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## KNOWING AFRICA, OR WHAT AFRICA KNOWS

**John Middleton, Editor-in-chief.** *The Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara*. 4 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999. 2,466 pp. Bibliographies. Appendixes. Index. \$475.00. Cloth.

Such an undertaking! To present a complete geography of knowledge about Africa south of the Sahara is a task no less tricky for having lopped off the northern tier of the continent. Still, lay readers (if not all specialists) may feel confident that the itineraries of knowing presented here will lead them to the places they wish to reach and take them far beyond as well. And this is the service an encyclopedia should provide: guidance through the immense fields of knowledge about a world its readers desire to traverse. Encyclopedias do not encompass static worlds. New knowledge will appear in the service of new questions. But the scholarly journeys taken by its many contributors define an encyclopedia's world. We do not know how other scholars—intellectuals who live and work outside the academic world (or the world of government)—would have drawn the boundaries of this Africa; here is where the subtleties of touring, what's not seen and why, come into play. The guides always shape what the tourist learns.

If readers are tourists, what they look upon here might best be conceptualized, following Robert Darnton (1984:191–213), as a tree of knowledge. Trimming these trees, as Darnton observed, is an exercise in power. Darnton wrote about the world of Enlightenment France and of the control over it that the two philosophes, Diderot and d'Alembert, hoped to establish and consolidate with the publication of the *Encyclopédie* between 1751 and 1772. The *Encyclopédie* of the philosophes appeared at the height of the eighteenth century, a century in which Europeans were in the thick of slave trading and colonial expansion. In the case at hand, the trimmed tree of knowledge is that of Africa south of the Sahara. A host of scholars have decorated this tree, guided by the grand vision of the editor-in-chief, John Middleton, and his editorial board, J. F. Ade Ajayi, Goran Hyden, Joseph C. Miller, William A. Shack, and Michael Watts. Their *Encyclopedia* appears at the end of what some have called “the American century,” a century fraught with wars, genocides, and the exporting of American popular culture across the globe. This essay will describe key aspects of this grand vision by assessing some of the branches of the tree of knowledge that appear in the *Encyclopedia*. Along the way, I'll try to illuminate some of the gulfs and bridges between the Enlightenment's century and the American century.

I should reveal, however, that I contributed an entry to this *Encyclopedia*. The hubris of authorship might be expected to deflect my reviewer's eye from shortcomings and omissions, but I feel strangely free of that particular seduction. The terrain of accomplishment presented here is so vast, so varied, so revealing of the many strands of knowledge that compose the notion contained in the phrase “Africa south of the Sahara” that it dwarfs

my tiny part in it. So, I turn my critique partly against myself, as well as against all who have pitched in.

In the first of three introductory essays, J. F. Ade Ajayi rightly points out to readers that information on Africa south of the Sahara “is relatively scarce and generally locked up in specialist publications” (1:xix). He seems to applaud the four volumes presented here as incursions against the arcane. But he seeks to place the *Encyclopedia* in historical perspective by wondering, “what has the study of the social sciences and humanities contributed to an understanding of and to policy formulation in the development of Africa?” (1:xix). His answer: “It concentrates attention on peoples and cultures rather than the entire range of knowledge and... its perspective remains predominantly external” (1:xxv). To remedy this problem of vision, Ajayi calls implicitly for resuming work on the abandoned *Encyclopaedia Africana*.<sup>1</sup>

V. Y. Mudimbe opens the second of these essays with a pithy conundrum: “Africa, this name which is mine and yet not me” (1:xxvii). He echoes Ajayi’s observations by reminding readers that Africa is an idea invented by intellectuals, rendered as a place of difference in historical and literary texts “from the Egyptians and the Greeks down to Western writers of the nineteenth century.” Africa is a medium for “the grids and paradigms that directly contributed to the extension of Europe outside its borders,” and the locus of “‘abnormal’ cultural spaces” in the logic of “the intellectual and political disciplines of the last two centuries” (1: xxvii). But Mudimbe feels that this *Encyclopedia* “witnesses to a radical reconversion that subsumes a new intellectual configuration.” It expresses “a new understanding of what the African difference means as a sign” (1:xxxii). In a word, it is “a reflection of ourselves and will tell generations to come how, at the end of the twentieth century, we reinvented Africa” (1:xxxii).

