

BOOK REVIEWS

States, Archives, and the Vivid Past

A History of West Central Africa to 1850

By John K. Thornton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
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The acclaimed historian of West Central Africa, John Thornton, introduces his new book as a long overdue response to Jan Vansina's seminal *Kingdoms of the Savanna*.¹ One of the most influential works of African history since its publication in 1966, *Kingdoms* was intended as an introduction to the precolonial political history of Central Africa as well as a demonstration of the value of oral tradition as historical evidence. Its success led to a series of critical studies through the 1970s and 1980s, which modified the historical and evidentiary claims of *Kingdoms*. Nonetheless, until the publication of *A History of West Central Africa*, no work has replicated the geographic and temporal scope of *Kingdoms*.

A History of West Central Africa, like *Kingdoms*, offers a history of state formation and political centralization in polities that Vansina and Thornton both term 'kingdoms' and 'empires' from about 1500 to before European colonial conquest at the end of the nineteenth century. They focus geographically on the southern drainage and northwestern mouth of the Congo River, as well as the Angola plateau and the upper Zambezi region to its south. The principal polities here include Kongo, Ndongo, Matamba, Portuguese Angola, Loango, Lunda, Kuba, and Luba. Thornton, thus, has an expansive definition of West Central Africa, far beyond his previous focus on Kongo- and Kimbundu-speaking regions of Angola and following the Lunda polities into the interior of present-day Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia. His major organizing theme of political centralization limits coverage of communities in the northern reaches of the region — rainforest societies characterized by decentralization, also mostly left out by Vansina's *Kingdoms* but detailed in his *Paths in the Rainforest*.²

Kingdoms and *A History of West Central Africa* differ in their evidentiary emphasis. Vansina, through fieldwork and the testimonies collected by anthropologists, missionaries, ethnohistorians, and colonial officials, used *Kingdoms* to make a case for oral tradition as evidence. Given the ink spilled on interpreting oral traditions since its publication, key aspects of *Kingdoms* need revision, based especially on subsequent work by Vansina, his students, and his successors, including but not limited to Joseph Miller, Phyllis M. Martin, Thomas Reeve, Jeffrey Hoover, John Yoder, and, of course, John Thornton. In addition to using this post-*Kingdoms* generation of scholarship, mostly published in the 1970s and 1980s, Thornton's evidence is based on a careful evaluation of original archival manuscripts. His experience with the Kongo Kingdom, which generated both oral tradition and documentation, led Thornton to recognize that oral tradition is selective, with omission and

¹J. Vansina, *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (Madison, 1966).

²J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of a Political tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, 1990).

amplification of details, and thus for the historian should be secondary to the study of contemporary documentation.³

Thornton's trove of archival sources, mostly Portuguese but also Italian, French, German, Dutch, and Kimbundu, gathered over decades of research, is impressive. In the main, they follow careful readings of several notable accounts from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, including those of the Portuguese soldier and historian António de Oliveira de Cadornega, the Italian Capuchin missionary Giovanni Cavazzi de Montecuccolo, and the Portuguese ethnographer-explorer-diplomat Henrique Augusto Dias de Carvalho, read critically, in the original, and supplemented by diaries, reports, and correspondence. By interpreting these European and mostly non-internal sources (although there are exceptional cases of African-authored documents, especially for the Kongo Kingdom), Thornton is developing an important methodological innovation for Africanist historiography. Using these sources involve archival skills often underemphasized in Africanist historical training and investigation. Here Thornton adeptly cross-checks names and places across sources in multiple European languages with arcane orthographies, which are then compared to renderings in modern Angolan or Congolese languages. Gauging by the details in the footnotes, Thornton spent much time standardizing disparate sources into a single and comprehensible historical narrative.

