

WOMEN'S AUTHORITY AND
SOCIETY IN EARLY
EAST-CENTRAL AFRICA



Christine Saidi



Women's Authority and Society in Early East-Central Africa

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**A complete list of titles in the Rochester Studies in African History and the
Diaspora, in order of publication, may be found at the end of this book.**

To Christopher Ehret, my mentor, and Aleen Stein,
my friend; to James Choi, Mia Choi, and Guy Moise,
my children; and to my *zauj*, Jafar Saidi

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Introduction

Women's Authority and Society in Early East-Central Africa is a long-term social history of a major African region. Its geographical scope is the wide expanse of savannahs extending across Zambia and into Malawi, the southeastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the far southwestern edge of Tanzania. Its time frame is the span of eras from the first arrival of farming peoples in the late first millennium BCE up to the nineteenth century CE. As social history, it contributes to an important new field in the study of early African history, exemplified in such recent works as Kairn Klieman's *The Pygmies Were Our Compass* for the western equatorial rainforest region, David Schoenbrun's *A Green Place, A Good Place* for the African Great Lakes region, and Rhonda Gonzales' *Society, Religion, and History* for eastern and east-central Tanzania.¹

Women's Authority differs from the other early social histories in that it is the first exploration into understanding women's power and gender dynamics in the *longue durée* of early African history. This study views gender relations as a crucial and integral factor in shaping the specific ways in which people have carried out work, social relations, and spiritual beliefs in past eras in East-Central Africa, and how they have distributed authority and allocated their social, spiritual, and material responses to historical challenges and opportunities. The findings of this book raise a series of issues for historians of Africa and, by implication, for historians of other world areas to consider in the future. The findings in this study begin to rectify the relative neglect by historians of the significant roles women played in early African history and in central African history in particular. This research shows that it is both possible and essential in writing a complete social history to reveal the contributions of women to historical change and development far back in time. Both explicitly and by implication, this book showcases the pitfalls of projecting the more male-dominated gender relations of turbulent recent periods and of politically centralized societies back into the deep past. To write this long-term inclusive history it has been necessary to employ less familiar kinds of historical evidence and use uncommon historical tools, such as historical linguistics.

The historical roles and developments recaptured in this book contribute to emerging reevaluations in anthropology of long-held orthodoxies about