

Pre-Ottoman Africa

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I have to confess that every time I address African history, I find it very difficult to escape the following conceptual dilemma: how do I go about dealing with the history of a fragmented continent within the framework of an external conceptual tradition and paradigm?

Discovery, Conquest, Colonization, Development, are general concepts but when they address African history they always entail a monocentric view of World history.

My purpose in this presentation is not to shift a core from Western Europe to the Bosphorus Strait, but to simply reconstruct a *sui generis* evolutionary dynamic of the African continent before the Ottoman preponderance in the XVIth century. To do so, I am compelled to acknowledge at least three major breakthroughs in World History that definitely shaped African historic destiny in the XVth century:

- The Challenge of the Turkish Empire and its impact by favoring for the first time in World history the connection of four continents through transports, trade and geopolitics.
- The invention of the Atlantic, allowing the breakthrough in the great wall of water that closed the known world to the **Detroit** of Gibraltar for several millenaries.
- The invention during the Italian Renaissance of perspective in drawing and spatial representation that put Africa in a dominated position of a scenic object, subdued to the observation and description of the kings' geographers or the paintings of

artists. Just at the beginning of modern history Africa was labeled through a subaltern imagery reproduced all over the world.

I will try to go around that dilemma with Marshall Sahlins's following pragmatic predicament that "peoples' cultural assumption of external condition that they do not create and cannot escape is the very principle of their action constructed in relation to the forces of nature and also typically in relation to the pressure of other societies."¹ We will therefore talk about power and political construction, contacts, cultural, religious bonds and commerce. Such concepts leave more room for internal dynamics in African history and emphasize unity over dislocation, history over legend and prejudice.

Africa and the Turkish Challenge

Pre-ottoman Africa was not indeed a patchwork of communities which technology and loose population density bounded in isolation and backwardness.² All over the continent communities from different linguistic and anthropologic origins, were integrated in a set of interwoven networks revealed by local narratives and written sources. These networks have built for several millenaries the double track of the *sui generis* evolution and integration to an international space made possible by trade, migration, and religious expansion.

¹ Marshall Sahlins, "Cosmologies of capitalism: the transpacific sector of the "world system" in Culture, power, history, Nicholas B. Dirks, ed, Princeton University press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994, p413

² Pierre Chaunu and Frederic Mauro have in 1969 pointed out the key figures of low level technology and population density to explain the allegedly passive role of Africa in Atlantic History. In this schema Africa was a mere background of European History

What Mudimbe³ advocated in a discursive paradigm through narratives and gnosis as the invention of Africa, must not hide the historical path through which, trade, migration and political management of space created the missing link of antic and pre-modern world.

Let us emphasize the process which made possible the invention of that missing link and point out the paramount role of the Turkish Empire.

The quest for the missing side of a triangle

Broadly speaking, the image of Africa in antic and medieval times is represented by the geometric figure of a right triangle. We found such a figure in Greek and Roman literatures with Eratosthenes (-275-195), Strabo (-63-25, and Pomponius Mela (1st century). The two sides of that triangle: the Mediterranean face from the Nile delta to the Strait of Gibraltar, and the side facing the Red sea were well known, but the third one, the hypotenuse was really unknown. So West Africa represented the missing link of the World in ancient and medieval time. On a symbolic and conceptual level, the world beyond the strait of Gibraltar constituted an impassable shield for the rational mind and for the horizon of the traveler.⁴ Nature also participated by forbidding access with the presence of strong south–west winds

The vacuum was filled with exotic idealization, phantasms and imagination for millenaries. So from Diodore and Pliny the Elder to Solo in the Vth century, Africa remained within a lure of fantastic approximation. Greek and Roman narratives on Africa as pointed out by Mudimbe were “A subtle integration of geographies of

³ Mudimbe V Y, *The Invention of Africa*, Indiana University Press Page X

⁴ Since the 12th century B.C. the Phoenician master of the navigation and the traffic in western Mediterranean often ventured in waters near the Pillar of Hercules; and the inhabitants of the ancient Ghades (Cadix) maintained the magus of a sea of terror as a way to reserve themselves its wealth.

monstrosities, witness (...) search for marvel and (...) love of the bizarre” Mudimbe, 1994, p. 80.

The Turkish Challenge following the takeover of Constantinople definitely shifted the perspective in World History opening the Atlantic world and reshaping the geopolitics of Empire in Africa.

