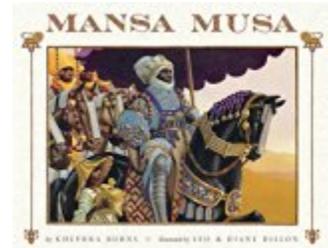


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Khephra Burns. *Mansa Musa*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. San Diego: Gulliver Books, 2001. iv + 50. \$18.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-15-200375-3.

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## Improbable Prequel to a Pilgrimage

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Readers may enjoy the allegorical progression presented in Khephra Burns' *Mansa Musa*, an imaginary story that takes place in the years before the celebrated king of medieval Mali took the throne. But teachers should not consider the book as a useful classroom resource. The book is based upon a syncretic spiritual vision rather than any reliable history or ethnography, and in too many regards is more misleading than informative.

The story is that of the young Musa, whom we first meet carrying water (the first of innumerable ethnographic gaffes; this is/was established women's work in West Africa) when a stranger, Tariq al-Aya (Arabic: a rough translation would be 'path of the miracle,' although the author may have a different meaning in mind), arrives in town. Musa is then captured in a lightning slave-raid and carried off to Morocco, where he is purchased by the same stranger, Tariq al-Aya, who now sets himself up as the initiator of Musa. He takes Musa through the great cities of the (medieval) Islamic world of North Africa, so that Musa can appreciate the world outside and learn how important it will be for the king of Mali to establish the reputation of his land. Then Musa is sent home just in time to become king after his older brother, Abu-Bekri, departs in his flotilla of boats over the Atlantic. Musa will then fulfill his destiny and make a celebrated pilgrimage through Cairo to Mecca which will make Mali and gold synonymous for much of the Middle Ages.

We know much less about Kankan Musa (a.k.a. Kanku Musa or Mansa [king] Musa) than we would like.

He was a king of Mali, who reigned some time after the empire was founded by Sunjata (ca. 1235). He is reported by 14th-century Arab historians (al-Umari, Ibn Battuta, who visited Mali, and Ibn Khaldun) and by local west Africans (*es-Sadi*, author of the *Tarikh esSudan*, and Mohamed Kati, author of the *Tarikh el-Fettach*); their accounts vary in the degree of detail, but are based on the pilgrimage to Mecca that he made in 1325. He took with him thousands of slaves and huge quantities of gold; gold prices in Cairo, relative to silver, were depressed for some years after that. Their accounts of his accession to power are not entirely consistent. Al-Umari says he took power after his elder brother Abu-Bekri II decided to attempt a great voyage on the sea, from which he did not return; Ibn Khaldun simply notes that with Mansa Musa the succession passed from the line of Mari Diata (Sunjata) to that of his brother, Abu-Bekri.[1]

Mande oral tradition does not have a great deal to say about this king, despite his fame in the outside world. His pilgrimage to Mecca, associated with that of other individuals and sovereigns, is sometimes contrued as the origin of local magical and divinatory practices, but in this function Musa is conflated with other figures (see Conrad, de Moraes). The account in the *Tarikh el-Fettach* offers perhaps the most detail from local oral tradition, such as stories of the canal that Mansa Musa had dug in the desert to satisfy the yearning of a wife.[2]

Nevertheless, he has captured modern imaginations, in part because he has been relatively well documented for African kings of that time, but in part also because of

his older brother. Abu-Bekri's purported trans-Atlantic voyage has become an article of faith in some circles (including this book), although, other than the account given in al-Umari, there is virtually no evidence to support this voyage or even the existence of the brother. In some sources, Musa is the descendent of Sunjata's brother Abu-Bekri (known in oral tradition as Manding Bokari), with no mention of a brother. The accession of Musa is portrayed as a break in the normal sequence of kings, which suggests something unusual in this transition. Other Sahelian figures make celebrated pilgrimages to atone for some great crime: the legendary Fa-jigi atones for incest; the Songhay Askiam Mohammed atones for killing his uncle (in the course of taking power). The *Tarikh el-Fettach*, a 17th-century Arabic text produced in Timbuktu, says the reason for Musa's pilgrimage was to atone for killing his grandmother. None of these uncertainties and doubts has any place in this book, however.

In other words, this book is using the fame of Mansa Musa to construct an allegorical and spiritual voyage which is intended to ring the major bells in an American vision of the African experience. It is very similar, in intent, to Clyde Ford's *The Hero with the African Face*, which retells well-known African myths and legends with a commentary grounded in self-help literature. The author therefore appropriates any number of suggestive terms and ideas from African tradition (the unacknowledged sources appear to have been Afrocentric, in the framework of Molefi Asante's work) as well as Islamic belief, to construct a path of symbolic initiation for the hero. The fact that some of these terms are authentic, but misused, and that their combination is unrealistically syncretic is what makes this book inappropriate for classrooms; the corrective work necessary to clarify provenance outweighs the pedagogic value of the book.

