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Recommended Citation


This book can be called an excellent reference for a library, but it is not at all suitable as a text to be used for a course on Africa for the 19th century. In order to create a compelling story of African cultures and societies, there is needed a discussion of sources and perspectives. How do we know what we know? How were the data collected – from written documents, from letters, from archeology? Whose perspective is being presented – is it one of European historians and anthropologists, is it given by European traders in the slave trade, does it come from African merchants, African slaves, Islamic ulamas and scholars? The source is important.

For the reader it is important to gain a sense of African geography, a sense of the resources of Africa, an idea how the slave trade or the gold trade or the salt trade were conducted. It is important to know that even today there are few cities with more than 100,000 people. The relevance of the material presented gives meaning to the stories given by the historian. What was the impact on Africa of the European slave trade? How were slaves in Africa different from those in Brazil, the Middle East, and North America?

To make Africa real to the reader, more is needed than a sequence of facts that are given without meaning. For instance, Islamic culture penetrated deeply in West and East Africa. The reader needs to know what a caliphate is like. How did Muslim religion change African society? What was the role of the ulamas, the scholars, the land-owners, and what were the contributions of these civilizations that were highly literate? The authors write about many Islamic societies, but with few exceptions, the reader only learns facts without any genuine understanding. The few exceptions are the chapters on the Sokoto Caliphate, and the descriptions of the Kingdom of Morocco.
Some topics that could be developed and would be of keen interest to the reader would be the complexity of African trade. There is only one recorded letter on the slave trade. The trader had to be very ingenious; there was frequently a lack of common currency; the trader who sought slaves might have to give a wide variety of items, including tobacco, alcohol, shells that would be acceptable as currency, and some textiles. It is important to know that theoretically slavery was not permitted in the 19th century, while in fact it continued very strong. Also what did the diaspora of slaves from Africa do to the African population? This is hardly mentioned.

The importance of trade in salt in many parts of Africa needs to be understood; it was an essential commodity for survival. How salt was carried by camels in the desert over great distance needs to be explained. The last chapter of the book does give a good overall view of the century discussed, which is helpful.

A very good source on Africa would be J.D. Fage, *A History of Africa*. The importance of trade on the Niger River is explained. The story of the Islamic transformation of West Africa is particularly interesting: Islamic institutions come to life; the interaction of the caliph, the emirs, the land-owners, the ulama, the warriors, and the peasantry is told in ways that their history becomes real.

If the purpose of the teacher is to gain an understanding of the African continent, including its geography, I would recommend John Reader’s *Africa*. This is a magnificent study. The photography is original and inviting. The people of Africa become real. The nature of the salt trade, which uses camels who can travel great distances without water or much food for a week, is fascinating. The pictures give you a good idea that Africa contains many deserts, beautiful mountains and waterfalls; the fauna and animal life of Africa is shown. In West Africa, the story of the Ashanti Kingdom, the trade in gold, the existence of armies on horseback, and the beautiful art work based on gold are all described in an interesting manner. You can live the life of the
captured slave, you learn that in some cases in Islamic communities slaves can redeem themselves, they are free after completing a day of work, they were not exploited like American slaves. Islamic civilizations in West Africa like the Sokot kingdom had great scholars, produced a great literature including philosophy and poetry. This is not sufficiently explained in the condensed history edited by Professor Ade Ajayi.

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