I. Political Construction in Africa, State formation and Empire making

I will sum up my point in seven stances showing the particular trajectory of pre-Ottoman Africa in comparison to Europe or Asia.

“The African experience of politics amid large supplies of land and low population densities while confronting an inhospitable physical setting is in dramatic contrast to the European experience of state building.”⁵

In Europe, the XVth century growing demand in land supply in a context of a demographic shift in population density open the path to the creation of centralized state apparatus.

Charles Tilly portrays this process as a “continuous aggressive competition for trade and territory among changing States of unequal sizes, which made war a driving force in European History.”⁶ A model of State building then raised up, based on a set of life and death imperatives, to control a growing population, raise taxes over an intense rural-urban trade, build centralized public finances, enlist men as soldiers and develop the necessary

⁵ Herbst, 2000, op. cit., page 13.

⁶ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, capital and European States AD. 990-1992* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell 1990, p.54).

logistics and infrastructure to fight and win battles against voracious neighbors permanently challenging the national territorial integrity.

To ensure the “Wealth of the Prince”⁷, a strong State with a solid territorial background was needed. “The more solid the national block is, the wider the State’s geographical and economic base is, and the bigger chances of international expansion will be.” France, Spain, England and the Empire were going to be the protagonists of a bitter rivalry which has become a condition for survival in the continent.⁸

Raymond Aron really pointed out the singular historical path of State and Nation building in Europe: “The non-coincidence of belonging to the same culture and political unity is the rule and not the exception all through human history.”⁹

Unlike the human anthill largely spread in Asia, the African continent is one of the less populated zones on earth. Such a feature is not only a key factor acknowledged or dismissed by economist and demographic analyst on their trying effort to explain the underdeveloped position of Africa. It is also at the core of every historical endeavor in drawing the specific trajectory of the African continent.

African political geography poses a completely different set of political challenges to state builders compared to the problems European leaders faced.¹⁰

As accurately stated by Herbst¹¹: “the fundamental problem facing State builders in Africa--be they pre-colonial kings, colonial governors, or presidents in the independent

⁷ Dessaix P, Monchrestien et l’économie politique nationale, Genève, Stakeline, 1970.

⁸ Claude Mettra, La France des Bourbons. D’Henri IV à Louis XIV, Edition Complexe Bruxelles 1981, p.18.

⁹ Aron R., Paix et guerres entre les nations 1962, p. 296.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Herbst, States and power in Africa : comparative lessons in authority and control
Princeton University press,2000, page 3.

¹¹ Herbst, op. cit., page 11.

era has been to project authority over inhospitable territories that contain relatively low densities of people.”

Despite the lack of reliable continuous data, such a feature is generally portrayed by travel narratives and archeological evidences revealing patterns of scattered populations. Sub-Saharan Africa with roughly 18 percent of the world’s surface area has always been sparsely settled. Africa had only 6 to 11 % of the World population in 1750.¹²

We are not addressing the demographic imbalance generated by slavery, but instead we insist on how political constructions had to cope with low-density populations. Logistics, ecologic and economic factors played the key roles, slowing down political processes.

I.1 Compared to Europe and other densely settled areas it was more expensive for states to exert political control,¹³ levy tribute and ensure a durable legitimacy over a given number of people.

Comparative population densities (people/sq.km)

Region	1500
Japan	46.4
South Asia	15.2
Europe	13.7
China	13.4
Latin America	2.2
North Africa	1.6

¹² Cf. John D Durand “Historical estimates of World population: an evaluation” Population and development Review 3 September 1977, p 259. cf. Herbst 2000, page 16.

¹³ John LLiffe, Africans, The History of a continent , Cambridge, Cambridge University press 1995, p. 70.

Sub-Saharan Africa	1.9
Former USSR area	0.6

The Chinese model relaying a sense of authority to a local gentry ensuring efficient social and economic control in provinces, districts and communes is an obvious difference between Africa and Asia. Asian “hydraulic societies”¹⁴ with their overwhelming endeavor in land control and irrigation works are at the extreme opposite with the availability in land and extensive agriculture experienced in pre-colonial Africa. The prevalence of a traditional rain fed agriculture over a cooperative system of production in Africa is one of the outcomes of the remote impact of state involvement. The contrast is overwhelming with the Confucian tradition in Asia where the state through a huge mandarin apparatus, truly enter into the solution of recurrent problems of rural areas.¹⁵

Correspondingly, the examples of Ghana, Mali and Songhay empires in the West African savannah illustrate the set of economic impediments a central ruler had to face to lay his grip over remote provinces.

