

## THOUGHTS ON THE WESTERN SAVANNAH AND SAHEL

Michael A. Gomez

New York University

### Abstract

A recent revival of interest in the empires of the medieval western Savannah and Sahel has generated new insights into slavery, ethnicity, race, and gender in precolonial West Africa. New histories of medieval West Africa also expand the spatial frame through which the relationship between the region's polities and the broader world can be understood. This essay offers a survey of that literature.

### Key Words

Mali, West Africa, North Africa, historiography, precolonial, slavery.

Several book-length studies of African history antedating the colonial period have been published within the last few years, suggesting renewed interest. There is no gainsaying that such a focus is both welcome and long overdue, as the earlier history had not simply been overshadowed by colonial and postcolonial studies but had seemingly been abandoned — the effect of which was to reinforce the view, long decried, that African history does not matter until moments of encounter. Such ahistorical practice is deeply ironic.

Examples of recent studies include David Conrad's *Sunjata: A New Prose Version*, a learned tome that adds significantly to our understanding of these traditions; François-Xavier Fauvelle's *The Golden Rhinoceros*, which offers beautifully written vignettes of an earlier time across the expanse of Africa, from East Africa and the Horn to West Africa; and my own *African Dominion*, which begins with very early archeological evidence and extends through the fall of Songhay to Moroccan forces in 1591.<sup>1</sup> This emphasis is well-supported by Kathleen Bickford Berzock's edited volume *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, which provides images of material culture accompanied by a number of essays.<sup>2</sup> To this list can be added Toby Green's *A Fistful of Shells*, the first part of which examines developments from the West African Savannah south to West Central Africa, and Herman L. Bennett's *African Kings and Black Slaves*, an inquiry largely into Catholic Iberian perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Although the last two works are occupied with West Africa in

1 D. Conrad, *Sunjata: A New Prose Version* (Bloomington, IN, 2016); F.-X. Fauvelle, *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages*, trans. T. Tice (Princeton, 2018); M. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton, 2018).

2 K. B. Berzock (ed.), *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa* (Princeton, 2019).

3 T. Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago, 2019); H. Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves: Sovereignty and Dispossession in the Early Modern Atlantic* (Philadelphia, 2018).

conjunction with the transatlantic slave trade, they nonetheless offer important insights into West Africa itself.

Many of the foregoing studies are indebted to immediately preceding scholarship that addressed the critical theme of spatial framing; that is, scholarship that reenvisioned the relationship between North and West Africa so as to place them into a vital and inextricable connection, essentially relocating previously differentiated regions into a single, unitary field of analysis. This is certainly one of the many contributions of Ghislaine Lydon in her *On Trans-Saharan Trails*, a perspective embraced by such emerging scholars as Erin Pettigrew.<sup>4</sup> And although they focus on the question of race (to which we will return), both Chouki El Hamel and Bruce Hall illustrate the benefits, if not the necessity of a unitary frame, establishing that we cannot fully understand developments in West Africa without taking into account parallel sequences in North Africa and vice-versa.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, relations between and within West and North Africa do not tell the entire story of political, economic, and cultural connections with the larger world, a dimension explored by *African Dominion*. That is, the West African Savannah and Sahel were vitally connected to North Africa and the central Islamic lands, particularly Egypt, in multiple and multilateral ways, especially during the periods of Malian and Songhay imperial formation from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, when these two polities explored their potential as peers.

Our knowledge of these relations is largely informed by sources outside of West Africa, which brings us to a critical nub of contention. Scholars differ as to the appropriate nomenclature for the period — ‘medieval’, ‘deep history’, etc. — but all would agree that any progress registered in its examination has largely come by way of archaeological finds and the reinterpretation of existing sources. *African Dominion*, for example, attempts to incorporate more recent archaeological data into the early narrative, by which we learn that substantial settlement and urbanization are processes extending millennia into the past. In so doing it responds to Reid’s exhortation to engage with multiple source streams and engages with the pioneering work of the McIntoshes.<sup>6</sup> External Arabic sources for the period have for the most part been reanalyzed, but a new and promising approach appears in Hadrien Collet’s recent article.<sup>7</sup>

In agreement with Reid’s lamentation over historians’ preoccupation with the colonial and postcolonial periods, interest in medieval West Africa cuts against the grain. Of course, one principal reason for the more contemporary emphasis concerns sources, while another is the opportunity to connect with a scholarship on modernity focused elsewhere. But

4 G. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge, 2009); E. Pettigrew, ‘The heart of the matter: interpreting bloodsucking accusations in Mauritania’, *The Journal of African History*, 57:3 (2016), 417–35.

