

## **BOOK REVIEWS – REVUE DES LIVRES**

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*Women in Tanzania: an Analytical Bibliography*, by Ophelia MASCARENHAS and Marjorie MBILINYI (Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, 1983).

Reviewed by Janet M. BUJRA\*

«Who are you to speak? You are only a woman», say the husbands of peasant women who raise their voices in village meetings in Tanzania. «What do you know? How much education do you have?» This book is a product both of women listening to other women, *and* of speaking out: «There are many different ways of posing the question of women or of women's oppression [in Tanzania]. In order to understand which positions represent a 'socialist' position it is essential to 'listen' to the people, by examining the concrete struggles and demands of peasant and working class women themselves» (17). The reader may at first be puzzled by the form which this product takes – the word 'bibliography' is redolent of cloistered individual study in the ivory towers of academic establishments. This is no ordinary bibliography, however, for whilst it will be invaluable as a resource guide and stimulus to the individual researcher, it makes two other strong claims to our attention. Firstly it is more than a bibliography, in that it presents a challenging and coherent theoretical and feminist perspective from which to evaluate the work carried out on women in Tanzania. Secondly, whilst it will be immeasurably useful to the individual researcher, it is also to be seen as the culmination of collective effort and of the pooling of resources, with the invitation – nay, demand – to reciprocate: «In the production of this work, we, as well as those who provided materials to us, are engaged in an act of sharing knowledge with the readers. We trust that those who make use of it will share their work with us in a similar way» (6). One indication of this sharing is to be seen in a parallel translation of the book into Swahili so that it may reach as wide an audience as possible in Tanzania. As the outcome of pooled effort, it is a forceful testimony, possibly without parallel in Africa, to the amount and quality of work on women, much of it by Tanzanian researchers, which has been carried out in response to a continuing and lively local debate.

The major contribution of this book is in its ambitious and immensely stimulating critique and appraisal of work (including the authors' own) on women in Tanzania and of the conditions of life of Tanzanian women. The theoretical framework proposed by the joint authors is outlined in a long introductory chapter which draws both on the Tanzanian texts and on wider reading. The four hundred bibliographical entries are divided into fourteen sections covering women peasants and workers; the mobilisation and political participation of women; legal, ideological and cultural aspects of women's oppression; reproduction and health; as well as case studies detailing the cultural variety of Tanzanian society and general accounts of women's position within it.

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The theoretical perspective adopted here is summarised in the statement that: «women's oppression is a fundamental aspect of the dominant capitalist relations of production and reproduction in Tanzania today» (16). The authors do *not* subscribe to a view of 'Tanzanian women' as an undifferentiated or uniform social category; on the contrary the question of women is for them explicitly a «class question», which is to say that whilst the relations of production almost always have a gender component, they divide women in one context, unite them in another.

The three basic concepts employed here to explain women's oppression are patriarchy, capitalism and struggle. Where so much else is problematised it is disappointing that the first two of these ideas are not more critically interrogated. It is conceded that the notion of 'patriarchy'—the subjection of women to male dominance—can be misleading if used 'transhistorically'. They attempt to rescue the concept by arguing that a precapitalist form of patriarchy in some areas of Tanzania (perhaps better described as gerontocracy, since it entailed the domination of younger men as well as women to the power of older males) was transformed by capitalist penetration: first 'reconstituted' in the peasant household under colonialism, then recast by capital and the state in the post colonial phase. This *periodisation* does not, however, confront the source of the problem, which is the implication in the term 'patriarchy' that there is something about *women* which makes them susceptible to male domination in all contexts and at all periods (and something about *men* which propels them to dominate). Not only is this empirically questionable but it also forecloses discussion on the precise question which should be at issue. In practice the authors are too intellectually alive to allow this to happen, and whilst the term 'patriarchy' is occasionally stretched beyond descriptive label to explanatory concept, they later offer a more useful, if inconsistent, formulation: «The problem posed is not that of women or men *per se*, but rather the social relations of production and reproduction which combine to oppress and exploit particular classes of women» (37). This rendering in turn is open to the objection that it suggests the mechanical operation of abstract laws of motion, hidden from, and beyond the control of human agency—a position which the authors, with their emphasis on struggle, quite clearly do not espouse. In the process of struggle it is evident that patriarchal *ideologies* are much to the fore, the very stuff of *participants'* consciousness. Analytically it is the relationship between participants' ways of understanding and the realities (of which patriarchal ideologies are a distorted impression) which needs further work.

