

# BOOK REVIEW

**John K. Thornton. *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. (New Approaches to African History series.) xx + 365 pp. Index. \$21.19. Paper. ISBN: 9781107565937.

Published by Jan Vansina in 1966, *Kingdoms of Savanna* was a hallmark, both methodological and conceptual, of the historiography of Africa. *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, by John K. Thornton, which is expressly affiliated with *Kingdoms*, is destined to be a valuable tool for all those whose work involves the history of Africa. The volume offers a reading of the history of the region centered on the emergence and evolution, up to the nineteenth century, of hierarchical and centralized forms of government defined as “state,” although, as in Vansina’s book, “kingdoms” and “empires” are the concepts commonly used.

Although it is a political history book, *A History of West Central Africa* is not limited to this level of analysis. In a region where the impacts of the Atlantic slave trade were especially extensive and lasting, Thornton draws attention to the importance of goods and productive specializations which stimulated short and long-distance commercial networks. The centrality it gives to textile production and to the strategic value of controlling the textile production belt—on the northern edge of the region—as an explanatory element for the processes of conquest, expansion, and displacement of political entities and populations is one of the most fruitful innovations the book offers.

Using his extensive knowledge of the vast bibliography relevant to this region, Thornton reconstructs the history of these political entities based on primary sources. From this point of view, it is well known, the region presents an enormous challenge. It includes areas where the set of written sources is one of the most extensive and richest in the entire continent, registered in different typologies and languages—Portuguese, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, English, and French—and spread across archives in several European and African cities. On the other hand, the central-western region of the continent comprises sub-regions where textual evidence is scarce and only very recent and where, at the same time, oral sources are plentiful.

Thornton has mastered the volume of this vast collection of sources through decades of research and extensive work, in particular on the western

half of this vast region between the Congo and Kwanza rivers. Although always complementary to the written record, his narrative also incorporates data from oral traditions, both those dispersed in the reports of missionaries, governors, soldiers, or travelers who crossed the region, as well as those from the modern ethnography, benefiting from the field archives of scholars such as Gladwin Murray Childs. The care taken in collating sources and the thoroughness in verifying data to ascertain the facts is impressive. Thornton's knowledge of several African languages, particularly Kikongo and Kimbundu, allows him to refine the nomenclature of places as well as the spelling of the names of African characters in a way which will certainly constitute a reference for the future.

*A History of West Central Africa* is framed through the thesis which is explained in the opening chapter: the idea that the history of human societies is marked by the transition from "egalitarian" to "stratified" and "unequal" forms of social organization. These, in turn, have given rise to hierarchical and centralized governance structures, which constitute a major social innovation. This thesis, due to its evolutionist flavor, is thoroughly examined in the field of anthropology, as shown by the very recent work of David Graeber and David Wengrow (*The Dawn of Everything. A New History of Humanity* [Penguin, 2021]).

With regard to this volume, the thesis has two problems. First, as Thornton's work itself shows, the composite nature of these political entities which are labeled as hierarchical and the alternating centripetal and centrifugal tensions which cross them bring into question their classification as centralized, even if the vocabulary by which they are described in the sources seems to indicate that they are. Second, the thesis omits from the equation the decentralized modalities of social organization that have historically evidenced great plasticity and longevity, even if some of them are not strictly "political" in nature. In a work as dense and detailed as this one, there is surprisingly little space allotted to Central African institutions and religious movements—mentioned foremost in the context of their interactions with Christianity—which mobilized populations and transcended spaces and political entities.

In a sense, *A History of West Central Africa* is also a state-of-the-art exercise on the historiography of the region. Its parallel with *Kingdoms of Savanna* shows how much progress has been made in advancing the knowledge of the histories of those societies, but areas of ignorance still persist, and new problems and questions arise from the continued renewal of critical assessments of the sources. The maps in the volume are very useful for a comprehensive reading. But in a work such as this a bibliography is more necessary than usual due to the almost encyclopaedic dimension of the references mobilized by Thornton, and its absence is incomprehensible. The lack of an index of abbreviations is even more unjustified. The reader who is less familiar with the subject and, above all, the student new to the field will experience major difficulties in sorting out the profusion of acronyms identifying archives, document collections, and compendiums.

*A History of West-Central Africa until 1850* is very useful as a working tool for all those interested in the history of Africa. It is regrettable that Cambridge University Press, in view of these several omissions, failed to produce a work which would do complete justice to the scope and relevance of the project.

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