

Households, Gender, and Politics in West African History

IN THE late 1990s, when conducting oral interviews in the village of Somangoi, in Guinea-Conakry, West Africa, I met a very old woman named Fanti Traoré. She described for me local memories of the French colonial conquest, which took place at the end of the nineteenth century. Although Traoré was in her nineties when we met, she had not yet been born when the “Scramble for Africa” was at its height and European armies and explorers swept through Africa laying claim to vast territories. But Traoré’s mother had been alive back then, and she told her daughter about the first day that the French arrived in Somangoi. According to Traoré, her mother and the other women of the village had gathered to wave leafy branches and greet the colonizers. Traoré clapped her hands together and recited the verses that had been sung to the French over a century before: “Our new husbands are here, everybody should leave their old husbands, our new husbands are here!”¹

At first pass, it may seem odd that the women of Somangoi identified these foreign conquerors as potential marital partners. In colonizing the Milo River Valley, as elsewhere in West Africa, the French did not come in search of new wives, nor did they try to anchor the colonial state by marrying local women. But when this song is situated in the context of precolonial state-making, which depended heavily on family ties and household relations, the marital logic articulated by the women of Somangoi starts to make a good deal of sense.

This book examines the relationship of households to statecraft in the Milo River Valley from the seventeenth century through the early twentieth century. It argues that when men make states—and men consistently dominate state-making during the period under study—they also make households. It further argues that the relationship between household-making and state-making

takes historically specific forms that illuminate the logic, parameters, and resources of a given political regime. Previous studies of African political history focus largely on male elites and on the formal institutions of rule that they controlled, without considering how those elites constituted the domestic sphere and treated it as a political resource. By approaching household-making and state-making as linked processes, this book generates a more nuanced understanding of West Africa's political history and its transformations from the precolonial through the colonial periods. This analysis exposes the intricate workings and history of power, or the various techniques and strategies that elites used variously to cultivate, accumulate, coerce, manipulate, and mobilize their followers and subjects. This approach also exposes the shifting construction and politicization of gender roles—that is, the way that differences between the sexes are freighted with particular meanings, implications, constraints, and opportunities—by revealing how men and women engaged with and were affected by different state-making processes over time.

This exploration of the relationship of households to states moves from a basic premise, which is that households serve as a constant preoccupation of state-makers and that political elites devote considerable energy to their construction and operation. But the manner in which they do so takes diverse forms. Stepping back from the Milo River Valley to consider the relationship between household-making and state-making on a broader historical scale makes this point clearly. In some places and times, political elites use the household as a foundation for statecraft, and they deploy marital bonds and familial ties to build and organize the state. Examples of such a state include kingdoms in medieval Europe that were made up of aristocratic families, and small-scale chieftaincies in Africa that were organized through real and fictive kinship networks. At other times, political elites use the household as a site to express and display the power, wealth, and connections that they have accumulated through external activities, such as warfare or commerce. One famous model of that type of state is that of Louis XIV of France, the “Sun King,” who transformed his palace at Versailles into an opulent showcase of his personal and political hegemony.² And in yet other contexts, political elites treat households as discrete and separate entities that can, nonetheless, be managed by the bureaucracy of rule. Think here of modern republics, such as the United States, where politicians defend the sanctity of their “private lives” while they use legal systems and social and fiscal policies to define, regulate, and tax the households of the citizenry.

In the Milo River Valley, analyzing household-making and state-making in the same frame is useful because it helps account for a pronounced transformation that takes place in the historical record from the precolonial to the colonial periods. In recounting the origins of Baté, a state founded

in the Milo River Valley in the seventeenth century by a group of Muslim migrants, the people with whom I spoke told stories about political change that invariably dealt with men, women, and the households they built together. But once those oral narratives focus on the era of French colonial rule, they suddenly cease to make reference to households and to women. In this regard, the masculine bent of local histories parallels that of the French archival record. The written records produced by colonial officials likewise illuminate the actions and interactions of men, French and African.

In accounting for the masculinization of the historical record, it may be tempting to focus on women's roles and to interpret the ubiquitous presence of women in Baté's precolonial narratives as proof that women once exercised great political power, which they subsequently lost with colonization. But that would be a mistake. Women in precolonial Baté never served as chiefs, nor did they serve in other official leadership positions. Each of the precolonial modes of statecraft that took root in the Milo River Valley prior to French colonial rule—one pacifist and one militaristic—was a thoroughly masculinist and patriarchal political regime. Moreover, women figure consistently into Baté's precolonial narratives as members of male-headed households: as wives, daughters, mothers, and sometimes slaves. Colonial rule, additionally, did not fundamentally alter these roles and designations.

What did change with the transition to colonial rule is the relationship of the household to the state. When the household operated as a pillar of statecraft, women could use their roles as mothers, wives, and sisters to sway their male relations and carve out informal pathways of political influence. Unlike Baté's precolonial elites, who saw their wives, children, and households as foundational components of statecraft, French officials did not view their personal lives or their households as a useful resource for making the colonial state. In colonization, the French created a bureaucracy of rule that was constituted exclusively by men and entirely devoid of personal, familial ties. That process rendered women's domestic roles incompatible with the exercise of political power.

