

AFRICAN GENDER RESEARCH AND POSTCOLONIALITY: LEGACIES AND CHALLENGES[?]

By

Desiree Lewis

Introduction

Much African gender research draws extensively on the disciplines of anthropology, and the predominant emphasis in many gender initiatives on the continent remains technocratic and narrowly developmentalist. Alternatives to traditional anthropological and technicist methods and ideas have been developed by feminist scholars in a variety of fields. In historical research from the late 80s, for example, Fatima Mernissi (1988) and Bonlanle Awe (1991) explored the need for “herstory” in African historiography, with their comprehensive accounts of women’s agency and subordination transcending the limitations of insular anthropology and developmentalism. Developing these themes in more recent work, Cheryl Jonson-Odim and Nina Mba in *For Women and the Nation* (1997) link the texture of historical process to a Nigerian woman’s narrative of her life to approach issues of gender and development from a holistic and humanist point of view.

Certain recent studies of the state have gone especially far in extending theoretical and empirical material for understanding women and African politics. Scholars like Azza Karam, dealing with Egypt (1998), and Sylvia Tamale (1999) and Ailai Tripp (2000), focusing on Uganda, examine postcolonial states in terms of gendered institutional structures, relations and cultures. In so doing they question restrictive notions of development and enlist a much wider range of theories and subjects than those examined in traditional anthropological accounts. In the sphere of economics Aderanti Adepoju and Christine Oppong’s *Gender, Work and Population in Sub-Saharan Africa* (1994) draws together a range of case studies in which women’s work is explored with detailed reference to gender roles, kinship, conjugal relations and the connections between reproduction and production. Collectively showing how governments and donor agencies, ignoring the minutiae of women’s labour, usually base development programmes on skewed notions of what this labour actually entails, this anthology offers a powerful critique of liberal women in Development approaches and also implicitly questions traditional anthropological biases.

With many contributions to recent cultural studies, African feminist scholarship has encouraged attention to the everyday, the ordinary and the seemingly insignificant. Here “culture”, seen to encompass all socially-inflected exchanges and mediations, is viewed as the site of localised struggles and transformations. Before the nineties, work on culture in relation to women and gender tended to fix or reify culture, or focused primarily on literature, visual art and music as examples of formal cultural expression; recent research has been enriched by confronting the enormous varieties of cultural communication. With this recent cultural studies work, broad attention to voice, communication and agency enlarge conventional understandings of women’s agency and transcend the “resistance” models that have often constrained understandings of women’s roles as political and historical actors. The attention to popular culture and social history in particular opens up ostensibly self-evident or neutral forms of women’s lives as fertile sites of self-expression, cultural creativity and political rebellion. Marking a departure from scholarship’s traditional “serious” subjects, these studies usefully depart from conventional anthropological projections of culture as static and unchanging.

The range of innovative and radical feminist work on gender in Africa today is therefore considerable, with earlier models often providing the basis for recent exploration. Yet despite the steady upsurge of ideas and publications, the field of women and gender studies in Africa today continues to bear the imprint of traditional anthropology and developmentalism. This impact is often insidious and indirect. It can affect, for example, students’ perceptions of gender, or biases in particular gender sources, or the orientation of gender research, or the donor specifications with which many feminist initiatives need to comply. In other words, these conservative traditions have continued to obstruct progress in African gender research and advocacy even though many feminist scholars have successfully mapped alternative paths and goals. It is a key argument of this paper that the dominance of anthropology and developmentalism need ongoing scrutiny in order for us to fully consider how to take progressive postcolonial agendas forward.

The paper starts with a survey of research trends that undermine the radical trajectories identified above. I focus mainly not on the details of particular approaches, but on the epistemological and political patterns thrown up by research to date, as well as the challenges they pose for future research. In the sections that follow I draw on my conclusions for a recent review essay of African women and gender studies to describe innovative emerging patterns.

[?] This paper stems from research work for a project driven by the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. However the opinions expressed reflect my own views, rather than the “collective beliefs” of the project, one of whose main aims is to encourage debate and conversation, rather than to establish consensus.