I.2 A rapid glimpse on the general distribution of empires in Africa establish an obvious correlation between densely populated areas along river valleys, lake, highlands and centralized polities.

“ The higher the population density, the greater the level of political centralization.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Karl Wittfogel, Oriental despotism, A comparative study of total power, New Haven: Yale University press, 1957, P 34.

¹⁵ Goran Hyden, Beyond Ujamaa, in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an uncaptured peasantry, Berkeley: university of California press, 1980, 1980, pp. 9-18.

¹⁶ Robert Bates, Essays on the political economy of rural Africa, Cambridge, Cambridge University press 1983, page 35.

Great lake region, Ethiopian Highlands, Nile river, Senegal river, Niger river, Zambezi and Limpopo valley ...

I.3 Ecological conditions played a big deal in not allowing high density.

50 % of the continent has inadequate rain fall and only 8 % has a tropical climate; 1/3 of the world's arid land is in Africa.¹⁷

I.4 The contrasting ecosystem and the attendant regional unbalance.

In as much as every part of the continent, space configuration shows different forms and induces different ways in managing and controlling space. Coastal plains, alluvial valleys or marshes, highlands, forests, savannah or deserts, almost the whole spectrum of nature's diversity, is always the condition of ancient African polities. The difference in local ecosystems within regions, provinces caused extensive costs and a variation in the form of control and accordingly a different set of policy. Projecting centralized power over distance was a tremendous challenge.

I.5 Ecological trend and human settling sequences in Sub-Saharan Africa.

For several millennia, the cultural scenario has revealed the adaptation of human communities to the specific condition of nature in Africa. The Holocene period between 5000 and 2000 Bps declines episodes of desiccation in several parts of the globe¹⁸.

¹⁷ Bediako Iamousé-Smith and Joseph School, Africa Interactive Maps CD ROM Odenton MD Africa interactive maps 1998,(cf. Herbst, op. cit.).

¹⁸ Betty J Meggers Archeological and ethnographic evidence compatible with the model of forest fragmentation, in Ghilleen T Prance, Biological Diversification in the tropics, New York, Columbia University press, 1982, pp. 489-490.

During these episodes fauna and flora underwent important changes and the human groupings compelled to adopt new survival strategies. The forms taken by this adaptation vary from the decrease in population density, to migrations or changes in the food régime. The witnesses of these ecological distresses are some archaeological features such as the concentration of lithic remnants in rock shelters or river strands, or the accumulation of heaps of shells along the coast line.

Another decisive feature resided in the drastic changes of the rain régime, evolving toward a constant but not uniform desiccation for more than 5000 years. This deterioration of the environment opened an era of southbound migrations. Fauna, flora and people took a southern thrust in WEST Africa. The trajectory of some plant species as palm oil, animals such as hippos attests inexorable distresses in the environment, with however some periods of respite in the rain regime in the XIth and XVIth centuries.

One can distinguish several humid sequences alternating with arid and desiccation periods.¹⁹

Until 300 BP	Arid Period
300 Bp to 300	Period of transition marked by an improvement of the ecological conditions, auspicious to the trans-Saharan trade
300 to 700	Improvement of the pluviometer
700 to 1100	Period of abundant rains

¹⁹ Geoges E Brooks, *Landlords and strangers : Ecology, Society, and trade in Western Africa , 1000-1630*, Westview Press, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford , pp. 8,9.

1100 to 1500	Long period of aridity
1500 to 1630	humid Period

Despite some factors like the direction of winds, the pedology or the distribution of rivers and lakes, five ecological zones define different cultural patterns in West Africa: the desert of the Sahara, the Sahel, the Savannah, the woodland savannah and the forest.

The migration of the 400 mm isohyets to the south led to the displacement of the agricultural soils and its corollary, the southbound movement of human occupation. Agriculture being possible in the zones receiving less than 400 mm only when soil is let to rest during some seasons,²⁰ one understands then how the process of settlement operated around the middle valley of Senegal where the Walo and Jerri soils offered the possibility of several harvests of sorghum and millet. It is this millenary process that settled the Fulbe, Serers, Berber and Soninke populations in the Senegal valley. Such a process build up a cross cultural system between Fulbé pastors practicing a transhumant raising bound to the north of the Sahel in the beginning of the rainy season , and to the south toward the Senegal and Niger valleys . The herds grazing the herbs and vestigial plants of the fields while fertilizing soil for the next cultures. This settled a complimentary system between nomadic and sedentary groups, a system of exchange of

²⁰ Brooks, op. cit., p. 11.

products and services like milk and livestock with savannah products like millet, artisanal products and rearing cattle for sedentary people.

