Concubines and Power: Five Hundred Years in a Northern Nigerian Palace. By Heidi Nast (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 288 pp. $68.95 cloth $22.95 paper

Nast’s Concubines and Power presents a historical-geographical account of royal concubinage by focusing on (1) human geographical methods, premised on (2) an agrarian based state in which reproduction moves history, and (3) presenting new empirical findings in the process (xviii–xix). Nast discusses specific areas of socioeconomic change brought about by concubines within the confines of the Kano royal palace since its origins circa 1500. In five chapters, she examines concubines’ roles in the context of grain processing and indigo dyeing, the nineteenth-century Fulani takeover, and pre- and postcolonial activity.

This study is unique in its attempt to explain how women were involved in state formation, concluding that royal concubines were central to the rise of the Kano state by virtue of their ethnic and political connections, as well as by their management of grain proceeds and marketing. Nast lays out clearly the manner in which concubines’ roles supported both extensive social networks and economic viability. Establishing political ties with the regions from which the slave-status concubines came, their presence in the palace created a network of political affiliations that could be used to solidify alliances. Of particular interest is her explanation of royal children as currency, like grain: The “womb functioned symbolically...as a source wherein the state’s primary currency was created: children” (167). Since the children of concubines were of royal status, increasing the emir’s political base through blood ties, women were valued for their reproductive capabilities, as well as for their productivity in controlling grain prices and indigo markets.

The most refreshing methodological aspect of this study is Nast’s reliance on such unusual sources as aerial maps and data concerning grain taxation; the social maps that she creates offer innovative historical perspectives on concubine activity. This kind of material is especially important considering the dearth of historical documents that predate the jihad, and the questionable veracity of oral traditions. Furthermore, Nast’s extensive input from individuals in the Kano palace is valuable for the insights that it provides. Nast does well to provide the background information necessary to set her personal contacts in context and to explain the disagreements among them on certain points. It would have been helpful to know whether she spoke to individuals in Hausa or used a translator, and how or whether she transcribed interviews. In contrast to the innovative methodology, the historical basis of the work derives directly from established historical, anthropological, and political studies of Hausa culture and comparisons to royal conditions elsewhere in Africa, as nearby as Yoruba and Benin and as far away as Darfur, without accounting for the extent of their differences in Islamic and ethnic influence.
Concubines and Power offers a detailed sociospatial geographical history of the residences, activities, and value of concubines in the Kano palace. It brings together a wealth of information on the lives of women who populate the harem, the heart of the palace, and lends insight into how women contributed to Kano politics and culture during the past 500 years. It will surely inspire further research on Hausa women and their vital roles in the culture.

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How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa Before 1600. By Jan Vansina (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2004) 325 pp. $45.00 cloth $24.50 paper

This book is a major contribution to the now-growing body of African historical works that systematically marshal nonwritten documentation in recovering the African longue durée.1 These works apply the long-established techniques for using the comparative method of historical linguistics in conjunction with ethnography to reveal the ideas, culture, and material lives of peoples of earlier times.2 Anthropologists and Indo-Europeanists have long utilized the techniques piecemeal or with limited goals in mind. Africanist historians have re-adapted the methods of linguistic and ethnographic reconstruction to build up complex regional histories and anchor these findings chronologically by identifying their points of conjunction with the available archaeology, oral tradition, and written documentation. Vansina is one of the major movers in this kind of history.

Despite its title, How Societies Are Born is not primarily a work of theory or comparative history. It is a first foray into reconstructing the broad sweep of the pre-1600 eras of history across southwestern Central Africa, from the upper Zambezi River areas on the east to the Atlantic coast at the west, and from northern Angola on the north to the Kalahari and northern Namibia on the south. Vansina builds a story of how the particular societies present in these regions by the seventeenth century came into being.

The story begins around 2000 years ago with the arrival of the first


2 Edward Sapir, Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture (1916), is considered the classic early text on method. Ehret, “Linguistic Evidence and Its Correlation with Archaeology,” World Archaeology, VIII (1976), 5–18, presents a simplified overview of the processes of correlating linguistic and archaeological stratigraphies.