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## BOOK FORUM

Judith M. Bennett. *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. viii + 206. ISBN 978-0-8122-3946-1 (cl); 0-8122-3946-6 (pb).

### Feminism, Patriarchy, and African Women's History

Iris Berger

At a conference on African women's studies held in the early 1990s, the virtual absence of interest in the past was striking. As speakers from across the continent outlined the state of research in their respective countries, history was mentioned rarely, and then only as a hypothetical baseline for change. At the time, I attributed this divide between history and activism to the dependence of African universities and their scholarly activities on funding from present-oriented development agencies. Yet reading Judith Bennett's provocative, wide-ranging new book, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, has convinced me that African feminists are not alone in their inattention to history. Whether the key to mending this divide lies in focusing on the history of patriarchy and the "patriarchal equilibrium," as Bennett proposes for Western feminism, is not as clear.

African women's history developed in a different context than the history of women and gender in Europe and the United States. Relatively new as an accepted academic field, African history grew rapidly in the late 1950s and early 1960s as former colonies discarded the bonds of over a half century of foreign rule. Like all national entities, these emerging countries tied their legitimacy in part to a reimagined past, both precolonial and colonial. With a natural tendency to build an identity around ideas of unity, nationalist historical writings rarely entertained the idea of "women" as a social category, ignoring the abundant evidence of African women's activist and organizational strength in many parts of the continent.

An interest in women as historical actors developed only in the early 1970s from the cross-fertilization of feminism, the general growth of women's history as a field of scholarly inquiry, and an interest in women and development sparked by Ester Boserup's pathbreaking 1970 study, *Woman's Role in Economic Development*.<sup>1</sup> In response to Boserup's bold hypotheses, many researchers designed local and regional studies to investigate her ideas more closely. Most important for Africa were two core themes: colonialism and imperialism had led to a decline in women's status, and in

most societies, women farmers played central economic roles. At a time when feminists in Europe and the United States were grappling with the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres that had siphoned women out of public life and into the household, an understanding of Africa's different legacy (and how it changed under colonial rule) helped to mold a new era of historical research. Relying on Boserup's model that traced women's subordination to colonialism, many of these accounts portrayed precolonial Africa as a "golden age" of gender equity tarnished by the abrasive effects of colonialism and capitalism. Unlike the glorification of medieval Europe Bennett highlights, this idealization of precolonial gender relations was short-lived.

From its expansion in the 1970s, African women's history has developed in ways that parallel women's history in the United States and Europe, while also reflecting trends particular to African historiography. Similar to women's history elsewhere, a compensatory concern with forgotten heroines—queen mothers, merchant princesses, spirit mediums, and participants in resistance struggles—yielded to an interest in peasant and working-class women (under the strong influence of Marxist-feminism and underdevelopment theory), and later to a focus on the meaning of gender in African historical contexts.<sup>2</sup> Rather than attributing women's oppression and inequality primarily to colonialism, the newer works began to explore the "entanglement" of indigenous and external patriarchies, often arguing that new regimes of domination emerged from the collusion of colonial officials and African male elders.<sup>3</sup> More recent studies have continued to challenge mainstream scholarship in new ways, both by proposing revisionist women-centered narratives on such key topics as the emergence of African nationalism and by foregrounding such issues of central concern to women as motherhood, sexuality, and childbirth, rather than perceiving them as dependent variables of other socioeconomic changes.<sup>4</sup>

