
Area studies

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Africa Bibliography

Compiled by Terry Barringer

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It was three years ago that we last reviewed *Africa Bibliography* (RR 2009/248) basing our assessment on the annual print volume for 2007 released in 2009. We return to it now after a relatively short interlude because there have been several changes to its pattern of publication. Having been published through several UK university presses, most recently Edinburgh University Press, it has now moved to Cambridge University Press. More significantly the new online version, made available on the Cambridge Journals Online platform with which many readers will be familiar, will soon consolidate all volumes back to inception with the annual for 1984 into one file (the consolidation process was just about to begin when this review was undertaken). Apart from this *Africa Bibliography* continues much as previously. It is still produced under the auspices of the London-based International African Institute and the compiler remains Terry Barringer.

For the benefit of those who have not encountered *Africa Bibliography* before its coverage is of books, journal articles and book chapters on Africa or of interest to students of Africa “principally in the social and environmental sciences, development studies, humanities and the arts. Some items from the medical and biological and natural sciences are included”. Geographically the entire continent along with associated islands such as Mauritius is covered but, unlike some rival bibliographical tools, items on the African diaspora are indexed “only very selectively”. The vast majority of the material included is in English, but a good number of items are in French with a few in other European languages. Except for

Swahili and Afrikaans, no items included are in other African languages or Arabic. Much of the material has been personally inspected by Barringer who mainly bases her research on major UK libraries with significant African holdings such as Cambridge University, Centre for African Studies (Cambridge) and the School of Oriental and African Studies (London) as well as the Afrika Studiecentrum in Leiden, The Netherlands.

Most of the above information can be gleaned from the Guide to Bibliography page which provides a thorough and clear summary of coverage, content, structure, search capabilities, etc, and compensates for the lack of any database help function. This and other links such as “about the compilers” and “introductory articles” display on the right of the homepage. To the left under three tabs are the search options: quick search, full search and browse. Browse allows viewing of lists of authors/editors and journal titles only and will not be useful or necessary for most search situations. Quick search offers a single entry box that searches across all fields by default with dropdown options to limit by specific fields such as title of item or year of publication. Phrase searching is available by enclosing words in parentheses, but Boolean operators and wildcard searching are not available at this level. This Google-style input and searching is most likely to appeal to the student or casual enquirer. Full Search, the default search offered when the homepage is opened, will be the preference of the serious student or researcher. It allows search terms to be input at three levels. At the top level a searcher can enter terms and limit them to keyword, title, author and journal title and select Boolean operators, all from drop down boxes. At the next, optional, level, searches can be restricted by region, country, subject category or content type. Beneath this, the third level permits restriction of a search to a range of publication years. The Subject categories are an especially notable feature of *Africa Bibliography*. Assigned by the compiler from a list of 68 headings (e.g. arts, biography, economic and social history, environment, law, languages and linguistics, politics, religion, social welfare), their careful use to refine Keyword searches gives the potential for very precise retrieval. This, and the relatively small size of the overall dataset, only 3,247 items were indexed in 2009 of which 2,492 were articles for example, gives *Africa Bibliography* the feel of a “hand-crafted” database, not overwhelming in size and with a reassuring human touch.

Once a search has been executed *Africa Bibliography* displays results twenty to a screen with title as the default sort order, but with the option to reorder by author, publication year and journal



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title. To the right of the list of retrieved items facets allow results to be refined by content type, year of publication, subject, country, region and journal title. Retrieved records are displayed in full and comprise only author, title, source and the region, country, subject and type designations added by the compiler. The lack of abstracts has been a weakness of *Africa Bibliography* in comparison with other general online databases with some African content, but in this new revised version this is partly offset by the sensible use of linking technology. An open URL link is provided for article records allowing searchers to establish item availability in their home libraries while a Google Scholar link is provided for every record. There is also a full text link for a good number of the articles where the publisher uses CrossRef. Add to this the ability to export records in a range of formats including to EndNote and RefWorks and *Africa Bibliography* has most of the functionality likely to be required by the researcher.