5 C. El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge, 2013); B. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1900* (Cambridge, 2011).

6 R. Reid, ‘Past and presentism: the “precolonial” and the foreshortening of African history’, *The Journal of African History*, 52:2 (2011), 135–55; R. McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger: The Island of Gold* (Oxford, 1988); S. McIntosh (ed.), *Excavations at Jenne-Jeno, Hambarketolo, and Kaniana (Inland Niger Delta, Mali): The 1981 Season* (Berkeley, 1995).

7 H. Collet, ‘Échos d’Arabie: le pèlerinage à la Mecque de Mansa Musa (724–725/1324–1325) d’après des nouvelles sources’, *History in Africa*, 46 (2019), 105–35.

renewed interest in the medieval also allows for trans-spatial considerations, incorporating Africa into global conversations about earlier periods. To be sure, the challenges of working with oral traditions purporting to relate to periods hundreds of years before their recording have discouraged more recent investment on the part of historians, but again, *African Dominion* attempts to revive inquiry, and hopefully debate, as to the potential usefulness of these materials as evidentiary sources.

It is the West African written documentation that has thus far generated more debate. Paulo F. de Moraes Farias's *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali* represents one of the few new sources for this period, based upon the study of epigraphic materials.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, the scholarship has turned on further explorations of the principal seventeenth-century chronicles — *Ta'riḵh as-Sūdān* and *Ta'riḵh al-Fattāsh*. Farias has argued for the crafting of these documents for ideological effect, whereas Mauro Nobili and Mohamed Shahid Mathee are concerned with establishing *Ta'riḵh al-Fattāsh* as a nineteenth-century 'literary pastiche', a perspective also reflected in Nobili's *Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith*.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, scholars do not agree on its utility.<sup>10</sup>

As suggested by their titles, a number of these works are concerned with slavery, which emerges as a major theme often intertwined with another, 'race'. As to the first, it is its instantiation in the domestic sphere that is of most consequence to the unfolding of early and medieval West Africa, although that sphere is obviously tethered to the tentacles of trans-Saharan trade. The discussions take advantage of a substantial literature and in so doing are not particularly concerned with reexamining the meaning of slavery in the West African context, as they essentially understand the institution in its conventional, proprietary sense.<sup>11</sup> This literature also tends to engage with studies of slavery in East Africa and the Indian Ocean.<sup>12</sup> The Achilles' heel in much of this literature, however, is that in

8 P. F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles, and Songhay-Tuāreg History* (Oxford, 2003).

9 P. F. de Moraes Farias, 'Intellectual innovation and reinvention of the Sahel: the seventeenth-century Timbuktu chronicles', in S. Jeppie and S. Diagne (eds.), *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town, 2008), 95–107; M. Nobili and S. Mathee, 'Towards a new study of the so-called *Tāriḵh al-Fattāsh*', *History in Africa*, 42 (2015), 37–73; M. Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith: Ahmad Lobbo, the Tāriḵh al-Fattāsh and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa* (Cambridge, 2020).

10 For example, see 'Review roundtable: Michael A. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*', *American Historical Review*, 124:2 (2019), 581–94.

11 For example, see S. Miers and I. Kopytoff, "'Slavery" as an institution of marginality', in S. Miers and I. Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1977); F. Cooper, 'The problem of slavery in African studies', *The Journal of African History*, 20:1 (1979), 103–25; C. Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery* (Chicago, 1991); P. Lovejoy and J. Hogendorn (eds.), *Slow Death for Slavery: The Course of Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897–1936* (Cambridge, 1993); P. Lovejoy, 'Plantations in the economy of the Sokoto Caliphate', *The Journal of African History*, 19:3 (1978), 341–68; J. Hogendorn, 'The economics of slave use on two "plantations" in the Zaria Emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 10:3 (1977), 369–83; O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, 1985).

