

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Catherine Chambers. *West African States: 15th Century to Colonial Era.* Looking Back Series, Ages 12 and up. Austin, Texas: Raintree Steck-Vaughn Publishers, 1999. 63 pp. \$28.55 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8172-5427-8.

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This book is part of a historical series on selected societies and cultures. Each volume in the series focuses on a specific period in the history of a region. Other titles are on China, India, North America, Japan, Islam, Peru, and Mesopotamia.

This volume on Africa is highly recommended for purchase. It is educational even beyond its content. For instance, the author is careful to define terms (e.g. genealogies). The author also discusses sources, including the treatment of oral history with its problematic aspects, but also with respect for it as a historical source. She educates the juvenile reader to the fact that bias can exist in a historical source and that written sources also come with their problems: "Most of the direct evidence in this book comes from written eyewitness accounts. These accounts and observations, especially those by foreign visitors, can sometimes be clouded by the writer's own customs and expectations (p. 7)."

This book does not talk down to young adults; rather, it challenges them. In a number of places it explains how historical accounts can differ and how, to use Martin Bernal's phrase, "competitive plausibility" (what account, among the possible scenarios, seems to make the most sense or be most likely) is often what historians must resort to in reconstructing parts of the past. Thus it makes history a living, analytical field of study and not merely a collection of dates and "facts."

This book does not mince facts, however. After some discussion of various theories about the rise of the state, the author takes us on a chronological journey from ancient Mali to the early part of the twentieth century. In between we discover how different states originated (including their own myths of origin) from the Hausa city states to Oyo, Benin, Dahomey, Asante the Niger Delta States, and several others. Notably, the author weaves in a discussion of the Igbo people even where they were stateless, and shows the reader how their societies were still complex and organized.

This period of African history is connected through-

out the book to world history. In addition to the political history of this time the author discusses culture. In a sophisticated yet easily understood treatment of culture, Chambers describes the interplay of outside and indigenous influences. For instance, in discussing religion, she writes: "The adoption of other religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, altered the role of traditional religions in many communities. Similarly, traditional religions affected the way Islam and Christianity were practiced." (P. 28)

The author does less well when it comes to her treatment of women and gender in African history, mentioning mainly ruling women such as Amina of Zaria. There is a short section on women in the chapter on "Daily Life." However, given the literature, I think much more could have been done in this regard.

Also, the chapter on religion ties intellectual/philosophical ferment too closely to the arrival of Islam and Christianity, implicitly dismissing philosophical currents among non-Muslims and non-Christians, as though "traditional" culture were devoid of complex systems of thought. Chambers also uses "traditional" without benefit of discussion of how "tradition" was not static but organic and protean.

The last chapter, titled "Turmoil and Takeover", is on colonialism, and is very thin. Perhaps this is so because the true colonial period begins in the twentieth century for West Africa, and the beginning of the twentieth century is the end of this book.

Overall, however, I highly recommend this book. It has a great deal of information in sixty-three pages, is interesting enough that a juvenile who knows little of Africa will stick with it, and it treats complex subjects with sophistication while still keeping them understandable.

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