The vitality of African women's history since the 1970s notwithstanding, unlike in Europe and the United States, large numbers of women's activists on the continent did not consider themselves feminists, dismissing feminism as a Western import with little relevance to southern African liberation movements or to poor women's daily struggles for survival. While many African scholars have now embraced a feminist identity, the interest in history is more mixed.<sup>5</sup> The pioneering journal *Feminist Africa* (launched in 2002), published by the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, confirms Bennett's point on the gap between feminism and history. The journal's website describes it as "the first journal on gender with a continental focus" whose aim is to promote African discourses on the gendered implications of "African political, educational, cultural and historical concerns" in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>6</sup> Yet the "history" in its articles rarely transcends the postcolonial past.<sup>7</sup> The few exceptions

include a short personal recollection of the historic 1956 women's march against the pass laws in South Africa, a tribute to Coretta Scott King, and a brief discussion of eighteenth-century colonial discourses about indigenous women's sexuality in the introduction to an issue on "Subaltern Sexualities."<sup>8</sup>

Another recent South African feminist project, an edited collection published by the Human Sciences Research Council, is specifically historical but approaches the issue of continuities over time from a different perspective than Bennett.<sup>9</sup> The original publication date—on the fiftieth anniversary of the largest women's anti-pass law demonstration—was meant to highlight the relationship between the past and the present. But rather than emphasizing the continuous legacy of patriarchy, the book underscores its reverse: the quest for emancipation, as indicated in the title, *Basus'imbokodo, bawel'imilambo* (*They remove boulders and cross rivers*). Sharing Judith Bennett's concern with the ups and downs of women's struggles, the editor, Nomboniso Gasa, explains that the theme of emancipation was a deliberate choice, "a thread that connects the chapters, generations and subjects"—from precolonial chiefly women to those in the concentration camps during the South African War, from those who struggled against apartheid to the contemporary women who face HIV / AIDS, poverty, and marginalization.<sup>10</sup> Although Gasa's introduction embraces feminism, she also stresses the contributors' concern to understand patriarchy in ways that acknowledge both "other forms of unequal power relations," and "women's multiple and varied experiences and identities."<sup>11</sup>

While women's diversity, intersecting patriarchal traditions, and the connections between inequality and agency are long-accepted concerns of women's historians that Bennett also acknowledges, whether African women's history is a story of enduring patriarchy is a contested issue. In an earlier response to Bennett's ideas, Sandra Greene surveyed a wide range of historical writing on African women to argue convincingly that "the status of the average woman appears to have never been on par with that of the average male except during the period before the advent of agriculture and pastoralism."<sup>12</sup> Yet others might disagree, observing that the scholarship on which she draws does not take sufficient account of specifically African conceptions of gender. Influenced by postmodernism, they would assert that "woman" in African societies was not a static, biologically defined group with a single status, but a socially constructed category that evolved over time in its meaning for each individual. In her examination of central Africa, for example, Eugenia Herbert illustrates this point with a contemporary analogy, suggesting that because gender is a category that transforms itself through the life cycle, "one penetrates the glass ceiling by living long enough."<sup>13</sup>

Similar ideas inform the anthropological work of Ife Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi on Igbo and Yoruba societies respectively.<sup>14</sup> Although concerned, as are historians, with changing patterns of rural life, both have a strong theoretical interest in exploring the meaning of gender in precolonial Africa. To demonstrate the flexibility of Igbo gender categories, Amadiume focuses on the apparently paradoxical notions of “male daughters,” women who have been accorded male status in the absence of a son, and “female husbands,” wealthy women who acquired “wives” to assist them in their economic pursuits. She contends that the centrality of these concepts provides evidence of a gender system more flexible than in the West. Issuing a more radical challenge to the notion that gender differences permeate all societies, Oyewumi argues that the category “women” simply did not exist in precolonial Yorubaland; rather there were females in various roles. For women and men alike, seniority within the lineage, not the division between women and men, was the main form of social differentiation. Gender, in her view, did not become a salient identity until the colonial period.

This brief review of the history and historiography of women confirms Bennett’s perceptive observations about the disconnect between feminism and history, but raises questions about whether in Africa the idea of a continuous patriarchal heritage can provide the analytical template to link the past with current women’s activism. What is most interesting about this current debate, however, is that it is no longer a question of “Western” feminist ideas being imposed on Africa, but a discussion between various groups of African women, some identifying themselves as “African feminists,” others seeking more specifically African concepts to inspire their scholarly and activist work. For historians, based both inside and outside the continent, a key question is whether this intellectual ferment will lead to new understandings of the potential links between history and women’s struggles for justice and equality, or whether history will continue to be perceived, even if implicitly, as irrelevant.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ester Boserup, *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1970.)

