

“YORUBA’S DON’T DO GENDER”: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF OYERONKE OYEWUMI’S

The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses

By

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Discourses on Africa, especially those refracted through the prism of developmentalism, promote gender analysis as indispensable to the economic and political development of the African future. Conferences, books, policies, capital, energy and careers have been made in its name. Despite this, there has been very little interrogation of the concept in terms of its relevance and applicability to the African situation. Instead, gender functions as a given: it is taken to be a cross-cultural organising principle. Recently, some African scholars have begun to question the explanatory power of gender in African societies.¹ This challenge came out of the desire to produce concepts grounded in African thought and everyday lived realities. These scholars hope that by focusing on an African episteme they will avoid any dependency on European theoretical paradigms and therefore eschew what Babalola Olabiya (1999) has called “dubious universals” and “intransitive discourses”.

Some of the key questions that have been raised include: can gender, or indeed patriarchy, be applied to non-Euro-American cultures? Can we assume that social relations in all societies are organised around biological sex difference? Is the male body in African societies seen as normative and therefore a conduit for the exercise of power? Is the female body inherently subordinate to the male body? What are the implications of introducing a gendered perspective as a starting point for the construction of knowledge about African societies?² What are the advantages and disadvantages of using explanatory categories developed within the North to understanding different African realities? Most of these questions have been raised in a number of articles, but it is in the book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of western Gender Discourses* (1997) by the US-based Nigerian theorist Oyeronke Oyewumi that we find a sustained argument against the concept of gender in Africa.

Constructing a Yoruba World-Sense

The central thesis of Oyewumi’s provocative book *The Invention of Women*, is to deny that gender is a fundamental social category in *all* cultures. Drawing her examples from the Oyo-Yoruba in western Nigeria, Oyewumi argues that gender has not historically been an important organising principle or a first order issue. Contra European discourse, amongst the Yoruba, biology was not used to explain or establish social relations, subjectivity, positioning and hierarchy. She suggests that in European culture and intellectual history, participation in the *polis* and cultural significance is determined by the meaning ascribed to the body. Here, her argument resonates with other critiques of the European schism between ‘mind’ and ‘body’. The body is regarded as the site of irrationality, passion and moral corruption. The mind, in contrast, functions as the seat of reason and restraint. This dualism enabled the association of certain groups with the body and bodily functions, and others with reason and spirit. Those conceived as irrefutably embodied were visibly marked out for enslavement, oppression and cultural manipulation. For Elizabeth Spelman, the oppression of women is located in ‘the meanings assigned to having a woman’s body by male oppressors’ and the oppression of black people has ‘been linked to the meanings assigned to having a black body by white oppressors’ (1989: 129). In a similar vein, Oyewumi attributes the biologizing of difference to the primacy of vision in European intellectual history. Privileging the visual facilitates an emphasis on appearance and visible markers of difference. Oyewumi concludes that the entire western episteme bases its categories and hierarchies on visual modes and binary distinctions: male and female, white and black, homosexual and heterosexual etc. The physical body is therefore *always* linked to the social body (Oyewumi 1997:xii).

Oyewumi rejects a similarly visualist mechanism at work in African societies. Her key claim is that unlike Europe, African cultures are not and have not historically been ordered according to a logic of vision, but rather through other senses. In this way, she suggests that the notion of a “worldview” is only appropriate to the European context. She proposes that “worldsense” better matches the African way of knowing. At base, Oyewumi contests the idea that a western categorical schema for understanding society and social dynamics can simply be exported elsewhere. For Oyewumi, students of Africa must recognise that a greater degree of conceptual sensitivity is

¹ See Ife Amadiume *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, Culture* (1997); the following articles in *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women’s Studies* (2001) edited by Nkiru Nzegwu & Oyeronke Oyewumi: Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome ‘African Women and Power: Reflections on the Perils of Unwarranted Cosmopolitanism’; Nkiru Nzegwu ‘Gender Equality in a Dual-Sex System: The Case of Onitsha’

² Of course these questions are not new, feminists anthropologist such as Heneritta Moore have posed similar questions alongside post-structuralist feminists with their theories of gendered identity that moves beyond the sacrificial logic set-up in second-wave feminist accounts of sexual difference.

necessary in order to understand non-western social structures. More specifically, she claims that in the Yoruba context, a different structuring principle is in operation and needs to be theorised.

Instead of the visual logic informing social division and hierarchy, through structures such as gender, sexuality, race and class, Oyewumi argues that it is in fact *seniority* that orders and divides Yoruba society. Seniority refers primarily to chronological age difference. However, it also refers to an agent's positioning within the kinship structure. An insider (i.e. extended blood relations) is always senior to an outsider who is marrying into the family. For the insider, seniority is based on birth-order: the first-born is senior to all the other children. For an outsider marrying into the lineage however, their seniority rank depends on how many children (including blood relations) is already part of the lineage. Seniority is therefore always *relative* and context dependent: 'no one is permanently in a senior or junior position; it all depends on who is present in any given situation (Oyewumi 1997: 42). For example, even if x is the first-born (and therefore senior in relation to the other members of the lineage), if x marries out, then she automatically is 'junior' with respect to her spouse's lineage. As an ordering power in the Yoruba context, seniority operates in terms of a patrilineal system (a fact which, remains problematically undertheorised in Oyewumi's account). For Oyewumi, seniority 'cuts through the distinctions of wealth, of rank, and of sex' (J.A. Fadipe cited in Oyewumi: 41) and is not aligned with biology.

Oyewumi's claim for the absence of gender in Yoruba culture and the centrality of seniority as an organising principle is based on two factors: a) there is no mark of gender in the Yoruba language (whereas seniority *is* linguistically marked and is therefore an essential component of Yoruba identity); and b) Yoruba social institutions and practices do not make social distinctions in terms of anatomical difference.

