

BOOK REVIEWS

ZELL Hans M. (ed.), 2003.

THE AFRICAN STUDIES COMPANION: A GUIDE TO INFORMATION SOURCES. 3RD REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION. Chippenham: Hans Zell Publishing. 513 pp. (B-5 size), + 31 pp index, print and Web version. ISBN 0954102916.

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One seldom gets a book for reviewing that covers such an extremely wide selection of topics as *The African Studies Companion* does. The first edition of the Companion (published in 1989), which already had 667 items of information on 148 pages, has now expanded to 1,909 items on 513 pages. Many omissions and defects of the first edition were added or corrected in the second edition (1997), and the current edition is quite complete in the areas it deals with, while some obsolete information has been removed.

The first edition appeared in the time when computers already were in use, especially among the academics, but the guide was published only in printed form. So was also the second edition, although the Internet was already in use by many academics. The rapid spread of Internet services has given a reason to publish the current edition in print and Web format.

One could hastily think that instead of buying the book one could simply browse and read the pages of the book in Web. This is possible, but quite cumbersome, because the Web version is constructed as a database, and various long sections of the book have been cut into smaller sections. Therefore, the book format serves as a traditional type of reference work and can be easily picked up from the bookshelf. The Web format is constructed by making extensive use of browsing and searching possibilities in computer environment. Access to the body text of the Companion is from the table of contents, and it is fairly easy to keep control of one's travel in the database. The text follows faithfully that of the book, but long sections have been cut into several short pieces, and access to each of those is by clicking the ascending number concerned. While browsing the database, a search window is available on the screen for possible searches in that section. Therefore, browsing and searching function interactively, which is an excellent solution.

From each section one finds cross references to the database, as well as to external sites in the Internet. This feature facilitates guided surfing, which otherwise could turn out quite frustrating. While using the Web version, one in fact has a huge selection of Web sites in use, and this is obviously the purpose of this guide. An important feature in the book version is that the references to

other sources or sections have the same format as in the Web version. Therefore, it is possible to find a correct Web address from the book without going to the Web version.

One might wish to use the Web version in the way the publisher did not intend it to be used. Such uses include, for example, the search of email addresses from a certain section of the book, or from the whole book. Such a service is not readily available and it is not known whether the publisher consciously has excluded it. However, with fairly elementary computer skills such addresses can be retrieved.

The publisher promises that the Web version will be updated every now and then, so that the most recent information is in the Web. The compulsory use of the username and password make the use of the Web version a bit clumsy, but this price has to be paid for commercial access.

To be honest, no information source is complete, including this in many respects excellent work. Africa is a wide continent and the number of information sources is so big, that a resource work should excel in choice and accuracy rather than in complete coverage. In the Companion, preference has been given to general and current information sources. This is a wise decision for a resource that aims at serving a wide coverage of users. It functions as the source of scholarly information on Africa for researchers in many fields, but it serves well also non-specialists, who want to get the first introduction of information sources on Africa.

The compendium has 25 sections, each of which provides information on a specific type of resource. Throughout the work much effort has been put to online information sources. Many of those sources have also been evaluated as to their reliability and accuracy. The first section lists and describes general online resources on Africa and African studies, as well as the best starting points on the Web. The date of evaluation is also important information, because online resources tend to be left without regular updating, some resources simply vanish, while others are kept in strict control and updated regularly. The sources are also rated by providing the best sites with a special symbol. This is particularly useful, because the user may soon become frustrated with poorly maintained sites. The section as a whole is a mixture of excellent and less prominent sites, and as such it represents the fairly sad situation in the field. The novice in the field is in bad need of such guidance that the Companion offers.

The second section contains a varied collection of general current reference tools, including electronic resources. Many traditional reference works with updated issues have been retained from previous editions of the Companion, while several have been deleted. Particularly noticeable is the inclusion of some excellent online databases. Particularly should be mentioned the African Studies Database, which since 1994 has collected more than 750,000 records and documents into a database, where many kinds of searches can be made. Part of the online resources are available only against payment, which limits their use by institutions especially in Africa.

