



John K. Thornton. *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*. New Approaches to African History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Maps. 384 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-12715-9.

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A History of West Central Africa to 1850 certainly will be a valuable reference work for any researcher examining political, social, and economic developments in the region. John K. Thornton's mastery of Portuguese and other relevant archives for this broad time period is arguably second to none. The level of detail regarding political struggles in the region is quite remarkable. By combining a voluminous collection of primary sources with the current historiography, Thornton does a major service to specialists of the region and period as well as more general readers. His book serves as an update to earlier works, such as *History of Central Africa* (1983), edited by David Birmingham and Phyllis Martin and *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (1988) by the late Joseph Miller. As Thornton notes, the declining numbers of histories of precolonial Africa in the 1980s and 1990s (particularly for states in the interior, such as the Luba Empire) created a crying need for a new overview. One minor quibble with the title is that his definition of West Central Africa excludes Gabon, even though Gabon is often referred to as part of western Central Africa. The Loango state's influences appear to have extended up into modern southern Gabon and the Teke kingdom was on the northern outskirts of Thornton's main area of interest, but

Thornton's definition of West Central Africa leaves these regions out of view.

One of the quite valuable general insights lies in the integration of the expansion of the Lunda Empire and other interior states with developments in regions closer to the Atlantic coast. One unintentional result of the flourishing of scholarship on the Kongo kingdoms and its southern neighbors in the last two decades is that the importance of interior states has been at times neglected. The older literature on the Lunda state dating back to the 1960s and 1970s tended to not connect with events in Kongo and more coastal territories. Thornton also brings in recent scholarship on these interior territories and employs sources in Portuguese on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This synthesis of primary sources and current research thus places the Lunda state at the center rather than at the periphery of major events. The Lunda state's increasingly powerful grip on much of the modern Democratic Republic of Congo had a growing impact on the eastern borders of Kongo and other states.

This book leaves readers to link Thornton's dense narrative history to their particular interests and approaches. There are benefits and disadvantages to this decision to leave out a central argument, which certainly is quite unusual for a monograph like this. Readers will have to judge

where Thornton's survey fits within the larger scholarship on the Atlantic slave trade and pre-colonial states. Certainly, the wars sparked by the unending competition among African political leaders fits Thornton's longstanding argument that European and Brazilian slave traders did not solely drive African political leaders to launch conflicts to exchange slaves for imported goods. How people outside of formal positions of power understood and sometimes resisted these rivalries is generally not visible here, although obviously Thornton, among others, has looked at dissident political movements, such as Kampa Vita's Antonian movement, elsewhere.

My main concern is in regard to how this book might be used in history courses. Cambridge University Press's *New Approaches to African History* series apparently is designed to "introduce debates on historiographical or substantive issues" (p. i). As much as it may be an act of hubris to doubt one of the preeminent presses in African studies, I cannot see how this goal is met here. There is no explicit discussion of the larger historiography on Central Africa or Atlantic slavery. The linguistic turn in examining the evolution of political concepts and identities used by researchers like Paul Landau and Rhiannon Stephens elsewhere is not referenced. The relevant literature certainly is embedded in the text, but students or others unfamiliar with the scholarly literature on these topics will not be able to learn much about them. I do not think this lacuna detracts from the overall value of the study, but it does have implications for how this book could be used in the classroom. Instructors would need to provide other readings to guide students through debates over the impact of the slave trade on African societies, for example. Another issue any instructor should keep in mind is the sheer density of the text as it explores political conflicts between African states, within African states, and between the Portuguese and such states as Kongo. I am not confident undergraduates would have an easy time keeping focused on major themes. There is no bibliography, let alone an annotated bibliog-

raphy to help introduce the literature to people unfamiliar with the region's history.

One possibility to try to make this study work for undergraduates would be to compare states and particularly the strategies and careers of individual leaders. They include well-known figures like Njinga as well as less well-known but prominent leaders like the early nineteenth-century Lunda king Naweji. Thornton also effectively notes the varying fortunes of individual Portuguese colonial leaders and the Marquis de Pombal's mid-eighteenth-century efforts to rationalize and consolidate the colonial government. Another approach would be to trace within the Kongo kingdom the long history of rival extended royal families, such as the House of Kinlazu and the House of Kimpanzu.

For faculty and graduate students, on the other hand, this will be an indispensable resource for anyone seeking to conduct research in this period. It is highly unlikely there will be a similar synthesis of primary and secondary sources on precolonial West Central Africa in English for the foreseeable future, just as the last works to take up this monumental task came out more than three decades ago. The author's decades of consulting appropriate European archives means that researchers will find this study to be a crucial route in directing them through a very rich body of material. There is no doubt *A History of West Central Africa to 1850* will have a long impact on the scholarship on this region's history.

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