12 See, for example, G. Campbell (ed.), *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London, 2003); E. Alpers, G. Campbell, and M. Salman (eds.), *Resisting Bondage in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London, 2005); I. Chatterjee, 'Renewed and connected histories: slavery and the historiography of South Asia', in I. Chatterjee and R. Eaton (eds.), *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington, 2006), 17–43; S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, 2006);

its effort to dissociate East Africa and the Indian Ocean from the study of slavery in the Americas, there is often a simplification of the dynamics in the latter, as well as a vacuous sense of its evolving literature. That is, the view as offered by a number of Africanists is that slavery in the Americas was racialized in such a manner as to render the process flat and undifferentiated with respect to either space or time. As such, the Africanist scholarship tends to present both slavery and race in the Americas as a collective straw man. Upon closer investigation, the similarities between these worlds are striking, with divergences far less obvious or significant.

With that said, once we move beyond the comparative mode, the Africanist contribution to the theorization of domestic slavery is actually quite rich in specificity, although the literature essentially vacillates between proprietary versus ameliorative approaches: either ‘the enslaved are chattel’ in the former, or ‘the enslaved are in the process of negotiating continua of outsider-to-kinship statuses’ in the latter. A major feature of *African Dominion*’s reconsideration of the medieval period is its discussion of domestic slavery, especially concubines and eunuchs, and the ways in which the ostensibly servile often assumed positions of authority, even and especially over free people, including nobles. Without making claims of universality, it offers an alternative definition of slavery as a socially sanctioned, highly exclusive relationship of subjugation between parties in one-to-one correspondences, obligating the dominated party to fully submit or yield to the will of the dominant for as long as the relationship is sanctioned. The actual experience of subjugation, however, though potentially all-encompassing in scope, tended to be relatively proscribed and was instead characterized by a flexibility or autonomy serving the interests of the dominated as well as the dominant (to the extent that was possible). With exploitation and power as the objectives of the latter, the dominated were the vehicles through which those objectives were often realized. Labor was central to production, as agency was critical to governance, with the former taking place on farms and battlefields, in mines and households, and the latter in positions of responsibility, if not privilege. In enough instances, individuals performed on both sides of a dichotomy: eunuchs were both soldiers and officials, concubines were both sexually exploited and mothers (even becoming royals), with female domestics one act removed from either category.

But with slavery, either for domestic purposes or export, comes the question of eligibility — who can be enslaved? It is here that the question of ethnicity emerges, and it is here that *African Dominion* departs from much of the literature that views the formation of ethnicity within Africa as a function of European imperialism and holds that colonialism is equally an ethnogenic moment for African social order. *African Dominion* takes this position because the sources are very clear that, in determining eligibility for enslavement, those making the determination had to first and foremost take into account a group’s relationship to Islam — whether or not a community was Muslim, and indeed whether they

---

K. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1985); A. Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures and the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce, and Islam* (New York, 2010); J. Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington, 2011); M. Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, 2002); and the well-researched E. McMahon, *Slavery and Emancipation in Islamic East Africa* (Cambridge, 2013).

had voluntarily become so. The status of the community translated into the status of the land, so that persons emanating from a Muslim land were not to be enslaved, whereas those from elsewhere were indeed susceptible. As this was a juridical process, reality often diverged from practice, but the point is that in the unfolding of the adjudication, notions of specific ethnic groups emerged. This is not to say that this was true of all of Africa, but neither is it accurate to maintain that throughout the continent, such identifications had to await the nineteenth century.

In dialogue with Hall and El Hamel's work, *African Dominion* makes the point that some notion or configuration of 'race' was also emerging in the West African Savannah and Sahel, long before the Portuguese arrived in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>13</sup> It may not have been precisely the same concept that begins to cohere in the Americas in the seventeenth century, but it was arguably in the same genus of social and cultural imagination, as it referred to the culturally orchestrated, socially sanctioned disaggregation and reformulation of the human species into broad, hierarchical categories reflecting purported respective levels of capacity, propensity, and beauty, and in ways often tethered to phenotypic expression. That some sense of fundamental difference was developing can be seen in the very nomenclature used by geographers writing in Arabic to delineate the world's known regions, as *Bilād as-Sūdān* is the only one formed on the basis of somatic representation. Such distinction does not convey, in and of itself, pejorative connotations, but over the centuries a discussion does unfold in which the nature and potential of black people are debated. It becomes a complicated issue inextricably connected to questions of 'civilization', which in turn have much to do with monotheism and urbanity.

