

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sylviane Anna Diouf. *Kings and Queens of West Africa*. New York: Franklin Watts, 2000. 63 pp. \$8.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-531-20375-0.

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Sylviane Diouf's *Kings and Queens of West Africa* represents a step forward for African history sources for young adults. The text is one of four volumes in the *Kings and Queens of Africa* series, dividing the continent geographically, and is published as part of the *Watts Library*, aimed at elementary and middle school students.

At first glance, this text is merely the latest in the "Glorious Africa" tradition of African history. Largely a response to the ignorance and indeed purposeful denigration of Africa's achievements in colonial textbooks and those in the west, such texts seek to promote pride in the Africans' achievements. Diouf clearly intends to present evidence of royal African achievements to her readers, from noting that Mansa Musa's Mali was "one of the best organized and largest empires in the world at that time" (p. 10) to informing us that today "West Africa has all the modern conveniences that can be found in Europe and America" (p. 52).

In fact, however, Diouf presents a remarkably even account of the lives and context of Mansa Musa, Asantehe Osei Tutu, and Ndata Yalla Mbodj of Waalo. For example, she courageously admits to Osei Tutu's role in the slave trade (although letting him off rather easy and saving her ire for the French in Senegal). Moreover, her presentation of the lives of these famous West Africans is contextual and appealing. The author intertwines cultural and economic descriptions of Mali with Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca, evenhandedly interposes traditional and economic explanations for the location of Kumasi, and allows us to see Ndate Yalla as a leader caught be-

tween French and Moorish power. Each of the monarchs is presented as complex (and in Osei Tutu's case, somewhat troublesome) individuals.

Many of Diouf's sources are excellent, including such academic texts as Boubacar Barry's *Le Royaume de Waalo*, and we can forgive her oversimplification of some issues which could have been presented in a nuanced manner which would have added to the text, such as the motivation behind Faidherbe's invasion of Waalo and the success of the abolition of slavery in West Africa. Similarly, the writing is so good that we can also overlook the probably inappropriate juxtaposition between sophisticated concepts such as concepts of rules and cultural legacies and the large text size and over-simple prose style elsewhere.

Finally, *Kings and Queens of West Africa* represents a modern text in its use of a multitude of techniques to help young readers. Chief amongst these are a bibliography of texts and websites, highlighted words accompanying an accurate glossary, and sideboards illuminating cultural and personal tidbits. While we should look forward to young adult literature that also celebrates the less flashy and less noticed cultural, agricultural, and technological achievements of African societies, we should look to authors like Sylviane Diouf to create them for our children.

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