



AFRICAN WOMEN A READER

By Chima J. Korieh

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AFRICAN WOMEN

A READER



Chima J. Korieh

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

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Introduction



The idea for this volume emerged from my frustration over the past five years with teaching courses in African women's history without a single suitable text or collection of readings for students. In these years, I have sought to provide students with representative but important readings in the significant literature that has emerged in the study of African women. Often these readings are articles in journals or portions of larger books or monographs. *African Women: A Reader* is intended to bridge this gap and make important readings available to students in a single volume.

The past four decades have witnessed a rapid change in the trends and quality of research on African women. The evaluation and analysis of African women's roles have affected how women are perceived and the institutional frameworks within which they operate. The periodization of the literature shows that three central concerns have dominated the general methodological and theoretical issues about African women's past.¹ The emphasis in the pre-1960s period witnessed an increasing interest in women by amateur scholars. The interest in this period was influenced by missionary and freelance writings of early European travelers and ethnographic reports on African societies. With the establishment of effective colonial administration in the early periods of the twentieth century, women's issues increasingly popped up in political, social, and economic discourses. The emphasis was on social processes such as kinship relations, social structures of law and order, patriarchy, marriage, childhood betrothal, and polygamy. This trend continued in the 1960s with the production of ethnographic and anthropological monographs like Evan Pritchard's *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and other Essays in Social Anthropology*, which tended to emphasize the inferior status of women in relation to men.² Yet the questions raised in these early analyses were presented from Western perspectives and within a framework of a Eurocentric gender ideology.³ Largely, information about the lives, experiences, and activities of women were treated according to a stereotypical abstraction that related little to the lives they represented.

The 1960s–1970s witnessed the independence of many African societies from colonial rule and attempts by African leaders to advance the social, economic, and political structures of the emerging nations in Africa. The period was influenced by liberal scholarship and a systematic attempt to study Africa by African scholars. There was also a significant shift in the methodological and theoretical framework for the study of African women. Significant emphasis was made to counteract the traditional view that women had no history. The literature that emerged in this era emphasized women’s complementary roles and the division of labor which assigned certain spheres of influence to men and others to women⁴ as the profound philosophical ideas which underlined the assignment of separate tasks to men and women.⁵ The works in this period were still dominated by Western ethnocentrism in the study of African societies. Yet this approach to the study of African women was part of what Imam has described as “the Golden Age of Merrie Africa,” in which precolonial Africa was seen as a land of peace and harmony. Indeed, the research in this period was influenced by the nationalist struggle and anticolonial sentiments of the 1960s and an attempt to legitimize indigenous African institutions and history.⁶ However, as Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay pointed out, the literature that emerged early in this period consisted of romanticized histories of great queens, amazons, and matriarchies⁷ that generally ignored the roles and contributions of the majority of women.⁸ Moreover, the literature ignored most African states that did not live in centralized polities and “states.” In actuality, this framework failed to interrogate the systematic privileging of men in traditional society, while at the same time inventing women as an analytical category even where such gender categorization did not exist until modern times.

The 1970s–1980s witnessed a massive production of literature dealing with African women. The trend in this period was influenced by neocolonialism, feminism, and worsening economic trends in Africa. For Africans in particular, the literature focused on bringing attention to women in the face of continued economic decline and the implications of state policies such as SAP (Structural Adjustment Programs) on women. The dominant Marxist perspective of the period concentrated on the political economy and women became a specific subject of inquiry. Some of the literature radically criticized the development and modernization informed literature. Yet the approach focused on the way in which women have been active in attempting to establish their authority and independence, especially as producers. Again, many European and African researchers in this period sought to validate the experiences of African women within a Eurocentric framework. In actuality, the process of making women visible is also a process through which women’s actual roles and class structures have been undermined. The Marxist interpretations of women’s inequality ignored the variations in women’s status in different parts of Africa. Such a homogenous representation of women’s experiences also ignored the



ways local contexts and structures affected women and men. While Marxist and radical feminism have contributed in significant ways to the theorizing of gender inequality and our understanding of the structures of subordination such as class and state mechanism, they have failed to adequately explain (in the case of the Third World in particular) the role of the world system in generating inequality in society.

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed the most complex and far-reaching trends in the presentation of African women in historical writings. The literature has sought to alter the accepted version of the past by studying women's separate experiences as a legitimate area of research. These trends in the presentation of African women explicitly see women as actors in sociopolitical and economic processes rather than passive recipients of change. In a review of the trends in African women's history from 1971–1986, Margaret Jean Hay noted that these years witnessed a shift in the research focus on African women's history from “queens to prostitutes and from heroines to victims.”⁹ Feminist political economists also used the political economy framework to analyze the realities of the political economy of colonialism and postcolonial Africa and how women fitted into them.¹⁰

In recent years, the study of women in historical and contemporary perspectives has occupied the attention of a growing number of scholars and commentators.¹¹ Africanists in general and African women in particular have increased efforts to affirm the identity of African women and their contributions to their societies. Despite the considerable efforts in this direction, the study of Africa women is fraught with difficulty. The task of writing on the past and present roles of women is difficult because this is a relatively neglected area in the extant literature. Moreover, we are dealing with societies with very different sociocultural experiences; the cultural and historical diversity certainly makes generalizations on African women problematic.

African Women: A Reader is a thematic and chronological exploration of African women's historical experiences. The collection is divided into four units. Part One is an examination of African women's lives before 1500. It begins with a careful exploration of important methodological, ethical, and philosophical issues about the African past. We will attempt to challenge stereotypical misconceptions of Africa by the outside world. These have historically promoted ignorant ideas about Africa and Africans. It then examines the role of women in the sociopolitical organizations and economic structures of African societies before the contact with Europeans. Across the ages, the African continent played host to diverse cultures and striking civilizations. This unit explores the place of women in African development and civilization. It examines some principal themes and developments that have influenced African women's lives in this period.

The fifteenth century was a defining era in world history. This was the period of the European exploration of Africa in search of gold and other luxury goods.



The exploration of the West African coast, which began with the Portuguese and was later joined by other European nations, brought Europeans in direct contact with Africans in sub-Saharan Africa for the first time. Part Two explores women's experiences in the transformations that occurred as African societies encountered Europeans in the fifteenth century. The contact will change the course of African history as much as gender relations and the role of women in African societies in fundamental ways. The European exploration and the so-called voyages of discovery from the late fifteenth century and the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade (which represents the largest forced migration in human history, from its beginnings in the fifteenth century until its abolition in the mid-nineteenth century) altered the relationships between men and women. Did abolition impact gender roles in African society? The readings in this unit reveal that European explorations inescapably linked Africa to the global formations that would expand at a much faster rate, as European technology gave them an opportunity to impose their hegemony on other parts of the world. Yet men and women had different experiences as a result of these encounters.

Part Three examines women's experiences of some principal themes and developments that have influenced the course of African history from the middle of the nineteenth century. These include the abolition of the slave trade, the nineteenth-century European missionary activities in Africa, and the overall notion of mission to civilize Africa. We examine the changing nature of Euro-African relations, which would eventually lead to the scramble and partition of the African continent among major European powers and the changing role of African women during the colonial period. The unit explores African women's responses to imperialism, the development of nationalism and national consciousness, and the process of decolonization in Africa. Ultimately, the unit examines how European imperialism shaped African female experiences and gender relations from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of colonial rule.

Part Four examines African women's experiences in postcolonial Africa. By the mid-1960s, many African countries had gained political independence from European control. This brought Africa to what is generally known as the post-colonial period. The 1960s was a decade of optimism for African societies. This optimism did not last. We will examine how the African political elite utilized their political capital after independence and the experiences of women in this period. What were women's reactions to the obstacles faced by the new nation-states in the post-independence period, as they struggled to shape the nature of the new states in Africa? What were women's unique experiences of the barriers to rapid economic, political, and social developments in Africa? The unit explores women's experiences of contemporary African crises and issues of survival.



NOTES

1. For an excellent review of these approaches that I have cited in several parts of this work, see A. Mei-Tje Imam, “The Presentation of African Women in Historical Writing,” in S. Jay Kleinberg, ed. *Retrieving Women’s History* (UNESCO, 1988), 30–40.
2. See, for example, Evan Pritchard, *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and other Essays in Social Anthropology* (London, 1965).
3. See, for example, Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis, 1997), ix.
4. Imam, “The Presentation of African Women,” 34. See also M.M. Green’s anthropological study of an Igbo community. *Ibo Village Affairs: Chiefly with Reference to the Village of Umueke Agbaja* (London, 1947).
5. A.M.D. Lebeuf, “The Role of Women in the Political Organization of African Societies,” in Denise Paulme, ed., *Women of Tropical Africa* (New York, 1963), 114.
6. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, eds. *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford, 1976), 4.
7. Ibid.
8. Imam, “The Presentation of African Women,” 36.
9. Margaret Jean Hay, “Queens, Prostitutes and Peasants: Historical Perspectives on African Women, 1971–1986,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 22 no. 3 (1988): 431–447.
10. Simi Afonja and Bisi Aina, *Nigerian Women in Social Change* (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 1995), 7.
11. See, for example, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Women: A Modern History* (Boulder, 1997).



