tool – a place for recalling lost collective memories and to instil an understanding of the cultural foundations of Africa.

From my Accra office, I am now involved in the making of other civic buildings across Africa, which I approach in a similar way to the Edo Museum: using architecture to illuminate history and form collective identities. On a personal level, I have also returned to my ancestral land in the Akuapem hills of Ghana and constructed a country home for myself in my father's village. To be rooted locally, I designed it using rammed earth and it has been constructed organically. I am entirely preoccupied with thinking about the elemental quality of earth, our co-relationship with nature and the origins of Black architecture. Like this book, I believe my return is a process of going back to the past to reconstruct the future.

KINGS, KINGSHIP AND KINGDOMS IN AFRICAN HISTORY

John Parker

In 2018, King Mswati III of Swaziland decided to mark his country's fiftieth anniversary of independence by changing its name to Eswatini. Wedged between South Africa and Mozambique and with an area of just 6,704 sq. miles (10,789 sq. km) and a population of 1.1 million, Eswatini is one of Africa's smallest nations. It is also the continent's last absolute monarchy. Emerging as a distinct state in the mid-eighteenth century and consolidating its position a century later under the forceful leadership of Mswati II, the kingdom of the Swazi people, or *Umboso weSwatini*, was one of the few in Africa to survive European colonial rule and emerge intact as a modern nation in the era of renewed sovereignty in the 1960s. Indeed, Sobhuza II, who became king at the age of four months in 1899 and who oversaw that transition, is one of the longest-reigning monarchs in world history; after a brief experiment with democracy following independence from Britain, he suspended the Westminster-style constitution and ruled by royal decree until his death in 1982. Today, Mswati III, on the throne since 1986, continues to govern as king or *Ngwenyama* ('the lion'), in consultation with his queen mother or *Ndlovukati* ('the she-elephant'). Together they preside over the hallowed annual rituals of *ncwala* and *umhlanga* – the latter emerging in recent years as a matter of concern for women's rights activists, as it was then that each year the king was presented with a young bride to add to his retinue of wives.

Eswatini remains one of just a handful of absolute monarchies – systems of government in which a hereditary ruler holds or dominates executive power – left in today's world. So-called constitutional monarchies, such as the United Kingdom or Japan, are more common: in these, kings or queens continue to symbolize or embody the nation as 'head of state', but real authority has been devolved to representative bodies like parliaments. Yet the decline of royal power is a relatively recent phenomenon in world history: dynastic kings emerged as the rulers of the earliest centralized states in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas, and continued generally to hold sway for thousands of years until the idea of absolute monarchy began to come under attack from the seventeenth century. In Africa, as elsewhere, kingship went into terminal decline only in the twentieth century and in some cases this is an ongoing process: in Morocco, which following independence in 1956 saw the restoration of the long-established Alaouite dynasty, it was as recently as 2011 that King Mohammed VI agreed to a reduction in his autocratic power in an effort to placate popular protest associated with the Arab Spring. The current direction of those reforms, however, is unclear. Throughout much of the rest of the continent, moreover, 'traditional' kingship continues to function within modern nation-states. Shorn of most of its political sovereignty, it remains a focus for older and more localized forms of identity, culture and sacred power. This is not to say that centralized kingdoms dominated Africa's varied political landscapes throughout history: as we will see, the ability of many of the continent's peoples to govern themselves without recourse to kings may be just as important as the state-building efforts of would-be dynastic rulers. Yet from the ancient Nile Valley to the savannas of medieval West Africa, the highlands of Ethiopia and on to the forests and grasslands stretching away to the south, African civilizations have given rise to some of the world's most impressive kingdoms. The history of these kingdoms and the nature of royal power at their core is the subject of this book.

