A Gender-Related Reading of the History of Danxome?[1]

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Wives of the Leopard, Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey
by Edna G. Bay
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Wives of the Leopard is probably the last book published on Danxome, although it was published by the Virginia University Press as far back as 1998.[2] Given the rapid pace of review of fresh ideas in the academic world, writing about this subject some ten years after publication might look anachronistic. However, I presume that, for most of us, this book remains very current for two critical reasons: firstly, while it may constitute old stuff for the Anglophone academia, their francophone colleagues may yet not be very conversant with it. Secondly, for us Beninese, this book raises such vital questions that transcend time and space.

This is what justifies a critical review of the book cited above. Professor Bay's intellectual process is original in many regards. Obviously, some authors (and no less prominent ones) have written on the women of Danxome.[3] Unlike the authors of previous publications that focused on the role of the Amazons, she subtly reminds us that the Amazons are but the trees that hide the forest. Indeed, she considerably widens the scope of our insight into the public life of women in Danxome by situating this celebrated corps of fighters in its natural context, that is the bustling life of Abomey palaces where thousands of women are milling up and down attending to various duties.[4] Professor Bay portrays these human hives as a distinct world whose organisation is articulated around some basic principles meant to create equilibrium between the two main pillars of a skilfully designed structure, represented by the king and his *kpojito* or the queen-mother. This situation is the reflection of the equilibrium in the universe, which is articulated around the primordial duality of male and female beings. The palace therefore constitutes a microcosm of the kingdom, a wider stage for the alliance of opposites: Alladaxonu/Anato; woman/man; Coast/Abomey; Kutomè/Gbetomè.[5]

Professor Bay's intellectual methodology is original for yet another reason: her approach is a clear departure from the usual treatment of sources, insofar as her process aptly blends an exhaustive investigation of written material on Danxome with carefully selected oral sources. What we have been accustomed to so far is the seesaw movements between the two sources, which pretend to be blissfully ignorant of one another. For instance, Robin Law and John Reid declare, in plain language, their scepticism of oral sources and have consequently gone on to produce voluminous publications using explorers' records and the accounts books of European trading companies.[6] For his part, Maurice Glèlè Ahanhanzo produced his monumental reconstruction of the history of Danxome using solely the royal family's traditions.[7] Professor Bay has signalled the end of this dialogue of the deaf by proving that it is possible to tap on both sources in order to scientifically reconstruct the history of Danxome while maintaining fully historical objectivity. Far from being contradictory, the sources would rather complement and validate one another. At first, one would not trust that a foreign historian would be able to successfully conduct such a delicate field research without succumbing to the pitfall of superficiality. The fact that she has been able to successfully and aptly carry out this work is a testimony to her ability to develop a good deal of empathy – a trait that is rare to find among 'Africanists' today. Now, what exactly is the book about?

The main proposition contained in this clear and easily readable book is the fact that, when the Alladaxonu, a small group of invaders got to the Abomey plateau, they were confronted with a serious problem of political legitimacy. To entrench its political domination, this minority ruling class needed to establish an authority that was politically and culturally acceptable to the majority of the local population. They used a two-pronged approach to achieve their objective. At the cultural level, they tried to create a link with the Fon people through the contrivance of the royal lineage by making Dako the first king and by claiming a mythical lineage from the leopard, consistent with a widely-touted myth in the plateau area.[8] From the political point of view, the Alladaxonu's strategy was to multiply alliances with the other ethnic groups in the plateau area, using women from the royal lineage reputed to be faithful and sexually liberated; these traits proved useful to the Alladaxonu's bid to increase the size of their group.[9] Indeed, rather exceptionally for a patrilineal society, children of princesses are automatically

come from as far away as Nyasaland (present day Malawi) and Belgian Congo on the African mainland and from Oman, Yemen, the Comoros, India and Shiraz in Persia. The author argues these peoples interacted in commerce, agriculture and crafts and that, even if the idyllic characterisation of social relations on the islands of Unguja and Pemba may have been exaggerated, they could not strictly be pigeon-holed into the racial hierarchy obtaining on the mainland (Europeans at the top, Asians in the middle, and Africans at the bottom.) The main argument here, and which becomes significant later on in the book, is that Zanzibariness came to be a reality, whatever the origins of those who claimed it.