PART ONE



Conceptual and Methodological Issues

Chapter One



African Women and Historians

Gender Biases in African Historiography

By Paul Tiyambe Zeleza



In the last two decades the literature on African women has grown rapidly. This can be attributed to several factors, including the political impetus of the women's movement and the crisis of conventional development theory and practice, and the consequent rise of the women-in-development project. For the discipline of history, more specifically, interest in women's history has been spawned by the widening horizons of historical epistemology and research, especially the growing interest in, and the development of, new approaches to social history. Until recent times historians preoccupied themselves with political history. They tirelessly described political developments, wars and battles, and celebrated the lives of great men (Barraclough, 1978; Conkin, 1989; Himmelfarb, 1987).

Despite the proliferation of the literature on women, including women's history, women remain largely invisible or misrepresented in mainstream, or rather "malestream," African history. They are either not present at all, or they are depicted as naturally inferior and subordinate, as eternal victims of male oppression. Alternatively, the romantic myth is advanced that the roles of women and men were equal and complimentary in good old, harmonious, pre-colonial Africa, or the lives of notable, exceptional, heroic women are celebrated (Imam, 1988). In short, in most institutions of higher learning in Africa women's history is still marginal and lacks recognition and academic respectability (Awe, 1991: 211).¹ This situation is, of course, not peculiar to African history. It applies worldwide, and to the social sciences in general.²

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Gender Biases in African Historiography," from *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, pp. 207–232. Copyright © 2005 by Palgrave Macmillan. Permission to reprint granted by the publisher.

This selection seeks to do four things. First, it will demonstrate the inadequate representation of women in African history by looking at some of the most frequently used texts. Second, an attempt will be made to identify some of the reasons for this by examining the dominant paradigms in African historiography. Thirdly, the selection outlines the reconstructions of women's history made by feminist historians. These historians face two interrelated challenges. The first is to recover, empirically, the lives of women and restore their story to history. The second challenge is theoretical, to deconstruct the conventional historical paradigms and devise new ones which will rid history of its inherent androcentrism, in order to redefine and enlarge the scope of the discipline as whole, to make historical reconstructions more inclusive, more comprehensive, and more complex. The final part, then, suggests some ways of gendering African history.

The Invisible Women

The authors of African history textbooks differ in their approaches and research methods, in the subjects they examine, the interpretations they advance, and in their ideological outlooks. But they have two things in common: they are predominantly male and sexist in so far as their texts underestimate the important role that women have played in all aspects of African history. In more extreme cases women are not even mentioned at all, or if they are, they are discussed in their stereotypical reproductive roles as wives and mothers. The language used often inferiorises the women's activities, or experiences being described. Also, women's lives are usually cloaked in a veil of timelessness: the institutions in which their lives are discussed, such as marriage, are seen as static. In viewing them as unchanging, as guardians of some ageless tradition, women are reduced to trans-historical creatures outside the dynamics of historical development.

A survey of some of the most widely used history textbooks clearly demonstrates these biases. The selection will examine three categories of texts: general histories that are continental in their coverage, regional histories, and histories of particular themes, such as political, economic, and social history. With each text, the selection tabulates the space devoted to women in the text and in the illustrations, if any, and the general thrust of those references in terms of content.



The General Histories

Eight sets of general histories were examined. They are all written by prominent historians of Africa, both African and Africanist. None is a woman. Some of them do not even mention women in their indexes. This is true of Tidy and Leaning's (1981) two volume text, *A History of Africa* and Afigbo *et al.* (1986) *The Making of*

Modern Africa, also in two volumes. Volume One of the latter book looks at Africa in the nineteenth century and Volume Two at Africa in the twentieth century. I looked at the revised edition published in 1986. “This very popular text,” the blurb at the back proclaims, “has been thoroughly revised to include the most up-to-date developments in research and historiography.” The two texts have 372 pages each, making for a total of 744 pages, none of which is specifically devoted to women. The illustrations are hardly any better. Out of the sixty illustrations in Volume One women appear perfunctorily in two. Volume Two is a little better. Out of 80 illustrations women appear in 13, mostly in the background. Only in three are they the central focus of attention.

The most comprehensive studies which seek to summarise current significant knowledge in African history are the UNESCO *General History of Africa* (1981–1998) and the Cambridge *History of Africa* (1975–1986) both published in eight thick volumes.³ Both studies have very little to say about women. An examination of Volumes 6 and 7 of the UNESCO *General History* and volumes 5–8 of the Cambridge History dealing with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, periods upon which reconstructions of African women’s history have concentrated, amply bears this out. Volumes 6 and 7 of the UNESCO *General History* have 861 and 865 pages, respectively. Women are mentioned only on 4 and 14 pages, respectively. In Volume 6, the women are mentioned with reference to Chokwe women who followed their husband traders (p. 302), provision of education for Egyptian girls by the Coptic Church (p. 347), women as gold washers in Asante and Lobi (p. 690), and sexual relations between diaspora African men in Europe and European women (p. 759), while in Volume 7 they are mentioned with reference to their fertility patterns (five pages) and polygyny (four pages). It needs to be noted that the references to women on these pages are mostly restricted to a sentence or two. As for visual representation, out of 125 illustrations in Volume 6 women appear in 20. Only in ten of them are women represented alone. The women depicted are mostly either slaves or queens. In Volume 7 women appear in 11 out of the 96 illustrations. Only in two of these illustrations are the women the central characters.

The same pattern can be seen in the Cambridge History. Women appear on three pages out of 517 pages in Volume 5; ten out of 956 pages in Volume 6; 30 out of 1063 pages in Volume 7; and nine out of 1011 pages in Volume 8. Of the three references in Volume 5, one is to Creole women traders, the other to Chokwe acquisition of slave women, and the third is to the growing numbers of European women in the colonial enclaves towards the end of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, in this volume marriage is mentioned on 8 pages without even referring to women at all! In Volume 6 the references are to women’s agricultural work (on four pages), women as “assets” or “pawns” for chiefs, local lords, and elders



(on four pages). The last two are on young women migrating to towns in southern Africa and the importation of British female domestics to South Africa. The bulk of the references to women in Volume 7 are to women's resistance against colonial rule, specifically pass laws in South Africa and taxation in Nigeria. Next comes references to the increased agricultural burden on women as a result of expanded cash crop production, the imposition of forced labour and male labour migration. Interestingly, most of the references are to women in Southern Africa. Women in Central Africa are referred to only on one page, East African women on two pages, North African women on three pages, and West African women on six pages. It is quite remarkable that in Volume 8 which deals with the period 1940–1975, for which there is abundant literature on African women in development, there is only one reference to women as producers! Indeed, in this volume women are largely mentioned in passing, with reference to urban migration, employment, seclusion, and apartheid pass laws.

The single volume general histories are no different. Basil Davidson's (1991) revised and expanded edition of his celebrated *Africa in History*, has only one reference to women, in which the author states rather blandly that "generally, all women in Africa suffered, as most of them have continued to suffer, from more or less gross forms of discrimination imposed by men" (p. 191). In Curtin, *et al.* (1978) *African History* which, we are told, "celebrates the coming of age of *African history*, representing a quarter of a century of research by scholars from Africa, Europe and America," and in which "less emphasis is given to political history and more to social, economic and intellectual trends," women are mentioned only on nine out of the 612 pages, and appear in one out of 25 illustrations. On five of the nine pages, women are mentioned or alluded to in relation to polygyny, in which they are depicted merely as commodities that were circulated. In the remaining references, a paragraph is devoted on page 161 to discussing, in static terms, gender inequality in early East Africa. This is followed, on pages 559 and 566 by sketchy discussions of two paragraphs each, first of the impact of male migrant labour on women during the colonial period, and second, of gender imbalances in settler and non-settler colonial cities. The longest section dealing with women, tries to examine, in three paragraphs, the 1929–1930 women's "riots" in Nigeria known as the Aba "women's war." The lone illustration with a women's representation is a piece of sculpture, whose caption reads: "Kneeling woman holding a bowl, from Luba, Zaire, Buli workshop. Such statues were used by Luba kings. White porcelain clay with supernatural powers was kept in the bowl. This is a utensil of sacred kingship." This is all the authors have to say about gender relations in this society!⁴

There are more references to women in Robert July's (1992) latest edition of *A History of the African People*. They appear on 20 out of the book's 593 pages and in



seven out of the 78 illustrations. But the descriptions and depictions are very sexist. Women are portrayed either as high status queen-mothers or merely as pawns and commodities that were distributed by male elders. According to the author, they were valued in pre-colonial societies primarily for their fertility (p. 548), and by the Europeans as concubines (p. 146), for they were otherwise part of the rural “unproductive population” (p. 405). Indeed, in July’s account women are discussed in the same breath as children, debtors and slaves in the precolonial era (p. 125), and as children, the aged, and the infirm in the colonial era (p. 406). Women’s lives are seen as static, as shown by the fact that the longest section on women, which revealingly comes towards the end of the book (pp. 546–47), discusses women “in traditional African society,” thereby glossing over the impact of colonialism, and then jumps to contemporary discrimination against women, which the author attributes largely to “widespread ignorance among African women concerning the specific details of their own rights.” In the illustrations we mainly see the women walking. When they are doing something, like pounding grain, it is before a background of a drought-stricken landscape, the effect of which is to reinforce the futility of their efforts. The ravaged landscape becomes a metaphor of their utter helplessness and victimisation by, and in a perverse way affinity to, nature.

