Re-appropriating Matrifocality:
Endogeneity and African Gender Scholarship

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Abstract

A central concern of many Southern sociologists has been the crisis 'intellectual dependence' (Alatas 2000). Averting what Hountondji (1997) refers to as 'extraversion' involves separating what is idiographic in Western social science scholarship from its nomothetic aspirations; what Chakrabathy (2000) called 'provincializing Europe.' It involves excavating local 'libraries' (Zeleza 2006b) and scholarship that takes its 'locale' or research site on its own terms. 'The study of Africa', Oyewumi (2004) argued, 'must start with Africa.' In this paper, we explore the works of Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi as such ventures in endogeneity, and examples of the contribution that African sociologists make when they take their ethnographic data on its own terms; without status anxiety.

We examine the contributions of Amadiume and Oyewumi to gender scholarship, focusing on the idea of matrifocality or matricentricity. While not a new concept, the idea of matrifocal or matricentric societies acquires distinct valency in their epistemic framework and as the basis for theorising matriarchy. Rather than an exercise in the archaeology of a 'mythical pre-historic past' (Eller 2000), matricentricity in Amadiume's works accounts for the structural and ideological conditions of many African societies. It affords us the basis for transcending the 'bio-logic' (Oyewumi 1997) of dominant western feminist discourses. Beyond the epistemic rupture that it produces in Gender Studies, we argue that the concept of matrifocality has wider heuristic value. We illustrate its theoretical value for rethinking 'Identity', beyond the prevailing patricentric framing, and in allowing us to make sense of contemporary African data.

Keywords: *Matrifocality, Matricentric Society, Gender Scholarship, African Sociology, Endogeneity*

1. Introduction

Much of the discussion about the state of the Social Sciences and the Humanities in Africa has often been driven by grievance and pessimism. Much of this rightly point to the imperial character of the global division of labour in knowledge production. The crisis of brain drain and the state of our faculties often disable rather than empower the younger generation of African scholars who are the focus of our efforts. The starting point of this paper is Paulin Hountondji's (1992, 1997) concern about the crisis of theoretical extraversion in African scholarship. Related to this, therefore, is Dipesh Charkrabathy's (2000) point about the imperative of "provincializing Europe"; in other words, to understand Europe and its dominant knowledge systems as specific products of specific location (idiographic) rather than ideas and principles that are inherently universalistic in their explanatory powers (nomothetic). The result is the imperative of elevating, for global gaze, the different 'libraries' of Africa. Using the sociological enterprise as our point of departure, we explore existing works that demonstrate distinct epistemic value within the African sociological landscape.

For this purpose, we focus on the works of two African scholars, Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi, as exemplars of such distinct epistemic contributions within African Sociology. In their specific cases, their works produced epistemic ruptures in the global discourses around the sociological understanding of gender relations and how we understand 'gender'. We illustrate such seminal contributions by exploring their efforts to theorise 'matrifocality.' We further suggest that the concept of matrifocality produced in their works offer us the heuristic basis for not only understanding gender relations but issues of identity and a better handle on the political task of the struggle for gender equality. Amadiume and Oyewumi demonstrate what can be achieved when we allow the local ethnographic data to speak to how we do Sociology, in ways that are distinctly epistemic in outcome.

Previously, we made a distinction between three types of scholarships within the African social sciences: 'regurgitation', 'protest scholarship', and works of distinct epistemic significance (Adesina 2006). Scholarship-as-regurgitation imposes received categories (concepts, theories, and paradigms) on local conditions. While the data and the sociologist may be local the narrative and analysis function as extensions of Euro-American discourses. At its best this mode of scholarship results in "translation—articulating the tenets of African culture and ideas in western academic terms" (Zeleza 2006b:202). These works deploy local data without challenging the received theories and conceptual frameworks; they reinforce rather than alter the terms of international division of intellectual labour. (Adesina 2001, 2006, 2008).[1]

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1   *The short discussion here is a refinement of earlier ideas in (Adesina 2006, 2008).*

Protest scholarship seeks to negate the terms of the international division of intellectual labour—in which Africa and Africans supply the data and their Euro-American counterparts supply the theory. Often these may generate a lot of materials but do not necessarily generate new *epistemic insights that march the distinctness of the local ethnographic data on which they stand*. By contrast, endogeneity requires that we treat local ethnographic data not simply as items of scholarly narratives but explore the extent to which they instigate distinct epistemic insights or lead to epistemic rupture. The works of Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi represent such ventures in endogeneity which produced epistemic rupture in gender scholarship. They offer insights into how a new generation of African sociologists can meet the challenge of intellectual reclamation. I will use the re-appropriation of the concept of 'matrifocality' or 'matricentric' societies to illustrate the point.

