Review of Heather Millar, *The Kingdom of Benin in West Africa*

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Review of Heather Millar, *The Kingdom of Benin in West Africa*

**Abstract**
Clio smiles, then weeps. A hundred years after its destruction, the empire of Benin enters the hall of fame of civilizations. Standing alongside old standards like Greece and Rome that have constituted the canon at least since the Renaissance, and next to some newcomers like the ancient Maya, the Aztec empire, China's Tang Dynasty, and India's Gupta Dynasty that have been ushered in by the spirit of multiculturalism, Benin—so far the sole representative of the African continent in the series "Cultures of the Past"—takes its position on the educational shelf that could shape the historical consciousness of future generations. Other West African kingdoms like Oyo, Dahomey, and Asante could have represented Africa in the global canon of political and cultural history (Forde & Kaberry 1967), but Benin, triumphant in her 1897 defeat, offers a more poignant testimony to the horrors of colonialism and a more striking monument to its demolition.

**Disciplines**
African History | African Languages and Societies | African Studies | Anthropology | Cultural History | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

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Clio smiles, then weeps. A hundred years after Tang Dynasty, and India's Gupta Dynasty that hall of fame of civilizations. Standing along-

Heather Millar

THE KINGDOM OF BENIN

Asante could have represented Africa in the African kingdoms like Oyo, Dahomey, and culturalism, Benin—so far the sole representative of the African continent in the series "Cultures of the Past." Essays by Elisabeth L. Cameron and Doran H. Ross "play" with ideas about dolls, expanding our American notions of dolls as simply playthings. The catalog section presents dolls made from wood, clay, beads, gourds, wax, tar, or plastic. This variety of dolls is used to promote fertility, mark coming-of-age initiations, symbolize marriages, and represent the dead, in addition to serving as playthings.

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CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS

IN WEST AFRICA

Heather Millar


Reviewed by Dan Ben-Amos

Clio smiles, then weeps. A hundred years after its destruction, the empire of Benin enters the hall of fame of civilizations. Standing alongside old standards like Greece and Rome that have constituted the canon at least since the Renaissance, and next to some newcomers like the ancient Maya, the Aztec empire, China's Tang Dynasty, and India's Gupta Dynasty that have been ushered in by the spirit of multiculturalism, Benin—so far the sole representative of the African continent in the series "Cultures of the Past"—takes its position on the educational shelf that could shape the historical consciousness of future generations. Other West African kingdoms like Oyo, Dahomey, and Asante could have represented Africa in the global canon of political and cultural history (Forde & Kaberry 1967), but Benin, triumphing in her 1897 defeat, offers a more poignant testimony to the horrors of colonialism and a more striking monument to its demolition.

The victors who conquered Benin a hundred years ago first spread its fame by trading in its cultural goods. This has been the looter’s way for ages. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, they paraded its seven-branched candelabrum, the table of shewbread, and its trumpets and censers in the streets of Rome, and then commemorated their loot on the Arch of Titus, erected in A.D. 81. None of the original objects are extant.

About 1,800 years later, at the end of the nineteenth century, the British soldiers who ransacked Benin behaved less ceremonially but with greater commercial acumen. Essentially they followed the same route, spreading the artworks throughout the major anthropologi-

cultural history and lore of African headwear and its vital role. Notions of status and achievement, personal and communal, are symbolized in headwear. The enigmatic beauty of the Benin ivory hip-mask made by the artists of the Igbesanmwan guild has become as well known as that of the Mona Lisa, and now it is a symbol of African artistic attainments as well as a monument to their ravishment.

The present book evidences the recognition of Benin as a major past power and a cultural center with its region, establishing its position in the canon of civilizations. Its appearance in an educational series designed for, and one hopes adopted by, middle and high schools in the English-speaking world could potentially affect the historical consciousness of the coming generations. Literature for children and adolescents—textbooks in particular—could set new historical and literary horizons for the future. Far from being marginal, it forges the idea of history, delineates its boundaries, and selects the facts, figures, and peoples that make up the traditional heritage upon which the students of today will build up their cognitive world. It re-

THE LEGACY OF BENIN

First she unfolds the grand course of Benin his-
tories of peoples whom the world forgot.

The reshuffling of historical narratives that has engaged scholars in recent years and has brought about the incorporation of the pasts of African, Native American, and Pacific peoples, to name but a few of the neglected populations, into the scope of global history, is finally filter-

a significant contribution to the field of African history. It provides a comprehensive overview of Benin's political, social, and cultural development, from its early origins to its destruction by the British in 1897.