The victimisation, indeed infantilization, of women is no less explicit in Freund’s (1984) self-proclaimed radical book, *The Making of Contemporary Africa*, which is written, it is claimed, “from a materialist perspective [that] provides a refreshing reinterpretation of the complex events in sub-Saharan Africa since the eighteenth century. It also serves,” the blurb continues, “as a succinct introduction to the history of modern Africa, incorporating in the text a critical appraisal of the best scholarship in recent years.” However, women, who are mentioned on 22 out of the 857 pages, but hardly shown in any of the 12 illustrations, are treated no better than in the other books examined above. Almost invariably, they are mentioned as “dependents,” together with youths, clients and slaves whether in the pre-colonial period (p. 63), or the colonial period (pp. 129, 131, 134). Women and youths are mentioned interchangeably when examining their entry into wage labour (p. 147) and colonial cities (p. 183). For a study claiming to be informed by historical materialism, it is rather strange that before the nineteenth century men and women are shown to have lived in an oversimplified, static, and homogeneous world, in which the men hunted and the women grew and prepared food (pp. 19–20), until, behold, the Europeans brought cassava which “may have freed women from agricultural labour,” never mind that “the evidence for this is very limited” (p. 45). The marginalization of women extends to the bibliography. Publications on African women are given only one paragraph in a fifty-page select bibliography.



The Regional Histories

The regional histories display the same tendencies. There are those that totally ignore women, and others that mention them in passing. The few that discuss women in slightly more detail still betray androcentric biases. I have examined five regional histories, covering each region of the continent. Needless to say, regional history is unevenly developed, reflecting no doubt different historiographical traditions, patterns of colonization and decolonization, and the varied constructions of regional identities.⁵ By comparing different editions, some of the regional histories under survey clearly demonstrate that women's history has yet to penetrate the thick walls of androcentrism that encircle African historiography.

An example of a regional history that does not mention women is Abun Nasr's (1975, 1987) *A History of the Maghrib*. In the second edition published in 1975 women are not even indexed. In 1987 the author published a revised volume that "supersedes" the previous two editions. He was compelled to do so, he states, because "our knowledge of Maghribi history has advanced rapidly and new perspectives for interpreting it were opened by research in which Maghribi historians have participated in an outstanding way" (p. xi). The new book is certainly more detailed: it has 455 pages compared to 422 pages for the 1975 edition. But it resembles the earlier editions in one fundamental way: women are still totally ignored. So much for the "new perspectives".

Women are also largely absent from the regional histories of southern and eastern Africa that I looked at. They are not mentioned in the first edition of Denoon and Nyeko's (1972, 1984) *Southern Africa Since 1800*. Neither are they mentioned in the second edition of 1984, which was undertaken, the authors tell us, because of the "very great changes in the quality and quantity of information available. In order to accommodate the new evidence, and the new ideas which have been circulated," they conclude, "we could not simply make the small changes which are often introduced into the second edition of a book. Instead, we found we had to re-write the book, developing a new framework for this evidence and for these ideas." This new evidence and the new ideas apparently have yet to discover women or gender. As for the illustrations, out of 23 in the first edition, only three show women, one of a woman barely discernible in a group of men, another of semi-naked women, and the third of women and girls smiling to the camera before a background of a shanty location. In the second edition, the offending picture of naked women has been removed, but the other two retained. In a third picture a handful of school girls are shown as part of the Soweto uprising; they are walking behind a large group of school boys. Thus there are still three pictures depicting women, but now out of 26 illustrations.

Omer-Cooper's (1987) textbook is not much better in terms of the illustrations. Women appear in 18 out of the 115 illustrations. They are prominently featured



in only six out of the 18, and only in one do they appear alone. This is a picture of women leaving jail with their fists raised in defiant gesture. In the actual text, women are mentioned on seven out of the 297 pages, with reference to marriage (on three pages), Zulu military settlements, royal women, and pass laws (on one page each).

The same skewed coverage of women is evident in the standard history texts on East Africa. Women are not mentioned in Ingham's (1965) study, or Ogot's (1973) widely used text, *Zamani*. Women are also notable for their absence in Volumes I and II of the three Volume *Oxford History of Bust Africa* (Harlow and Chilver 1965). In Volume III women are mentioned on ten out of 691 pages, mostly in connection to their marriage patterns, fertility, and morals as perceived by missionaries and other colonial ideologues (pp. 405–08). Women's political activities are mentioned very briefly on two pages, noting the formation in Tanzania in the 1950s of a Council of Women by a certain Lady Twining and a women's section in the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), respectively (pp. 185, 187). As for women's productive roles, the book is largely silent, except to note, in a sentence put in brackets, that "(women, except for those who had found freedom, at a price, in the towns, did what they had always done)" (p. 512).

The situation is not much better with Ajayi and Crowder's *History of West Africa* (1985), the standard textbook on West African history. According to the index of Volume 1 of the 1976 edition⁶ women are mentioned on four pages out of the book's 649 pages. The textual material is confined to fleeting statements on the institution of women chiefs in the Ondo area of the Yoraba, and the active role played in political life by women relations of the king in the Wolof and Serer kingdom. There are 26 additional references to women which can be culled from the text. They include the three references to Queen Amina, and the 11 and 12 references to matrilineal and patrilineal systems, respectively. On "the legendary exploits" of Queen Amina the author murmurs that "her conquests and achievements may have been exaggerated" (p. 561). As for the statements on the matrilineal and patrilineal systems, they are often presented in the anthropological present, and no attempt is made to analyse how they developed, or the content of gender relations they embodied. For example, we are told (p. 464), without explanation, that in Djoloff the predominant matrilineal system gradually gave way to the patrilineal system. Volume 2 of the 1976 edition, which covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has, surprisingly, even fewer references to women. There is only one reference to the category "patrilineal," none to "matrilineal." No remarkable woman is mentioned. Half of the references to women, made on six pages in a book of 764 pages, are on the impact of the nineteenth-century jihads. The famous 1929 Women's Aba riot is given short shrift in two sentences.



A comparison between the 1976 and 1985 editions shows little improvement in terms of gender coverage and analysis. The example of Volume 1 will suffice. In the 1985 edition, according to the index, there are two additional pages that refer to women. The additions are on women as slaves (pp. 640–41). In the meantime, references to matrilineages and patrilineages have been reduced to two pages each, and if one adds references to marriage and family, there are 12 other references to women. In addition to those directly referring to women and Queen Amina in the index, women are mentioned on 22 pages, less than the number in the 1976 edition. And yet the 1985 edition is 93 pages longer than the former edition!

The most extensive coverage of women among the regional histories I examined was found in Birmingham and Martin's (1983) *History of Central Africa*. The fact that it was first published in 1983 may have something to do with it. Also, unlike the texts examined above, one of its editors is a woman. Volume One deals with the pre-colonial period, while Volume Two focuses on the colonial and post-colonial periods. In the first volume women are mentioned on 59 out of the book's 315 pages, and in the second volume on 53 out of the 432 pages. In both volumes, however, women are mostly referred to in relation to marriage. References to women and marriage can be found on 35 out of the 59 pages where women are mentioned in Volume One and on 30 out of the 53 pages in Volume Two. The bulk of the remaining references deal with women as timeless victims of a ferocious patriarchal order. In Volume One women are mentioned as subordinate agricultural labourers and as slaves on nine pages each. In Volume Two women's labour, whether in the agricultural or the urban economy, is mostly discussed as an appendage of male migrant labour. Predictably, the remaining contexts in which women are mentioned centre on women's infertility and prostitution.

The Thematic Histories

It would appear that women's invisibility is no less marked in the historical studies dealing with specific themes. It is most apparent in studies dealing with political history, and slightly less so in texts on economic and social history. Out of the seven studies on nationalism and decolonization that I examined, four do not mention women at all (Davidson, 1978; Mazrui and Tidy, 1984; Hargreaves, 1988; and Gifford and Louis, 1988). In Rotberg and Mazrui's (1970) massive collection on *Protest and Power in Black Africa*, women are not indexed, but one of the contributions is on a woman religious and nationalist leader, Alice Lenshina of Zambia (Roberts, 1970). That is one out of 35 contributions. In Gifford and Louis's (1982) *The Transfer of Power in Africa*, which is 654 pages long, women are mentioned only once, not in the actual text, but in the bibliographic essay, where a study on women's involvement in the Algerian revolution is noted and the point made that



this involvement “did not lead to an improvement in their condition in a Muslim society. Once independence was achieved, a traditional reaction scuttled the advances they had started to make” (p. 534). De Braganca and Wallerstein’s (1982) three volume reader on African liberation movements only contains two documents by women: one is by Zanele Dhlamini on women’s liberation in South Africa prepared on the occasion of the South African Women’s Day in 1972 (Dhlamini, 1982), and the other by Sinclair (1982), President of the South African women’s organization, Black Sash, replying to a newspaper article disputing claims that conditions in South Africa in 1970 were improving. The cover of Volume 2, in which there is no document by a woman, shows a male soldier with a gun receiving a pumpkin from a woman, who is balancing another pumpkin on her head while holding a third by her other arm. The message is clear: men are the fighters, women the food providers. So much for the transformative power of liberation struggles!