2. Matrifocality

In its popular usage, 'matrifocal family' refers to female-headed households, often with absent fathers or male spouses.[2] Parkin (1997: 29) defines the matrifocal family as one "where adult males regularly leave home for long periods to work or for some other purposes." Raymond Smith (1956) was the first to attach the concept (matrifocal) to this type of family structure, partly as a point of departure from Fortes. In his efforts to isolate what he considered the irreducible 'elementary components' of family and kinship, Fortes (1969: 261) argued that an individual is tied, 'bilaterally' to both the mother's kinship line (matri-kinship) and the father's kinship line (patri-kinship). No one, he argued, "can become a complete social person if he is not presentable as legitimately fathered as well as mothered." As Smith (1996: 39) notes, the essence of Fortes' formulation was to make the nuclear family universal and the irreducible basis of kinship. In his formulation, patriliny and male-headed families are the norm; indeed Fortes believed that his formulation covered Ghana's matrilineal Akan nation. Much of the strong mother-centric families that other western anthropologists observed in the Caribbean was explained by the high incident of "illegitimacy" and unstable family structure.

Smith's (1956) study of "lower-class" Guyanese households showed a high degree of mother-centred activities and family structures, although households normally arose from the cohabitation between a man and a woman. In the early period of child-bearing, the woman is dependent of the spouse in a rigid division of labour: the man takes little or no part in child rearing but supports the woman who is pre-occupied with child rearing.

> As the children grow older... [t]he woman is gradually freed from the constant work of childcare and when the children begin to earn, they contribute to the daily expenses of the household. It is at this stage that one begins to see more

2   *Cf. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/matrifocal.*

clearly the underlying pattern of relationship within the domestic group; where-
as the woman had previously been the focus of affective ties she now becomes
the centre of an economic and decision-making coalition with her children. This
increasing 'matrifocal' quality is seem whether the husband-father is present or
not. (1996: 42).

While the households become female-headed with age and widowhood, Smith argues
that this matrifocal arrangement is evident in both male and female-headed household.
Matrifocal families tend to exhibit bilateral kinship.

Two things are important in Smith's idea of Matrifocality. First, it is linked to the
separation of domestic and non-domestic division of labour. This dimension of mother-
centric households was highlighted in Elizabeth Bott's (1968 [1957]) study of English
families; they exhibit strongly "segregated conjugal roles" and they reflect the low labour
market participation of women. Bott noted that kinship networks revolve around mother
and children and a high incidence of clustering female relatives, especially in contexts
where "there are no particular economic advantages to be gained by affiliation with paternal
relatives, and whenever two or preferably three generations of mothers and daughters
are living in the same place at the same time" (Bott 1968: 137). The bilateral kinship
relationship is much closer to the Guyanese cases than Smith himself acknowledged.

Second, the characteristic, as in Bott's cases, is found predominantly in lower-class
households. Even for the Guyanese society, the women-centred families and kinship
network are not the 'ideal' family or kinship network. Most middle and upper class
Guyanese families are patrifocal and patrilineal. In a sense, matrifocality is a common
feature of unstable family structures, absent fathers and/or 'illegitimacy'. Both cases
Smith's Guyanese and Bott's English) tend to exhibit bilateral kinship.

In both cases matrifocality diminishes as we move up the class structures of the
societies and reflect gendered division of labour with the exclusion of women from
extra-domestic economic activities.

In a later refinement Smith (1996 [1973]) identified three distinct aspects to his idea
of matrifocal families:

1. **"Domestic relations"** with "marked sex-role differentiation where men are
    excluded from participation in child-rearing" and other domestic activities or
    chores (p.54), and women are largely excluded from extra-domestic economic
    activities. It is this 'functional interdependence' that produces female-centred
    domain of the household.
2. **Familial relations,** by which he argued that "by far the most important element
    producing a matrifocal quality in lower-class West Indian kinship is the low
    priority of solidarity emphasis placed upon the conjugal relationship within the
    area of 'close family' ties" (p.55).

