

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

From the very first volumes of *The Journal of African History*, the Sahelian empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay have captured the interest of scholars (and, one hopes, readers). If at first these expansive and legendary states appeared in the background of studies of the West African gold trade, they soon emerged as an important subject of inquiry in their own right.¹ They have since become a *locus classicus* in the study of African history. This latest issue of the journal includes a forum exploring the recent surge in scholarship on these three states, recasting some of the central narratives of their existence, the relationship between them, and their very status as empires.² In a survey of recent literature, and drawing on his own opus offering a 'new history of empire', **Michael A. Gomez** points toward future directions for research while insisting on the relevance of this relatively distant period of the African past for more recent histories of gender, ethnicity, and slavery.³ **Mauro Nobili** argues that a key, shared component of these empires — namely the existence of communities of African Muslim clerics — has been understudied and undertheorized. Instead, scholarship has too often ignored the presence of African Muslim scholars and religious specialists, thereby reproducing long-refuted theories that depict Islam in West Africa as somehow foreign. Reconsidering the history of the empires, then, sheds new light on the history of Islam in the region in more recent decades as well. Finally, **Hadrien Collet's** contribution helps us to understand how it is that these early states have come to be seen as a kind of trinity, bound by the idea of an 'imperial tradition', which anchors so much of our understanding of West Africa in the centuries before the opening of the Atlantic world.

Collet's essay focuses on the ideological work that went into establishing the idea of the 'imperial tradition', which would grow so dear to French colonial thinkers. It is worth recalling that in the early decades of the twentieth century African American scholars, led by W. E. B. Du Bois, also celebrated the Sahelian empires as evidence of African

1 I. Wilks, 'The northern factor in Ashanti history: Begho and the Mande', *The Journal of African History*, 2:1 (1961), 25–34; N. Levtzion, 'The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century kings of Mali', *The Journal of African History*, 4:3 (1963), 341–53; C. Meillassoux, 'L'Itinéraire d'Ibn Battuta de Walata à Malli', *The Journal of African History*, 13:3 (1972), 389–95; J. O. Hunwick, 'The mid-fourteenth century capital of Mali', *The Journal of African History*, 14:2 (1973), 195–206.

2 The forum articles provide extensive references to recent work on Ghana, Mali, and Songhay. The papers emerge from the conference 'The Imperial Tradition' in the Sahel held at Columbia University on 6 Dec. 2019.

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

achievement.⁴ They thereby sought to combat the racist rhetoric of the time while maintaining the hegemony of the very idea of civilization built around imperial conquest, capital cities, and — it must be said — a textual tradition. The celebration of civilization was, of course, an alibi for European imperialism at that time. It follows, then, that claiming the mantle of empire for Sudanic Africa was an act of resistance to epistemological white supremacy. While Marxist scholars — whose ranks Du Bois would join later in his long life — have made us much more attuned to the violence and inequality that is the foundation of imperial rule — anywhere at any time — few historians of Africa would likely subscribe to Walter Benjamin's assertion that 'there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'⁵ Surely not the celebrated manuscripts of the Sahel, the *Tarikh al-Sudan* and the *Tarikh al-fattash*? Yet Ousmane Kane has recently excavated the complex origins of the field of Islamic intellectual history he dubs 'Timbuktu Studies', and Nobili reveals that African empires, too, deliberately and deceptively built on the legitimacy conferred by a textual tradition prone to subtle manipulation.⁶ The essays in this forum ought to be essential reading for all of us who have framed our own understanding of Africa's pre-Atlantic past around these 'temporally distant, quasi-mythical realms', realms which continue to do so much ideological work in our own time.⁷

Who better than the mid-twentieth century figure known as the 'cadi of Timbuktu' to prove the broader point about ideological manipulations of the textual tradition? In the 1950s, as Mohamed Shahid Mathee demonstrates, a clever scholar's claim to authority in Timbuktu could still provide legitimacy to an embattled empire, in this case the French one. As Mathee illustrates, when Muḥammad Maḥmūd bin al-Ŝayḥ penned a history of the southern Sahara known as the *Kitāb al-turjumān*, his strategy of seeking contemporary legitimacy by making dubious claims to associations with past glory echoed those made generations earlier. Al-Ŝayḥ is something of a picaresque figure in the history of decolonization in the Sahel, and he was a great champion of the idea of a Saharan state under French tutelage, independent both from Algeria and from Mali and its neighbors. Mathee gives al-Ŝayḥ the close attention he merits, thereby summoning the spirit of Marx, whose 'Eighteenth Brumaire' — a text contemporary with the production of the *Tarikh al-fattash* by Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir — first observed that what unfolds once as tragedy often returns as farce.⁸ Readers may ponder whether al-Ŝayḥ was to al-Ṭāhir as Louis Napoleon was to his uncle Bonaparte.