Investigating the interaction of state-making and household-making in the Milo River Valley over three centuries makes several contributions to our understanding of politics and historical change in Africa. This approach demonstrates that it is critical to historicize, and not to assume, the existence of a clear demarcation between the political realm and the social realm, between the public sphere and the domestic one. The categories that historians and other academics often deploy, which separate and project backward into time a division between "the political" and "the social" do not accord with how most precolonial elites in the Milo River Valley understood statecraft. Those men would have considered any effort to distinguish their political lives

from their personal lives as a supremely odd proposition, and one that would obscure a full measure of their power. It is a mistake, in other words, to assume that an understanding of West Africa's complex political traditions can be achieved simply by analyzing political leaders and institutions. It is imperative to instead address the way in which precolonial political elites used their personal lives to advance political agendas and ambitions. This perspective reveals that one of the significant but overlooked characteristics of colonial rule was the inability or refusal of French colonial officials to treat their own households as political assets. In effect, the states that took root in the Milo River Valley from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries may have been uniformly masculinist, but they certainly did not advance identical practices and forms of male supremacy.

Studying the relationship of household-making and state-making is also useful because it exposes the effects on gender roles of major forces of historical change. Research on West African history has emphasized how, for example, long-distance trade, organized violence, and colonization altered the region's political, economic, and social landscape. But the constraints and opportunities produced by commerce, warfare, and occupation did not unfold evenly and affect unilaterally all members of a given society or state; rather, those processes typically operated along an axis of gender, affecting men and women differently. To take one example: long-distance trade became increasingly important in Baté in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This male-dominated activity did not simply change economic patterns of production and consumption in the Milo River Valley. It also changed the composition of its households, increased the practice of slavery within the state, and reinforced the political and personal authority of male elites. Recognizing that gender roles are, in part, a product of wider social, economic, and political processes, and that those processes are likewise affected by prevailing gender norms, thus generates a more complex understanding of the foundations and forms of power in West Africa.

Finally, exploring the dynamic ties between household-making and state-making creates a fresh vantage point to consider the implications and legacies of colonization. Analyzing the French occupation from a perspective firmly rooted in the precolonial period reveals that one of the most significant innovations of colonial rule lay in the way in which the French separated the state from the household and, in so doing, empowered male colonial subjects. In colonization, the French created a bureaucratic structure of rule that presumed that all men, regardless of status or origin, could assume the burdens and responsibilities associated with colonization. The French simultaneously consigned all women, irrespective of rank or birthright, to a depoliticized domestic realm. In short, a good part of the reason that women disappear

from Baté's narratives of power and politics with colonization is that, unlike precolonial state-makers, the French did not construct their state through households and in conjunction with women, but around them.

HOUSEHOLDS, GENDER, AND STATECRAFT IN
PRECOLONIAL AFRICA

The household, which stands at the center of this analysis, is a unit of material, cultural, and social production and reproduction that is typically constituted by men, women, and children who share a common familial affiliation and live together in a shared space. In the Milo River Valley, the region of Upper Guinée that is the focus of this study, households are patrilineal and polygynous in organization and structure. Polygyny enables male household heads to marry several women (usually no more than four), and male elites often use their marital unions to forge alliances and fortify connections to other groups and families. As ethnographic and historical evidence makes clear, polygynous households can be antagonistic, fraught places, as when competitions for favor and standing among co-wives and children of different mothers spark fractious conflicts. But those households can also engender strong and enduring bonds, particularly among children of the same mother. Where this book departs from previous scholarly investigations of Mande, the larger ethnolinguistic world of which the inhabitants of the Milo River are a part, is in its efforts to take seriously and historicize the political implications of household dynamics and to specifically show how households figured into and were affected by state-making processes in both the precolonial and the colonial periods.

This study defines states as structures of formal authority that exert political supremacy over their subjects and that provide formalized protection to people in exchange for the sacrifice of some degree of independence or autonomy. States typically offer basic rules or principles of exchange and dispute resolution, and they may also be informed by a belief system and corresponding set of rites and rituals. In some states, only members of certain families may occupy leadership positions, whereas other states employ a variety of criteria for determining who may wield authority. Many states are highly flexible and knitted together by patron-client, marital, and kinship ties, but the state nonetheless exists as an autonomous, identifiable political institution that stands apart from, or independent of, any one person, officeholder, clan, or kin group. In this book, the term “state” refers to a product, and “statecraft” refers to a process. Exploring the processes involved in making a state—also referred to as state-making, state-building, or state formation—makes it possible to move beyond a fixed analysis of the attributes and functions of a state to consider the dynamic forces and relationships that give form to a particular polity.³

This exploration of statecraft in the Milo River Valley fills several gaps in current scholarship on political systems and their history in Africa. Studies of African history written today tend increasingly to focus on either the pre-colonial era or the colonial period; few studies breach that temporal divide in a sustained and thorough manner. Moreover, the Milo River Valley is a region of West Africa that has been largely neglected by scholars, and so too has its corpus of original, oral sources been mostly unexplored. In addition, most studies of African political history deploy what are arguably Western conceptions about what constitutes the “political.” This book departs from that trend by following the lead of local historical narratives that propose a more fluid definition of political units and political processes, one that pays heed to households and gender roles, and their implications for state-making.