Oyewumi elaborates the first claim by arguing that language is central to the formation of social identity. Language 'represents major sources of information in constituting world-sense, mapping historical changes, and interpreting the social structure' (1997:32). As such, African languages have not been taken as seriously as they ought to be by students of Africa. Instead, knowledge about Yoruba cultures and indeed many African societies is captured in terms of western conceptual categorisation, creating epistemological dependency and laziness. She argues that this dependency leads 'to serious distortions and quite often to a total misapprehension of Yoruba realities' (ibid:28). Unlike many European languages, where the category "woman" or "female" is often excluded or marked as Other to "man" or "male" who functions as the norm (in terms of generic usage of pronouns and at a general level of language use), in Yoruba, gender distinctions *only* occur in terms of anatomical sex difference. The absence of a cultural or symbolic layer of meaning to gender distinction in Yoruba means that there is no noun equivalent to "woman" or "man" – these terms simply cannot be translated. Instead, the only distinction possible is between female and male – what Oyewumi refers to as "ana-male" and "ana-female". For Oyewumi, the word *obinrin*, erroneously translated as "female/woman",

[...] does not derive etymologically from *okunrin*, as "wo-man" does from "man". *Rin*, the common suffix of *okunrin* and *obinrin*, suggests a common humanity; the prefixes *obin* and *okun* specify which variety of anatomy. There is no conception here of an original human type against which the other variety had to be measured. *Eniyan* is the non-gender-specific word for humans (ibid: 33).

Against a western mindset, anatomy does not determine position or status in the Yoruba language. To turn Freud on his head, 'anatomy is not destiny'. *Obinrin* (female) is not subordinate or powerless to *okunrin* (male). Neither is she symbolically or normatively inferior to him. Similarly, *okunrin* is not privileged over *obinrin* on account of his biology. In simple terms, sex difference has no normative implications beyond anatomical distinction. Instead, social positioning and identity is derived through a complex and dynamic web of social relations. Names, occupation, profession, status and so on are not marked linguistically in terms of gender. Therefore, categories that have the mark of gender in English have no equivalence in Yoruba. There are no gender-specific words denoting son, daughter, brother, or sister. Yoruba names are not gender-specific; neither are *oko* and *aya* - two categories translated as the English husband and wife, respectively (Oyewumi 1997:28). Instead, it is seniority that is linguistically encoded in Yoruba: 'The third-person pronouns *o* and *won* make a distinction between older and younger in social relation' (ibid: 40). An example we can suggest to illustrate the social pressure of this distinction occurs when two Yoruba meeting for the first time are quick to establish who is senior, junior or age-mate. In the absence of seniority status being agreed, the formal third-person pronoun *won* is used. Again, the desire to establish seniority and status achieves exaggerated effect in the fetishisation of names and professional titles. These are often linked together for additional prestige, so that people describe themselves (or are described as): Doctor, Chief, Mrs X or Professor (Mrs) Y. As one commentator on this phenomenon notes,

The love for titles has reduced some Nigerians to sometimes prefixing their professional designations to their names. Hence such titles which people outside this country would view as absurd: Engineer X, Accountant Y, Architect Z and Surveyor X. Some individuals who served the country in missions abroad, [...] have chosen to be addressed as Ambassador X

or Y. Would it be a surprise if in future we encounter such appellations as Mathematician X, Scientist Y and Linguist Z? (Ezeigbo 1996: 38).

Thus, in social interactions, there is an obsessive quest to establish seniority early on in an interaction, via what Ezeigbo calls "titlemania". As this mode of Yoruba sociolinguistics contrasts so strongly with western forms, Oyewumi argues that it is essential that indigenous categories and grammar are examined and not assimilated into English, as is currently the case. For Oyewumi, the absence of gender in Yoruba language means that the "woman" theorised in many western feminist discourses in terms of negation and limitation has no equivalent in Yoruba culture. In contrast to the west, Yoruba women are not perceived as "powerless, disadvantaged, and controlled and defined by men' (1997: xii).

This line of argument leads to the second point about the constitution of identity in the social sphere: the absence of gender demarcation in language is reflected in a corresponding omission in social institutions and practices. Yoruba institutions are traditionally organised around *agbo ile* – a compound housing facility composed of a group of people with common ancestry, sometimes specialising in a particular occupation such as weaving, dyeing, hunting, drumming and so on. The lineage group situated in the compound is the site for the expression of social legitimacy, authority and power. Each member of a lineage (whether *ana-male* or *ana-female*) is referred to both as *omo-ile* (children of the house/insider) and *oko* (husband). As we have seen, the *Omo-ile/oko* occupies a privileged position vis-à-vis an *aya-ile* (*ana-female/wife/outsider*). Social hierarchy is thus structured in terms of an insider-outsider relationship, by which all *omo-ile* are automatically senior to incoming outsiders irrespective of their chronological age. A woman therefore, is not *intrinsically* disadvantaged in relation to a man. As Oyewumi writes,

Although *ana-females* who joined the lineage as *aya* were at a disadvantage, other *ana-females* who were members of the lineage by birth suffered no such disadvantage. It would be incorrect to say, then, that anatomic females within the lineage were subordinate because they were anatomic females. Only the in-marrying *aya* were seen as outsiders, and they were subordinate to *oko* as insiders. *Oko* comprised all *omo-ile*, both *ana-males* and *ana-females*, including children who were born before the entrance of a particular *aya* into the lineage. In a sense, *aya* lost their chronological age and entered the lineage as "new-borns", but their ranking improved with time vis-à-vis other members of the lineage who were born after the *aya* entered the lineage (1997: 46).

Oyewumi goes on to show that social practices (such as the division of labour, kinship, profession and monarchical structures) are not ordered in terms of gender difference but according to lineage. For example, she critiques the dominant assumption in West African studies that equates man with farming and woman with trading. She argues that among Oyo-Yorubas both *okunrin* and *obinrin* are represented in trade and farming. These distinctions 'are without foundation and so are nothing but an imposition of an alien model that distorts reality and leads to false simplification of social roles and relationships.' (ibid: 76). Instead, occupation and status depend on how agents are positioned within the social field – a positioning that is always relative and contextual. Hence an *ana-female* could be both an *aya* and *oko* (an outsider to one lineage, an insider within another). At the level of practice, Oyewumi shows that there is no barrier to participation in various fields of power in terms of anatomical differences. *Ana-females* are not precluded from becoming warriors, diviners, hunters, farmers and so on. Nor are *ana-male* excluded from trading and food preparation, even if this food preparation is only for themselves and not for the family. In this respect, using a term taken from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we can say that Oyewumi points to the Yoruba as having their own "logic of practice". It is the logic that Oyewumi wants most of all to excavate in order to produce indigenous knowledge.