The savannah is characterized by precipitations ranging 400 to 1000 mm. It is *par excellence* the soil of baobab and palm oil trees. The soils are ferruginous and let appear a crust often with dispersed vegetation. The west African savannah is the area of millet, and cotton, an extensive agriculture that leave some soil to rest during years to gain a fertility hampered by exposition to the sun or dripping.

The isohyet 1000 mm declines southbound toward the Fouta Djallon, the belt of cola and rice, the area of expansion of camels, horses, donkeys and sheep that the Tse Tse fly confines to the verge of the forest and its 1500 mm precipitations. The Gambia river marks a clear demarcation between the soils of the savannah and the woodland savannah. It defines the belt of the Tse Tse fly and decline a line of separation between centralized societies to the north and the northeast and labeled as stateless societies in the south along the Guinean coast. This region is also the soil of origin of the Dioula Mandinko tradesmen that have for millennia served as mediators between the savannah and forest products such as kola nuts, pepper, the indigo and the salt of the coast of Guinea. These exchanges took advantage of the numerous rivers emanating from the Fouta Djallon Massif to define a very integrated commercial space before the opening of the Atlantic to European trade.

I.6 The wide spreading of resources in a geographically extended area, with limited indented shorelines led to the compelling mediation of cross-cultural diasporas , in

order to control valuable resources such as salt , gold or slaves. The key role of mercantile diasporas from Arab, Berber, Soninke or Hausa origins is a paramount feature of pre-colonial Africa. They played a key role in spreading largely spoken languages such as Swahili, Soninke-Bambara, or Hausa.²¹ But using camels, horses, donkeys, portage or dugout, they compensate the discontinuities of trade routes or disruption of river navigability.

I.7 Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Mossi, Kongo, Asante, Dahomey, Monomatapa are indeed some patterns of political entities integrating large areas within the leadership of elites who managed to get local legitimacy and build strong ties along international trade networks in the Arab world.

The thrust of these different political entities often build up a “mental map” based on the reach of central power, generally within a month of walking or Horse or camel riding.²² Decomposition and re-composition has created through centuries a sense of spatial coherence jarring with the distorted image of confusion and dislocation generally portrayed. Very steady links maintained the spatial cohesiveness between trading towns, political core and remote tribal communities paying tribute taxes, undergoing raids or supplying slaves or matrimonial feminine recruits.

²¹ Alexandre P, *Langues et langages en Afrique noire*, Paris, Payot 1967, p. 22.

²² Wilks reports that the Ashanti conceived of their empire as radiating out in all directions for twenty days walking or roughly a month for a messenger to depart from the capital Kumasi and return from the frontier. (10 miles a day according to Wilks estimate) Any farther was deemed too difficult to administer because the lag in response time was too great... no lands more distant than a month from Kumase, in and out, could effectively be administered even though they might be subdued for the duration of a campaign, cf. Ivor Wilks” *On Mentally Mapping Greater Asante: A Study of time and motion*”, *Journal of African History* 33, (1992): pp.182-3.

Most entities, or communities portrayed as primitive or savage because of their isolation in forests, mountains or marshes are in fact social excrescences from centralized political construction, searching refuge for political dissidence or economic disturbance.

Many instances support this approach: The Baoulé from Asante settling in the forest of Ivory Coast.²³ The Mande-speaking groups developing segmental kinship ties while originating from politically centralized area from the Niger Belt.

This complex settings in social organization is also illustrated by the second-hand political domination within the Asante Empire which demanded slave tribute tax to the Gonja kingdom which organized raids for slaves from the segmental Gurunsi, Tallensi or Lodaaga communities.²⁴

There is no need to portray the detailed features of all pre-colonial political ensembles in Africa but a general pattern could be drawn as a series of concentric circles radiating out from a core.²⁵

A. The savannah belt from Senegal river to Lake Chad continuing eastward through Darfour and Kordofan to the Ethiopian highland.

