

## A History of West Central Africa to 1850

Based on substantial new research from primary sources and archives, this accessible interpretative history of West Central Africa from earliest times to 1852 gives comprehensive and in-depth coverage of the region. With equal focus given to both internal histories or interstate interactions and external dynamics and relationships, this study represents an original approach to regional histories which goes beyond the existing scholarship on the area. By contextualizing and expanding its range, to include treatment of the Portuguese colony of Angola, John K. Thornton provides new understandings of significant events, people, and interregional interactions which aid the grounding of the history of West Central Africa within a broader context. A valuable resource to students and scholars of African history.

John K. Thornton is Professor of History at Boston University, where he is a specialist in the history of pre-colonial Africa and the African diaspora. He is the author of numerous books, including *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (1992, 2nd edition 1998), *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony* (1998), *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles and the Foundation of the Americas* (2007, co-authored with Linda Heywood), which was awarded the Herskovits Prize by the African Studies Association, and *A Cultural History of the Atlantic World* (2012), which was awarded the World History Association Book Prize.

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# A History of West Central Africa to 1850

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John K. Thornton

*Boston University*



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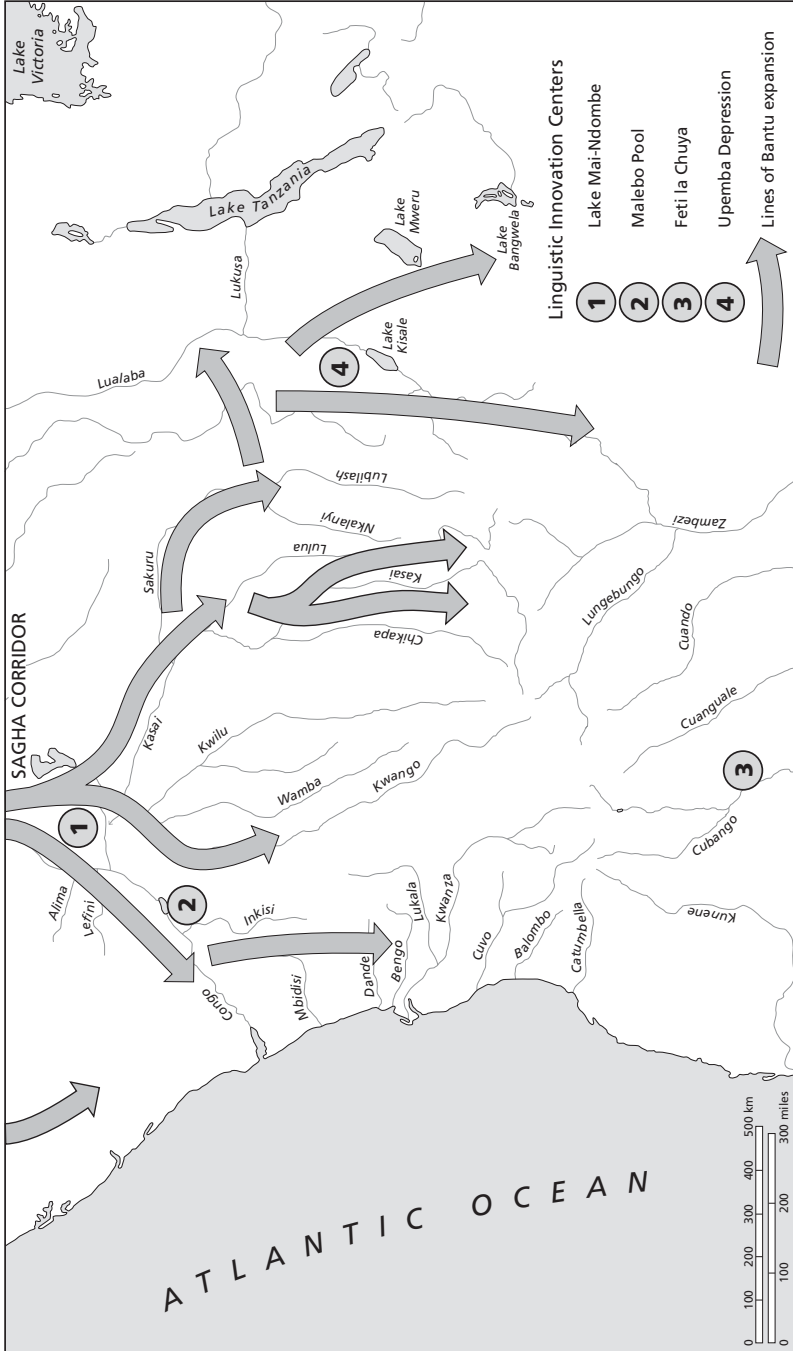
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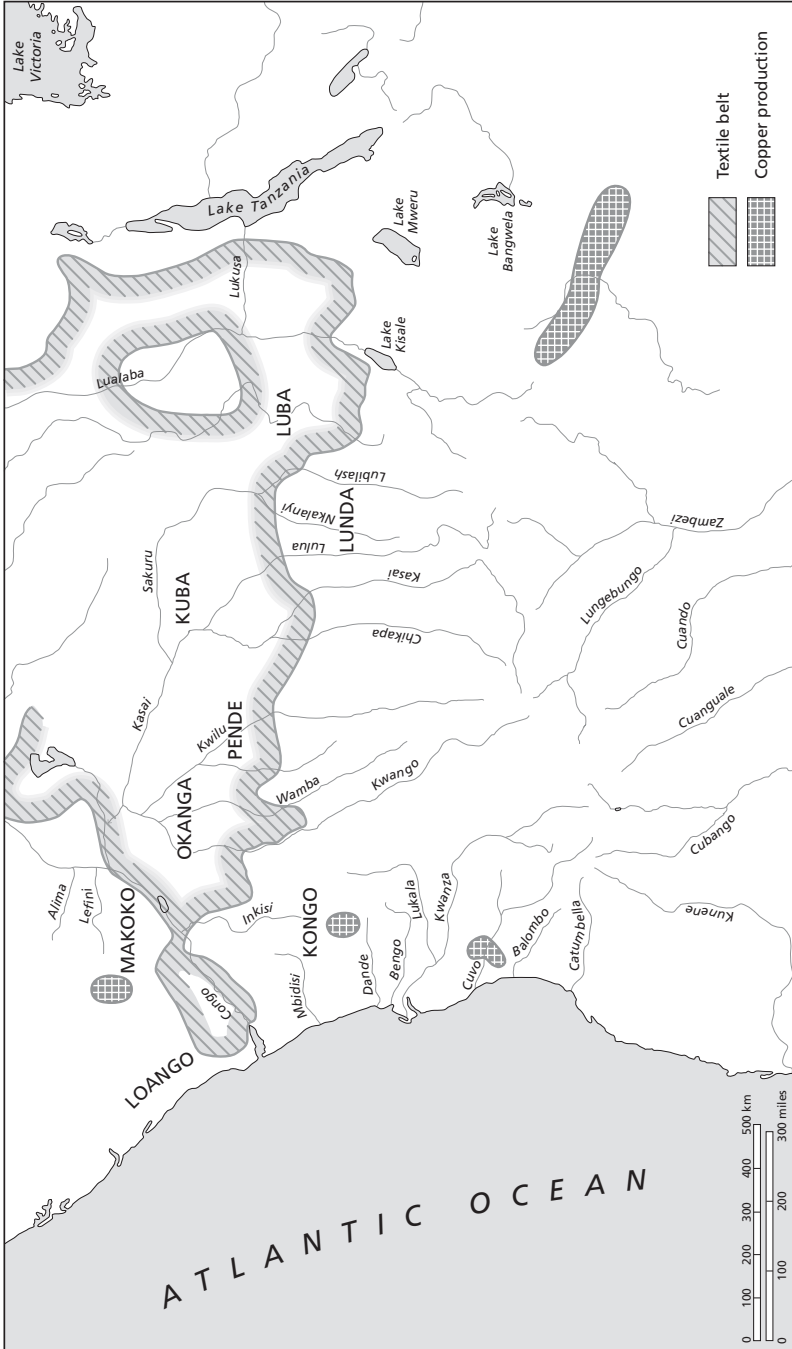
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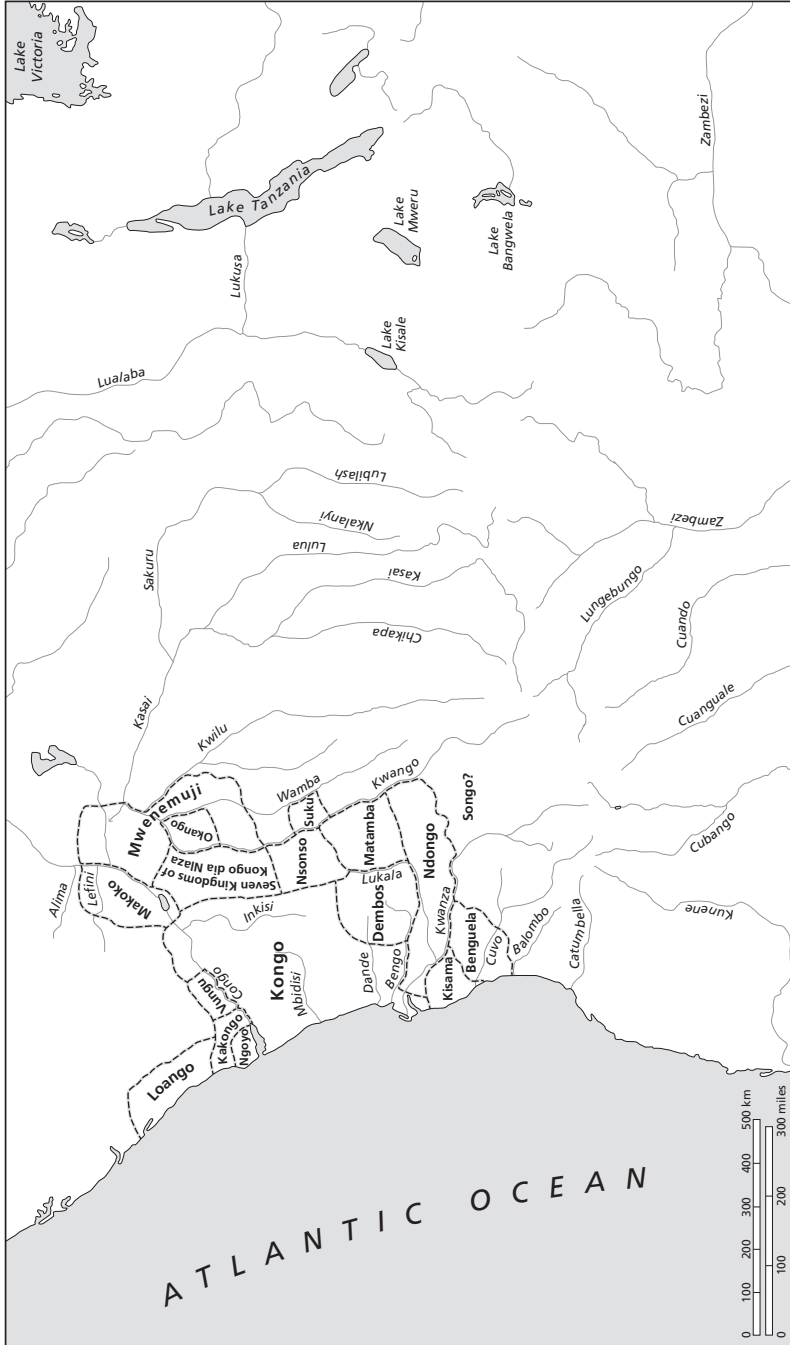