There is much to be admired in Oyewumi's challenge to current assumptions. She is surely correct to question the universalisation of gender categories as a fundamental organising principle in all societies and across time. To commit oneself to the assumption of gender is to remain unquestioningly embedded within a specific western intellectual tradition of critique. Of course, this does not mean that this tradition is itself fixed and unchanging. The point is rather that when "foreign" categories are adopted uncritically, they *can* distort local structuring dynamics and modes of understanding. It is true that as a first order principle of inquiry, gender may well be insufficient to capture the complexities of Oyo-Yoruba social reality. Of course, the more general point is that the threat of mis-translation works both ways. Just as the western gendered terms of woman and man do not translate directly into Yoruba, neither does the system of seniority necessarily translate into other cultural contexts. In this case, the crucial issue is remaining faithful to the specificities of local cultural experience and social structure. I also agree with Oyewumi when she argues that the way we enter the research field and the questions we ask will in part determine the result we will get. If a gendered question is posed in a society where seniority is more dominant, a gendered response will nonetheless result. Contemporary scientific paradigms such as quantum mechanics have shown that the frame of the experiment in part produces its own results (measuring for mass renders velocity indeterminate and vice versa). In quantum mechanics, as elsewhere more generally in scientific and social scientific method, the shadow of the researcher is always cast across that which is researched. Again, a basic principle within the phenomenological tradition is that there is no "object" available outside of the subject perceiving

it: the seer is always seen, the toucher always touched. Concepts and categories are never “objective” - they are always caught up in the dynamics of power relations and the field of culture itself.

Despite the persuasive force of her text, there are two highly problematic aspects of Oyewumi’s argument. First, we need to question her underlying methodology and theoretical assumptions of language and discourse. Second, her call for indigenous knowledge creates a problematic essentialism and authenticity.

A Problematic Methodology

In terms of Oyewumi’s problematic methodology, I want to focus on three areas: a) the importance she ascribes to language as revealing a cultural essence; b) her understanding of the nature of power; and c) her assumption about the relation between language and social reality. A philosophical discussion of these issues will clarify the import of her arguments against the universalisability of gender distinctions.

a) *Language as Cultural Truth*

In order to deny gender demarcation, it is important for Oyewumi’s critique that she refers to a pre-colonial trajectory of anatomical difference, found in its purest form amongst the Oyo-Yoruba. In this way, *okunrin* and *obinrin* are tainted with symbolic, gender-based layers of meaning only through the colonial project. She therefore assumes that the original meanings of these words lies beneath the surface of colonial mis-projection and mis-translation. This line of argument is similar to that employed by late romanticist philosophers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who were keen to articulate a sense of the power of classical Greece in terms of its parallels with the development of the European modern nation state. Etymology, and the desire to capture the “original” meaning of German and Greek words, was exactly the method the German philosopher Martin Heidegger employed in order to theorise the historical destiny of the German *volk* in the run up to the Nazi regime in the 1930s. In both cases, that of Oyewumi and certain strands of European thought, we can detect a questionable understanding of how words convey their meaning across time. The problematic assumption is that words have an “original” meaning that can be accessed in some way or other, as if words are like dirty brass plates that need an occasional polish. On what basis can one guarantee that a word’s meaning at a certain point in history conveyed a given meaning? Even if an earlier meaning is detected (an easier task in literate cultures with a history of dictionaries, but more difficult in historically oral cultures like the Yoruba), how can we be sure that this previous connotation is the *original* meaning? This problematisation is especially pertinent in the Yoruba context - given the plethora of contested origin stories that abound amongst the Yoruba.

A more accurate account of how words convey meaning across time would be one that emphasizes flux rather than stasis and conservation. Nietzsche’s assertion that truth is a “mobile army of metaphors” is more useful here, describing the transient natures of words and the ways in which bodies (armies) transmit and transform words through motile communication with others in each historical presence.³ When truth is understood in this way, we can understand how the meaning of a word reveals the history of the projections a culture or a community has imposed upon it. In this sense, words are more like totems, bearing the meaning that society projects upon them, yet lasting beyond each epoch of projection. It may well be that even the *history* ascribed to a word is in part a projection of the present. In this sense, Oyewumi’s claim about language revealing social dynamics can be at most half right. It may be that *okunrin* and *obinrin* appear to reveal little beyond anatomical difference; however, there is nothing in Oyewumi’s argument that can support her supposition that this has always been the case.

The danger of resulting to etymological arguments is that they ultimately support an *authenticist* and *organicist* approach to language and culture. Just as Heidegger wanted to express the authentic destiny of the German people, so too Oyewumi is specifically interested in the traditions and world-sense of the Oyo-Yoruba. But how can she be sure that the Oyo-Yorubas are the true originators of Yoruba beliefs and social practice? Why and what basis ascribe a linear history to words and their relation to origin myths? Why assume that the explicit meaning of a word forecloses and precludes other possible meanings of words? Alison Weir demonstrates precisely this point, in relation to an alternative non-essentialist conception of how meaning operates across time. She writes, referring to the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein:

For Wittgenstein, words could be better understood on the model of a rope that consists of a multiplicity of individual fibres: thus, the meanings of words can be better understood in terms of a multiplicity of interrelated usages. Once this model of language is combined with an historical model, it becomes possible to understand meanings as mediated through complex interrelations of different social practices in different contexts, through different discourse and institutions, which invest these concepts with multiple layers of meanings.

³ "What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms -- in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins" Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense,' *The Viking Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann transl.

