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## ***Converging Constructions: A Historical Perspective on Sexuality and Feminism in Post-Colonial Africa***

### **Abstract**

*In recent times, there have been emerging issues on the relevance of the feminist movement in sub-Saharan Africa and the theoretical reconceptualisations that have arisen in response to the discourses on rights, sexuality, roles and identities in the region. Studies have shown that unique factors have a direct bearing on the situation of African women, especially those in post-colonial territories, and that feminist actions in the region are influenced by converging constructs of statehood, culture, religion, politics and ethnicity. Theoretical developments relating to the public/private divide in civil societies provide further contexts in which to analyse African responses to feminism and sexuality. This paper analyses feminism and sexuality in post-colonial Africa as seen from the gendered lens of an African woman. It is a historical perspective of converging constructions that have an impact on the movement in the South, and the colonial dimensions and consequences of these flows on women, rights, identities and roles.*

### **Introduction**

The feminist movement that has emerged in post-colonial Africa is basically heterosexual, pronatal and concerned with women's rights, political and economic issues. It differs radically from the Western model which is, by and large, an advocacy of sexual rights, female control over reproduction, choices within human sexuality and essentialism. Discourses on sexuality and feminism in the sub-Saharan African region are political projects that reflect specific class, cultural and religious interests, and are based on a human rights strategy. Identifying gender-sex roles and identities in Africa has grown out of insights into post-colonial societies where the social and ideological structures of communities, and relationships in the public and private domains, remain essentially polyandrous. African women are active participants in these relationships in multi-dimensional roles, with responsibilities in the private and public domains remaining considerably gender specific (Mikell, 1995:422). Emerging feminist actions in the region are directed at bringing existing socio-cultural ideas of gender into the open, challenging them and defending

suggestions for acceptable alternative forms and resolutions.<sup>1</sup> There is also a greater boldness in addressing the economic and political elements that determine social constructions of gender roles and women's status in African societies.

The challenge to develop 'new' views of gender 'equalities' in regions that have always had distinct cultural traditions and historical experiences continues to pose difficulties. Throughout the region, the argument that African women should be accorded greater access to resources and control over their sexual lives; and the emerging views that male and female roles are parallel and complementary and should extend across household, economic, political and religious circles, remain novel and theoretical in many respects.<sup>2</sup> The frequent conflicts between traditional/cultural, state/political and gender/sex interests are some of the special challenges encountered in the continent. African women's 'unique' and 'universal' roles in rituals of birth, marriage, death and other rites of passage and the strong association of women with reproductive and household activities, propagated by the male oriented colonial era has continued into the post-colonial moment (Osha, 2004: 7).

Feminist knowledge systems emerged out of the necessity of addressing African female subjecthood in the context of these pressures. A new inquiry into the meaning, nature, modalities, possibilities and desirability of an African feminist epistemology has become unavoidable in the competition with Western theories (Mikell, 1995: 416). The challenges, problems and prospects of the movement in third world feminist discourses are unique.<sup>3</sup> The relations between religion and gender equality continues to be a 'multicultural headache' as religious freedoms and women's human rights remain burning issues in African societies (Parasher, 1995: 225). This article hopes to provide a historical insight into 'another' reflection on gender issues, and the contributions of African feminism to gender discourses.

### **Sexuality and Colonialism**

The history of the African female figure has been linked to the vast project of colonialism, as the sex and gender role conflicts in post-colonial Africa are partly as a result of social structures that arose during the colonial period (Brain, 1976). African political economies were tied to the West, and African men were given increased recognition in political and commercial circles relative to women. After colonisation, hierarchical gender roles and discriminatory relationships in politics, economics, religion and culture have tended to be continual. African women's struggle against gender asymmetry and inequality is often described in terms of the relationship between public and private spheres, or the 'domestic versus public' distinction in gender roles (Amaduime, 1997). In colonial Africa, female subordination took intricate forms 'grounded' in traditional culture and implemented through this domestic-public

dichotomy.<sup>4</sup> In many historical African societies, male and female roles were peculiar to the original social patterns and ideologies of those societies, but these became reconfigured around the edges as the society changed and evolved. The imposition of Western capitalism and political hegemonies altered the dynamics of gender and sexuality in many colonised societies with the result that the historical and contemporary dynamics of the African state, and its approach to gender issues, have been different at different times. Feminist research has disproved the pervasive stereotype that African gender roles are mired in an 'archaic' past, and demonstrated that these roles have changed as culture is reshaped by experience and development.<sup>5</sup>