The history of the Milo River Valley offers a vantage point to specifically consider a range of studies that have been undertaken on precolonial African states. Investigations into states and politics have been on the forefront of African history since the field first gained a firm footing in the Western academy in the 1960s, the era in which, not coincidentally, many African colonies gained their independence. At that time, historians went in search of a “usable” past to prove that Africans had a tradition of self-rule and governance that predated the European colonial conquest of the late nineteenth century. Much of this first historiographical wave focused on kings and chiefs and systems of rule in the deep precolonial past. The resulting studies imply that the men who constructed West Africa’s major medieval states, such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, operated within a clearly demarcated political realm and that households or women mattered little to political processes and developments.⁴ This emphasis is particularly ironic given the sources on which these studies draw. The epic of Sundiata, which narrates the founding of the Empire of Mali, is filled with mothers, wives, and sisters, whose actions and influence profoundly affect the political trajectories of their male relations.⁵ Academic histories thus leave the impression—one that is quite at odds with the sources on which they rely—that it is possible to understand the workings of West Africa’s medieval states simply by analyzing male leaders and the political structures that they built and maintained.

Whereas studies of medieval states emphasize the contributions of indigenous African peoples and processes to state formation, other studies explore the impact of external forces on precolonial African states. Much of that scholarship has focused specifically on the consequences in Africa of the transatlantic slave trade. Many scholars contend that the transatlantic slave trade fostered in Africa the emergence of centralized, predatory states led by kings and chiefs whose armies brought devastation and enslavement to weaker peoples.⁶ Of late, that model has come under question by studies of decentralized, or

acephalous, societies, which indicate that state consolidation and warfare were not the only effective means to achieve protection from the predations of the slave trade.⁷ The transatlantic slave trade and its long-term consequences have also influenced interpretations of African statecraft in the nineteenth century, after the British outlawed the slave trade in 1807. A. G. Hopkins argues that the shift to legitimate commerce—the export from Africa of raw materials and agricultural products—produced a “crisis of adaptation” among African elites who had been habituated to accumulating wealth and power through the slave trade. Other scholars dispute the idea that the transition to cash crops and natural resource exploitation generated crises of authority among African rulers. They point out that some African elites shored up their losses in the slave trade by investing anew in domestic African slavery and directing this labor to the cultivation and export of cash crops.⁸

Taken together, these studies show that the transatlantic slave trade and the transition to legitimate commerce shaped the context of state-making in Africa from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. But these investigations of economic history and political economy also tend to stop at the proverbial edge of the chiefly household compound.⁹ That is, these studies overlook the way that male elites used their households to mediate and manage these larger transformations.

It would be mistaken to suggest, however, that research on precolonial African polities has completely disregarded the contingencies of male authority or the role of women and households in state-making. Some of the most insightful examinations of precolonial African political systems have come from feminist scholars who have called attention to specific instances in which elite women exercised political power. In the Kingdom of Dahomey, the wives of the king held certain political offices, while in Buganda in East Africa, the Queen Mother controlled her own sources of wealth production and had the authority to curb the authority of the king, the Kabaka.¹⁰ These examples importantly demonstrate that precolonial Africa cannot be characterized as a reign of unimpeded male dominance. But these cases also suffer from a critical limitation, for female officeholders are more the exception than the rule in sub-Saharan precolonial African states. In the Milo River Valley, as in most of West Africa, only men were deemed eligible to serve as chiefs or political leaders of any sort. Studies of female rulers and officeholders thus do not go a long way toward illuminating the workings of gender and politics in the Milo River Valley or, for that matter, in most of precolonial Africa.

In many ways, the approach to the precolonial political history of the Milo River Valley presented in this book shares most in common with those scholars who argue that power in precolonial Africa is best understood as a quest by elites to accumulate “wealth in people.” Historians, anthropologists, and

political scientists have pointed out that in Africa, unlike in modern Europe, land was plentiful relative to people and that the major challenge elites faced in creating states was accumulating and controlling human dependents.¹¹ Marie Perinbam makes this point by emphasizing that relations between people gave form to the nineteenth-century Bamako *kafu*, or state (which is located in present-day Mali). That *kafu* was made up by a dense network of powerful families who exerted social and political control over other people, not land.¹² Other scholars, such as Jeffrey Herbst, have likewise argued that many precolonial African states lacked the infrastructural and technological capacity to rule through violence and coercion. Political elites consequently had to cultivate and coerce their followers and “broadcast” their authority through other means.¹³

As the relationship between household-making and state-making in the Milo River Valley shows, African elites did not use a singular or timeless approach to accumulating followers. In Baté, male elites acquired dependents very differently in the seventeenth century, when they focused principally on agricultural production and religious study, than they did in the mid-nineteenth century, when warfare and captivity became a mainstay of the political system. In effect, by analyzing the relationship between household-making and statecraft in the Milo River Valley, this book brings further precision to the “wealth in people” principle by historicizing and particularizing the strategies that elites use to attract, compel, and control human dependents over time.

Tracking the relationship between household-making and state-making in the Milo River Valley from the seventeenth through the early twentieth centuries also exposes the inadequacies of conventional periodizations, which are, nonetheless, difficult to discard. The centuries preceding colonial conquest are only imperfectly described by the ahistoric and vague term “precolonial,” whereas the historic break suggested by the term “colonial” masks the way that older, African political systems and hierarchies persisted into and influenced the French occupation.¹⁴ Examining the connections between households and states for more than three centuries of time can be an unwieldy task, and the results of this undertaking are not necessarily even and constant. In part, those inconsistencies are the result of the limitations of the available sources. But that lumpiness is also the result of the persistent conflicts and competitions that stood at the heart of the state-making projects in the Milo River Valley.