Contemporary documents, compared to oral traditions, allow for a precise appreciation of human agency. Even as Vansina's *Kingdoms* focused on the acts of state builders (and destroyers), these were mostly derived from oral tradition, which could conflate mythological heroes, titles, and individuals. Moreover, oral tradition emphasized details significant to a society at a certain moment in time. Once these aspects of oral tradition were appreciated, oral traditions came to be studied for structural and cultural aspects of those societies, as in Luc De Heusch's influential *The Drunken King, or, The Origin of the State*, which challenged key historical interpretations of *Kingdoms*.⁴ Thornton's work, which by contrast emphasizes archives not oral traditions, is a history of those mid- and upper-level state makers who might have been forgotten, amplified, or obfuscated in the memory of the societies concerned. The book is teeming with individuals who act. There is contingency at every juncture; nothing is taken for granted and little appears inevitable or determined by structural elements. As such this is a complex history, hardly for beginners: students and scholars might find the level of detail challenging. For Thornton detail is vital: detail demonstrates agency and gets the record straight.

There are broader patterns that Thornton discerns, notably the imbrication of the Atlantic slave trade in the many wars of early modern West Central Africa. Yet Thornton's work here, unlike his previous scholarship, takes us even further away from Atlantic commerce. Thornton does not develop a general theory of the impact of the slave trade across time, and African agency is always highlighted in contrast to processes of political, economic, and demographic underdevelopment through the growth of debt and slavery, as in, say, Joseph Miller's *Way of Death*, another influential book about this area that employs similar sources.⁵ For Thornton, the Atlantic slave trade is located within earlier and ongoing traditions of population movement, since, according to Thornton, the forcible movement of populations from sparse rural regions to towns was the chief mechanism behind the extraction of surplus needed for political centralization. The slave trade, for Thornton, was not all that was going on here. Much conquest and expansion from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries was driven by efforts to control textile, copper, and salt production in the eastern and northern regions.

Thornton's focus on contemporary documentation recenters the narrative of *Kingdoms* from the Luba in the east of the region to the Kongo and Ndongo polities in the west. For *Kingdoms*, 'the

³J. Thornton, 'Modern oral tradition and the historic Kingdom of Kongo', in P. S. Landau (ed.), *The Power of Doubt: Essays in Honor of David Henige* (Madison, 2011), 195–208.

⁴L. de Heusch, *The Drunken King, or, The Origin of the State*, trans. and ann. Roy Willis (Bloomington, IN, 1982).

⁵J. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade* (Madison, 1988).

crucial event in the earlier history of Central Africa . . . [was] the introduction of Luba principles of government into Lunda land . . . and their transformation by the Lunda'.⁶ This east to west movement of political principles is reversed in *A History of West Central Africa*. Instead, we follow Portuguese chroniclers from the coast into the interior. Thornton's narrative begins and is centered on those areas where the evidence is strongest: the Angolan plateau to the Congo River mouth. Possible bias due to the density of evidence for certain regions aside, there are valid reasons for Thornton to recenter the narrative. Vansina and the earlier historiography gave much weight to the origin myths of oral traditions from the interior and underappreciated how eighteenth- or nineteenth-century alterations to these oral traditions gave an impression of the historical depth of the polities in the interior (as in the case of supposed western migration of the Imbangala titleholder, Kinguri).⁷ Luba and especially Lunda appear in Thornton's accounts as later political innovations, with their height achieved only after 1750. While there may have been earlier processes of state formation along with the slow and steady development of institutions that would underpin later forms of government, as indicated by archaeology and historical linguistics, there is little evidence of the scale and systems of transregional governance of the eighteenth-century Lunda and Luba 'empires'.⁸ Thornton demonstrates that Lunda was not as deeply rooted in the past and that it was no less powerful and influential for that fact: from 1750 to 1850, Thornton has the Lunda as the prime movers in this region.

Colonial archives, like oral traditions, are selective in what and who they record. They obfuscate according to the interests, beliefs, and perceptions of those who record, as Jared Staller has demonstrated recently in his against-the-grain reading of the European accounts of the Imbangala.⁹ Thornton is adept at reading European sources critically and contextually, even as he offers little in terms of the theory, or even methodology, that informs his archival investigation. Vansina's *Kingdoms* was likewise a demonstration of a methodology rather than a discussion of it. Nonetheless, before and after *Kingdoms*, Vansina published extensively on oral tradition as historical evidence.¹⁰ Readers of Thornton's work are forced to consult numerous disparate reports on Portuguese and missionary archival sources that he has published over the previous few decades.¹¹ It would be a great service to Africanist historians should Thornton develop these reports into a critical edition on his sources and a methodological reflection on using them.