Analysing the identities of African males and females before colonisation does not deny the underlying issues of sex and gender in reproduction, marriage, family and other rites of passage, concerns and responsibilities. Rather, feminist analyses focus on understanding how these biological differences were used or ignored in traditional African social structures and relationships (Paulme, 1974). African feminists tend to accept symbolic gender distinctions and identities that incorporate naturist assumptions about 'femaleness' and 'maleness', but nevertheless challenge the subordination of women as an accompanying feature of these cultural constructs. The present concern is how women negotiate and manipulate gender relationships and meanings to meet their needs and interests at the local, national and global levels (Cook, 1992:646).

Western feminists are often troubled that African women take their reproductive roles too seriously, celebrate their ability to give birth, and refuse to subordinate their biological roles to other roles within society. This pro-natal aspect of African culture is reflected in the fact that in many parts of the continent, African women still bear five or more children while being economically active.<sup>6</sup> The alternative nature-culture ingredient in African feminism is not likely to disappear in the near future, although its manifestation may continue to weaken. Consequently, one must always consider the pro-natal element when one examines contemporary African feminism and its interaction with the state.

Before colonisation, women's contribution to the economies in their societies demonstrated how the household and political societies were linked through their activities and contributions. Economic and political relationships were 'corporate', not individual, and women conceived of their roles as determined by their membership in 'corporate' groups that included the family, society and nation (Jacobs, 1987). This fusion of society, culture and community structured the roles that African women played in private, social, political and economic arenas.<sup>7</sup> The early ideological model acknowledged that individuals were part of many interdependent human relations including family and community. Because African societies were constructed upon a corporate base that emphasised kinship and reproduction, women had unique roles. The

range of high level female positions in pre-colonial sub-Saharan African societies, including royal queens and queen mothers as well as chiefs and religious advisers, made African politics distinct from politics in many other areas of the world.<sup>8</sup> Scattered throughout the myths of both patrilineal and matrilineal groups are references to early female rulers and priestesses in charge of shrines and deities, who led and protected their people as they established or expanded the polity.<sup>9</sup> Female leaders were not called 'feminists', although women leaders were often responsible for representing women (Arhin, 1983). Male dominance did exist at many levels, including the domestic/household level and level of popular culture, but the corporate and dual sex structures created a façade of egalitarianism by allowing women a voice in certain leadership roles and public female representation (Busia, 1951).

### **(En)Gendered Reconstructions and the Widening Gap**

During colonisation, the early state progressively centralised society, and religious, cultural and corporate model ideologies were used to restructure men and women's positions. Governments increasingly refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of women's dual sex roles. Women started to experience social inequalities in cultural, political, religious and other realms as the state evolved and society 'developed' (Omoyajowo, 1982). A pattern of gross female exclusion and gender biases emerged as Islam and Christianity made incursions into sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>10</sup> By inserting the ethics of Western Christendom, the regime became the major force in changing sub-Saharan African women's symmetries and identities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The changes affected gender relations through overt support for 'patriarchy' and 'individualism', and advanced new economic approaches that challenged the corporate and dual sex-gender concepts embedded within African culture and communities (Douglas, 1971). As the colonial regime moved from initial operations of penetration to political and economic integration, men's roles progressively separated from women's roles in every sphere of society. Across the continent, 'civilising' missions sought to totally reconstruct African society and culture. The result was that men struggled to achieve autonomy from the intrusive colonial force and to revalidate control over their social lives.<sup>11</sup> Conjugal relations of the new marriage systems also tended to solidify the notion of male dominance within marriage, even though the new laws contained 'protections' for wives of monogamous unions.<sup>12</sup> African cultural practices, like polygamy, that had hitherto provided an avenue for societal stability, security and continuity, were viewed as repugnant and in need of changing (Smith, 1965).

