

Encyclopedia of African Religion

Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, eds. *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009. 2 vols: 920 pp. \$325.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 1412936365; ISBN: 9781412936361 (set).

The two-volume *Encyclopedia of African Religion* targets university undergraduates and graduate students, particularly those studying religion, African studies, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Offering a succinct and useful overview of African religion, the ten-page introduction declares, “The *Encyclopedia of African Religion* is the first comprehensive work to assemble ideas, concepts, discourses, and extensive essays on African religion” (xxi). The editors, Asante and Mazama, seek to distinguish the religious thought and practice that arose in Africa from Islam, Christianity, and other religions that attract many African adherents but originated outside the African continent. Egyptian religion is firmly held to be African, not a separate entity. The relationships between African religion and Islamic and Judeo-Christian thought are discussed within a number of entries; however, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are not themselves separate entries. The editors’ starting point “is the unity of African religion” (xxii), not plurality, but with “diversity of expressions” such as that seen in many religions. Based on their research, the editors assert that the African worldview acknowledges one Supreme Being. Asante and Mazama consider the term “monotheism” a Western concept that is insufficient to convey this African belief. The Supreme Being lacks interest in the day-to-day activities of humans; therefore, the Supreme Being creates lesser deities who deal with humans and these deities serve as the foci of worship and supplication. The appendix contains an apparently exhaustive list of the names of God in Africa. Some contributors use “African Traditional Religion” (ATR) in their entries and apparently the reader should consider ATR and “African Religion,” the term preferred by the editors, as synonyms.

The seventy-page index greatly enhances the usefulness of the set with volume number as well as page given for each reference even though pagination is sequential in the set. An attractive redundancy is the listing in the index of the entry topics. Glancing through the forty-six-page bibliography of “African Religious Sources” provides a window into the variety of language sources, particularly French and some German in addition to English, necessary for thorough research of African religion. These references also reveal the colonial roots of so much of the information relied on by Westerners as well as African scholars. Books and journals published in Africa are seen in the bibliography but the majority of sources appear to be from American and European publishers even when the authors display African surnames.

The (table of) contents provides the page number on which each letter of the alphabet starts, followed by an alphabetical listing of each of the nearly five hundred entries. Following the contents is a Reader’s Guide that groups these entries under sixteen broad categories including Ancestral Figures, Deities and Divinities, Nature, Rituals and Ceremonies, Sacred Spaces and Objects, Taboos and Ethics, Texts, Traditions, and Values. These groupings appear to be the editors’ attempt to assist the less knowledgeable reader.

First editor Molefi Kete Asante, a black studies professor at Temple University, was born in Georgia and educated in the U.S. The co-editor, who teaches African-American studies at Temple, is from the Caribbean and received

her PhD from the Sorbonne. The ninety-seven contributors hail primarily from U.S. institutions (approximately seventy-eight), although a number have African names. Women were well represented in the list of contributors. Employing the same principle that native-language-speaking teachers are considered superior to acquired-language instructors, some African scholars consider academic works on African religion, history, and other African topics produced by Africans to be more accurate than materials written by non-Africans. The reviewers are acquainted with one contributor, a respected professor of religion from the University of Ibadan in Nigeria who is currently the president of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary.

Reading through the entries revealed topics that warranted more depth of coverage than the one- to two-page entries could provide, as well the absence of important issues. “Drum” was beautifully illustrated with a half-page photo of Yoruba drummers playing “talking drums,” although that term, used frequently in southwestern Nigeria, was not employed and only the photo caption told how the drum could “speak” Yoruba. Drums and drumming play vital cultural and religious roles and would have benefited from more material. Due to controversies in Western churches about homosexuality and the phenomenon of Western congregations aligning with African church bodies, one would expect an entry for homosexuality, but none was found. However, in perusing the index, “Homosexuality taboo” is a sub-topic under “Fertility.”

Each entry is signed and has a short bibliography but these references were not always included in the forty-six-page bibliography at the end of the second volume. No explanation concerning the bibliography is provided in the introduction; therefore, the reader is unsure if the references listed are the sources of the information within the encyclopedia or supplemental or both, and the same is true for the references included with the entries.

Orthography of African languages is evolving and two (sometimes more!) spellings may be in use for some terms, with the currently preferred version sometimes in doubt. “Ibo” and “Sango” (Nigeria) have see references to “Igbo” and “Shango” but other alternate spellings such as Masai for Maasai are not seen. Variant spellings appear to be a systemic issue. Although “Vodu” is seen within several entries, “Voodoo,” discussed within the “Hoodoo” entry and noted within several entries, receives neither an entry nor an index listing, a disappointing oversight given its importance in French-influenced Louisiana and the Caribbean. In the United States, “Voodoo” might be the best-known religion with African roots, thus making it a likely subject of research that will not be satisfied in this work.

The following omissions suggest haste to publish, space limitations, or lack of thoroughness. The first is the absence of an article or any mention in the index of one of the largest people groups in Africa, the Hausa, along with their well-developed traditional religion called “bori.” Numerous books and articles are available on the subject. Also, the article on the “Fulani,” Fula, Pulo, or Fulbe (same ethnic group depending on the West Africa location) is cursory and fails to mention the contemporary traditional practices of the Wodaabe Fulani in Niger, with only a glancing reference to the Fulani traditional religious practices of the past. “Ogboni” and “Ekpo” (both in West Africa) secret societies are entries, but no listing for secret societies made the index, thus hiding an important practice from readers with no knowledge of the particular organizations. A spot-check also revealed that names and places in picture captions were not uniformly indexed nor were all the references in the introduction indexed.

Because many Westerners have limited knowledge of geography in general as well as of the African continent, the omission of a map of Africa is a serious oversight. An ethnographic map in addition to a political map would be exceedingly helpful.

In summary, although this set seems to be unique in scope and focus, notable weaknesses include omission of some major African religion traditions and practices; inconsistency in supplying variant spellings, especially for relatively familiar terms such as “Voodoo” and “Masai”; inadequate indexing for numerous names, places, and terms contained within articles; and the absence of a map of Africa to provide the user with context and a sense of proximity and relationship (or lack thereof) for various deities, practices, and ethnic groups. Black-and-white photographs of selective African religious icons and practitioners provide visual attractiveness, and additional illustrations would have been welcome; however, no list of illustrations is provided. The cover features a Maasai woman and an East African backdrop with other Maasai persons, and the sewn binding appears to be sturdy enough for the usage required of a reference book. Despite weaknesses that could all be remedied with a second edition, the reviewers would recommend this set to college and university, seminary, and public libraries that want to expand their African culture and religion resources.

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