

UCLA

CSW Update Newsletter

Title

Why a Historian Writes Reference Works

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4x39v5nb>

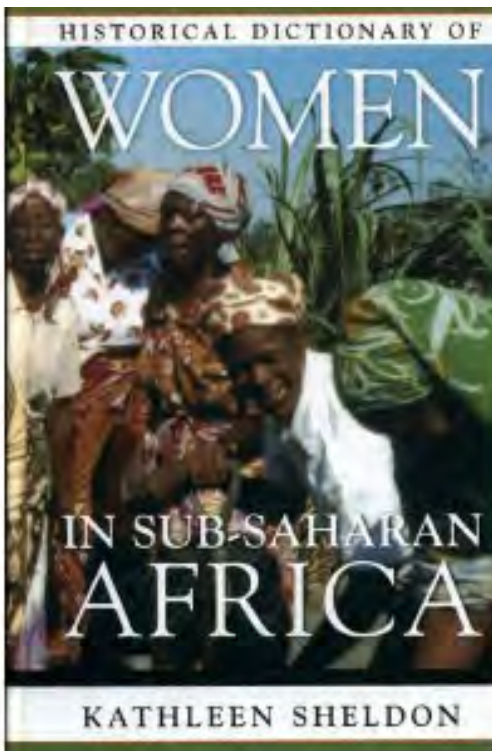
Author

Sheldon, Kathleen

Publication Date

2011-04-01

Why a Historian Writes Reference Works



I HAVE ALWAYS enjoyed working on reference works, although they are sometimes treated as marginal to “serious” academic research. Because the format is often brief entries on topics that appear easy to pull together, it may seem as if anyone with a computer could write reliable entries on a wide variety of topics—just look at Wikipedia! Although that site has improved since it began, it continues to present skewed and sometimes undocumented information as “truth.” As a historian who has written for and edited quite a few reference works over the years, I would argue that reliable reference publications depend on the

contributions of scholars. The most useful reference sources are those that are written by recognized experts and edited by more experts with credentials and training in a particular field.

My own research has been in African women’s history, with a special focus on Mozambique. I have written and edited a number of articles and two books on African women’s and Mozambican history. But what I also enjoy, and what I have time and support for doing as a CSW Research Scholar, is contributing to encyclopedias and dictionaries. Most notably, I wrote the *Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*, which

was published in 2005, and reissued in paperback in 2010 with a new title, *The A to Z of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Just to facilitate my own research, in the 1970s I began compiling a database on African women, first on index cards, then transferring all the citations to a computer program. I now have over 8,000 entries, all coded for relevant topics, allowing me to rapidly find published sources on any number of issues. The database provided a crucial starting point for many of the entries in my historical dictionary as well as for other projects.

My first effort was in my early years as a graduate student at UCLA in the late 1970s. The women's studies movement was still new, and professors were trying to incorporate material on women into classes they were already teaching. Margaret (Peg) Strobel was interim director of the UCLA Women's Studies Program then, and she saw the need for an annotated list of materials on women that would be a source for those professors. She found work-study funding for me and a graduate student in anthropology to compile a list of sources on women in the social sciences, with an emphasis on women in international studies. My co-author, Elizabeth Oakes,

and I blithely took on the task of reading everything we could find, a task that was still possible then, though clearly impossible now. We divided the subject areas between us, and wrote annotations describing the material and its usefulness in a classroom. When Peg saw the result, she thought it was publishable, and the first press she contacted, ABC-Clio in Santa Barbara, agreed. We then worked hard on finalizing our content, with help in compiling the index from Carolyn Williams, another history graduate student; that was a complicated task in those pre-computer days. Our *Guide to Social Science Resources in Women's Studies* was published in 1978, and was one of the first reference works in the new field of women's studies. It was selected as a Choice "Outstanding Academic Book" in 1979.

It was some years before I once again turned to reference work, though in the interim I wrote an article that analyzed colonial-era reference works, "'Rats Fell from the Ceiling and Pestered Me': Phrase Books as Sources for Colonial Mozambican History," in *History in Africa* 25 (1998). In the late 1990s I began contributing to reference publications. I wrote entries on Mozambique for the

Encyclopaedia Britannica on line (1999) and the *World Book Encyclopedia* (2001), as well as entries on Mozambican topics for the *New Encyclopedia of Africa* (2007), the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (2008), and most recently for the *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion* (2010). While to a certain extent encyclopedia entries do not require a great deal of original research, writing an article on fashion and dress did demand that I seek out new sources and rethink information from earlier publications of mine.

But the greater part of my contributions to reference sources has been focused on African women. I began by writing an article on African women's history for the *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing* (1999). I then repeatedly revised and updated that essay for the *Encyclopedia of African History* (2005), the *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (2005), the *New Encyclopedia of Africa* (2007), and the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* (2008). For the five-volume *New Encyclopedia of Africa*, I also wrote an additional eight entries on topics related to women, and I was the editor for the "women" subject area. I went on to write

three entries on African and Mozambican women for the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History* (2008).