<sup>2</sup>Some key works include Judith Van Allen, “‘Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’? Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women,” in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Belinda Bozzoli, “Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9, no. 2 (1983): 139–71; Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870–1939* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992); and

Nancy Rose Hunt, "Placing African Women's History and Locating Gender," *Social History* 14, no. 3 (1989): 359–79.

<sup>3</sup>This useful phrase comes from Lynn M. Thomas, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

For a fuller discussion of African women's history see Iris Berger, "Marxism and Women's History: African Perspectives," *Contention* 4, no. 3 (1995): 31–45, and Berger, "African Women's History: Themes and Perspectives," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955–1965* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), and Josephine Nhongo–Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse? Woman and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2000). Important contributions to this trend include Diana Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion, and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia, 1894–1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Jean Allman and Victoria Tashjian, "I Will Not Eat Stone": *A Women's History of Colonial Asante* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000); Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Thomas, *Politics of the Womb*; and Tabitha Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya, 1900–50* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>The reasons for this shift are complex, and vary by country and region, although the three international women's conferences sponsored by the United Nations certainly contributed to the exchange of ideas among women from different regions of the world. It is important to note, however, that while more African women currently identify themselves as feminists than in the past, the trend is not universal; the editors of a new journal, *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, edited by U.S.-based African women, specifically reject (presumably Western feminist) views of African women as marginalized, downtrodden, and exploited. For an alternative perspective, see Amina Mama's article, "Is It Ethical to Study Africa?" *African Studies Review* 50, no. 1 (2007): 12, 14–15, for a frank discussion of the reluctance of the African scholarly community to engage with feminist analysis and epistemology and the serious underrepresentation of women in faculty positions in higher education. Because of Bennett's concern with the links between historical understanding and feminist activism, I thought it important to devote the rest of this essay to writing by "African" women. The term is not as transparent as it might seem, however. Some of these women are based outside the continent, and some of the South Africans involved in this work are white.

<sup>6</sup>See the journal's website at <http://www.feministafrica.org/>.

<sup>7</sup>The neglect of history notwithstanding, in two pathbreaking issues on sexuality, contributors have boldly challenged "the dominance of heteronormativity" in African societies, linking "the limited set of sexualities considered permissible within African societies" directly with patriarchal gender relations.

<sup>8</sup>One important collection of essays, Gwendolyn Mikell, ed., *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), is equally present-oriented.

<sup>9</sup>Nomboniso Gasa, *Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo* [They remove boulders and cross rivers: Women in South African history] (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, xvi, xviii. The brevity of this article makes it impossible to discuss more than a brief selection of the work of African women historians who reflect on the relationships between their historical case studies and present-day women's issues. Some examples include Tapiwa B. Zimudzi, "African Women, Violent Crime and the Criminal Law in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900–1952," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 3 (2004): 449–514, and Nhongo–Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse?* In her important new book, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, Tabitha Kanogo ends her story in 1950 and makes no explicit connections with the present, although she provides rich material for present-day feminist activists.

<sup>12</sup>Sandra Greene, "A Perspective from African Women's History: Comment on 'Confronting Continuity'," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 3 (1997): 95–104.

<sup>13</sup>Eugenia W. Herbert, *Iron, Gender and Power: Ritual Transformation in African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 238. I explore these ideas in "'Beasts of Burden' Revisited: Interpretations of Women and Gender in Southern African Societies," in *Paths Toward the Past: Historical Essays in Honor of Jan Vansina*, ed. Robert W. Harms et al. (Atlanta, GA: African Studies Association Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup>See Ife Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Press, 1987), and Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).