Thus, the concept of “women” already *includes* multiple and often contradictory meanings, and is already open to shifts and changes in meaning. (1996, 121)

Ultimately, etymology can only “work” if one assumes that a culture has in some way remained pure across time and that there have not been discontinuities or paradigm shifts in collective self-understanding. As Weir’s quote suggests, this belief is even further from the truth when we consider that a spatial (or synchronic) discontinuity can be added to the temporal (or diachronic) discontinuity of language meaning. The meaning of words even within the same present can alter from place to place and context to context – differing in different institutional or praxial situations. In contrast, Oyewumi claims to have uncovered a repository for the essential Yoruba system that transcends both space and time. Oyewumi relies on there being an *essence* or *pure form* to the Yoruba culture, social system and language that is unaffected by changing socio-cultural forces and time. Here, she succumbs to the age-old “will to truth” – the term Nietzsche applied to a fundamental desire present in all western metaphysics since Plato to uncover *the* truth – a desire that must remain unconscious of the very assumption that motivates it – that there *is* a Truth (capital T) to be discovered. For Oyewumi, the Yoruba culture has an unhistorical essence that is unaffected by time and change. A more attentive listener to the Yoruba language and culture will not fail to notice the absence of such an essence or cultural authenticity.

b) The Language of Power

The second problematic area in Oyewumi’s account, relates to her understanding of power. Although Oyewumi’s account of power dynamics in the Yoruba social system, based around being an insider or outsider in relation to lineage and seniority, involves context-dependency (being an outsider in one context, an insider in another) and relativism (being senior to certain members of the lineage, junior to others) and is inevitably complex in form, it nonetheless remains simplistic in another sense. The essential pitfall of her account of power, whether that of seniority in Yorubaland or gender distinction in the west, is that a particular variable of power is *the same everywhere* in isolation from any other form of enablement or constraint. One can readily concede that Oyewumi is right to argue that seniority is the dominant language of power in Yoruba culture. However, she is wrong to conclude that seniority is the *only* form of power relationship and that it operates outside of or in relation to other forms of hierarchy. In line with recent theories of power (such as in feminist and post-modern thought), I suggest that different modes of power are always working in terms of each other. No mode of power, be it gender, seniority, race or class, has the same value from context to context and from time to time. No form of power is monolithic or univocal, existing in isolation from all other modes of social structuration. Rather, each variable of power acquires its *specific* value in the context of all other variables operating in a given situation. The consensus amongst many critical thinkers and feminists today is that the boundaries between different modes of power are often irreducibly blurred. For example, class difference works only in the way it does through a specific constellation of effects that are articulated in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, geography and generation and *vis-a-vis*. And of course, this pluralized, context-sensitive approach to class changes how we understand these differentiated positionalities in turn. Each mode of power is like a thread that creates a pattern of significance only when woven together with all the other threads that combine in a specific situation (the family, the work-place, the city, the culture and so on).

Oyewumi’s failure to take seriously the interwoven nature of power dynamics means that she cannot account for the complexity and nuances of seniority as it actually operates in the Yoruba context. For example, she cannot discuss the fact that the ideology of seniority is very often used as a way of masking *other* forms of power relationship. It is in this sense that her theorisation of seniority may be seen as disturbingly naïve and politically dangerous. The vocabulary of seniority often becomes the very form in which sexual abuse, familial (especially for the *aya*/wife in a lineage) and symbolic violence is couched. Her refusal to complicate or interrogate the workings of power is even more alarming giving the virulent abuse of power in the teacher-student relationship in the Nigerian education system that often goes unchallenged by the victim because they are loathe to challenge the abuser in the name of “disrespecting their senior”. In these situations, what is at work is not seniority but rather another form of *power over*, disguised as respect for the elder. Seniority in the Yoruba context is therefore often a ruse for other forms of power. However, because Oyewumi wants seniority to stand alone as *the* dominant mode of power in the Yoruba social system, she simply cannot recognise blurred reality for what it is. She therefore must avoid *all* work done by feminists and social theorists that stresses the complex interdependency of one form of power upon another and the ways in which one explicitly manifested (and respected!) power often conceals other more insidious ones. Her monolithic and unsophisticated account resembles early first-wave forms of feminism that stressed the transcendent nature of patriarchal oppression (and bracketed out, at least initially, many other forms of power domination that women were and are subjected to).

Of course, Oyewumi’s thematisation of seniority in the Yoruba context differs from early feminist discourse in that she stresses power as *enabling* over power as *constraining*. However, the emphasis placed upon positive power serves to highlight the problems with her account. It is precisely because she *doesn’t* recognise that seniority operates in differential contexts, intertwining with other variables (which remain at best “second order” in her account), often functioning as a euphemism shrouding abuse in respect, that enables her to deny that gender distinctions are at work in Yoruba society and deny the existence of gendered based inequality. Only when

isolated from all other conditioning factors can a particular variable of power (like seniority) appear to be wholly enabling. However, as soon as we adopt a more complex, interrelated notion of power, we can see that power as capacity always operates in the context of other forms of limitative power – what Foucault referred to as “micropower”. In this way, Oyewumi’s desire to foreground and celebrate Yoruba or African female power need *not* preclude an analysis of the ways in which they experience constraint and domination. Power-over and power-to are then seen as interdependent. To the extent that we ignore either form is the extent to which we *simplify* social reality and our understanding of the complex operations of power.

c) *Language and Discourse Becoming Social Reality*

This simplification of the nature of power leads to the third set of fundamental problems with Oyewumi’s text. Her etymological/linguistic method of reducing social reality to explicit discourse assumes that the prevalent meanings of words or discourse can completely capture social reality. Oyewumi flattens completely the relationship between language and reality by assuming that there is total isomorphism between the two. Although Oyewumi is right to argue that language *can* express reality, why should we assume that the realm of language, law, discourse or symbols is a perfect mirror or picture of social reality? On what basis should we ascribe a desire to articulate what really happens at the level of language itself? Oyewumi’s text cannot answer these questions simply because she fails to make a distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* description – that is, between what happens at the level of language, discourse, symbolic or juridical norms on the one hand, and social reality or everyday lived experience on the other. We can see this absence if we return to her privileging of the anatomical as the basis of “female” freedom. For Oyewumi, there are no barriers to *obirin*’s activities in relation to *okurin*. That is, the biological fact of being female does not interrupt or determine in any way (beyond the obvious fact of reproduction) the *social* perceptions of bodies. It is this alleged gender neutrality that affords *ana*-females in the Yoruba context the level of freedom and capacity that they enjoy. However, just because gender difference is not inscribed within discourse or marked within language doesn’t mean that it is entirely absent in social reality. There is often a gap between what happens in law and social reality. It is precisely by not making a distinction between language and reality that Oyewumi is able to elide this possibility and assume that Yoruba women have the same power as men in their lineage.