For the past year I have again been a subject editor for women, this time for the forthcoming *Dictionary of African Biography*, to be published later this year by Oxford. In the projected two published volumes with 2000 entries, the editors and I set a goal of 15 to 20 percent for the entries on women, which is a very high percentage when compared to other biographical dictionaries. In addition to helping choose which women to include, finding authors for the articles, and editing two hundred submissions, I wrote two dozen entries myself. We hope to maintain that percentage with the online version of the dictionary, which will include 10,000 articles on African men and women.

My most notable reference work, however, was my *Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*. That resource included an overview essay on the history of African women, a timeline, and an extensive bibliography of over one hundred pages, introduced with a historiographic essay. I wrote all of the nearly 700 articles myself, including brief biographies of 280 women, entries on more than 200 organizations,

publications, and key events, and 150 short essays on important concepts such as feminism, fertility, markets, music, and religion. I hoped it would serve as a broad introduction to African women's history, through a series of brief, readable entries, most with cross-references to related items.

Quite a few of the entries required that I engage in basic historical research, looking up archival sources and contacting individual women to verify information about their lives. In the process of researching and writing that book, I learned a lot about little known political leaders, poets and writers, religious innovators, artists and musicians, and many other African women who have made impressive contributions to their communities and to the world. The book of course included such well-known women as South African anti-apartheid leader Winnie Mandela, Kenyan environmentalist and politician Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman to be elected president of any African nation. But I was more intrigued by some of the lesser-known women who have made real contributions to their own societies and to the world.

For instance, Esther Afua Ocloo (1919-2002) was a Ghanaian market woman who pioneered microloans in Africa. She was the daughter of poor farmers and she went to high school in Accra on a scholarship from the Cadbury chocolate company. After she finished high school in the 1940s her aunt offered her financing of less than one dollar which Ocloo used to purchase the materials to make twelve jars of marmalade. With her earnings invested back into her enterprise, within a few years she expanded into making juice, won a contract with the military to supply orange juice, and advanced into manufacturing other canned foodstuffs. She used her income to finance her further education in food technology in England, and invested in projects designed to improve women's economic opportunities. In 1975 at the United Nations Decade for Women meeting in Mexico City she learned about micro-loan programs, in which poor women were awarded very small loans which have a high rate of repayment due to the support groups formed by the grantees. In 1979 Ocloo and several other women established Women's World Banking as a vehicle to make such loans, and Ocloo was named chairwoman. In 1990 she

was a co-winner of the \$100,000 Hunger Project Africa Prize in recognition of her accomplishments.

For another entry, I had read a passing reference to Caroline Ntseliseng 'Masechele Khaketla, who was one of the first women published in Lesotho. I had trouble finding out more about her, until I contacted the Lesotho Embassy in Washington, D.C. They put me in contact with the poet's daughter, who was a cabinet minister at that time, and I eventually was able to write an informed entry drawn from the information sent to me directly from the poet herself. Born in 1918, Khaketla was educated in Lesotho. She later attended Fort Hare University College in South Africa, where in 1941 she was the first woman from Lesotho to obtain a university degree. While she made significant contributions to education and served on several government and church boards in Lesotho, her renown is as a writer. Khaketla's first poem collection, *Mantsopa*, appeared in 1963, and she has published twelve books of poetry, drama, and short stories. She writes in Sotho and promotes efforts to write and publish in African languages, which is not always an easy choice due to the limited audience for many such languages. She was awarded

honorary doctorates in literature from the National University of Lesotho (1984) and the University of Fort Hare (2002).

I also hoped that my dictionary would prove useful not simply as an entry point for novices in the study of African women, but that it would bring attention to forgotten publications such as the 1950s journal, *African Women*. Beginning in 1954, it was published twice a year by the Department of Education in Tropical Areas at the University of London. Articles reported on women's education and development in Africa, with a focus on the Commonwealth countries, and although most were written by foreign service officers and development workers, African women also sent in reports about their activities. It was an invaluable source on women's organizations; for example, the second issue, which appeared in June 1955, carried reports on corn mill societies in Cameroon, women's groups in Sierra Leone, day nurseries in Ghana, women's clubs in Uganda, and girls' education in Somalia, along with other briefer reports. It was forced to end publication in 1965 due to budgetary constraints, but is still

a valuable source of information about African women in the 1950s and 1960s.

The history profession has given some recognition to reference work. The American Historical Association gives the Waldo G. Leland Prize for the most outstanding reference tool in the field of history, though it is only offered once every five years. And in 2005 I was able to participate in the International Congress of Historical Sciences, in Sydney, Australia, where my presentation on "Writing an Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa," was part of an auxiliary session on Historical Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, which also included scholars from Switzerland, Australia, Japan, and the Czech Republic.

In the end, however, I just enjoy the process of finding information, putting it into an accessible format for colleagues and the general public, and publishing articles and books that will be consulted by a wide audience.

Kathleen Sheldon has been a CSW Research Scholar since 1989. She received her Ph.D. in History from UCLA in 1988 and she also holds an M.A. in African Area Studies from UCLA. In addition to her work on African women she recently published "No more cookies or cake now, "C'est la guerre": An American Nurse in Turkey, 1919 to 1920," *Social Sciences and Missions* 23, 1 (2010), based on a diary kept by her great-aunt, Sylvia Thankful Eddy.