According to Shivji, it was the politicians jostling for political space who ushered in the politicisation of race and ethnicity, especially as independence approached and the prospects of taking power beckoned. Thus were born the easy categorisations that sought, and managed, to place the various ethnic and racial groups into neat, little boxes: Arabs, Indians, mainlanders, etc., categorisations that would come to colour the politics of the islands to this day. Shivji shows the absurdity of such characterisations by pointing out that the first nationalist calls for independence from the British actually came from young, educated Arabs, acting not in the name of Omani colonialism but of Zanzibari nationalism.

Still, the damage had been done, and, whereas Karume and the Afro Sirazi Party (ASP) accused the Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP) of being Arab feudalists acting at the behest of their masters in Oman, the ZNP suspected Karume and the ASP of being Trojan horses for the mainland. The bad blood created in that epoch poisons Zanzibari politics to this day.

Shivji quotes a couple of writings by present-day Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) leaders hailing from Zanzibar and holding Union ministerial positions, characterising the leaders of the opposition Civic United Front (CUF) as agents of Arab colonialists bent on returning to re-colonise Zanzibar. It is of interest that at least two of those cited may have been, at the time of their writings, ministers responsible for the Police, and thus charged with dealing with 'political agitators' during troubled times on the Islands, such as during elections.

Chapter Two describes in detail what transpired during the January 12 1964 insurgency, which came to be known as the 'revolution', the role played by John Okello and Karume, the part played by Babu and his Umma Party cadres. There seems to be no doubt on the part of Shivji that Karume did not take an active part in the events of that Saturday night, and that he may have been kept at a distance for his own safety. It also seems that Okello must have played a more significant role than that ascribed to him by some ASP stalwarts (that he was chosen to make those bloodthirsty radio broadcasts because of his voice!). Shivji also discounts claims made by Babu on the importance of his Umma cadres in directing the revolution, although he concedes some of them, who had trained in Cuba, might have instructed some insurgents in the use of firearms.

What is beyond dispute is the direct participation in the uprising of the so-called 'Committee of 14', including Seif Bakari, Saidi Natepe and Saidi Washoto, representing the *lumpen* character of the uprising, suggesting that it was not necessarily informed by a well thought-out political agenda for a social revolution. The author even asserts that the revolution, while necessarily political, was not popular because a good half of the population did not support it. This part of the genesis of the uprising, as demonstrated by Shivji, was to seriously affect the conduct of affairs of state once *les sans- culottes* found themselves holding the reins of power. It is hardly surprising that the state that they put in place proceeded haphazardly and without a clear direction, while wreaking havoc on people's basic rights, instilling fear in the populace and dealing with real or perceived opponents in the most brutal fashion.

It is in Chapter Three that the author deals with the factors that determined the birth of the union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar. On the one hand, there was the age-old desire, expressed over and over again by African nationalist freedom fighters of the region within the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa (PAFMECA), including Nyerere, who had wanted their countries to enter into some kind of unity/federation even before independence. This would be the 'pull' factor. On the other hand, the tensions of the Cold War, especially acute at that particular time in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, may point to another source of pressure, or the 'push' side of the equation. In this respect, Shivji affords us ample documentary evidence to show that the imperial powers subjectively saw themselves as standing to gain from what they saw as the neutralisation of the perceived 'communist' threat posed by Babu and the 'comrades' from the erstwhile Umma party.

When one considers the oft-repeated desire for unity in the region and the expressed anxieties by the imperial powers concerned about the implantation of a 'Cuba' on the East African coast, reinforced by what Shivji (and he is not alone in this) sees as Karume's insecurity and his tenuous hold on power, it is perhaps not outlandish to conclude that 'pull' met 'push' in the move towards Union. In this context, did Nyerere, ardent pan-Africanist but also convinced anti-communist that he was, see a once in a lifetime opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, that is, rid himself of a 'communist' threat on his doorstep while at the same time fulfilling a long standing yearning for unity, in which case the end justified the means? This is what seems to be implied.

