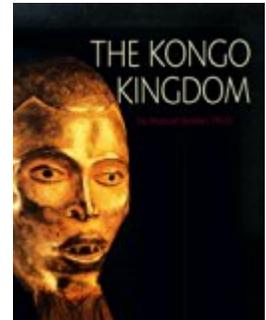


Manuel Jordan. *The Kongo Kingdom.* New York, London, Hong Kong, Sydney, and Danbury, Conn: Franklin Watts, 1998. 64 pp. Ages 9-13. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-531-20282-1.



Reviewed by John K. Thornton

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This volume is part of the First Books series dedicated to African Civilizations and includes titles on Asante, Benin, the Songhay Empire, and other pre-colonial African states and empires. *The Kongo Kingdom* is designed for late elementary school readers as part of an introduction to African history. It is handsomely produced, well illustrated and written in a simple and direct style. It has generally good maps, a time line, and glossary of difficult terms and those in African languages that will make it very useful for its target audience.

The Kongo Kingdom is historical, accessible, attractive and well written. It will help to address the need for quality information for younger children that must take place before we can have cultural literacy that includes African history. The Kingdom of Kongo was an important African state, and an important part of the American background because as many as one in five African Americans descend from people who were originally from the Kingdom of Kongo.

The book is generally well conceived, and the chapters on traditional religion and art are well il-

lustrated and are particularly good, probably because of Jordan's own background in art history. Traditional religion is also generally well handled, although the focus is more on the religion of the northern areas that lay outside of Kongo than on the kingdom itself. As is often the case in books like this one, the cultural elements tend to be presented in the "ethnographic present" as timeless, rather than dynamically.

The sections of the book that deal purely with history, however, are disappointing, a blow in a work about a historical kingdom. Jordan relies on seriously outdated interpretations which reflect the opinions of historians some 35-40 years ago. Thus, Jordan places primary emphasis on the reign of Afonso I as the "Golden Age" and sees the later sixteenth century as a time of decline. For him, the Jaga invasion of 1568 is effectively the end of Kongo's strong period. Moreover, he sees the battle of Mbwila (which he does not name and dates in all but one place in the text to 1655 instead of 1665) as the end of the country. He then mistakenly contends that the Portuguese conquered Kongo in the aftermath of the battle,

though in the introduction he describes this as simply the break up of the country. This approach is at odds with virtually all scholarship produced since the early 1970s, which puts Kongo's "Golden Age" in the early and mid-seventeenth century, and views the Jaga invasion as a relatively minor problem. Thus, the single page that the book devotes to the seventeenth century fails to mention the reign of Garcia II (1641-61) when Kongo reached its territorial height, maximum political centralization, and greatest international prestige.

In keeping with the predominant interpretation of Kongo history of the 1960s, Jordan has relations with Portugal as central to the country's history. While there can be no doubt that Portuguese affairs were very important, there is no evidence that they themselves kidnapped Kongo citizens to be slaves during Afonso's reign, as Jordan maintains, nor support for his idea that they forced Diogo I (1545-61), to fight Ndongo in 1556, or that this effort was defeated in 1560. Not only did they not conquer the country after Mbwila, but they were crushingly defeated at the battle of Kitombo in 1670.

Jordan also fails to convey the importance of Christian identity to the Kongo in the period after Afonso's death. While he notes Afonso's conversion and his efforts at Christianizing the country, he does not appreciate the long range success that Afonso had in developing a syncretic and acceptable Christianity which became a fundamental part of Kongo's self identity from his day through to the colonial period. This failure and his ill considered decision to stop his narrative with the battle of Mbwila and the supposed Portuguese conquest also deprives him of the opportunity to discuss the civil war period or the religious movement of Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita (1704-1706).

In the suggested reading portion at the end of the book, Jordan refers his readers to Kenny Mann's history of Kongo, written for older readers. It is sad that he did not pay closer attention to this work, which is much more historically accu-

rate, in writing his own. In so doing, he marred an otherwise useful and well-considered work.

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