LANDMARK EMPIRES: SEARCHING FOR MEDIEVAL EMPIRES AND IMPERIAL TRADITION IN HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF WEST AFRICA

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Abstract

The history of medieval West Africa is defined by the age of three great empires that succeeded one another: Ghāna, Māli, and Songhay. How did these empires come to frame our view of the West African past? To answer the question, we have to understand first how the European and Eurocentric concept of an empire was imposed on a specific African context and why it thrived. In this respect, the case of Sudanic empires in particular illuminates the process of history writing and scholars' relationship with their time and object of study. In the last few years, Sudanic empires have made a prominent return to the historical conversation. I propose here a critical reflection on 'empire' and 'imperial tradition' in the western Sahel based on europhone and non-europhone (Arabic) historiographies, from the first histories written in postmedieval West Africa to those produced by twenty-first-century scholarship.

Key Words

Mali, Senegal, West Africa, historiography, colonialism, decolonization, epistemology, Islam.

In his landmark study *The Invention of Africa*, the Congolese philosopher Valentin Mudimbe defines (European) ethnocentrism as being composed of two dimensions, one ideological, the other epistemological.[1] Ethnocentrism has been a central component of African medieval history when it developed as a discipline in Europe between the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. It is nowadays self-evident that every written history is to a certain degree ethnocentric. Historians have for some time now acknowledged that they can approach the past as it actually was to a limited extent only. They draw inspiration from their own historical context and, more often than not, their work reflects their realities, thoughts, and present rather than constituting a reliable rendition of the past. This mirroring effect has become commonplace of epistemological work in history.[2] Yet the body of work on medieval empires in West Africa lacks such reflexive and deconstructive approaches.

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1 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN, 1988), 19.

2 For example, R. Barthes, 'Le discours de l'histoire', *Information sur les Sciences Sociales*, 6:4 (1967), 65–75; R. Barthes, 'L'effet de réel', *Communications*, 11 (1968), 8–9; A. Prost, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire* (Paris, 1996).

The field of western Sahelian medieval studies was defined by an imperial age, spanning from the eighth to the sixteenth century, when the hegemonies of Ghāna, Māli, and Songhay followed one another.[3] To this day, this chronological framework still structures our representation of the past. Yet in the last two centuries, only a handful of critical studies have reflected on the question of empires and imperial tradition in medieval West Africa. The imperial tone that dominated the historiography of the western Sahel was the product of European writing during the colonial period. Ethnocentrism, intertwined with colonial ideologies and epistemologies, was therefore embedded in the conceptualization of this history from its genesis.

This article undertakes a cursory study of empires and imperial tradition by singling out the epistemological and ideological ruptures and continuities in history writing. I first present and discuss Arabic sources and then proceed to recount the historiographical trajectory of the empires as objects of study. I argue that their epistemological filiation with former states of thinking and ways of history writing still affects the thinking of contemporary historians. The past of West Africa is still interpreted through concepts that were first developed for the study of European history and therefore were originally foreign to Africa. The return of empires to today's historical conversations compels us to deal with this historiographical inheritance.

EMPIRES AND IMPERIAL TRADITION IN THE EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ARABIC SOURCES BEFORE THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The literary Arabic sources for the western Sahel are external until almost 1500.[4] The texts about the *Bilād al-Sūdān*, i.e. the area south of the Sahara, were translated and published in compendia, the most famous of which are the *Recueil* by Joseph Cuoq and the *Corpus* by Nehemia Levtzion and John Hopkins.[5] Together, they present roughly 600 pages of patchy and selective sources dating from the eighth to the fifteenth century. While relatively rich compared to sources for many other regions of Africa, the corpora are nevertheless highly limited given the time span and the connection of the region to the Islamic worlds.

Manuscript culture fully developed in West Africa in the postmedieval period.[6] The first internally written histories of the past of the western Sahel were produced in the middle of

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3 Sudanic empires did not instantly become the showcase for West African medieval history during the formative period of the discipline (the beginning of the nineteenth century). P. Masonen, *The Negroland Revisited: Discovery and Invention of the Sudanese Middle Ages* (Helsinki, 2000), 245–318.

4 The epistolary exchange on Islamic governmentality that took place between the Mālikī scholar al-Maġīlī and the sultan of Songhay Askia Muḥammad in 1498 is the first extant internal piece of writing of some length and historical significance. See J. Hunwick, *Sharî'a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghîlî to the Questions of Askia al-Hâjj Muhammad* (Oxford, 1985). Arabic had been written in the region for a long time. The oldest Arabic inscription in Tadmakka dates to the year 1011 CE; see P. F. de Moraes Farias, 'Essouk Arabic non-funerary inscriptions, new (previously unpublished) series', in S. Nixon (ed.), *Essouk-Tadmekka: An Early Islamic Trans-Saharan Market Town* (Leiden, 2017), 299–303.

5 J. Cuoq, *Recueil des sources arabes concernant l'Afrique occidentale du VIIIe au XVIe siècle* (Paris, 1975); N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins (eds.), *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge, 2000 and 2011 [1981]).

6 I consider here the medieval period as a particular 'regime of globality' in which West Africa participated fully. See my discussion of the concept in the conclusion to the present article. One example of this global economic

the seventeenth century; they are the *Tārīḫ al-Sūdān* by al-Saʿdī and the *Tārīḫ* by Ibn al-Muḫtār. This is where our search for empires begins. As Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias demonstrates, the authors of the chronicles drew from various written and oral materials sourced from different cultural contexts. This heterogeneous material, carrying different regimes of truth, was rearranged into linear narratives reconstructing and interpreting the West African past.[7] Put simply, such narratives were created by historians.

Like modern historians, the authors of the chronicles devised narratives about the Sahelian past with little documentation at hand. Thanks to extant written and oral narratives, they were aware that the region had known a considerably higher number of great states than the three great states of Ghāna, Māli, and Songhay. This reality is vivid in the chronicles. During the era of Songhay hegemony in particular, a myriad of secondary sultans and rulers are reported; West Africa was then a complex political mosaic.[8] Nonetheless, to devise a prestigious political tradition that the Timbuktu-based Arma power could be part of, they distinguished Ghāna, Māli, and Songhay as the upholders of a linear political trajectory that would culminate with the advent of a proper Islamic Sahelian urban society.[9]

This construction of the 'medieval' past was emic in its nature. The Timbuktu chronicles circulated widely in the erudite Islamic culture of West Africa. As a result, their devisement of the past shaped the historical representations of learned men during the following centuries. As Mauro Nobili's recently published study on the *Tārīḫ al-Fattāš* shows, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Nūḥ Ibn al-Ṭāhir inscribed the newly formed Islamic state of his master Aḥmad Lobbo, the founder of the caliphate of Ḥamdallāhi, into this political tradition.[10]

How was 'imperiality' expressed in these chronicles? The authors used general and vernacular terms for positions of power (e.g. *malik*, Arabic for 'king', and *koï*, Songhay for 'ruler or owner of a high function'). However, when they wanted to be more specific, they used the terms sultan (*sulṭān*) and sultanate (*sulṭana*), which had a particular meaning in the Islamic context in which they were living and writing. An Islamic sultanate was superior to a mere kingdom, for a sultan usually had other rulers under his power. After the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258, the sultanate became the new form of

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interconnection is the presence of Chinese ceramic in several sites of sub-Saharan and East Africa; see P. Boucheron, F.-X. Fauvelle, and J. Loiseau, 'Rythmes du monde au Moyen Âge', in I. Cattedu and H. Noizet (eds.), *Quoi de neuf au Moyen Age?* (Paris, 2016), 150–66.

