Book Review: Trevor Getz and Liz Clarke, *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History*, Second Edition, (Oxford University Press, 2016).

By Noe Rangel

Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History by Trevor R. Getz and illustrated by Liz Clarke is a remarkable work that transcends traditional historical narratives. Getz is a Professor of African and World History at San Francisco State University, and Clarke is a South African illustrator who has been the artist behind several graphic histories, including *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt: Empire, Disease, and Modernity in French Colonial Vietnam* and *Witness to the Age of Revolution: The Odyssey of Juan Bautista Tupac Amar*. In *Abina and the Important Men*, Getz and Clarke reconstruct the life history of an enslaved woman in the British Gold Coast Colony of West Africa during the nineteenth century. Through the experiences of Abina Mansah, they engage the readers with powerful themes, such as slavery, slave trading, colonialism, and women's agency, in a highly accessible format that breaks stereotypes of typical academic writing.

One of the strongest elements of Getz and Clarke's work is their use of a wide array of primary and secondary sources, especially in retelling and illustrating Abina's courtroom experiences. From primary sources, like Abina's lengthy courtroom transcript, the authors effectively present the complexities and limitations of the legal and social structures in colonial West Africa. *Abina and the Important Men* highlights the colonial legal system's bias and inconsistency in applying British abolition laws. The system favored the economic interest of wealthy palm oil producers," known as Important Men," who supplied the English crown with tax revenue, over Abina's cause. The author's analysis of text-based sources is bolstered by their incorporation of well-detailed historical maps, underscoring the vastness of the Ashanti Empire and showing its territorial expansion over time. At its peak in the late eighteenth century, the

Ashanti Empire ruled over much of the territory that comprises modern-day Ghana and parts of the Ivory Coast and Togo. The book creates the context of the exploitative colonial relationship between the Ashanti and the British Empire. With large swaths of land under the control of the Ashanti, the authors emphasize how British government control was limited to protectorates. Regional control and stability lay mainly in the relationship forged with the Ashanti Kingdom, which ebbed and flowed between them. Ashanti customs adapted to give the perception that the kingdom no longer partook in the slave trade. The British, in turn, overlooked seemingly blatant violations of abolition laws, such as customary practices involving domestic servitude, economic control disguised as dependency, and coerced marriage as part of bride price in favor of maintaining the colony's political stability and protecting the commercial interests of the so-called "Important Men." The authors effectively use historical maps to illuminate the intricate dynamics of power, control, and compromise between the Ashanti Kingdom and the British colonial government, revealing the nuanced reality of colonial rule and its implications for the practice of slavery.

Traditional historical narratives have predominantly placed considerable importance on prominent political or social figures, essentially silencing the voices of ordinary individuals. The authors have brought forth an otherwise forgotten voice in their approach to *Abina and the Important Men*. Abina's narrative adds to attempts by historians to dive deeper and learn to use new sources, which can include oral traditions and archaeological remains, to tell the stories of "people without history." Except for Abina, her narrative is focused on a small group of key figures, including her former master, Quamina Eddoo. Eventually, the reader understands that although he is included among the "Important Men," he is largely irrelevant to the history of the Gold Coast, and few records exist outside court transcripts. However, several courtroom

officials, such as James Hutton Brew, who represented Eddoo, and Abina's attorney, James Davis, are traceable throughout multiple surviving judicial records of the period. By foregrounding Abina's story, the authors capture the lived experience of an otherwise ordinary person who was enslaved and thrust into a new reality, navigating the complexities of colonialism and the patriarchal society of the British colonial administration and its influence on the Gold Coast.

Getz and Clarke also effectively use Abina's story to shed light on enslaved people's strategies of resistance against their enslavers. Abina's decision to escape from her enslaver and seek legal recourse exemplifies one of the many ways in which enslaved people sought self-liberation in colonial West Africa during the nineteenth century. Her choice to escape and the journey she undertook to reach British territories represented her physical resistance to enslavement. Yet, as the authors emphasize, Abina's resistance also manifested itself on intellectual and emotional levels. The authors' analysis of her testimony demonstrates how Abina questioned the legitimacy of her enslavement and asserted her rights. First, by refusing to accept the clothes offered by Tado (the man Eddoo intended for her to marry) and asserting her freedom by choosing to escape rather than go through with the marriage. During this period and in this region, accepting cloth as a gift implied marriage and control over women, regardless of their status as enslaved individuals or free. Secondly, by testifying in court, Abina reveals how the legal system fails to deliver her justice. For example, early in Abina's journey, her attorney explains that her enslaver, Eddoo, is an 'important man', who the British do not like to alienate, especially in matters related to allegations of illegal slaveholding in the Gold Coast. As the authors reaffirm throughout *Abina and the Important Men*, men like Eddoo brought in revenue and served as vital instruments in the British model of indirect rule, even though they often held

large numbers of human captives. The jury's verdict of innocence exemplifies how the court was more interested in maintaining the status quo than upholding the British civilizing mission of abolishing African slavery.

Nevertheless, Abina's testimony asserted her humanity and forced the court to recognize her as a person, and not as a commodity. These forms of resistance challenge the notion that enslaved people were passive victims. Instead, it highlights agency and resilience in the face of oppression. Overall, Getz and Clarke balance scholarly works, which can be dense and unavailable to the public, with an introductory reading that serves as a starting point to think critically on the themes of slavery, slave trading, colonialism, and women's agency. The book is grounded in research, drawing from primary and secondary sources and deep analysis. Choosing to take on complex issues only adds to their credibility and authenticity. Their book can guide historians to reach a wider audience, encourage critical thinking, and enhance comprehension of historical concepts.