As part of this review a number of trail searches were conducted, all of which gave expected results. No database malfunctions were detected and the database generally responded quickly from a domestic Internet connection. For comparative purposes, some searches were also run in the gratis website *AfricaBib* (www.africabib.org). Although results were mixed, the general impression was that *Africa Bibliography* provided a far better “search experience” in terms of database structure and consistency and was also probably superior in mainstream coverage, albeit inferior in overall number of records. The other main rival is the subscription *International African Bibliography* (www.degruyter.com/loi/iabi), now published by Walter de Gruyter. Available online and in print like *Africa Bibliography* but updated quarterly, this was not accessible by this reviewer and so a full comparison could not be undertaken. However, database size seems somewhat greater, both overall, with records extending back to 1971, and in current annual coverage. Otherwise, apart from *International African Bibliography* having a specific section devoted to the African diaspora, there would appear to be many similarities: indeed, like *Africa Bibliography*, *International African Bibliography*, despite the German publisher, is also edited from the UK.

In our previous review of the print version we concluded that *Africa Bibliography* was “despite its impressive coverage and presentation [...] a niche product [...] of limited use in general libraries”. This improved and soon to be extended online version does not really change this verdict. However, for niche African specialists, *Africa Bibliography* has always been one of the tools of the trade and this new incarnation, with its extended

range, improved functionality and use of linking technology, will ensure it remains near the top of their bibliographical toolkit.

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RR 2012/200 The Sudan Handbook

Edited by John Ryle and others

James Currey

Woodbridge

2011

xx + 220 pp.

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The Sudan Handbook, as is pointed out on its first page, describes a state which no longer exists, and much of the book is devoted to explaining why this occurred. It is the product of educational courses held annually in the last few years for academics and development workers from all parts of the country, and aims to offer an introduction, from a variety of perspectives, to its geography, history, society, culture and politics; half of its 20 authors are Sudanese and the others are Western scholars. The 18 thematic chapters are supplemented by a glossary of specialised words and initialisms; short biographies of 50 of the most prominent figures in Sudanese history and politics; a chronology from ancient Egyptian times to the present; and an adequate index. There is no general bibliography, but there are short reading lists for each chapter. The maps, in particular, go far to explain how the diverse geography of the Sudan, for instance in landforms and rainfall, must have influenced its history, though paradoxically none of them display any indication of heights.

It is difficult for a non-specialist reviewer to attempt to summarise this multi-faceted book in a few lines. Readers will learn that Sudan, like most African countries, owes its boundaries, and even its name, to colonial expansion, but may be surprised to find that this arose not from western colonialism but from Egyptian colonialism. Egyptian governments of all stamps had since ancient times aspired, for obvious reasons, to control the waters of the Upper Nile, and in the nineteenth century were finally able to achieve their goal; or so it seemed for a while. But by the twentieth century, Egypt herself had fallen under British domination. The rulers of the “Anglo-Egyptian Sudan”, very few in number, naturally staffed their administration with the most educated people available there, the literate Arab

middle class. These intellectuals, almost by definition, soon found themselves attracted to Arab nationalism and opposition to British rule. But, in a vast country so diverse in its geography, ethnic and linguistic composition, social customs and economic life, Arab nationalism itself often met with opposition. In the South, where not many were Muslims or Arabs, it was often perceived as another variety of colonialism.

Thus when independence came in 1956, the Sudanese government was scarcely secure in its position. Its subsequent history has seen short periods of fragile democracy in intervals between autocratic regimes which, by attempting to impose centralised rule, provoked more opposition in the South, leading to two long and destructive civil wars which have only very recently been brought to an end by Southern independence. The tragic conflict in Darfur, with more recent origins which

are explained by the authors, continues to the present day, and presents the Northern government, still promoting an Islamist variety of centralism, with a serious problem, compounded by the loss of most of its oil revenues to the South, and a rapidly rising population. The newly independent South, meanwhile, attempts to recover from the devastation of war under the handicaps of extreme poverty, underdevelopment and weak state structures. This handbook provides a comprehensive summary of the position of Sudan – formerly the largest African country – at one of the turning points of its history, and will surely prove a valuable addition to the stock of any library with an interest in the Middle East or Africa.

K.C. Fraser

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