7 For examples of a method establishing a dialogue between different types of sources by taking their specificities and regimes of truth into account, see P. F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuāreg History* (Oxford, 2003), lxxx-xcv.

8 See for example the list of the sultans of Kala, Binduku, and Sibiriduku in the Middle Niger at the time of the Songhay Empire in al-Saʿdī, *Tārīḫ al-Sūdān*, ed. O. Houdas (Paris, 1898), 9–11.

9 P. F. de Moraes Farias, 'Intellectual innovation and reinvention of the Sahel: the seventeenth-century Timbuktu chronicles', in S. Jeppie and S. B. Diagne (eds.), *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town, 2008), 105.

10 M. Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith: Aḥmad Lobbo, the* Tārīkh al-fattāsh *and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa* (Cambridge, 2020); see also S. Mathee and M. Nobili, 'Towards a new study of the so-called *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*', *History in Africa*, 42 (2015), 37–73; M. Nobili, 'New reinventions of the Sahel: reflections on the *taʾrīḫ* genre in the Timbuktu historiographical production, seventeenth to twentieth centuries', in T. Green and B. Rossi (eds.), *Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past: Essays in Honour of Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias* (Leiden, 2018), 201–19.

imperiality in Islam. Consequently, in medieval sources on West Africa produced after the thirteenth century, imperiality and imperial narratives were expressed through the conceptual framework of the Islamic sultanate. Not long after Mansa Mūsā visited Cairo's citadel in 1324, the polymath al-ʿUmarī was able to record fragments of a speech given by the Malian sultan to Mamlūk officials.[11] Mūsā made such an impression on his contemporaries that few years later, al-ʿUmarī registered Māli among the great sultanates of Islam of the fourteenth century in his encyclopedia *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*. Mansa Mūsā's description of his state reveals that he had intimate knowledge of the *Dār al-Islām*. He gave a geopolitical portrait of his lands that described his wars with barbaric infidels through jihads, mimicking that of his Mamlūk counterpart and his wars with the Mongols.[12] As Gabriel Martinez-Gros demonstrates, fighting barbarians was a key characteristic of Ibn Khaldūn's conception of Islamic empires:

> Empire, as we can deduce it from the theoretical mechanism of Ibn Khaldûn, is autistic. It fails at thinking of other realities than itself, and its negation, the savage. The empire shares with the Neolithic tribe, dear to Lévi-Strauss, the idea that humanity comes down to it. The Rome of the Antonines, the China of the Tangs, Islam at the Abbasid apogee are empires in the sense that they do not have borders with entities that would be comparable, but frontiers — or high walls; the empire does not have neighbors, but Barbarians. . . . This reduction of sense, and first of history, to one political construction, beyond which lies the world of the formless and the inconceivable [is] one of the characteristics of empire.[13]

Indeed, Arabic authors' descriptions of court etiquette at the capitals of Ghāna and Māli give the impression that courtly elites displayed a certain 'world order' to audiences comprised of courtiers, officials, and visitors.[14] That said, the barbaric/civilized dichotomy constructed by medieval authors must be mitigated, since intensive trade networks connected these two worlds. The *mansa* of Māli himself embodied several political and religious practices coexisting peacefully. We must also read such dichotic discourse through its performative intent: helping the interlocutors to understand the power and magnitude of Māli by using their ways of understanding the world. Similarly, in the case of Songhay, Bruce Hall's work shows that debates pertaining to imperiality were deeply rooted in the remit of political Islam.[15]

Was political filiation in the western Sahel, as displayed in the Timbuktu chronicles, experienced by the elites of the medieval period? To a degree, cultural and political inheritance was certainly handed down from one state to the other. Ghāna was granted a special status in the Māli sultanate, and it can be argued that much of its power etiquette was

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11 Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus* [2000], 267–70.

12 *Ibid*. 268.

13 G. Martinez-Gros, 'L'empire et son espace: conclusion', *Hypothèses*, 11 (2008), 275–6. My translation.

14 Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus* [2000], 265, 290–1; F.-X. Fauvelle, *Le rhinocéros d'or: Histoires du Moyen Âge africain* (Paris, 2013), 96. Regarding empires as incarnations of a world order, A. Negri and M. Hardt detail features that resonate with what we know of medieval Sudanic states: 'Empire is formed not on the basis of force itself but on the basis of the capacity to present force being in the service of right and peace. . . . The first task of Empire, then, is to enlarge the realm of the consensuses that support its own power.' See M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, 2000), 15.

15 B. Hall, 'Arguing sovereignty in Songhay', *Afriques*, 4 (2013), https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.1121.

passed on to the *mansa*s of Māli.[16] Likewise, the subsequent shifting of hegemony from Māli to Songhay did not erase Māli's legacy in the Niger Bend. When the *Tārīḫ* of Ibn al-Muḥtār was written, the memory of Māli was still very much alive, especially its Islamic heritage.[17] The Muslim elite still remembered what they owed to Māli's dominion over the region, while Mansa Mūsā's pilgrimage was still the subject of numerous anecdotes.[18] However, if the political filiation between Ghāna and Māli appears incontrovertible, the one between Māli and Songhay is subject to discussion. The remnants of the Māli sultanate, reorganized as a smaller kingdom after the fifteenth century, were often at war with the Songhay.[19] A late medieval source points out to the use of Islamic legal and political arguments by the sultan of Songhay, Askia Muhammad, rather than the local tradition of inherited imperial political power to claim sovereignty over distant Muslim groups.[20] Written sources do not allow us to demonstrate with certainty if the *askia*s of the Songhay inscribed themselves in an imperial tradition dating back to Ghāna.[21] What is certain is that, in the middle of the seventeenth century, a historical narrative of great medieval sultanates spread from the Niger Bend through West Africa as a means of creating an intelligible past, and that it was still alive in local Islamic historical cultures during the early decades of the nineteenth century. At the end of the nineteenth century these states were made empires by colonial scholars — the new power producing knowledge about the past of West Africa. As we shall see, it was not merely a matter of translation. The concept of empire carried ideological and epistemological baggage.