HOUSEHOLDS, GENDER, AND STATECRAFT IN COLONIAL AFRICA

Considering state-making and household-making in the same frame brings together two approaches to the study of colonialism that typically remain discrete. Feminist scholars have approached the European occupation of Africa by looking outward from the state to consider the social consequences

of colonialism and its effects on women in particular. Political scientists and political historians, by contrast, typically focus on the apparatus of rule to shed light on the organization and capacities of the colonial state and, by default, on the men who literally manned those processes. Both of these scholarly avenues share a common assumption, which is to accept, implicitly or explicitly, the premise that colonialism was a “male project.” But neither of these approaches explains the operation of the colonial state as a masculine political regime: the male exclusivity of colonial structures and colonial institutions is accepted as a given, not as a product of a particular set of circumstances, practices, and ideologies. This oversight is not inconsequential, for the colonizers introduced radical innovations to statecraft when they conquered and occupied Africa. In French West Africa, the colonial elites promoted a division between private and public spheres, and they disaggregated their own households from the apparatus of rule. In their ideas about autonomous men, dependent women, and the dangers of inherited status, the colonizers furthermore put into place policies and practices that bore the unmistakable imprint of nineteenth-century French republicanism.

Feminist historians have done a great deal to illuminate how the European occupation altered the social and economic lives of women in colonial Africa.¹⁵ Their studies show that colonization introduced new markets, political structures, and social and religious practices that produced conflicts and contestations over gender roles, marriage, and motherhood.¹⁶ In some contexts, the colonial state provided avenues for women to exit marital unions, and expanding urban centers opened pathways for women to carve out new economic roles for themselves.¹⁷ But colonial rule also marginalized women and subjected them to greater scrutiny. Colonial efforts to codify “customary” law and utilize “traditional” ruling structures invariably fortified the authority of male elites over women.¹⁸ Moreover, in various parts of Africa, the colonizers launched “improvement” campaigns that were meant to reinforce female domesticity by instilling in girls and women colonial notions about how to properly make and maintain a household. These campaigns taught women about sanitation, hygiene, and child rearing, while schools for girls likewise trained their charges in the “domestic sciences.”¹⁹ These studies clearly establish that colonialism opened some opportunities for women, but it also funneled them into particular roles and subjected them to new constraints and restrictions.

Although feminist historians have been sensitive to the outward effects of the colonial state on women and domestic relations, research on the colonial state itself—on its institutions, infrastructure, and coercive mechanisms—has tended to neglect questions of gender and the household. Studies of the colonial state have instead focused on colonial institutions and their transformative

capacities. Using the Belgian Congo as a case study, Crawford Young invokes the concept of *bula matari*, or the stone crusher, to convey the brutal and arbitrary nature of colonial rule. Mahmood Mamdani similarly depicts the colonial state as omniscient and authoritarian.²⁰ Other scholars, however, reach different conclusions about the nature of colonial rule. They note that European powers proved unable to live up to the grandiose claims of control suggested by their carefully drawn maps and detailed treaties. In their analysis of colonial Kenya, Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale point out that the colonial state was pulled in many directions and stretched thin by limited resources and conflicting agendas.²¹ Along the same lines, Richard Roberts has argued that precolonial practices and institutions proved resilient and adaptable, while Herbst notes that the colonizers faced the same geographic and demographic challenges that precolonial elites did in their efforts to radiate their power over sparsely populated areas.²²

These divergent interpretations of colonialism—one that characterizes the colonial state as omniscient and powerful, the other that emphasizes its fundamental weaknesses—indicate that there is no broad consensus about the hegemony of the colonial state in Africa. The range of assessments about the nature of colonial rule reflects not only a diversity of scholarly opinion but also a diversity of European colonial powers and agendas. What these studies have in common is an uncritical acceptance of the European and African men who stand at their centers. The “stone crushers” of Young’s Belgian Congo are men, as are the citizens and subjects who populate Mamdani’s analysis, and likewise the colonial officials in the studies by Berman and Lonsdale. These investigations have not, however, taken measure of the forces and processes that propelled the colonizers to create a bureaucratized political realm that was constituted exclusively by men and notably void of households and intimate family relationships. Standard political analyses of colonization, in other words, naturalize the male bias and the impersonal, bureaucratic structure of the colonial state without investigating their debt to nineteenth-century European gender ideologies and political structures.²³

Investigating the relationship of the household to the state offers a means to address these lacunae in the extant literature on the colonial state in Africa. In colonization, French officials—and those from other European states—differed from their precolonial predecessors because they did not personalize statecraft by marrying strategically, accumulating dependents, or creating households with the intention of simultaneously fortifying their political and personal power. Indeed, by the early twentieth century in French West Africa, white supremacist beliefs so permeated the colonial project that the intimate relationships of white French men and black African women were labeled deviant, subversive, and contrary to the “civilizing mission.” Of course, official

disapproval did not stop French men from seeking out African women for companionship and sex. But they did so for their own private reasons, not for political ones. The disjuncture that consequently emerged between the principles of colonialism and its quotidian practices has informed a spate of research on colonial cultural and social mores. Anthropologists and historians have explored, for example, the sexual anxieties and racial obsessions that these allegedly transgressive unions inspired in a variety of imperial contexts.²⁴ These studies have done a great deal to illuminate how European ideas about race, gender, and sexuality shaped the colonial encounter. But this research on the actions and angst of colonial elites has not considered the political implications of the unions of European men and African women; it has not addressed how, specifically, the privatization of the personal transformed the political landscape of West Africa and created a masculinist political regime that distanced and marginalized all colonized women.

