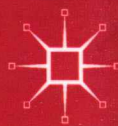


# Gender Epistemologies in Africa

Gendering Traditions, Spaces,  
Social Institutions, and Identities

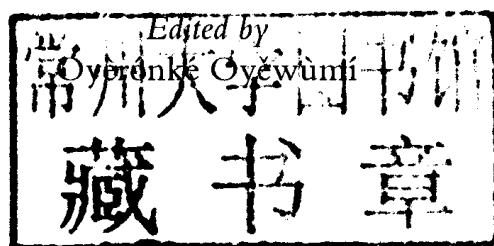


Edited by Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí

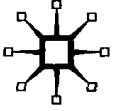


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GENDER EPISTEMOLOGIES IN AFRICA

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## INTRODUCTION

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### *Gendering*

OYÈRÓNKÉ OYĚWÙMÍ

It has become axiomatic that gender is socially constructed: that the social differences between males and females are located in social practices, and not simply in biological facts. Gender differences cannot be reduced to nature. In my earlier work, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Oyěwùmí 1997), I documented the social construction of gender in Yorùbá society and emphasized that gender is not only socially constructed but also historical. The issue of the historicity of gender cannot be overstated, given that in the Western dominant discourses, gender is presented as transhistorical and therefore essentialist. Studies of Africa should not rely on Western-derived concepts to map the issue of gender in African societies, but instead must ask questions about the meaning of gender and how to apprehend it in particular times and places. Thus, the problem of gender in studies of Africa is fundamentally an epistemological one.

The book *Invention* contributed to a new understanding of how history and bodies intersect in the social construction of African spaces. Most importantly, it problematized the disjuncture between intellectual histories of bodies in African societies and the everyday meanings that bodies may or may not carry in these localities.

The present anthology responds to the paucity of theoretically engaged studies of gender in Africa by gathering together a variety of studies that are engaged with notions of gender in different African localities, institutions, and historical time periods. These studies take seriously the idea that in order to understand the structures of gender,

and gender relations in Africa, we must start with Africa. Also, in order to develop valid theories of gender, all types of experiences from around the world must be documented. If structures of gender emerge out of particular histories and social contexts, we must pay attention to the continuous ways in which gender is made and remade in everyday interactions and by institutions. In this sense, then, “gender” is actually more about gendering—a process—than about something inherent in social relations.

The papers in this anthology span a wide range of societies, cultures, historical time periods, and disciplines. Most of the papers are products of original research that has not been published elsewhere. A number of them are pioneering in that they interrogate gender in subjects and institutional sites that have in the past not invited much gender analysis in African studies: notably Epifania Amoo-Adare’s paper on gender and the construction of urban space, and David Ogungbile’s consideration of women’s leadership role in Islam. The focus on elite African women in a number of the papers is also a welcome corrective to the overwhelming focus on African poverty and the victimhood of women. The overrepresentation of African women in much of the literature as desperate victims robs them of agency, which in turn often leads to a devaluation of African experiences of resistance and nullifies African females as a resource for developing feminist ideas and theories. A focus on elite women also sharpens our engagement with gender issues as we explore the intersection of class and ethnic privilege in relation to gender disadvantage.

Some of the questions the papers in the collection ask are: What do histories, traditions, uses of space, cultural productions, and institutions tell us about notions of gender in particular times and places? What meanings do men and women attach to their own everyday social practices, institutions, and cultural productions? What are the implications of these for our understanding of gender as a social category or as a facet of identity, and even the process of gendering itself? What do they tell us about the lived experiences of males and females in these societies?

### **The Order of Things**

In the opening essay, “Decolonizing the Intellectual and the Quotidian: Yorùbá Scholars(hip) and Male Dominance,” Oyèrónké Oyěwùní examines the internalization of male dominance in Yorùbá academic discourses and within the intellectual community itself. By focusing

on issues of translation of Yorùbá oral tradition, she draws our attention to the ways in which colonial gender categories have become part and parcel of Yorùbá daily life in spite of the fact that these categories and constructs are historically recent imports into Yorùbá society. She then looks at how the imposition of male dominance on Ifa, an indigenous body of knowledge, has created distortion, inaccuracies, and most significantly the demonization of women with serious ramifications for their freedom of worship, in particular. Oyěwùmí firmly links the ongoing process of creating patriarchy to the failure to decolonize. She advances the concept of historical feminism as a necessary step in the struggle to take back our history, and to transform social relations.