LESSER EMPIRES: MEDIEVAL EMPIRES OF WEST AFRICA AT THE BIRTH OF AFRICAN STUDIES IN MODERN ACADEMIA (NINETEENTH CENTURY–1940s)

The constitution of medieval West African studies as a European academic discipline started in the first half of the nineteenth century and is generally dated more precisely to 1841, when the British geographer William D. Cooley published *The Negroland of the Arabs*. Cooley was the first to attempt a historical narrative of the *Bilād al-Sūdān* using the Arabic medieval texts available at the time.[22] In his work Cooley does not refer to empires. In 1858 Heinrich Barth first proposed the Ghāna-Māli-Songhay trinity that

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16 N. Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (New York, 1973), 108. The Sunjata epic also favors a close bond with Ghāna, ruled by a group of the Mande people, but it has to be noted that the extant versions are contemporaneous and there is no way of knowing how this relationship was presented in local narratives during medieval times.

17 H. Collet, 'The sultanate of Mali (14th–15th century): historiographies of a Sudanic state from medieval Islam until today', (unpublished PhD dissertation, Pantheon Sorbonne University, 2017), 198–204.

18 *Ibid.* 205.

19 al-Saʿdī, *Tārīḫ al-Sūdān*, 74–7, 93–4, 98.

20 Hall, 'Arguing sovereignty'.

21 In his famous *Miʿrāǧ al-suʿūd* written in 1615, the great scholar Ahmad Baba (d. 1627) gives a list of the peoples and their political territory that are known to be anciently Islamized in the Western Sudan. Māli and Songhay are mentioned, but not Ghāna, which probably existed only as a literary relic at the time. See Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (Cambridge, 2011), 53.

22 Masonen, *Negroland Revisited*, 319–420.

would come to frame the medieval past of the western Sahel. He based his work on frag-ments of the *Tārīḫ al-Sūdān*, linking local developments to foreign influences, but still did not speak of empires.[23] On the French side, colonial officer Louis Gustave Binger spoke in 1886 of Māli as a 'vast empire', while in 1888 the linguist René Basset called Ghāna and Songhay 'empires'.[24] Between 1898 and 1900, the Arabist Octave Houdas edited and translated the famous Timbuktu chronicle *Tārīḫ al-Sūdān*.[25] He still did not use the word 'empire' to translate the term 'sultanate', preferring 'kingdom'. At the time, the chronicle fascinated Europeans, but as Moraes Farias shows, it was considered merely an invaluable repository of historical facts rather than a sophisticated 'intellectual innov-ation and reinvention of the Sahel'.[26]

Flora Shaw was among the first to exploit the chronicle, together with Arabic medieval texts, in *A Tropical Dependency*. She qualified Māli and Songhay as empires but Ghāna as a kingdom.[27] It was the French Africanist Maurice Delafosse who, in his landmark study *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, was the first architect of the construction 'Sudanic empire'.[28] As Jean-Louis Triaud remarks, 'empires are everywhere in [Delafosse's] history':

> Delafosse thus contributes to setting for several generations, dates, concepts, and representations, from which we have the greatest difficulties to detach ourselves even today. The concept of Sudanic empire is, in this regard, the most remarkable and the most durable among those coming out of his work.[29]

Delafosse listed many West African polities from before his time as empires, not just Ghāna, Māli, and Songhay. He presented the Sudanic empire as the most refined political organization in West African history.[30] At the time, the French École Méthodique, known for its highly political, factual, and linear historical narratives, was the dominant historio-graphic school.[31] As Triaud underscores, Delafosse's historical discourse, full of 'dates, events, kings, and empires', is an embodiment of the history writing of the school.[32] In 1913, when Houdas edited and translated the so-called *Tārīḫ al-Fattāš*, Delafosse was

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23 'It is remarkable, that while Islám in the two larger westerly kingdoms which flourished previously to that of Songhay, — I mean Ghána, or Ghánata, and Melle, — had evidently emanated from the north.' H. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa, Volume IV* (London, 1858), 411–12.

24 L.-G. Binger, *Essai sur la langue bambara* (Paris, 1886), 3; R. Basset, *Mélanges d'histoire et de littérature Orientale: Essai sur l'histoire et la langue de Tonbouktou et des royaumes Songhaï et Melli, Volume II* (Louvain, 1888), 17.

25 Es-Sa'di, *Tarikh es-Soudan*, trans. O. Houdas (Paris, 1900), 18. The Arabic text was edited and published two years earlier in 1898.

26 Moraes Farias, 'Intellectual innovation', 95–108.

27 F. Shaw, 'The Soudanese states', ch. 8 in *A Tropical Dependency: An Outline of the Ancient History of the Western Soudan with an Account of the Modern Settlement of Northern Nigeria* (London, 1905), 78–82.

28 J.-L. Triaud, 'Haut-Sénégal-Niger, un modèle "positiviste"? De la coutume à l'histoire: Maurice Delafosse et l'invention de l'histoire africaine', in J.-L. Amselle and E. Sibeud (eds.), *Maurice Delafosse entre orientalisme et ethnographie: L'Itinéraire d'un africaniste (1870–1926)* (Paris, 1998), 210–32, esp. the section entitled 'Of kingdoms and empires', 218–20.

29 Triaud, 'Haut-Sénégal-Niger', 218. My translation.

30 *Ibid.* 220. He sees it as a military monarchy comprised of several kingdoms and without social or ethnic unity.

31 P. Garcia, 'Historiographie méthodique', in C. Delacroix, F. Dosse, P. Garcia, and N. Offenstadt (eds.), *Historiographies, concepts et débats, Volume I* (Paris, 2010), 443–52.