While the French did not treat their own intimate relationships as politically significant, they did not altogether ignore the households of their colonial subjects or overlook the contribution that they could make to the colonial project. In colonization, the French consistently sought to engage and mobilize “the household” as a social construct, and the colonizers regularly used policy and decree in an attempt to remake African domestic arrangements into ones that were more amenable to and reflective of French ideas about “civilization.” Furthermore, the approach that the French took to state-making and household-making in the colonies—which depoliticized the personal lives of political elites—was a colonial adaptation, not a new invention. That is, the division between public and private embedded in the colonial project reflected reigning practices and norms in the metropole during the Third Republic, which oversaw the rapid colonial expansion into Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. In France in the Third Republic, men (as long as they were white and French) had rights to citizenship, and they could actively participate in the public realm. Women, in contrast, were treated as legal dependents of their male relatives; they could not achieve full citizenship, nor could they gain official access to the political sphere.²⁵

In colonization, French officials drew upon these metropolitan gender constructs and filtered them through the ideologies of cultural uplift and racial superiority that animated the colonial project.²⁶ The metropolitan distinction between men as active citizens of the state and women as domesticated dependents found colonial application within policies and laws that granted all male African colonial subjects access to the colonial bureaucracy and that consigned all female African colonial subjects to the household.²⁷ As this book shows, the effort by French officials to disaggregate the household from the state—both their own households and those of their African colonial

subjects—was, in fact, a distinctive feature of colonialism. Recognizing that the French effort to create separate spheres for men and for women was a deeply political act also collapses the scholarly divide that has long characterized colonial historiographies of gender and politics. In sum, to fully grasp the consequences and implications of the colonial occupation, it is critical to pay heed to European gender ideologies and their influence on the structure and operation of the colonial state.

PLACES AND PEOPLE

This book focuses on a region, the Milo River Valley, which is located in the interior, eastern part of the modern-day nation of Guinea (Conakry). It forms part of a larger geographic region known as the Western Soudan (not to be confused with the country, Sudan, located in East Africa). The Soudan is a savanna region that stretches from western Africa to eastern Africa. It is south of the semiarid Sahel region that edges the Sahara desert. In the savannas of the Milo River Valley, no natural boundaries demarcated the precolonial Islamic state of Baté, although its principal towns and villages lay clustered on the western bank of the river. The Milo River has long supported Baté's agricultural base, and it has served as a means for transportation and communication, a resource for fishing, and a protective barrier against invaders from the east. Baté's location near different geographic and productive zones played a key role in its economic development and enabled its capital, Kankan, to emerge as a major crossroads of commerce by the early nineteenth century.

The annual cycles of production and farming in the Milo River Valley are shaped by two seasons, dry and rainy. The dry season, or *telemaa*, is punctuated by the *harmattan* that fills the sky with a ruddy, reddish sand that blows down from the Sahara, shortens the hours of daylight, and casts everywhere a thin film of sandy red dust. The harmattan is followed by heat—months that parch the land and the hardy outcrops of trees and shrubs that dot the savannas. The Milo River shrinks and slows, grasses dry out, and animals and people wait for the start of the rains, which, when they come, bring with them life and growth. During the rainy season, or *sama*, the Milo River runs full, and grasses and plants grow once again. Baté's farmers have long put to full use the predictability of the rains and the richness of the Milo's floodplains. An early nineteenth-century French traveler reported the wealth of plant and animal forms cultivated in the area: yams, rice, fonio, onion, and okra grew in its fields, while cows, sheep, and goats grazed on the plains.²⁸

The inhabitants of the Milo River Valley who claim historic ties to the region come from different backgrounds and origins. The clerical, familial state of Baté was founded in the seventeenth century by Muslim Serakhullé migrants who came from near the Sahara desert, who, over time, came to be

identified by the ethnic and religious designation of Maninka Mori, or Muslim Maninka. Their neighbors, who in times past were polytheists, are referred to as Maninka, and they lived in a handful of chieftaincies that surrounded Baté, including Wassulu and Toron to the east, Sankaran to the west, and Konia to the south. Both the Maninka and Maninka Mori are speakers of Maninkakan, also known as Malinke, which is a Mande language and indicates the membership of the people of the Milo River Valley in the Mande world, a sociolinguistic group that predominates in the western savannas. Today, the heartland of Mande lies between Kankan in Upper Guinée, Kangaba in Mali, and northern Côte d'Ivoire, but it also incorporates speakers of Mande languages who live in Burkina Faso, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Senegal.²⁹ Mande ethnic groups include Bamana (or Bambara), Maninka, Mandingo, Kuranko, Soussou, and Dyula.