3.   Finally, **"stratification":** "the absence of property and status considerations is particularly conducive to the development of a matrifocal system" (1996: 56), although this is not necessarily about poverty.

Smith made a distinction between his ideas of matrifocal structure and family networks, on the one hand, and Fortes' formulation regarding the Ashanti lineage system, on the other hand. For him the critical difference, and why he did not attach matrifocality to the Akan case, is that while there is a large incidence of female-headed households, at the juridical level the focus shifts to the men in their roles as mother's brother or brother. In other words, "the intensity of affectual relationship between women and children" (1996: 56) regardless, the kinship system revolves around paternal authorities.

More generally, in Smith's sense of the concept, matrifocal households do not represent the normative household or kinship systems of their societies but the result of low economic status and juridical exclusion of women. While certain family structures in such societies may be matrifocal, *the society itself is not matrifocal or matricentric.* This is a fundamental point of departure for Amadiume and Oyewumi. It is in these three dimensions of Smith's understanding of the concept (domestic relations, familial ties, and social stratification) that matrifocality takes a different meaning in the works of Amadiume and Oyewumi.

3. Re-appropriating Matrifocality

Amadiume (1997) shows greater preferences for 'matricentric unit' (1997: 18) or 'matriarchal principle' (1997: 36) as her organising concepts. Further, it is within a wider, alternative framework for making sense of gender relations that the concept gains normative status and certainty. Rather than an aberration, the societies that supplied their ethnographic data are matrifocal. Families are not matrifocal because of low economic status, poverty, the absence of men, gender allocation of household tasks, or economic exclusion of women. They are, because they are, structurally matricentric. It is within this context that 'matrifocality' assumes its distinct meaning and its heuristic value as a sociological category. It is this wider of 'matrifocality' or 'matricentrism' as the organising principle of the society that this a distinct venture in endogeneity.

3.1. Ifi Amadiume: An Introduction

In her 1987 book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands,* Ifi Amadiume turned the gender discourses of the preceding decades on their heads, **precisely** because she took the sociational dynamics of Nnobi (in Eastern Nigeria) that provided the field data **on its own terms without undue anxiety about what those who had erected the global gender narratives had to say or think**.

While dual-sex, the Nnobi community was predominantly matricentric, stretching from its myth of origin, to the household; from mode of organising economic production to its system of governance, Amadiume identified a "strong matrifocality and female orientation... [in which] mother and children formed distinct, economically self-sufficient sub-compound units classified as female in relation to the male front section of the compound" (Amadiume 1987: 27). Central to the kinship network is *umunne* or the spirit of shared motherhood (1987: 56). The data show dual-sex economic activities, material wealth, etc. Men and women convert material wealth into prestige and titles, with the highly sought title of *ogbuefi* available to men and women. The institution of 'first daughters' means that they or men take on many 'wives.' As Amadiume (1987: 31) notes "first daughters, barren women, rich widows, wives of rich men, and successful female farmers and traders" take on wives; a phenomenon she referred to as "female husbands." Procreation intercourse happens between the wife and chosen relatives of the 'female husband', with resulting offspring recognised as the child of the 'female husband'.

Land inheritance goes to sons as well as "male daughters." A woman's right of access to land for production in her husband's homestead is guaranteed both by having a son or a 'male daughter' (1987: 34). The dual-sex roles are also reflected in juridical terms: lineage men and women perform distinct juridical roles. The organisation of patrilineage daughters (*umu okpu*) is formal, encompassing married and unmarried daughters of the lineage with leadership based on seniority. The oldest daughter heads the *umu okpu* regardless of marital status. Amadiume highlighted the power that the *umu okpu* exercised in the lineage of birth of the women. They are responsible for ensuring peace and settling dispute; ensuring that the lineage is strong, giving verdicts and imposing fine. The power covers women married into the lineage as well as male-kins. In addition, they control the patrilineage funerals, a function that gives them great power within the lineage.

In the wider domain of political administration of Nnobi, parallel to the male title holders is the organisation of *Ekwe* title women who hold veto power in public decision making and political administration. They also control the market system, a vital part of the economic life of the community.