Over the course of some five thousand years of recorded history, Africa has witnessed the rise and decline of hundreds of kingdoms, great and small. These have been ruled by countless kings: the great majority of them have been men, but queens too have played a role in the African past, as have powerful 'queen mothers' like the *Ndlovukati* of Eswatini. No one book can consider all of them, so what this one does is to focus on nine key regions where centralized states and expansive empires emerged at different times to dominate the political landscape. Some of the nine chapters look at the history of a single famous kingdom, while others trace a broader and longer political tradition that gave rise to a sequence of states. Perhaps the best-known of these regional trajectories is the succession of three great empires in medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali and Songhay, examined in chapter 2 by Rahmane Idrissa. The first chapter, by David Wengrow, also explores a wider regional context by shifting the history of the emergence of Africa's earliest kingdoms away from its established focus on pharaonic Egypt to a dialogue along the Nile Valley, between Egypt to the north and Nubia to the south. This analysis sets the tone for the chapters that follow: their aim is not simply to offer chronological narratives or reiterate received wisdoms, but to consider fresh insights into the role of kingdoms and kingship in African history. Understandings of this key aspect of Africa's past have changed in significant ways since the history of the continent emerged as a subject of sustained academic study in the mid-twentieth century. Over that time, much has been achieved in recovering and interpreting histories of state-building in Africa: no longer is the continent's deep past an indistinct realm of 'lost kingdoms'. Yet the African past does remain poorly integrated with that of the rest of the world – a marginalization, as Michael A. Gomez argues in his recent study of empire in West Africa, that has only been underlined with the recent emergence of the field of 'global' history.[1] This book seeks to contribute to the task of rectifying that marginalization by presenting to a general readership some of the most exciting recent developments in the understanding of states and societies in the African past.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF KINGSHIP IN AFRICA

What exactly is a king and what distinguishes him from ordinary people? Do kings – and queens – forge their own power as autonomous historical actors, or are they created by wider social structures and processes? Are they predators or peacemakers, and do the systems of dynastic rule they preside over function by coercion or by consent? How, in the words of one study of the rituals of royalty, 'are people persuaded to acquiesce to a polity where the distribution of power is manifestly unequal and unjust, as it invariably is?'[2] Africa's diverse peoples have long had their own debates about these questions. As everywhere, the nature of political power has been gradually worked out, experimented with, modified and contested over time. Africans also developed their own ways of recording and celebrating – and sometimes critiquing – the history of dynastic states and the kings who ruled over them. As we will see in the chapters that follow, recovering and interpreting these political traditions remains a key task for the continent's present-day historians. To begin to make sense of Africa's bewildering variety of historical experience, however, we need first to think about how scholarly perceptions of African kingship more broadly have taken shape. What factors, in other words, have shaped what can be called the 'production of knowledge' about Africa in the modern world?

The first point to make is that the production of knowledge about Africa and its peoples took place in a particular historical context: the increasingly unequal encounter between the continent and the world beyond it in the age of European imperialism. This culminated in the violence and dispossession of the European conquest and partition of Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – from which only the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia emerged as an independent state. In the opening phase of globalized interaction, European slave traders, explorers, missionaries, envoys

and, ultimately, conquerors were all drawn to Africa's royal courts – that is, to recognized authority figures with whom they could negotiate or do business. Like earlier Arabic accounts of Africa south of the Sahara Desert, the records of these contacts therefore tend to stress the prominence of powerful kings – 'savage' or 'barbaric' kings in the ugly racialized language of the time, but the rulers of centralized kingdoms, nonetheless. As the age of European exploration and commercial penetration gave way to that of conquest, it was the same kings and their associated ruling elites who were often best placed to negotiate the terms of colonial rule. Despite having lost much of their authority, they used what remained to try to control knowledge of the past and of their own role in it. Kings, that is to argue, were clearly of great historical importance – but in some cases they might not have been quite as important as outside observers or they themselves sought to demonstrate.

