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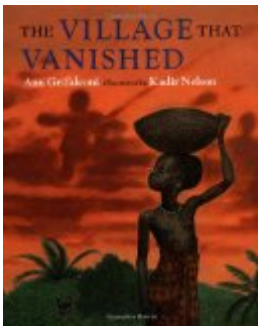

Ann Grifalconi. *The Village That Vanished.* New York: Dial, 2002. ii + 40 pp. $16.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8037-2623-9.

Reviewed by Ned Alpers

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Wisdom of the Ancestors

Ann Grifalconi and Kadir Nelson have produced an attractive tale of how a young girl's faith in the wisdom of the ancestors helps her village to escape capture by a band of slave traders. The story is a simple one that is readily accessible to children from about age 6 (as read to) to age 11, depending on reading skills. It focuses on a young girl, Abikanile ("listen"), who overhears her mother, Njemile ("upstanding"), praying by the river that their village might be spared the ravages of slave raiding. When news of the slave raiders reaches the villagers, they cannot decide what to do until Njemile suggests that they disassemble the village down to the ground and then disappear into the forest. An old woman, Chimwala ("stone"), who is also Abikanile's grandmother, says that she will remain with only her hut and a small field of maize and beans, and will tell the raiders that she is a witch, which is why she lives all alone. But when the villagers have to cross the river to reach the forest and safety, they cannot find a ford by which to cross. Njemile prays the same prayer that she first heard her mother reciting at the river and sees a way across the river by a series of step stones, by which she nimbly scampers across. At first, the villagers cannot see the stones, but when she chides them for having so little faith in their ancestors' wisdom, they take heart and follow her across the river. Eventually, the slavers come to the village, where they are met by the old woman. After they scour the bush for captives and find none, they ride away empty-handed. The moral of the story is that a people were saved because the young girl and the old woman "did what had to be done when their people were threatened. They knew that once the ancestors have spoken, one must answer not only with faith, but with courage as well" (p. 40)!

Although the story is clearly set in the era of the slave trade in Africa, it assumes a timelessness that borders on the ahistorical because the author specifies neither a time nor a place where the village is located. The village is named Yao, as are its people, and the author informs us in a prefatory note that "all the Yao names are authentic," while also providing a guide to their pronunciation. If, however, these names are indeed authentic, they

are not known in CiYao, the language of the Yao people of northwestern Mozambique, southern Malawi, and southeastern Tanzania, although they are certainly authentic to some Bantu language. According to my colleague, Christopher Ehret, all three terms would appear to be closer to languages in the Rufifi-Ruvuma group of Mashariki Bantu in southeastern Tanzania, but definitely not CiYao. If the names of the three main characters in ***The Village That Vanished*** are East African Bantu, however, the physical setting of the story is definitely West African, since the accompanying illustrations of the slave raiders show their leaders on horseback and garbed in characteristic Sudanese fashion. The only other possible hint as to where this village is supposed to be located geographically is the village's rondavel housing, although round houses were so widespread across the continent that this aspect of material culture cannot by itself be taken as a specific geographical or cultural reference.

The author also does not tell the reader to what market their captives would be sent. Although the slavers' garb indicates that it was almost certainly not for the Indian Ocean traffic, these raiders could have been seeking victims for the Atlantic trade, the trans-Saharan trade, or even for the internal market of an area like northern Nigeria. The absence of any connection to the world outside Yao, therefore, obscures the larger forces that produced the demand for bonded labor. To be sure, from the perspective of Abakanile and her community, the source of the demand that drove the slave raiders to the threshold of their village would have mattered little, but for young readers for whom this story might be their first exposure to the slave trade, it does matter.

Despite these problems of omission with respect to the global context of the slave trade in Africa, this remains an appealing little book. Kadir Nelson's beautiful illustrations successfully capture the fabular aspects of the story while also revealing some detailed sense of what a small African village might well have looked like in the past. In the end, whoever these Yao are supposed to have been and wherever in Africa they may be imagined to have lived and defended their freedom, the cultural message of this story is more important than its historicity.

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