- Transportation by beasts of burden
- Troops of armed horsemen
- Control and tribute levying
- Iron tools for agriculture
- Population growth and urban settlement

²³ De Dalvetre Marmier(P, Ma) « Les étapes du peuplement » in Côte D'Ivoire, Ministère du Plan, Etude régionale de Bouaké, 1962-1964, I

²⁴ Goody Jack, Technology, tradition and the state in Africa Oxford University press, London, 1971

²⁵ Jeffrey Herbst , State and power in Africa op cit ,p 45;

- Large states : Ghana (c.400-1240), Mali c.1240-c.1500), Songhai(c.1460-c.1600), Jolof, Kanem Bornu, Hausaland city States and leading cities like kano Katsina, and Zaria with manufacturing industries of weaving, leatherwork, glass-making and metal work.
- Up to the XVIIIth century. A network of distribution by caravans across the Sahara to Tripoli , Tunis and Ghadames covered the whole of North Africa and the Mediterranean sea.

B. From the woodland belt to the dense equatorial rain forest in the South

- the tsetse fly and the lack of fodder impeding the formation of large cattle
- on-foot transportation
- soldiers, footmen
- small markets and States

C. The states of the woodlands and Forrest

Yoruba, Edo, Fon, Gur are offsprings of pre-Islamic kingdom in the Hausa region

D. The Bantu ensemble: From the XIth to the XVth centuries a big interior empire governed by the Karangas, melted gold and exchanged it on the Indian ocean coast with pearls of glass and Chinese porcelain, pieces of copper and sculpted birds were also among their treasures. The center remained an active trading center at least until the XVIIth century.

General pattern of African polity.

” The core, usually the area of earliest political consolidation, continued to be ruled directly by the central authority; then came an inner area of closely assimilated and politically integrated dependencies. Beyond it was the circle of relatively secure vassal polities... This circle merged with the next circle of tribute-paying, straining at the center’s political leash. Beyond the center’s control became increasingly symbolic. The center could only practice political intimidation and extract sporadic tribute through institutionalized raiding or undisguised pillage.”²⁶

This chain of authority could sometimes entail an international system of alliances and formal vassalage. Between the Merinid Sultan of Morocco and the Ruler of the Mali Empire, the title of Khalifa, referring to Al Mansour, or the diplomatic etiquette between the Tripoli Pasha and the Wali of the Waliya of Bornu suggested that set of alliances and vassalage between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa while no evident hierarchy was established.²⁷

The general consequences of such a model are a loose control or very often a total absence of interest in outlying areas. This void was filled by tradesmen and Muslim clerics. Their symbolic capital, information trends, currencies and goods shaped and international trading space all over the continent before the opening of the Atlantic World.

Indeed circulation of people, goods and currencies forged a trading space all over the continent.

²⁶ Igor Kopitoff « The Internal African frontier : The making of African Political Culture » in *The African Frontier : The reproduction of traditional African Societies*, ed. Igor Kopytoff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1987, P.10.

²⁷ Thomas Hodgkin, « Diplomacy and diplomats in the western Sudan », in *Foreign Relations of African States*, ed. ,K.Ingham (London: Butterworths,1974), p22.

Iron and copper rods were common currency in west Africa Cowries were also used to pay goods from East Africa

Trade has created an economic space integrating uneven cultural areas in regional pools build up all across the continent.

The trans-Saharan trade linked North Africa from Morocco to Egypt with the Western Sudan, and also bounded sub Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean sea controlled successively by Vandals, Arabs ,Turks and Ottoman.

In the Guinean Gulf, coast side traffic controlled by local tradesmen grew another network

In east Africa From Kilwa to Sofala and Quelimane Persians,Arabs and Chinese created with natives tradesmen a paramount networks extending through the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

The main products were Gold, salt, Cola, textiles, ivory, and slaves but rice, millet, yam and livestock structured production spaces around densely populated urban areas²⁸ such as Timbuktu, Djenne, Kong ,Kano, Sofala, etc...

Islam was a Banner for nomadic groups giving them a sense of unity but truly constituted a cross cultural vehicle linking large area , a network of towns linking the Sahara and the Mediterranean.

In 1055 the Almoravid seized Sidjilmassa and Aoudaghost then crossed the Mediterranean through Southern Spain.

²⁸ Chauveau, Jp Dozon, Richard J, « histoires de riz, histoires d'ignames :le cas de la moyenne côte d'ivoire » Africa L I, 2 pp 621-657, 1981.

Trade brought in horses and guns which provoked a shift in the balance of power. From then on, empire and state building were based on new gunpowder legitimacy. The XVI th century opened a new era of economic violence and political turmoil. A geopolitics of chaos spread all over the continent with second-hand polities built outside the traditional standard of political legitimacy.