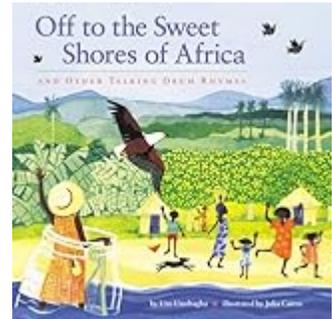


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Uzo Unobagba.** *Off to the Sweet Shores of Africa And Other Talking Drum Rhymes.* San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000. 56 pp. Ages 2-8. \$16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8118-2378-4.



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## African Village Life

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This beautifully illustrated book uses many rhymes to depict village life in West Africa. It is full of important cultural messages and meanings. It includes stories on animals, rivers, plants, everyday life, market-scenes, farming and crops. The book is not numbered, but it has twenty-five leaves, printed on both sides to make a total of fifty pages. The illustrations fill most of the space.

The author is a Nigerian mother of two, writing for the first time. The poems were originally written for her children. The poems derive from her Nigerian cultural heritage and her interest in Mother Goose rhymes. The poems feature African objects and ideas—the use of the drum, the tropical animals and fruits, the desert, market, and rivers. The author hopes to be able to enchant readers who, hopefully, will develop an interest in Africa.

Put together, the poems tell a story of village life. I will use the poems to create a coherent story that emerges from the book. The poem opens with an invitation to travel to Africa, to its sweet shores. The lullaby consists of a simple-harp, a harmonica and a jar of

tapioca. We are invited to walk and listen to the talking drum in the land “where sunbirds hum.” We are promised a beautiful garden, full of palm and paprika, eagle birds, various animals, and a river. What do we first see? The baobab and the hare, sounding “Ti-gi-boom-Chi-ki boom” Then follow the elephants, trumpeting all over the place, with swinging grey trunks. We are invited to join the parade of elephants, beating our drums as we sing along.

We need a pot to fetch water to drink. And each person has a pot, one that can also sing: “Toodle-loo! Toodle-lei!” It can sing by itself, but it can also enjoy the company of a mouse. A village drum is always available as a companion:

Boom! Boom! Boom-bi-boom! The drum is marching around the room. Doom! Doom! Doom-di-doom! The clay pot is dancing with Bimbo the broom. Goom! Goom! Goom-gi-goom! The golden gong is wearing a plume.

We are not always lucky enough to have animals to sing for us. We can wait for the canary under a tree for a

long time. Monkeys and bananas can pursue us, driving us away from under the tree. The cricket can be nasty.

We can be comforted with chicks that hatch at the right time, the fish that are so overjoyed that they dance directly into our dishes, a rooster crowing and laughing coo-ka-roo-koo on our rafters. If we enjoy looking at the long neck of the giraffe, we must be on the look-out for the lion and run when we see one. The zebra runs, although we can ride it as a horse and run with it, and the impala jumps, even faster than the birds. The desert does not scare us, and we sing as we walk in its heat and drink with the camels in the oasis. We can always enjoy a camel ride:

Down along the camel's hump, We like to slide, with feet astride; Down, we fall with a thumpy thump! Hur-ray! For a humpy, thumpy ride! And where is the tortoise, the most famous of all the animals, in the jungle? "He's riding in the basket," said the cricket; "He's riding on the donkey," said the monkey; "He's under the mat," said the crane rat; "He's hanging from a rope," said the antelope; "He's travelled to Onitsha," said the kingfisher' "He's playing with the ant," said the elephant; "I heard him laugh," said the giraffe' "He's up to a trick," said the dik-dik; "Oh no! He's not!" said the jumping mouse, "He's fast asleep in his tortoise-shell house!"

The cattle boy works with his animals, but he amuses us with his whistling. We are cold in December, as the harmattan brings its cold wind and dust. We enjoy swimming in the river, but must be careful when it rises, lest

it sweep us along. With the rain comes the rainbow, and the water to make our plants grow. After the rain comes the sun, and we run to the village square to play and sell our sugar cane in the market.

There is always food for us: akara, plantain flakes, pompom drink, oranges, tangerines, corns, pineapple and other fruits. And when we are no longer children, we marry, under the moon, singing love songs, dancing the rumba dance. We live old enough to tell stories to our grand children, sitting in front of our compounds.

I have nothing but praise for this book. All the characters are familiar objects that charm children. The rhythmic language is simple. The glossary is excellent, and it allows the readers to understand African culture. The author's note should have informed the readers of the inclusion of a glossary at the end of the book. The book will most be enjoyed by those with some background in African culture. Those totally unfamiliar with the culture will need someone to explain a number of issues.

The book is to be read to kids (ages 5-9), and the rhymes should be read with passion. Many sound musical, and can be accompanied by musical instruments when opportunity allows. A good reading will captivate their attention. The various drawings are so colorful and self-explanatory that children can enjoy looking at them. Those who like to draw and paint have many examples to start with.

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