Major general current bibliographies as well as abstracting and indexing services are listed and described in the Companion. Cross references to some specialist sources have also been included. Most of the resources in this group are still in print form, but some are available online. While print versions are always commercial and the pricing is fairly reasonable, Web sources range from free access to extremely expensive ones. It is impossible to understand, why one publisher requires almost \$4,000 for access to a database, while another one, with comparable services, provides it free of charge. The Library of Congress must be given full credit for maintaining a free quarterly index to African periodicals. On the basis of various types of sources listed in the Companion it is possible for the user to make a selection between them. Book review sources are almost exclusively commercial.

The section on major biographical resources is an example of how the Web version can expand the scope of available information. Only part of sources is described in the print version, and links to online sources widens the possibilities of the Web user for browsing.

Guides to African language resources is a section with print and online sources, and all major sources have been described. Statistical sources list mainly basic data on Africa, including principally large international or governmental organizations.

Geographic sources is a field, where a number of basic maps of Africa are freely available. This is one of the best sections of the Companion, because maps are needed in almost all fields of studies. There are reasonably good map sites free of charge. However, the best and most valuable maps are available only through commercial vendors, and most important ones are listed and described. Film and video resources are also described, part of sites being commercial.

The section on journals and magazines is among the most important parts of the Companion just because researchers try to publish the best findings of their research in periodicals. The best journals are important forums for achieving academic merits, and for this reason they are also excellent sources for up-to-date information. To be honest, the level of journals varies a lot. A fairly detailed description of each journal helps the reader in evaluating them. Arranged according to the publishing country the list gives also a good picture about each country's activity in this field. Periodicals are increasingly becoming available simultaneously in print and in the Web, and most often the Web version is offered to those who subscribe to the print version and pay for it. And very often the Web version gives access to the listing of articles and possibly abstracts, but only seldom to full text. Very few free of charge Web periodicals are available. From the viewpoint of the user, access to full text of all articles would be the ideal solution. However, most publishers, being concerned of their income, still hesitate to move to such service, and some offer full text articles of older issues only. With the time, the Web versions will be the winners, and obstacles to this development should be removed. In the otherwise detailed description of the journals one feature is missing. That is the absence of the

information on whether or not the journal has a peer review practice. This is one of the main features in rating periodicals, and in gaining merits it is significant.

A few news sources, including newspapers, for Africa have been described. There is a large section on library collections in various countries. Generally only contact information is provided, and also subsections are mentioned if applicable. Libraries in Africa are in a separate section. These sections provide hardly any further information except the contact addresses, but this is what often is mostly needed.

The Companion serves well those who are interested in publishing. There is an excellent index, which helps the writer of each research field to find the relevant publishing houses. The contact addresses for each of them are given, and reference is made to the relevant numbered research areas in the index, which the publisher deals with. Also information on distributing channels is given, if applicable. This section is extremely useful.

The Compendium does not miss to list major international and regional organizations, foundations, donors, and aid agencies, as well as African studies associations and societies.

The importance of the Web is reflected in two final sections. Major online active forums and mailing lists are included, as well as a guide to important Web sites and resources. This area is likely to develop considerably in future, and there is need for frequent updating.

The price of this excellent source has risen to \$170 with this twin edition. A library in Europe or America can surely afford it, but for many African libraries it is simply too high. And if new versions of it will appear every two years, or even more often, as planned by the editor, it will become quite expensive to update the guide. The problem with the Web version is that it is said to be available 'for a limited period' for those buying the package, without specifying it in any way.

I have no difficulty in rating The African Studies Companion the best single source of general and current scholarly information on African Studies. The availability of the Web version opens entirely new possibilities for the user to find relevant information. I also very much appreciate the way how the editor has evaluated Web sites. This is very helpful for the user and it hopefully motivates those in charge of Web sites to improve and update their services.