In the final introductory essay, Ali A. Mazrui reflects on the origin of African studies along similar lines. Reviewing continental and racial definitions of “African,” and downplaying literary expression, he underscores the deeply oral character of the “indigenous legacy of the study of Africa” (1:xxxiv). He repeats earlier points about how Western knowing once denied the existence of African history, science, poetry, and philosophy. But Mazrui argues that “for better or for worse, the three greatest legacies that the West has bequeathed to Africa are the nation-state system, capitalism, and liberal democracy” (1:xxxviii). He wants us to consider how in Africa these legacies pull in directions that differ from their histories elsewhere, thus inviting readers to think of recent African history as a variation on a theme rather than as an aberration or statement of utter difference. What Mazrui is trying to get across, in my view, is the idea that African studies contains both an inner dimension of discovering identity for whoever accepts the name “African,” and an outer struggle or “rendezvous between African studies” and paradigms of cultural “values, beliefs, symbols, modes of communication, and lifestyles” (1:xl).

What then can be said of this *Encyclopedia* as a self-conscious rejoinder to centuries of “othering” Africa and Africans and as a library of information that both reflects the contours of knowing Africa today and defines the possibilities for continuing Mazrui’s inner quest and outer struggle?

The shape of the tree of knowledge described by the entries takes on a form familiar to us from an earlier era of the West’s engagement with Africa. For example, it gives new life to intertwined categories like clan and lineage, witchcraft and sorcery, taboo and sin, religion and ritual. A sprinkling of entries conform to one of the hallmarks of representing Africa: ethnic groups. Some sixty-seven are named and described, many others are mentioned in passing in the “Peoples and Cultures” section of individual country entries, and information on some seven hundred ethnic groups appears in an appendix (4:477–563). An unhelpful and ahistorical entry on “Pygmies” (3:544) even turns up.<sup>2</sup> But the *Encyclopedia* also describes newer horizons in that learning process by including entries on geometries, gender, and popular culture. The contributors hang many old ornaments on this tree of knowledge about Africa, refashion another set of old ones with the fruits of recent research, and introduce new ones from the academy’s library of categories.

One troubling legacy appears immediately, in the title itself. The fact that the Saharan deserts and not the Mediterranean coasts describe the northern edges of this knowledge conveys a geographic form to the racialization of African identity. The editors have not completely separated Northern Africa from the rest of the continent (some 90,000 words discuss connections between Northern Africa and the rest of the continent).<sup>3</sup> But the editor-in-chief argues that such a boundary conforms to conventions in teaching, learning, and writing (1:xvii). This divide will no doubt raise some eyebrows. Arguing that convention renders this divide acceptable merely transfers onto the backs of a vaguely defined conformist mass a decision with important implications for reconfiguring Africa as an object of knowledge. Had the editors included Northern Africa in the grand vision, they would have had to ask contributors to explain and demonstrate, carefully and repeatedly, why Northern Africa is part of Africa, why “sub-Saharan Africans” and “North Africans” need each other in order to understand themselves fully. They could have begun the task of reconnecting one of the great limbs of the continent to one source of its life.

Excellent entries on the African diaspora are welcome. But their narrow focus on the Americas raises again the question of how best to mark Africa’s edges and describe its shape.<sup>4</sup> This reviewer regrets that this convention, too, was not interrogated by the contours of this work. If, for example, we can speak of Islam in Africa, mustn’t we also speak of Africa in Islam? At the very least, an encyclopedia should explore the nature of the equivalencies promised in my inverted phrase. If we can reverse that flow, mustn’t we do so also for all the continent’s many edges? Accepting that challenge would have gone some distance toward confirming Africa as the

centrally located continent that it has been for very many millennia.<sup>5</sup>

This criticism might be taken up in another way. Just think how African histories and African historians have burst the chains placed on Africa south of the Sahara in the long colonial and contemporary centuries of Europe's and North America's engagement with so-called Black Africa (Miller 1999). The chains of textuality were unlocked by intellectuals who embraced oral and other "nontraditional" sources for history-writing. And yet the process is incomplete.

In otherwise excellent entries covering the African past, the familiar periodization—prehistory/precolonial, colonial, postcolonial—unfortunately prevails. Desmond Clark perhaps speaks for many when he suggests that written records remain the *sine qua non* for the study of history. But his entry, which covers masterfully the established periods in the archaeological past, contradicts much else in the *Encyclopedia*. Indeed, Clark claims that archaeology, his domain of expertise, "is the main source of data on which the history of a preliterate [*sic*] society must be based" (1:68). His very phrasing reveals the difficulty of maintaining a divide between "history" and "prehistory" on the basis of the presence or absence of written sources. Archaeology, which studies "the residual, artifactual material and other phenomena that have survived on ancient activity areas," does not restrict itself to written sources. Some, even most, may feel that they know what Clark means, but I believe the often useful semantic fuzziness of the word *history* has here been taken too far.