The book is divided into several sections, each focusing on a different aspect of Benin's history. The first section provides an overview of Benin's geographical location, its natural resources, and its physical environment. The second section covers the political and social history of Benin, including its founding, the establishment of a centralized state, and its interactions with neighboring regions. The third section examines the arts and culture of Benin, including architecture, sculpture, and textiles. The fourth section looks at Benin's economy and trade, including agriculture, metalworking, and the transatlantic slave trade.

The book is written in an engaging and accessible style, making it suitable for both students and general readers. It includes numerous illustrations and maps to help readers visualize the historical events and developments discussed in the text. The bibliography and index provide additional resources for those interested in further exploration of the subject.

Overall, this book is an important contribution to the field of African history and provides a valuable resource for students, scholars, and the general public interested in the history of Benin.
Millar devotes the third chapter to religion. She book blurb informs the reader, a professional place in Edo social structure, rituals, and belief. 

Africanist nor a Benin specialist. She is, as the writer and a student of Chinese language and scholarship the two names are interchangeable, but the Edo people never refer to themselves in their own language as Bini. They might use this term in conversation with a foreigner, accommodating his or her terms of reference, but in their own speech, proverbs, poetry, and narratives, the term Bini and its derivations do not occur. A. F. C. Ryder (1969:10) correctly regards Edo as the native name and Benin as an alien designation.

The origin of either name is subject to folk etymologies and legends that critical linguistic analysis has not yet validated. Jacob Egharevba derives the name Benin from the expression “Ile-Ibinu” (land of vexation), which he traditionally attributes to the Yoruba Prince Oranmiyan, who could not adjust to life in Benin (Egharevba 1960:7; see also Bradbury 1957:18). H. Ling Roth (1968 [1903]:17-8), citing Captain Roupell who recorded historical Benin traditions from well-informed chiefs a year after the disastrous events of 1897, suggests that Oba Ewuare (ca. 1200) named the town after his favorite slave, Ubin, while Egharevba (1960:17) proposes that Oba Ewuare (ca. 1440) named it after his own beloved slave, Edo. Indeed “U” is a common prefix for names of localities in the Edo language, and therefore the first of these traditions may represent some older cultural information, but the repetitive nature of these two narratives indicates that they have their basis in a traditional naming pattern rather than in historical fact.

Comparative linguistics offers another possibility for rescuing the origin of this dual naming from obscurity. Ryder suggests that “the first Portuguese to arrive on the coast picked up the name beni, meaning ‘water dwellers,’ from the Ijo and applied it in error to the Edo” (1984:352, n. 21). Certainly such a detailed discussion has no place in a middle- or high-school textbook, yet the succinct style does not exempt Millar from accurately stating the Edo terms for their national identity.

When Millar addresses the Edo pride in their past glory, she does it in an underhand-ed way, reducing a statement of political strength to its ceremonial manifestation. She opens her narrative with the statement that “five hundred years ago, the kingdom of Benin (buh-Neen) outshone all others on the West coast of Africa” (p. 6). Indeed, from all available accounts, the kingdom reached one of its political peaks at the turn of the sixteenth century. At that time few West African empires, which would attain the height of their political strength in subsequent centuries, rivaled Benin. Yet, Millar’s next sentence is a non sequitur that reduces the idea of power to its ritualistic component: “At no time did the kingdom glitter more than when a new king was about to be crowned” (p. 6). No doubt, up to these very days the Edo people celebrate their political and religious rituals with much fanfare, following traditional principles as much as possible. But royal and annual rituals are just an external manifesta-
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The installation of a new king, colorful as it may be, is not the reason for the historical regional supremacy of Benin.

When Millar describes the role the Oba plays in state rituals she says: “Though he wears modern eyeglasses, he carries on traditional that are at least eight hundred years old” (p. 17). The historical inaccuracy in dating these traditions notwithstanding, the dichotomy she perceives between Oba Erediauwa’s nearsightedness and Edo rituals implies an opposition between eyeglasses as symbols of modernity and rituals as symbols of tradition.

Indeed, Oba Erediauwa is very much a modern man, and not just because of his glasses (his father wore them as well). He has degrees from a world-renowned university and before ascending the throne had a successful career within the Nigerian federal government. His current cultural policies demonstrate that his education complements rather contrasts with Benin tradition. He does not let technical, scientific, and educational progress eradicate Edo traditions, insisting upon their preservation and adequate public presentation. His enlightenment is in accord with modern thinking that advocates integration of new and old ways. Later in the book Millar addresses this issue (pp. 62–63), this time correctly.

