



tual biases that underpin the notion of gender and in turn brings out African perspectives and cultural models to bear on this concept. In this light the volume achieves its stated objectives of interrogating the foundational assumptions that inform Western epistemologies of African studies, especially African gender studies. In the wake of its dismantling, we are offered alternative organising principles, models and conceptual tools with which

to digest the multiple understandings of gender and its diverse implications for social transformation in Africa. Regrettably, for a volume that purports to be an anthology of African gender studies, the conspicuous invisibility of men and masculinity studies in the volume means this turns out to be an anthology of women's studies in Africa. In doing so, the book misses an opportunity to open up in a

serious way African gender studies to gendered studies of both men and women.

## References

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## Women Writing Africa

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**W**omen Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel, edited by Esi Sutherland-Addy and Aminata Diaw and published in 2005 by Feminist Press at the University of New York, is the second volume of the acclaimed Women Writing Africa project. The idea for this ambitious and far-reaching project arose from the editors' desire to restore African women's voices to the public sphere, an area where up until now women's voices have been largely marginalised. This volume will serve as a welcome resource for students and scholars or indeed anyone interested in West African culture, particularly given the informative headers before each text which provide the historical and social context of each piece, rendering the book extremely accessible.

The completion of this book took over ten years and the collaboration of one hundred and fifty researchers, translators and editors working in twenty-five different languages, which is an indication of the breadth and scope of this amazing project that covers the history and culture of twelve countries. As well as serving as an anthology and a celebration of African women's writing, this work offers a detailed and fascinating historical and sociological perspective on the role and place of women in West African society.

The huge variety of texts and diverse voices present in this volume are one of its most laudable aspects. The texts covered here range from traditional lullabies, marriage songs and folk tales to political and historical writings. For example, Anne-Marie Raggi recounts the 1949 women's uprising in protest against French colonial rule in the Côte d'Ivoire. Although work from established writers such as

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Mariama Bâ and Tanella Boni is present there are also testimonies from 'unknown', 'ordinary' women such as Binta Bojang, a Gambian woman who testifies to the efficacy of traditional rituals (specifically the Kanyeleng ritual) in curing her barrenness. This text therefore allows the reader an in-depth insight into the everyday reality of West African women's lives.

Furthermore, this volume draws together texts from all sectors of society. Thus we find letters from Sarah Forbes Bonetta, who was born of royal African birth and became Queen Victoria's protégée, alongside those of Malinda Rex, a liberated slave who writes from America to complain of the conditions she is living in. This complexity and richness of voices and experiences reflects the diversity of the West African and Sahel region. Clearly, as the publishers point out, in such a huge area women's individual experience varies enormously. However, it can nonetheless be linked through common tropes and themes, such as the definition of women through their sexuality and their experiences under colonialism.

Throughout history African women have often been subjected to negative stereotypes. Courageous, independent and beautiful African women such as Cleopatra and Nefertiti have been transmogrified into white women so as not to disrupt stereotyped western conceptions of African women. As one writer in the book mentions, the image commonly repre-

sented of African women by western media is of a woman 'old beyond her years, she is half-naked, her drooping and withered breasts are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around her face; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hand'. It seems, therefore, that although the West may have moved on from the sexualised, erotic construction of African women favoured by colonialists, little progress has been made in conveying the actual, multi-faceted, complex reality of West African women today. This book consequently plays a key role in readdressing the representation of African women by challenging the aforementioned stereotype of the docile, mendicant African woman. For example, we read about the powerful 'Queenmothers' who led movements of resistance on the Gold Coast thereby demonstrating the early political and social importance held by women. Further examples of the power women often wield in West African society are to be found in texts such as 'The Aba Women's War' in which one woman's testimony indicates the feminist nature of a protest against taxes imposed on women by a warrant chief in Owerri province, eastern Nigeria during the 1920s.

Another salient issue that this work addresses is the importance of oral texts in allowing subordinated and oppressed members of society, here women, to have a voice. The number of spoken texts in the volume far outnumbers the written pieces, a stark reminder of the lack of access to official forms of communication for women. Often oral texts are wrongly dismissed as unreliable and invalid historical sources. However, this collection illustrates what a rich resource they represent. If women's voices are to be restored to the public domain it is essential to bring

this form of expression to the fore. Consequently, the interweaving of oral and written texts is one of the most unique and praiseworthy qualities of this project. Despite the editors' frustration about their inability to convey the spirit of these texts, the vitriolic qualities of the singers' message in traditional songs such as 'Xaxar' and 'Welcoming the Bride' are clear. Furthermore, the fact that the simple but poignant words of young women's songs such as 'I'd like to stay', in which the singer expresses her fear of marriage, preferring to stay by her mother, demonstrate that the performance of these songs is

not absolutely essential to convey their message.