Wherever they live, Mande peoples often associate culturally and historically with the Mali Empire, the medieval super-state that was founded in the thirteenth century. John William Johnson posits that the epic traditions that narrate the life of Sundiata Keita, founder of the Mali Empire, constitute “a social and political charter” of the Mande world.³⁰ Today, the people of Mande live scattered in many West African countries, and they speak different languages, practice different religions, and claim various ethnicities. Although Baté’s founders do not claim direct descent from the rulers of the Mali Empire, they are nonetheless of the Mande world—and they share with Mande common cultural threads, including certain family names, social practices, and an ample corpus of oral traditions.³¹ Indeed, the cultivation of political knowledge and political history through orality—an attribute that is highly valued throughout Mande—forms an integral part of this present investigation into the history of the Milo River Valley.

SOURCES AND METHODS

In investigating the history of statecraft in the Milo River Valley, this book relies on a variety of historical sources. For the precolonial period, it uses a rich corpus of oral histories that I collected in interviews in and around the towns and villages that made up the precolonial state of Baté. When starting research on this project, I spent more than a year traveling in and around Baté, typically by bicycle, conducting oral interviews with elders, mostly men but also women. This book uses the family, town, village, and regional narratives that I collected during that time. It also considers formal oral traditions as presented by *jeliw* (singular, *jeli*), also known as *griots* or bards, who specialize in performing epics, as well as the references to the past that often crop up in daily conversation in the Milo River Valley. This evidentiary core has been enriched in subsequent years by conversations carried out with Al Hajj Hawa

Touré Karamo Kaba, a Koranic scholar and member of one of Kankan's leading families.³² Our ongoing discussions and debates, now conducted through e-mail with the help of a research assistant, Mory Kaba, have been indispensable to clarifying and elaborating the processes and tensions investigated in this book.

In contrast to the oral record, the documentary record pertaining to the Milo River Valley is thin, especially as it relates to the precolonial period. Historical Arabic documents have proved elusive, in part because the climate does not lend itself to document preservation, but also because local records are said to have been destroyed when Kankan was burned to the ground in 1891, when the French arrived. The earliest available written documentation about the Milo River was written by European travelers, who voyaged only rarely in this part of West Africa until late in the nineteenth century. The first extant reference to Kankan was made in passing by a French traveler, Gaspard Mollien in 1818.³³ A little more than a decade later, another French traveler, René Caillié, became the first European to visit Kankan. He spent six weeks there in 1827 and devoted more than one chapter of his two-volume account of his West African travels to the town.³⁴ After Caillié's visit, the documentary trail evaporates again until 1870, when a cleric from Kankan gave a lecture in Monrovia, Liberia, that was reported in a local newspaper. Documentary evidence increases from the 1880s, when an uptick of interest among Europeans in Africa generated various letters and reports on Kankan and other parts of the interior of West Africa.³⁵ The formal occupation of the Milo River Valley by the French in 1891 widened that documentary trail, and I traced the actions and thoughts of French officials from that period onward in archives in Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and France.

The evidentiary challenge for the historian thus lies in the precolonial era. Given the dearth of documentary evidence that pertains to the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, it is clearly imperative to work with the available sources, which are oral. But using such historical accounts to write history presents some difficulties.

Oral sources of history have occupied an important place in the field of African history since its inception as an academic field of study. In the late 1950s, Jan Vansina established that orally transmitted information could be a valid and useful resource for studying the past.³⁶ To validate the historical value of oral sources, Vansina developed "rules of evidence" to evaluate and derive historical information from the inevitable alterations and changes to which those accounts fall subject as they are passed from one generation to the next. Vansina's approach to oral traditions is essentially an optimistic one. It is premised on the idea that those sources contain an essential truth that can be, with some manipulation, extracted.³⁷ The problem with Vansina's fact-based methodology, however, is that it neglects to consider the dynamism

and malleability of oral sources. Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen make this point in their recent edited volume by emphasizing that oral sources are both products and processes, and that these sources are communicated differently depending on a number of factors, including the audience, as well as the tellers' materials, resources, and efforts to "tell better stories."³⁸

Indeed, the susceptibility of oral narratives to change has inspired some of the genre's most trenchant critics. One such critic is Jan Jansen, who has spent much time working in Kela, Mali, a town that is famous for its learned families of *jeliw*. Jansen has studied the way that *jeliw* learn and transmit oral traditions, for the profession is a heritable one that passes from one generation of *jeliw* families to another.³⁹ Despite claims made by *jeliw*—that they pass down knowledge of the past exactly as it was taught to them—Jansen witnessed how they changed and manipulated those traditions to meet different needs, as when a group of *jeliw* invented wholesale an oral tradition to enhance their standing and legitimize claims to certain farmlands.⁴⁰ Jansen concludes that it is fruitless to use the knowledge of *jeliw* to reconstruct the past, because, he asserts, their narratives are "essentially unhistorical." Jansen contends that oral traditions should be understood as a cultural resource used to manage the present, not as a carefully preserved historical archive.⁴¹