It is easy to introduce examples that demonstrate the necessity of this distinction between language and symbolic representation on the one hand and social reality on the other. For instance, from the experience of post-apartheid South Africa, there is nothing at a discursive or juridical level that limits a black South African from acquiring the material and symbolic freedoms that white South Africans have long enjoyed. After all, South Africa has one of the most enlightened and progressive constitutions in the World. And yet, at the level of everyday lived experience, there are real inhibiting factors that limit the extent to which black Africans can participate in economic life and symbolic representation. Removing inhibitive barriers (from language and the law) is just the *beginning* of a long process to creating a just society. The same story could be told many times over in different historical contexts – for instance, the difference between *de jure* legitimation and *de facto* reality for African-Americans after the abolition of slavery and up to the present day in the United States. It is often the case that people (both oppressor and oppressed) in their everyday interactions continue to act according to a dynamic of symbolic oppression that has long been considered outmoded from an explicitly juridical or discursive point of view. Hortense Spillers puts the point succinctly when she writes of the continued legacy of slavery in the contemporary situation in the States:

Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated”, and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise (1987: 68).

De jure and *de facto* modes of reality are therefore often considerably out of joint and at odds with each other. The issue then becomes that of recognising and then accounting for this difference. In the case of women in the Yoruba context, the task, contra Oyewumi, is one of citing cases and frameworks of gender oppression or privilege that are not inscribed within the discursive/juridical sphere. A key issue here, among many that we may point to, is the fact that in a patrifocal society such as the Oyo-Yoruba, it is the *ana-females* as *aya*/wife who generally have to move “out” to another lineage, becoming outsiders and therefore subordinate in their spouse’s lineage and not generally the *ana-males*. And insofar as heterosexual coupling and motherhood is privileged, it is *ana-females* who are expected to marry out. Therefore, it is women who typically become subordinate (whether as senior or junior wife) to men. Furthermore, because Yoruba women have primary responsibility for food preparation and child-care, they are much more likely to have the dual responsibility of nurturer and economic provider, both normatively female roles in Yoruba society.

Oyewumi passes over these statistical and normative probabilities by resorting to two strategies, first of all questioning the value of statistics, and secondly by pointing to counter examples. Neither of these responses is at

all adequate in the face of the critique developed here. Whatever one may think about statistics, the fact that probabilities can be calculated on their basis indicates a normative structure at work. Denying the validity of statistics then becomes a weak way of denying the existence of normativity itself. It is true that even in the most unreconstructed of patriarchal cultures one could find accounts of women in position of power, taking up a variety of roles such as monarch, hunters, etc. Again, the use of counter-examples is just another instance of what Bourdieu has termed the presence of the “miraculous exception” within what is in reality hegemonic framework. Although there are some *ana-females* who are both *aya* (in relation to their spouse) and *oko* (in relation to their lineage) and *are* hunters and farmers, it is not the case that *ana-males* as *oko* have child-rearing responsibilities or food preparation for the family beyond providing for themselves during their stay in the farm. Using the experiences derived from the “miraculous exceptions” has the function of neutralising the real workings of power and helps to mask oppressive regimes of power. While one can sympathise with the therapeutic value motivating Oyewumi’s desire to uncover a pre-colonial, harmonious, ungendered history, the evidence she uses to support her argument simply does not stand up to scrutiny. We cannot simply use the experience of princesses and privileged women to evaluate the position and experience of most women in society. Instead, their experience (if at all) should be used to imagine new possibilities and fight inequality and not to deny the collective subordination of women.

Once we start to recognise modes of oppression that exist below the threshold of discursive analysis, in the way I have suggested, we then need to account for the difference between words, representations, laws and social reality. It is at this point that we can start to point to Oyewumi’s text as being caught up in the very modes of power she attempts to articulate. The central problem for Oyewumi here is that because of the absence of a *de jure/de facto* distinction, she can have no conception of *ideology* – a discursive framework that seeks to legitimate and reproduce certain norms of power and privilege. Without this conception, her thought itself is vulnerable to becoming trapped within the *ideology* of seniority, rather than simply describing it. By portraying seniority as the defining characteristic of Yoruba power dynamics, against which all other modes of power are secondary, in the context of a naturalistic and naive approach to the relation between language and reality, Oyewumi’s text ends up uncritically adopting the very form of power she sets out merely to describe.

No one has expressed the dangers of such ideological capture better than Bourdieu. To repeat the sentence cited at the beginning, “The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than complicitous silence.” (1977:188). Here Bourdieu shows his acute awareness of a *de jure/ de facto* distinction – that social dynamics and modes of hegemony and repression often exist below the level of discourse and everyday speech. Again, the quote suggests that the failure to *recognise* this process (by remaining silent about ideology) runs the risk of complicity *and* a too easy complaisance. This is clarified in the section that continues immediately after this sentence in *The Logic of Practice*:

It follows, incidentally that any analysis of ideologies, in the narrow sense of “legitimizing discourses”, which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies: this is true of all internal (semiological) analyses of political, educational, religious, or aesthetic ideologies which forget that the political function of these ideologies may in some cases be reduced to the effect of displacement and diversion, camouflage and legitimation, which they produce by reproducing – through their oversights and omissions, and in their deliberately or involuntarily complicitous silences – the effects of the objective mechanisms. (1977:188-9).

