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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

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 substan

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 decade

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 Tegreñña-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 Yohännes 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 Däbbäb 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 Bahtä 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 Bahtä's native Tegreñña), 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 Bahtä 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 some

"peasant."[23] To be sure, the term is used loosely, but, then, so is "peasant." The

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*

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 r

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 *shifta* 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 *shifta* 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 grh sub9(o)0he0pprediffuse-5 TD0. anc Tc0.0008 Tw[particula

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 Hoodpl9t'. Alithe P9d'. .

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 Egptian 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 th

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

Africanists still have plenty of terrain to cultivate in exploring the social

dimensions of rural criminality. Hobsbawm's *Bandits*

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[19] Ibid.,

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" (