Three of the six books on economic history that I looked at also do not mention women or deal with the question of gender (Munro, 1976; Wickins, 1981; Issawi, 1982). The other three make very feeble efforts to do so. In Rodney’s (1982) renowned *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* women are mentioned on six out of 312 pages. Brief references are made to the exploitation and oppression of women in the Maghreb (p. 55), the women Amazon warriors in Dahomey (p. 121), and women’s limited access to education during the colonial period (pp. 251, 266). The most detailed treatment of women comes in the last chapter on the impact of colonialism on Africa. Ironically, it outlines the role of women in “independent pre-colonial Africa.” The author discusses the “two contrasting and contradictory tendencies.” On the one hand, women, especially “in Moslem African societies,” were exploited and oppressed by men through polygamous arrangements. But they were also accorded respect and enjoyed a “variety of privileges based on the fact that they were keys to inheritance,” on the other. Indeed, “women had real power in the political sense, exercised through religion or directly within the politico-constitutional apparatus” (p. 226). It is quite strange that in an economic treatise women’s economic roles are hardly addressed.

In Hopkins’ (1973) *An Economic History of West Africa* and Austen’s (1987) *African Economic History* only the barest allusions are made to women’s economic roles, Hopkins refers to women on six out of 337 pages in two contexts: in connection with household labour and local trade. He notes that in the (timeless) pre-colonial era, West African “societies distinguished between the labour of men and women, though the line was not always drawn at the same point” (p. 21). As for trade, women’s involvement is portrayed as having been restricted to local trade on the grounds that “local trade was a convenient adjunct to household and, in some societies, farming activities” (p. 56). Recent studies have shown that women were also involved in long distance trade (Afonja, 1981; White, 1987; Amadiume, 1987).



Despite its publication almost a decade and half after Hopkins' study, Austen's book is far less satisfactory both as an economic history text and in its coverage of women. Women are mentioned on ten out of 294 pages, either in passing (sometimes even in brackets as on p. 180), or invoked to support dubious contentions. For example, Austen denies that the Atlantic slave trade had a negative demographic impact on Angola because women "who are the key determinant of reproduction in any human population" were left behind (p. 96). He also disputes that colonial cash production undermined domestic food supplies for women continued their "traditional" food producing activities (pp. 139, 145).

The most extensive coverage of women in the studies I examined was found in books on labour and social history published in the 1980s. Earlier labour history studies tended to ignore women. For example, women are notable by their absence in the two renowned labour history studies published in the 1970s: *The Development of An African Working Class* (Sandbrook and Cohen, 1975) and *African Labour History* (Gutkind *et al.* 1978). Two relatively recent labour histories compare favourably to this. One is by Stichter (1985) and the other by Freund (1988). In Stichter's *Migrant Labourers*, women are discussed on 82 out of 225 pages. In fact, two of the seven chapters are specifically devoted to women. In Freund's *The African Worker*, women are featured on 28 out of 200 pages. Stichter's analysis on women centres on two main issues. First, the effects of male labour migration on women where it is argued that male labour migration led to changes in the traditional division of productive labour between men and women. Women's workload increased as they took on tasks previously done by men and became heads of households. They showed initiative by adopting new agricultural strategies and trading roles, or by migrating to the cities. Secondly, in Chapter 6 Stichter examines women as migrants and workers by looking at the factors behind female labour migration, the patterns of women's employment, and the forms of women's consciousness and struggle.

Stichter seeks to celebrate women's active involvement in the labour process, but in the end she idealises colonialism as a force that liberated African women from ruthless patriarchal control. In "African pre-capitalist societies," she asserts, women's status was not dissimilar to that of slaves and serfs' (p. 148). This contention is based on an uncritical acceptance of anthropological theories on "domestic," "lineage" or "patriarchal" modes of production according to which male elders controlled the labour of junior males and women of all ages.⁷ Not only is the conceptualisation of modes of production problematic, as demonstrated above, but gender relations in precolonial Africa cannot be generalized.⁸ As Freund states, "the rights of male elders to appropriate surplus in African societies varied immensely" (p. 6), so that "it is a tricky business to generalise for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole on the question of women and labour exploitation" (p. 83). However, Freund's own examination of women and the labour process (concentrated on pp. 81–90) is far



less satisfactory than that provided by Stichter. It lacks any systematic historical analysis, for unconnected and undeveloped points are thrown around on women's labour in the household, informal sector, factory work, and domestic service. That says something about the author's valuation of women as historical subjects.

A similar problem can be seen in the books on social history that I examined. While efforts are made to incorporate women, they are still depicted either as marginal or weak. For example, although several authors in *Peasants in Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Klein, 1980) refer to rural women, women are never depicted as central to the peasant production systems, societies, struggles, and transformations being analysed. In Feierman and Janzen's (1992) collection, *The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa* in which women are considered on 58 out of the 487 pages, the women are largely discussed with reference to their fertility patterns, rather than their role as healers, unlike men. We are also told of male perceptions of disease rather than female perceptions. In a rare comparison of male and female medical practitioners, we are informed that among the Zulu women practice medicine in a "clairvoyant" manner while men practice in a "nonclairvoyant" manner (Ngubane 1992). In Illife's (1987) ambitious, but disappointing, tome *The African Poor: A History*, women are discussed on about 100 out of 387 pages. But Illife's poor women, like his poor in general, are timeless victims of Africa's seemingly primordial structural poverty. They are invariably "unsupported" or "unattached" women, that is, women without men, the unmarried, widowed, and sterile women. Nothing could save them from poverty, neither wit nor informal sector activities. And they could not turn to poverty relief institutions or their own social welfare and support networks for these institutions and networks were poorly developed or non-existent. Their only salvation lay in marriage. In short, married and dependent women are invisible from the ranks of Illife's poor.

African Historiographies and Women's History

The relative underdevelopment of African women's history can partly be attributed to the fact that, as Bolanle Awe (1991: 211) has argued, "compared with the history of many other parts of the world, the writing of the history of Africa itself is a fairly recent development." Few would dispute that history as a discipline is intrinsically empirical. That does not mean, however, that historical reconstructions are not based on deeply held philosophical assumptions, or specific theoretical frameworks often borrowed from the other social sciences. In the last three decades, as demonstrated in earlier chapters, three paradigms have dominated mainstream African historiography: the nationalist school, which was dominant from the time of decolonization to the early 1970s; the underdevelopment or dependency perspective, which held sway from the late 1960s to the late 1970s; and the Marxist approach which gained



ascendancy in the 1970s and early 1980s. This periodization is not meant to denote neat sequential stages, for elements of all three paradigms have coexisted at any one time in the last three decades and, indeed, continue to do so, as shown in Chapter 7 on imperialist historiography.

As noted earlier, in reconstructing African history, the nationalist historians were preoccupied with eradicating imperialist and racist myths that Africa had no history prior to the coming of the Europeans, and in devising new methods of research to recover African history (Ki-Zerbo, 1981; Vansina, 1985; Henige, 1982). This fixation with celebrating and laying the empirical framework of African civilizations not only consumed the historians' energies, but also blinded them to gender analysis. These historians sought to reclaim and glorify Africa's great states, cities, and leaders. In short, nationalist historiography was primarily political and elitist. It had little to say about the "masses," whether men or women, or social and economic history. Almost invariably, exploitation and oppression were discussed only in reference to colonialism. Thus in its epistemology, nationalist historiography had neither the conceptual tools nor the ideological inclination to deal with class or gender hierarchies, exploitation and struggles in African history.

For their part the historians using the dependence paradigm focused primarily on the economics of exploitation, but in spatial, not social or class terms. Development and underdevelopment were seen as integrated and dialectical processes, linking and reproducing the differentiated spatial configurations of Europe and Africa, "metropolises" and "peripheries," "centres" and "satellites," the "North" and the "South," "developed" and "developing" countries, the "First" and "Third" worlds. Consequently, the central problematic of dependence historiography was to unlock and explain the process by which surplus from Africa and the peripheries in general was drained, expatriated, or appropriated by Europe or the metropolises in this integrated world capitalist system. Unequal exchange, whether of products or labour costs, became the pivot around which the entire process of western development and "Third World" underdevelopment spun. The dependence paradigm produced a static, frozen history of Africa, one in which external forces played the predominant role. It is a history of inter-national, not class, relations and struggles. Whenever class is alluded to, it is often used as a derivative and functionalist category, simply as one among the many factors that mediate dependence and underdevelopment. If dependence historiography ignores class, it has proved stubbornly blind to gender analysis.