A reliance on contemporary documentary primary sources is laudable but can also lead to errors. Take this passage: 'Shaka Zulu's revolution in southeastern Africa would have its echoes much farther north, as Zulu-led armies fanned out over Southern Africa. In 1823 Cacoma Milonga allowed the army led by the Makolo (Zulu) general Sebetwana, coming northward from South Africa, to establish himself within the territory of Luyana' (319). Even if we accept the agency of 'Shaka Zulu's revolution', a rather antiquated historiographic notion, Sebetwane was not a Zulu general and had Sotho, not Zulu, ancestry. The date Thornton gives for Sebetwane's settlement in Luyana lands, 1823, is highly unlikely. The errors seem to derive from a particular reading of a difficult source, Da Silva Pôrto's journals. The rendering of the generally known Makololo of

⁶Vansina, *Kingdoms*, 97.

⁷J. Vansina, 'It never happened: Kinguri's exodus and its consequences', *History in Africa*, 25 (1998), 387–403.

⁸The precursors to Lunda and related institutions of government are described in J. Vansina, 'Government in Kasai before the Lunda', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 31:1 (1998), 1–22; and J. Vansina, *How Societies are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville, VA, 2004).

⁹J. Staller, *Converging on Cannibals: Terrors of Slaving in Atlantic Africa* (Athens, OH, 2019).

¹⁰See Vansina's seminal publication on oral tradition, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985), which updated and deepened his 1961 intervention. See also J. Vansina, *De la tradition orale: Essai de methode historique* (Tervuren, Belgium, 1961).

¹¹On Kongo oral traditions versus written sources, see Thornton, 'Modern oral tradition'. Thornton has published numerous reports on Portuguese and missionary archival sources. For example, see J. Thornton, 'The correspondence of the Kongo Kings, 1614–35: problems of internal written evidence on a Central African Kingdom', *Paideuma*, 33 (1987), 407–21; J. Thornton, 'New light on Cavazzi's seventeenth century description of Kongo', *History in Africa*, 6 (1979), 253–64. On the latter, see Thornton's translation of Cavazzi on his personal blog, a great contribution in making Kongo history accessible: <https://www.bu.edu/afam/people/faculty/john-thornton/john-thorntons-african-texts/>.

Sebetwane as ‘Makolo’, represents not only an unusual transcription (Da Silva Pôrto has the name as ‘Macorrollos’) but also a problem of shoddy editing, a general flaw of the book. What else did these Portuguese records get wrong, or what was missed or misread, given the vast historical ground that Thornton covered here? In the case of Sebetwane the rich primary source and historiographic evidence makes the error immediately apparent; however, for many other cases, due to the dearth of alternative sources, historians will have to carefully follow up on Thornton’s footnotes, a frustrating task because *A History of West Central Africa* offers no bibliography.

Close adherence to Portuguese documents leads to an adoption of European early modern terminology by Thornton. There is a certain intellectual justification in calling something by what its observers called it; as such, prominent men and women are identified as nobles (or by the generic Angolan term for chief, *soba*), subordinates are generally slaves, uncontested elites are kings, and transnational groups of polities are empires. Yet is Thornton guilty of describing West Central Africa through exogenous categories? In some cases, such as Kongo, the category of say ‘kingdom’ is not really exogenous at all, given the long-held ties between Kongo and the early modern European world. But what of the polities to the interior, further from Portuguese influence? No doubt observers such as Dias de Carvalho described them with the conceptual apparatus available to them. But should we rely on their terms? In what sense were far-flung Lunda or Luba titleholders representatives of an empire, for example? When discussing the Lunda Empire, Thornton seems to have the Holy Roman Empire in mind, a particular historical phenomenon that needs further discussion for Africanist historians. Vansina came to adopt the term ‘commonwealth’ instead of ‘empire’, which appears a more accurate evocation.