Other scholars share Jansen's skepticism about oral sources, but draw very different conclusions about their essential utility. In her research on rumors about vampires and blood-suckers in colonial Africa, White explicitly states that she does not believe that vampires and blood-suckers existed at all. But White contends that whether true or not, fantastic and fabulous rumors about vampires and blood-suckers nonetheless open a powerful lens on the terms and tropes that Africans use to interpret colonial rule.⁴² White convincingly argues that stories or rumors circulate, coalesce, and condense around certain themes at particular historical moments for a reason, or set of reasons, that can be productively analyzed. By approaching rumors as products of a particular historical moment, not necessarily as factual statements, White explores the context that gave those accounts such resonance, enabling her to explain why certain rumors acquired the status of "truth."⁴³ This approach has enabled White to crack a nut that has largely eluded historians, which is to write a nuanced cultural history of colonization that is finely attuned to the discourses, critiques, and viewpoints of Africans.⁴⁴

My use of oral sources in the study of statecraft in the Milo River Valley incorporates something from both Vansina, in his quest for truth and fact, and White, in her exploration of interpretations and perspectives. On the one hand, I "mine" oral sources, à la Vansina, for what they convey about basic narratives and events in the precolonial past. In part, this approach is purely

practical—any serious effort to understand Baté’s precolonial past must draw, by necessity, on oral narratives, as there are few alternatives. If we do not accept that local accounts of Baté’s history possess valuable historical knowledge, then it would not be possible to know very much at all about the Milo River Valley prior to the arrival of Europeans in the region.

On the other hand, I share with White a certain doubt about the bare reliability of such narratives. I am not convinced—nor would it ever be possible to prove—that many of the men and women who figure into the oral narratives of this book “actually” lived and acted in the ways attributed to them. It seems highly likely that the stories about individual men and women serve as symbolic representations—as a convenient shorthand—for events that likely involved many people and that took place over multiple generations. Oral narratives no doubt condense what were likely complex interactions and protracted conflicts into neat and clear stories that often emphasize certain values and codes of conduct, and present idealized models for social hierarchies, gender roles, and the interface of privilege and subservience. But, like White, I believe that it is in these tropes and prescriptions—not despite them—that a great deal can be learned about the past.

As a result, this book on the history of statecraft is replete with vivid examples from the oral record that may or may not be verifiably “true” but that, nonetheless, offer a compelling vantage point on particular historic moments and processes of change. It is impossible to know, for example, whether or not some women from Kankan really mocked Samori Touré, the Maninka empire builder, after he was captured by the French in 1891 by singing him a song about onion sauce, as discussed in chapter 4. But the possibility that the people of Kankan did feel some satisfaction when Samori was captured (whether or not they sang a song to make that point) does gain credibility when considered in the light of Kankan’s experience with Samori. Samori, a one-time ally, later turned against Kankan and its leaders, conquered and occupied Baté, and replaced its leadership with his own men. Just as stories about vampires and blood-suckers offer insight into the political economy of colonial rule, this story of onion sauce—as with other remarkable tales of visionary women, gun-wielding chiefs, and long-lived mules—provides evidence of the tensions and strife of both the precolonial and colonial periods.

As these examples suggest, this book uses the cultural terms through which precolonial statecraft is understood and discussed in the oral sources. The result is a political history that bears little resemblance to “conventional” works of this genre. This book does not focus exclusively, as do many studies of politics and states, on politicians, high offices, infrastructural organization, or legal frameworks. Rather, I approach Baté’s political history as do its narrators, who tell a nuanced story about the genesis of the state through stories about

people, households, and relationships—men and women, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, masters and slaves, foreigners and locals. These oral narratives suggest that the trajectory of statecraft in the Milo River Valley was shaped by external forces as well as by internal processes, such as jealousies of brothers, loyalties of mothers, and rivalries that cut across generational and family lines.⁴⁵ Exploding the divide that separates the “social” from the “political”—by considering how profoundly political was the social and how deeply social was the political—is not, in other words, simply an intellectual exercise, but a perspective that grows out of the sources themselves.

It is also clear that, as the critics charge, oral sources are malleable and vulnerable to change. But it is also evident that limits act on the circulation and invocation of the past, and that understanding those limits can yield useful historical information. As Arjun Appadurai points out, “The past is a scarce resource”: the listeners and conveyers of oral sources cannot reformulate the past haphazardly, but must work within the realm of the possible and the plausible, even if they do not necessarily deploy verifiable, literal “facts” in doing so.⁴⁶ And, as I have learned over the years, the oral sources that circulated in Baté are, in fact, quite “historical.” Those sources invoke and operate within a detectable framework, parameters of historical possibility that change as the narratives cover different periods and processes. Violence, for example, figures into Baté’s oral narratives differently over time—it is absent, avoided, and abhorred in those stories that relate to Baté’s early years, while it is common in those stories that relate to the nineteenth century. So too does a telling shift take place in the way that women figure into the oral record—they are complex and influential in the early narratives, whereas they feature as symbols and victims in the late nineteenth-century period of warfare, and are basically absent in those stories that relate to the colonial period. These changing characters and tropes are not random, I argue, but in fact reflect fundamental historical transformations that took place in the states and households of the Milo River Valley.