32 Triaud, 'Haut-Sénégal-Niger', 215.

involved as a co-editor.[33] His influence is striking, for in the translation of this chronicle the word 'empire' was used everywhere.[34]

The Europeans' implicit model was the Roman Empire and its capital. Hence, the identification of African imperial capitals became their main concern, if not obsession.[35] In the process, the 'question of Ghāna' led to the reclassification of Ghāna as an empire, since the ruins of Kumbi-Saleh, identified as its capital, were deemed worthy of empire.[36] The Europeans' encounter with such a glorious past led to the creation of a 'historical exception' for the medieval western Sahel in keeping with the ideological tenets of the colonial era.[37] The French administrator and historian Charles Monteil, the author of the first monograph on the Māli Empire in 1929, also published in that year 'L'œuvre des étrangers dans l'empire soudanais du Mali', an article in which he defined Sudanic empires.[38] Monteil's narrative can be puzzling since compared to his contemporaries he sometime demonstrates a critical attitude, but nonetheless it reverberates with colonial ideas, leading to some contradictions. For instance, he stated that the disappearance of Sudanic empires left societies 'barely different from their anterior state', and a few lines later emphasized some of their legacies.[39]

Monteil's reasoning was threefold. First, he showed skepticism about using the concept of empire for West African polities and advocated that, even if they were so called, they were not comparable to European empires. Second, he characterized the Sudanic empire as a 'simple mode of exploitation of peoples', the might of which depended solely on the emperor and his army. However he had to acknowledge the textual and material evidence suggestive of an empire (e.g. monuments, ruins). He could not deny Sudanic empires any form of accomplishment. This led him to his third argument. Drawing from both the theory of the inequalities of human races and a *Kulturkreis* type of diffusionism, Monteil explained the 'historical exception' of western Sudan with a cultural and genetic diffusion from the Islamic north.[40]

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33 On the problematic edition of 1913, see Mathee and Nobili, 'So-called *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*', 37–73.

34 O. Houdas and M. Delafosse (trans.), *Tarikh el-fettach ou Chronique du chercheur* (Paris, 1913), 55, 75.

35 J. Vidal, 'Au sujet de l'emplacement de Mali, capitale de l'ancien Empire Mandingue', *Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifique de l'AOF*, 2 (1923), 251–68; M. Delafosse, 'Le Gâna et le Mali et l'emplacement de leurs capitales', *Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifique de l'AOF*, 7 (1924), 479–542. For studies on the particular historiographical adventure of the imperial capital of the Māli Empire, see F.-X. Fauvelle, 'Niani redux: en finir avec l'identification du site de Niani (Guinée-Conakry) à la capitale du royaume du Mali', *P@lethnologie*, 4 (2012), 237–54; H. Collet, 'L'introuvable capitale du Mali: la question de la capitale dans l'historiographie du royaume médiéval du Mali', *Afriques*, 4 (2013), https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.1098.

36 Regarding the 'question of Ghana', see J.-L. Triaud, 'Le nom de Ghana: mémoire en exil, mémoire importée, mémoire appropriée', in J.-P. Chrétien and J.-L. Triaud (eds.), *Histoire d'Afrique: Les enjeux de mémoire* (Paris, 1999), 235–80; and Masonen, *Negroland Revisited*, 284–306.

37 Masonen, *Negroland Revisited*, 525–34.

38 First a lengthy article, it was published in 1930 in the form of a short monograph; see C. Monteil, 'Les empires du Mali: études d'histoire et de sociologie soudanaise', *Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'AOF*, 12:3–4 (1929), 291–447; C. Monteil, *Les empires du Mali* (Paris, 1930); and C. Monteil, 'L'œuvre des étrangers dans l'empire soudanais du Mali', *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 2 (1929), 227–35.

39 Monteil, 'L'œuvre des étrangers', 227–8. My translation.

40 *Ibid*. 234. My translation.

After Delafosse's death in 1926 and Monteil's publications in the 1920s, the literature on the past of West Africa became scarce during the remaining years of the French occupation. From the emic construction of an Islamic political tradition based on the Timbuktu chronicles, the Europeans periodized the age of great empires that came to define the medieval period. Epistemologically speaking, the Sudanic empires and their history were cast by a European historiographical current that transplanted European concepts and ideas of history to an African context. Ideologically speaking, Sudanic empires were considered lesser empires compared to those of Europe, and their few acknowledged achievements were attributed to the northern civilization of Islam.[41]

FULLY-FLEDGED EMPIRES: THE 'GOLDEN AGE' OF MEDIEVAL WEST AFRICAN EMPIRES AT THE TIME OF POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE (1950s–70s)

The years following the Second World War brought the onset of a shift in ideology.[42] By the time of West Africa's political independence in 1960, many ideological aspects of the history written during the colonial period were already judged coarse, undignified, and racist. Decolonizing historical knowledge was the scholar's priority. A critical inflexion and an inversion of values came from West African historians who, in the wake of nation building and the reappropriation of African history, erected the Sudanic empires as the embodiment of a golden age, conceived in opposition to a medieval Europe torn by war and disease.[43] The Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Niane, whose work was prominent in the 1960s and the 1970s, was the great promotor of Sudanic medieval empires. In his narrative, they were powerful centers of attraction:

> The epoch corresponding to the Middle Ages in Europe was for West Africa a period of great political stability due to the development of great empires and a unique civilization under the influence of Islam. Nowadays, this period takes on easily, in our eyes, the aspect of a golden age, for we would look in vain in the history of the continent for such a fecund, prosperous period. Are not the names of Ghana, Mali, and Gao now synonymous with pomp, with splendor? . . . The crossing of Cairo by pilgrims provided the Mamlūk chroniclers with thousands of anecdotes in which everywhere the wealth and the generosity of the black sultans were emphasized. The prosperity of the Senegalese-Nigerien cities attracted to Sudan poets, merchants, and Muslim scholars from Maghreb and Egypt. Before the discovery of America and the Indies, Sudan played the role of Eldorado.[44]

Niane mainly focused his work on the Māli Empire. His translation of a Guinean version of the Sunjata epic in 1960, *Soundjata ou L'épopée mandingue*, was universally acclaimed. It was regarded for more than two decades as the canonical version of the

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41 Of course, the argument for the need of a civilizing foreigner directly served the French colonial endeavor. Monteil states explicitly that, in that regard, the French were continuators. *Ibid.* 235.

42 The first issue of the review *Présence Africaine*, launched in 1947 by Alioune Diop (1910–80), is a good example of that shift.