If the study of medieval West Africa results in new insights into slavery, ethnicity, and race, it also provides an opportunity to explore the gender conventions of that time and place. The sources focus on males, and as such one can discern ideas and values that cohere around what it meant to be a man, and conversely a woman — precisely the reason for the phallogocentric emphasis. But a more careful read reveals the presence of women as royals as well as concubines, and everything in-between, from agricultural workers to traders to textile workers.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, because of these conventions, a concubine could enter the royal family as the mother of a noble's scion, as in fact many of the Songhay rulers were sons of concubines. In the political domain, women were often the glue through which a heterogeneous society was held together, especially in Songhay. In the religious sphere, they were principals in ancestral practices, but were also instrumental in the development of leaders in the Muslim community. In particular, the *baraka* or communicable spiritual power that distinguished a number of men in cities like Timbuktu and Jenne actually flowed through mothers, not fathers.

Taken together, the collective picture is one of successive, related societies in motion, under construction, with the constitutive elements of what makes their societies unique in process. As opposed to an ethnographic present, these new readings of early West Africa reveal transitions and transformations. Much of the social change was being driven by Islam's progression throughout the West African Savannah and Sahel. Without

<sup>13</sup> El Hamel, *Black Morocco*; Hall, *History of Race*.

<sup>14</sup> See Gomez, *African Dominion*, esp. ch. 11.

question, the particular development that attracts most scholarly attention is the ascension of Timbuktu and Jenne as centers of learning, and this is obviously facilitated by the biases and social positions of the authors of the major chronicles, along with the presence of such luminaries as Aḥmad Bābā. As such, the secondary scholarly investment has been in demonstrating how ‘Islamic’ Mali and Songhay were growing, and how they were becoming part and parcel of the *Dār al-Islām*. But this emphasis arguably occludes and distorts the actual cultural conditions and practices of many if not most inhabitants of these realms. We learn more about what may have comprised their spiritual imagination through the orchestrated denunciation of Sunni ‘Alī, whose alleged polytheism was emphasized to further legitimize his overthrow. Once we get past the fourteenth century, most historians (as opposed to anthropologists) evince little interest in this aspect of Songhay beliefs, so at best we have a very partial and incomplete picture of the overall process of social change.

Of course, Islam’s expansion would impact multiple sectors, but one in which existing practice proved resistant was governance. There are certain continuities in the ways in which polities in the West African Savannah and Sahel governed themselves, particular features that convey over centuries if not a millennium, that include the executive and judicial prerogatives of the ruler, the posts of governors over districts and cities — even what these offices were called, as nomenclature transfers from Mali into Songhay. To be sure, *qāḍīs* would be appointed in critical urban areas where Islamic law was practiced. But it is striking that descriptions of royal courts could easily be interchanged between various states, sovereigns, and even temporalities. This could mean that notions of sovereignty and political power were well established as early as early Ghana and that subsequent regimes and dynasties extending through imperial Songhay sought to inherit structures associated with an earlier, prescriptive era as an important means of legitimization, of continuity with what had preceded. Askia al-ḥājj Muḥammad’s creation of the position of *kanfāri*, to which he appointed his brother ‘Umar in order to rule Songhay’s western hemisphere, was certainly innovative, but the evidence suggests far more instances of consonance among the many offices constituting the previous administrative apparatus of imperial Mali. Such insistence on West African forms of government were maintained even though pilgrims, scholars, and merchants were in constant motion to and from both North Africa and the central Islamic lands where they could observe firsthand how other societies were organized. In this way, the prior orientalist description of ‘Sudanic’ government is not entirely erroneous, although the reasons for temporal and spatial resonance are now better understood.<sup>15</sup>

As West African polities grew in power and capacity, they eventually reached that stage of political formation that can properly be called ‘empire’, by which is meant the assertion of an expansive central authority that supersedes all other claims to local or regional sovereignty, creating in the process individuated, hierarchical relations to the center.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the histories of the various polities in the West African Savannah and

<sup>15</sup> For example, see M. Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger (Soudan française)*, 3 Volumes (Paris, 1912).