1. The impact of anthropological studies of women.

A tradition of scholarly research on African women first surfaced with studies like Denise Paulme's *Women of Tropical Africa* (1963) and Sylvia Leith-Ross' *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* (1965). These works were powerfully shaped by the structural functionalist approaches initiated by Claude Levi Strauss. Paulme, in her introduction to the collection, describes the variety captured in the essays as follows:

The first thing that strikes one on reading these contributions is how widely varied the modes of life are which they describe. There are agriculturalists of more or less permanent settlement, pastoralists living in straw huts and following their herds from one grazing land to another, or again a complex stratified society with masters, servants and slaves and a strict clientage where subordinates provide subsistence products for a patron who is bound to protect them from the exactions of others, this being the mode from the bottom of the pyramid to the solitary sovereign at its apex. (1963:2)

The tone and language reflected here as well as the subjects focused on immediately signal a particular anthropological fixation with customs, modes of life and cultural difference, an over-riding feature of which is a tendency to present African women as frozen in time and place and subjects with static rituals and customs but lacking any real history. The character of this work has been traditionally ethnographic in the sense of offering a window on non-western worlds by defining these as the complementary projections of western ones. Discrete units of analysis like the family, lineage, marriage or kinship indicate an effort to demonstrate (or inscribe?) the radical difference of African from western societies. The particular focus on women's social roles, their situations within marriage and their cultural roles in many ways conjures up a sense of all-pervasive "strangeness".

The codification of African women's "difference" in scholarship did not necessarily result in their being denigrated, an effect usually attributed to much western scholarship. On the contrary, scholarly imagining of African women in texts like Paulme's are often ennobling and even iconic. These portrayals continue to be a marked feature of the present, and the shrouding of African women in an enigmatic "difference" is a significant feature of recent seminal work produced by certain African scholars. Among these is Ifi Amadiume's voluminous oeuvre. In her *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (1997), a work in which she outlines concerns in her output as a whole, she shows that a strong matriarchal legacy throughout Africa has allowed women to acquire unique powers and positions of authority, these distinguishing them from women in the west.

Amadiume's recourse to anthropological legacies originating in structural functionalism is registered especially clearly in her preoccupation with topics like kinship, family, lineage and ethnophilosophy. Pat McFadden acutely pinpoints the political effects of this connection when she writes: "The academic language of lineage, the family, and notions of hierarchy and status are drawn largely, in methodological and conceptual terms, from the stock of traditional ethnographical and anthropological sense making, different only in that it is applied via a claim that because it is an African female academic who is using the language, it therefore assumes a different meaning and implies different and previously unknown features and characteristics about those societies and communities" (2001: 60).

McFadden concentrates on the political effects of this "strange consonance" of "old European appropriational practices of studying Africa" and the "claims of indigenous African anthropologists", dealing mainly with how problematically the latter feed off the former. What primarily concerns me here, though, is the extent to which early anthropology has functioned as a discourse for producing particular research agendas and establishing interpretive frames for ongoing study and representation of African women. In other words, the problem is that the overwhelming impact of a particular tradition within anthropology has been registered not only in anthropological work on African women and gender relations, but more pervasively - in the way that early anthropological concerns have filtered into and defined an authoritative lens in fields ranging from feminist theory and politics to gender advocacy.

The overdetermining impact of anthropology is evident in the way that certain theorists have essentialised African women in terms of binary oppositions between western and African women. A theorist like Catherine Acholonu, for example, in her *Motherism: the Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, uses the term "motherism" as a "multidimensional Afrocentric theory" (1995: 110) to define what she sees as being "the essence of African womanhood" (1995). Writing more recently, Gwendolyn Mikell (1997) claims that "African feminism is distinctly heterosexual and pro-natal" and grants a pivotal place to the distinctively supportive roles of African as opposed to western women. For certain theorists, then, African women's ascribed roles and identities are seen to constitute the basis for their radical "alterity", with difference being imagined through the available signifiers and images offered by structural functionalist anthropology.