43 See C. A. Diop, *L'Afrique noire précoloniale* (Paris, 1960), 97.

44 D. T. Niane, *Le Soudan occidental au temps des grands empires* (Paris, 1975), 26. My translation.

epic.[45] He was among the pioneers who systematically incorporated orature into their work as means to Africanize historical knowledge on West Africa.[46] Yet his work demonstrates great conceptual continuity with the previous period. As we can see in the extract above, the idea of a 'historical exception' characterizing the medieval western Sahel was still present. Committed to the search for the imperial capitals, he even strengthened the paradigm of Niani as capital of Māli, an idea forged in the scientific colonial literature by Jules Vidal and Delafosse.[47] During the archeological excavations directed by Władysław Filipowiak at Niani in 1965 and 1968, Niane was the principal historical advisor. The great empires Ghāna-Māli-Songhay were the focus of his work, reinforcing them as synonyms for medieval West Africa as a whole. In the post-1960 context of pan-Africanism and the building of nationalist history, he did more than ratify this chrononym; he gave it a soul and substance.[48]

The inversion in ideology and the promotion of empires benefited from the powerful momentum of the independence movement of the 1960s. The empires, having unified in the past peoples of different cultures and languages under one domain that brimmed with peace and prosperity, were perceived in spirit as centralized yet inclusive political models from which the newly formed republics could draw inspiration. Stigma became insignia of pride, and the legacies of the imperial tradition were incorporated into national histories. The main epistemological inflexion of that time was the preeminence given to orature in the construction of historical knowledge.[49] Yet oral narratives were not impervious to the powerful epistemological frameworks that shaped the history of medieval West Africa.[50]

RECASTING EMPIRES: RECENT DEBATES AND THE QUEST FOR RECOGNITION (1980s–PRESENT)

The new status gained by the Sudanic empires in the field of African history made them a candidate for recognition by world imperial history. In 1980 the French Africanist George

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45 D. T. Niane, *Soundjata ou L'épopée mandingue* (Paris, 1960). It was challenged by a Malian version in the 1980s, see J. Jansen, 'The next generation: young griots' quest for authority', in Green and Rossi, *West African Past*, 239–58. Since then, several other versions of the Sunjata epic have surfaced. David Conrad recently published one from Fadama, Guinea; see D. Conrad (ed.), *Sunjata: A New Prose Version* (Indianapolis, IN, 2016).

46 E. Brizuela-Garcia, 'The history of Africanization and the Africanization of history', *History in Africa*, 38 (2006), 35–46.

47 Regarding the search for the capitals and the excavations at Niani, thought to be Māli's imperial capital, in 1965, 1968, and 1973, see Fauvelle, 'Niani redux', and Collet, 'L'introuvable capitale du Māli'.

48 Examples include R. Mauny, 'Le Soudan occidental à l'époque des grands empires', in H. Deschamps (ed.), *Histoire générale de l'Afrique noire, Volume 2* (Paris, 1970), 185–202; Niane, *Le Soudan occidental*; D. Conrad, *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali and Songhay* (New York, 2005); F. Simonis, *L'Afrique soudanaise au Moyen Âge: Le temps des grands empires (Ghana, Mali, Songhai)* (Marseille, 2010).

49 According to Niane: 'We don't have written information on the manner in which the vast empire [i.e. Mali] was governed. Mali did not leave archives, official acts being proclaimed orally. . . . Heralds, here the griots, constituted at that epoch a veritable chancery.' Niane, *Recherches sur l'empire du Mali au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1975), 56.

50 Recent works have emphasized the main role of traditionists as mediators of their epoch and their capacity to repurpose orature to reflect their own historical context. On the question of orature's different regimes of historicity, especially the 'encyclopedic phase' that produced many dated events and the creative tension between written and oral history, see Jansen, 'Next generation'.

Balandier contributed a chapter titled 'Le concept d'empire dans l'histoire de l'Afrique noire' to a comparative history book on world empires.[51] First regretting the absence of African history in debates on empire, he raised the problem of definition and the inevitable tacit reference to Eurocentric imperial models.[52] Paradoxically, he then proceeded to argue that African societies overall only produced what he called 'incomplete empires' (*empires inachevés*), a Eurocentric statement in itself.[53] This assessment applied to the whole continent. Balandier singled out one exception:

> The only empires by extension are those of the Western Sudan, . . . [where] the determining economic condition is . . . on the one hand, the high concentration of gold mines, and, on the other hand, the intermediary position on the north-south axis of trade until the time of the coastal trading posts.[54] The search for gold led the Arab-Berbers to Western Sudan. The trans-Saharan trade was established and organized by them. At the outlet of the main caravan roads, the conditions of life were deeply changed; local powers gained in strength by controlling a fruitfully expanding trade; cities multiplied, like so many 'Saharan ports'; book culture inserted itself with Islam; social differentiation became more and more complex and visible. The great political endeavors were possible; and they were achieved because the economic stakes were considerable: gold, salt, Mediterranean goods, and those of the so-called Guinean forest, and then the slaves.[55]

Finally, Balandier mitigated Monteil's militarist argument by stating that if we consider empires in the *longue durée*, they were spaces of economic control and cultural diffusion, especially regarding religion, rather than of military domination.[56] As we can see, even though the status of Sudanic empire improved at the time of Balandier's writing, some earlier conceptions were difficult to leave behind (e.g., the agency of the north in its development and the idea of a 'historical exception').

In the late 1970s, the historical field of medieval West African studies lost its momentum. The publication of the two compendia, the *Recueil* and the *Corpus*, suggested that most of the Arabic medieval sources had already been discovered, which considerably slowed down the search for new texts.[57] Scholars working on West Africa chose other temporalities; the study of the contemporary period became most prominent.[58] Medieval studies were limited to a handful of specialists, notably John O. Hunwick and Nehemia Levtzion. In this

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51 G. Balandier, 'Le concept d'empire dans l'histoire de l'Afrique noire', in M. Duverger (ed.), *Le concept d'empire* (Paris, 1980), 443–59.

52 *Ibid.* 443–4.

53 To support his idea of '*empire inachevé*', he points out two limits. First, a failure to produce archives prevented the institutionalization of imperial power and its severance from a lineage-rooted system. Second, the means of agrarian production remained limited (no plough, wheel, animal traction, or mechanical means of irrigation) and prevented the accumulation of surplus that could lead to technical progress in specialized crafts and more radical social stratification. *Ibid.* 445–51.

54 Or 'by their expanse', from the French *par l'extension*.

55 *Ibid.* 452–3.

56 *Ibid.* 459.

57 Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus* [2011], vii.

58 On this question, see B. Hirsch, 'Éditorial: pour une nouvelle histoire des mondes africains avant le XIXe siècle', *Afriques*, (https://journals.openedition.org/afriques/550), 2010; and R. Reid, 'Past and presentism: the "precolonial" and the foreshortening of African history', *The Journal of African History*, 52:2 (2011), 135–55. Prominent West African historians such as Sekene Mody Cissoko, Alpha Gado Boureima, Boubacar Barry, and Mamadou Diouf contributed notably to develop the postmedieval history of the region.

