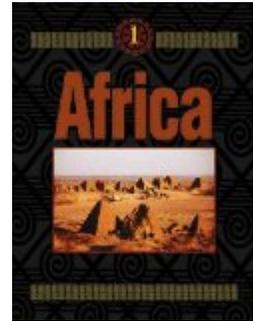


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Middleton, ed. *Africa: An Encyclopedia for Students*. New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001. 4 vols. \$468.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-80650-1.

Reviewed by Paul Thomas (Stanford University Libraries)  
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## Everything the Kids Need to Know About Africa

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This four-volume encyclopedia is based on the editor's well-received *Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara* (New York: Scribner's, 1997), which received the Honorable Mention in 1998 for the Dartmouth Award given by the American Library Association's Reference and Users Services Association. The original edition contained 896 articles by scholars from around the world, but especially from Africa so as to have the encyclopedia present African as well as non-African perspectives. Many of the articles from this original edition have now been re-edited and updated to form an appropriate reference work for students in middle and high schools. In addition, new material on North Africa and on broader topics such as human origins, music, colonialism, slavery and food, have been added.

The encyclopedia is well illustrated with 260 black and white pictures spread throughout the volumes, with each volume also having an eight-page section of color pictures devoted to some particular topic. The first volume's color picture segment, for example, is devoted to "African culture." The illustrations do a good job of presenting both contemporary Africa and historical Africa, as well as contemporary rural and urban Africa. Approximately fifty basic maps are also included, although this is not the source one would use for its maps alone. Also included are sidebars that provide information on topics or word definitions that may be unfamiliar to many students, or to place topics in their appropriate chronological context. In the article on Food and Drink there are

three sidebars on "wild foods," "peanuts," and "fruits" (the latter including a recipe for South African fruit salad). Typical of the words defined are polygamy, savannah, deforestation, exploit, indigenous and federation. These terms are repeated throughout the four volumes whenever they occur. A six page Time Line of Africa is found in the beginning of each volume, and an index to all four volumes is found at the end of each volume.

In an encyclopedia whose scope is set so broadly, it is fairly easy to come up with questions as to why certain things were written or done (or not done) the way they were. It might have been interesting to have the articles signed or at least know who contributed to this work. A guide to pronunciation might have been helpful, especially for younger readers. Unfortunately, only volumes 1 and 3 contain a general geopolitical map of all of Africa that allows readers to put places in their continental context. That is to say, the map of the country of Benin is useful, but it would be nice for the reader to know where it is in Africa. Even the "List of maps" at the start of each volume fails to include the maps of the whole continent, so if the reader fails to notice them facing the title pages, he or she may have to try to find an atlas elsewhere. The lack of bibliographical references within the text is sometimes irritating, or when included, uneven. Some authors, such as Camara Laye and W. E. B. Du Bois have titles of their best-known works cited in their articles, whereas Steve Biko, Ahmadu Bello and Adolphe Eboué have none of the works by or about them mentioned. Granted there is a "Suggested readings" section at the end of volume 4, but it may be too little too late.

Curiously, one of the sections in the “Suggested Readings” is for individual countries, but only eight countries are listed there. On the other hand, the section for online resources should lead most readers to appropriate literature if they have access to the world wide web.

Overall, however, this is a very useful reference tool

for school libraries. From Art and Archeology to Women and Wildlife and Game Parks, from Cities and Urbanization to Religion and Ritual, this encyclopedia does an excellent job of presenting Africa, past and present, in all its multifaceted aspects. It does a very good job of presenting Africa for young readers, but also in such a way as to make it an excellent tool for secondary school students.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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