The colonial regime also conceived of men as playing the major economic and productive roles even in agriculture.<sup>13</sup> Colonial administrators found it difficult to conceptualise the centrality of women and their contribution to new agricultural strategies. Occasional fluctuations in the colonial and global economies gave women opportunities for agricultural experimentation and farm management (as in Western Kenya since the 1930s), or offered limited opportunities for farm ownership and profits from trade (as in cocoa growing areas of Nigeria and Ghana between the 1920s and 1940s) (Priestley, 1992). Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, land scarcities resulting from European appropriation of land for plantations encouraged male migration, and made it more difficult for wives, who had been left behind in the villages, to secure land for subsistence farming (Hay, 1982). In Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya, women penetrated, albeit with great difficulty, the world of factory or civil service employment, but then faced the difficulty of balancing domestic and wage labour demands.<sup>14</sup> In many domestic and economic realms, the processes of colonial domination and capitalist development interacted with traditional culture to change and distort sex roles by increasing the workloads for women in public and private spheres. This created the social dynamics of individualism, which clashed with the traditional communal compact and resulted in significant gender inequity for ordinary women.

On the other hand, new legal options during the colonial periods, gave women some opportunities to air their grievances against cultural injustices.<sup>15</sup> In several cases, these women did not seem to wish to challenge tradition but felt they had to object to extreme inequities regarding traditional marriage and property rights.<sup>16</sup> Cultural inhibitions on women instituting court proceedings were evident in West, East and South Africa, but there were often alternative dispute mechanisms to resolve such cases.<sup>17</sup> Among the Kikuyu, Akamba and other Kenyan groups are cases of gender inequity in traditional laws that were exaggerated by implementation of notions from English common law, which treated women as dependants with no proprietary capacity (Hay, 1982). Led by urban activists, women's organisations often lobbied for a unified standard of benefits for married women, whether married under traditional or Western law.<sup>18</sup> Particularly after the Second World War period, the realisation of the coming demise of colonialism appeared to give a new dimension to women's rights.<sup>19</sup> However, although post-independence legal change challenged many gender inequalities, male privileges hatched during colonisation persisted into the contemporary period.

### **Conceptualising Rights: The Emergence of African Feminism**

Over the past three decades, many states in post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa have survived several crises; the onset of coups and the establishments of democratic regimes, economic instabilities culminating in the collapse of

national economies, the imposition of controversial Western styled Structural Adjustment Programmes, and the external pressure to 'democratise' government processes so as to involve the 'people'. From the onset, the pressure to democratise and open up public participation to women, as well as protect their 'rights', has been externally derived. This has produced female responses that have grown out of a mixture of indigenous African experiences and colonial interventions (Callaway, 1987). Women started to challenge existing stereotypes, as well as verbalise and demonstrate their visions of gender roles in the continent on their own terms.

Foreign and external concepts of 'gender' and 'sex' have also spurred many African feminists to reassess 'female subordination' and dual-sex patterns that have been generated throughout African history.<sup>20</sup> These structures and cultural patterns have provided symbolic reference points for African women to advocate for gender equity in contemporary periods.<sup>21</sup> The obvious signs are that feminists have begun to reject the limitations of indigenous and colonial gender stereotypes and are struggling to achieve equitable roles in their societies. They have become more vocal about social, personal, cultural, religious and political challenges and their newly emerging vision of African feminism (Oyewumi, 1997). The twin human-sexual rights awareness in sub-Saharan Africa has also resulted in political struggles for increased participation by women and dealing with the dilemma of having to respond to the persistent gender hierarchy in ways that are personally liberating as well as politically positive (Butegwa, 1993). This is not a totally new challenge for African women. As earlier mentioned, gender hierarchy and dual sex roles, evident in traditional African culture, was present before the colonisation of many African states. Subsequently, hierarchical gender roles and divisions in politics, culture and religion have tended to be continual and feminist struggles to overcome gender and sex stereotypes are struggles that the African woman has come to be familiar with.

The African feminist approach differs structurally from the Western forms principally because African (and much third world feminism) owes its origins to different dynamics than those that generated Western feminism (Coomaraswamy, 1994). African women's resistance to Western hegemony and its foreign legacy within African culture have also shaped the post-colonial movement. The African discourse has not grown out of the individualism within capitalist industrialising societies that brought about the 'women's rights are human rights' agenda and shaped the movements in the United States, Britain and other European countries.<sup>22</sup> The new African feminism is not essentially characteristic of the feminist debates in Western countries about the female body, sexuality, autonomies and sexual rights. Rather, the emerging African model is distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal and concerned with economic, social, cultural and political empowerment.<sup>23</sup> To this extent, it



parallels the recent growth of feminism in other developing and non-Western countries.