Another manifestation of the traditional anthropological bias in research is the leaning towards a fetishized "culture", seen to be self-contained, coherent and neatly bounded. References to culture infiltrate discussion and debate in various ways to codify and entrench the binarism of Africa and the West. Here, the fixation with an imagined "africanicity" in relation to women and gender in many ways reproduces the dominant

discursive construction of Africa, constantly described in terms of everything that the west is not. This is not to deny the importance of ongoing attention to Africa's unique situation in global politics or culture, or to reject the relevance of metaphorically using terms like 'the west' or 'western' to decode power relations. What is disturbing, however, is the fixing of these categories as absolute entities, with meanings about Africa being formulaically measured on the basis of their being antithetical to projections about the west. In the same way that colonial discourses have imagined Africa in terms of its antithetical difference from the west, so does much recent intellectual thought and politics fixate on a binary impulse – ostensibly in an effort to contest western dominance, but often with the effect of reproducing western modes of misrepresentation and projection.

The preoccupation with cultural difference often colours the tone of debate, the kinds of agendas that define conferences or workshops, orientations in teaching and curricula design and various forms of gender advocacy. The focus of this work and politics often appears extremely radical insofar as inherited terms like "gender" or "feminism" are jettisoned in favour of a new language which seeks to register distinctively pre-colonial or postcolonial agendas.

One difficulty with the assumption that language can be overturned in favour of an entirely new lexicon and world outlook is the problematic assumption that words and their meanings can be neatly separated from a globalised cultural repertoire pervasively underwritten by centuries of western discursive dominance. The effort to salvage past modes of thought, or to invent an entirely new language, seriously underplays the extent to which current language use, terminology and theory have become irrevocably creolised. This means that what we understand, from the vantage point of the present, to be pre-colonial and what we currently imagine to be postcolonial will always be deeply implicated in western discursive practices. This dilemma seems to me best confronted not by attempting to transcend hybridisation as "contamination", but by squarely acknowledging and working with it in order to develop "new" contestatory modes and theories.

Another problem with efforts to salvage or recreate entirely new meanings by codifying a pristine "Afrocentrism" concerns ways in which organicist notions of African identity feed into conservative gender and class hierarchies. Throughout Africa, the reification of African difference has been marshalled in a variety of ways to build a sense of African unity that mystifies class and gender divides. Evidence of this abounds in the strategies and pronouncement of postcolonial political elites, in the philosophies of heads of state, and in the defensive reactions to radical women's agendas of many male politicians. Thus, the effect of Afrocentric nation-building in debates about gender on the continent is often to foreground alliances between formerly colonised black men and women to the extent of underplaying the very urgent divisions and struggles around resources, power, dignity and self-expression associated with inequalities between men and women.

This seems to me a key drawback of the extremely important intervention made several years ago by Chikwenye Ogunyemi. In a seminal work published in *Signs* "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English", Ogunyemi launches a radical critique of the extent to which white and western women have ignored the realities and locations of African women. She goes on to coin the term "womanism" as an alternative to feminism, arguing that African women and men have been united in a common struggle against colonialism. I believe that this intervention, made in 1986 remains a crucial milestone in the efforts of radical African women to name themselves independently and to contest the appropriative ways in which many western feminists have spoken for them. But the argument about the congruence of African men and women's struggles can become tricky when a critique of colonialism and neo-colonialism and white feminists' dominance is *pitted against* an analysis of gender hierarchies in Africa. There seems to be no reason why one form of oppression should be privileged above another, and why it should not be possible to critique western feminist discursive dominance while simultaneously disavowing patriarchal oppression in Africa.

When we consider the repercussions of privileging racial or national identity to the extent of ignoring structural inequalities between men and women in postcolonial African politics, it is disturbing that a celebrated "Africanicity" can muffle and displace crucial power relations and challenges for change in Africa. Consequently, the reification of Africa or an essentialised African identity can mystify political consequences in ways reminiscent of earlier constructions of Africa. Traditional anthropology, and in particular the legacy of structural functionalism, can therefore be seen to have had a major impact not only on anthropological work on women and gender, but on the debates, discourses and frames that are sometimes generally deployed within African women and gender studies and advocacy. As such, anthropology has exercised the force of a regime of truth, a discourse with which observation and description are anchored in language and interpretive methods with the force of irrefutable objectivity or scientific scholarly accuracy.