It would be tedious to document all the errors of history and background. As an illustrative example, let us consider simply the question of the protagonist's name. Mansa [king] Musa of Mali is also known as Kanku (or Kankan) Musa. Musa is the personal name (from the Arabic for Moses). Kanku or Kankan, the first part of the compound name, and which the author uses as a personal name for the boy, is generally presumed to be the name of the king's mother; in a polygamous system (which all African kingdoms were, to an extreme) the sons of the ruler are often distinguished from each other by appending their mother's name. So with the founder of Mali: Sogolon-Jata becomes, by contraction, Son-Jata or Sunjata. Kanku Musa, or Kankan Musa, is thus Musa son of

(the woman) Kanku. To call him Kankan alone is thus a serious solecism.

One can multiply such examples of misapprehension of the record. What is to my mind the most egregious passage comes very early (p. 6, although the pages are not numbered): "Balla Diallo, the master drummer, played the balafon while Kalabi Dauman, the senior griot, recited the epic tale of Sundiata, the crippled child who grew to become a great simbon, warrior, and founder of the empire. Mamadou Kouyate, the village soothsayer, kept his own counsel.."

Diallo is a Fulani/Peul/Tukolor name, not that of a Mande griot. A master drummer, Fulani or other, does not play the *balafon* (a wooden xylophone); that is the prerogative of a jeli or Mande griot, and particularly of the Kuyate (Kouyate) lineage. The story of the association of the Kuyates and the *balafon* is a central episode in the epic of Sunjata. Kalabi Dauman is a name taken from the list of Sunjata's ancestors (in particularly Islamic version), and in the Mande system would never be singing. *Simbon* is principally a hunter's title; it refers to Sunjata in many of the epics, but it derives from, and always evokes, the specialized world of the hunters' associations which are a significant element of Mande culture (the *simbong* is also a hunter's whistle). *Simbon* is not used, as happens throughout this book, to indicate moral maturity or non-specialized qualities.

Thus, in four lines, the author has demonstrated complete ignorance of the ethnography and history behind the story that is being told. The names are authentic African names. All else, the combination of names, the attributes, the projected ideology, is invented or imagined. This pattern holds true throughout the book. One illustration shows the initiate Musa in an Egyptian temple or tomb, whose walls are decorated with relief carvings of Mande *komo* masks (the *Komo* is an initiatory society) and Dogon dance masks: this is the visual equivalent of this textual bouillabaisse. African terms, Islamic names, modern concepts and concerns are blended to enrich the story of Mansa Musa.

I am trying to imagine an appropriate, if Eurocentric, equivalent which would properly convey the incongruities involved. Consider if you will the young Charles, son of Big-Foot Bertha, living in the dark era of Frankish Europe. He milks the cows daily, and in the evening listens to the Andalusian singing of Ian MacDonald. Viking raiders carry him off, and a one-eyed stranger named Woo-Tan takes him and leads him ... through the troll-fells of Scandinavia, where he rediscovers his Germanic

roots but comes to appreciate the need for empire, and so on his return takes the throne and becomes Charles the Great, a.k.a. Charlemagne.

Young readers may enjoy the (very predictable) story, and the book itself is very well-produced with extensive illustrations by Leo and Diane Dillon. Maya Angelou provides a jacket blurb which promotes it. Teachers looking for reliable African material, however, should avoid this book.

#### Notes

[1]. For *AlUmari, Ibn Battuta, and Ibn Khaldun*, see *Levtzion and Hopkins, Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2000),

*pp. 252-278 (esp. 268-69, Al-Umari), pp. 279-304 (Ibn Battuta), and pp. 317-342 (esp. 334-335) for Ibn Khaldun. For es-Sadi, see John Hunwick, Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), pp. 8 ff.; for Mahmoud Kati, see O. Houdas, ed., Tarikh el-Fettach (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1981), pp. 55 ff. There are numerous background studies; perhaps the classic is Levtzion's Ancient Ghana and Mali\_ (London: Methuen, 1973).*

[2]. On oral tradition, see David Conrad, "Searching for History in the Sunjata Epic: The Case of Fakoli" (*History in Africa* 19 [1999], pp. 147-200, esp. 152 ff.) and Paolo de Moraes Farias, "Pilgrimages to Pagan Mecca in Mandenka Stories of Origin" in Moraes Farias and Karin Barber, eds. *Discourse and its Disguises* (Birmingham: Center for West African Studies, 1989) pp. 152-170).

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