The African variant of feminism has grown out of a history of female integration within largely masculine and agrarian-based societies with strong cultural heritages. These differences in the development of 'feminisms' have caused frictions in certain ways between Western and African forms, particularly over sensitive issues like sexuality, abortion, clitoridectomy, early marriage and other customary practices that are culturally accepted in many non-Western societies.<sup>24</sup> There are also frictions between Western state actors who have been intent in implementing policies that would 'advance' women's development in Africa and the third world (Mohanty, 1989). Because of these fundamental differences in premises, the reference points for many Western feminists and those in sub-Saharan Africa have been structurally different. While Western feminists emphasise individual female autonomy and sexual rights, African counterparts are struggling with culturally 'accepted' forms of female subordination, gender inequity and inequality.

The newly emerging African feminism has also been as a result of women's responses to political leaders who have attempted to limit political participation by women. This resistance has pushed women towards greater boldness in addressing the economic, legal and political elements that determine and affect gender and status in societies that have distinct cultural traditions and historical experiences.<sup>25</sup> What has changed in the contemporary context is that the tradition, while continuing to be a source of cultural consensus, is now being openly questioned and reinterpreted (Walker, 1990). In post-colonial Africa, the traditional authority has been challenged and supplanted by modern actors, whose authority is not derived from the above factors. However, the insistence of fundamental 'rights' in liberal feminist ideologies currently being propagated by many Western theories is often inapplicable to a third world or African situation. The reality is that tensions between the political state and certain 'rights' continue in many third world countries.<sup>26</sup> To be sure, feminists all over the world have broadened the parameters of debate and transformed the agenda to women's rights, gender equality and equity. But it can hardly be claimed (by African feminists) that they have succeeded in gaining acceptance for the new interpretations and dimensions of sexualities and sexual rights.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, there are significant developments in post-colonial feminism, even though many African societies have not fully become part of the contemporary discourse on civil society and possible constructions of 'gender' and 'sexuality'.

### **Gender Discourses and the Challenges to Universality**

One of the main achievements of feminist analysts in African countries, and post-colonial states in particular, has been to make women's experiences

visible and relevant. It is now possible for women in these regions to engage in communicative discourses on the interpretation or reinterpretations of the concepts of gender justice and roles, especially on issues related to women's rights (Oyewumi, 1997). What this means is that there is presently a new social movement engaged in public information regarding the reconceptualisation of women's identities. This is surely a big step forward. The novel and encouraging aspect of this development is that women are not only engaged in gaining access to the political or economic spheres of the state, but are engaged in redefining the meaning of gender and human rights in their societies. For the first time, women are articulating their aspirations and expectations in their own right.<sup>28</sup>

Many feminists have taken steps to critically re-examine their assumptions about the homogeneity of women's experiences, and have sought to analyse whether women's differences in different territories preclude the formulation of common political agendas and coalitions for action. The writings and activism of many women in post-colonial contexts or in developing areas around the world have challenged the idea that there should be a 'commonality' or 'globality' in the forms of feminist expressions and activism.<sup>29</sup> Amrita Basu, for example, has suggested that such an assumption of sameness eludes the multiplicity of women's differences around the world, within different countries, and more specifically in post-colonial and developing countries (Basu, 1995). She claims that in the attempt to create a uniform feminist identity or agenda across national, geographic, cultural or ethnic boundaries, there is often a failure to appreciate 'the extent to which women's movements are locally situated'. Amrita opines that if feminism is defined in terms of Western conceptions and forms of activism, not only is there a danger of inappropriately imposing Western priorities and goals on women in diverse contexts, but there is a failure to recognise the strength and transformative potential of women's organising as it exists in their local settings.