In this light, Oyewumi’s attention to language, which appeared at first to be over-emphasised, actually turns out to be not strong enough. There is no sense in her text in which she allows herself to reflect critically on the apparent neutrality of biological difference at the level of language or suspect that this language itself might be imbued with normative or ideological traces. She fails absolutely to suspect the potential relationship between power and language. The result of this is that her text ends up uncritically restating the normative power of seniority. Moreover, she has no way of addressing the complex relationships in which people ‘play with’ the normative structure of seniority to their own advantage. For example, as a junior, it might be in my interest to acknowledge the authority of a senior and show deference because it suits my own needs and purposes. In this case, my apparent respect is just that: an appearance. My “respect” is not in reality motivated by the consideration that as an elder they are worthy of that status. Again, a senior may tacitly relinquish her seniority when she is dealing with a junior because the junior has economic or social capital which the senior wants to access. A case in point is where an elder brother may give up his status of seniority in relation to a wealthier younger sister. Seniority thus becomes a ‘game’ that people can play to different effects and for various purposes. But if we stay at the level of the explicit meaning and symbolic coding, then we miss out on the gaps, the silences, the concealed meaning in any particular mode of address. Therefore, in contrast to this playful, hybrid and above all else pragmatic approach to the language of seniority mentioned, Oyewumi’s book is replete with refusals to envisage any other way of viewing the Yoruba social system except as structured by seniority *qua* seniority. It is the specific emphasis she

places on the Oyo Yoruba (as opposed to all other geographic-cultural variants) that most clearly reveals that her account itself represses difference and impurity in favour of ideologically driven authenticity and purity.

In this way, Oyewumi's text falls prey to a dubious manoeuvre that is commonly made by theorists striving to articulate an account of identity and social dynamics in opposition to the western norm – that of repressing the difference, the silences that inheres within the object of study itself. As Nancy Fraser writes of those involved in identity politics:

Stressing the need to elaborate and display an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identity, it [identity politics] puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture. Cultural dissidence and experimentation are accordingly discouraged, when they are not simply equated with disloyalty. So, too, is cultural criticism, including efforts to explore intragroup divisions, such as those of gender, sexuality and class. Thus, far from welcoming scrutiny of, for example, the patriarchal strands within a subordinated culture, the tendency of the identity model is to brand such critique as 'inauthentic'. The overall effect is to impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations. (2000, 112)

As I have stressed, the critique presented here does not deny the existence of seniority in Yoruba society (both as a structuring form and as a rhetorical strategy); neither does it disregard Oyewumi's attempt to show that it often dominates other modes of capability or constraint. The point of this critique is rather to argue that in claiming an irreducible difference between the Yoruba social system and western systems, Oyewumi herself then undermines the differences that are themselves always already at work in the Yoruba context. Seniority may well take precedence over patriarchy in the Yoruba worldview. However, and in sum, her account of language and its relation to social reality remains naïve, her understanding of modes of power and how they operate monolithic (and therefore simplistic), and her conception of the relation between *language* and power silently complicitous with normative forces that she fails to articulate.

African Local Knowledge in the Plural

Oyewumi's fixation with an untainted linguistic and social indigeneity is ultimately motivated by a desire to assert the radical Otherness of African culture in relation to European. This desire to proclaim Africa's own unique culture, mode of being and hermeneutic tradition has a long tradition in African political and intellectual history, embedded as it is in the quest to contest European denial of African humanity and their global dominance. Oyewumi's project of highlighting a Yoruba cultural logic that is not polluted by Western gender demarcation or inequalities thus situates her in a long list of 'race' men⁴ keen to uncover and assert indigenous African knowledge and modes of self-representation. Yet, her desire to uncover a pure Oyo-Yoruba cultural framework that is anterior to colonial projects is deeply problematic and against the grain of the very culture she wishes to uncover. In this final section, I want to challenge Oyewumi's "cultural insiderism" by sketching an alternative way of conceptualising power dynamics and the production of knowledge in the Yoruba social system. This account still allows for sensitivity to differences in social systems (such as the relative absence of seniority in one context and its prevalence elsewhere) without falling into the trap purity, authenticity and essentialism.

This alternative conceptualisation takes its lead from Weber's speculative use of the religious basis of modern capitalism in his book "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism." Just as Weber points to a specific theological context in which capitalism developed (that of a Protestant culture that, in its divorce from Catholicism, had erased all modes of mediation with the sacred, leading to a collective spiritual anxiety that was responded to in terms of a special emphasis on *work*), so too I will suggest that acknowledging the specific theological-aesthetic horizon of Yoruba culture leads to insights into the structure of Yoruba social dynamics. In contrast to Weber's protestant monotheism, the Yoruba social system is inherently polytheistic. Polytheism is not simply a plural relation to the spirit-world; rather, deeply inscribed theological imperatives have an organising power that spreads far beyond religious practice. Polytheism engenders a fluid and pragmatic attitude, not just towards gods, but towards all things, categories and concepts. Although contemporary Nigerian society (and contemporary Yoruba culture) is, on the surface, divided in terms of Christian and Islamic faiths, the deep structure of the society is polytheistic and ordered by the spirit world of the accommodative traditional gods. This theological background is revealed most readily in aesthetic practices such as dance and music. Polytheism in spirit translates into the aesthetics of *polyrhythm*.⁵

⁴ See Cheikh Anta Diop (1981) *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*; Amílcar Cabral (1970) *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts*; Nnamdi Azikiwe (1969) *I Renascent Africa*; Kwame Nkrumah, (1961), *I speak of Freedom: A Statement of African Ideology*

⁵ We can speculate that there is a general relation between deep historical-theological structures (even in secularised societies) and aesthetic practice. Just as in the west, historical monotheism has led to or privileged monorhythmic practice (for example, 4/4 or 3/4 time in music), so too in Yorubaland, polytheism has nurtured and encouraged the development of

Yoruba society has been and still is both polytheistic in its belief structures and polyrhythmic in aesthetic practice and everyday life. Unlike the European spiritual tradition, there is therefore no central transcendental ordering principle in the Yoruba context - instead individual gods function to serve different spiritual needs. As a person's spiritual needs change across time, so too does their theological allegiance. This does not mean that people change gods intermittently or have an attitude of "anything goes". Instead, polytheism involves living with several different moral or truth claims and negotiating the tension that arises from sameness and difference without excluding one or the other. In this light, Yoruba society more closely resembles the account of inter-relational and multiplicitous power structures that post-modern theorists have described. There is no dominant line of power in a polytheistic society that has a monopoly on truth – rather, there is a shifting constellation of forces of capability and restraint. Truth, under polytheism, does indeed become a mobile army of metaphors. At the level of discourse, no one interpretation can dominate; at the level of lived reality, enabling and constraining forces are always in contestation with each other.