Readers will learn how the politics of representing the African past have generated innovative methods if they consult entries by David Newbury ("Historiography," 2:299–305), Wyatt MacGaffey ("Art: Overview," 1:107–13), Joseph Miller ("History and the Study of Africa," 2:305–11), and Christopher Ehret ("Linguistics, Historical," 2:579–80), among others. The methods they outline challenge the basis for the conventional definition of history writing on which Clark relies. Still, these entries notwithstanding, I believe that the *Encyclopedia* generally fails to communicate the exciting and innovative contributions scholars of the African past have made to the methodology of writing history.<sup>6</sup>

Nonspecialist readers, who must form the overwhelming majority for this work, may be confused by differences in emphasis and content in the stories of Africa's past given in the regional archaeology entries, the regional history entries, and the general history entries. Unbeknownst to them, timidity in using historical linguistic evidence to construct clear narrative lines for topics like the history of technology in Africa (especially that of metallurgy) reflects the privileging of particular sources (archaeological sources in the case of the archaeology entries) over attempts to integrate the various sources available. Intrepid readers will pursue such matters in the bibliographies that appear at the end of these entries. Most, however, are likely to shrug their shoulders and conclude, not incorrectly, that no consensus on these matters exists.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Martin Hall's

entry on the archaeology and prehistory of Central and Southern Africa, alone among the archaeologists' contributions to this long section (1:67–98), presents a critical historiography of the practice of archaeology in Africa.

Historians may feel that the entries from “Historiography” to “History of Africa: 19th and 20th Centuries” (2:299–333) account for some of the very best work in any of the volumes. David Newbury (“Historiography”) masterfully reviews the familiar tripartite periodization of African historiography: precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial. He manages to unpack the monolithic precolonial period by discussing different regions and by mentioning the type of source most used to write histories of those regions. He briefly discusses four types of sources: oral accounts; sources written by Muslims between the eighth and the fifteenth centuries; largely nineteenth-century European written observations; and largely nineteenth- and twentieth-century written accounts by African authors. Newbury does not, however, consider the importance of oral accounts of Europeans. Joseph Miller writes about how the academic discipline of history has engaged with (or ignored) Africa and how that relationship has changed both. He reviews major methodological and thematic issues, covering some of the same ground touched on by Newbury. Miller’s review largely ignores the impact of work in other parts of the world (especially Latin America and India) on framing new themes in African history.<sup>8</sup>

Roderick J. McIntosh covers the period to the seventh century. He introduces the notion of African originality to supplement the claim that early African history was “precocious,” that it can boast many firsts: the appearance of hominids, the world’s first blade tools, and the world’s earliest ceramics. By making several novel points, McIntosh extends one of Miller’s outstanding arguments—that African historical studies have much to teach the rest of the world about “decentralized politics, low-energy technologies, [and] mnemonic (verbal, oral) cultures” (2:311). McIntosh tells us that herding predated farming in the northern third of Africa, that specializations in production underwrote the birth of articulated hamlets of contemporaneous but physically separated communities. Together they “created a generalized economy based on the kind of reciprocity among specialists that would have buffered any one of them from the effects of a temporary ecological disaster befalling their specific niche” (2:313). In short, McIntosh provides a compelling counter to the familiar view of Africa as a harsh place in which Africans have merely survived, rather than having thrived.

In “Oral Culture and Oral Tradition” (3:359–63), Dorothea E. Schulz briefly engages the controversy surrounding differences between oral and literate cultures before disposing of it by reminding us “that the ‘use’ and the mental implications of either written or oral texts can be understood only in consideration of their actual relevance and use in a specific society” (3:360). Unfortunately, the “See Also” list of entries does not include “Pop-



ular Culture” or “Literature,” where readers would be introduced to the debates over the capacity to historicize matters of use and relevance in specific but earlier or departed forms of society.

One familiar means to historicize African societies lies in attempts to fix them within firm linear chronologies. “King Lists and Chronologies” (2:442) by David Henige reveals clearly the uneasy relationship between the academy’s need for Africa as an object of knowledge and Africa’s relationship to that very project of knowing. Henige has dedicated himself to revealing the difficulties of using African royal genealogies as sources for detecting linear chronology. In this regard, he notes, they behave like royal genealogies elsewhere. They stubbornly legitimate passing political conflicts and competitions but do not allow scholars to detect and analyze change. His point well made, we learn nothing of what such lists do tell us about African conceptions of time, political culture, and the constructing of histories. However, if readers turn to the entries on “Kings and Kingship” (2:443–50) and “Queens and Queenship” (3:545–48), they are rewarded if not with historical sensibility then with a sense of how royalty expresses key ideas in African cultures.