<sup>16</sup> This is consistent with Burbank and Cooper’s definition of empires as ‘large units, expansionist or with a memory of power . . . that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people. . . . The concept of empire presumes that different peoples within the polity will be governed differently’; see J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010), 8.

Sahel, they were all animated by a minimalist theory of governance, whereby compliant communities were offered economic prosperity in exchange for security and a modicum of intervention. This was certainly the case with Mali by the early fourteenth century, followed by Songhay in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In both instances, the objective was the unification of the region's three major river systems — the Niger, Senegal, and Gambia — further facilitating integration into a trans-Saharan trading network of untold value.

At this point we move from what is demonstrable in the sources to the realm of the highly speculative, but also possibly related to a 'Sudanic' approach to government. Just as pilgrims, scholars, and merchants visited other parts of the Muslim world, and just as West Africa was host to a number of persons from that world, it is not possible that the region was unaware of the technologies travelers witnessed elsewhere. To be sure, the calculation may have been that archery was as effective as muskets (once the gunpowder revolution began early in the fourteenth century), and in any event, the evolution of these weapons could not have been foreseen. But if Africans as far west as Songhay (but not as far east as Bornu, where regimes indeed incorporated firearms) did not evince much interest in such weaponry, neither did they apparently consider taking advantage of literacy to maintain records. That official government documents dating to the fifteenth century or before have yet to be uncovered does not mean they do not exist or were never created, but rather that there is not a lot of evidence that systematic efforts were maintained to create such documents. It is unclear what this means, especially as literacy had been a feature in these realms, at least among elites, for hundreds of years. The fact that writing was associated with religious endeavor yields little insight, as writing was also used for mathematics, medicine, astrology, and so on. In contrast, we have accounts in which the Jula (merchants) are said to have memorized their transactions as a matter of regular practice and to have viewed recording them in writing as an affront.<sup>17</sup> As such, the ways in which West African governments and merchants conducted their affairs would appear to have very much been a matter of choice as opposed to the result of an absence of options, which speaks to the power of tradition and to the power of social formations invested in those traditions.

There remains much more to learn with respect to early and medieval West African history. Much of the new information will necessarily come from archaeological advances, but it is also possible that additional externally written sources, mostly in Arabic, have yet to be consulted. Debates over internal documentation, including and especially *Ta'rikh al-Fattāsh*, will likely continue with more thoroughgoing textual analysis. And then there is *African Dominion's* call for reconsidering the potential of oral tradition as sources of historically useful information.

The way forward also includes a broadening of spatial horizons, not only vertically but horizontally. There is certainly more to learn about Mali and Songhay's relations with North Africa and Egypt, but the former's relations with other West African entities, extending east to Lake Chad and southeast into Hausa and Yoruba territories, is a subject

---

17 See V. Fernandes, *Description de la Côte d'Afrique de Ceuta au Sénégal* (Paris, 1938), 84–5.

of as much if not more curiosity. This will obviously require further disruption of convention with respect to regional specialization.

A major argument in *African Dominion* is that Mali and Songhay, as imperial formations, merit full integration into world history. But empire is not the only category in which West Africa's multiple global connections become visible; for example, Scott's conceptualization of 'Zomia' — communities resistant to centralized authority or other state projects — may be another area of articulation that, in helping to explain early West Africa's assorted political arrangements, may also support an understanding of West African polities' minimalist tendencies as an accommodation of such tensions (as opposed to evidence of challenged capacity).<sup>18</sup> In turn, viewing relations between West African states and their antitheses as a series of negotiations between centrifugal forces also creates its own referent, from which studies of parallel phenomena elsewhere in the world might benefit.

Notwithstanding alternative framings, the rise of empire in West Africa remains a critical context for interrogating the social, cultural, and economic significations of notions such as race, gender, and slavery, while facilitating comparisons with other times and places. Early and medieval West Africa also reflect an extended engagement with commercial and cultural forces, allowing for more comprehensive approaches to transnational dynamics. The full consideration of this history will contribute to the relocation of Africa from the margins to the center of human endeavor.

---

18 J. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 2009).