It is in this context that we can contest Oyewummi's authenticist and essentialist account of the Oyo-Yoruba. Instead of privileging a specific form of Yoruba culture (e.g. seniority amongst the Oyo) as the paradigmatic version, a polytheistic take on Yoruba culture and society shows that there is an intrinsic *internal* difference and differentiation at work which cannot be entirely adduced to European imperialism. The Beninois philosopher Paulin J Hountondji has argued that inconsistencies, pluralism and discontinuities in African society cannot be explained solely in terms of colonisation. For Hountondji it is necessary to recognise that:

Pluralism does not come from any society from outside but is inherent in every society. The alleged acculturation, the alleged 'encounter' of African civilization with European civilization, is really just another mutation produced within African civilization, the successor to many earlier ones about which our knowledge is very incomplete, and, no doubt, the precursor of many future mutations, which may be more radical still. The decisive encounter is not between Africa as a whole and Europe as a whole: it is the continuing encounter between Africa and itself (1976: 165).

Moreover, in contrast to Oyewummi, this approach to pre-colonial internal differences among different African cultures produces a conception of a society that is fluid and open to difference, rather than oppositionally stacked against alternative conceptualisations. Yoruba culture, as polytheistic, matches Wittgenstein's metaphor of language as a rope: certain aspects of the culture extend across time and space, but there is *no* central strand of the culture (from the perspective of expressive practice or power dynamic) that stands as an ordering principle for the whole). In this sense, polytheism and polyrhythm operate as an alternative model of social structure and dynamics that contrasts strongly with the essentialist, authenticist schema Oyewumi prefers. In this view, Yoruba culture occupies an impure, bastardised and bastardising space, inviting inter-mixture and productive dialogue with its outside. It is this kind of mangled and mixed local knowledge that I find productive: where cable dishes protrude from mud houses, Nike is paraded in the bush and where Mercedes stickers are mixed amongst local fetishes in the bus driver's cab. In a thousand such examples, Yoruba culture displays its polyrhythmic powers of accommodation, adapting to and appropriating external influences just as much as internally transforming its own. Contra Oyewumi, the "local" in "local knowledge" is just as much about how postmodern and global cultural flows are articulated and expressed in specific contexts as it is about traditions that have been passed down and transformed across generations. Indigeneity, if it exists at all, exists in the form of cultural juxtapositions that are seamlessly linked via confident modes of cultural agency.

The important difference between this approach to the Yoruba social system and Oyewummi's is that discourse (language, regimes of representation and so on) can now be seen to be perpetually in conflict. Although one mode of discourse (say that of the necessity of paying respect to seniors) may be hegemonic, an appreciation of the differential character of Yoruba society points to other forms of duty, allegiance, capacity and limitation that is also at work. It is in this way that approaching Yoruba culture as polytheistic facilitates a *critical* relation to Yoruba discourse. Instead of simply accepting one mode of speech or representation (as Oyewummi does), this approach suggests that discourses themselves should be examined in order to work out if they themselves are concealing symbolic violence or are ideologically motivated. With Bourdieu in mind, we can then look beneath the discursive layer to examine the logic of practice at work. Instead of concentrating totally on language and what is *said*, we can then examine what is *done*, what remain unspoken, using statistics, typical examples and a whole variety of other methods that anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists and philosophers have spent decades perfecting. This is not to privilege action over speech, or social reality over discourse and law, it is rather to place discourse *in the context* of practice and unmasked how they are negotiated *and* manipulated. It is in this way that the distinction between *de jure* representation and *de facto* reality can be maintained for the purposes of a genuinely critical theory.

polyrhythmic expressive practice. This relation between religion and rhythm certainly finds concrete confirmation elsewhere – for instance in the polyrhythm of Indian classical music and the structure of Hindu polytheism.

In contrast to Oyewumi's account of an absolute priority ascribed to seniority in Yoruba society, the approach developed here around polytheism is based on an appreciation of the deeply-grounded theological and aesthetic structures that enable both plurality *and* for existence across time. Polytheism helps to explain how Yoruba society absorbed and absorbs change and difference, rather than show how it has excluded it. It also allows us to move away from a totalising theory based on the idea of the *ultimate* truth or paradigm as articulated in Oyewumi's ideology of Oyo-Yoruba seniority. In a move that echoes Nietzsche's critique of the will to truth, the Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe has argued that one of the features of a *monotheistic system* is the belief in the notion of the '*ultimate* – that is, the first and last principle of things. Speaking of the ultimate is another way of speaking of the truth' (2001:215). He goes on to say that 'there is no monotheism except in relation to producing a truth that not only determines the foundations and goals of the world but provides the origin of all meaning' (ibid). A monotheistic conceptualisation can become fixated on a single notion of what the culture is, and block other stories dwelling within the culture. It is often the case that at the very moment when African thinkers assume that they are paying attention to local knowledge and realities (against western epistemic hegemony) that their own blind-spots and embeddedness within a particular epistemological tradition are produced and made manifest. In the case of Oyewumi, the blind-spot is that of an unconsciously adopted conceptual monotheism. Oyewumi's figuration of a pure Oyo-Yoruba social landscape marks a refusal to open herself up to the mystery of alterity, of the delicious and contradictory pains and pleasures of a Yoruba world of difference. The metaphysics of monotheism that underscores her text shows how unwittingly western Oyewumi has become, despite her desire to ground her theory in a Yoruba cultural milieu. This contrasts with the kind of local knowledge that has been presented here – cultural practices embedded in the spirit of Yoruba eclecticism and pragmatism. This local knowledge brazenly and playfully admits the Other into its frame in order to critique, work and rework a whole array of influences that refuse the narcissism and singular imperialism of a monotheistic paradigm, such as that staged by Oyewumi.