Perhaps because anthropology and anthropologists have had a checkered past in Africa, only a single entry by Beidelman on the topic (“Anthropology and the Study of Africa,” 1:55–57) appears in the work. This may be the clearest attempt to rearrange the decorations on the tree of contemporary knowledge of Africa south of the Sahara. In the colonial past, anthropology has been linked to the production of knowledge “that many Africans saw and have continued to see as part of the colonial endeavor to appropriate and dominate the indigenous peoples” (1:56). Yet anthropologists have transformed their discipline as profoundly as historians have transformed theirs. They have done so as a direct result of encounters with a generation of postcolonial African and Africanist intellectuals.

Anthropologists have been at the forefront of critiques of colonial practice and have revealed something of African contributions to shaping the content of colonial experience. They have increasingly committed themselves to the project of historicizing their discourse on Africa, of submitting their knowledge to a new regime of authority created more and more by Africans or with African involvement. It remains true that most anthropologists who work in Africa are not Africans (even if African intellectuals today produce knowledge that looks much like anthropology), and Beidelman’s point, quoted above, surely helps explain why this should be so. But anthropology and anthropologists have contributed much to our understanding of many important realms of African experience: selfhood, agency, urbanization, wage labor, gendered identities, Christianity and Islam, to name only a few. With these credits, anthropology should have received a rather more prominent place on this tree of knowledge about Africa. The foregoing, of course, glosses over the very real and emerging sense of an indigenous African anthropology, dedicated to the challenge of

representing others and generating explanatory schemes for economic, political, and social change within the continent's geographic and historical contours (Kramer 1993; MacGaffey 1986; Hunt 1999; Fabian & Kanda Matulu 1996; Feierman 1990; Cohen & Odhiambo 1989).<sup>9</sup> It also glosses over the fact that anthropological categories themselves govern much of the structure of the *Encyclopedia's* grand vision.

If anthropology and anthropologists seem to lurk behind much of what's new in this vision, the study of African languages must rank among the most important bridges across the gulfs that separate the eighteenth- and nineteenth- from the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Outsiders recognized similarities between many languages in Africa from early times. I suspect that further research might reveal that these recognitions paralleled and supplemented the importance of such observations for the creation of European nationalisms. The genetic hypothesis in comparative linguistics was first enunciated by William Jones at a meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1786, where he suggested that languages like Sanskrit, Greek, Persian, and Celtic "have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists."<sup>10</sup> Could intellectuals have retained the descent idiom at the center of this observation in the service of promoting a sense of continuity between "an immemorial past," a contemporary community of speakers, and their "limitless future," a continuity that Benedict Anderson (1991:11,12) argues was central to the creation of nations?

In Africa the reality of linguistic affinity has been central to resisting the linguistic underpinnings of the hyperethnicity of the colonial experience. One lively location for these debates about language and ethnicity has been the question of the nature of the similarities shared by a large group of languages that colonial scholars (and, after them, academics) have called "Bantu" and, especially, the implications of these similarities for the history of much of Africa south of the Equator. Even so, this potentially promising field of African cultural production remains underexplored.<sup>11</sup>

In this regard, Jan Vansina's confident recounting of the dispersion and settlement of Bantu-speaking peoples across the southern third of the continent stands out for its clarity (1:156–60). But his clear-headed confidence in his story belies the considerable disagreement over the basic composition of, and relations among, the constituent branches of the Bantu subgroup of Benue-Congo. Other scholars have produced different compositions, with differing implications for the history of the subcontinent between ca. 1000 B.C.E. and ca. 500 C.E. (Bastin, Coupez, & Mann 1999; Heine, Hoff, & Vossen 1977; Ehret 1999; Klieman 1997). Still, this entry offers the important conclusion that the "original input" of Proto Bantu "became so interwoven with other elements that to label the resulting ways of life 'Bantu' is misleading" (1:156–60). This point should be taken seriously. It might correct the common tendency among Africanists and teachers of world history courses to speak of something they call the "the Bantu expansion." The urge to simplify what were many, very different expan-



sions in the service of concise pedagogy must be staunchly resisted here. Moreover, the implications of Vansina's warning for the viability of a Bantu cultural politics must be assessed.