In some parts of the continent, such as ancient Egypt, Ethiopia, Islamic North Africa and the so-called Sudanic zone of West Africa, the development of literate cultures gave rise to the production of royal chronicles and other written documents from which dynastic histories can be recovered. Elsewhere, it was often the imposition of colonial rule that led to the writing down of what had long been orally transmitted traditions of kingship. Some of this innovative textual production was by European missionaries and officials, but much of the most important was by newly literate African elites or 'cultural brokers'. One famous example of the latter from British-ruled Uganda, examined in chapter 6, is *Basekabaka be Buganda*, a history of the kings of Buganda first published in 1901 by the kingdom's prime minister and leading intellectual, Apolo Kaggwa. Other, non-elite views of the past were often drowned out and are only now beginning to be recovered.[3] Yet the production of knowledge in colonial Africa was dominated not by the discipline of history but by that of anthropology. It was anthropologists – whose research focused not on the past but on the contemporary 'ethnographic present' – who sought to understand how African societies continued

to govern themselves within the framework of colonial overrule. Initial findings from those regions under British rule were drawn together in 1940 in a landmark volume edited by M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard. *African Political Systems* divided societies into two broad groups: one characterized by the presence of royal authority, administrative machinery and judicial institutions, that is, by states; the other by the absence of centralized rule – so-called stateless or 'segmentary' societies. This picture of a polarized political landscape is now regarded as too simplistic and too static. A significant revision was soon suggested by the anthropologist Aidan Southall, who, based on his research among the Alur people of northern Uganda, argued that between kingdoms and non-centralized societies there existed a third structure of governance he called 'segmentary states'. Southall defined these as states in which the reach of political sovereignty and ritual authority did not exactly coincide: direct political control was confined to a central, core domain, while ritual authority extended beyond that core 'towards a flexible, changing periphery'.[4] What a given kingdom looked like could depend on the position one viewed it from.

These colonial-era models of political systems are just that: models. It would take the advent of historical research in Africa's new universities and beyond in the era of decolonization and independence to flesh them out by looking back in time and considering the circumstances in which individual kingdoms emerged, expanded and in turn declined. Yet pioneering anthropologists made a crucial observation about African kings, one that has contributed to an understanding of the nature of kingship in other parts of the world as well. Royal power, that is, was fundamentally underpinned by ritual authority. 'An African ruler is not to his people merely a person who can enforce his will on them', Fortes and Evans-Pritchard argued; 'his credentials are mystical'. The 'mystical values' of kingship typically referred to the preservation of fertility, health, prosperity, peace and justice, and were symbolically dramatized in great public ceremonies that expressed 'the privileges and the obligations of political

office'.[5] A classic example of such an annual ritual drama was the *ncwala* of the Swazi kingdom. *Ncwala*, depending on which of many interpretations of the ceremony one favours, served to renew the identity of the king as an agent of fertility, as a heroic warrior and as a sacred 'stranger'.[6] As interpretations of 'the king's two bodies' and the curative powers of the 'royal touch' in medieval and early modern Europe have shown, the entanglement of political and ritual authority has not been limited to Africa.[7] Indeed, in a recent re-examination of the ritual aspects of kingship, the historical anthropologists David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins argue that claims to divine power 'have been the raison d'être of political power throughout the greater part of human history'.[8]

The understanding of kingship in Africa took a new turn as historians began to examine the continent's past. If anthropology developed as a 'colonial science' (despite anthropologists often taking a dim view of the damaging impact of European rule on the people they studied), then African history as a discipline took shape in the era of anti-colonial nationalism and the liberation struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. The imperative for many of this first generation of historians was to reject the denigrating colonialist view that Africans had no history worth studying by recovering a 'usable past' of achievement in state-building and governance. The succession of powerful Islamic dynasties in North Africa could hardly be denied, but it was in these years that attention turned to the forging of kingdoms and empires by civilizations south of the Sahara. The long history of connectivity across the desert also began to emerge, most prominently the role of Islam and long-distance trade in the emergence of the great empires of what medieval Arab geographers called the *bilad al-Sudan*, 'the land of the Blacks'. More controversially, trans-Saharan connections took shape in the idea that a distinctive 'Sudanic civilization' may have been influenced by the diffusion of rituals of divine kingship from pharaonic Egypt. There was in fact little evidence to support the notion of ancient Egypt as the font of African statecraft – an argument that had uncomfortable echoes of the

colonial-era Hamitic Hypothesis, the racist myth that any sophistication in African civilization could only have been the result of conquest by waves of light-skinned 'Hamitic' invaders from the north.[9]