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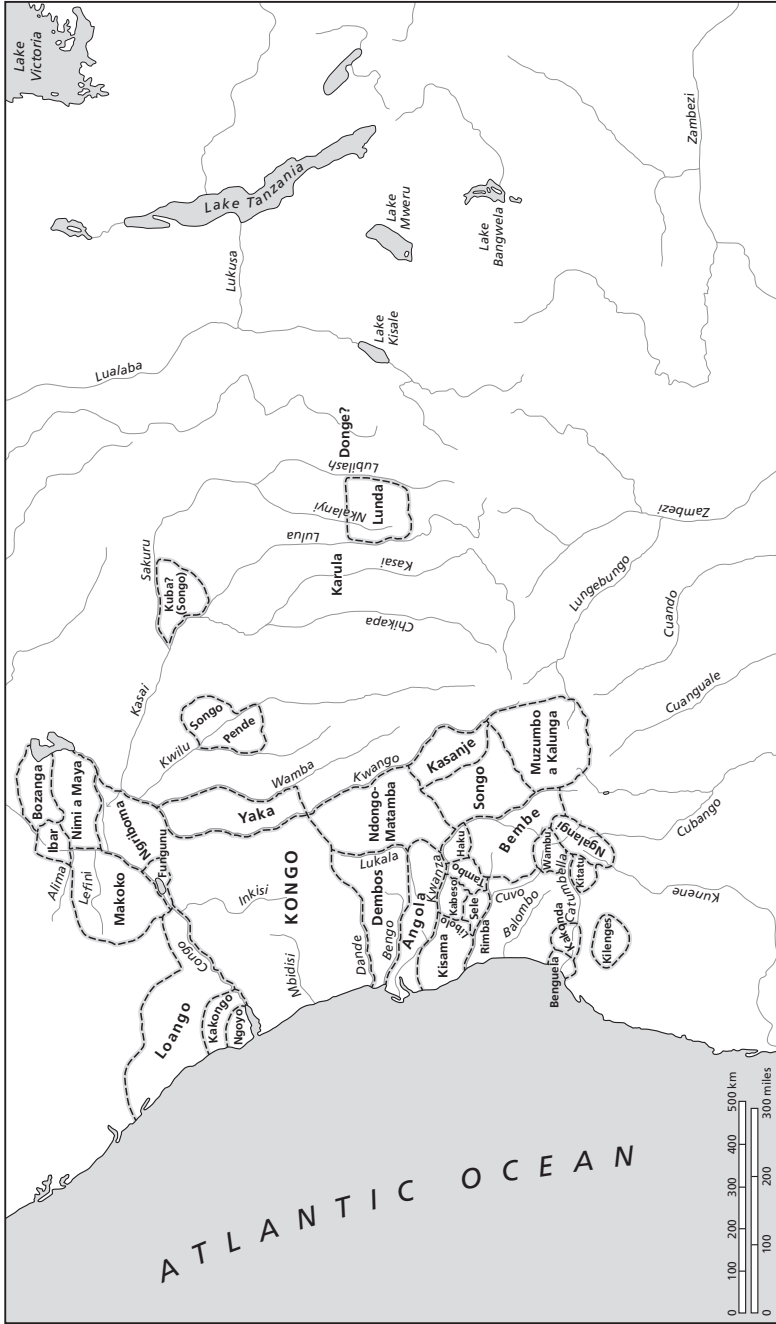