In this section, Shivji also sets out the basic points agreed upon by Nyerere and Karume, illustrating the surprisingly lackadaisical and non-consultative manner in which the Union was entered into, which fact would come to haunt the Union to this day. The author shows how even the promulgation of the interim constitution was done by one man, the president of Tanganyika, who did not even consult the president of Zanzibar on the matter. Shivji muses that even if Karume had been consulted, he probably would not have been able to make head or tail of it, given his feeble grasp of such legalistic niceties and his lack of competent legal personnel, whereas Nyerere was served by capable expatriate British lawyers. For Shivji, this was the ominous beginning of a long journey of non-consultation and unilateralism exercised by Nyerere that incrementally eroded the identity and autonomy of Zanzibar within the Union, with dire consequences that he expounds upon later in the book.

Chapter Four takes on the state of the Union as it tried to find its feet within the general framework of the Cold war, with Western powers doing their best to limit the influence of Babu and his 'communists', Karume asserting his power by marginalising the Babu group and Nyerere increasingly uneasy with the growing autocracy manifested by his partner in the Islands. In short, Karume reneged on the promises made at the time of the Revolution, banned Babu's Umma party and dispersed its cadres, mainly to the mainland. Using the Revolutionary Council, he gradually became the source of all executive, legislative, and judicial power. As to the Union, he did what he pleased, pretty much as if it had never existed. His party, ASP, was totally emasculated, all associations, including those affiliated to his own party, were banned, and up to his death in 1972 not a single party congress was called.

Nyerere watched in horror from Dar es Salaam as Karume became an embarrassing despot, clamping down on human rights, allowing people to go without basic essentials, including foodstuffs, even as his foreign reserve coffers bulged. The forced marriages saga, in which he and his chief lieutenants apportioned themselves Arab and Persian girls, most of them under age, was an outrage that Nyerere apparently had to suffer in the name of the Union. The disappearance of prominent politicians who had run foul of Karume, some of them reportedly killed in blood-chilling circumstances, was another grim matter. In addition, he refused to give young Zanzibaris the opportunity to acquire higher education, even at the University of Dar es Salaam, which should have been their right. In sum, once Karume had taken out insurance with his entry into a Union he hardly respected, he became a dangerous tyrant even as he dished out largesse to the once dispossessed blacks by building them modern houses and redistributing land.

At the same time, more seeds of discord were being planted in such areas as the membership of Zanzibar in the East African Currency Board (EACB) and the jurisdiction of the newly formed Bank of Tanzania (BOT), both issues touching on the desire to maintain a measure of autonomy and an assertion of Zanzibari identity. (The fact that these issues were 'resolved' in favour of the Union government, in effect Tanganyika, has not meant that they have gone away, and they have come later to rear their heads again in unrelated issues such as membership of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and international sporting organisations). This was roughly the situation at the time of Karume's death, when the Union was already stretched to breaking point, and Shivji suggests in this book that had Karume lived even a little longer, the Union would not have survived.

The contents of Chapter Five will no doubt be of great interest to constitutional lawyers, who may want to mull over the Union's legal/constitutional foundations. This section sets out to show that there was very little thorough consultation between the two partners and that whereas Tanganyika was served by competent legal counsel, as already seen, Zanzibar was not. Even attempts by Salim Rashid to enlist the services of a Ugandan lawyer, Dan Nabudere, came to naught because, according to evidence adduced by Shivji, Nabudere was apparently confronted with a *fait accompli*. According to the author, Nyerere, with the help of a British lawyer, Roland Brown, had seen to that.

There is indeed considerable confusion as to who among the Zanzibari leadership did and who did not know in advance of the decision to proceed with the unification of the two countries. The account in the book gives the impression of revolving doors in a comedy of errors, with characters coming and going without necessarily interacting with each other. The suggestion by Shivji is that the confusion was organised, because Karume did not want too many members of the Revolutionary Council to know what was afoot, as most of them would have opposed it. Even after reading this part at least twice, this reviewer cannot pronounce himself with certainty as to who was privy to the whole process of the signing of the Union.

Problems persisted after the signing of the agreement. While the Tanganyikan parliament met to ratify the Articles of Union, the same cannot be said of the Revolutionary Council of Zanzibar, and Shivji presents testimonies of people who should have known (eg. Jumbe and Salim Rashid) asserting that no such ratification came to pass. Shivji marshals closely knit legal and constitutional arguments in this section with a view to demonstrating that the Union was seriously flawed from its very inception because the requisite legal and constitutional steps were not followed through because, suggesting that one side to the bargain was bent on manipulation while the other just did not have the capacity to comprehend what was going on.