If use of the concept 'patriarchy' seems to offer up too much to proponents of patriarchal ideology, the most exciting aspect of this book is its focus on the struggles of women, at different class levels, to comprehend and to transform their lives. The authors are careful to note that by 'struggle' they include not only collective resistance, but also various forms of individual action and 'non-action' which might appear to suggest passivity or acquiescence—for example the 'go-slow' performance of work by domestic servants, often interpreted by employers as 'stupidity' or 'laziness'.

The major forms of struggle are located amongst working class and peasant women, accounts of which allow the authors to put paid to the view of women as fatalistically accepting their inferior lot – or, as a (male) participant in a debate at the university put it: «Our mothers in the villages are perfectly happy». Women's collective and individual actions of protest and resentment are seen as a response, given their particular location in the sexual division of labour, to the extension of 'capitalist' relations of production. Many examples of women's resistance are provided, from refusal to participate in rural 'development' projects which increase their workloads without enlarging their control over the product of their labour, to demands for more job security and equitable wages in industrial occupations. More individualistic forms of resistance are to be seen in the increasing numbers of women, and especially independent women, migrating to towns, and a tendency there towards the rejection of marriage: «If you are a women and want to be equal you can't stay with your husband any more», as a clerical worker at a bank put it (Item 143, Hatton). What women are beginning to resist here are ideologies of wifely passivity, such as those celebrated in Swahili poetry: «sit politely with your husband / don't bother him when he talks / don't answer back to him... satisfy his needs» (quoted Item 224, Munuo).

There are other kinds of 'struggle' which seem to have a more ambiguous place within this (heroic?) conception of women. These are the forms which culminate in women oppressing and exploiting each other. Thus there are women described here who accumulate savings via beer brewing or prostitution, and use them to claim an independent stake in the means of production by buying land and cultivating it with the use of hired labourers, some or all of whom may be women. Another case in point are the 'struggles' of petty bourgeois women to assert cultural class dominance. This is a more complex and sensitive issue. The authors face up honestly and fairly to the issue of potential class bias amongst Tanzanian women social scientists: «Their work has often reflected their own personal and professional struggles as members of the petty bourgeoisie» (37). These struggles are not to be dismissed (though they suggest a more privileged order of female subordination!) but they should not be allowed to elbow out the concerns of workers and peasants. More important, a conscious and continuing effort is clearly being made in Tanzania to overcome class divisions between women. This is evident in the rising concern, interest and commitment to women's issues manifested in much of the work described in this book. But it is also to be seen in research methodology, where a clear attempt to work on matters of concern to peasant and working women themselves, and to share results with them, are positive fruits of 'listening to the people' (see for example Item 119 reporting Oomen MYIN's attempt in Morogoro to report back to villagers about research findings, her «use of visual aids in the form of posters to codify results», and her production of «a simplified research report in Kiswahili to be distributed to the villages concerned...»).

Class struggles of another sort between women are reported on, but not theorised. There have been open conflicts between working women and the wives of party and government bureaucrats. Amongst other

factors, the loud voice which such 'big wives' have within the national women's organisation (the UWT) undermines its capacity to mobilise women as a whole towards transforming their lives: «Women workers accused the UWT of being an organisation of 'big wives'... which did not represent their interests» (21). In particular such 'big wives' resented the extension of maternity leave to unmarried mothers, and what working women regarded as 'sexual harassment' they interpreted as 'stealing our husbands'. The extent to which such attitudes and practices constitute an expression of 'class interest' and what exactly the class interests of the state bureaucracy are, is a question demanding further research.

The unexamined assertion is that this interest – and the pressure to which women's struggles are in large measure a response – is the extension of *capitalist* relations of production via the agency of the state. This seems to me to be a mis-leading way of conceptualising the contradictions of contemporary Tanzanian society. On the one hand whilst capitalist relations of production *are* being extended in some areas in the form of Kulak or large scale capitalist farmers directly exploiting labour power, the major change that is taking place in Tanzania is the transformation of subsistence cultivators into petty commodity producers, subjected to various forms of state persuasion and coercion to produce for a market which is also subject to state direction and control. The extension of market relations, whilst a necessary preliminary to capitalism, is not in itself a manifestation of the establishment of capitalist *relations of production*. Whilst some would wish to regard peasant farmers as 'disguised wage workers', the vital difference is that effective control over the means of production is still in their hands, and in so far as they still have the capacity to produce subsistence goods, this remains a potential alternative and fall back position from which to participate in the market. Women here (as in most of the rest of Africa) are engaged more in food than in cash crop production. This gives them on the one hand a certain distance from mercantile exploitation, whilst at the same time allowing male (and some female) producers and appropriators of the product of cash crop agriculture an extra dimension of power. I would argue, then, that peasant women's struggles here centre on petty commodity production rather than on capitalism.

