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Michael A. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. 520 pp. ISBN-13 : 978-0691196824.

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Winner of both the African Studies Association's and the American Historical Association's 2019 Book Prizes (Herskovits and Martin A. Klein Prizes), *African Dominion* marks Michael A. Gomez's timely return to African history after his 1992 *Pragmatism in the Era of Jihad: The Precolonial State of Bundu* (Cambridge University Press). In the intervening years, Gomez has cemented his reputation as scholar beyond Africa and across the Atlantic, exploring questions of race, culture, and slavery in the Americas and the African Diaspora (*Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* [University of North Carolina Press, 1998]; *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* [Cambridge University Press, 2005]; *Black Crescent: African Muslims in the Americas* [Cambridge University Press, 2005]). These concerns are evident in the conceptualization of his new book, an ambitious project which has attracted a great deal of attention, receiving both abundant praise and sharp criticism, as exemplified in the *American Historical Review*'s "Review Roundtable" dedicated to the work (April 2019).

Importantly, *African Dominion* seeks to bring Africa into the focus of global history, concentrating on "the invention and evolution of empire" (1) in the early and medieval periods (ca. 500-1600), to counter the neglect the continent continues to suffer from world history scholarship. Gomez conceives the work as "both an account and critique of West African empire…a tale of immense potential undermined by regrettable decisions and the inflexibility of critical conventions" (5). In a sense, the author views the successive projects of empire in West Africa—exemplified by Mali and Songhay—as having 'failed' in some ways and offers the reader an analysis of the multifaceted and complex reasons for this outcome. Inextricable from questions of statecraft in the Western Savannah and Sahel, was "the evolution of such mutually constitutive categories as *race, slavery, ethnicity, caste,* and *gendered notions of power*" (1, italics in the original), which form the backbone of Gomez's analysis and around which his arguments are built.

The book is divided into four parts, each comprising several chapters. In Part I, "Early Sahel and Savannah," Gomez make the significant argument that Gao should be viewed as "West Africa's starting point" in terms of political statecraft (20) instead of the commonly accepted Ghana. The latter was characterized by a long existence with periods efflorescence, and three different political regimes, including a later militant, revisionist version of Islam, which occurred simultaneously to an intensification in slaving (43). The next part concentrates on Imperial Mali, which Gomez views as a transregional Mande power projecting authority from the center to outlying areas, exemplified by the Sunjata epic, "a declaration of the integral elements of empire as understood by the Mande" (62). *Mansā* Mūsā's iconic pilgrimage then succeeded in bringing Mali to the world, projecting power and becoming 'Global Mali's' most illustrious moment.

The last two parts concentrate on Imperial Songhay and its demise. For Gomez, Songhay represents the height of medieval West African statecraft, characterized by novel

policies of political integration, including within the ruling family itself, where he underscores the role of the royal concubines and offers fresh perspectives. Songhay is thus seen as a novel experiment, undertaking innovations in realms of international commerce, ethnic diversity and Islam's expansion, "thus becoming a more ethnically heterogenous society in which allegiance to the state transcended loyalties to clan and culture" (170). Nevertheless, the expansion of domestic slavery in Songhay, which Gomez claims became "a slave society in every sense of the concept" (354) under *Askia* Dāwūd, as well as instability of succession and growing influence of royal slaves, would act as destabilizing forces within the empire at the time of the Moroccan conquest, marking the end of empire in the region (367).

Presenting a historical synthesis of such magnitude requires impressive familiarity and dominance over a vast array of sources. In contrast to other regions on the continent, there exists an abundance of 'evidence' relating to West Africa: an extensive oral tradition (notably the Sunjata epic); written texts in Arabic (of which the so-called Timbuktu chronicles are the best known) and *ajami* (African languages in the Arabic script) originating from the region, as well as early Arabic sources emanating from authors outside the region (Ibn Khaldūn, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, and an array of Arab geographers); in addition to relatively well-studied archaeology (at Jenne-jeno, Gao and Essouk-Tadmekka) and epigraphy (also at Gao-Saney, Essouk and Bentyia). Very often, these sources have been studied in isolation, offering fragmented pictures of the West African past. One of the merits of *African Dominion* is bringing them into conversation in a single volume. Gomez argues that this creates "a new archive" (6), where divergent sources are placed into dialogue, in ways that render them often "proximate" (61) and even "harmonious" (20). For the case of Mali, the external written record "sheds light on political developments, while the oral corpus affords insights into their cultural and social dimensions" (62). For the case of Songhay, "history very much rests on a penned indigeneity," while the oral record "provides an alternative, often countervailing perspective, more impressionistic than declarative" (170).

However, it is precisely Gomez's treatment of the sources and scant engagement with the historiographical debates of the last decades which has attracted most critique. Paulo F. de Moraes Farias, whose *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles, and Songhay-Tuāreg History* (2003) represents a major breakthrough in the field, argues that Gomez uses the epigraphic evidence as "mere records of dates and titles," instead of viewing them as a "corpus of texts and a discursive field" (*African Historical Review* [AHR] 4/2019: 589). Similarly, he objects to the author's uncritical use of Timbuktu's *taʾrīkh* literary genre, in particular of what Gomez still persistently calls the *Taʾrīkh al-fattāsh*—and still attributes, partially, to Maḥmūd Kaʾti—which recent scholarship has convincingly argued represents two distinct works. The first work is a 17th c. chronicle by Ibn al-Mukhtar and the second is a 19th c. one by the scholar Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir written to lend legitimation to Aḥmad Lobbo's political and religious projects (see Mauro Nobili and Shahid Mathee's "Towards a new study on the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*," *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 37-73; greatly expanded in Mauro Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith: Aḥmad Lobbo, the Tārīkh al-fattāsh and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa* (2020), which appeared after the publication of *African Dominion*). These critiques are echoed by Shamil Jeppie, an expert on the written legacy of Timbuktu, who highlights that the sources from the region's archives have been the subject of ample methodological and theoretical debate, yet "Gomez appears not to want his grand narrative sweep disrupted by taking these issues seriously" (*AHR* 4/2019: 588). *African Dominion*'s extensive notes (over 100 pages) and bibliography demonstrate Gomez's familiarity with the aforementioned debates, and in his response to the critiques, makes it clear that in his view, undue attention to questions of sources and method "prevent the full realization of the book's objectives" (*AHR* 4/2019: 592) and continues to emphasize his contention that disparate sources are more complementary than conflictual.

As is clear from these exchanges, *African Dominion* has spurred a welcome and long-overdue re-examination and debate on central themes of Africanist historiography, as well as on a neglected period of West African history. As such, the book is indispensable reading for specialists, not only of the region, but also others interested in questions of empire, political innovations and slavery and race more globally. In addition, the methodological concerns raised by critics of the work should stimulate further research and as well as Africa-centered theoretical innovation.

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