

Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History. Getz, Trevor and Liz Clarke. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN 9780199844395

Abina and the Important Men is a graphic history about a real court case from the 1870s in the town of Cape Coast in the British Gold Coast Colony (southern portion of modern day Ghana) of West Africa. The plaintiff, Abina Mansah, contended that she was wrongfully enslaved by a wealthy planter, Quamina Eddoo, and, as a consequence, brought charges against him and fought to secure her freedom through the courts. The book is a collaboration between a historian, Trevor Getz, and a South African graphic artist, Liz Clarke. Getz, a historian of modern African history and world history at San Francisco State University, is known for his earlier work on the slavery and abolition in Africa, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa* (2004). *Abina and the Important Men* is also simply a history about “women without history,” and parallels, as a historical production, Sandra Green's recent book *West African Narratives of Slavery: Texts From Late Nineteenth-And Early Twentieth Century Ghana* (2011).

The graphic history was clearly designed specifically for use in the classroom. It is divided into five colorfully demarcated parts. The first part is the graphic narrative with requisite pictures and text. The second part is the actual transcript from the court case. The rest of the sections of the graphic history provide the necessary context for instruction in the classroom in addition to various maps. Part III gives a short historical background of the region, the slave trade and British involvement in the area. Parts IV and V are essentially study-guides for using the text in the classroom, that include discussions of broader historical themes that come out of the court case and also potential ways for students to approach the text in the classroom.

In Part I Getz and Clarke construct the historical narrative surrounding Abina's court case.

Britain, of course, was the most important European slave trading nation. According to the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database, out of the approximately 12.5 million slaves shipped out of the Africa from 1501 to 1866, British ships transported 3.2 million of them. However, by the late 19th century, Great Britain had already outlawed the trans Atlantic slave trade (1807) and also abolished slavery in its territories (1834). Consequently, through its attempts to end slave trading in the Gold Coast region, Britain became involved in a number of wars against the great slave trading nation of Asante. Following the 1873 war, Britain established a colony over a few of the large towns on the coast, including Cape Coast, and a protectorate over most of the remaining Fante coastal states. Along with the creation of the colony and the protectorate, Britain also abolished the legal status of slavery in these areas in 1874. Practically, this meant that although slave owners could not use the courts to enforce enslavement, the British would not actually take any positive action to actually physically free slaves. The slaves, themselves, would have to make abolition a reality, as Abina's case shows.

So, by the time of Abina's court proceedings in 1876, slavery, though nominally illegal in the Gold Coast Colony and Protectorate, was actually flourishing and countenanced by the British. Slavery flourished precisely because it buttressed the region's economic system built upon the production of so-called "legitimate" products. By the 1870s, the Gold Coast was an important palm oil producer. Palm oil was a major export from West Africa to Europe, particularly England, during the 19th century. Many of the palm oil plantations depended upon a slave labor force. Since the abolition decree did not affect the condition of wives or concubines, slave owners began to import slave girls to work on plantations and perform other work, as a way of evading the abolition decree. Slave owners would import female slaves and pass them off as members of the household or wives. This was how Abina Mensah came to life as a slave in the Gold Coast.

Abina was originally a slave in the Asante controlled interior of the Gold Coast region. Getz does not state whether she was born into slavery or was captured. Clearly, by the time she was taken to the coastal areas as a teenage girl, she had already been habituated as a slave for quite some time. The narrative picks up her story while she was in the interior. She was originally bought by a man named Yowawhah who took her to the coastal town of Salt Pond and then sold her to a wealthy palm oil trader named Quamina Eddoo. In the Gold Coast, powerful and influential men like Quamina Eddoo were referred to as “important men.” After acquiring Abina, Eddoo placed her under the charge of his sister, Eccoah, who put her to work performing various tasks alongside other slave girls who ranged in age from 9 to 13 years of age. Eventually, Eddoo decided to give Abina to a male member of his extended family as a wife. It is at this point that Abina decides to run away to the town of Cape Coast.