In investigating the cultural pools and repertoires upon which these oral sources draw, this book owes a great debt to a body of research that focuses on the Mande world, the larger sociolinguistic grouping of the Western Soudan of which the Maninka Mori and Maninka peoples of the Milo River Valley are members. The academic origins of Mande studies are found in the work of a handful of colonial ethnographer-administrators who wrote about the cosmologies and social practices of Soudanic peoples.⁴⁷ Today, scholars of Mande rely on personal knowledge and extensive fieldwork to decipher the meanings at play in the oral traditions, social worlds, and cultural practices of Mande. In translating and transcribing oral traditions, in learning the beliefs and craft of hunters, and in apprenticing themselves to blacksmiths and potters, scholars

from an array of disciplines have exposed how complex cultural dynamics configure relations of power and status in Mande social worlds.⁴⁸ Although some of this scholarship can be criticized for assuming a degree of cultural and ethnic fixity across time and place, specialists of Mande have nonetheless generated insights that are of particular use to understanding Baté's history. Placing Baté within this larger sociolinguistic context shows the linkages that it shares with the rest of the Mande world, as well as the ways in which its historical trajectory is distinctive and stands apart from patterns and processes that predominate elsewhere.

Analyzing the interpretive perspectives and information conveyed by oral sources is not an exact science, and there are no doubt some people who will dispute some of the interpretations that are presented here. But it is my hope that the chapters that follow will bring weight and substance to the claim that it is still possible and, indeed, imperative, to use oral sources to study Africa's past and its precolonial past in particular.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This book is first and foremost an analysis of the dynamics of statecraft and household-making in the Milo River Valley. This approach sheds light on political processes, as well as on the way in which politics constructs, and is constructed by, social dynamics and gender roles. But this book can also be read as a narrative of political change that illuminates transformations that took place in West Africa more generally from the seventeenth century through the early twentieth century. Baté's history offers a view on, for example, the history of Islam in Africa, for Baté was founded by Muslims steeped in Suwarian principles of pacifism. The history of Baté also exposes some of the consequences and effects of the transatlantic slave trade, the rise of warfare and "legitimate trade" in the nineteenth century, and the impact of colonization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This book is organized in two parts. The first part focuses on transformations in the relationship of state-making and household-making in the precolonial era. Chapter 1 shows that, at the height of the transatlantic slave trade, a small group of Muslim migrants used their households to lay the foundation of the state of Baté. Drawing on pacifist traditions of Suwarian Islam, the leaders and residents of Baté avoided making enemies by focusing on agricultural production and religious study. This approach to statecraft protected Baté's residents from warfare and predation, while it also rendered Baté's male household heads heavily dependent upon the contributions and cooperation of their female relations. In this era, age and religious erudition could collapse the gender divide, and postmenopausal mothers could acquire a certain degree of influence and authority. Chapter 2 demonstrates that

Baté's households continued to serve as a foundation of statecraft in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At this time, the interests of male gerontocratic elites and marriageable young women converged in an effort to use household relations to attract and settle male migrants to the state. Many of the migrants to the state were involved in long-distance trade, a specialty dominated by men, and they took advantage of changing terms of trade along the Atlantic Coast to transform Kankan, Baté's capital, into a major center of commerce and production. Male household heads invested profits from trade in slave labor, which rendered them less dependent on the contributions of their female relations. Baté's households continued to anchor the state, but they now contained greater social and gender differentials than they had in Baté's foundational years.

Chapter 3 continues the analysis of the precolonial era by investigating how the adoption of warfare by Baté's male elites in the mid-nineteenth century changed the relationship of the household to statecraft. For a variety of material and religious reasons—slave ownership served increasingly as a mark of manhood, while ideas about militant jihad gained currency among some of Baté's male elites—a younger generation of men cast off the pacifist traditions of Suwarian Islam embraced by their fathers. As young men with guns embarked on military campaigns, Baté's households became living testaments to the wealth and power, in the form of slaves and wives, that men accumulated through warfare. This chapter shows that the households of Baté's male elites ceased to serve as the central site of political production and reproduction but that they continued to be important symbolically to statecraft. Chapter 4 focuses on Samori Touré, the Malinke state-maker from the south who eventually conquered and occupied Baté in the 1880s. Samori strategically composed his household and treated it as politically significant. But, like other African leaders who derived their power from warfare and slaving, he considered his household more as a forum to display the power—in slaves and wives—that he accumulated elsewhere. This chapter demonstrates that, even in warfare when slaving and predation dominated the political landscape, African rulers continued to regard their own households as an intrinsic component of state-making.

Whereas the first part of the book moves chronologically through the precolonial period, the second part of the book uses different angles to study the early colonial period. Like part 1, the second part of the book considers how political elites—who were now French—approached household-making and state-making. Chapter 5 starts by tracing the French conquest of the Milo River Valley. It shows that the French introduced a new method of making states and making households to the Milo River Valley. Although many French officials entered into intimate, sexual relationships with African

women, these men did not treat their locally constructed households as a means to constitute the state or perform their power. But as chapter 6 reveals, although French colonial officials may have disaggregated their own households from statecraft, they also sought to eliminate inherited hierarchies of privilege and servitude and create households composed of autonomous men and dependent women. This chapter shows that the French treated households as part of a separate social milieu that was nonetheless important to creating a colonial order. Finally, chapter 7 moves beyond colonial intent and ambition to investigate how French efforts to drive a clear line between public and private spheres translated into practice in the Milo River Valley. As the economic activities of women, the persistence of slavery, and the workings of the local administration show, the French faced considerable difficulties in promoting a colonial order void of social stratification and constituted by households made up of autonomous men and domesticated women. This chapter demonstrates that the French colonizers were not as organized or as omniscient as they proclaimed at the time—and have often been assumed to have been since then by historians and other scholars.