On this score, Marxist scholars were hardly any better, despite their vigorous critiques of both nationalist and dependency historiographies. Marxist historians were too preoccupied with fitting African histories into the Marxian modes of production, or inventing tropicalized varieties, and articulating them with the capitalist mode during colonialism, to delve seriously into gender analysis. Besides, class, not



gender, is the central problematic of traditional Marxism. Women's oppression is seen as a secondary phenomenon, a symptom of capitalist oppression. As argued in the classic Marxist study on women, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* by Engels (1972), women's oppression originated with the introduction of private property. Contrary to popular perceptions, this study does not offer a concrete historical analysis but an abstract model based on dubious anthropological data (Lane, 1976). The inadequacy of the traditional Marxist paradigm has given rise to other feminist frameworks, including radical feminism and socialist feminism, which seek to comprehend the role of class as well as gender, race, and nationality among other social constructs, in the creation of women's oppression and liberation (Jaggar and Rothenberg, 1984; Hirsch and Keller, 1990; Hutchful, 1996).

It can be seen, therefore, that none of the three dominant paradigms used in reconstructing African history takes women's history and women's oppression seriously.⁹ Not surprisingly, women are either absent or marginal in the historical studies examined above, which were in one way or the other inspired by these frameworks. Thus the challenge that faces feminist historians is not only one of recovering women's history, of redressing balances, but also one of developing new theoretical frameworks that better explain the real world. In this endeavour, feminist historians have been busy deconstructing the hierarchical conceptual dualisms that seek to encase women's lives in the worlds of "nature" and the "family," and the "private" and "domestic" spheres, as distinct from the supposedly male worlds of "culture" and "work," and the "public" and "political" spheres. To begin with, the binary vision contained in these dualisms, such as the private/public divide, misrepresents the interdependence and interconnectedness of social reality and processes. Moreover, these distinctions and dichotomies are not universal, whether as empirical realities, or as conceptual categories. They arose in a specific European historical context¹⁰ and are derived from Enlightenment thought (Foster, 1992: 3–6).

Historians concerned with gender analysis have to guard against both essentializing and universalising the experiences of particular, mostly white middle-class western, women. "There are startling parallels," writes Spelman (1988: 6), "between what feminists find disappointing and insulting in Western philosophical thought and what many women have found troubling in much of Western feminism". All too often race, ethnicity, and class are inserted as "additive analyses." The unfortunate result is a discourse that is patently racist, especially when spurious comparisons are drawn between racism and sexism and the latter is depicted as being a more "fundamental" form of oppression, for it distorts and ignores the reality of Black women who experience both forms of oppression.

In North America the ethnocentrism and "white solipsism," as Rich (1979) calls it, of western feminist scholarship has come under sustained attack from African-American and African-Canadian feminists and other so-called "women of colour."¹¹



These criticisms have caused white middle-class feminists considerable discomfort, guilt, and sometimes reappraisals of their intellectual and political practices. The problems of feminist ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism are even more blatant when it comes to studies of women in the so-called “Third World” (Sievers, 1989; Afary and Lavrin, 1989; Reinhartz, 1992). In African studies the Eurocentric virus afflicts not only women’s studies but all the social science disciplines and the humanities, especially when it comes to the construction of “theory” and the writing of regional or continental surveys and syntheses (Imam and Mama, 1994). Western Africanists, who are by their very existence implicated in western dominance, have often not displayed the necessary reflexivity and “epistemic humility,” to borrow Pierson’s (1991) term. African scholars, including feminists, have fought vigorously against this “intellectual imperialism.” Despite their criticisms, ethnocentric practices are still alive and well in western feminist scholarship on Africa as can be seen in the recent special *Signs* issue on Africa which blithely justifies the absence of contributions from African women scholars.¹²

Our review of the literature has so far been derived mostly from the criticism of *content*, the poor coverage of women, the tendency to view women’s lives as peripheral and unchanging, all of which reflect the absence of concepts that tap women’s historical experiences. Little has been said about *methodology*, that is, the actual techniques and practices used in the research process. How do the methodologies of the three historiographical frameworks compare with the trends in feminist research?

Feminist researchers use a variety of methods. But they all arise, according to Fonow and Cook (1991a: 2), “from a critique of each field’s biases and distortions in the study of women.” Their work tends to display, they argue, reflexivity, action-orientation, and attention to the affective components of the research, among other things. Feminist historians, more specifically, have embraced oral history as a key method to recover women’s experiences and voices from androcentric notions, assumptions, and biases which dominate “malestream” history everywhere. As one author has put it, “women’s oral history is a feminist encounter because it creates new material about women, validates women’s experience, enhances communication among women, discovers women’s roots, and develops a previously denied sense of continuity” (Reinhartz, 1992: 126).¹³ Women’s history is also unusually interdisciplinary in its approach.

Of the three paradigms, it would seem that nationalist historiography, has more in common with feminist history in terms of *methodology* than with either the dependence or Marxist perspectives, both of which rely on traditional social science research methods. Nationalist historians prize oral tradition, which they believe enables them to recover African experiences and “voices,” that is, African perceptions of their lives, their consciousness, often silent in the arid and self-serving written



records of colonial functionaries. Oral sources remove the cloak of invisibility enveloping many aspects of African history. Confronted with limited or non-existent written sources, nationalist historians were also unusually open to the use of a wide range of sources, from oral traditions and historical linguistics, to the findings of anthropology and the natural sciences. This made interdisciplinarity an important feature of nationalist historical scholarship. Thus feminist and nationalist historians tend to privilege oral methods in their efforts to dismantle deeply entrenched biases and recover the history of long suppressed, exploited, and humiliated groups of people.

The goal of nationalist historiography was to bring Africa and Africans back into history. In this sense it was an emancipatory project. But nationalist historiography did not deviate from the contours of western historiographies, from which it borrowed most of its questions and assumptions. It sought to demonstrate that Africa had built civilizations comparable to those of Europe. To what extent can women's history escape such a fate? Is restoring women to history enough? Is women's history to develop as an autonomous field of research, or is its aim to reformulate and transform history as a whole? Women's history is slowly gaining ground in many countries but there are already signs of its ghettoization.¹⁴ Those who would wish to avoid this trajectory suggest going beyond writing women's history by writing gender history. Women's history focuses specifically on women's experiences, activities and discourses, while gender history provides analyses concerning how gender operates through specific cultural forms (Newman, 1991: 59).

Restoring African Women to History

In African history feminist historians are still largely at the stage of restoring women to history, of writing what Lerner (1979: Chapters 10–12) has called “compensatory” and “contribution” history, rather than of writing gender history.¹⁵ The last two decades have seen rapid growth in the literature on African women. Most of it is the work of anthropologists, sociologists, and development specialists. The number of historians writing about the historical experiences of African women is still relatively small but growing.¹⁶ Already the days when African women were painted with the brush of exotica and seen as a monolithic group afflicted by eternal victimization seem to be long gone. Explanatory models of women's oppression derived from European and American history and racist anthropology have come under challenge and been stripped of their univerzalistic pretensions. African women are no longer seen as being cloaked in veils of “tradition” from which they were gradually liberated by “modernity,” for the concepts “tradition” and “modernity” have been exposed for their ahistoricity and ethnocentrism.¹⁷



The themes that preoccupied anthropologists for ages, such as kinship, marriage, fertility, sexuality, and religion are being re-examined as historical processes. Moreover, feminist historians are beginning to examine more systematically the historical development and construction of women's culture, solidarity networks, and autonomous social spaces. The importance of women's economic activities is being demonstrated, whether it is in agriculture, trade, or crafts and manufacturing. Researchers have also shown that women actively participated in pre-colonial politics, both directly as rulers and within arenas viewed as the female province, and indirectly as the mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, and consorts of powerful men. Women's involvement extended to military participation, both as individuals accompanying male troops and as groups of actual combatants. It can no longer be doubted that during the colonial era women actively participated in nationalist struggles. They either organised their own groups and fought against colonial policies which they saw as inimical to their interests, or they joined male-led nationalist movements. Colonialism is seen to have had a contradictory and differentiated impact on men and women, as well as on the women themselves. The more nuanced accounts reveal that while the position of most women declined during the colonial era, women also took initiatives that reshaped their lives and challenged the colonial order.

In terms of periodisation, most of the literature concentrates on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Women's history before 1800 is still largely tentative. The rest of this section presents a brief bibliographic survey of women's history in different parts of the continent.¹⁸ For the period before 1800 the few works on women in the Western Sudan focus mainly on three themes, first, the political role played by women leaders, such as Amina; second, the impact of Islam on the gender division of labour and women's position in society; and third, the growth of women's slavery with the expansion of the trans-Saharan slave trade (Sweetman, 1984; Callaway, 1987; Robertson and Klein, 1987). For the West Coast and its hinterland the literature has dwelt on women's active participation in trade, production and state formation, and increased social stratification among women (Afonja, 1981; Awe, 1977; Brooks, 1976). The historiography on eastern and southern Africa has featured the role of queen mothers, marriage and kinship systems, and the role of women in production (Young, 1977; Leacock, 1991; Kaplan, 1982; Mbilinyi, 1982; Sacks, 1982; White, 1984; van Sertima, 1985; Kettel, 1986).