context, two disciplines animated the reflection on empires: anthropology and archaeology. The Māli Empire received most of the attention. Because it was so intricately interwoven with the *roman national* of the Republic of Mali and because the Mande people carried through time the epic of its foundation, the history of medieval Māli gradually eclipsed that of Ghāna and Songhay in terms of scientific publications. The Sunjata epic, relating the birth of the Māli Empire, became the focal point of the discussions. A critical turn affected the approach to the Sunjata epic, visible in the seminal *In Search of Sunjata*, whereby the focus shifted to the cultural and political remnants of the Māli Empire in postmedieval greater Manden.[59] Anthropology has been at the forefront of challenging the historical doxa of West African imperial history. A special issue of *History in Africa* in 1996 addressed this particular topic. When studying the liveliness of medieval Māli's political inheritance, Jan Jansen provocatively asked, 'Did the Mali empire still exist in the nineteenth century?'[60] Similarly, archaeologists contributed to challenging a history of empires far too dependent on political perspectives. In this respect, Roderick J. McIntosh's *Peoples of the Middle Niger* formed an important milestone in 1998 by putting forward the concept of heterarchy.[61]

In the Republics of Mali and Guinea, from the 1990s the Māli Empire became a substratum exploited to address questions of governance, heritage, tourism, and the place of the African past in universal history, especially regarding the question of human rights.[62] As Éric Jolly has observed, in the context of failing decentralization and aspirations to greater democracy arose the 'contemporaneous invention of the medieval Manden charter', a declaration on human rights chronologically rooted in the empire's foundation.[63] Gregory Mann sheds light on what was at stake in the 1990s when this body of texts rose to prominence:

> The interests of foreign actors had intersected with those of West African neotraditionalists, jurists, and organic intellectuals, even as the latter group offered a powerful rebuttal to the idea that they needed tutoring in governance from Europe. . . . Rather than invoking postcolonial failure and the shame of being hectored by outsiders, human rights discourse could now provoke precolonial pride.[64]

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59 R. A. Austen (ed.), *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (Bloomington, IN, 1999).

60 J. Jansen, 'The representation of status in Mande: did the Mali Empire still exist in the nineteenth century?', *History in Africa*, 23 (1996), 97–109.

61 McIntosh suggests that centralized political power could arise from heterarchy, 'a complex organization in which the relations between elements are unranked vertically but may be highly stratified horizontally'; see R. McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger* (Cambridge, 1998), 304.

62 Jansen, 'Next generation', 239–58; G. Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (Cambridge, 2015), 238–42.

63 Regarding the history of the declaration of *Kurukan Fuga* and the Hunters' Oath (*Donsolu Kalikan*), known as the Mande Charter, see É. Jolly, 'L'épopée en context: variantes et usages politiques de deux récit épiques (Mali/Guinée)', *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 65:4 (2010), 885–912; J.-L. Amselle, 'L'Afrique a-t-elle "inventé" les droits de l'homme?', *Syllabus Review*, 2:3 (2011), 446–63; and Mann, *Empires to NGOs*, 238–42.

64 Mann, *Empires to NGOs*, 239–40.

The Manden charter (or charter of *Kurugan Fuga*) underlines the proclivity for summoning the so-called West African golden age to produce material for present aspirations.[65] The Māli empire appears more as a federation of kingdoms and provinces with some autonomy, and not as a monarchist powerful state centralized around the capital, giving a political precedent inclusive and respectful of its cultural and political diversity.[66] As Mann argues, 'the *Kurugan Fuga* offered a tool for thinking through this process of "returning" power to smaller communities and village confederations' and an alternative path to the European-inspired, capital-centered, and democratic nation-state which had failed to be established in a sustainable way.[67]

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, medieval history gained a new momentum in the wake of several groundbreaking publications.[68] The door was opened to a more critical and reflexive history willing to confront its historiographical inheritances. The last decade further accentuated this renewal of studies with contributions straying away from the tripartite imperial framework, such as the fragmented narrative laid out by François-Xavier Fauvelle in his *Golden Rhinoceros*, Sam Nixon's edited volume on Tadmekka, or Alain Gallais's alternative political models for West Africa before the nineteenth century.[69] In this dynamic context, medieval empires also returned to the foreground.

Yet world imperial history did not change its relationship with African empires from before the nineteenth century. When Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper published their acclaimed *Empires in World History*, medieval empires of West Africa were only mentioned anecdotally.[70] A worldwide renewal of interest in a 'new imperial history' overlooked Africa.[71] As a reaction, endeavors from both Francophone and Anglophone

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65 Jansen, 'Next generation', 309. When making room for the African past in the greater history of human rights was needed, a Sudanic empire provided it. Such a claim is of course to be understood in the remit of the group enunciating it and in a competitive nationalist context. On how competition and narrative friction led to creative tensions regarding the Sunjata epic, see F. Simonis, 'Le griot, l'historien, le chasseur et l'UNESCO', *Revue ultramarines*, 28 (2015), 14–30.

66 The Māli Empire is described as a federation in e.g., F. Simonis, 'L'Empire du Mali d'hier à aujourd'hui', *Cahier d'histoire: Revue d'histoire critique*, 128 (2015), 5. It could be argued that medieval sources, with a biased Islamic conception of power, show the opposite, emphasizing the importance of the etiquette of the court, the place of the ruler at the center of the state, and a fairly centralized state.

67 Mann, *Empires to NGOs*, 241.

68 Masonen, *Negroland Revisited*; P. F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Inscription from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuareg History* (Oxford, 2003); J. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Saʿdi's Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents* (Leiden, 2003).

69 F.-X. Fauvelle, *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages* (Princeton, 2018), first published in French as *Le rhinocéros d'or*; Nixon, *Essouk-Tadmekka*; A. Gallais, *De mil, d'or et d'esclave: Le Sahel précolonial* (Lausanne, 2011), 74–90. Some years before, other historians had already focused on other regions of medieval West Africa like the Senegambia; see A. Bâ, *Le Takrur: Des origines à la conquête par le Mali, VIe-XIIIe siècles* (Nouakchott, Mauritania, 2002 [1984]); and J. Boulègue, *Le grand Jolof* (Paris, 1987).

70 J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010), 10. This particular point was one of the criticisms of the book, see for instance D. Ghosh, 'Another set of imperial turns?', *American Historical Review*, 117:3 (2012), 773.

71 This historiographical trend focuses largely on European colonial empires.

academia strived to insert African empires into world history.[72] To 'relocate this history from the periphery to the center of world history' was an explicit goal of Michael A. Gomez's *African Dominion*.[73]

African Dominion was the first book of considerable length on the matter in a long time. For this reason, it has sparked a wide interest and has already been thoroughly discussed since its publication.[74] Returning to the history of empires was, however, tricky. Since the publication of the *Recueil* and the *Corpus*, the repository of sources had remained stable and had already been extensively exploited. In the last two decades, specialists on the topic consciously distanced themselves from grand narratives to avoid the pitfalls of the political history framed during the first decades of the twentieth century. Instead they explored new ways to relate a history drawing on a fragmented primary source base dominated by elite points of view.