Another structural difference perceived is that much analysis and vision for change in the Western movement have tended to be formulated around the concerns of gay, transsexual and 'white' women citizens.<sup>30</sup> Many African feminists have challenged such mainstream movements to rethink analysis of the social structures and dynamics that frame African women. According to Oyeronke Oyewumi's thought-provoking introduction to her recently edited volume *African Women and Feminism* (2003), 'We will continue to define ourselves and our concerns on our own terms'. The assertion underscores one of the most enduring predicaments of African feminist epistemologies: the incompatibility with Western Knowledge formations and their compulsion to universality.<sup>31</sup>

Amrita's fears and similar schools of thought are valid in the sense that women's concerns and gender issues are viewed from different angles and trajectories. The category of a singular 'feminist' movement is often wrongly



used to capture the experiences and analyses of hugely diverse populations whose concerns defy singular definition. It reduces the complex situations that women in the global South face to a fictitious common experience (Mohanty, 1991). The need to recognise the specificity of 'local feminisms' is vital to the movement in post-colonial and third world territories. Although third world women are not a monolithic category, it is easy to identify opportunities for coherent third world feminist struggles that are based on peculiar differences. Even as women in the third world experience oppression in different ways from their Western counterparts; cultural, political and religious biases contribute and further complicate these differences. Mohanty situates third world feminist struggles at the 'intersection of different relations', appreciating that women may experience the oppressive aspects of these relations of ruling differently while also recognising the common 'complex of domination that all women face' (Mohanty, 1991). She asserts that Africans can identify opportunities for coherent 'third World feminist' struggles that are based on 'common experiences'. Other activists have argued that despite the multiplicity of situations, locations and identities of third world women, the experience of the women's human rights movement suggests that a global feminism driven by international feminist networking is also possible.<sup>32</sup>

The contentious issues as to what third world feminism means in the face of particular claims around culture, national sovereignty, religion, politics and other forms of social identities, have echoed in debates around the world. As Florence Butegwa points out, human rights are universal in the sense that all laws, treaties, procedures and policies theoretically apply equally to all people, including women from all jurisdictions of the world. She believes that universal human rights and claims of particular women can be seen as complementary rather than in opposition or in conflict (Butegwa, 1993). In this way, the idea of universal human rights serves as a regulative principle that informs the articulation of women's local demands and strengthens their resistance to oppression and abuse.

The latter argument may be more palatable to certain feminist ideals, as the former relativist stance seems to create potential situations in which women's rights can easily be eroded in the name of social, cultural or religious particularities. As feminists and activists all over the world have recognised, a new approach to human rights, or a new understanding of universality that encompasses the idea of women's rights, is desirable. When local women's groups use human rights thinking and practice, especially in the context of international networking, they actively demonstrate the complementary links between universal ideals and local struggles, and the necessity to translate international laws into national social and political practices.<sup>33</sup> Feminist networking has successfully linked together women from diverse backgrounds to work on common projects that have been central to the global campaign and movement for women's human rights. Consequently, feminism in post-colonial Africa

can seek to advance the formulation of common political agendas and coalitions for action especially in the areas of women's rights. As Mohanty points out, even as women in the third world experience oppression differently, they do so in relation to common systems of power and domination that affect all women all over the world.

### **Post-colonial African Sexuality: Converging Constructions and Other Dimensions**

In the history of colonialism, Western ideas and concepts of female sexuality played a very important part in African societies, and a variety of Western imperial projects reconfigured the discourse of African sexuality in many ways. Multiple structures of characterisation, subjectification and construction evolved from the institution of the colonial order.<sup>34</sup> Within the dominant ethos of colonialism, the female sex maintained a denigrated position in the hierarchical structure. The order transferred these structures, classifications and domination to the post-colonial state, which has failed to critique this structural feminine oppression. More recently however, feminist researchers of the colonial and post-colonial periods have begun to theorise on this incomplete process of decolonisation.

After colonisation and independence, African societies continued to subject the colonial gender- sex identities to further pressures and constructions across the continent (Leith-Ross, 1965). The post-colonial state remained largely patriarchal and unreconstructed. In addition to reproducing the logic of colonial oppression, it formulated converging constructions of sexual identities.<sup>35</sup> In contemporary societies, the colonial frameworks and background continued to formulate elaborate approaches to, and discourses on, sexualities. Variables such as culture, ethnicity, religion and class remained determinants and dimensions that converged to complicate the problem. At this juncture, it can be emphasised that post-colonial Africa did not have a universalised reading of feminism and theorisation. Instead, multiple readings and constructions of sexual roles and identities that accorded with the differences and complexities of the phenomenon emerged.<sup>36</sup>