The historiography on women becomes more voluminous for the nineteenth century. The analysis tends to be richer in empirical detail and displays more theoretical sophistication. For Western Africa Aidoo (1981) emphasises the central role that Asante queen mothers played in the nineteenth century. Wilks (1988) looks into the life of one remarkable woman in Asante, Hoffer (1972) and Boone (1986) discuss how female solidarity among the Mende enabled some women to



become chiefs and exercise political power. White (1987) sensitively charts out the development of women traders in Sierra Leone, Carney and Watts (1991) show that the intensification of agricultural production in the Senegambian region from the mid-nineteenth century was both a social and gendered process. Mann (1985, 1991) explores women's urbanization in Lagos by looking at the changing forms of marriage and social status for elite women and their access to landed property, capital, and labour in the second half of the nineteenth century. Roberts (1984) suggests that the growth of local slavery freed elite Maraka women from agricultural labour and allowed them to expand textile manufacturing which they controlled. In her penetrating study, Amadiume (1987) delineates the changing constructions of gender and sex roles in Igbo society. Boyd (1986) writes of the Fulani women intellectuals produced by the jihads, while Imam (1991) brilliantly charts out the development of seclusion in Hausaland before and after the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate as well as during and after the colonial period.

The nineteenth century was also a period of rapid change in eastern and southern Africa. The expansion of commodity production, which sometimes included the slave trade, appears to have facilitated the subordination of women in some societies. Such appears to have been the case among the Mang'anja in southern Malawi (Mandala, 1984), the southern Tswana (Kinsman, 1983), the Maasai, (Talk, 1988), and in southern Mozambique (Isaacman, 1984). In other societies, women's productive roles, economic autonomy, property rights, and household relations were transformed by the adoption of new technologies, such as the plough, as has been demonstrated in the case of Basotho women (Eldridge, 1991), or as a result of political change, such as the reorganization and expansion of the military system as has been demonstrated in the case of the Nandi of Kenya (Gold, 1985), which led to the progressive removal of male labour from the homesteads, and the intensification of female labour time in household production. Women responded to these changes in various ways. Their solidarity, as well as opposition and accommodation to their growing subordination, was articulated through song and poetry (Gunner, 1979), the formation of spirit possession cults, dance, improvement, and puberty rites associations (Strobel, 1979), the manipulation of ritual and prophetic power and conversion to Christianity (Comaroff, 1985). In addition, some resorted to casual labour and prostitution, selling and buying land, or tried to put their role as food producers to good effect (Clark, 1980; Crummey, 1981, 1982; Spaulding, 1984; Alpers, 1986; Kapteijns, 1985).

Analyses of women in nineteenth century North Africa have also become more sophisticated as historians abandon the idealist biases, according to which the status and role of women in these societies is primarily attributed to the ideas and values contained in Islamic religious and juridical texts. It has become quite clear that this approach ignores the fact that the formal texts do not tell us much about the



changing realities of women's lives in the extremely diverse societies and countries that make up the so-called "Muslim world" (Beck and Keddie, 1978; Keddie, 1979; Keddie and Baron, 1991; Tucker, 1983; UNESCO, 1984; Jansen, 1989; Ahmed, 1992). The literature on Egypt makes it clear that the exploitation of peasant women increased in the course of the century thanks to agricultural "modernization," state centralization, labour and military conscription, and the progressive decline of the extended family as a semi-autonomous unit and the consequent consolidation of family property around men. At the same time, however, some elite women acquired land either through purchase, inheritance, usually in the absence of male children, or grants from male relatives, especially a father (Tucker, 1985). Seclusion of middle class women appears to have increased as the old merchant classes became marginalised due to the imposition of state trading monopolies and as the wives of the "new" urban-based petite-bourgeois professionals were increasingly cut off from their husbands' professional lives and relegated to the domestic sphere (Cole, 1981). All these changes provoked debate about the position of women in society. The feminist discourse was conducted among the intellectuals, including men (Cole, 1981; Kader, 1987; Philipp, 1978; Cannon, 1985).

For women's history in the twentieth century, the impact of colonialism has, predictably, featured prominently. Many of the writers already referred to in the preceding paragraph examine how African women were affected by the imposition of colonial rule. They demonstrate that colonial patriarchal ideologies combined with indigenous patriarchal ideologies tended to reinforce women's subordination, exploitation and oppression. Many elite women were progressively marginalised as they lost their political power and control over trading and manufacturing activities. But there were other women who took advantage of the expanding petty commodity markets (Ekejiuba, 1967; Johnson, 1978), or who sought to retain their autonomy by migrating to the rapidly growing colonial towns and cities where they often engaged in trading activities, beer brewing, domestic service, and sometimes prostitution, thanks to the acute demographic imbalance between the sexes (Little, 1973; Bujra, 1975; van Onselen, 1982; Gaitskell *et al.*, 1983; Robertson, 1984; White, 1990). The expansion of cash crop production and male labour migration increased women's workloads, while at the same time their ability to appropriate the products of their labour declined (Boserup, 1970). Migrant labour was particularly prevalent and its negative effects on women especially evident in Southern Africa (Muntemba, 1982; Wright, 1983; Walker, 1990). There were, of course, some societies where women did succeed in retaining and even improving on their previous autonomy, if only temporarily (Hay, 1976; Mandala, 1984).

All these developments produced acute tensions in gender relations, to which the colonial state responded by tightening restrictive customary law, which led to important changes in family structure and created new forms of patriarchal power



(Chauncey, 1981; Hay and Wright, 1982; Chanock, 1985; Roberts, 1987). By far the topic that has attracted the most attention is that of women's resistance to colonial rule (Denzer, 1976; Rogers [Geiger], 1980, 1990). The studies range from those that examine specific activists (Denzer, 1981, 1987; Okonkwo, 1986a; Rosenfeld, 1986; Brantley, 1986) and events, such as the Aba Women's War of 1929 (van Allen, 1976; Ifeka-Moller, 1975), the Anlu's Women's uprising in the Cameroons (Ritsenthaler, 1960), the spontaneous uprisings of South African women in the late 1950s (Bernstein, 1985) and their participation in the struggles against apartheid generally (Goodwin, 1984; Mandela, 1984; Kuzwayo, 1985; Barret, 1986), to general analyses of women's involvement in nationalist struggles in various countries (Steady, 1975; Denzer, 1976; Mba, 1982; Walker, 1982; Weiss, 1986; Geiger, 1987). It is now abundantly clear that women were actively involved in the wars of national liberation, such as Mau Mau (Likimani, 1985; Kanogo, 1987; Presley, 1991), and those in Algeria (Gorden, 1972), the Portuguese colonies (Urdang, 1979, 1984), Namibia (Cleaver and Wallace, 1990), and Eritrea (Wilson, 1991). Studies are also beginning to appear on women's active involvement in labour movements and struggles (Robertson and Berger, 1986; Zeleza, 1988a; Mashinini, 1991).

For the post-colonial period much of the literature has focused on whether or not women's position and status has improved or deteriorated with independence. The scope of subjects covered is wide, ranging from women in the rural and urban economies and women's participation in state politics and development projects, to changes in the structure of marriage and kinship. The literature shows that in many countries women's rural production has become more commodified since independence. In addition to farming, women in regions afflicted by the growing crises of subsistence have increasingly resorted to petty trading and wage labour to make ends meet. Commodification has increased the differentiation of rural women and made it more complex (Afonja, 1981, 1986; Guyer, 1984; Okali, 1983; Crevey, 1986; Newbury and Schoepf, 1989).

Research on African women has privileged rural over urban women, perhaps because the vast majority of African women are still rural dwellers (Simmons, 1988; Davison, 1988, 1989). But it is quite clear that the number of women migrating to and living in cities has risen considerably (Sudarkasa, 1977; Adepaju, 1988; Perold, 1985; Stichter and Parpart, 1988). Much of the literature on urban women has tended to focus on their activities as traders or informal sector operators. Those studies that deal with women in wage employment have demonstrated that while women's employment has grown rapidly in many countries since independence due to economic expansion, increased women's access to education, changes in family structure, and struggles by the women themselves for economic independence, women still tend to be crowded in low-paying service jobs and have to juggle with



the burdens of the double day (Selassie, 1986; JASPA/ILO, 1986b, 1986c, 1986d, 1986e, 1986f, 1988; Zeleza, 1988b; Stichter and Parpart, 1990).

The studies done on women's participation in state politics demonstrate that women have been excluded and marginalized from the political process, despite their active involvement in the independence struggles. In some countries women, especially petty traders, have been targeted as scapegoats and attacked by states facing acute economic problems.¹⁹ The literature has also amply demonstrated that until quite recently most government and international aid organizations primarily focused on men rather than women in their development projects. This was gradually changed thanks to the growth of the feminist movement and the food crisis in many African countries. The "women in development" movement and ideology was born. But it has done little, to date, to empower the vast majority of Africa's economically exploited and politically marginalized women (Brian, 1976; Nelson, 1981; Lewis, 1984; Mbilinyi, 1984; Overholt *et al.*, 1985; Swantz, 1985; Munachonga, 1989). This is true even in the self-styled "socialist" regimes (Haile, 1980; Urdang, 1983; Fortman, 1982; Seidman, 1984).