One excellent entry offers just the right combination of generalization and detail. Kwesi Wiredu's "Modes of Thought in African Philosophy" (3:167–72) reviews divisions between traditional and modern African philosophy, cosmogony and ontology, human personhood, and immortality and morality. He goes a very long way toward filling out this important domain of knowledge about Africa. Historians, however, may regret his failure to connect these timeless summaries to the larger sweeps of African history. Had Wiredu done so, readers might not only learn of the existence of African philosophies and their critical contexts, but also come to appreciate the great continuities and breaks in categories of African reflection.

For example, it is surely fair to think that African reflections on, say, personhood and morality changed during the era of the slave trade from Africa or during the era of migrant labor. If so, how? Categories of personhood and morality opened, split, narrowed, and shattered during colonial urbanization, or during the monetization of the social economy through wage and market involvement, or during the time of emergent clustered urbanization in the Middle Niger Delta (300 B.C.E. to 800 C.E.). But what did these processes involve? Cross-references at the end of Wiredu's entry might have directed readers to excellent entries by Bogumil Jewsiewicki ("Mami Wata in Central Africa," 3:110–13) or Ivan Karp ("Person, Notions of," 3:39–96), where Jewsiewicki and Karp attempt some answers to these questions.

Readers who hope to find here an entrée to Afrocentricity, perhaps thinking it a part of African philosophy, may be frustrated. As far as I could tell, it has been reduced to either the question of African influence in the early history of the Lower Nile Valley (Mark Horton, "Egypt: Ancient Connections with Sub-Saharan Africa," 2:25–30) or the historiographic and political importance of Cheikh Anta Diop's scholarship (Ifi Amadiume, "Egypt: An Afrocentric Perspective," 2:35–39). Horton locates the presence of African features in Pharaonic Egyptian society in interactions between Nubian and Egyptian villages during the fourth millennium B.C.E. He also mentions the fact that Pharaonic Egyptian dialects belonged to the Afro-Asiatic language family. Amadiume's entry surveys the major writings of Cheikh Anta Diop, only some of which touch directly on Egypt.

These disparate points may leave readers feeling utterly confused about the importance of, and the intellectual genealogies for, Afrocentricity. Amadiume rightly emphasizes Diop's political interests in reconnecting ancient Egypt to reflections on African thought. But in the context of Diop's critique of European racism she fails to take up Horton's suggestions for pursuing the various threads of sub-Saharan African influence in the Lower Nile Valley. Instead, her entry recounts Diop's scholarly views on the racial character of ancient Egypt, on his claim that ancient Egyptian

political culture forms “the authentic model” of “the African dynastic monarchy,” and on his claim for the central roles of matriline and matriarchy to this model (2:37). Amadiume argues that we should read Diop in order to grasp “the scientific strength of his comparative methodology and the theoretical implications of his ideas” (2:38). But, beyond the fact that Diop’s scholarship does not encompass the now vast field of Afrocentrism, Amadiume seems to ignore those scholars, including Horton, who have actually engaged rather than merely repeated Diop’s ideas (Celenko 1996).

Entries on “Ethnicity and Identity,” two key design elements on contemporary trees of knowledge about Africa, are divided regionally (2:84–102). Jean-Loup Amselle, an accomplished writer and theorist of African forms of ethnicity and their colonial transformations, tackles West Africa. He argues the now familiar point that colonial officials, possessed by racial theories of social hierarchy, created maps of African ethnicity which then formed the basis for their administrative effort, for anthropological research, and for the creation of uneven and atomized “development.” Having advanced this important argument, Amselle fails to turn his analytic attentions to precolonial forms of ethnicity. Before, during, and after the colonial moment, some West Africans worked hard to transform the content of ideas and institutions, such as *nyamakalaw* (supra-ethnic hereditary occupational groups), and to expand or restrict membership in some social groups, such as Dyula or Wangara traders. Others worked equally hard to preserve continuity in the form and content of these groups. Scholars who study these efforts have wrestled with elucidating the construction of ethnicity in order to reveal their long and complicated pasts (Tamari 1997; Hale 1998:59–113). Thus Amselle’s failure to interrogate the historical depth and contingency of precolonial ethnicity and identity in West Africa renders his important contribution teleological. For him, West African ethnic identities give form to contemporary tribalism without displaying the legacies of precolonial contests and conflicts over their form and function and membership. One should add here, however, that Amselle does engage precolonial contingencies in his important recent book (Amselle 1998:43–57).