African feminism identifies with a secularised, global regime and movement, but is also a regime that has not quite entered the domain of liberalism and modern sexuality. In conceptualising the notion of sexuality, the facts of diversity inflected by variables of religion, culture, ethnicity, and region and of course the post-colonial state, are factors that need to be recognised. These variables in varying degrees and in various ways affect the forms of sexualisation and the modes of feminist actions that they invite (Urdang, 1979). One is tempted to identify further 'orders' of sexuality in the African situation in the following manner: the post-colonial nationalist order which takes its impetus and its ideological muscle from the very font of colonialism;

the regime of sexuality fostered by the *Sharia* legal code; the regime fostered by various Christian denominations, and a global secularised regime of sexuality. There are others based on historical, tribal, regional and political affiliations. Consequently, the modes of socialisation and role-identities that women encounter in the African region will always depend on the particular framework in which they find themselves.

Underlying the situation is the gulf within national understandings of sexuality, epistemologies within the public and private domains, and aesthetics in which both politics and patriarchy play a prominent part. Women in ethnic minorities often have to deal with antagonistic pulls of gender inequality and ethnic identity. We must read the possible colonial dimensions of these flows, that is, the colonialism of their logics and also the technologies of domination that they enable, in order to know the feminist ideologies that are possible within the structures and hierarchies of power.<sup>37</sup> Thus, in order to understand contemporary sexuality in post-colonial Africa, there is the need to revisit the history of colonial oppression to understand its construction(s) of sexuality within the colonial epoch itself and beyond it to determine the ways in which the logics of sexuality have been disabled, enabled or reproduced (Haram, 2004). In essence, the way(s) in which women's sexuality may be constructed in contemporary Africa and the modes of socialisation that accompany that process depend, to a large extent, on the previously mentioned variables of culture, ethnicity, religion and region. The ideological underpinnings that mediate these various determinants are important in the discourse of feminism if we grant that these variables are some of the broad categories by which women's sexualities are constituted in post-colonial Africa (Arnfred, 2004).

While the feminist movement in the West bases its claims to sexual rights in the universal sphere of freedom and autonomy, the success of the African movement is mostly reliant on 'interpretations' of religious and cultural values, political structures and policy statements.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, many definitions and conceptualisations of sexual rights adopted by Western styled feminists remain relevant only for Western civil societies.<sup>39</sup> The constituents of community, culture and ethnicity and their interlinking to gender, sexuality and rights are very relevant and crucial to feminist discourses on female sexuality and rights in the African continent, especially the sub-Saharan region.<sup>40</sup> This interaction between gender and cultural aspects of identity is captured by the theoretical concepts used by many feminist analyses in post-colonial Africa. The potentials and politics of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity in a poly-ethnic society are the chief mechanisms that interlink the discourse on feminism in the continent. In essence, their meanings and interactions with gender specific issues need to be negotiated by women in third world countries who wish to succeed and make an impact on the transformative potential of feminism.

## Conclusion

Throughout the continent, African women have become more aware of their rights as women, and of the need to address their subordinate positions in public and private life. There is a new willingness among African women to strategise for change and be more specific in their goals and modes of operation for achieving a new gender compact. For the most part, they are concerned about how to reconcile 'feminism' with culture and other converging factors, in assertive and positive ways. It has become clear that the earlier fascination with achieving post-colonial 'democracy' and 'modernisation' was misplaced, as women are still struggling to understand the 'patrimonial autocracy' that African states have experienced and why these conditions have affected women more negatively than men.<sup>41</sup> Women are questioning men's ideological perceptions of women as nurturing, acquiescent, subordinate and familial and not as people with equal capabilities and rights.<sup>42</sup> More than ever, African women are challenging the inequitable relationships that exist in their societies, the cultural models or compacts that continue to influence their lives, and the deep social issues that are affected by ethnic, political, religious and economic crisis. Whilst reassessing their positions, they are nonetheless aware that a strong thread of cultural continuity connects their lives and the experiences of earlier generations. Although the detotalisations and despatialisations of postmodernism, coupled with the post-colonial's privileging of cultural pluralism and frameworks, have unsettled the bases of cultural authenticity, African feminist epistemologies suggests that this authenticity remains easily resistant in the face of misrepresentation or occlusion by dominant, foreign knowledge systems.