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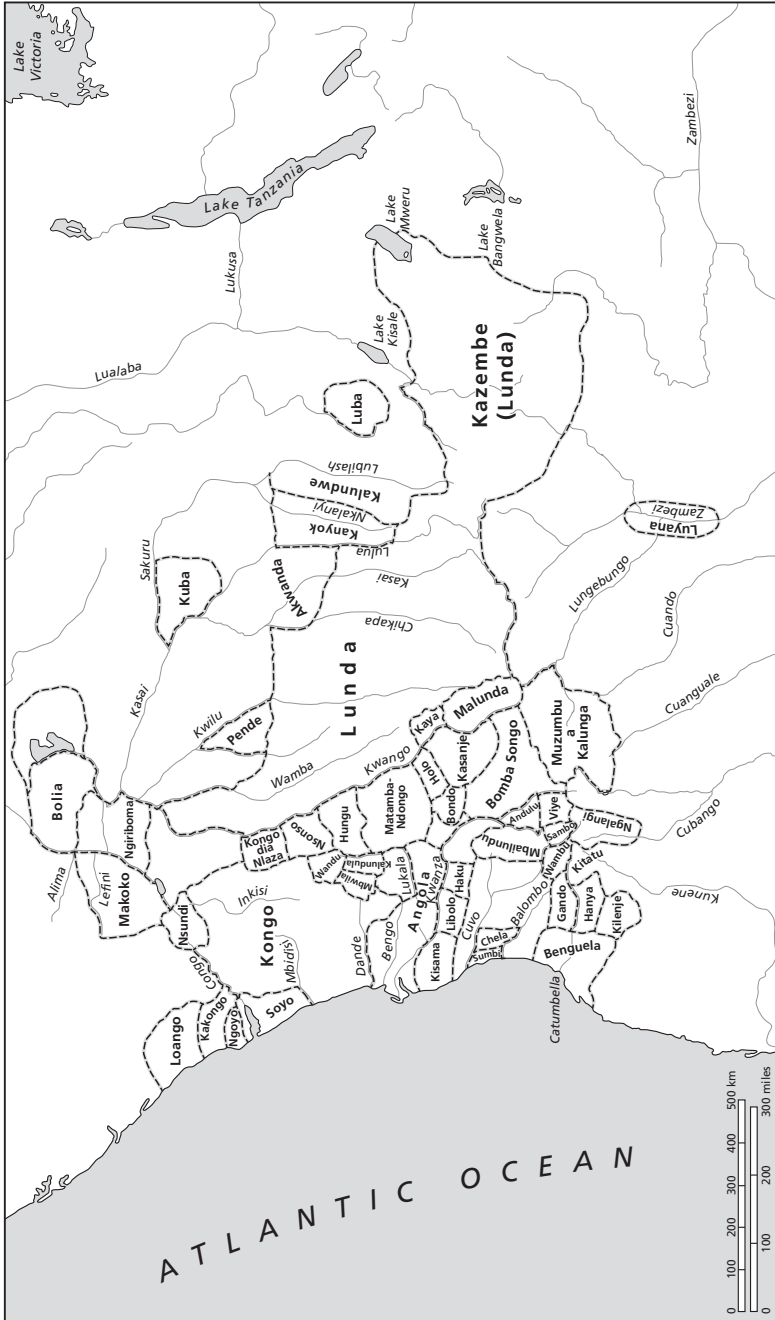
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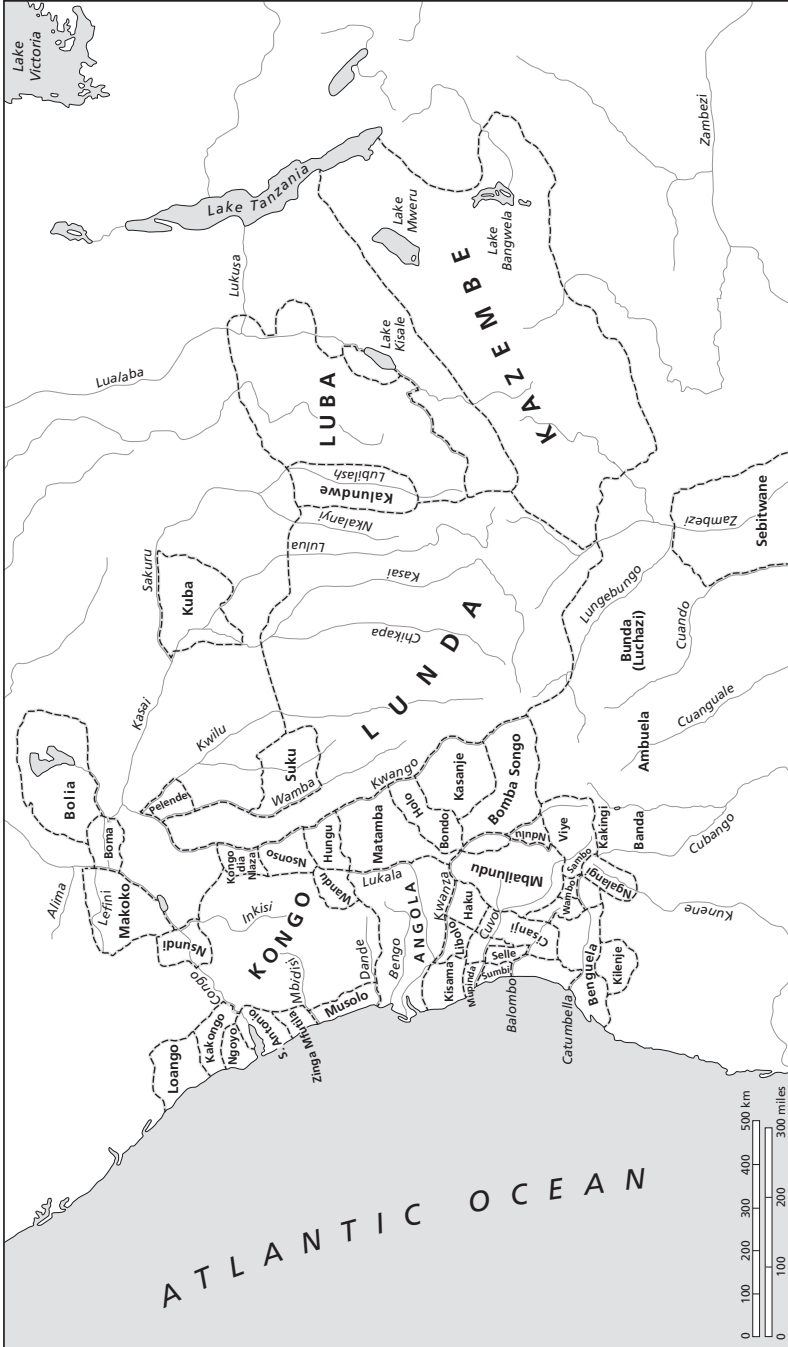
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6. Situation 1750