In the brief introduction to this set of entries we are told that most observers, African or non-African, do not use the word *tribe* (2:82). While surely freighted with the weight of the very colonial power so ably analyzed by Amselle, the word *tribe* is used often today in Africa. Suggesting to lay readers that *tribe* is a four-letter word may put them off an important path of critical thinking. Is it not the case that the situational selectivity that characterizes ethnicity and identity in much of the world (including Africa) might include selecting colonial forms of ethnicity to pursue one’s goals? Amselle addresses the matter of coercive state power, so often the beneficiary of this selection, when it comes to party politics and access to state resources. But David Parkin (“Ethnicity and Identity: Eastern Africa” 2:87–91) reminds us that other levels, both quotidian and ancient, contin-

ue to be in play within and beyond the sphere of colonial and postcolonial state power.

Wim Van Binsbergen's contribution to this set of entries, focused on Central Africa, is excellent. He combines definitional statements of ethnicity, identity, culture, and ethnicization with a broad historical and geographic specificity. The result is a thorough, if profoundly troubling, appreciation for both the inescapability of ethnicity and its constructedness. Van Binsbergen illustrates this latter aspect of ethnicity through copious examples from precolonial eras, different organizational contexts, urban, rural, and postcolonial settings. He concludes by reflecting on the role of cultural "reconstruction" in setting limits on ethnic manipulation.

Since the colonial period, many have viewed African identity as a profoundly ethnic identity. This view often derives its force from yet another view in which Africa appears as the apotheosis of ethnic *diversity*. These equivalencies and substitutions still form an important part of viewing Africa as utterly unique, the virtual homeland of ethnicity. Tales of ritual in its myriad forms often support visions of Africa as hyperethnic. Andrew Apter's approach to the vast topic of "Festivals, Carnivals, and Rituals of Rebellion" resists these conventions by concentrating on West Africa and on rituals of rebellion (2:127–31). He invokes Max Gluckman's thesis on royal rituals as locations for political acting out, "which protects the kingship from the king" (2:129). Beyond this functionalist view, Apter wonders "under what conditions the transformative capacities of ritual become actualized" (2:130). The principal answers seem to lie with expansionist royalty, which absorbs ritual practices from its neighbors, and with resistance to such expansionist impulses, which establishes "a counterposed ritual field" to that of the center (2:130). Apter's focus on revealing how both the historical context and the historically changing content of ritual contained political conflict and competition could have been broadened by considering a couple of other issues.

First, we should take seriously Maurice Bloch's (1989) concern with how an aggressive royalty co-opts older ritual fields at its birth. Second, we should ask how ritual practice escapes royal or ruling class efforts to control it, and thus how certain rituals within state structures serve as locations for disputing the claims of dominant ideologies about who should occupy different levels of a hierarchy even while affirming the very centrality of hierarchy. Jonathon Glassman's prize-winning study of the political economy of urban cultural politics in nineteenth-century Swahili coastal towns might have been drawn upon here (1995:117–74; see also Newbury 1991; Feierman 1990:69–93, 245–64).

For Europeans, the transitive knowing of Africa re-emerged in the sixteenth century with ethnographic description (Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988; MacGaffey 1994). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, intellectuals here and there had grown obsessed with translating idioms of history-mindedness in order to show that Africa and Africans lived in the same time-slice

of social evolution. We must add gender to the many key categories—such as capitalism, nationalism, and democracy—glossed in these still more recent translations. The entries clustered under the heading “Gender” review the main developments in academic understanding of women in African society, among which stand out issues relating mostly to women’s roles in production, socialization, politics, ritual and religion, and economic development. Deborah Pellow and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch recount much of the now familiar depth and nuance that women’s studies has added to our understanding of these topics. But they miss the chance to recast the category of gender around both men and women and their social relations.<sup>12</sup> Recent work on consumption, sexuality (which is cross-referenced at the end of this entry), and homosexuality sheds new light on the matter.<sup>13</sup> And this scholarship goes above and beyond a radical rethinking of Western feminist theory’s relation to African womanhood. Perhaps entries on men, women, and transgendered individuals would have best served the reader hoping to find the latest work on gender, broadly conceived. Jane Parpart mentions some of this work in passing, but fails to apply its insights in reconfiguring gender’s possible meanings. As they stand, these entries should be re-titled “Women.”

