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Willie F. Page. *Encyclopedia of African History and Culture.* New York: Facts on File, 2001. 992 pp. $247.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8160-4472-6.

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Pre-Colonial African History and Culture in Three Volumes

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This encyclopedia spans the history of Africa from ancient times to 1850. The three volumes are arranged chronologically: the first, *Ancient Africa*, runs from prehistory to 500 C.E. The second volume deals with the period between 500 and 1500 and is called *African Kingdoms*. In the third volume, entitled *From Conquest to Colonization*, the period between 1500 to 1850 is studied. More than 1,300 entries provide the key-words to the pre-colonial African past and culture. The reader is aided by various devices: there is a glossary, a time line, a list of entries, and an index. Cross-references function as a guide through the volumes. Maps, figures, pictures and short inserted narratives make the entries attractive for the non-specialist. The entries cover a wide range of subjects: from Benguela to the Blue Nile, from Alexander the Great to Sundiata, from the Tutsi to the Almoravids, from clans to folkore, from gold to tobacco, from the praying mantis to bananas. This variety renders the encyclopedia a valuable tool for people beginning their studies in African history. Through the "further reading" sections, students are encouraged to proceed with their investigations.

The encyclopedia, however, is not without its flaws. Firstly it seems that the selection of entries has been made on arbitrary criteria. Nyau dances of the Maravi kingdoms are not included, nor are ngoma healing rituals. Yet the Bambara beliefs in nyama and nyamakalav both receive a separate entry. Some ethnic groups have been included, others have been left out. While zebras and giraffes are included, chiefs and canoes, meriting at least as much attention, are not. There is no discussion of "Big Man," the "Hamitic hypothesis," and other concepts that have been important in Africanist research on pre-colonial Africa. Apart from these omissions, the division is sometimes unclear: one would not expect to find "Spreading Islam" under the heading "Missionaries."

A further weakness is the frequent appearance of anachronisms. There is hardly any point in showing a picture of a "present-day Turkana man" when discussing the 1,6 million years-old remains of the skeleton known as "Turkana boy" (vol. 1, p. 225). Many African folktales have been inserted in the first volume, even though there is no evidence whatsoever that they stem from prehistoric or ancient Africa before 500 C.E. In any case most items in the realm of folklore and religion have been included in the first volume. There is no reason, however, to assume these beliefs, practices and literary forms to have stopped in 500 C.E. Furthermore, such treatment implies that Africa knows no religious and cultural change. A perspective in which such beliefs and practices are presented with their full historical dimensions not only does more justice to the subject, but is also more fascinating for the reader.

There are a number of mistakes and incongruities. Thus queen Amina is stated to be "perhaps the most notable ruler of Zaria," ruling between 1650 and 1680, and credited with conquering the "neighboring Hausa states" (vol. 3, p. xxxi, 298). Yet she receives no separate entry. Furthermore, while most authors date Amina's rule to the sixteenth century, it is more likely that Queen Amina ruled in the fifteenth century, two hundred years earlier than Willie Page suggests. In terms of analysis, the volumes leave much to be desired. For example, ethnicity is not approached in any historical manner: the ethnic groups are assumed to be simply there. There are many such interpretative problems. In some cases, these relate to the overall framework. Thus the author shows a clear preference for centralized states. The maps only show kingdoms and volume 2 is even called *African Kingdoms*. Are only kingdoms relevant to African history? Do people without a monarch not have a history? So as to save them from oblivion, even the Kikuyu are classified as a "smaller kingdom"! The Nuer are less fortunate: "their constant movement over vast areas and their

struggle for subsistence left them very little time to be concerned about a central organizing body" (vol. 2, p. 87). Enough has been said about the simple inversion of colonial stereotypes of "primitive" Africa without altering the equally stereotypical expectations of what civilization ought to look like. In other cases the analytic flaws are limited to a sentence. Page states, for example, that "Bantu settlement in southern Africa, of course, was not unopposed" (vol. 1, p. 30). For such resistance, there is to my knowledge, no evidence. A statement like "Stories, tales, proverbs, customs, explanations, and codes of behavior have all been passed down for centuries in Africa in the great tradition of oral literature" (vol. 1, p. 86) once again reverts to a static interpretation of African cultures.

At times the evidence is twisted to fit the interpretation. An example is the entry on the slave trade (vol. 3, pp. 248-252). The role of Africans in the slave trade is minimized. Thus a caption for a picture showing a European slave merchant and an African middleman reads: "It glosses over the pressure placed on coastal peoples to do the Europeans' bidding" and a bit further down the text reads: "They [European traders] coerced coastal people by the threat of force or other harm to became [sic] their go-betweens." The Kongo king Alfonso I is said to have been "placed on the throne" by the Portuguese. This renders the Portuguese, rather than the Kongo aristocracy, responsible for the slave raids carried out under his rule. Apart from the misplaced political correctness such a statement implies, it is also a most questionable analysis of the events: after all, the candidacy of Alfonso I was supported by many Kongo elders, while his rival to the throne stood much closer to the Portuguese.

Of course valuable data can be garnered from these volumes. In many cases the information is accurate and the volumes provide a wealth of information on an enormous variety of subjects. Willie Page has succeeded in writing clear and accessible prose. Moreover the volumes are easy to use. The edition is intended for a wide audience, including high school students and interested amateurs. For these audiences especially, however, it may be difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff.

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