3.2. Oyeronke Oyewumi: An Introduction

Oyeronke Oyewumi's 1997 book, *The Invention of Women*, focused on the Yorùbá society. The book confronts the totalising gender narrative in Western feminist discourse. As Oyewumi argued, "the cultural logic of Western social categories is based on the ideology of biological determinism... a 'bio-logic'" (1997: ix); a tendency to impose social roles and categories on the anatomically female or what she called "ana-females" as distinct from "ana-males". This "body reasoning", she contends has been imposed on the reading of African societies and ethnographic data, even when the interaction of biology and the

social in these societies tells a different story. Put simply, "in pre-colonial Yorùbá society, body-type was not the basis for social hierarchy: males and females were not ranked according to anatomic distinction" (1997: xxii). Indeed, she argued (and contrary to the general thrust of western feminist discourse), in the Oyo-Yorùbá sub-group from which she derived her data "there were no women—defined in strictly gendered terms—in that society." For Oyewumi, this is because the concept derives from the "philosophical discourses about the distinctions among body, mind, and soul and in ideas about biological determinism and the linkages between the body and the 'social'" (1997: xiii).

Put simply, "gender was not an organizing principle in Yoruba society prior to colonization by the West... Rather, the primary principle of social organization was seniority defined by relative age" (1997: 31). Yorùbá language is not gendered and categories such as "male" or "female" do not translate easily in the language since there is very little about the association of such socially-constructed categories with anatomic maleness or femaleness (1997: 33). 'Okùnrin' and 'Obìnrin' (the English notions of male and female, respectively) "do not refer to gender categories that connote social privileges and disadvantages... [;] they do not express sexual dimorphism" (1997: 34-5). "A superior is a superior regardless of body-type" (1997: 38).

Similarly, the concepts of 'husband' or 'wife' do not have the same social meaning as in English.

> With regards to the categories husband and wife, within the family the category *oko*, which is usually glossed as the English husband, is non-gender-specific be-cause it encompasses both males and females. *Iyawo* glossed as wife, in English refers to in-marrying females. The distinction between *oko* and *iyawo* is not one of gender but distinguishes between those who are birth members of the [con-sanguine] family and those who enter by marriage (Oyewumi 2006: 317).

Here Oyewumi may serve as a corrective to Amadiume's idea "female *husband*" since the category "husband" in Nnobi does not coincide with and is not determined by anatomical maleness. However, "seniority is highly relational and situational in that no one is permanently in a senior or junior position; it all depends on who is present in any given situation. Thus it is neither rigidly fixated on the body nor dichotomized" (Oyewumi 1997: 43). As in Amadiume's data, Oyewumi found the same strong matrifocality and seniority-based status among consanguine relations rather than biological differentiation. As she notes (Oyewumi 2006: 317), the Yorùbá society that supplied her data,

> Is non-gendered because kinship roles and categories are not gender-differentiated. Significantly then, power centres within the family are diffused and are not gender-specific. Because the fundamental organising principle within the family is seniority, based on relative age and not gender, kinship categories encode seniority not gen-der. Seniority is the social ranking of persons based on their chronological ages.

The principle of motherhood suffuses the ideological framing of social order and social relations to the point of the sacred/mythical powers adduced to the child-bearing position of women or *ìkúle ab*iyamo (Oyewumi 1997: 38). Kinship network is based on similar principle of those who shared the same womb; uterine kinship defined around motherhood. While patrilineal for the most part, Oyo Yoruba, as with most Yoruba societies are best understood as dual-lineage. As in Amadiume's data, the lineage female descent organization (*omo ile*) has similar rights and influence within their lineage regardless of anatomical differences.

However, unlike the Amadiume data, Oyewumi's data does not suggest strict dual-sex division of labour. Rites performance or priesthood is not exclusively male; priestly activities have men and women functionaries. A key difference is in the absence of the institution of "female husband." Inheritance would suggest that female children are not disadvantaged relative to their male siblings.

Outside the domestic sphere, women economic activities reflect the same principle of independence and autonomy. Markets are largely controlled by women and long distance trading among the Yoruba is female-dominated. This stretches to the public realm of public administration; again Oyewumi's data suggests women's presence in the political sphere up to the office of the Alâfin Oyo--the political head of the Oyo Kingdom. Several lower-level political functionaries (Baálè) were women as well. The more recent political history of the Ibadan sub-segment of the Yoruba suggest that women were active occupants of the senior political office of *Iyálóde*. The history of Oyo Kingdom shows that there were anafemale and anamale *ìlàrí*, the political functionaries who also act as body guards to the *Alâfin*.

