

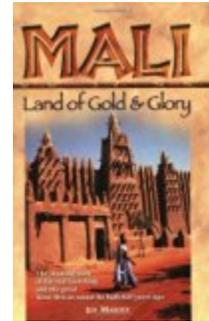
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joy Masoff. *Mali: Land of Gold and Glory*. New York: Five Ponds Press, 2002. 48 pp. \$9.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9727156-0-7.

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## Ancient Mali Goes to School in Virginia

The complex history and customs of the ancient Mali Empire in West Africa are now a Standard of Learning (SOL) for third grade social studies students in Virginia. These students will now be required to learn about the formation of this great empire: Sundiata, its founding mansa or king; the introduction of Islam; and trans-Saharan trade of salt and gold. *Mali: Land of Gold and Glory* was written specifically to serve the needs of Virginia teachers in need of curriculum materials to support this new content area, as evidenced by the postcard advertising this publication. The publishers include a free set of lesson plans and a poster with orders of ten or more, a substantial incentive to teachers and their large class sizes.

The forty-eight-page publication is divided into three sections, "The Land," "The Kings," and "Today," each again divided into several chapters. The narrative is presented through the voice of a griot who recounts the history, the legend of Sundiata, and describes the geography and the peoples.

Each page has colorful imagery, photographs, or reproductions of historical engravings or works of art. Other features include a time line that has major dates for West Africa placed along the top part of the page and a two-page timeline near the end of the publication. A short reading list identifies a few books appropriate for middle school, high school, and adult readers.

It is a daunting task to present such a complex social and cultural history in a manner that is accessible to

young students (and teachers). The task is further complicated by the fact that there are still so many unknowns about this time period and area.

There is a dearth of excellent teaching materials about Africa in general and the Mali empire in particular. Judging from teachers' comments about this publication on the internet, *Mali, Land of Gold and Glory* is a welcome resource that enables teachers to introduce this interesting history to their students.

One of the strengths of this publication is the language used to convey the history of the empire and legend of Sundiata. It is easily read and accessible to young students. Using the narrative voice of the griot, the book presents this history more as a story than as an academic text. The narrative is an engaging one. It employs the strategy of referencing known personages or events, such as "you have heard of George Washington. You have heard of King Arthur. The people of Mali needed someone brave to lead them to freedom" to draw parallels for young American readers between West Africa and their own history (p. 19).

Another strength is the selection of many color photographs presenting people, architecture, and related subjects, which are appealing to young readers.

Many chapters have a timeline that runs across the top of the page, providing important benchmark dates of West Africa and the West African kingdoms. A more comprehensive timeline is offered on pages 42-43, begin-

ning with 1,000,000 BCE to 1619, the date “First Africans come to Virginia Colony as indentured servants.” The latter timeline offers comparative dates from European and American history, off-set in different colors from the rest of the dates. Even the timeline has four illustrations on the two pages.

Despite the attractiveness of this publication, there are a few issues that require clarification and some errors that need to be pointed out.

The first is a conceptual issue facing anyone—teacher, author, museum educator—who would write for a young audience about this time period. Although there is a profusion of adult literature about the history of this time period, there are only a handful of books for young people. Given the scant visual material on ancient Mali, i.e. works of art or material culture, how does one represent the history of an empire from eight hundred years ago in a compelling way for young audiences? Masoff has largely selected contemporary photographs illustrating different ethnic groups, architecture, and trade, and a few images from art history to add appeal and substance to the narrative. The use of the photographs makes the publication colorful and attractive, however, this implies that life eight hundred years ago looked like life today. From historical accounts we know that there were diverse populations that lived in this area, but were they the same peoples that we know today as the Bamana, Fulani, and Tuareg? The lack of historical information about the differences among the peoples of today and those eight hundred years ago seems to perpetuate an ahistorical attitude, precisely what the publication is trying to counter. Perhaps that is a conceptual leap teachers must bridge with additional explanations in the classroom.

The photographs lead to another dilemma. Very few of them have full credit lines, such as when and where they were taken. The photo credits on the inside back cover list only who has rights to the image, and do not provide dates or origins. The two sculptures featured on pages 16 and 17 are fully identified. The famous detail of Mansa Musa holding a golden orb from the famous Catalan Atlas, published in 1375 and attributed to Abraham Cresques appears on the title page and page 29. Unfortunately, the author has the date of publication as 1385 (p. 29). While this non-African image is identified as coming from Spain, the source of the illustrations of Mecca (p. 32) and Muhammad and his followers (p. 42) are not identified. Since illustrations of Mohammad do not appear in Islamic art, it might have been more appropriate to use an image of a Koran.