As an aside, we may now mention another weakness in Oyewumi's argument that we haven't referred to until now. This is that she assumes that an egalitarian and anatomical relationship between the sexes has been erased since colonialism. The question that arises here is this: why should we assume that pre-colonial structures could be so easily wiped out? Examples of retained spiritual and aesthetic traits of diasporic Africans since the Middle Passage indicate that such structures can survive even the most violent of upheavals (Sturkey, 1987, Sobel, 1987). In this case, Oyewumi needs to explain how gender egalitarianism was erased through indirect rule, whereas the passage across the Atlantic did not completely erase other structures of African society. I suggest that the adoption of a "colonial" gender ideology in Yoruba society cannot be easily explained as an erasure of earlier form. It makes more sense to assume that there must have been an element within Yoruba culture itself - a 'cultural fit' between an unmarked gender ideology in Yoruba society and gender coding in European culture that allowed for easy adaptation of colonial rule. This is not to deny the violent disruption wrought by the colonial processes, rather, it is more the case that cultural actors are more strategic (albeit tacit) in their response to change and innovation. As an elderly Malian Imam cited by Hecht and Simone puts it, when discussing the ending of the practice of female circumcision: 'Change must discover unexpected reasons for its existence; it too must be surprised at what it brings about. Only in the tension between the old and new does the elaboration of a moral practice occur' (1994: 17). Therefore, constructing differential African realities from within - indicated by a polytheistic approach to discursive practice and critique, indicates that Yoruba society, in all its plurality, already had the *potential* to absorb external schemas and power dynamics. Again, this absorption is always critical, playful and pragmatic – rather than dogmatic, authenticist or essentialist.

Here then is the final difference between the account of seniority found in Oyewumi and the more hybrid version of the Yoruba social system I have suggested. Oyewumi ultimately *rejects* any form of western categorisation as inappropriate to different contexts, such as Yoruba society. In this case, gender distinction, as with her highly dubious reference to homosexuality, can only be seen as a "western import". In contrast, the Yoruba society's polytheistic form (as I have been arguing) means that it is much more ready to accept and absorb difference than Oyewumi might think. Unfortunately, it is often the case that theories of African culture and society reveal more about the angst ridden African theorists and intellectuals who try to universalise and project solutions to their own anxieties, than they do illustrate how the majority of Africans engage and navigate their everyday lived experience. It is these intellectuals who in fact pose the greatest obstacles to understanding local knowledge in all its richness. Beneath the surface of language, gender distinctions (as with other allegedly second-order modes of power structure) have always already been at work in Yoruba society; the only thing western discourse has done is to have helped to articulate it and invite more work raising it to a critical discursive plane. Just as second-wave feminists in the west had first of all to struggle with the ways in which patriarchal ideology exists and invites complicity in language, so too elsewhere.

What is at stake here most fundamentally in my argument is the necessity to reject an oppositional and rejectionist attitude towards theoretical models and vocabularies derived from elsewhere. In this respect, as I have indicated, perhaps the biggest irony of Oyewumi's text is that it is ultimately very "western" (in the clichéd sense of the word) in its unconsciously monotheistic approach to difference. Instead of intrinsic difference (the difference of the multiple, of a society that is always at odds with itself, a society alive to the richness of otherness, a polyrhythmic society) Oyewumi invites us to think of difference in exclusionary and oppositional terms. In this way, she rejects western theory only to commit mistakes that have long been criticised *within* its terms. Her account is ultimately

ideologically driven by an essentialist will to ultimate truth that must implicitly reject the accommodative and inclusive spirit at work in Yoruba theological and aesthetic tradition. A hermetically sealed African or Yoruba culture fearful of impurities and contamination has never existed. The desire for purity and a self-contained, referential self/nation, I submit is a construction of the political and intellectual elite in pursuit of the ultimate truth.

In conclusion, in terms of the question of gender, the forcefulness and conviction at work in Oyewumi's account is such that her account of seniority must be taken seriously and be explored beyond Oyewumi's own project. Despite her problematic assumptions about the nature of language and its relation to power, she nonetheless succeeds in demonstrating the need to be aware of the issue of automatically importing assumptions about the structure of society under study which may not apply on the ground. All future research into gender outside of the west should therefore be mindful that it runs the risk of projecting into the society that which is not there at either a discursive or praxial level. With this incessant vigilance about the threat of theoretical projections in mind, it is then possible to examine the ways in which gender inequality may yet still exist by other means despite its absence within discourse. Or it maybe that gender demarcation and discrimination on further exploration is relatively absent. In this case, the analysis of other social systems may reveal distinctive constellations of power (both as capacity and as constraint). It is however unlikely that a result which privileges one mode of power above all others (such as Oyewumi's notion of seniority or the feminist reification of gender) will entirely escape a similar form of critique as that staged here, which detects ideological complicity at work in the argument.

Most importantly, we must reject outright any attempt to assign a particular conceptual category as belonging only to the "West" and therefore inapplicable to the African situation. For millennia, Africa has been part of Europe as Europe has been part of Africa and out of this relation, a whole series of borrowed traditions from both sides have been and continues to be brewed and fermented. To deny this inter-cultural exchange and reject all theoretical imports from Europe is to violate the order of knowledge and simultaneously disregard the contribution of various Africans to European cultural and intellectual history and vice-versa. Finally, asserting a polytheistic approach to understanding Yoruba (and other African) social dynamics does not lead to an outright rejection of Oyewumi's theorisation of seniority. Rather, what is now required is to open up a space where a multiplicity of contradictory existences and conceptual categories can be productively engaged within our theorising. It is in this way that we can understand and maintain Africa and local knowledge in the plural.

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