While Oyewumi's data does not suggest the absence of 'patriarchy', it does challenge our understanding of "male rule" and the effectivity of such idea in light of the distinct fracturing of the assumption that biology equal the social. Amadiume (1987, 1997) repeatedly stressed the dialectical interactions between patriarchal and matriarchal institutions, as binary opposites, in the Nnobi context.

What the works of Amadiume and Oyewumi demonstrate is not simply supplying data to validate theorisation from the North; what Hountondji (1991, 1993) called 'extraversion'. Rather, they allowed their data to produce conceptual outcomes appropriate to its uniqueness. The result is an important, epistemic, shift in our understanding of a global idea of gender; because they took their locales seriously enough to engage with them without undue anxieties of what "the world has to say" about them.

4. Theorising Matriarchy

In her 1992 paper, "Theorizing Matriarchy in Africa", Ifi Amadiume sets about the task of theorizing "the vexing concept of matriarchy, not as a totalitarian system--that is, the

total rule governing a society--but as a structural system in juxtaposition with another system in a social structure" (2005 [1992]: 83). The starting point for Amadiume is differentiating "between Eurocentric scholarship and an Afrocentric perspective", the latter being studies that take the African locale as its starting point. She identified the works of Cheikh Anta Diop as one instance of the later, especially as they relate to "the institutions of kinship, kinship ideologies and the state" (Amadiume 2005: 83). Much of the anthropological works of the 19th and 20th century on kinship and descent, Amadiume argues "derive from specifically Indo-European histories" which were mapped on non-European experiences: "other peoples and their cultures were seen through European eyes" (Amadiume 2005: 83). Fortes' resort to patrifocal nuclear family as the norm from which others are judged is an example of such Eurocentric approach.

The idea of a linearity of human evolution—in which individualistic, social contractual relations with its familial root in patriarchy as its highest form—is an illustration; a patriarchal ideology that Cheikh Anta Diop identified as having been reproduced at the level of the state (Diop 1991, Amadiume 2005: 84). This is the context of Fortes giving evolutionary primacy to the monogamous, patriarchal, nuclear family. While Smith is averse to Fortes' racialist discourse, his understanding of matrifocal households as the non-normative Other rests on anthropologists' linear conception of human evolution.

> In all the so-called scientific comparative reconstructions by nineteenth century theorists, African data were left out... [and] it was African data that effectively overturned theories of general evolution of kinship (Amadiume 2005: 85).

In the African context, rather than patrifocality, Diop demonstrated that matrifocality is the norm. In the long history of Africa that Diop (1991) mapped, what emerged are the "juxtaposition of systems" of filiation. The significance of such juxtaposition is that "there was an absence of matrius opposite a patrius in the juridical role" (Diop 1991: 121, Amadiume 2005: 89). What several African ethnographic data show[3] is that "the matricentric unit is [not only] an autonomous production unity; it is also an ideological unit" (Amadiume 2005: 88), which generates distinct 'moral codes' (1997: 35). In several of the so-called patrilineal African societies, matrifocal logic defines the norms of social relationship. Unlike Wendy James (1978), Amadiume argues for going beyond this to make the link with matriarchy even in patrilineal and patriarchal contexts. It is common to miss this link.

In making sense of matriarchy and matriliny and the easy dismissal of "the link between gender and a particular type of descent, specifically the possibilities of authority and power for women in matriliny" (2005: 90), Amadiume suggests that what is needed is a "*structural analysis of the metaphorical symbolism of matriliny (biological connection*

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3   *These include Fortes' Tallensi data (Ghana), Claude Meillassoux's Guro data (Côte d'Ivoire), and Paul Ries man's Jelgobe data (Mali-Burkina Faso).*

between generations or motherhood) and the matriarchal ideological construct generated from this symbolism" (2005:91). As she argued:

> The invisible, transitory or distant role of man as father in African kinship was extremely difficult for the European mind to accept... Unlike the Europeans, Diop as an African had no difficulty in talking about a "matriarchal regime".

