

BOOK REVIEWS

ESTERHUYSEN Pieter (ed.), 1998.

AFRICA A-Z: CONTINENTAL AND COUNTRY PROFILES. Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa. 373 pp. (A-4 size), + 20 pp. references and index.
ISBN 0-7983-0135

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Africa Institute of South Africa has produced a series of source materials on the African continent known as the Africa Institute Educational Service. The statistical compendium *Africa at a Glance* with its numerous tables, maps and graphs on a variety of topics has been in the market already since the 1970s. This basic source book was later complemented by the poster-size *Africa Wall Map* and *Africa Fact Sheet* with basic data in condensed format. *Africa A-Z* is the third in this series and it, together with the earlier ones, is considered to constitute a basic package of information on Africa. The target group of these materials includes 'schools and other educational institutions'.

The book consists of two parts. In the first section, a condensed overview is given of a wide range of aspects on Africa. The major features of the geography of Africa, including the influence of the changing winds and currents in different times of the year, are well described and make very interesting reading. The reader gets a clear picture (perhaps sometimes too clear), why sea water is cold on the shore of Namibia and Angola and why it is warm on the coast of the Indian Ocean, or why some areas are covered by rain forests and other areas have rain hardly at all. Differences in health conditions, of humans and of livestock, in various environments have also been described. All this information explains why the population in Africa has clustered in certain areas and why some areas, such as the rain forest area with high biomass production, is sparsely populated. The history of Africa from the emergence of the first hominids through early African states to the colonial period and the time of independence has been described by focusing on major events and important phases. Taking into consideration the pressing space limit in this kind of book the achievement is impressive. The numerous and excellently drawn maps have a central role in presenting and classifying the multitude of information, which in text form would make messy reading.

The description of development indicators in Africa does not try to hide the not-so-rosy future which Africa is facing. The main factors which contribute to the prevailing economic problems in Africa are clearly pointed out. Among

those is the rapid population growth all over Africa and the resulting overpopulation. The accelerating clustering of people to already overpopulated urban areas worsens the economic situation, because there is seldom opportunities for productive work for the newcomers. The impact of diseases, such as malaria, tuberculosis, trypanosomiasis, and especially AIDS, on the development of Africa is given due attention.

An overview of the political development in Africa from the years of independence since the 1950s through the single-party system of the first decades of independence to the multi-party system in the 1990s gives a concise picture of the recent political history. Here again clearly drawn maps add to the clarity of presentation.

The main part of the book, however, consists of surveys of individual countries, 53 of which are independent. The description of each country follows a uniform basic pattern, including a map of the country, a description of selected data, and a data panel with most recent data (first quarter of 1998) on selected topics. The survey of each country is typically done under the following topics: The country, The people, Infrastructure, Economic activities, Past and present, and Government. There is, however, considerable variety in how extensively each of these topics is covered for each country. In most cases the variation in length is justified, because the description of some countries is more complicated than of others, and also the relative importance of countries varies.

As a whole I would consider the result very good, especially if the book is meant for multi-purpose use for non-experts. However, I would have liked to see two things better represented in country surveys. One concerns the languages of each country. There is some description of the linguistic situation under the heading The people, but it is often very general, and especially the total picture in the whole country does not become clear. The other comment concerns the use of maps, which is related to the previous comment. In the case of South-Africa and Ethiopia there are additional maps showing administrative districts with information on the main languages used in those areas. Such information is missing elsewhere, although it could have been provided for many of the countries. For such countries as Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Lesotho, etc. linguistic maps are trivial, but for most countries they would be informative. Although there are problems in locating linguistic information on maps when people move from one place to another and people with different languages intermingle and cluster to cities, some basic linguistic patterns prevail and they should be illustrated on maps. It is hoped that more linguistic information will be included into the next edition of the book.

A further, slightly critical, comment concerns the perspective and style of writing. The text reveals that things are looked at from the viewpoint of South Africa, which is not necessarily bad. Each book dealing with such issues as this one is likely to be biased. Now that South Africa is free from the ban of the rest of the world it is refreshing to read how things in Africa look from the perspective of that country. I should not say that the perspective is biased. On the contrary, the description of various countries is based on the data available in

international sources and as such it is faithful to the data. The South African perspective is readable more in what has been said and in what detail. But this is more like local flavour than a bias.

In sum, the book has a clear structure and it is a very useful source book also on higher levels of education. Especially the maps are clear without too much detail and suitable for making transparencies for teaching purposes. Also the large size (A-4) is ideal for presenting such excellent informative maps which the book contains. There is no doubt that the book ranks among the best in the field and will find its way also to university libraries all over the world.

van der HEYDEN Ulrich, 1999.

DIE AFRIKAWISSENSCHAFTEN IN DER DDR. EINE AKADEMISCHE DISZIPLIN ZWISCHEN EXOTIK UND EXEMPEL; EINE WISSENSCHAFTSGESCHICHTLICHE UNTERSUCHUNG. Hamburg: LIT, 622 pp., ISBN 3-8258-4371-8.