But African women in the post-independence era have not been passive victims. They continue to struggle both individually and collectively against their exploitation, oppression, and marginalisation, and to push open the doors to economic, political, social, and cultural empowerment (Obbo, 1980, 1986; Stamp, 1986; Dolphyne, 1991).

Gendering African History

It is quite evident that a lot of work has been done to recover women's history, but much more needs to be done. Also, the history that has so far been recovered has yet to be fully incorporated into the mainstream of African historical studies. Feminist historians, therefore, have to pursue a two-pronged agenda: writing women's history and gender history. Women's history, or "herstory," is often seen as a reconstruction, a retrieval, of women's experiences, expressions, ideas and actions. Gender has been defined as the changing social organization and symbolic representation of sexual difference, the primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated or signified. As a concept it offers an epistemological redefinition of historical knowledge as construction rather than reconstruction (Scott, 1988: Chapters 1 and 2). To put it simply, it is said that in women's history the primary focus is on women, while in gender history it encompasses both men and women as gendered subjects.

Apart from its explanatory power, the growing importance of gender as an analytical category reflected growing frustration among feminist historians at the relatively limited impact that women's history was having on mainstream historical



studies.²⁰ There were also those who may have adopted the term “gender” merely as a synonym for women because it sounded more objective and neutral than “women,” and thus gave their work academic legitimacy. Moreover, its popularity was probably helped by the proliferation of studies on sex and sexuality. It can further be argued that the concept of “gender” offered the reductionist paradigms of Marxism and psychoanalytic theory a much-needed face-lift. Unfortunately, women’s history and gender history have increasingly come to be seen in oppositional and hierarchical terms. This reproduces the very binary thinking and dichotomous models feminist historians have been at pains to discard.²¹

The elevation of gender history over women’s history may appear more “radical” and inclusive, but can in fact play into the hands of anti-feminists and legitimate exclusionary practices in academia. Courses in women’s history can be opposed on the grounds that gender is integrated in the mainstream courses when that is in fact not the case. This is, for example, the situation in Canada where, Pierson (1992: 138) points out, there is no “positive evidence that the paucity of women’s history courses results from mainstream adoption of gender as “a useful category of historical analysis, leading to an integration of gender history and the history of women’s past experiences into non-women’s history courses, undergraduate and graduate.”²²

Women’s history and gender history, are mutually reinforcing, and need to be pursued simultaneously by feminist historians. In concrete pedagogical terms this means devising curricula that contains specific courses in women’s history and consciously incorporating feminist perspectives in mainstream courses. Creating and maintaining specific courses in women’s history is based on a recognition that women’s history represents “a field of knowledge production which has its own history, formed by both the politics of women’s liberation and intellectual developments within history and in associated disciplines” and that there are methodological frameworks that are specific to women’s history and women’s studies in general (Allport, 1993). Women’s history, in short, must not be seen as a temporary necessity, something that is not “real history.” Women’s history is, both on an empirical and theoretical level “one of the most exciting historical specializations today” and by its very existence is instrumental in “deconstructing mainstream historiography. By emphasizing the ‘other side’ of history, women instead of men, the implicit male perspective of historiography that has obliterated women becomes explicit. This process is ‘pivoting the centre’ of dominant historiography. It exposes normative and expressive rules of both historical writing and teaching” (Grever, 1991: 77).

The actual content of the courses in women’s history, and the teaching methods, will of course vary, reflecting, no doubt, different national histories, women’s experiences, and intellectual traditions. Underpinning courses in women’s history, epistemologically and pedagogically, should be feminist theorizing that recognizes difference and the gendered nature of all social relations and works on the immediate



environment to achieve political action (Foster, 1992: 10–25). These courses must not only be offered at the university level, but at the primary and secondary school levels. Needless to say, this is likely to be met by resistance from the educational authorities in many countries. The strategies to overcome such resistance will necessarily vary. But such endeavours and struggles are unlikely to go far without organization. Feminist historians need to make women's history visible by organising all kinds of activities, penetrating the councils that design syllabuses and set examinations, and by publishing new material. Without new course books the case for women's history is unlikely to be advanced. In other words, in addition to publishing sophisticated articles, monographs and books on women's history for use at the university level, feminist historians have to undertake the far less glamorous task of publishing new material for schools.

Advancing gender history and mainstreaming entails gender-balancing courses and making gender as fundamental as, say, class as a category of historical analysis. Taking gender seriously as a conceptual tool for understanding the human past challenges the conventional periodizations based on political events and cultural and religious shifts in which men were preponderantly involved,²³ and transcends the traditional questions and problematics, constructs of significant events, and the theories and explanatory models of social change (Scott, 1988; Kelly-Godol, 1984).

Gendering history is a process that involves a series of curricular changes, whose ultimate objective is a balanced and inclusive curriculum, in which women's and men's past experience can be understood together. A number of stages have been suggested in developing a gendered history curriculum (Schuster and van Dyne, 1984; Schade, 1993). Confronted with a curriculum in which women are absent, the feminist historian could begin by searching for and incorporating the missing women within the conventional paradigms. This would essentially be a story of the heroines, of the great women leaders, warriors, traders, thinkers, and so on. This could be followed, or accompanied, by offering specific lectures within the course on women experiences during the period under discussion.

This gradualist or additive approach is problematic. Introducing women's history into the curriculum through a few "exceptional" examples does little to change the existing paradigms. In fact, a subtle, and perhaps unintended, message may be imparted to students: that since some women did succeed the failure of others to do so may be ascribed to their lack of motivation, ability, and other individual attributes. This serves to deny the reality of oppressive structures. Adding a couple or so lectures may make women seem anomalous, the material about them marginal to the core knowledge covered in the curriculum. This is merely to suggest that the larger goals of curriculum transformation must not be lost in well-meaning, but token, gestures which do not challenge the conventional paradigms.²⁴



The questions of gender, class, and other social constructs that shape historical change, such as race and ethnicity, must be discussed explicitly. One way of confronting androcentric historiographical biases and promoting gender history is to use “battling readings” throughout the course. This involves using readings from “regular history” and “women’s history” for every topic discussed. This forces students to confront different constructions of history and the differentiated participation of men and women in historical processes. For example, in discussing trade in nineteenth century West Africa one can pit Hopkins’s (1978) *An Economic History of West Africa* and White’s (1987) *Sierra Leone’s Settler Women Traders*. In studying the pre-colonial iron industry Haaland and Shinnie’s (1985) *African Iron Working* can battle it out with Herbert’s (1993) *Iron, Gender, and Power*. For a general survey of African history the “battling textbooks” can be *African History* by Curtin *et al* (1978), and Johnson-Odim and Strobel’s (1990) *Restoring Women to History*.

This enables the students and the teacher to systematically question the existing paradigms, the validity of the conventional definitions of historical periods, causality, and normative standards of what constitutes significant knowledge, and the incorporation of gender as a category of analysis.²⁵ A gendered curriculum would embody an inclusive vision that explores history as “ourstory,” a complex, ambiguous, and contested story of the human experience, a story based on difference, diversity and inequality, rather than sameness, uniformity, and generalization.

A gendered historiography would, for example, demonstrate that migration, one of the beloved themes in African historiography involved more than the heroic adventures of male warriors and leaders, that essentially it entailed the expansion of productive, distributive, and demographic frontiers in which both men and women played a fundamental, but differentiated role, and gender relations, divisions of labour and ideologies were often reconstructed in the process. Migrations would no longer be depicted as dramatic but simplified events, rather as complicated, if prosaic, social processes. Gender would also help decode the symbolisms, ideologies and structures of state formation and the changing nature of hegemony and social struggle. Analysis of imperialism and colonialism would certainly be deepened, for imperial conquest articulated the misogynist constructions of “manliness” and “otherness” and the reconfiguration of African gender relations and sexuality featured centrally in the justificatory baggage of the colonial project. For its part, economic history would lose its neat and dualistic analytical categories that strictly separate productive from distributive activities, “traditional” from “modern” societies, “subsistence” from “market” economies, “informal” from “formal” sectors, “unproductive” from “productive” labour, “private” from “public” spheres, for it would be shown that women either straddle both, or their involvement in one reproduces the other. The male labour power that is mobilised for the “modern,” “market,” “formal,” “productive” and “public” spheres would hardly exist without women working in



the “unremunerated” (“unproductive” in the lexicon of neo-classical and Marxian labour theories) “traditional,” or “subsistence,” or “informal,” or “private” sectors. Thus it would be clear that the dualisms of conventional economic historiography do not represent distinct, separate spheres, but integrated activities structured by gender and class.

Conclusion

The examples could go on. But the case for gender history, I believe, has been made. Gendered history offers an opportunity both to bring women to the historical centre stage and to make history a truly comprehensive study of the human past in all its complexities. The pursuit of gender history should not, however, be at the expense of women’s history as a separate and distinct branch of knowledge and history. Feminist historians can, and wherever possible should, work on both fronts simultaneously. Privileging one over the other is to fall into the very binary dichotomies and hierarchies of “malestream” historiography and western philosophy that feminists and African historians have been struggling against all these years. Gender history cannot go far without the continuous retrieval of women’s history, while women’s history cannot transform the fundamentally flawed paradigmatic bases and biases of “mainstream” history without gender history. Ultimately our goal is both to understand women for their own sake, much as we try to understand workers or peasants for their own sake, as separate windows into aspects of the human past, and also to probe and capture our shared, but varied, diverse and unequal, historical experiences and relations as human beings.