The paradox is particularly stark in the case of James, a feminist anthropologist, who seemed unable to "comprehend the idea of matriarchy"; what Amadiume called "a refusal to see what is staring one in the face! (Amadiume 2005: 91-2). Much of this reluctance to move from an acknowledgment of matrifocality to matriarchy is because "for many people, 'matriarchy' connotes a system of domination, the reverse or mirror-image of patriarchy" (Dashú 2005: 185). For instance, Dashú (2005:186) settles for the idea of 'matrix society' rather than acknowledge or attempt to theorise matriarchy. However, for Amadiume, matriarchy refers to the exercise of power by women within their societies. *In other words, matrifocality is not simply about 'mother-rights' or a society or family being 'mother-centric'*, rather Amadiume shows how it reflects the domains of the legitimate exercise of power by women; it transcends the sphere of domesticity into the 'public' arena of governance and juridical power that women exercise in the communities. As mentioned earlier, even when marriage takes them away from their compound of birth, the patrilineage daughters (the *umu okpu*) continue to exercise strong political and juridical power within the lineage. At the political level women of the village exercise direct political power through the Women's Council. The *Ekwe* titled women hold veto power in the village deliberative assembly (Amadiume 1997: 85). The consensus-focused public decision-making process also made disregarding the women's voice near impossible. The political matriarchal system, as Amadiume (1997: 85) shows, exists "in dialectical and structural relationship with the *umunna*-based patriarchal system, both in dialogue with each other." Oyewumi made similar arguments relating to the significance of seniority ordering, rather than gendered, in the exercise of power and control within the lineage. The consanguine links does not, *ipso facto*, result in the diminution of the role of women. The Nnobi political system also involves "a third classificatory system: the non-gendered collective humanity, *Nmadu*" which is grounded in a "non-discriminatory matriarchal collectivism as a unifying moral code and culture generating affective relationship" (Amadiume 1997: 85).

In a re-interpretation of the Ashanti data, Amadiume pointed to the that matriliny here is "both concrete and ideological, it is through their mother and not through their mother's brother that men trace status, rank, and rights. The matrilineal groups holds and transmits property." But beyond the kinship network, Amadiume pointed to "the reproduction of matricentric unit, the tripartite matriarchal triangle at the superstructure level in the centralized political systems" (p. 92).

In using the category of *matriarchy* Amadiume's point is not that women exercise a totalising power of domination. Rather, it is that matricentricity is not simply about the affirmation of uterine or mother-rights but in the distinct sphere of political and juridical power that women exercise, as well. The over-riding matricentric character of the society is therefore not in the absence of centres of the political and juridical roles for men, as against women, but in the "in the all-encompassing matriarchy, all Nnobi were bound as children of a common mother, the goddess Idemili." In Amadiume's data as in Oyewumi's, uterine kinship holds much stronger bonds of relations than agnatic kinship ties—even when the siblings are from different fathers.

Plate 1: *The Nnobi Dual-Sex System*

obi – male	*Mkpuke* – female
Headship = *diokpala* (first son) *di (dibuno)* = husband • the person has a male status in cultural classification of gender • in biological sex-gender the person can be man or woman.	**Headship** - Mother - wide - mother • the person is culturally classified as female, even when playing the role of *di* = husband.
The unit composition Headship over: • one or more *Mkpuke* units (matri-centric units or households) • therefore family	**The unit composition** • matricentric = mother and siblings • therefore household.
Economy • dependent on *Mkpuke* productive units for labour, raw food and cooked food	**Economy** • the smallest production unit • autonomous • has its own farm or garden
Ideology • Patriarchal in ideology of *umunna* (common fatherhood) • jural force • competitiveness • masculinism, valour • force, violence	**Ideology** matriarchal in ideology on *umunne* (common motherhood) moral force collectivism ideals of compassion, love, and peace

Source: (Amadiume 2005: 94)

The paradox is that the same analytical confusion and the hostile response to the works of scholars like Amadiume, Oyewumi, and Nkiru Nzegwu, even among African feminists, one would argue is rooted in , rooted in a specific western gender discourse. Eller's (2000) attack on 'the myth of matriarchal prehistory' was not directed