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Ulrich van der Heyden's published academic dissertation is a monumental exposé of the rise and fall of African studies in the former German Democratic Republic. Despite the fact that academic research on Africa is a relatively old field of study in Germany, political turns during the twentieth century have more than once blurred the potential of African studies in Germany to emerge into a well-established academic subject comparable to the situation in Great Britain, the USA, France or Canada. The First World War put an end to the German colonial state, and what survived was divided up after 1945. Thereafter African Studies existed in the two German states, but never side by side. Instead, it continued as two alien entities despite the fact of their common background. With the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the GDR, a 45-year tradition of African research in Germany came - unwillingly - to an end: the chairs and research post in the former GDR were dissolved, almost all East German academic research staff lost their posts, and whatever scientific tradition had developed since the war was buried. Although it may not have been unique, the GDR's attempt to establish a multidisciplinary approach to African Studies, inasmuch as African studies in the GDR did not restrict itself to language and literature, as it had in the FRG (Afrikanistik) but included also social, political and cultural studies.

Van der Heyden provides a thorough and in-depth overview of African research in the GDR. His is not merely an attempt to rehabilitate those researchers who, due to the political system in which they worked, have been doomed to oblivion, but rather a critical analysis of the state of African studies in the GDR including its paradigms and achievements. Van der Heyden's

monograph starts with a presentation of the structural premises of research on Africa in the GDR - the foundations of development-oriented research, its key publication forum, the journal 'asien-afrika-lateinamerika' but also the various other publication series in which East German researchers published their findings. Despite the existence of a remarkably broad spectrum of various publications, van der Heyden identifies one category that was totally missing: readers and manuals that would have provided students and other interested persons with an introduction into African studies.

In the next chapter, van der Heyden presents a critical account of the various paradigms that laid the basic foundations for research, especially the influence of marxism-leninism and the two ways that researchers tried to cope with this situation: either by trying to formulate their arguments within the official tradition, which is termed by van der Heyden as 'revolutionstheoretisch' or to work within the borders of the official framework but not through it. Whereas the former paradigm was criticised by Western researchers as merely repetitions of official GDR jargon, van der Heyden underlines that the results of the latter researchers in fact did not differ very much from those of, for example, their West German colleagues, especially from those of researchers that were doing research from a critical standpoint. The central idea of East German research on Africa was 'solidarity with the suppressed populations'. It was in a sense not only the driving force of the researchers, but also the foundation of official GDR foreign policy. As a result, the concept of solidarity turned out to be both a driving force and a straitjacket, as the state demanded solidarity from the researchers as well. In a sub-chapter, the influences of Soviet research and the relations between East German and Soviet researchers is discussed.

The next chapter deals with the emergence of African studies within the academic system in the GDR. Three interesting case studies are included, namely the intrigues against and the eventual libelling of Ernst Dammann, the shifting of the focus of research to Southern Africa, and a thorough presentation of the situation at universities in Berlin and Leipzig. Dammann's case is interesting - van der Heyden presents a detailed picture of the agitation of some junior staff members against one of the key persons in African research in East Germany as well as competition between the old scientific centre at the Humboldt University and the new one that was emerging at the University of Leipzig. The outcome of the 'Fall Dammann' was that Berlin lost its position as a centre for African research when Dammann moved to West Germany, whereas Leipzig emerged as the main centre. Other sub-chapters deal with the position of African history, or rather the focus of the colonial period in Africa. As van der Heyden concludes, historians in the GDR pictured the colonial conquerors as the active participants, whereas Africans were passive, merely reacting. There was also an apparent lack of theoretical discussion among historians in the GDR, but this lack was offset by their focus on empirical and source-oriented research.

The fifth chapter deals with the impact and the limitations of African research in the GDR. It starts with a discussion of the relationship between official GDR foreign policy and African studies as an academic subject,

including the outspoken interest of Otto Grotewohl and the East German state towards African states, which reached its peak during 1979 when Erich Honecker twice visited Africa. However, as van der Heyden points out, African studies as such did not profit from official state policy, and during the 1980s the relationships with Africa played a rather marginal role in GDR foreign politics. Van der Heyden follows this with a discussion of the and limitations of the research themes and dogmas, especially that of marxism-leninism, in East German research on Africa.

Van der Heyden concludes his monograph with a thorough overview of the development of East German research on Africa after 1989, accompanied by some critical reflections on the fate of African studies in the former GDR. He also discusses the fate of researchers in a new political situation that was overshadowed by the total dismantling of old academic institutions and the elimination of an academic subject and its representatives. Most, if not all East German researchers, lost their positions, and few if any were able to continue academic research. Van der Heyden himself is one of the few who have tried to bridge the gap between the two Germanys. To a certain extent, his monograph is not only a critical self-reflection but equally an attack on those who regarded East German research on Africa as 'backward' and state-controlled.

