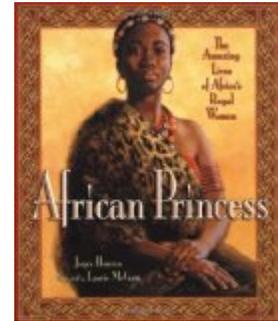


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joyce Hansen. *African Princess: The Amazing Lives of Africa's Royal Women*. New York: Hyperion Books, 2004. 48 pp. \$16.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7868-5116-4.

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The Perfect Princesses

Joyce Hansen writes about six princesses from different regions, who lived at different times but who were all “courageous risk takers who knew exactly what they wanted.” These women, she tells readers, were “successful and effective leaders,” when “most women had little real power. Their dramatic stories contain lessons for our own lives” (p. 5).

Hansen covers the entire continent and rounds up the usual figures: Hatshepsut of Egypt; Taytu Betul of Ethiopia; Njinga of Angola; and Amina of Zaria. The Dahomean Amazon Tata Ajach and the Ugandan Elizabeth Nyabongo of Toro have not been mentioned in books on African monarchy and it is to Ms. Hansen’s credit to try to open the field. However, the choice of these two princesses may be questionable. Tata Ajach, extremely obscure, was one of hundreds of wives of King Glele and not a major one at that. She had no power and was not a leader. Equally troubling is the presence of Ms. Elizabeth Nyabongo. With ten pages devoted to her—the longest part of the book—Ms. Nyabongo seems to be the real heroine of the book. By comparison, Amina has only four pages, Hatshepsut and Tata, six, Njinga and Taytu Betul each have eight pages. The fact that she served Idi Amin Dada (Hansen calls him just “Idi Amin”) does little to posit her as a courageous risk-taker and a role model. She represented a bloody dictator without a word of criticism. As Hansen herself stresses, it is only when she refused Dada’s advances that she was dismissed and then fled the country. Nyabongo rightly feared for her life, but did nothing and had nothing to say when hundreds of thousands of her compatriots were

slaughtered. It is more than a stretch to present her as a courageous, effective leader.

Although Ms. Hansen has her historical facts right, her book is deficient in several aspects. Each biography is a panegyric, without any suggestion of complexity, mistakes, or shortcomings. This lack of balance mythifies the women and can push serious readers to dismiss them entirely as “too good to be true.” The geography, which for young readers is important, especially concerning Africa, is sorely lacking. A map indicates the cities where the women lived, but unfortunately, there is no country name that could help readers place the women in modern countries. More confusing still, the names of the kingdoms are indicated in the same manner as two country names. The kingdoms of Zaria, Dahomey, Matamba, and Toro, thus appear in the same font and size as Ethiopia and Egypt, which may lead readers to conclude that Zaria is a country just like Egypt. The text facing the map may well mention that Africa is not a country, but the map does nothing to help readers grasp it. On the contrary, without any indication of borders, Africa does indeed look like one country. The homelands of the women are indicated by the architecture of the place, but strangely for Njinga only a European vessel is shown.

Equally annoying, when describing the continent Ms. Hansen goes heavy on the stereotype. In order to inform readers that Africa is more than animals, diseases, and hunger she opens the introduction with “Africa is snowcapped mountains, blue seas and rivers, powerful waterfalls, steamy rainforest, tawny desert plains, green

valleys,” (p. 5). Only after this lengthy enumeration of clichés on Africa’s nature untouched by Africans, does she write “and modern cities.” Too little, too late. What young readers will take with them are not Abidjan or Lagos, but Serengeti and Kilimanjaro. Also, although the author does not use offensive language, she still lets the colonial word “tribe” slip out (p. 19).

The illustrations are beautiful and mostly accurate, but it is discouraging to note that for the cover the most stereotypical image was chosen, that of an African princess as America sees her: Njinga in leopard skin, hoop earrings, and cowry shells. The additional iconography is adequate, although it is another disappointment to note that the famous Hausa architecture is not represented. In its place, as one could unfortunately expect, is a simple, round, banco thatched-roofed house, the cliché of the “African” dwelling also used on the map to represent Tata Ajach’s home, even though she would have lived in the palace at Abomey. And although extraordinary photographs of Hausa horsemen exist, the

one selected is at best mediocre.

The bibliography is of little use, with only four books for young readers and four for older readers, including two academic books (which are *really* for older readers), and a third –*In Praise of Black Women 1: Ancient African Queens*—whose deficiencies should have disqualified it.

African Princess has good intentions, but it does not achieve its objectives. It is hard to see what “lessons for our own lives” can be learned. The times, the peoples, the historical background, and the events are too sketchy to provide context and help appreciate the women in all their dimensions, not simply as female achievers but also as “successful and effective leaders.”

Given the paucity of books on historical African women, this one cannot be entirely dismissed. It has some good documentation, and may have been an adequate book many years ago. But it needs to be used with caution because it falls far short of what is expected today.

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