

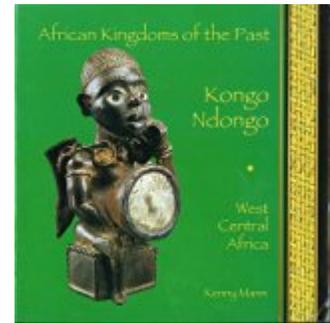
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kenny Mann. *Kongo, Ndongo: West Central Africa.* Parsippany: Dillon Press, 1996. 105 pp. \$7.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-382-39298-6.

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Angolan Antecedents

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An introduction, seven short chapters, and an epilogue make up this book, written for children from the seventh through the twelfth grades. Mann uses oral tradition, documents, archaeological evidence, and aspects of culture to construct her narrative. She concentrates on the period from c.1400-1800. Coverage includes the founding and development of the kingdom of Kongo, its rise to power by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, interaction between the Esikongo and the Portuguese beginning in the 1480s, the reign of the Christian ruler King Afonso, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, exploits attributed to Queen Njinga, and the gradual Portuguese penetration and eventual absorption into the northwestern part of their colony of Angola. The epilogue concisely summarizes the last two centuries of Angolan history.

Mann is particularly good in setting the stage for the trans-Atlantic slave trade by tracing the rise of a sugar growing complex in the Mediterranean, its spread to numerous Atlantic islands, and finally its transference to Brazil and the islands of the Caribbean. Thus she clearly shows how the demand for labor on the sugar plantations in the Americas led to European demand for an ever increasing supply of labor which in turn resulted in the development of the slave trade in Kongo and northward along the Atlantic coast to Senegambia. She is also adept at interweaving the rise of Christianity in Kongo after the initial contact with the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century, its spread to important segments of Esikongo

society, and its interaction with indigenous culture.

The text adequately portrays Esikongo life in such areas as state-building, agriculture, trade, crafts, traditional religion, social structure, and family life. The outstanding features of this book, however, are the photographs from the last 150 years of such things as the landscape, masks, and wood carvings; the paintings and illustrations from earlier centuries, and the maps, particularly a 1502 Portuguese map of Africa (p. 58) and a 1731 French map of Kongo itself (p. 59). Students will be captivated by the colorful painting of a blacksmith, his equipment, and entourage done in the seventeenth century by the Italian missionary, Antonio Cavazzi (p. 20), and by a contemporary, haunting photograph of a group of Angolans lining the Congo River, the figures nearly merging into the embrace of the forest (p. 37).

Another useful aid consists of interesting and informative sidebars that quote from indigenous oral traditions, relate portions of a Portuguese account, discuss the etymology of certain Kikongo words, and tell of the spread of Christianity among the people in the late fifteenth century, for examples. We learn, for instance, that King Afonso encouraged his people in the early sixteenth century to adopt Christianity. When they did “they took saints’ names, learned Christian songs and prayers, and celebrated Christian holidays. . . .To them, the Christian saints. . .were much like the spirits they had worshiped before the arrival of Christianity” (p. 52). In another sidebar we read that the lives of the people “were enriched

by poems, ritual songs and phrases, prayers, speeches, love songs, eulogies, praises, stories, proverbs, riddles, and other forms of verbal expression” (p. 31).

The author tries, with a good deal of success, to make the people in her historical account come alive by employing a clear, direct writing style. Perhaps writers of scholarly volumes might try to emulate such a style. Too often the latter believe they must crank out dry, pedantic tomes which somehow manage to do what should be virtually impossible – make reading history unrelentingly dull.

As this is a book for secondary school students Mann might have devoted a chapter to activities of teenagers in her geographical area. She could have depicted them helping their mothers in cultivating food crops, assisting their father in collecting palm kernels, and in numerous activities of play, for examples. The author obviously made an attempt to use the same words in her text as she would have used if writing about these subjects in other parts of the world. Occasionally, however, she stumbles. “People wore idols and fetishes” (p. 42) writes Mann. Why not refer to “religious objects”?

Also, given the widespread but erroneous Western

notion of rampant cannibalism in Africa, the author should have done a better job of discussing this aberration. Her description of the Imbangala as “ferocious” and “fierce cannibals” reinforces the stereotype and her one sentence explanation for their behavior, “Severe drought possibly drove them to invade the (Kongo) kingdom,” is not sufficient. Global examples of cannibalism and in-depth discussions of causal factors are necessary if the topic is broached.

A number of factual errors catch the reader’s attention. The former kingdom of Kongo we learn comprises present day northwest Angola and the “eastern wedge of Zaire” (p.23), although it is actually the western wedge, and Luanda is not “in southern Angola” (p.24), but the northwest part of the country.

I recommend this book to teachers, supervisors, and librarians for their schools. Students in grades seven through twelve will benefit from the fascinating story of African history this book provides.

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