The question of the production of knowledge stands at the center of my critique so far. Thus Richard Fardon’s perceptive and deft entry on the making and transmission of knowledge (2:465–72) offers a microcosmic representation of the entire project of this *Encyclopedia*. Fardon remarks that “part of the difference between people in African societies concerns what they should or might legitimately know” (2:467). This *Encyclopedia* stands as an answer to that question. It tells us what sort of person a knower of Africa might be, as reflected in the content of the many entries that constitute the volumes. But Fardon takes us through the life-cycle of knowledge-making and its transmission. After locating knowing in ideas about difference, and vice-versa, he begins to discuss the notion of specialized knowledge and the specialists who shepherd it. Smiths, smelters, and potters (but not, surprisingly, hunters or midwives) appear as knowledgeable people who, not unlike university professors, at once frighten and inspire others. Fardon mentions diviners and the Mande “power associations” (*nyamakalaw*), as well as priests and chiefs. Relations between secrecy and knowledge often govern our understanding and experience of knowing, and Fardon draws out these relations by discussing how secrecy sanctions knowledge and channels authority. He lays out regional commonalities in sub-Saharan myths, ritual, and institutions, and closes by reminding us that no neutral position exists for considering the “indigenous resources” of precolonial African knowledge available now for confronting the future.

Two points came up for me. First, how can we ignore those forms of knowing that lie beyond specialist control and the logic of secrecy, such as tales, rumor, or gossip, not to mention those vast regions of knowing extinguished at the hands of colonial violence?<sup>14</sup> Second, if this first point is

joined to the challenge of creating a new definition of tradition as something constantly available to people of all sorts for continuous creative work, then the central task becomes one of dialogue, transmission, and translation. The heritage of understanding Africa, rooted in the very history of Africa, calls constantly for revision and renewal. In this sense, then, the *Encyclopedia* stands as a snapshot of that process. In many ways, this process still engages categories created at the moment of European encounter with Africa in the “long” sixteenth century. This process still struggles to locate and translate African idioms for defining itself. In many ways, that self is an Africa fragmented and grown from overlapping traditions of common historical development. But it is still present as a place, the very existence of which resists limited specialist knowledge and encourages crossing those lines.

Some of the criticism of the *Encyclopedia* offered in this essay might be considered misguided and unfair because it suggests that the work itself has the power to alter how Africa is known and not just to present the contours of that knowing. I imply, for example, that recasting entries on “Gender” or on individual ethnic groups might alter outsiders’ conceptions of these topics in Africa. I suggest these “new” entries might do so if they complicate, historicize, and “indigenize” their content by putting African experiences of them directly in dialogue with what outsiders assume about them. I realize that no encyclopedia has such power. But I do feel that encyclopedias in general both subtly enforce boundaries within older topographies of knowing and offer guidance into new frontiers of knowing. I have tried here to indicate fairly the nature of how this *Encyclopedia* has done these two things.

Likewise, I have suggested the limits implicit in depending too much on the transitive qualities of “knowing.” The intransitive dimensions of knowing Africa, expressed in the other half of this review’s chiasmic title, “Africa knows,” might involve a radical new approach to trimming the tree of knowledge about Africa. However, I wonder if this inversion alone can guarantee the fulfillment of Professor Ajayi’s hope that an internal encyclopedic perspective will better ensure the coverage of “the entire range of knowledge” about Africa. Does a claim to know where Africa begins and ends lie at the heart of this hope? Or is the heart of this hope a reminder about balance and dialogue, about the need to balance the content of knowing Africa through dialogue with what Africa knows? I think Ajayi wisely implores us to pursue the latter hope.

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## Notes

1. First sketched by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1909, the *Encyclopaedia Africana* was a project Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. intended to complete with *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (1999:ix–xvi). However, after changing form many times, the original project envisioned by Du Bois has gone forward with a focus on African biography. See, for example, *Encyclopedia Africana Project* (1995).
2. The editor-in-chief accepts the reality of ethnic names (4:477) and directs readers to entries on "Culture and Culture Areas," "Tribalism," and "Ethnicity and Identity," where they may learn more about the straightjackets ethnicities must

wear as well as the power they wield. Some entries for individual ethnic groups are cross-referenced to entries on larger historical and contemporary themes (see “Zulu,” 4:433–34). Some contain historical and contemporary context (see “Temne,” 4:216–17) but are not cross-referenced. Readers might find some aspects of these entries disconcerting as well. For example, in the entry “Fulani” (2:177) we learn that “the Fulani are generally light-skinned and exhibit a wide range of black and Berber features.” The author, S. Ademola Ajayi, does not help us to disentangle skin color, ethnicity, and culture. And how should we do so, when these and other elements of culture and social action lie at the very heart of ethnicity? I wish that the opportunities for creative linking of entries covering individual ethnic groups with historical change and the contemporary politics of ethnicity had been more fully and consistently seized upon.

