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978-1-107-03080-0 - A History of African Motherhood: The Case of Uganda, 700–1900
Rhiannon Stephens
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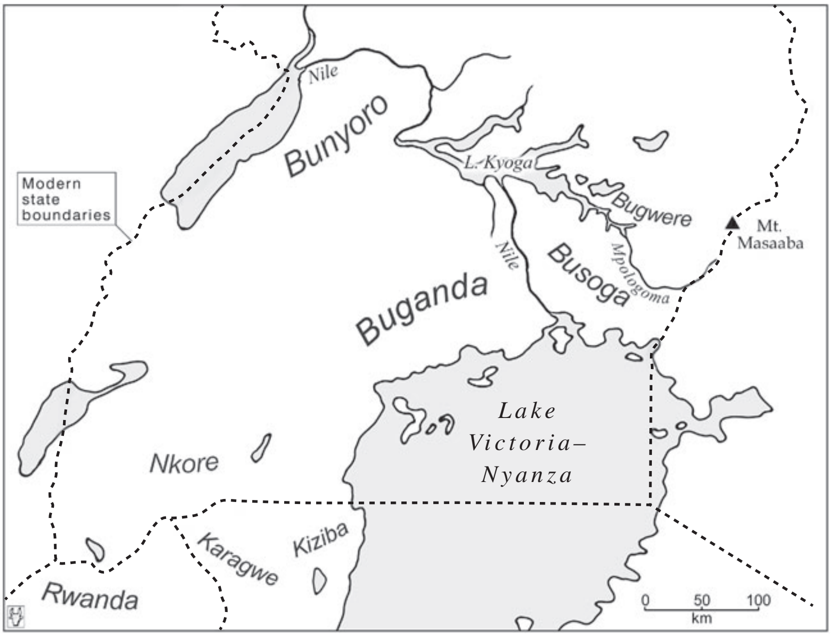
Introduction

This book tells the story of the familiar – motherhood – in what, to many readers, is an unfamiliar place, east central Uganda. Motherhood appears regularly in historical studies, but is rarely itself the focus of analysis. Rather, it is invoked as a universal category imbued with relational and emotional significance: motherhood is usually about nurturing, caring, facilitating, and restraining. As such it can be used to explain women's position in society without challenging our ingrained concepts of essentialism and biology. But when the historical lens turns to motherhood itself, its universalism and eternality dissipate almost instantly; motherhood becomes unfamiliar. To write historically about motherhood, it is necessary to expand our understanding of it beyond biological reproduction and practices of nurture and caregiving and think instead about motherhood as a social institution and as ideology. In the area of Uganda that today encompasses the societies of Bugwere, Busoga, and Buganda – all descended from the common ancestral North Nyanza language community – such an approach opens up a wide and complicated history of motherhood that can be traced back to the first millennium and shows it to have been at the heart of most important historical developments in the area, from the organisation and reproduction of lineages and clans to the centralisation of political power into monarchical states (Map 1).

This project started, perhaps rather unfashionably, as a way of exploring women's history in precolonial Uganda. Motherhood is widely recognised as an essential aspect of women's lives in Africa, more important than marriage in terms of identity, social status, and political and



MAP 1. Great Lakes Region, including North Nyanza societies and major neighbouring states.

religious authority.[1] It seemed therefore the obvious starting point for a study charting developments in women's lives before the rapid changes of the modern era. Despite the project's initial focus, this book is an exploration of the roles motherhood has played in social organisation, economic activity, and political power rather than a history of mothers per se. To borrow a phrase so effectively used by the historian Lorelle Semley, it is a history of *public motherhood*: of motherhood as social institution and ideology.[2] As such this book speaks to historical research across the

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[1] For example: "Although wifehood in many African societies has traditionally been regarded as functional and necessary it is at the same time seen as a transitional phase on the road to motherhood. *Mother* is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women." Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, "Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds: African Notes on Feminist Epistemologies," *Signs* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1096. Emphasis in original.

[2] Lorelle D. Semley, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). Semley also uses the phrase 'public mothers,' which she in turn has borrowed from Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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premodern world, not because motherhood is a universal, but because a focus on public motherhood makes possible a fundamentally different way of viewing patrilineal and patriarchal societies.

