* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
- ³¹ The starting point for Akira Kurosawa’s masterwork, *Seven Samurai* (1954), is the victimisation of peasants by bandits in pre-modern Japan.
- ³² “Interpreting Ethiopian Banditry,” no pagination.
- ³³ David M. Hart, *Banditry in Islam: Case Studies from Morocco, Algeria and the Pakistan North West Frontier* (Wisbech, Cambridgeshire: Middle East & North African Studies Press, 1987).
- ³⁴ Hart, *Banditry*, 6-12.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 13-19.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 20-26.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 30.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 31-34.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 39-40.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 41-44.
- ⁴¹ Nathan Brown, “Brigands and State Building: The Invention of Banditry in Modern Egypt” (*Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32.2, 1990), 258-81.
- ⁴² Brown, “Brigands,” 260.
- ⁴³ Gwyn Campbell, “The Menalamba Revolt and Brigandry in Imperial Madagascar, 1820-1897” (*International Journal of African Historical Studies* 24.2, 1991), 259-91.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 265.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 267.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 269.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 290.
- ⁴⁸ George L. Simpson, “Frontier Banditry and the Colonial Decision-Making Process: The East Africa’s Protectorate’s Northern Borderland Prior to the First World War” (*International Journal of African Historical Studies* 29.2, 1996), 279-308.
- ⁴⁹ Donald Crummey, “Banditry and resistance,” 135.
- ⁵⁰ See, in addition to Simpson, Abdussamad Hajj Ahmad, “Gojjam: Trade, early Merchant Capital and the World Economy, 1901-1935,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1986, and John Lamphear, *The Scattering Time: Turkana Responses to Colonial Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
- ⁵¹ Cited in Simpson, “Frontier Banditry,” 288.
- ⁵² See particularly, P. Scully, “Criminality and Conflict in Rural Stellenbosch, South Africa, 1870-1900” (*Journal of African History* 30.2, 1989), 289-300; Mark Beittel, “Mapantsula: Cinema, Crime

and Politics on the Witwatersrand” (*Journal of Southern African Studies* 16.4, 1990), 750-6; and D. Johnson, “Criminal Secrecy: the Case of the Zande ‘Secret Societies’” (*Past and Present* 130, 1991), 170-200.

⁵³ E. I. Steinhart, “Hunters, Poachers and Gamekeepers: Towards a Social History of Hunting in Colonial Kenya” (*Journal of African History* 30.2, 1989), 247-64.

⁵⁴ Clark C. Gibson, *Politicians and Poachers: The Political Economy of Wildlife Policy in Africa* (Cambridge, 1999).