

Kenny Mann. *Oyo, Benin, Ashanti: the Guinea Coast.* Parsippany, N.J.: Dillon Press, 1996. 105 pp. \$23.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87518-657-3.



Reviewed by Paul H. Thomas

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This well-received text (it won a Notable Children's Trade Books in the Field of Social Sciences award from the National Council for the Social Studies/Children's Book Council in 1996) is one of six in a series that covers the history of pre-colonial states in Africa. Geared towards children in elementary school but also useful to those in middle school as well, it is a visual delight, replete with color photographs, maps, and African designs and artwork that should make it quite attractive to its audience. It is also clearly and well written, and includes a pronunciation guide, a timeline, an index and a bibliography.

The purpose of this book is to introduce young readers to three pre-colonial kingdoms that were situated in what is now present-day Ghana (Ashanti and the Akan people) and southwestern Nigeria (Oyo and the Yoruba people and Benin and the Edo people). Given its emphasis on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is not surprising that Mann also includes a substantial discussion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its effects on the development of the Guinea coast.

The text assumes no prior knowledge of Africa or its cultures on the part of the reader and so is careful to explain and define new concepts and ideas. Given the audience, the author makes a concerted attempt to keep the explanations as simple as possible, although she succeeds perhaps too well on occasion. For example, in the one page description of Islam (p. 35), Mann writes that "Through a series of dreamlike visions, [Muhammad] was led to the ideas and founding rules of a new religion he called Islam." Any practicing Muslim would point out that it was God who spoke to the Prophet (through the archangel Gabriel). To refer to God's revelations to Muhammad merely as "dreamlike visions" is at best an understatement and at worst an affront to Muslim people of faith. The Muslim understanding of Islam is something the readers of this text need to know.

One quite interesting aspect of this volume is its use of stories handed down generation to generation by each of these peoples to explain their origins. Each kingdom's history is prefaced by what we could call the myths and legends that deal with its world view, including stories of both

the gods and of the ancestors, actual and legendary. This is a very interesting intertwining of culture with history, helping to demonstrate how culture influenced each of the kingdoms and how it continues to define each of these peoples down to the present, even though they have now become citizens of larger, Western-style nation states. In addition, it is important to note that all of the discussion of this area has been firmly wrapped in the effect that geography has had on its social and economic development. All this helps to create a text that is far from being a mere dry listing of the name and dates so often associated with history books.

While the overall quality of this book is very good, I have a few quibbles with it. The introduction (not that any student ever reads the introduction) is confusing in some respects. When I began reading it, I thought I had skipped a page because it seemed to start in mid-stream, and it uses concepts that students would not know (for example, the phrase 'legitimate trade') and that are not explained until much later in the text. Although it was much smaller by comparison, some less oblique mention of the trans-Saharan slave trade might have been useful to provide a better understanding of Africa in the world as a whole. And while the focus of this book is admittedly on the history of these kingdoms before they were overtaken by the expanding power of European colonialism, the last one hundred years have been compressed into an all-too-too brief epilogue of nine pages that, while well written, cannot help but paint with very broad brushstrokes the history of Africa under colonial rule and since independence.

The bibliography was adequate, but I found it curious that a book aimed at English-speaking North American elementary school children included a title in German. And since Mann notes in the epilog the fact that the 1996 Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to a Yoruba writer, Wole

Soyinka, one wonders why none of his works were listed in the bibliography.

Still, this book's shortcomings are relatively few and far-between. Given its intended audience, it does an excellent job of introducing and treating important themes and concepts that are necessary for an understanding of African history. Mann has done a good job in presenting her information from what is essentially an African viewpoint, while doing her best to avoid Western bias. This book can be heartily recommended for use in schools where it should be a useful and welcome text.

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