Oddly, the chapter “How Benin Lives On Today” (pp. 60–72) focuses only on describing the cultural legacy of the past with barely any reference to dynamic modern life. There is no mention of either the University of Benin and its modern teaching hospital nor the other medical facilities in the city. As the capital of Bendel State, in the past thirty years Benin City transformed from a somewhat dormant town into a thriving economic and political center within Nigeria. Demographically and linguistically it is a home no longer just for the Edo but also for many other Nigerian peoples. In addition to Edo languages, the modern citizens of Benin City speak or at least hear on their streets and in their markets Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and other Nigerian languages. Such diversity has stimulated social and religious changes, a proliferation of new cults and churches, and a general increase in cultural creativity. Except perhaps in its rural enclaves Benin is no longer a homogeneous society. The exchange of languages, ideas, and belief systems between members of different groups only adds to its vitality.

Edo authors and poets transform their oral tradition into literary forms and have local theatrical groups produce dramas that reenact narratives of past Obas, their wars and internal conflicts. So far they have not enjoyed access to international publishers, and their literary creativity is clearly local. Consequently it is free of any external pressures, providing a basis for the emergence of a genuine Edo literature. Millar, however, ignores this important cultural development. The only aspect of Benin’s artistic renaissance that she mentions is carving, which is produced specifically for the tourist trade (p. 64). At the same time she projects an Edo-centric view of the African diaspora. The worship of West African gods in Cuba and other Caribbean islands and Brazil, and their revival in East Coast cities from New York to Miami, are not necessarily subject to Edo religious influence but rather to the spread of cults the Edo share with other West African peoples. Similarly, jazz rhythms certainly exhibit the influence of African music but not necessarily Benin music. In her designation of Benin as a source of modern musical styles Millar further compounds vague and antiquated generalizations, stating that the music is typical “of the Niger-Congo River area where Benin is located” (p. 72). Benin, as the map on page 18 clearly shows, is west of the Niger River, located at

Continued on page 88
6° 20' latitude and 5° 35' longitude. The long coastal stretch from the Niger to the Congo (Zaire) deltas is home to a broad range of musical styles, and their condensation into a single type does not do justice to the richness of African musical creativity. Millar continues with her fuzzy attributions to the Edo in her discussion of African aesthetic principles. She points out that while the idea of "coolness" as a high aesthetic value is shared with other African peoples, somehow its spread through-out the modern world owes much to the Edo (p. 72): she thus neglects this concept among the Yoruba, noticed by Robert Thompson, who suggested it as a source for the African-American expression "cool" (1966:85-102).

Millar’s account of recent historical developments raises questions more than it provides answers. For example, although she tells about the Owegbe cult, including some lurid details (pp. 67-68), she is totally silent about the formation of civil rule under British administration and the rise to power of Agho Obaseki. Obaseki became the Iyase of Benin in 1916 and was the Head of Benin District, the largest and most populous in Benin Division. The lack of narrative balance becomes even more glaring when one considers the fact that Chief Omo-Osagie, the Iyase of Benin in the sixties, was involved in the Owegbe cult affair. The Owegbe association grew from a small cult in 1947 to a politically powerful secret society that permeated all ranks in Benin and neighboring divisions. Its influence “constituted a serious threat to peace, order and good government in the Mid-West,” and therefore “sterne measures [were] required to eradicate its menace” (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1966:159). Following the report of the investigation commission some prominent political leaders were arrested on April 19, 1966.

The affair shook up the political power structure in Benin and could have served not only as an example of “modern witchcraft,” as Millar calls it, but as an illustration of the multidimensional nature of politics in modern Benin. Millar’s silence about the rise to power of Agho Obaseki and his descendants in Benin is particularly regrettable because this important chapter in modern Benin history has been the subject of excellent historical studies by Philip Aigboma Igbafe (1979). In general the Edo people are fortunate as far as modern scholarship is concerned. Students have examined their art, language, and history, applying to their research high and rigorous standards. The excellent dictionary history, applying to their research high and rigorous standards. The excellent dictionary that Hans Melzian compiled in 1937 offers a solid linguistic foundation. In 1956 K. O. Watts initiated the Benin Scheme, one of the earliest interdisciplinary projects devoted to the study of a society in sub-Saharan Africa. He brought together a team of young scholars: the anthropologist R. E. Bradbury, the historian A. F. C. Ryder, the art historian Philip Dark, and the archaeologist Graham Connah. Each made a substantial contribution to the study of Benin, yet except for Bradbury’s books, none receives even so much as a mention in Millar’s suggested reading list and the bibliography (pp. 76-77). The omission of H. Ling Roth’s Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors (1903) from the same list is similarly surprising.