The phase of history writing focused on the heroic achievement of African kingdoms as an exemplar for modern nation-building, however, was short-lived. As early as the 1970s, more radical scholars influenced by Marxist thought were inclined to portray states – whether precolonial, colonial or postcolonial – less as mechanisms of good governance than as engines of exploitation. While nationalist historians looked to the political logic of states, Marxist scholars looked to their productive logic; the dispute between them, an early survey of these divergent interpretations pointed out, 'was really over the evolutionist assumption that it is "better" to live in states'.[10] For those non-centralized African peoples who struggled to preserve their independence from would-be state-builders, this assumption was surely wrong. For many who came under the rule of kings, too, dynastic power was something to be wary about: for the Nyoro people of Uganda, for example, the concept of 'rule' was synonymous with 'oppression'.[11] Yet there was a great deal of other evidence to suggest that many African communities did think that it was more civilized to live under the rule of kings – despite the trouble they could sometimes cause. Much of this evidence is embedded in oral traditions, which would emerge as such a crucial source for the continent's historians. Those traditions preserving the origins or the 'founding charters' of states often tell stories of the borrowing of the institution of kingship from more sophisticated neighbours. Olatunji Ojo examines one famous example in chapter 4: that of the kingdom of Benin in present-day Nigeria, whose elders appealed to the ruler of Ile-Ife, the 'cosmic metropolis' of the nearby Yoruba-speaking peoples, to send them a divine prince. Others tell stories of roving immigrants, heroic 'strangers' from beyond the established cultural order who usurped power from autocratic tyrants and instituted just and sacred kingship. Those left without kings were often dismissed as either unfortunate or uncouth by those who had them:

as the immigrant Suku peoples sang of the Mbale in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo: 'They are *bahika* (slaves) because they have no king'.[12] Likewise, the upstart city of Ibadan in nineteenth-century Yorubaland was denounced by its more ancient rivals as being 'without a king or even a constitution'.[13]

More recent historical research has moved beyond the analysis of African kingdoms as either triumphs of effective governance, on the one hand, or as engines of predation, on the other. There is now a greater focus on the nature of political cultures and the ongoing relationship between states and the societies from which they arose. These approaches have been shaped by an increasing interest in the continent's social history – the challenge for which was to seek out new sources of information beyond the authorized dynastic traditions, which kings since the time of the Egyptian pharaohs had used to impose an 'official' view of the past and thereby consolidate their own rule. A new generation of Egyptologists, for example, looked to the written records left by communities of working people and to the dynamics of the religious realm in order 'to liberate ancient Egypt's complexity from the weight of its official ideology'.[14] South of the Sahara, too, the discovery of new historical sources and the reinterpretation of old ones have offered fresh perspectives on the process of state-building. One recent example is the work of Paulo de Moraes Farias on medieval Arabic epigraphy (i.e. inscriptions on stone) in present-day Mali, which challenges some key aspects of the 'imperial tradition' as enshrined in chronicles produced in seventeenth-century Timbuktu (see chapter 2).[15] Another is the analysis by Neil Kodesh of political identity and well-being in Buganda, which offers a perspective on the history of the kingdom quite different from that of Apolo Kaggwa's dynastic narrative, *Basekabaka be Buganda*. In his tellingly titled book, *Beyond the Royal Gaze*, Kodesh considers how Buganda might have looked not from its royal court but from its peripheries, where older traditions of public healing and belonging that focused on sacred sites continued to shape clan identities after the accumulation of centralized power from the