Chapter Six looks at the Jumbe phase, with Jumbe having taken over the leadership of Zanzibar after Karume's assassination. Jumbe came to power almost as an antithesis to Karume. According to Shivji, Jumbe had all along not been seen by Karume as a potential threat. He rarely made his opinion known, was content to do his chief's bidding and acquiesced in all his excesses. But he was also a more 'educated' man, in touch with modern tenets of governance, and therefore more to Nyerere's liking. He wasted little time in consolidating his power by clipping the wings of the Revolutionary Council and investing more power in party structures and undertaking constitutional reforms.

He also opened debate within the party, calling for an end to the more egregious abuses that were associated with the Zanzibari leadership under his predecessor. He also opened the doors for young Zanzibaris to study outside Zanzibar, tens of them joining the University of Dar es Salaam, where not only did they acquire 'modern education' but were also able to mingle and exchange ideas with their counterparts from the mainland. Thus was born a new crop of Zanzibaris who would, in time, make their mark on the conduct of politics in Zanzibar and within the Union. Shivji notes the irony that it was these same 'Young Turks' whom Jumbe had sent to university that would, in time, become the instruments of his own political demise.

Perhaps most important in this section is Shivji's critical look at the way Nyerere, using the doctrine of party supremacy, managed to further encroach on Zanzibar's autonomy. From the outset, Shivji endeavours to show how Nyerere had all along acted in a manner that was detrimental to Zanzibar's autonomy by gradually elongating the list of Union matters beyond the original eleven items, thus making laws and decisions made on the mainland even on non-Union matters applicable to Zanzibar.

The merger of the two political parties, TANU and ASP, in 1977 and the subordination of all political, legislative and economic decisions to the authority of the

that were identified included the labour unions, the military and the students and teachers.

The quest for change thus took Bereket into organizing the labour unions with fellow intellectuals like Mesfin Wolde Mariam and Seyoum Gebre Egziabher and flirting with the military, notably with the charismatic General Aman Andom, like Bereket of Eritrean origin. Briefly, until their cover was blown and they had to disperse, he was involved in a clandestine group led by the inveterate opponent of the emperor, *Blatta* Takkala Walda-Hawaryat. This underground activity is the subject of a thinly disguised novel that the author had written earlier, *Riding the Whirlwind: An Ethiopian Story of Love and Revolution* (Red Sea Press 1993). The novel is dedicated to General Aman, along with two other Ethiopians, the physicist Yohannes Menkir and the poet Yohannes Admasu, the latter also something of a rebel and who apparently was befriended by the author when they were both banished to Harar.

Bereket's ultimately enduring estrangement with the regime – and Ethiopia – came through his involvement with the Eritrean liberation movement. As in the case of so many other Eritreans, that estrangement took an almost irreversible turn with the dissolution of the UN-sponsored federation in 1962. It was presaged by the successive steps taken to undermine the federal arrangement and the clandestine opposition movements that this triggered – the *MaHber ShewAte* (Cell of Seven) and the *Haraka* (the [Eritreran Liberation] Movement), active in the highlands and lowlands of Eritrea, respectively; Bereket came to be affiliated with a unit of the former operating in Addis Ababa until its cover was blown.

It was apparently his Eritrean clandestine work that eventually led to his banishment to Harar province. Apart from the initial shock and uncertainty triggered by the nocturnal knock in September 1967 – the chain of occurrences that form the prologue to the whole story – his banishment was far from intolerable. That indeed was the case with most imperial banishments, contrary to the author's assertions that he was shown particular leniency because of the emperor's special sensitivity to people of Eritrean origin, his reputation among his generation of educated Ethiopians and his connections with the diplomatic community. Imperial policy generally aimed at the cooption or mollification – rather than liquidation – of political opponents. Not only did Bereket enjoy the sympathy and understanding of the provincial governor and his wife, but he was soon elevated to the post of Mayor of Harar town. That too, as we have seen, was terminated through the artful intercession of the Minister of Interior. Bereket was rehabilitated, even if he opted for a World Bank posting in Washington DC soon after.