The volume’s glossy paper, colored photographs, and handsome production do not compensate for its shortcomings. The induction of Benin into the hall of fame of civilizations does not require cosmetic surgery. The kingdom was a forceful power in the region, and its history illustrates many of the follies of political force and at the same time many of the collective and individual cultural advancements of a dynamic society. Its presentation in a school textbook can and should reveal Benin’s past and present without omitting any facts, fully accounting for its glory with an accuracy that befits our children.

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**Benin Kingdom of West Africa**

**John Peffer-Engels**


**EDO**

The Bini People of the Benin Kingdom

Chukwuma Azuonye

The Heritage Library of African Peoples. The Rosen Publishing Group, New York, 1996. 64 pp., 24 color photos, glossary, bibliography, index. $15.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by Joseph Nevadomsky

These two books are part of a recent deluge of children’s texts on Benin that include The Kingdom of Benin in West Africa by Heather Millar (reviewed in this issue, pp. 12; Benin Folklore by Funmi Osoba (Haddad, London, 1994), a “book of traditional stories from Benin” that is now quite impossible to get, since Haddad seems to have packed up; Ancient African Town (Metropolis Series, The Salariya Book Co., Brighton, in conjunction with Frank Watts, London, 1997), a tour of seventeenth-century Benin by Fiona MacDonald (who has misscibed from Paula Girshick Ben-Amos and Henry Ling Roth and gotten it completely wrong) with illustrations by Gerald Wood (who has no visual idea of it). Benin is also one of the focuses of Oyo, Benin, Asante (“African Kingdoms of the Past” series, Dillon Press, New Jersey, 1996) by Kenny Mann, a documentary filmmaker who grew up in Nairobi and has an engagingly integrated sense of history.

Aimed at early-elementary schoolchildren, Benin Kingdom of West Africa is one of a series called “Celebrating the Peoples and Civilizations of Africa” that lists the Asante, Dogon, Maasai, Yoruba, and Zulu in its titles. It is a simplified version of Edo: The Bini People of the Benin Kingdom, written for a juvenile (junior high) audience. Edo is the latest addition to “The Heritage Library of African Peoples,” which boasts more than fifty titles, ranging from the Agikuyu in east Africa to the Zulu in southern Africa. Unfortunately, if these two offerings are indicative of the two series, the Rosen Publishing Group should be held accountable for irresponsible editing, resulting in books full of sloppy errors.

In less than a thousand words of text Peffer-Engels gets it so wrong so often. “Who Are the Edo of Benin” tells us that “many Edo were brought as slaves to North and South America and took their art and religion with them,” a remarkable twist on the history of a kingdom that became involved in the slave trade as entrepreneurs rather than as victims. Flip a page and we learn that the Edo people “chew bitter-tasting kola nuts when they work in the hot sun.” To prevent sunstroke? Kola nuts are consumed for the same reason that Westerners drink coffee—as a mild stimulant. They do keep people awake, especially long-distance taxi drivers and students studying late for exams, but this has absolutely nothing to do with the sun. Flip again and the section on villages shows two kids playing draughts “in Benin City, the largest city in Benin.” Benin City, the largest city in Benin? Another flip and the section on the king shows a photograph of Ize Iyamu, in chiefly dress and in front of his house, with the caption “The Edo believe that the Oba is very powerful.” This cleverly ambiguous caption suggests that we are looking at a photograph of the king. Another page describes a shrine to Olokun as an paternal ancestral shrine. In addition to these textual errors, the photographs by Phyllis Galembo are highly saturated and much too dark as printed.

_Edo: The Bini People of the Benin Kingdom_ begins with a foreword by George C. Bond, series editor and also director of the Institute of African Studies at Columbia University. It comes off as very old hat: “Large numbers of Africans live in modern cities. Rural Africa is also being transformed, and yet its people still engage in many of their customs and beliefs” (p. 7). Anyone who has done research on religion and ritual in Benin City knows that the rural-urban dichotomy does not and never did apply: urban centers are havens for all sorts of customary practices and beliefs, and urban worshipers commute between town shrines and countryside shrines as divinities and diviners require. That there is some kind of magical transformation between rural and urban is strictly in the heads of old-fashioned developmental theorists.

Chapter one has a useful map but is otherwise unremarkable except for the photograph of what appears to be a native physician who is identified as an enogie (pl. onogie). He is dressed in war garments and wears a small uste (raffia tray) around his neck. His title is Enogie n’Ogiju (Phyllis Galembo, personal communication), which translates as the “Duke of death” and, indeed, is the moniker of this native doctor. Although the caption goes on to say that an enogie holds the “position of village chief or head,” in fact it is the idonumere, the oldest person in the community, who functions as the head. The onogie, or Oba’s half-
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