7. Situation 1850

## Preface

I remember distinctly the day I saw Jan Vansina's *Kingdoms of the Savanna*, in 1969 when I was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan. I had been interested in African history for some time, but had confined myself mostly to West Africa. Vansina's book changed my mind, it offered the amazing swirl of Central Africa, and although I would not have a copy of my own for many more years, it was one of those books that I loved.

Many years have elapsed since then, and in 2014, two years before Vansina passed away, I took up the task of writing my own general survey of Central African history, cajoled by Martin Klein to undertake the project. I had then been working for nearly forty years on the history of the region and had accumulated a vast store of documentation. I knew that these years of gathering material and archival visits in many countries needed to have an outlet, and I was persuaded that I should use all this store of material for my own version, or perhaps update, of Vansina's classic.

Vansina had written *Kingdoms* early in his career, and more as a side project among his many more detailed works or as an attempt to demonstrate that oral tradition could be used successfully to produce a regional history, as it was to be a fully researched presentation. Vansina's research was extensive, but it was far from exhaustive even of published literature of the day. Even so, it became his best-known work, and a classic statement of the history of Central Africa. I was now

considerably further along in my own career, and I had a better chance at being more exhaustive.

The 1970s, the decade in which I entered graduate school, was in many ways the “golden age” of pre-colonial African history. The pioneers of the 1960s had established the discipline and set some parameters, and a number of young historians like myself had taken up the challenge. Many Ph.D. projects, some supervised by Vansina, others simply inspired by him, sought to expand and deepen our understanding of the region, to flesh out, challenge, and expand what Vansina had begun.

But the golden age ended by the 1980s, and aside from a few earlier projects that came to fruition or to print in the first years in the decade, the output of new analytical work on the history of pre-colonial African history, in West Central and more generally, declined precipitously. In some ways the publication of the pre-colonial volumes of the *Cambridge History of Africa* and the UNESCO *General History of Africa*, completed in the early 1980s, summed up what had been done, almost as a final report.

A few of the historians of my generation held on and continued to push forward; but on the whole, this work was not as inspiring for the scholars entering African history after 1980. Sometimes years went by without a new Ph.D. in pre-colonial history being defended, and often it was a matter of only one or two. Journal output took on a similar decline, many issues of the *Journal of African History*, our flagship journal, were printed without any contributions on pre-colonial history.

The reasons for this are multiple, and one could argue at length about it; for now it should just be regarded as a fact. And the ultimate result was that the project started by Vansina was not fully followed up, enriched, and carried by many hands into the future.