4 See, e.g., W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa, and Color and Democracy* (New York, 2007 [orig. 1947]), ch. 10. Du Bois cites in particular Léo Frobenius, Maurice Delafosse, and William Cooley as useful sources for his account of the Sahelian empires; on these figures see Collet's essay in this forum. Du Bois also notes the influence of Howard University professor William Leo Hansberry, amongst others; Du Bois, *World and Africa*, xxxiii.

5 W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. and ed. H. Arendt (New York, 1968 [orig. 1955]), 256.

6 O. Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), ch. 1; M. Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph and the Renewer of the Faith: Ahmad Lobbo, the Tārīkh al-fattāsh and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa* (Cambridge, 2020).

7 A. LaGamma (ed.), *Sahel: Arts and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara* (New York, 2020), 15.

8 K. Marx, 'The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in R. T. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd edn, New York, 1978), 594–617. On the *Tarikh al-fattash* and Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir, see Nobili's contribution to this forum, as well as Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph and the Renewer of the Faith*.

Whether in the 1950s, the 1850s, or the fifteenth century, the history of the Sahel is dominated by sedentary empires. One wonders what al-Ŝayḥ, Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir, or indeed any of the intellectuals and historians who helped to create the Sahelian tradition would have made of the nomadic state created by the Beja in the eastern desert many centuries ago. In his article ‘A Nomadic State?: The Blemmyean-Beja Polity of the Ancient Eastern Desert’, **Julien Cooper** asserts that pastoralist Beja were unified not only linguistically, but also politically. They maintained a long-lived tribal polity that, unlike the Sahelian empires, neither engendered nor relied on urban centers or long-distance trade. In other words, they were both politically centralized and nomadic, as Greek, Egyptian, Coptic, and Arabic texts reveal. Cooper’s work reminds us once again that the African past reveals a multitude of pathways to complexity.⁹

We know what we do about the Blemmyean-Beja polity due in part to the few traces of diplomatic correspondence it left behind. In **Elizabeth Thornberry**’s study of Andrew Gontshi, however, it is not diplomatic sources but the law and more specifically the practice of legal agents that opened up a pathway for black South Africans to contest segregation in the Cape Colony in the late nineteenth century. Gontshi was called to the modest but vital task of working within the law to advance the everyday interests of black South Africans. This was both ‘lawyering’ and a form of politics with a lower-case ‘p’ — a struggle for power. Gontshi’s career, argues Thornberry, opens a window onto an early generation of black South African legal agents, an elite but embattled group that helped plant the seeds of the eventual African National Congress.

The reviews section leads with **Raphael Chijioke Njoku**’s lively assessment of **Awet Tewelde Weldemichael**’s book *Piracy in Somalia: Violence and Development in the Horn of Africa*. Weldemichael shows that piracy arose in that region not because of any intrinsic cultural values or social proclivities of Somali peoples for profiteering at sea, but because of, as Njoku puts it, the ‘predatory assault on the country’s land and waters’ by foreign entities. Some of those forces coalesced in a brutally efficient international network of corruption which, combined with collapsing internal political institutions, helped to drive Somali individuals and groups into robbery at sea.

The interactions of internal and external forces, and their social consequences, is also a central theme **Joanna T. Tague**’s book, reviewed by **Jeanne Marie Penvenne**, on Mozambican refugees in postcolonial Tanzania in the 1960s and 1970s. Mozambique likewise figures into **Eric Morier-Genoud**’s book on Catholicism and politics, reviewed by **Allen Isaacman**. Processes of mobility and displacement, as well as enslavement and emancipation, are themes that crop up in **Mariana P. Candido** and **Adam Jones**’s edited volume on African women in the Atlantic World, reviewed by **Laura Rosanne Adderley**. The history of enslavement in West Africa is considered by **Finn Fuglestad**, in a book considered by **David Wheat**, while emancipation’s history in Sierra Leone is investigated by **Richard Peter Anderson** and assessed by **Tamba E. M’bayo**.

Our present era of pandemic invites reflection on the effects of disease in other times and places. Such historical comparisons are made possible by **Samuël Coghe**’s review of **Mari K. Webel**’s, *The Politics of Disease Control: Sleeping Sickness in Eastern Africa*,

9 S. McIntosh (ed.), *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge, 1995).

1890–1920. Indeed, as that point suggests, the COVID-19 pandemic and its particular consequences in Africa will no doubt one day garner attention in the pages of this journal. We will not reach that day, however, without the ongoing commitment, contributions, and intellectual energy of an array of people — from authors, book reviewers, and anonymous peer reviewers from institutions of higher learning around the world, to support from the press, which includes our Managing Editor, **Reynolds Richter**.

All best wishes for health and well-being in 2021.

THE EDITORS