Conceptualising the Tanzanian state as a capitalist state is also less than precise. What is in fact extremely valuable in this book is the wealth of concrete instances that are provided of the contradictions and paradoxes of a state ruling class which is *not* a capitalist class, and which, in order to perpetuate its existence must increase the marketable surplus over which it has control, whilst at the same time maintaining a political climate within which pressure to produce more does not produce explosive conflicts. Its internal divisions and inconsistencies are amply illustrated here. On the one hand, given its lack of effective economic control it is forced to «rule by decree» (84); on the other hand it attempts (though often without conviction) to harness the people's energies to its own political ambitions. Regarding women I particularly savoured the description of rural ideological campaigns conducted by urban women as 'hit and run seminars' (Item 212, Linjewile), and in an account of Tanzania's 1971 Marriage Act, the distinction between 'paperwork' and 'mass knowledge'.

The bibliographic references here provide more than adequate backing for the authors' claim that rural development policies (particularly villagisation whereby scattered homesteads are concentrated into compact settlements with far more government direction over what is to be produced) have, «not only... *not* contributed to the liberation of women, but [have] heightened women's oppression» (95–6). Women's already heavy workloads are increased without a corresponding expansion in women's control over the means of production or disposal of the product. The irony is, that in their critique of these and other policies and practices of the Tanzanian state, the authors are able to derive support from the writings of NYERERE, the pronouncements of the Party and debates in the press. This is not just a matter of contrasting ideological claims with reality, it also exposes the extent to which there are contradictions expressed in debate, discussion and self criticism within Tanzanian state and society regarding state practice.

Within the concept of 'struggle', the authors have also placed intellectual endeavours – the history of attempts to conceptualise women in Tanzania. The way in which local opposition to women's studies has consisted in labelling it a 'foreign' import, ridiculing and trivialising women's concerns, or demoting women's struggles to the status of a 'secondary contradiction' will be familiar to all who work in this field. In addition there is a frank attempt to trace the various theoretical frameworks which have marked the struggle to conceptualise women in Tanzania. Since the history of women's studies is virtually coterminous with the extensive and influential work of one of the authors here (MBILINYI), this involves a task of self-criticism which we could all usefully emulate. From a relatively simplistic version of patriarchy and the sexual division of labour, the framework of explanation has shifted to modes of production and reproduction and class / gender struggles, pausing briefly to engage with, and reject, structuralist paradigms (in particular the articulation of modes of production). What is immensely encouraging is the growth of this area of research and analysis over the past decade, with a conference held in 1979 attracting sixty researchers, «nearly all of whom were Tanzanian women» (Item 30).

As a research guide, this bibliography has certain minor inadequacies which could perhaps be attended to in the later editions which one would hope to see. Firstly the ordering of items within each section is alphabetical, by author's name. Given the aims of the enterprise it would have been more useful to arrange them in chronological order so that the dialectical unfolding of argument or understanding could be better appreciated. Secondly the index is unhelpful except for locating the work of authors in various sections. An index which would allow one to trace references to particular regions of Tanzania as well as subjects not categorised in the sectioning of the book (e.g. to matrilinearity or to domestic service) would have been useful. Thirdly, in a book in which gender is central, it is not always possible to distinguish the sex of authors mentioned. The relevance of this information cannot be doubted in some cases – for example, surely the F.U. MBAH, Item 147 (who argued that prostitution is

«a safety valve for men's tensions», protecting women against widespread rape and allowing for a way of earning a living «very much like a clerk») is a man? Finally it is sometimes difficult in the annotations to tell where the summary of author's views ends, and comment or critique begins. Separating and subheading these two dimensions would have seemed more just to all concerned. However it is as a witness to the far reaching work carried out on women by Tanzanian researchers (as well as researchers in Tanzania), and as a stimulus and spur to further work, both in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa, that this book will finally be judged. At present it has no known rivals.

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