As the editors write, we have 'a responsibility to set the reality of African women's lives in history and in the present before a world that is just waking up to their importance'. The recent election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, an interview with whom is pertinently included in the book, as president of Liberia demonstrates the veracity of this quotation. Her election is also proof of the constant evolution of women's place in African society. The editors of this book

have succeeded in restoring the cultural legacy of West African women, indeed the volume itself is a testament to the ability and determination of women to survive in a culture which often subordinates and marginalises them. *Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel* brings the experience of African women to centre stage and as such forces its readers to redefine and rethink their conception of these women in whose hands, as Ama Ata Aidoo writes, 'lies, perhaps the last possible hope for ourselves and everyone else on this continent'.

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## And Hens Began to Crow:<sup>1</sup> Young African Women Engage the Public Sphere<sup>2</sup>

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It's 2006 and time again to take stock. Suddenly, one is enveloped by a gripping sense of déjà vu, déjà entendu! Yet turning back the hands of time, one cannot deny that the feminist movement, feminism and women in general have come a long way. A recently released United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) report<sup>3</sup> pinpoints many of these gains. Encapsulating issues, for example at the educational, socio-economic, political and reproductive rights level, identified by the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies as those requiring urgent redress and gauging these against the road travelled by many women from Beijing +5 through to Beijing +10, the report identified certain salient successes. Despite these incremental gains, the report concludes that discrepancies in levels of achievements still persist. Sall (2000), Mama (2003), Pereira (2004 a) and Gouws (2004) have analysed some of these discrepancies in various spheres.

A glaring discrepancy, but unfortunately one hardly addressed, is gender relations, equality and justice among young women and men. Bearing in mind that we are now facing a generational change whereby the lower strata in society (mainly the young) are now coming of age and taking their place in crucial social, economic and political sectors and institutions, can we aver that the advance in gender justice and equality in Africa is a viable emancipatory project for all categories in society in the face of the relentless, rigid structures and institutions? Importantly, can we claim

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that young women as compared to young men are sufficiently equipped for the task at hand? Critically, what room for manoeuvre is available for young women in society?

### **Gender power relations penny-sized: Talking 20+ and Kenya's lost decades**

A critical analysis of the political economy and the socio-cultural structures of the Kenyan society, host to the Third Women's Conference, ironically exposes major caveats of a highly regressive gender relational order that has only recently begun to change amidst continuing resistance. Over twenty years of a highly authoritarian regime that literally undermined women's voices, readily translates to over two lost decades for gender struggles in Kenya. Whereas in the neighbouring countries such as Uganda, great leaps were being made in opening up women's and gender relational issues in the public sphere (Kwesiga and Tripp 2002), in Kenya such debates were either put in a black box, easily dismissed as social welfare issues to be tackled by NGOs offering charity, or utterly ignored. No significant debates at the level of the public sphere on some of the issues addressed by the various women's conferences and which feature as major recommendations for governments to institutionalise have

occurred. It seems to me that this situation still continues amidst the proliferation of civil society groups with gender sensitive approaches. Women's agency, especially in the political and socio-economic sphere, was and still is being excessively misused. Analysis abounds on how women's groups in Kenya still continue to be captured by the national machinery (Maathai 1995; Nzomo 1999), incapacitated despite concerted efforts (Gallo 1998 and Aduol 2002) or outrightly dismissed as yet another elitist group seeking to further regime interests (Kenya Women's Political Alliance<sup>4</sup>). Certainly, these developments when gauged against a World Bank Country report on Kenya (1989) suggest a worsening situation.

The wholesale embrace – albeit much debated and opposed – of economic liberalisation programmes has led to unprecedented effects in the two most important sectors: health and education. The overall political economic development has not made matters any easier. The continued political ethnicisation of relations coupled with high level corrupt practices has led to stalemates in progressive and equitable natural resource redistribution programmes. Negatively affected are entitlements to land, forests, grazing and water (Kanyinga 2000). The latter practices have led to an increase in ethnic conflict and the mass displacement of groups. The continuing unequal regional development and the rise of anomie in society evidenced in the high levels of criminality have not made matters any