This situation presented me with a dilemma as I thought about how to frame this book. It would not make sense to attempt a simple survey of the literature, as there had been little new literature since the general histories had been published. Beyond that, I had collected a substantial quantity of original material, manuscript and printed, that had not been fully explored by the 1980s, and that material would alter materially the lines of research that had already been opened, but also would allow the filling in of quite a number of blanks in the 1980s prospect of the field.

What I realized I needed to do was essentially to reargue the history of the region, not necessarily overturning what had been done, and sometimes making few changes, but rather to start from scratch, so to speak, from the primary sources either of contemporary documentation or oral

tradition, and look at the whole again, region by region over the long period I chose.

A second dilemma was to decide how best to write it up. One option was to make it an accessible and interesting interpretative history, focusing on the best stories and the best-developed analytical angles, making a big-picture analysis that might suit a general reading public or a textbook. But to do this would also leave out the unexplored regions, or areas for which my contribution might be only to correct chronology or add a few new events. This approach would require more source analysis, more argument shaping about minor details or potential interpretations, and that would add layers of difficult and frankly boring material for the general reader.

My eventual solution was to try to find a middle ground between those two, attempting to find big themes and good stories and to push as much of the tedious argument and source criticism as possible into footnotes. In the end, I hope this book will be a framing resource, providing the basic historical–chronological outline of each of the countries within the larger region, to play with interregional issues that were often missed, to fill in blanks in this story where there was material to fill them with.

While my goal is to be as comprehensive as possible, the scope and content of the various primary sources which I am using from archaeology, linguistics, oral tradition or written documents, sharply defines how much I am able to say about many of those societies in the zone. In the western end, there is a vast quantity of first-hand eyewitness documentation to assist the historian, and for those regions the coverage is both more detailed and more reliable, whatever might be said about bias in that record.

The overwhelming bulk of the best written testimony has been from missionaries, and the cream of that stream are the letters, reports, and book-length descriptions that the Capuchin missionaries wrote between 1645 and 1720. Their work in turn was confined fairly much to the Kingdom of Kongo, their principal target, and to Queen Njinga's combined kingdom of Ndongo-Matamba, and this book has favored those two regions in volume and nature of its coverage.

The written record for most of the region east of the Kwango River, however, has a very slender documentary base, even at the end of the period (1852), and what we know is largely based on oral traditions recorded years, and often centuries after the events. As important as oral tradition has been – and indeed, one of Vansina's purposes in *Kingdoms of the Savana* was a demonstration of what could be done with oral tradition –



still the region's history is knowable in a much more limited and less reliable way when one employs first-hand written documentation.

Likewise the study of the areas south of the Kwanza River, while the subject of some thread of documentation, is still largely the domain of oral tradition, particularly the kingdoms of Viye and Mbailundu, for which there is the basis for conducting a model exercise in working with well-established oral tradition and written documentation to enrich both sources. In the course of research, I had the good fortune to gain access at the University of Washington to the papers of Gladwin Murray Childs, a missionary in this region in the early to middle twentieth century, who systematically collected oral traditions that were highly relevant to the reconstruction of these two kingdoms. Transcription summaries of these traditions, taken in the original Umbundu, have been invaluable in that section.

This documentation imbalance is reflected in the book itself, as readers will see. The best-quality written materials are highly concentrated in the period 1580–1710, and I have not resisted the temptation to use those fully to tell a history that can be told only with the benefit of eyewitness testimony. While the Portuguese and Angolan archives have abundant material for the later periods, their scope is largely concerned with the affairs of the twin colonies of Angola and Benguela, and even there mostly with administrative matters. While still of value in understanding the societies outside the scope of their primary concern (the areas controlled by the Portuguese colony), the light they shed the surrounding African communities is intermittent and limited.

Oral traditions, in spite of their ability to provide important though mostly political information on regions without their own written records, or at least the written observations of contemporary foreigners, still provide pose problems. Vansina's initial enthusiasm for oral tradition to provide a straightforward record of the past waned as the real problems of the source emerged. In particular, that the central problem of oral tradition is not in locating or reconstructing a text; nor is it in remembering or forgetting information passed on from one generation to the next. Rather, it is that oral traditions were recalled and transmitted for practical reasons, typically to record rights and powers. But scholars had to recognize that because they had real-life implications they were especially prone to political manipulation.

