

*African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*, by Michael A. Gomez. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. viii+505. ISBN: 9780691177427.

Michael Gomez's 2018 book *African Dominion* is an erudite exploration of the history of the empires of medieval West Africa as key players in the global context of empire building, the *dar al-islam*, and slavery.

Divided into four sections of three to four chapters each, the book proceeds chronologically, beginning with the early Sahel and Sahara through Imperial Mali and Songhay and ending with the fall of the Songhay Empire to Morocco in the late sixteenth century. The first section provides important background and theoretical considerations for studying West Africa with the remaining sections focusing on the major personalities of each era.

The themes of the work center on “[t]he rise of Islam, the relationship of women to political power, the growth and influence of the domestically enslaved, and the invention and evolution of empire” (1). Gomez’s focus on West Africa as a place of change, innovation, and evolution directly challenges a Western notion of a static, Otherized Africa absent from history except as a foil to Europe.

In Part 1, after an overview of the traditional erasure of Africa from world history scholarship in English, Gomez uses archeological data as a counterpoint to demonstrate the rise of urban centers and global trade networks in the Middle Niger Valley during pre-antiquity, focusing on the towns of Jenne-jeno, Gao, and Timbuktu, and regions such as Masina and Mema. In the remaining chapters of this section, he explores early Gao and the kingdoms of Ghana in the eleventh and twelfth centuries through the writings of Arabic travelers such as Ibn-Battuta. Gomez probes the African and Islamic development of concepts of race and ethnicity, laying the groundwork for analyses in later chapters about how eligibility for domestic slavery hinged on religious practice rather than phenotype. He also points to an intersectional issue as the Islamification of these regions imposed a patrilineality (with the children’s race following that of their father) that erased the traditional matrilineality of West Africa.

Part 2 begins with the epic Malian figure of Sunjata and moves through the development of Imperial Mali in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries. Chapter 5, “The Meanings of Sunjata and the Dawn of Imperial Mali,” is a standout chapter that provides a methodological framework applicable far beyond this book for how to use oral sources in historical analyses. Gomez rightly sees oral traditions as sources of truths, stating, “As opposed to viewing divergent sources as hierarchical and competitive in historical claims-making,

the approach here places them in dialogue, whereby the external, written record sheds light on political developments, while the oral corpus affords insights into their cultural and social dimensions” (62). He then outlines three, non-mutually-exclusive, interpretive categories for analyzing oral sources: 1) “episodes concerning historical developments corroborated by independent sources” that allow for a high probability of historicity; 2) unsubstantiated “historical developments posited by the oral corpus” that register “within a range of historical plausibility;” and 3) didactic narratives “within which the historicity of ‘events’ is of less significance than their instrumentality” thus key to “recreating the social and cultural context” of a given time period (63). In charting this methodology, Gomez provides an important tool for a more inclusive historiography.

Further, in this section, through the example of Mansa Musa and his Pilgrimage, Gomez points to the challenges these African empires confronted as they interfaced with global markets in transformation as a result of European colonization and the Atlantic slave trade.

Part 3 turns to Songhay and reevaluates the traditional focus on Timbuktu at the expense of the larger Songhay Empire. Gomez proceeds through the reigns of Sunni ‘Ali and Askia Al-Hajj Muhammad and analyzes Songhay political structures, the rulers’ uses of violence, and their religiosity. Chapter 11, “Of Clerics and Concubines,” is of particular interest to feminist readers as it explores the informal routes that women used to access power under the patriarchal structures of Imperial Songhay.

In Part 4, Gomez outlines the regimes of the fratricidal sons of Askia Muhammad, during which tensions from weak succession customs erupted in civil wars. Chapter 13, “Surfeit and Stability,” provides an important analysis of domestic slavery under Askia Dawud under whose rule Songhay will have a brief resurgence. Ultimately, Songhay will not recover from its civil wars in the changing landscape of Africa under the shadow of European colonization and slavery. In 1590, Morocco invades, and Imperial Songhay falls.

While Gomez’s implicit audience is historians of Africa and the Islamic world, the book has broader appeal to scholars who wish to expand their knowledge about both the historiography of Africa and the world of medieval West Africa on the global stage and in the development the slave trade. The book does assume a basis of knowledge about West African geography and culture that could prove an impediment to the non-specialist. That said, this aspect of the book ultimately reads more like a performance of the seriousness with which Gomez is asking us to take West African history.

One of the biggest challenges that Gomez faces is that of sources. Almost

all written sources for West Africa are either external (and contradictory) and/or postdate the events described. As have many scholars before him, Gomez acknowledges the challenges of these sources, and his strategy for reading them in dialogue with oral traditions, archeology, and epigraphy provides a profound and nuanced analysis.

From a feminist perspective, the book provides valuable insights into the loss of official lines of matrilineality in Africa and the subsequent responses of medieval West African women. While there is no explicit discussion of West African constructions of masculinity, the book's focus on male rulers provokes important questions about non-Western, intersectional identity formation. In terms of sexuality, there is little discussion beyond that of the role of women as mothers and the role of enslaved eunuchs. Eunuchs were much more than the guardians of imperial harems in West Africa, serving as advisors, soldiers, and ambassadors. Further analysis of their status could shed light on constructions of nonnormative sexualities and genders in medieval Islamic West Africa.

As Gomez states in his "Preface," "what is before the reader is only sixty percent of its original submission (as a two-volume work)" (vii). Much more remains to be said about medieval West Africa. *African Dominion* challenges the non-specialist reader to learn more.

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