In the next essay, Adélékè Adéèkó is even more focused on translation and its impact on Yorùbá writing. In "Gender in Translation: *Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà*," he contends that discourses of gender in Yoruba life and culture have not considered fully how translations of categories from the language of scholarly discoveries, particularly English, shape the classification and explanation of observed social phenomena. The primary evidence revolves around the many ways in which the life of Ìyálóde Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà (ca. 1825–1874), a high-ranking female chief in precolonial Ìbàdàn in Nigeria, is deployed in accounts of the evolution of "woman-being" in southwestern Nigeria. Adéèkó focuses on the linguistic, cultural, and philosophical ramifications of the depiction of gender matters in Akínwùmí Ìṣòlá's Yorùbá play *Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà: Ìyálóde Ìbàdàn*, its two English translations, and its most recent film adaptation. The translation problems analyzed in this paper include textual considerations that affect the inter-medial translations a creative writer faces while working from sources in oral traditions and written, typically Christian, nationalist histories. The paper also discusses inter-epochal translations that are present in all the versions regardless of language and medium.

Both Oyěwùmí and Adéèkó's essays suggest that translations of Yorùbá life into English inevitably result in what one might call an ode to patriarchy, as various Yorùbá writers and intellectuals write male dominance into social categories, historical events, and translations of oral traditions. In the third essay, literary critic Marame Gueye presents another facet of male self-aggrandizement in a different African society. In "Ode to Patriarchy: The Fine Line between Praise and Criticism in a Popular Senegalese Poem," she interrogates a popular poem known in Senegal as *Fatou Gaye's Song*. This poem was composed by a man named Eladji Gaye as a way of mourning his wife, Fatou. While singing the praises of Fatou, Gaye's text parallels *taasu*, a panegyric oral

form where praise and criticism are often hard to dissociate. The poem, and the only known interview of its author, are panegyric accounts of Fatou's life even as they are criticisms of women in general. Although the poem on the surface is a song for Fatou, it is in many ways a selfish gift, because it mainly praises Gaye himself, and patriarchy in general. It is interesting how the male author of the poem, the interviewer, and the two commentators, both designated marriage experts, who are all men, use Islam to undergird patriarchy and then create new forms of sexism based on their interpretation of Islamic texts.

In the next essay, we see that the alliance between Islam and patriarchy is not inevitable. Scholar of religion David O. Ogungbile documents the experience of a remarkable woman who is an Islamic leader in Òşogbo, Nigeria. This paper focuses on the status and role of women in Nigerian Islam, offering a case study of Alhaja Sheidat Mujidat Adeoye, the founder and leader of the Fadillullah Muslim Mission. It discusses the religious experience of Alhaja Sheidat, which motivated her to found a movement and introduced a new expression into the tradition, thus causing an alteration in religious stereotypes within a religiously pluralistic community. What is remarkable is her rejection of the patriarchal traditions of the Islamic community in Òşogbo, where women were not even welcome to join in prayers in the mosque. Alhaja Sheidat claimed a divine experience that led her to found and lead the Fadilullah Muslim Mission, with its own ministry and an established mosque that came to enjoy a huge following among indigenes as well as visitors to the city. The impact of her movement is so great that the street in which it is located is known as Fadilullah Street. This paper examines the uniqueness of the practices of Alhaja Sheidat *vis-à-vis* the religious experience that gave birth to her movement. It investigates her activities and practices, her acceptance within the Muslim religious and Yoruba patriarchal community, and public responses to her movement.

In the age of modernity, the impact of dominance of gender constructs in everyday life cannot be overstated. Yet very little has been written about gender and the construction of space in African societies. As a result, ignorance and illiteracy on this subject abound, a dangerous situation given how the organization of space has power to locate and circumscribe women, as in the exclusion of muslim women from mosques in Òşogbo. Beyond religion, however, "Engendering Critical Spatial Literacy: Migrant Asante Women and the Politics of Urban Space," Epifania Amoo-Adare educates us on the power of spatial configurations in our everyday social practices and ideological

constructions of place and identity. In this theoretical paper, Amoo-Adare delineates an area that has received little attention in African writings: the politicization of space. More importantly, she shows that black women the world over are disproportionately represented in unsuitable and inadequate urban spaces and are also underrepresented in urban development decision-making processes. As an architect and a migrant Asante woman who has lived in a number of global cities, Amoo-Adare believes it is important to develop a critical literacy on black women's urban spatial conditions by conducting research that recognizes the spatial nature of socioeconomic life and as a consequence would reveal the possibilities for radical change in the politics of space. To this end, she investigates how migrant Asante women's household configurations, sociocultural practices, and spatial self-perceptions have changed in Ghana's rapidly urbanizing capital city, Accra, in order to engender a timely praxis of critical spatial literacy.