This new mood of 'African feminisim' considers the convergence of these multiple identities and their alignment with cultural expectations and interests. They know that to be taken seriously, the strategy should not be to develop radical theories ... but theories to which such acknowledgements and considerations pose no threat. Instead of attempting to 'eliminate' sexism, or 'transform' patriarchy into sexually neutral frameworks, the African feminist must be realistic and aim at establishing unique discourses, based on knowledge of her peculiar system that can be meaningfully used to articulate her position. The persistence of authentic clashes with Western feminist ideologies necessitates the inquiry into the meaning, nature, modalities and possibilities of a feminist epistemology fashioned on its own terms. This approach enables a 'cultural reading' that is focused on the power relations that work through constructions of masculinities and femininities. In the final analysis, the new model of African feminism represents a point of view that is inspired by specific discourse analysis, gender studies and post-colonial theory.

## Notes

1. Report of the Women's Human Rights Caucus at the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995, Prepared by Susana Fried, with Deevy Holcomb, Center for Women's Global Leadership, 1995.
2. The nature-oriented view of male and female genders is gradually been replaced by other more sophisticated analyses: a view of gender roles as asymmetrical and equal. However, this has not been without much resistance.
3. There are also strong and persistent conflicts within the region, between traditional systems and secular 'democratic' models that are based on gender-specific rights.
4. These unequal gender relationships were further exaggerated by Christian and other Western contacts, and patterns of inequalities arose that were actually distortions of the original African models.
5. Indeed, earlier gender roles tended to form around indigenous African cultural models that encouraged dual sex participation, but these roles were modelled and reconstructed during the colonial and post-colonial periods.
6. Since the 1970s, the average fertility rate of many African women has hovered around five children, but this has not reduced women's interest in occupations outside the home. Of course, multiple factors now influence women's fertility rates, but the majority (of educated women) still give birth more often than their Western counterparts. Thus, we can say that what it means to be an 'empowered' African woman differs materially from the anti-naturalist campaign of women in the industrialised west.
7. Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa of Ashanti mobilised the Asante regiments and led them into battle against the British, who had exiled King Prempeh after colonial conquest of 1900. Although no match for British firepower, Yaa Asantewaa's courageous loyalty remains an inspiration to Asante school girls. See also Lebeuf, Annie, 'The Role of Women in the Political Organisation of African Societies', in *Women of Tropical Africa*, ed., Denise Pulme, Berkeley: University of California Press.
8. Among the Hausa of Nigeria, a line of seventeen *magajiya* (or queens) had their own compounds, advised the king, and received part of the royal money. By the seventeenth century, however, royal Hausa women had lost their religious and political authority as a result of the jihads. See also Smith, M.G., 'The Hausa of Northern Nigeria', in *Peoples of Africa*, ed., James Gibbs, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
9. Despite the Islamic limitations on acknowledgement and representation of traditional spirits and deities, women in Senegambian and West African communities interacted with spirits, acted as sorcerers and promoted community well-being and cohesion throughout these areas.
10. Many researchers of the pre- and post-colonial eras have shown that the contradictions of the colonial and nationalist experiences further distorted the gender roles inherent within the original political structures. In Luo communities in Kenya, the penetration of Christianity led to larger monogamous family sizes, as well as heightened involvement of women in public economic decision making.