The 1974 revolution was a great landmark in the history of Ethiopia. When it erupted in February 1974 with a series of popular strikes and demonstrations, there was a euphoric expectation that it was the herald of a new era of social justice. The revolution was expected to be a kind of panacea for all the country's ills, from the age-old problems of social inequality and injustice to the more recent one of the over a decade-long war in Eritrea that had pitted government forces against the Eritrean insurgency. No person symbolized these aspirations better than General Aman Andom, an officer of Eritrean origin who was unshakeably Ethiopian in his orientation. Intimidated by the enormity of the task they were embarking upon, the group of officers who deposed the emperor and seized state power in September 1974 had no choice but operate behind his imposing figure. He was made chairman of the Derg, as the committee of 110 or so officers and NCOs who were steering the course of the revolution came to be known.

But the delicate arrangement, which was reminiscent of the partnership between General Neguib and the Egyptian Free Officers led by Nasser some two decades earlier, was bound to unravel. The Derg wanted Aman to be nothing more than a ceremonial head of state. Aman, who was a strong-willed person and not entirely without political ambition of his own, had other ideas. More fundamentally, Aman and the Derg, more strictly its emerging strongman Mengistu, clashed over the handling of the Eritrean problem. The former understandably preferred a pacific approach; the latter opted for a military solution. The tragic finale was played out on a fateful evening of November 1974, when troops loyal to Mengistu stormed the general's residence. The general was killed in the shootout, accompanied by nearly sixty other senior government officials and members of the nobility (as well as a small number of former members of the Derg or its subordinate committees), whom the Derg executed that same evening, thereby ushering in unmistakable fashion the bloody chapter of the revolution.

Bereket himself had hurried back from Washington to join the revolutionary tide. He was appointed member of the Commission of Enquiry that was set up to investigate the misdeeds of officials of the fallen regime. The Commission could hardly pretend to conduct an impartial investigation amidst the aggressive media campaign that had been unleashed against the accused. Bereket himself incurred universal opprobrium for the way he harassed the fallen prime minister, Aklilu Habtewold, who, given the prevalent imperial power structure, had little executive power after all. Was Bereket perhaps taking revenge for the conduct of Aklilu's brother, Akalework, who as Vice Minister of Education had him recalled from his studies in England in 1953? To his credit, Bereket demonstrates a remarkable capacity to laugh at himself when he recounts an encounter in Mekelle, a provincial capital in the north, where he was hiding as he ran away for his life, when one of the women visiting the house he was staying in harshly criticized Bereket, who was listening incognito, for his conduct.

The killing of Aman Andom proved a turning point in Bereket's life. As a close associate of the general, Bereket soon found himself on the Derg's wanted list and had to run for his life. The saga of his escape across central and northern Ethiopia is so full of drama that it is fit for a novel rather than a memoir. Bereket succinctly sums up his involvement with the Eritrean liberation movement thus: 'first as a mediator, then as relief organizer and finally as a full-fledged member of the EPLF' (p. 306). The mediation was between the two warring fronts, Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The relief work was with the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA). Despite some early disturbing signs of the dictatorship that EPLF was to evolve into, such as its methods of interrogation of suspects, Bereket plunged with gusto into the campaign for Eritrea's liberation. It was in his capacity as an uncompromising lobbyist for Eritrea's independence in academic and diplomatic venues that Bereket incurred the enmity of so many Ethiopians, including some who were his erstwhile friends.

Yet, the attainment of that independence left the big question of how independent Eritrea was to relate to Ethiopia wide open. In this respect, I recall meeting Bereket for the first time in my office at Addis Ababa University, only months after Eritrea's independence. He had come with the idea of a conference on Ethio-Eritrean cooperation. I was baffled by the initiative, coming as it did so soon after two decades of warfare that had pitted the two countries as totally irreconcilable entities. Bereket was not alone. Other Eritreans were coming to Addis in big numbers, some to enjoy the variegated cultural life of the capital, others to reclaim their parent's residential quarters. The bloody war of 1998-2000 notwithstanding, those gestures underscore the fact that the destiny of Eritrea and Ethiopia remains inseparable, and this is indeed the overall feeling that the reader comes out with after reading the book under review.