Motherhood in African history is traditionally seen as having a specifically African form although one that is both unchanging and uniform across different regions and times. The core framework of this depiction works as follows: women who were unable to have children, either through their own infertility or that of their husbands, were socially and economically vulnerable. At best, they faced poverty and, at worst, accusations of witchcraft. After death their spirits were not remembered, except as possible agents of misfortune, and children were not named after them.[3] Although it is rarely explicitly stated, the inverse is thus held to be true: women who were able to reproduce biologically sought to have as many children as possible. Such women were socially included and valued and could look forward to an economically secure future.[4] The high birth rate in twentieth century sub-Saharan Africa is thus generally depicted as a continuation of a subcontinent-wide, precolonial approach to motherhood. There are important exceptions to this generalised depiction, but the dominant vision is of a timeless, and therefore ahistorical, African motherhood.[5]

A History of African Motherhood argues that motherhood in precolonial Africa has a history that is complex and that motherhood is central to our understanding of African history more broadly. A historical perspective enables us to see motherhood as a social institution and as an ideology that both shaped and was shaped by the communities of which it formed such an important part. As those communities changed over time – expanding, diversifying, contracting – so the way in which they constructed motherhood also changed. There was no single trajectory or outcome of motherhood even within individual communities. Some African women may have found economic and social security through their maternity, but many others will not have done so, regardless of the number of children they had.[6] Some women may have faced isolation and insecurity as a result of infertility, but others were able to acquire ritual authority as mediums precisely because of their infertility.[7] Motherhood also enables us to explore the complexity of social and political organisation by bringing women into the analysis without excluding men. Mothers were wives to husbands, daughters of fathers, and mothers to boys as well as girls. And motherhood, in these societies, could not exist in the absence of fatherhood. As a fundamentally relational institution, all of these relationships shaped both the individual experience of motherhood and its public form. By viewing motherhood as diverse, as culturally specific and as subject to change over time, we can see how people drew on it, as social institution and as ideology, to shape their societies long before the changes wrought by entry into the modern era of long-distance trade, capitalist markets, and colonisation.

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[3] For a clear summary of this perspective, see Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 77.

[4] My thanks to Anne Hugon of the Centre d'Études des Mondes Africains, Paris, for our discussion on this question which helped to clarify and sharpen my thinking.

[5] For some of the exceptions, see Steven Feierman, "Struggles for Control: The Social Roots of Health and Healing in Modern Africa," *African Studies Review* 28, no. 2/3 (1985): 73–147; Nancy Rose Hunt, "'Le Bébé en Brousse': European Women, African Birth Spacing and Colonial Intervention in Breast Feeding in the Belgian Congo," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21, no. 3 (1988): 401–32.

Over the past two decades or so, historians and theorists writing about motherhood in Europe and North America have demonstrated it to be both contingent and historical and have posed questions vital for studying motherhood in Africa. "Until quite recently, however," notes the historian of medieval Christianity, Clarissa Atkinson, "motherhood had no history; it was too thoroughly identified with the private sphere and with the 'changeless' biological aspects of the human condition. Women's lives were organized and their capacities defined by their status as mothers, potential mothers, and non-mothers, but motherhood itself was not perceived as an institution shaped by culture and subject to history."[8] To overcome our culturally constrained vision of motherhood as "biological and invariant" and write about it historically, we need to conceptualise motherhood as an institution with an ideology, as Heather Jon Maroney argues.[9] Such an approach enables us to untangle "the social, historical, biological and psychological dimensions of maternity."[10] In viewing

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[6] Rhiannon Stephens, "Birthing Wealth? Motherhood and Poverty in East-Central Uganda, *c.* 700–1900," *Past and Present* 215 (2012): 235–68.

[7] See, for example, Iris Berger, "Fertility as Power: Spirit Mediums, Priestesses and the Precolonial State in Interlacustrine East Africa," in *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History*, ed. David M. Anderson and Douglas H. Johnson (London: James Currey, 1995), 65–82.

[8] Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 6.

[9] Heather Jon Maroney, "Embracing Motherhood: New Feminist Theory," in *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism*, ed. Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett (London: Verso, 1986), 405.

