

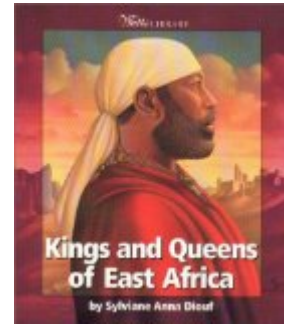
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sylviane Anna Diouf. *Kings and Queens of East Africa*. New York and London: Grolier Publishing, 2000. 63 pp. Ages 9-12. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-531-20373-6.

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Uneasy Lie the Heads

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While most schoolchildren are familiar with at least a handful of the past crowned heads of Europe, few have been exposed to the fascinating lives of past monarchs on the African continent. Sylvia Diouf's colorful book on selected kings and queens who played important roles in the rich histories of the East African countries of Madagascar, Ethiopia, and the Sudan, addresses this oversight.

The book frames the lives of Queen Ranavalona, Emperor Menelik II, and King Yambio within a broad contextual description of Africa and African monarchies. As with any abbreviated biographical sketch, the challenge here lies with weaving a coherent picture for the reader while necessarily leaving out a great deal of supporting information. Dr. Diouf is only partially successful in this regard. For example, as Yambio pits the Europeans against one another in a play for power and survival, he "thought that if he had good relations with the British, the Belgians would not attack his kingdom..." When, at his invitation, the British arrived, they were attacked and defeated by Yambio's own forces. The obvious contradiction is not revealed. Similarly, the author does not say why Lij Iyasu, Menelik's grandson, was "forced out of power" (p. 51). A timeline for each country would have helped the reader place the events in the book in historical perspective.

More problematic still are such factual errors (or typographical oversights) as the statement "Europeans first arrived in Africa in 1944..." (p.7), which is almost immediately (and correctly) contradicted in the pages following.

The description of Yambio's death at the hands of one of his grandsons as a murder (p. 37) does not reflect the fact that in many African kingdoms, sick or otherwise incapacitated rulers were killed according to divine or traditional decree, purportedly for the good of the whole kingdom.

The text is richly and beautifully illustrated with a wide variety of media, from photographs to paintings, drawings, and engravings. But because the plates shift back and forth from the distant past to the immediate present, often on facing pages, a young reader might have trouble determining the time period of those images not clearly labeled.

The final paragraph of the book seems to separate the problems and violence that have plagued much of the continent over the past 200 years from its fascinating cultures, but the richness of heritage in Africa today is partly a reflection of such trials and tribulations.

With some modifications and corrections in a later edition, the book could provide a distinctive introduction to the dynamic kingdoms and past indigenous rulers of Africa.

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