11. This was often achieved through intensive subjugation of women's economic and reproductive abilities. The 1929 Aba riots in Nigeria provide an example of a government attempt to arbitrarily impose taxes on women traders, and the colonial administration's ignorance of African women-controlled kinship networks and how they could be used to mobilise mass resistance to an oppressive regime.
12. Even the African women activists of the 1960s were concerned about laws affecting marriage and the question of 'who is a wife?' assumed additional proportions. These social constructs affected the economic livelihood of women and their children. See Vallenga, Dorothy Dee, 'Who is a wife: Legal Expressions of Heterosexual Conflict in Ghana', in *Female and Male in West Africa*, ed., Christine Oppong, London: Allen and Unwin, 1983.
13. This is ironic given the predominance of farming in many parts of pre-colonial Africa, and the fact that traditional gender spheres of work often assigned regular crop production to women.
14. See Daaku, K. Y., *Trade and Politics in the Gold Coast: 1600-1820*, London: Clarendon, 1970.
15. For example, in the British colonial records for 1900-1925, there are many instances of women rebelling against injustices perceived within the logic of the traditional system and ideology.
16. In Ghana and Nigeria, the British desire to make determinations about women based in 'customary law' often encouraged them to give African males greater traditional powers than the culture justified.
17. See Crummey, Donald, 'Women, landed property, and litigation', in *African Women and the Law: Historical Perspectives*, ed., Margaret Jean Hay and Marcia Wright, Boston: Boston University, 1982. The Amhara women of Ethiopia in the early sixties appeared to have contradicted the pattern of lesser female property rights and exclusion of women litigants from the courts found in many other parts of Africa. Nevertheless, they do not appear to have gained the same representation in the courts as men.
18. Ibid, p. 31.
19. Supra n. 12.
20. See for example, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldua, eds., Kitchen Table: 1981.
21. Supra, n. 1.
22. Arnfred, S., ed., 2004, *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*, Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
23. Ibid.
24. The attempt to persuade African women that mutilation of the genitalia resulted from male-controlled oppression of women or from ideological constructs that devalued women was met with general resistance until recently.
25. Because the extent of feminism in a typical third world context is often based on patriarchal systems, tradition and religion, the movement is characterised by strong male resistance.



26. This tension is often manifested in the respective claims of the state and other institutions to regulate the family and personal affairs in the public and private domains.
27. For instance, in respect of abortion as a feminist issue, many who advocate women's rights to safe abortions constantly battle against the claims of religious and cultural groups. The emphasis on political rights and equality for women, achieved by targeting the state, has also not necessarily resulted in the social transformation of women's lives.
28. The fact that such mobilisation often takes place in religious and traditional settings necessarily pre-supposes that feminist attitudes are 'foreign' and confrontational. The transformative potential of feminism, in the region, is thus constantly confronted with postmodernist analyses and converging challenges that seem to deny the possibility of a successful struggle.
29. See Schuller, Margaret, 'Introduction' *From Basic Needs To Basic Rights: Women's Claim to Human Rights*, Margaret Schuller, ed., 1995.
30. *Supra* n. 20.
31. See also Cook, Rebecca, 'International Human Rights Law Concerning Women: Case Notes and Comments,' *Vand. J. Transnat'l L.*, 23, 1990: 779.
32. For example, in articulating what she sees as the bases of third world feminism, Mohanty shifts the focus away from particular experiences to an analyses of the way in which power is exercised in the world. Similarly, through an understanding of the exercise of power as global and interconnected (that is, universally experienced, albeit different in its effects) an argument can be made for universal human rights as a system of accountability in all jurisdictions.
33. Thus, even though it is difficult to find a common framework or perspective through which to analyse women's lives and organize for change without falling into the trap of false universality, the idea that women must choose between universality and particularity has been challenged.
34. Assumptions regarding patriarchal domination on one hand, and lascivious sexuality on the other, characterised colonial and missionary perceptions of gender and sexuality.
35. Exploring the relationships between colonialism and sexuality has demonstrated the centrality of African women's sexuality and the formations and constructions of colonial identities in ways that reverberate even within the post-colonial moment.
36. See Ajayi, J. F.A. Crowder M., *History of West Africa*, Third edition, London: Longman, 1985, p. 61. An example is that a particular regime of sexuality under Islamic law and culture exists alongside other regimes instituted and supported by various Christian denominations.
37. If we concede that there are various 'regimes' of sexuality in existence and that they invite different modes of socialisation, then we also accept that we are broadening the very notion and script of feminism.
38. The acceptance of a particular interpretation by the state certainly influences the movement in that region, and organisations and associations that do not have their

interpretations accepted often do not make the desired impact in contemporary societies.

39. See Shettima, Kole Ahmed, *Women's Movement and Visions: The Nigerian Labor Congress Women's Wing*, in *Africa et Development*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 1990.
40. See Schneider, Harold, *The Africans: An Ethnological Account*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, 1981.
41. In fact, development has often been termed good for African men and bad for African women.
42. In Mead, M., *Male and Female*, (New York: William Morrow), Margaret Mead modified her earlier 1934 'nurturist' view of cultural flexibility in the content of sex roles by speaking of women achieving full 'sex role membership' through reproduction, in contrast to male sex-role membership being achieved through occupation.

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