[10] Maroney, "Embracing Motherhood," 399.

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motherhood as a social institution, and by writing its history, it becomes possible to demonstrate, in the words of British literary scholar Toni Bowers, that "motherhood, far from a static, 'natural' experience, is a moving plurality of potential behaviors always undergoing supervision, revision, and contest, constructed in particularity."[11] But understanding motherhood to be an institution is only the starting point. "As an institution," asks Atkinson, "how is motherhood constructed? How are its ideologies developed and proclaimed?" Most importantly for our purposes here, we need to ask, "How is the work of mothers related to the political and economic institutions of a society?"[12]

This comes to the fore in the institution of the queen mother, a feature of African monarchical states that has garnered significant scholarly attention.[13] As the historian Sandra Barnes highlights, the commonality of queen mothers, although not all biological mothers to kings, derived from most of them belonging "to the generation senior to the ruler" and occupying "a position in the governmental hierarchy that was equal or complementary to the monarch." Scholars have, furthermore, viewed queen mothers as performing "functions that were derived from 'mothering,' among which protecting and supporting were politically significant."[14] But, argues Semley, "scholars who equate women's political activities primarily with 'mothering' and caretaking present such skills as 'natural.'" In so doing, they obscure "women's leadership and decision making in the ritual, religious, political, and economic well-being of the community."[15] When we approach queen mothers from the perspective of an ideology of public motherhood, as Semley suggests, we can both move beyond culturally determined preconceptions of 'mothering' and place queen mothers effectively in a broader political and ideological context. Queen mothers have long been at the heart of political centralisation in

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[11] Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 19.

[12] Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation*, ix.

[13] See, for example, Edna G. Bay, "Belief, Legitimacy and the *Kpojito*: An Institutional History of the 'Queen Mother' in Precolonial Dahomey," *Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 1–27; Suzanne Preston Blier, "The Path of the Leopard: Motherhood and Majesty in Early Danhomè," *Journal of African History* 36, no. 3 (1995): 391–417; Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan, ed., *Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses, and Power: Case Studies in African Gender* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1997).

[14] Sandra T. Barnes, "Gender and the Politics of Support and Protection in Precolonial West Africa," in *Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses, and Power: Case Studies in African Gender*, ed. Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1997), 2.

[15] Semley, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass*, 39.

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east central Uganda, but their history suggests the broader salience of local ideologies of motherhood in social and political life, among royalty and commoners alike.

Viewing motherhood as an ideological concept allows us to reconstruct the historical architecture of its multiple functions, both durable and contingent, as a productive necessity, a cultural form, and a political institution. Some scholars will insist that we should not use the term ideology to discuss the precolonial African context. The term emerged in Europe, apparently in the early nineteenth century, and is closely associated with the European political developments such as communism and fascism. Other scholars, as the political scientist Kathleen Knight notes, have claimed the term is used too often and inconsistently. While competing definitions abound, Knight offers a common definition of ideology that allows for generalisation beyond any specific use or association: "the way a system – a single individual or even a whole society – rationalizes itself." She draws on John Gerring's definition that ideology requires coherence and stability. This is even the case when ideologies are "impractical, or even delusional." As a coherent and consistent social system of meaning, an ideology also requires contrast or opposition, usually in the form of other competing ideologies.[16] In all of these ways, the history of motherhood, in east central Uganda and likely elsewhere, is at heart the history of an ideology. As a cultural form, as a social relationship, and as a key element in political charters, motherhood took an ideological form that was both internally consistent and enduring over generations and at times over centuries. But it was by no means unchanging. People adapted their ideology of motherhood as they faced new challenges and possibilities. As the North Nyanza community expanded and divided, new forms competed with and at times eclipsed older ideologies of motherhood in a complex history of social and cultural change.

To view motherhood as an institution with an ideology is to enable the kind of historical analysis required to replace the universal, timeless conceptions of this common but complicated central feature of human society. It also enables a historical approach to gender in the region. As Joan Wallach Scott so persuasively argued, gender "provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction. When historians look for the ways in which

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[16] Kathleen Knight, "Transformations of the Concept of Ideology in the Twentieth Century," *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 4 (2006): 619 (quotes); John Gerring, "Ideology: A Definitional Analysis," *Political Research Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1997): 957–94.

