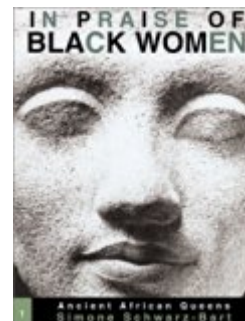


**Simone Schwarz-Bart, Andre Schwarz-Bart.** *In Praise of Black Women: Ancient African Queens.* Volume 1. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. 433 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-17250-3.



**Reviewed by** Sylviane A. Diouf

**Published on** H-AfrTeach (July, 2001)

## No Royal Treatment

This heavy, thick book relates the lives of twenty-eight African women, from Egyptian queen Ahmose Nefretari (alternatively called Nofretari, depending on the page) to Mamochisane of nineteenth-century South Africa. It is part of a four-volume series, first available in France in 1988. This second edition is published by Wisconsin under the auspices of UNESCO. Abundantly illustrated, it is presented by the publisher as "a treasure for every art lover, every school, and every family." In addition to the core text and images, most pages provide up to three sidebars. There is thus an abundance of information.

The authors, the Schwartz-Barts, are well-known French novelists and they have chosen to approach their work from a literary perspective, in a story-telling style. The accounts of the women's lives thus usually start with "Once upon a time" or "A long time ago." The genre exempts the authors from offering dates, and supporting evidence, and enables them to invent dialogues, actions, feelings, events, and physical descriptions.

In this context, even though the book presents itself as based on history, it is impossible for readers who are not historians of Africa to separate legendary characters from historical ones; and legend and fiction from facts. The choice of women is sometimes questionable with some, like Sogolon Konte, Sogane Toure, and Nandi, recognized only because of their sons' later accomplishments. In general, there is little of substance about the women and their times, and what is offered is at times vague and simplistic. The style and tone seem geared toward young readers, but the format and length of the book are designed for a much older audience. To add to the confusion, the sidebars present what appears to be poems, excerpts from travelers' accounts, summaries of contemporary studies, somebody's opinions, legends and proverbs, without any mention of sources or even a simple indication of what they are. There are almost no dates in the book, except for the detailed list of Mossi Kings (p. 114), incongruously provided since the authors do not bother to inform their readers of the geographical location of the Mossi, except to say they were to the "north of present-day Ghana" (p. 104). Maps are a

major problem. They are 4 inches square, in French, and often focus on such a small area that it is impossible to say what region of Africa or country they represent. Some are also incorrect. For example, the Kaabu kingdom (mistakenly called Gabu in the text, from the French Gabou) of southern Senegambia is illustrated with a map of the Ghana Empire (p. 131). Some maps have modern names, while others have ancient ones.

The illustrations are the strong point of this book. They are stunning historical documents, however, many are disturbingly out of place. A slave caravan in Ethiopia is used to depict the slave trade in Angola (p. 177); people from Benin (p. 130), Libya (p. 140), and Angola (p. 143), and a landscape from Central Africa (p. 134) can all be found to illustrate Kaabu. A "Group of Rebels" (p. 185) against Queen Nzinga of Angola depicts, in reality, men from Madagascar, Mozambique and South Africa. The list of illustrations gives their detailed captions (in French), which shows that they were not placed mistakenly, but deliberately chosen to illustrate information they had nothing to do with. Given the sheer amount of good pictures presented, this was an unnecessary deception that demonstrates how African cultures and peoples continue to be taken lightly, lumped together as if they were all the same. In other contexts, it is doubtful that illustrations of say, Russian peasants would be used to represent Portuguese traders. In addition, it is difficult to understand how blatantly incorrect and easily verifiable information such as "Africa has 350 million inhabitants" (p. 25) could find its way in an Africa-centered book. Almost as troubling is the repeated use of the word "tribe".

This is an irritating--if visually appealing--book because its many (serious) flaws could easily have been avoided. Its text does not do justice to its topic; and it is too confusing to be of serious use in a classroom or a school library, except for its striking iconography that nevertheless has to be treated with caution.

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**Citation:** Sylviane A. Diouf. Review of Schwarz-Bart, Simone; Schwarz-Bart, Andre. *In Praise of Black Women: Ancient African Queens*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

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