3. North Africa receives its own entry, composed by John O. Hunwick (3:333–39). If read together with entries on the earlier history of the continent and with those included in the “See Also” list at this entry’s conclusion, a tolerably coherent treatment emerges of North Africa’s organic links with the rest of the continent.
4. Of this set, only the “Overview” by Joseph E. Harris discusses the Asian and European parts of the African diaspora. The four excellent and more detailed entries by Stephan Palmié, J. Lorand Matory, Robert Farris Thompson, and Denis-Constant Martin cover African institutions, religion, art, and music in the Americas, respectively. See 1:443–66.
5. Perhaps the clearest statement concerning the edges and shapes of Africa actually defines the term *African*. It appears between brackets and in italics at the start of Ivan Karp’s entry “Person, Notions of” (3:392–96). Karp seems to be its author. He says “‘African’ refers to features that many, if not most, African cultures have in common, whether on the African continent or throughout the African diaspora. . . . People can live in more than one culture at one and the same time and may experience no difficulty ‘being African’ and ‘European,’ just as many people can speak two or more different languages.” This straightforward definition embraces culture and social life and avoids overemphasizing the continental and racial parts of the semantic territories covered by the words *Africa* and *African*.
6. And not only in so-called nontraditional methodologies. For an excellent critical edition of an important African text, see Hunwick (1999).
7. For example, John E. G. Sutton’s excellent and careful review of “Agriculture: Beginnings and Early Development” in the region (1:13–17) wisely avoids details on dating. Unfortunately, Sutton also chooses to skirt the matter of different African cradles of agricultural achievement, zones where farmers domesticated crops unique to Africa. With respect to dating issues, so influential in debates on African cradles for agricultural experimentation, Sutton might have mentioned the discovery by Christophe Mbida of Université du Yaoundé of a method for dating bananas through their phytoliths (fossilized particles of plant tissue) (see Mbida 1996:313,485–86,652,657). Likewise, Juliet Clutton-Brock’s entry on “Animals, Domestic: Origins and Domestication” (1:44–48) takes a careful stance on dating and locating centers of development for this major element of African food production and economics. William A. J. Payne’s entry, “Animals, Domestic: Uses of African Species” (1:48–54) con-

tradicts Clutton-Brock on the question of a continental African domestication of cattle. Clutton-Brock thinks not, Payne thinks so, and Mark Horton (1:92) takes the middle ground. Other confusions might follow from omissions of important evidence and topics. For example, Payne downplays the importance of horses in West Africa and northeastern Africa, but he might have consulted Robin Law's excellent review of evidence for horses in West African history (1980). Olga Linares, in a first-rate entry on "Agriculture: Agrarian Systems" (1:17–22), does not introduce readers to the crop complexes used in the various fallow systems she discusses. A search through the set of entries labeled "Production Systems" failed to turn up anything on intercropping and crop rotations. Lay readers thus will not learn of some of the most creative achievements of African farmers: the intercropped field in all its many guises.

8. For example, see Cooper (1994) and Isaacman, et al. (1992).
9. See also articles published in the new journal *African Anthropology* published by the Association of African Anthropology.
10. Quoted in Ruhlen (1991:27).
11. But consider the cultural politics behind the creation of the Centre International des Civilisations Bantu (CICIBA) and its scientific and cultural journal, *Muntu* (Chrétien 2000:35).
12. The "Sexuality" entry contains comments on same-sex partners (4:68–70). But the implications of the relations between African sexualities and African gender studies for their mutual understanding are not discussed.
13. On homosexuality: Murray and Roscoe (1998) should be read with James H. Sweet's careful review (2000). On consumption, gender, and colonialism: Burke (1996); Hansen (1999); Gondola (1999). On colonialism and sexuality: Jeater (1993). For a theoretical critique of Western feminisms and African gender systems grounded in an ethnography of Oyo-Yorùbá see Oyèwùmí (1997). Given the centrality of age and life cycle issues to the meaning of gender in African (or any other continent's) social life, cross-references to these entries should have been included. But then gender would have to have been incorporated into them!
14. On tales, see Vansina (1985) and Hunt (1999); on rumors and gossip, see White (1994); on colonial violence and the loss of fields of knowledge, see Feierman (1999) among many others.

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