The university has been one giant space where women have been faced with considerable difficulties in entry. Nevertheless, they are facing up to these challenges, as Njoki M. Kamau tells us in her study of the lives of Kenyan women, particularly academic women in higher education. The data suggest that women academics' career experiences are largely shaped by both indigenous gender role expectations and Western hierarchies of gender subordination. Unsurprisingly, women's career development lags behind that of their male counterparts due to lack of support, exclusionary practices, and an inhospitable environment. Yet the study also shows that academic women are active social agents in shaping their careers, as well as their personal and social lives. As active agents of social change, they cross gender boundaries by resisting, overcoming, subverting, juggling, and adapting the subordinate roles assigned to them as women.

In yet another empirical study of women's occupational activities, Marieme S. Lo concentrates on microenterprises in two African nations. In "Self-Image and Self-Naming: A Social Analysis of Women's Microenterprises in Senegal and Mali," Lo interrogates homogenizing accounts of women's microenterprises that do not take into consideration the perspectives and personal accounts of female entrepreneurs. Such emic perspectives convey intrinsic meanings, self-concepts, and differentiated identities that counter assumptions of uniformity. The paper thus argues that the prevalence of sociocultural clues and symbols in women's microenterprises, reflected in their names, compels a situated analysis of their internal structures, dynamics, and meanings. Naming strategies, a distinctive feature of such microenterprises, call for

a discursive analysis and social ontology of women's microenterprises. Using several theoretical frameworks, this paper provides a multifaceted lens to examine the social embeddedness of women's microenterprises and the creative and culturally adaptive strategies women entrepreneurs exert to assert agency in constantly shifting sociopolitical and economic contexts.

The last three papers are concerned with history: its documentation, interpretation, and uses. "Irua Ria Atumia and Anticolonial Struggles among the Gĩkũyũ of Kenya: A Counternarrative on 'Female Genital Mutilation,'" by Wairimũ Ngarũya Njambi, analyzes cultural and political mobilization centering on *irua ria atumia* in the anticolonial struggles in Kenya, looking more specifically at the Gĩkũyũ ethnonation. While a currently hegemonic eradication discourse presents female genital practices as proof of these women's oppression and domination, the history presented here demonstrates that *irua* can serve as a means of empowerment and resistance. *Irua ria atumia* instilled a cultural ethic of courage among Gĩkũyũ women, and became a rallying cause in struggles against British rule when officials attempted to ban the practice. This essay shows why we must not view cultural practices simply in terms of domination and conformity but rather as ways in which individuals and groups as agents strategically reinvent themselves.

In "NAKABUMBA: God Creates Humanity as a Potter Creates a Pot," Christine Saidi tackles debates about the gendering of history, especially the sexist biases of scholars as they affect the interpretation of precolonial history of various communities in East-Central Africa. The study looks at both potting and potters (which are associated with the female gender) and underscores the significant role potting technologies play in the early social history of the region. Saidi challenges the generally accepted understanding of the role of both ceramic technology and ceramic producers in African history. She also disputes the works of some Western scholars, who after examining both iron smelting and potting imposed faulty "paradigms" such as a strict gender division of labor and the resulting "technology hierarchy" onto African societies. The myth of a rigid, absolute African sexual division of labor creates facile analyses of very complex social institutions and is self-perpetuating, as the lack of research on potting rituals shows. The evidence found in the more recent history of East-Central Africa does not show that potters or ironworkers perceived themselves as competitors for power or that the technologies were in opposition to each other. In fact people, male and female, were working together

to overcome harsh environments and survive as communities in the region.

In the final essay, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, like Saidi, takes up the gender fictions of scholars who claim a widespread gender division of labor in African art and artifact making in which “clay is for women, and iron is for men.” She argues that such gendercentric models in the interpretation of African life and cultural artifacts are the result of the continuing dominance of Western paradigms in African studies. Focusing on writings on Yoruba classical art of Ife, she exposes blatant male privilege in the interpretation of art by art historians. The evidence that she uncovers shows that art, like other domains of Yorùbá life, was not delineated or organized on the basis of body type, also known as gender. Because of the lineage division of labor in the society, which she had detailed in an earlier work, the idea that the creators of the exquisite Ife art were male is unfounded. Oyěwùmí goes on to show that in fact social and ritual practices surrounding creation and procreation are intertwined, and that motherhood is understood as artistry in real, philosophical, and spiritual terms. Children, Oyěwùmí argues, are the ultimate work of art in Yoruba culture, and mothers are privileged in its creation.

The authors in this volume are engaged with documenting and analyzing the gendering of African traditions, spaces, social institutions, and identities. Their contributions show that gendering is not merely a static artifact but also a continuing process that is made and remade through personal experiences in everyday life—a process in which all are implicated. A gender epistemology that takes the process of gendering seriously necessarily incorporates resistance. As we go to press, the emergence of African women in leadership positions in all walks of life, most notably in the political arena, heralds new beginnings that take us back to the future.

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