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the concept of gender legitimizes and constructs social relationships, they develop insight into the reciprocal nature of gender and society and into the particular and contextually specific ways in which politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics."[17] A number of historians have demonstrated the truth of Scott's point for twentieth-century Africa, in particular with reference to the role of reproduction in constructing both gender and political relations. Lynn Thomas effectively encapsulated this truth in the phrase, "politics of the womb."[18] In this book, I draw on the insights provided by historians and anthropologists about the centrality of reproduction and gender relations to Africa's colonial and postcolonial experience and set those works in the context of a much longer trajectory of gendered history. In so doing, this fundamental aspect of East Africa's political, cultural, and social history comes more clearly into view.

It can often seem as if the history of much of Africa before the nineteenth century is shrouded in the mists of time. It is true that historians writing about more recent periods have a greater body of material to draw upon. But by taking oral traditions seriously and by exploring the possibilities open to us through interdisciplinary approaches, we now know a good deal about many parts of the continent over the past two thousand years. In the first blossoming of African history, many scholars focused on the precolonial period in a deliberate move away from the then conventional imperial approach in which African history was the history of Europeans in Africa. These works were inspired in part by Jan Vansina's argument that oral traditions, if correctly used, could stand on level ground with written records; perhaps the most famous of these early precolonial studies of East Africa is Bethwell Ogot's *History of the Southern Luo*.[19] This work was also inspired in part by a desire to write 'authentic' histories of African countries that could be drawn upon as part of the process of building up the new nations that emerged in the 1960s. But by the 1980s the subfield had slowed down. On the one hand, scholars increasingly realised that oral traditions could not be used in the same way as conventional archival material, that they were shaped as much by the tellers of the tales as by the historical events they narrated. On the other hand, the focus of academic historians moved to the colonial and increasingly postcolonial periods as archives opened up, revealing a wealth of material. By grappling with the implications of new understandings of oral traditions, however, scholars have produced nuanced and compelling histories of the deeper past.[20]

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[17] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1070.

[18] Lynn M. Thomas, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). The works are too numerous to list, but these three edited volumes include many of the key historians: Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi, eds., *Women in African Colonial Histories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy, eds., "*Wicked*" *Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2001); Lisa A. Lindsay and Stephan F. Miescher, eds., *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2003).

[19] Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, transl. H. M. Wright (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1965); Bethwell A. Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo: Volume One, Migration and Settlement 1500–1900* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967). Other East African examples include Gideon S. Were, *A History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967);

Other historians drew on linguistic evidence to write about periods beyond the recall of oral tradition. Among the first proponents of this approach were Roland Oliver and Christopher Ehret.[21] Many of their original arguments have been revised or even discarded as we have learnt more about African languages or as new archaeological evidence has been uncovered. But the underlying premise – that languages can serve as a form of archive giving us insight into past centuries – remains salient. More recently, scholars have combined evidence from multiple sources to write the history of Africa over several centuries and even millennia.[22]

Isaria Kimambo, *A Political History of the Pare of Tanzania c. 1500–1900* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969); Samwiri Rubaraza Karugire, *A History of the Kingdom of Nkore in Western Uganda to 1896* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); M. S. M. Semakula Kiwanuka, *A History of Buganda from the Foundation of the Kingdom to 1900* (London: Longman, 1971); David William Cohen, *The Historical Tradition of Busoga: Mukama and Kintu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500–1900* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1974); William Robert Ochieng', *A Pre-colonial History of the Gusii of Western Kenya: From c. A.D. 1500 to 1914* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1974); Steven Feierman, *The Shambaa Kingdom: A History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974).

[20] Again for East Africa only this work includes, Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); David Newbury, *Kings and Clans: Ijwi Island and the Lake Kivu Rift, 1780–1840* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom*, trans. by author (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); Neil Kodesh, *Beyond the Royal Gaze: Clanship and Public Healing in Buganda* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

[21] Roland Oliver, "The Problem of the Bantu Expansion," *Journal of African History* 7, no. 3 (1966): 361–76; Christopher Ehret, *Southern Nilotic History: Linguistic Approaches to the Study of the Past* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1971).