My own research in Kongo illustrates the problem well, because Kongo has both an independent stream of observer testimony and frequent recordings of tradition at specific times. Thus, we have

documents about the sixteenth century there, but also records of the traditions about the sixteenth century as they were left in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The disconnect between these versions of traditions demonstrates quite clearly (as the text to follow will show) how tradition came to be manipulated several times along the way. We can check these manipulations for Kongo; but for other areas, for which traditions about events two or three centuries older cannot be checked, we must always have a higher level of doubt. I have not hesitated to use oral tradition, but I have signaled its use, and must regard statements based on traditions to be provisional and approximate rather than definitive.

It is a significant challenge to acknowledge those many people who have assisted my journey to this project, since a journey of nearly forty years' duration has more debts than I can mention here. For that reason, with a few special exceptions I thank those who have helped and encouraged me on this particular project. To those who have provided me with assistance at earlier times, or even more recently and I have not acknowledged, my apologies.

I must thank my financial benefactors on this particular project, primarily Boston University, through the granting of leave to finish the work and a faculty assistance account along with occasional supplements to meet research costs. I must also acknowledge the Hutchins Center at Harvard University, and particularly its director Henry Louis Gates, for their substantial financial support, and to Professor Gates himself for being a party to my work.

My greatest intellectual debt is to Linda Heywood, who was with me on this journey from almost the beginning, from our meeting in the archives in Lisbon when we were both researching our Ph.D.s, to the lengthy correspondence on all matters from theory to documentation, and our continued collaboration that includes a book, several articles, many consulting stints, and two daughters. Although I have published a good deal in my own name, there is nothing I have written in which Linda has not had a hand through conversation, discussion, or mutually assisted translation in many languages.

I also owe much to my colleagues in that small but tight band of researchers on pre-colonial Angola, including especially (in no particular order), Wyatt MacGaffey, José Curto, Roquinaldo Ferreira, Mariana Candido, Cécile Fromont, Jessica Krug, Daniel Domingues da Silva, Kalle Kanonoja, Ariane Carvalho, and others. Among those no longer with us, I must mention Jan Vansina, François Bontinck, Joseph

Roosen, and Joseph C. Miller, with whom I had many discussions and much correspondence. I am particularly appreciative of the willingness everyone within this group has had to share documentation, research problems and strategies, discussions of tough problems as well saving many hundreds of hours in the archives.

Similarly, I want to thank my colleagues in the KongoKing research project at the Universities of Ghent and Paris, for our multi-year collaboration using linguistic, archaeological, and historical data to probe the origins and early history of Kongo. Particularly, I want to thank Bernard Clist, Pierre de Maret, Koen Bostoen, Hein Vanhee, Igor Matonda Sakala, Gilles-Maurice de Schryver, and Inge Brinkman. Beyond the group in Ghent, I owe a special thanks for commentary and discussion to Giacomo Macola, Annelike Vandamme, and David Gordon.

I have benefited from my participation in the Angolan project for the elevation of Mbanza Kongo to a World Heritage Site, and especially acknowledge Rosa Cruz e Silva, former director of the National Archives of Angola and subsequently Angola's Minister of Culture, for our long friendship, her intellectual encouragement, and support for me and so many other scholars working in Angolan history. Thanks to Tito Chiamba for translating Childe's invaluable oral traditions from Umbundu to Portuguese for me. Also thanks to Alexandra Aparicio, current director of the National Archives of Angola, and to the staff there for their support while doing archival research.

Also in Angola I owe a special thanks to Father Gabriele Bortolami, whose own knowledge of the ethnography of modern Kikongo-speaking people in Angola, his command of the older documentary tradition, resulting in a fine dissertation, was of infinite help to me. I remain grateful to him and his colleagues at the Capuchin monastery at Nossa Senhora da Fátima, for hosting Linda and me: and for his willingness to drive me through many of the former provinces of Kongo in 2011.