at Amadiume or Oyewumi, specifically. Indeed, other than in a footnote reference (p. 197) to Cheikh Anta Diop via Amadiume, Eller simply ignored the works of the African gender scholars. Nonetheless, Eller's polemical attack on what she called "feminist matriarchalists," from a supposedly feminist perspective, followed a familiar line: that an affirmation of women's biological reproductive capacity is to 'essentialise' women and that claims of a matriarchal past—as the sub-title of her book suggests—is unhelpful in advancing contemporary women struggle; such claims of a matriarchal past may hold emotive value, but essentially anti-women. Dashú's (2005) thorough-going critique of Eller's should suffice for now. As Dashú noted, much of Eller's critique of Marija Gimbutas (1971) caricatures the works of the people she critiques, especially, the works of Marija Gimbutas. As Dashú (2005: 192) noted, "what is truly unfair is to condemn a scholar's work without bothering to analyze her text. Eller never describes Gimbutas' theory in its own rights or quotes from her historical analysis." Similarly, Eller ignored fairly contemporary data from North America, from the *Iroquois,* which demonstrate strong political and juridical roles of women, within the clans as well as the Iroquois (*Haudenosaunee*), apart from being matrilocal and matrilineal (cf. Jennings 1984, 1985; Tooker 1985; Fenton 1998, Ritcher 1992; Ritcher and James, 2003). The postmodernist 'deconstructionist' proclivities that is so reminiscent of Anthony Appiah, whose influence inspired Eller, produced all deconstruction but no constitutive basis for making sense of not only the pre-historical data (as in Gimbutas) but the abundance of contemporary ethnographic and social historical data. It bears noting that in her effort to knock down what Dashú called the 'straw dolls' of matriarchy—from which in fact most feminist writers, including James cited above, run away from—she substituted a totalising and perpetual notion of patriarchy. The paradox is that Eller (2000) is cited approvingly such anti-feminists such as Robert Sheaffer.[4] More importantly, Amadiume and Oyeronke are not describing a 'mythical pre-history.'

Similarly, Bakare-Yusuf's (2004) critique of Amadiume, Oyewumi, and Nzegwu, among other derived from a basic mis-reading; she claimed that "some African scholars have begun to question the power of gender to explain African societies" (2004: 61), when the thrust of their arguments is that gender relations might play out differently in different societies; and that the experience of western women cannot be assumed as universal. Bakare-Yusuf adopts similar deconstructionist strategy as Eller, without offering alternative ethnographic data. Rather, Bakare-Yusuf did the exact opposite of what Oyewumi (2004: 8) called for: that "the analyses and interpretation of African must start with Africa." Bakare-Yusuf produced a narrative of "Africa [as] the West waiting to happen or… is like the West, albeit a preformed or a deformed West" (Oyewumi 1997: 21).

Further, what Oyewumi did not do was to claim "that a culture (in this case her Oyo-Yoruba) has in some way remained pure across time without discontinuities or

paradigm shifts in collective self-understanding" (Bakare-Yusuf 2004: 68). If anything, what came through in Oyewumi (1997, 2005), especially in Chapter 4 of her *Invention of Woman,* it is the erosion of women's power—economic, social, and political—in different transitional phases, most recently under European colonialism. The same was repeatedly and forcefully demonstrated by Amadiume (1987, 1993, 1997, 2000). Indeed, nothing reveals this more than her account of her field research (see Amadiume 1993). The erosion is a pattern noted in other archaeological, social historical, and ethnographic studies (Gough 1962, Gimbutas 1971, Dashú 2005). What Diop, Amadiume and Oyewumi demonstrate is the importance of historical sociology; one that goes back to before late colonialism and how Indo-European influences profoundly reshaped many African societies—a process that is ongoing. As Amadiume notes;

> Much has been written in denunciation of studies focusing on origin. Yet for colonized people, historical depth and continuity on which a non-colonial status and identity depends is an imperative as strongly demonstrated by Diop (1987, 1991). The advantage in looking at kinship from the perspective of historical origins is in the sense of meaning, in order to locate the origin of a social concept or phenomenon. (2005: 96)

Amadiume, however, anticipated such responses:

> *"Matrifocality is a cultural construct even if the metaphor used derives from the female reproductive role. It throws into question the derogatory dismissal of these ideas by European feminists as essentialist and limiting to women's choices. It seems to me that the important thing here is the ideological message generating the notions of a collectivism of love, nurturance and protection derived from womb symbolism. As James says of most African societies, whether patrilineal or matrilineal, 'there is a deeper and historically more enduring level at which the nature and capacity of women are given primacy in the definition of the human condition itself'.* (1997: 153-4)

Rather than being a deviation from the norm of patrifocal, male headed, nuclear family, matrifocal and matricentric household units represent the premise of a diversity of African communities and social formations, whether 'patriliny' or 'matriliny' or dual-lineage. In many of these, it is not the absence of the male person that marks the household as matrifocal; it is the primacy given to uterine or womb-relations. It is the shared motherhood that allows for a sense of single boundedness even among siblings of different fathers. In matrilineal kinship systems, the father-figure may not even be the basis from which children derive status. In matrilineal and matrilocal system, the matrifocality is more strongly so. Even in patriarchal kinship systems, patriarchy has fundamentally different effectivity from the Victorian ideas of gender relations.