A final note to the publisher: it is regrettable that this substantial contribution to the study of the rise and fall of African studies in the GDR lacks an index and an English summary.

BOVIN Mette, 2001.

NOMADS WHO CULTIVATE BEAUTY: WODAABE DANCE AND VISUAL ART IN NIGER. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. 110 pages incl. appendix.

Review by Amin Alhassan

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At a time when the ever expanding fashion industry is fast coopting the male gender into the culture of vanity, Mette Bovin's book reminds us that the use of excessive make-up may have been part of the male culture for many centuries. Her new book looks at the lives and times of the Wodaabe of the Sahara Desert country of Niger. As an anthropologist who has been studying the nomadic lifestyles of the Wodaabe and the larger Fulbe ethnic group since 1968, Bovin qualifies as a leading authority on the culture of these people. She has produced, directed or shot numerous films and videos on this Fulbe sub-group including her 1986 *Chronicle of a nomadic Wodaabe family*. She has also published extensively in Danish, English and French journals and books on the Wodaabe. The Wodaabe are a nomadic, cattle-raising sub-group of the Fulbe ethnic group that number about 20 million in 18 countries in Africa. The Wodaabe constitute

about three percent of the Fulbe and are only found in Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad

This book of ten chapters looks at Wodaabe cultural life within the framework of “the Self” and “the Other”, the modern Occident and the traditional Wodaabe. Bovin gives us an insight into such issues as beauty, aesthetics, dance and ethnic pride. Obviously the issue of why Wodaabe is distinct in the predominantly patriarchal hegemonic world receives much attention. Men, so to speak, become the object of desire. Thus Wodaabe men spend more time before the mirror to do make-up and take part in beauty pageant with female judges. The book is not just about this intriguing aspect of Wodaabe life. It can also serve, more or less, as a manual for choreography of Wodaabe dances. Chapter six especially is a very detailed guide, with drawing and representation of movements and actions in the art of Wodaabe dancing. Thus apart from its relevance for the intellectually curious, the book will resonate with the needs of the exotic dance practitioner.

The book relies on the power of the visual and the facility of the word to tell the beautiful story of vanity and aesthetics of the Wodaabe. However, the visual is the more privileged means of representation, and this is in keeping with Bovin’s practice of ethnography. Imagine a book of just 79 pages containing 64 figures, five drawings with an album of 71 photos as an appendix! And this is not the only reason why one needs to grab the book and feast his or her eyes on. The book is very readable and informative on the gender and identity politics in this unusual society of feminized men.

But then if you have been living by the axiom that a picture is more than a thousand words, then your encounter with this book may lead you to the rediscovery of the word. Why? Despite its ostentatious use of pictures, one finishes each of the ten chapters of the book with a thirst for more analysis. Simply put, the book lacks in-depth analysis of some of the controversial and provocative issues that Bovin brings home from the field to the theory mills. For instance, when she discusses racism and ethnocentrism among the ‘red’ skinned Wodaabe and their ‘too dark’ neighbors, Bovin merely broaches the debate and abandons the analytical issues that often warrant fieldwork in the first place. It is these very problems of ethnicity, racism and discrimination that are at the heart of some of Africa’s most visible crises, especially in the Great Lake region. And there have been numerous books and articles that have been produced in response to these issues. Yet, for her neglect of interdisciplinarity, Bovin misses the opportunity to link up her study to the rich collection of literature on identity politics that are found in postcolonial studies, gender studies, cultural studies, political science, etc.

The analytical limitations are not only restricted to her old-styled anthropology reminiscent of the colonial era. Some of her commentary is problematic. For instance she writes: “ ‘beautiful’ in our (Western) society is something individual. There is ‘individual taste.’ In Wodaabe society, taste is more collective: I find more consensus about what is ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’ in Wodaabe society” (pp.15-16). Of course even in the West, there is a collective

sense of taste. What are models in the fashion industry for? Don't we have standard formal dressing that one notices from the hustle and bustle of stock exchange markets through the political and diplomatic circles of Brussels, Paris, London, Washington, Copenhagen, Helsinki and Stockholm? So from this perspective, what makes the Wodaabe different if they share a common sense of what a mode is?

Bovin does not either situate the Wodaabe within the wider dynamics of modernization, the influence of the nation-state as an agent of modernization, and how it packages various 'exotic' groups for the touristic gaze in the name of earning foreign exchange for development (Chapter 7). She shies away from the political economy of the local in the global. Despite this criticism, the book contains a lot of first rate information that opens up several avenues for future research within the late postcolonial social formation. It is therefore fit not only for libraries, but will as well be a useful addition to most of the emergent disciplines that spin around issues about identity, gender and ethnicity.