So how did *African Dominion* approach this history? Gomez takes us almost immediately in medias res in the prologue, addressing what he calls the 'influential template' of the linear Ghāna-Māli-Songhay succession.[75] Pointing out that considering Ghāna the starting point of West African imperial tradition was merely scholars' uncritical repetition of the past devised by the Timbuktu chronicles, he then chooses the kingdom of Gao instead, explaining its importance using Arabic sources.[76] His argument can be strengthened by the recent unique discovery in Gao of the first fortified palace built with stones and its archeological treasure, which bears witness to a tremendous accumulation of wealth there before the eleventh century.[77] Indeed, Gao does not compare unfavorably to Ghāna. Nevertheless, why choose again a new starting point? In other centers of Arabic historical literature in West Africa, a similar status was given to other early kingdoms. The historiography of Sokoto, for instance, favored the historical Takrūr (valley of the Senegal River). In his history of Takrūr (i.e. Muslim West Africa) *Infāq al-maysūr*

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72 A French example is the 2015 dossier directed by the Africanist Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch for *Cahiers d'histoire: Revue d'histoire critique*. In the introduction, Coquery-Vidrovitch points out the necessity to deal with 'African empires' rather than empires in Africa, the latter having led to a focus mainly on European colonial empires in Africa; see C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'Introduction', in C. Coquery-Vidrovitch (ed.), special issue 'Les empires africains, des origines au XXe siècle', *Cahiers d'histoire: Revue d'histoire critique*, 128 (2015), 13.

73 M. A. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton, 2018), 7.

74 See especially the contributions to 'Review roundtable: Michael Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*', *American Historical Review* 124:2 (2019), 581–94. Gomez agreed to take part in a review roundtable with Ghislaine Lydon, Ousmane Kane, Shamil Jeppie, and Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias. His answer followed the four reviews. The five papers together give a fair overview of the book's strengths and weaknesses, and they will not be repeated here.

75 'Early West African history has come to represent a sort of time before time, when Africa was powerful and free of imperial imposition. Indeed, the notion of a West African "golden age" has been critical to many antislavery, anticolonial, and antiracism campaigns, in response to a western hegemonic insistence on an Africa both backward and devoid. Within such a context, histories of early and medieval West African societies tend to emphasize the urban-based, large-scale polity, majestic in scope and lavish in lifestyle, rolling out in linear and successive fashion, beginning with Ghana, then Mali, followed by Songhay.' Gomez, *African Dominion*, 20.

76 *Ibid.*

77 S. Takezawa and M. Cissé, 'Discovery of the earliest royal palace in Gao and its implications for the history of West Africa', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 208:4 (2012), 813–44. Gomez does not cite this article.

fī tārīḫ bilād al-Takrūr, Muhammad Bello placed the beginning of West Africa's Muslim political history with the historical Takrūr in the far west, a kingdom long forgotten.[78]

It might be more accurate to state that before the eleventh century the Sahel was home to a myriad of kingdoms — of which Ghāna, Gao, and Takrūr were the most powerful — that underwent different trajectories in both West African and European historiographies. Gao lost its identity as a separate kingdom as its history was diluted in the genesis of the Songhay Empire depicted in the Timbuktu chronicles, whereas Ghāna and Takrūr were more fortunate. Challenging this 'influential template' forged during the colonial period is a necessity. At the time of Songhay, for example, Māli was still a powerful kingdom acting as a model and a starting point for new political endeavors and their narratives, as in the case of the Kaabu federation or the kingdom of Gonja.[79] If we consider the wider region of postmedieval West Africa, the so-called imperial tradition of Ghāna-Māli-Songhay was one of many political traditions that developed around these three powerful states and others in orature and Arabic literature. Each of them had their own reading of the past before 1600.

The concept of empire and its historiographical trajectory, not discussed in a dedicated section, appear scattered throughout *African Dominion*.[80] The notion is discussed, for instance, upon broaching the Sunjata epic:

> The epic form of the Sunjata narrative is treated here as fundamentally a declaration of the integral elements of empire as understood by the Mande, featuring how it is thought to have come into being and the modalities by which it operated. As effected hundreds of years after the period in question, the corpus may serve more contemporary interests, but to the degree that earlier oral accounts were actually formed during the historical period they represent an attempt at recording and legitimating empire.[81]

In order to legitimize the Sunjata epic as a source for medieval history, Gomez offers three interpretive categories: 'historical developments corroborated by independent sources', 'developments posited by the oral corpus and unsubstantiated by sources of unrelated provenance, yet registering within a range of historical plausibility', and traditions whose 'didactic quality' enabled them to articulate social narratives that gave historical significance to relationships between groups.[82] The question of the Sunjata epic as a source for medieval history is itself a subfield of study. In the last three decades, as stated before, scholars working on the epic have come to realize that its current versions were certainly formed in postmedieval times. They shed light on how Manden societies made use of the

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78 'It has disappeared, to the point that the people of this land don't know its origin.' M. Bello, *Infāq al-maysūr fī tārīḫ bilād al-Takrūr*, ed. C. E. J. Whitting (London, 1951), 3. On the question of Takrūr, see U. al-Naqar, 'Takrūr: the history of a name', *The Journal of African History*, 10:3 (1969), 365–74.

79 On the Kaabu federation, see T. Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589* (Cambridge, 2012), 46–52. On the Gonja kingdom, see I. Wilks, N. Levtzion, and B. Haight (eds.), *Chronicles from Gonja: A Tradition of West African Muslim Historiography* (Cambridge, 1986). See also H. Collet, 'Les souvenirs du Mâli: les Mâli anciens comme horizon mémoriel en Afrique de l'Ouest (XVIIe–XIXe siècle)', in F.-X. Fauvelle and C. Gutron (eds.), *Afrique: Passés antérieurs* (Paris, forthcoming).

80 This was underlined by S. Jeppie, 'Review roundtable: Michael Gomez, *African Dominion*', 588.

81 Gomez, *African Dominion*, 62.

82 *Ibid.* 63.

political inheritance of Māli in order to position themselves in a complex network of political and social claims and statuses.[83]

The Ghāna-Māli-Songhay trinity emerges almost unscathed from *African Dominion*. The idea of a medieval imperial age, with 'West Africa at its pinnacle', is even strengthened.[84] It is undeniably a powerful argument to insert West Africa into the conversation on both world imperial history and world history, a process that only truly started in the last few years.[85] The book certainly serves its greater purpose. On the other hand, the idea of a 'historical exception' and its subsequent avatars (i.e. the golden age, the apex of a history) remain the corollaries of the age of empires. First elaborated in colonial times as a means to create a void between a glorious age and the arrival of the French — who took upon themselves to revive these societies with their so-called civilization after centuries of alleged decadence — the idea of 'historical exception' must be challenged. It is all too dependent on a certain political reading of the past and can be counterbalanced. From the perspective of Arabic manuscript culture and Islamic intellectual production, for instance, West Africa appears at its pinnacle during postmedieval centuries. The city of Timbuktu, the showcase of West African history, experienced its intellectual peak and radiated its influence in the decades following the medieval period.[86] The same can be said of the great city of Djenné.[87] Until the European conquest, on the whole West Africa continued to be politically, socially, and culturally very innovative and dynamic.