The lack of information about the photographs, especially their dates, relegates them to generic West African images, a stereotype and generalization that does not need perpetuating. Too often, photographs are treated as mere illustrations and not as sources of information in and of themselves. It is an unfortunate oversight in a publication that introduces the history of Africa to students.

The publishers have advertised this publication as having been “created expressly for Virginia’s new third grade SOLs.”[1] There is nothing inherently wrong with this, except that Masoff is unaware of an error contained in the SOLs which state that “Timbuktu was an important city in Mali. It had a famous university with a large library containing Greek and Roman books.” The author does not clarify whether these texts were actual Roman and Greek texts, or translations into Arabic of Roman and Greek texts. Masoff repeats the error in her book when she states, “The great library was filled with books from as far away as Rome and Greece” (p. 31).

In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on September 6, 2002, John O. Hunwick, professor of African history at Northwestern University, describes the thousands of manuscripts that hold textual evidence of West Africa’s history. One of the problems cited by Hunwick is that there are not enough Western scholars who command Arabic to be able to begin the transcription and translation of these precious documents. In a personal communication with Dr. Hunwick, this reviewer asked about the possible presence of Greek and Roman texts. He commented that “as for Greek and Roman texts, there is no evidence of their being in Timbuktu libraries. It is highly unlikely that original texts of these types would have been there, though some Greek texts were translated into Arabic as early as the nineteenth century, and it is conceivable that manuscript copies of some of these may have reached Timbuktu (but again no evidence).”[2] It is unclear to this reviewer where the evidence for this SOL element was obtained by the curriculum developers and why the author assumed that this element was accurate.

Some of the terminology employed by Masoff is unclear or, at least, open to interpretation. One such term is “country.” On page 17, she refers to ancient Mali as a country and on the inside cover there is a quotation in which the griot, Mamadou Kouyate, mentions “the father of the Bright Country.” Should there be a distinction drawn between what we refer to today as a country and how this griot was using it? It seems to compound the

problem of understanding the difference between the ancient empire which included parts of present day countries of Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gambia (nicely presented on a map on p. 45). The fact that the boundaries of these countries did not exist during the thirteenth century is not emphasized.

The author's use of "evil" in "evil Sosa clans rule the region" in the timeline (p. 19) should be eliminated. A historical reference such as a timeline should be free of subjective judgments.

African ethnic names which can have many variations can be devilishly tricky. Such is the case with the Soso, who are also referred to as Sosso, Sousso. However, the author's use of Sosa (pp. 19, 27) is incorrect.

Some interpretive statements accompanying some photographs need to be corrected. Three Berber men with turbans are characterized as "masked men" (p. 38). Although the caption explains that the turbans cover the face for protection, the use of "masked men" makes them appear as bandits. However, with another photograph, the author does mention that Tuareg boys (should this be men?) are required to cover their face in public. The author deals significantly with the importance of gold and salt, the commodities which contributed to the wealth of the empires of Ghana and Mali. She offers a description of additional goods that were traded: "The caravans brought treasures from as far away as China. Jewels and silks, furs and rare birds" (p. 14). It is a pity that claims such as this are made without providing any reference to the source of the information. There certainly was extensive trade of luxury items such as silk and coral, but some of these items (or the terminology to describe them) sound odd within the context of this history.

It would have been good for the author to present a little more history concerning the magnificent architecture of this region. The front cover and page 26 feature the mosque in Djenne and the inside back cover the mosque in Mopti. A third, unidentified mosque (p. 34) appears with a caption that reads, "some buildings have been standing for more than five hundred years." The author does not explain that without persistent repair and refurbishment of these structures at least every two years, these buildings would disintegrate. In fact, the mosque in Djenne was almost completely rebuilt several times in the late nineteenth century, the last significant restoration at the beginning of the twentieth century, and is now refurbished every two years. A few corrections need to be made to the maps as well. Burkino Faso should be Burkina Faso (p. 11). Tunisia was left off, and the boundaries between Guinea and Liberia and Niger and Libya were omitted (p. 45).

Finally, the table of contents indicates a glossary on pages 44-45. What is actually there is a series of questions with the heading "Things to Think About" and a comparative map of the ancient empires with present day countries.

If photographic credits were provided and corrections made in a subsequent reprinting *Mali, Land of Gold and Glory* would be a valuable resource for students and teachers alike.

#### Notes

[1]. "Standard 3.2. Curriculum Framework: World History and Geography to 1500 A.D.," Commonwealth of Virginia, Board of Education, Richmond, Virginia, 2001.

[2]. John O. Hunwick, personal communication, November 18, 2002.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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