

Winter 2019 Speaker Series

Indian Ocean World Centre

Speaker: Philip Gooding
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9 October 2019
4:30 pm, Peterson Hall, Room 116

Environmental and Political Crisis in East Africa c. 1877-84



In the late-1870s and the first half of the 1880s, parts of East Africa's Great Lakes region were trending towards an imminent political crisis. Mutesa I, the *kabaka* (king) of Buganda, struggled with military failures and religious factionalism; Mirambo in western Unyamwezi had to deal with escalating rebellions; and the *teko* (district chiefs) of Ujiji experienced an erosion of their influence at the hands of encroaching Muslim traders from the coast. These ostensibly distinct developing crises and others like them in nearby regions are usually attributed to political, economic, and occasionally, cultural phenomena. They have been portrayed as issues of debt, bondage, religious identity, and violence at the core of political structures. The environment is rarely considered as a central feature of these analyses. When environment is mentioned, it is usually analysed in terms of human impacts, such as via soil erosion, the destruction of crops and habitats, or over-exploitation. The intention here is to insert climatically-driven environmental change into this history. This paper suggests that first floods and then persistent below-average rainfall undermined food production and contributed to the destabilisation of political leaders' authority in diverse political settings in East Africa's Great Lakes region.