CONCLUSION: PARTING WITH THE GHĀNA-MĀLI-SONGHAY TEMPLATE

Ending the medieval period in West Africa with the fall of Songhay in 1591 is a peculiar choice. Classically, the end of the medieval period was defined by either a Western European event (the invention of metallic printing in the 1450s, the exploration of the New World or end of the Reconquista in 1492) or a Mediterranean event (the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the fall of the Mamlūk Empire in 1517). Therefore, with these choices of periodization West Africa has been placed out of sync, not unlike a historical isolate. A group of French historians from different fields of medieval studies has recently suggested a more inclusive model of periodization using the 'regime of "globality"' (*régime*

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83 Jan Jansen's work is particularly precious in this matter, see Jansen, 'Representation of status'; J. Jansen, 'Polities and political discourse: was Mande already a segmentary society in the Middle Ages?', *History in Africa*, 23 (1996), 121–8; J. Jansen, 'The political and military organization of the Northern Upper Niger, c. 1650–c. 1850', *Journal of West African History*, 1:1 (2015), 1–36; J. Jansen, 'When marrying a Muslim: the social code of political elites in the Western Sudan, c. 1600–c. 1850', *The Journal of African History*, 57:1 (2016), 24–45; Jansen, 'Next generation', 239–58. This is somewhat similar to the seventeenth-century Timbuktu chronicles reinventing the Sahelian past to serve a political project.

84 Gomez, *African Dominion*, 142.

85 See for example B. Hirsch and Y. Potin, 'Le continent détourné: frontières et mobilité des mondes africains', in P. Boucheron (ed.), *Histoire du monde au XVe siècle* (Paris, 2017 [2009]), 154–91; and Boucheron, Fauvelle, and Loiseau, 'Rythmes du monde au Moyen Âge'.

86 E. Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 1983); and more recently S. Jeppie and S. B. Diagne (eds.), *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town, 2008).

87 G. Holder, 'Djenné, "la ville aux 313 saints": convocation des savoirs, "lutte des classements" et production d'une ville sainte au Mali', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 208:4 (2012), 741–65.

de globalité) concept. Here the medieval period is characterized by as a particular moment of globalization, with the Islamic lands holding the central place and connecting Asian, European, and African poles through trade and other forms of circulation. The limits of this world system were drawn by the maximal range of trade goods' mobility.[88] In this system, West Africa's place was far from marginal; the region appears as one of the main historical poles and participates fully in this specific world economy. This regime of globality shifted with the opening of the Atlantic world as the Islamic lands lost their central position and connecting role. If we argue, rightfully in my opinion, that West Africa has always been a key participant in world history, we then have to acknowledge that the sultanate of Songhay belongs to a postmedieval temporality.[89] The sultan Askia Muhammad (r. 1493–1529) may have felt that something had changed in the rhythm of the world. Under his rule, Songhay was the first western Sahelian state to undertake the conquest of swaths of the Sahara as a way to better control the *chaînes opératoires* of the trans-Saharan trade. The sultanate of Māli seemingly never felt the need to carry out such an initiative in the desert, but by the end of the fifteenth century European coastal trading posts were a growing phenomenon. In the same period that Askia Muhammad undertook his pilgrimage to Mecca (1497–8), the Portuguese achieved the circumvention of the continent. The reshuffle of the West African geopolitical landscape had already started. Furthermore, the epistolary exchanges between the caliphates of Ḥamdallāhi and Sokoto in the first half of the nineteenth century, brought to light by Mauro Nobili, suggests that the age of Islamic reforms, also called the age of Islamic revolutions, was deemed to have started with Askia Muhammad.[90] The Songhay sultanate would belong then to a period, spanning from the end of medieval times to the French conquest, defined by the new place of Islam in state building and government.

If we consider, on the one hand, the complex political mosaic of the western Sahel until the thirteenth century in which coexisted powerful kingdoms (Takrūr, Gao, Ghāna) and secondary kingdoms or city-states (Tadmekka, Zāfūn, Awdaghust, Malal) and, on the other hand, the fact that West Africa was among the first regions impacted by the shift of globalization, then the Ghāna-Māli-Songhay template as an embodiment of the medieval period loses its relevance. We have seen before that it can be interpreted as one emic conceptualization of the past among others that developed in postmedieval West Africa. Leaving it behind will prove difficult, for the linear imperial tradition Ghāna-Māli-Songhay has become a powerful landmark of this history. It will take time. As recent archeological publications have shown, the longing for the three empires is hard to resist.[91]

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[88] Boucheron, Fauvelle, and Loiseau, 'Rythmes du monde au Moyen Âge', 150–66; see also the introduction to Fauvelle, *Golden Rhinoceros*.

[89] A recent publication places it with the states of the modern period, which takes place between the medieval and the contemporary periods according to the French quadripartition of history. See R. Dewière, 'Les sultanats du Songhay et du Borno', in F.-X. Fauvelle and I. Surun (eds.), *Atlas historique de l'Afrique* (Paris, 2019), 32–3.

[90] Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph and the Renewer of the Faith*, 192, 222.

[91] K. MacDonald et al., 'Sorotomo: a forgotten Malian capital?', *Archaeology International*, 13 (2011), 52–64; S. Takezawa and M. Cissé (eds.), *Sur les traces des grands empires: Recherches archéologiques au Mali* (Paris, 2016).

Concerning the highly polysemous concept of empire, there is no reason to deny West African medieval states such status. Inclusive definitions, such as that of Fanny Madeline, have suggested that the designation is suitable to various historical contexts: 'The empire can be defined as a vast and dynamic space, of formal and informal domination, multiterritorial or extraterritorial, where the absence of a socio-spatial unity has for a corollary the creation of a hybrid political system.'[92] In this regard, the great medieval states of West Africa were indeed fully-fledged empires. In this paper, I have emphasized how these empires have become central to the history of medieval West Africa and what this signifies. First imposed by Europeans, the concept has undergone several stages of transformation, often carrying over its original (European) ethnocentric ideas. For the time being, we may still need the political landmark of empire. Indeed, the recent revival of imperial-themed historiography has proved the persistent need for translating West Africa's great achievements into the common tongues of academia for the world to recognize them.

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92 F. Madeline, 'L'empire et son espace: héritages, organisations et pratiques', *Hypothèses*, 11 (2008), 223.