[22] For example, Edda L. Fields-Black, *Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Rhonda M. Gonzales, *Societies, Religion, and History: Central East Tanzanians and the World They Created,*

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Taking a broad interdisciplinary approach means that we can draw more complete and accurate pictures, although the remaining gaps in our knowledge are large and so we expect the history presented in these pictures to be challenged and revised. Importantly, through this work we have begun to better appreciate the diversity, complexity, and specificity of African societies, whether the entanglements of food production, culture and identity in the west central African rainforest or the intertwined nature of gender, economy, religion, and political power across the sub-Saharan region.

Some scholars of Africa's older history do have the benefit of written texts, although the texts that are available take a wide range of forms. Those writing about West Africa's place in the trans-Atlantic trade have shown the possibilities of uncovering African history even when using sources produced by outsiders. Since Kenneth Onwuka Dike's seminal *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, they have also shown the value of interpreting a wide range of African sources – written, oral, material – alongside archival ones.[23] Working on areas further inland, historians of the West African Sahel have drawn on the rich materials preserved in the libraries of places such as Timbuktu as well medieval inscriptions from northeastern Mali.[24] Those studying the other side of the continent, whether writing about the Horn of Africa, ancient Nubia, or

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c. 200 B.C.E. to 1800 C.E. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), Gutenberg e-book, http://www.gutenberg-e.org/gonzales/ (Accessed 2 January 2013); Kairn A. Klieman, "*The Pygmies Were Our Compass": Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900 C.E.* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2003); Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Jan Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

[23] K. Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956). Some recent examples include, Peter Mark, "*Portuguese" Style and Luso-African Identity: Precolonial Senegambia, Sixteenth-Nineteenth Centuries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); G. Ugo Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[24] Just a couple of examples from a rich field include, John O. Hunwick, ed. and trans., *Sharīʿa In Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghīlī to the Questions of Askia al-Hājj Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1985); Bruce S. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). On inscriptions see P. F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuāreg History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2003).

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the Swahili coast, also have the benefit of documents and inscriptions and chronicles.[25]

This growing body of writing on Africa in times long before the nineteenth century shows just how rich and nuanced that history is, but it also underscores the inadequacy of 'precolonial' as a descriptor for a period of time that stretches over several centuries. The term precolonial is rightly critiqued for privileging the colonial moment, as if all that came before was merely prelude. Equally problematically, it collapses dramatically different episodes of African history into a single, undifferentiated periodisation that intimates a degree of stasis. As yet, however, historians have not developed a new periodisation. Terms such as 'Early Iron Age' and 'Late Iron Age' have fallen out of favour with the archaeologists who first used them. And drawing on the periodisation of European history – ancient, medieval, and modern – risks imposing an external meta-historical narrative that too often makes little sense in the African context. Historians have responded by using specific, albeit broad, dates, a model that works well in individual cases but does not produce a wider generalisation.[26] In the end, we tend to stick with precolonial all the while bearing in mind its serious limitations. What is important is that our work, this book included, demonstrates the dynamism of past African societies and the ways in which people shaped those societies.

The rich and exciting literature on Africa's deeper past sheds light, albeit often indirect, on the history of motherhood. Jan Vansina, for example, writes extensively in *Paths in the Rainforests* about marriage practices and shifts by communities between matrilineal, patrilineal, and bilineal descent.[27] While he does not address it per se in his analysis,

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[25] And again, a few examples of the many that exist include, Edward A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves: Changing Pattern of International Trade in East Central Africa to the Later Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Derek Nurse and Thomas Spear, *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society, 800–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Téwodros II* (Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1992).

[26] Ehret has used 'African Classical Age' for the period 1000 B.C.E. to 400 C.E., in part to highlight the continent's place in world history. See Christopher Ehret, *An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

[27] Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*. This is a very different interpretation from the argument that all ancient African societies were matrilineal (and matriarchal) made by Cheikh Anta Diop and George Murdock, among others. See Cheikh Anta Diop, *L'unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire: Domaines du patriarcat et du matriarcat dans l'antiquité classique* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959) and George Peter Murdock, *Africa: Its Peoples and*