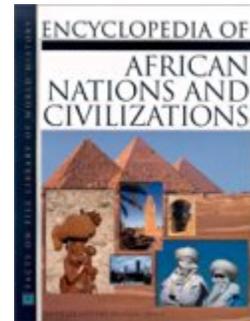


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Keith Lye, the Diagram Group. *Encyclopedia of African Nations and Civilizations*. New York: Facts On File, 2002. 400 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8160-4568-6.

Reviewed by Paul Thomas (Stanford University Libraries, Stanford University)
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Africa Past and Present, A to Z

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This work is basically an encyclopedia of African history and is meant to be a companion to the *Encyclopedia of Africa Peoples* (2002), a volume composed of approximately one thousand African ethnographies. The work being reviewed contains more than 450 entries that focus on African states, kingdoms, movements (especially anti-colonial struggles) and “personalities.” The introduction states that this book has presented its materials from an African perspective instead of a European or Arab one—an admirable goal indeed, although less than a revolutionary approach these days.

The encyclopedia covers all of Africa including North Africa and spans the historical record from ancient Egyptian times down to the present. It is divided into three sections. Section One, “Africa Today,” presents a series of brief regional overviews, focusing on contemporary African regional situations and includes the type of information useful for quick reference such as names of capital cities, GNP, and population density. Section Two, called “Development of the Continent,” focuses on topics and themes important in African history such as Bantu migration, the slave trade, colonial occupation and the various struggles for national liberation. Section Three constitutes the major section of this work and is called “A to Z of Nations and Civilizations.” The stated purpose of this section is to facilitate the finding of each civilization, state, colony and/or independent nation, and to provide the basic facts about it. In all three sections the editors have attempted to integrate visual forms of information

with their text.

Timelines and chronologies for all subjects fill this volume as do numerous illustrations that can be found on virtually every page. Maps also are amazingly abundant in this volume, and one or more can also be found on almost every page. Although directed towards a wide audience, this book would be most appropriate for high school age users, but also of use to teachers, and suitable for an undergraduate collection.

No book of this size and scope is perfect, however. The illustrations and maps are usually small and almost all are composed of but two shades of brown. There are no color pictures included that might make this volume more interesting to young people. The cross-referencing leaves something to be desired. There is an entry for Asante, but no reference from the alternative and probably better-known spelling of Ashanti. Although the former “homelands” of South Africa are each listed separately, and also in a section under the entry for South Africa, there is no reference from the word “homelands” itself. There is no reference from the Maghrib whatsoever, even though the very first section in the first part deals with North Africa.

Mistakes can be found. For example, the text describing the picture of the basilica of Our Lady of Peace in the Cote d’Ivoire is incomplete (p. 69). The Algerian Islamic political party, the “Front Islamique du Salut” (usually known by its French acronym, FIS) is referred to as the Institut Islamique du Salut (p. 99), and elsewhere as the “Fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front,” as if “Funda-

mentalist” were part of its name (illustration caption on p. 55). The map on the top left of page 90 places Guinea-Bissau where Sierra Leone is located. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) is referred to as the Ethiopian Liberation Front (p. 174).

The first part of the volume, that deals with regions, is not all that successful in the context of a work that refers to itself as an A to Z encyclopedia. Since the regions drawn up are somewhat arbitrary and each of the overviews given are very short, it would have been better to have placed that information in the body of the entries in the A-Z section. The brief statistics provided for each region would also be easier to digest if given in one section instead of breaking them up between the regions.

Perhaps the major shortcoming of this volume may actually be that it is too “busy.” The authors of this book may have tried to cram too much information into one volume. There are so many maps and illustrations (many of which are of dubious help and difficult to see in any sort of detail) that crowd the pages that it makes navigation and discovery difficult. It simply may not dawn on students that the only direct entries are names of current or former states, empires, colonies or parts thereof. There is an index to “personalities” and a general index, but they may not be sufficient to compensate for the arrangement if the reader does not realize how this volume is designed to be used. Finally, it is sad that bibliographical refer-

ences are completely lacking. They would be helpful to students—even if only references to online sources were provided. It is difficult to understand their omission in a volume geared to students.

If price is not an object, a better choice of a work having a similar purpose (albeit larger at four volumes) would be John Middleton’s *Africa: An Encyclopedia for Students* (2002, \$325). Although it lacks the myriad of maps found in the title under review, it is easier to navigate, has some color pictures and does include some bibliographical references. Its larger size allows it to present more material, and students should find it quite helpful and easy to use.

Overall, the work under review is of value in that it is very current and does contain a lot of information about Africa packed into one volume. It is worth considering, especially if a collection already has its companion volume (*Encyclopedia of African Peoples*) or if acquiring or shelving a multi-volume general reference work on African history is impractical.

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