Mainstreaming African women’s history and gendering African history are immense tasks. It needs the collaboration of both female and male historians who are informed by feminist perspectives and committed to a deeper and broader understanding of the human past than is possible by using the conventional androcentric paradigms. More concretely, there is need for comprehensive and up-to-date surveys of women’s courses offered in the Social Sciences and Humanities and Arts departments in African universities, as well as of faculty hiring by gender. Also, the importance of developing and disseminating bibliographic guides and syllabi cannot be overemphasised. Bibliographies of works by African scholars and published in Africa would help significantly: African feminist researchers need to be more aware of each others work and use that to build relevant paradigms instead of always borrowing theories manufactured in the West. Many of the existing bibliographic surveys mostly contain works published in the western countries by Africanists.²⁶ Moreover, systematic work needs to be undertaken to generate national, regional, and continental syntheses and other materials on various aspects of women’s history. The compilation of source materials on women’s history, both written and oral, for



research and which could also be used as primary readers in history courses, would be particularly useful.

NOTES

1. It would be interesting to find out how many departments of history in African universities offer specific courses in women's history.
2. This is quite evident from the papers in the collection by Offen *et al.* (1991), which cover about 25 countries in Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Asia. See Kleinberg, (1988); Carroll (1976); Angerman *et al.* (1989). In the social sciences the usual practice is for women to be taught largely in segregated women's studies departments. See Hess and Ferree (1987); Nielsen (1990); Reinhartz (1992).
3. All the editors of both series and almost all the contributors are men. At the time research for this selection was conducted Volume 8 of the UNESCO series had not yet come out, hence its omission in the analysis that follows. This volume shows a slight improvement over the previous ones, with women being mentioned on 38 out of the 934 pages of text. Nothing to brag about.
4. In the 1995 second edition there is an expanded coverage of women, but only to 17 pages out of 530 pages of text.
5. In the Orientalist constructions of North Africa, for example, the region is often seen as part of the "Middle East," the "Arab" or "Muslim" world, rather than an integral part of Africa. See Said (1979). Attempts to divorce North Africa, especially Egypt, from the mainstream of African history, were spawned by nineteenth-century European racist historiography. See Bernal (198, 1991). For problems of defining regions in Africa as historical units during different periods, and in relation to colonial configurations, see Zeleza (1984, 1985).
6. Volume one has no woman contributor, while volume two has one out of 16 contributors.
7. See especially the work of Terray, 1972; Meillassoux, 1981; and Seddon, 1978.
8. This point is made, and demonstrated powerfully, in Mandala (1990); also see, Zeleza (1993). This will also be demonstrated below when we examine the reconstructions of women's history attempted to date.
9. To be sure, as Foster (1992: 3) has argued, "the Liberal and Marxist discourses have been stretched to include women but the dominant assumptions still exclude a feminist perspective. They cannot accommodate feminist interests which threaten the very foundation on which these theories rest."
10. Bock (1991) observes that the old dichotomies are simply being replaced by equally problematic new ones, notably, gender/sex (social construction of male and female roles/biological differentiation between men and women), equality/difference, and integration/autonomy. She argues that the dichotomy between "social" gender and "biological" sex does not resolve but only restates the old "nature" versus "culture" quarrel. Again, it relegates the dimension of women's body, sexuality, motherhood and physiological sexual difference to a supposedly pre-social sphere, and it resolves even less the question of precisely what part of women's



- experience and activity is “biological” and what part “social” or “cultural” (p. 8). It is often also not realized that “the dichotomous distinction between sex and gender is largely specific to the English language” (p. 9). Also see K. Offen, R. Pierson and J. Kendall, “Introduction,” in K. Offen *et al.*
11. See, for example, the Influential work of bell hooks (1981; 1984; 1988). The anguished debates between white women and women of colour can be seen in some of the books on women’s history and feminist methodology already referred to, such as Offen *et al.* (1991); Jaggar and Rothenberg (1990); Hirsch and Keller (1990). Also see, *Feminist Review*, Nos. 22 and 23, 1986; Joseph and Lewis (1986); Lemer (1990); Stasiulis (1990).
 12. Discussed in greater detail below. It is this attitude that leads Parpart (1992: 171–79) to argue (after noting that African women have challenged the wide spread habit of western Africanists at conferences to discuss African women’s experiences without engaging African women scholars themselves) that the question of who does research on African women’s history “is a red herring.”
 13. The author notes that there are, of course, many types of oral history and various reasons why feminists use them. Also see Gluck (1979). Some feminist historians note that oral historians sometimes do not adequately question the concepts they use. For example, they may want to demonstrate women’s marginality, when the women concerned may not see themselves as marginal, see Geiger (1990). Others are not convinced that oral history helps in “liberating” the voices of oppressed women, see Personal Narratives Group, eds., 1989.
 14. For the ghettoization of women’s history and marginalisation of gender history in Britain see Jane Kendall, in Offen *et al.*, 1991.
 15. This history seeks, she argues, to write about women missing from, and describing their contribution to, traditional history. This constitutes, in her view, “transitional women’s history,” which she distinguishes from women’s history that studies the actual experiences of women in the past on their own terms, and what she calls “universal history,” a holistic history synthesizing traditional history and women’s history. The latter is what increasingly came to be referred to as gender history.
 16. For detailed bibliographic surveys, see Robertson (1987); *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 22 (3), 1988, *Special Issue on Women*; and the well-written monographs on so-called sub-Saharan Africa and the so-called Middle East, a large part of which covers North Africa, in Johnson-Odim and Strobel (1988).
 17. Historians have amply demonstrated that many practices and values which are considered “traditional” today, including those in the sphere of gender relations, were invented during the colonial period, see Ranger (1989) and Chanock (1985). Increasingly anthropologists have come to the same view, but in typically convoluted post-structuralist deliberations, see Comaroff (1980) and Moore (1986).
 18. This section relies heavily on Johnson-Odim and Strobel (1988), and Zeleza (1993).
 19. For example, in the 1980s the Nigerian military government increased its attacks on market women as Nigeria entered a period of economic crisis partly brought about by declining oil revenues. The women traders were blamed for high inflation and shortages, see Dennis, 1987. On relations between the Nigerian military and women see Mba, 1989.



20. Scott (1988: 3) gives this as one of the main reasons she turned to gender as an analytical framework in feminist history.
21. For a compelling critique of Scott's post-structuralist feminist historiography, see Hall, 1991; also see Schwegman and Bosch, 1991; and Newman, 1991. Bock (1991) and Sangster (1995) have argued forcefully for the deconstruction of the dichotomy between women's history and gender history. For her argument that gender history is not more encompassing, does not offer more profound insights, and is not theoretically more sophisticated than women's history, Sangster, a distinguished Canadian feminist historian, has been widely condemned by her younger colleagues (personal communication), one more indication of how vicious sectarian academic battles can be.
22. Pierson's (1992) data shows that the number of women's history courses in Canadian universities remains abysmally low, accounting for less than 3% of the total number of courses offered.
23. For example, in European history, the glory that was the Renaissance, the period during which men (elite men) saw their intellectual horizons widen, loses its glow with revelations that women became more subordinate and restricted than in earlier centuries, see Kelly (1984).
24. This point is made particularly well in the American context by Higginbotham, 1990. The *Women's Studies Quarterly*, has done several special issues on incorporating feminist perspectives in various Social Science disciplines, including Economics and Psychology with their rigid, positivist, and pseudo-scientific paradigms and models. See Vol. 18, Nos. 1&2 devoted to curricular and institutional transformation; Vol. 18 Nos. 3&4, to "Women's Studies in Economics"; Vol. 20, Nos. 1 & 2, to "Feminist Psychology: Curriculum and Pedagogy."
25. In my third year African history class that I taught at Trent University, I experimented with this method, and it was fascinating watching the students becoming more aware that "doing" history is as gendered as the historical processes they were trying to understand. For example, in my tutorial on the "Islamic Revolutions in West Africa in the Nineteenth" century I used Chapter 12 in Curtin *et al.* (1978) ("The Commercial and Religious Revolutions in West Africa"); Murray Last (1985) ("Reform in West Africa: the Jihad Movements of the nineteenth century," in Ajayi and Crowder, eds.); Boyd (1986) ("The Fulani Women Poets," in A. H. M. Kirk-Greene and M. Adamu, eds.); J. Boyd and M. Last (1985) ("The Role of Women as 'Agents Religieux', in Sokoto"); Kapteijns (1985) ("Islamic Rationales for the Changing Roles of Women in the Western Sudan" in Daly, ed); and J. Carney and M. Watts (1991) ("Disciplining Women? Rice, Mechanization and the Evolution of Mandinka Gender relations in Senegambia").
26. See, for example, the recently published bibliographic guide by Fong (1993). The absence or under-representation of works on women by African scholars in standard Africanist historiographic surveys is staggering as can be seen, for example, in Robertson (1987).