5. Heuristic Value of Endogeneity: some provisional notes

The value of the seminal ideas in African gender scholarship represented by the works of Amadiume, Oyewumi and others is not only in the epistemic rupture concerning how we understand gender relations beyond biological determinism or bio-logic. On its own this would constitute a remarkable contribution to global sociological scholarship. However, matrifocality in African gender scholarship has heuristic value beyond how we theorise gender. They provide an analytical framework for making sense of a range of other social phenomena: rethinking kinship network, how we theorise 'identity', etc.

Much of the discourse around identity in the last twenty years has sought to distinguish between issues of ethnicity, race, religion, etc., from class. When people speak of identity politics, for instance, they generally refer to non-class forms of social construction of self (individual or collective) and its implications for social activism. Much of the underlining logic of these discourses, especially around race and ethnicity, derives from patrifocal and patriarchal logic. It is within the logic of patrifocal and patrilineal descent that the obsession with the certainty of the biological-genetic link of the child to the father becomes the basis for constructing the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. With racialist boundary-marking, pigmentation and physiological attributes became the markers of such genetic certainty, and foundation of racist ideologies and social practices.

Matrifocality and matricentric kinship systems offer different bases for thinking through the concept and meaning of Identity. The principle of matrifocality is not only in transcending the bio-logic (biological determinism) that maps social attributes inexorably on biology but in its implications for identity and inclusive social order. If the child is a child of the compound, the child belongs to the compound regardless of patrimony. It makes the category "Coloured" or "Biracial" (worst still "Mulatto") ridiculous. We can see this in West Africa, the African-American kinship network and among the various indigenous peoples in Southern Africa. The principle of shared motherhood—hence matrifocality—is central to this. In such contexts, as Nkiru Nzegwu (2005) noted, fatherhood may be social rather than biological. The institution and practice of 'social parenting' provide us with the basis for rethinking identity. Beyond shared motherhood, inclusivity is grounded in a commitment to the community rather than the biological certainty of genetics. Similarly, categories such as 'child fostering' (cf. Isiugo-Abanihe 1984, 1985) would seem to me grossly inadequate in a complex social relationship; it would represent a distortion grounded in patrifocal paradigm.

The implication of the above is that we need to completely rethink the categories that we use in making sense of descent and kinship ties in many African contexts. The categories that we use, such as 'matriliny', 'patriliny' or dual-descent, become inadequate for making sense of social phenomenon that define our lived experiences that is far more complex than such ideas of uni- or dual-descent can capture.

Equally significant are the implications of the works of Amadiume and Oyewumi, and the idea of matrifocality for gender equity. First, biology does not determine sociality and patriarchy, patriliny and patrifocality are not primeval to human sociation. Second, from the primary unit of household and kinship systems, economic production and ownership, to the political administration of the public realm, matricentricity suggests a different logic than patrifocality and patriarchy. The exclusion of women from economic and/or the public realm of politics and sociality are not inherently human or African. Even where we can speak of patriliny, it does not suggest ana-female subordination or inferiority. Many so-called 'patrilineal' societies are in fact 'multiliny', with children being able to draw resources for social status and standing from the multiple permutations of descent that is available from either side of parenthood—social or biological.

Finally, for African activists and scholars working for gender equity, the works of Amadiume and Oyewumi point to the basis for appropriating the "useful past" from a diversity of African pre-colonial histories. As Amadiume (1997:23) argued:

> As European feminists... seek possible ways out of their historically oppressive patriarchal family structure... inventing single-parenthood and alternative affective relationships... in the African case we do not need to invent anything. We already have a history and legacy of a women's culture—a matriarchy based on affective relationships—and this should be given a central place in analysis and social enquiry.

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