By relying on the terms found in his sources, Thornton by and large ignores many anthropological terms. Even as these terms might also be exogenous conceptual categories, many scholars, including Vansina, came to prefer them. For example, in *How Societies are Born*, a precursor to the history of the region discussed by Thornton, Vansina discussed the emergence of age sets, sodalities, houses, and vicinages in eastern Angola and Kasai regions.¹² In part because of Thornton’s sources and terminology, these institutions are hardly to be found in *A History of West Central Africa*. It is difficult for those not closely attuned to details to recognize that these are the histories of the same societies. In Thornton’s account there are few titleholders, dependents, kinship groups, big men, secret associations, sodalities, age sets, etc., not to mention the more precise political institutions that have been used to describe governance in these polities, such as perpetual kinship and positional succession. As such there is a flattening of political variation across the region into early modern European political concepts. This book will be appreciated for historical details, not for cross-cultural anthropological and comparative political insights.

Kingdoms was published as European colonial regimes crumbled and Africans set out to organize what they hoped would become powerful states aimed at advancing the well-being of citizens. Fifty years later a very different view of the power of African states prevails. A celebration of statecraft has been replaced by that of the transformative power of the people. Even as Thornton does not necessarily celebrate political centralization, he remains focused on it — ‘powerful’ is always a key descriptive term, and yet the reader is never quite sure the extent of power or what is meant by it. Although there is still an audience that appreciates narratives of powerful African kings, queens, and nobles, recent scholars have pointed out that the development of social and political organization in decentralized and acephalous societies was also an arena of agency and history.¹³ The smaller scale appears in Thornton’s book, but more often as victims or obstacles to better-organized and centralized states, rather than as societies with histories and lasting institutions of their own.

¹²Vansina, *How Societies are Born*.

¹³K. M. de Luna, *Collecting Food, Cultivating People: Subsistence and Society in Central Africa* (New Haven, 2016). Closer to West Central Africa, see the emphasis on smaller scale societies in J. A. Krug, *Fugitive Modernities: Kisama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, NC, 2018).

Thornton has thought deeply about the choices he made, and despite the above critiques, there are legitimate intellectual justifications for the interpretations he chose. His work forces African historians to reevaluate the evidentiary value of contemporary European documentation. Although there are still many questions, by providing us with an introduction to the wealth of existing sources, by developing a clear political chronology, and by locating descriptions in time and place, he has provided a baseline for future generations of historians. There is, at last, little reason for historians to return to the authority of *Kingdoms*.

Will Thornton's work approach the impact and legacy of Vansina's *Kingdoms*? Precolonial African history, as Thornton notes, is no longer as popular as it was in the 1970s, and as such the *History of West Central Africa* may never be viewed as the landmark contribution as *Kingdoms*. But the most compelling reason for Thornton's work to be discussed for many years to come is less what is in vogue in the Western academy and more the work's relevance for Central Africans. *Kingdoms* was translated and distributed among many of the polities that it described, giving legitimacy and agency to the history of those outside the ambit of the colonial and postcolonial elite. (That might have been Vansina's intention). Even as Thornton's focus on archives appears to further distance professional academic historiography from the histories told by these societies, the power and appreciation of documents by Central Africans should not be underestimated. As this review is penned in early 2021, supporters of the Movimento do Protectorado Lunda Tchokwe, several of whom have been killed by the Angolan security apparatus, stake their claims for regional autonomy on the agreements signed between one of Thornton's key sources, Henrique Dias de Carvalho, and the Lunda paramount almost 140 years ago. Thornton's work will direct us all to this rich history in documents, with its ongoing relevance.

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Race, Tourism, and Conservation in South Africa

Safari Nation: A Social History of the Kruger National Park

By Jacob S. T. Dlamini. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2020. Pp. 350. \$36.95, paperback (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2409-4); \$80.00, hardcover (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2408-7); \$36.99, e-book (ISBN: 978-0-8214-4088-9).

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Following Jane Carruther's seminal work *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History*, the Kruger National Park (KNP) has become an important location through which to disentangle South Africa's complex history.¹ Jacob S. T. Dlamini's *Safari Nation* builds on this tradition and demonstrates that Kruger was never the exclusively white playground of popular and scholarly imagination. Rather, he adopts a 'histories of presence' framework to offer evidence of black experiences with the park, both inside and outside of the preserved landscape (3). Dlamini constructs

¹J. Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History* (Pietermaritzburg, 1995).