During her sojourn in Cape Coast, she befriends a EurAfrican, James Davis, who worked as a court interpreter. Being educated and deeply immersed in European culture, Davis is against slavery and decides to help Abina bring charges against Quamina Eddoo through the court system in Cape Coast.

With Davis acting as her legal counsel, charges are brought against Quamina Eddoo. Eddoo, however, hires James Hutton Brew, one of the few trained lawyers in the whole colony. Through his skillful questioning, Hutton Brew quickly confuses and puts Abina on the defensive about her slave status. He, apparently, argues successfully that Abina was not in fact a slave but a free worker. From the transcripts, the whole trial becomes a question of how to define freedom. Although the court transcript is silent on this point, since it ends abruptly, in the narrative reconstruction Quamina Eddoo is acquitted but Abina gains her freedom. All is well that ends well?

One reason the book is so useful for classroom instruction is because it is a window into many

aspects of the institution of slavery in Africa. For example, after Abina is sold to Quamina Eddoo in Salt Pond, although she was nominally owned by an “important man,” the person who actually managed her labor power on a day to day basis was a woman. Abina's slave experience in this regard is consistent with Claire Robertson's and Martin Klein's arguments in their authoritative book *Women and Slavery in Africa* (1997). Most slaves in Africa were women and although men owned the slaves, the actual day to day managing of their labor was in the control of freeborn women. When Abina is sold to Eddo, he formally cuts off her beads and gives her cloth. This was a formal way of showing that he owned her. There were also different names for slaves that were born in a household as opposed to slaves that were acquired through the market (*odonko*). As Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff have already shown in their time worn opus, *Slavery in Africa* (1977), the difference in names also reflected the variation in slave status and the treatment of different classes of slaves. A slave acquired through the market suffered greater debasement and physical abuse than slaves of the hearth or slaves born within the household.

The book also shows the extent to which slavery was thoroughly interwoven into the fabric of society in the Gold Coast. Abina, essentially, did the work that free women normally performed, anyway, during the entirety of her enslavement. She worked as a porter, performed domestic labor and was even available for the sexual gratification of her handlers. While working for Eccoah, she was also threatened, though not physically abused. However, while she was a slave in the interior she did suffer certain tortures, appropriate for slaves, such as being imprisoned in a log and, of course, flogging.

Abina and the Important Men is also an exercise in the process of historical reconstruction. Building upon the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept of the “silences of history,” Getz and Clarke attempt to give voice to Abina by filling in the empty spaces of the court transcript, which

was actually a transliteration of what Abina said. Part IV discusses the issues they grappled with in attempting to reconstruct a voice for Abina. For example, problems like reconstructing the way Abina talked and looked, and decoding the significance of the removal of Abina's beads, were some of the many issues that the authors had to explore and reinterpret in their own way.

Like the retelling of oral tradition by a *griot* or traditional African story teller, *Abina and the Important Men*, is also an exercise in reinterpretation. In addition to being story tellers, *Griot* kept the history in non literate societies. Because the history was recounted orally, each *griot* would put his own particular spin or embellishment on the retelling of it. Through the creation of their graphic history/novel Getz and Clarke are, like the *griot*, add their own spin on the actual history. The authors are well aware of this issue, as it forms the topic for Part IV.

This aspect of the book, however, gives it its strength, particularly as a tool for discussing the “historians craft” in the classroom. However, this strength of the book is also a weakness. Getz and Clarke have to color in so much space in the court transcript that they sometimes move in to a gray area between fact and fiction, history or literature. In this regard, it also would have been useful if the authors had supplied a pictorial glossary of material culture. In Part IV they explain how they were able to use historical pictures and drawings, memoirs, etc. to aid in the visual reconstruction of the style of dress, buildings and furniture of the time period. However, in the interests of clarity, they should also have added some sort of key that explained the cultural significance of some of the artifacts, like clothing, for example. Nevertheless, all in all, this is an excellent attempt at trying to provide historical content in a more innovative format. Students of African history will benefit immensely from this graphic retelling of African history.

Opolot Okia,

Wright State University