2. Developmentalist Approaches

Women in Development has been a feature mainly of donor-driven activity and research for NGO's, handbooks, consultancies and so on. As such it has been sidelined within academic scholarship and publishing. Despite this, the impact of developmental paradigms continues to make an enormous impact on, for example, the drawing up of gender courses, university lecturers' selections of readings, the political focus of workshops or postgraduate research and thesis-writing in addition to much advocacy work and policy-making in Africa.

Originating with Esther Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970), this paradigm defines as its aim the liberation of third world women from their entrapment in African patriarchy and under-development. The paradigm of women-in-development that was current in the seventies has been augmented in the present, with gender experts couching their prescriptions in the form of knowledge specially attuned to practical agendas for African women. This has resulted in a deluge of "accessible" and "relevant" material that sets guidelines for African women's "development". The limitations of this paradigm have been extensively critiqued by Rudo Gaidzwanwa (1992), Ruth Meena (1992), Amina Mama (1996), April Gordon (1996) and others. What still seems to warrant scrutiny is the ongoing appeal of this paradigm as one that most compellingly answers the need for Africa's gender-related developmental problems.

In other words, it does not seem sufficient simply to identify why WID approaches have been inadequate. What is important is the question of why, despite the abundant evidence of its inadequacy and the many examples of rich, innovative work on women's labour and involvement in the economy, it remains so prominent, and what this implies for the climate of progressive gender research and politics in Africa. In a climate that prioritises an urgent pragmatism, issues of intellectual development and the need for building a critical intellectual culture that exerts an influence on state and donor-funded gender work have been consistently underplayed.

While it is therefore noteworthy that developmentalist approaches have been steadily critiqued, the mindset and bias that makes these approaches, rather than any other, such major contributions to Africa's dilemmas are noteworthy. One result of the emphasis on technocratic and functional development has been to limit the intellectual quality and range of gender research. From a WID perspective, gender research and advocacy can be reduced to neatly defined gender issues, while analysis and rigorous intellectual work is marginalised as secondary, not of pressing importance, the luxury of intellectual elites.

The hegemony of developmentalism has been to sever scholarship from the agendas and priorities facing African women and to delimit issues of development to narrowly economic and donor-related concerns. Stephen Arnold, in his Preface to *Culture and Development in Africa* (1990), describes this situation as "technocratic balkanisation" (1990:viii). "Technocratic balkanisation" has had a major impact on university teaching and the ethos of intellectual debate and scholarship throughout Africa, with the trend being to displace the relatively militant and independent intellectual activity of the immediate post-independence period (during the sixties and seventies) with a growing focus on Development Studies, technologies of development and intellectual agendas driven by market forces and conservative political strategies. With gender research, technocratic balkanisation has had an especially restrictive impact because "gender" has a long history of being reduced to a peripheral "hands-on" concern. The broad and wide-ranging field of gender analysis has easily been reduced to clearcut "gender issues", technical points that can be easily identified and resolved in line with transformation driven by structural adjustment and conservative postcolonial state-building.

Another effect of the functionalist emphasis driven by WID is the bias towards policy-making rather than intellectual activism in gender advocacy. This means that short-term problem-solving and immediate action takes prior place over the careful analysis and political insight that could shape radical programmes and projects for long-term transformation.

In a highly suggestive article on Ghana, Dzotsi Tsikata (1997) identifies a schism between policy activism and intellectual activism on gender in Africa, a situation that has meant that "research has not had a fundamental impact on the work of activists, organisations and on state policy formulation" (1997:381). She goes on to claim that "while analysis has shown that state action is often both gender-blind and gender-biased, both independent and state-sponsored activists have sought to rely solely on the state to outlaw gender discrimination, with limited success" (1997). The systemic and structural nature of the problem presents difficulties that cannot easily be remedied. Tsikata's historical approach to policy is extremely valuable, since it develops more than a critique of existing state policy and considers how patterns develop, how pervasively they have affected gender research and activism and, implicitly, how they can be changed. Reviewing historical trends helps to explain the constrained dialogues between critical feminist scholarship and gender activism and the reasons for the highly visible, yet remarkably ineffectual state-inspired gender policy-making throughout Africa.

3. State and donor-driven initiatives

The emphasis on women in development has fed easily into the state-controlled developmentalist orientation that, throughout Africa, has helped to erode independent feminist initiatives in Africa. This orientation has a number of causes that vary from region to region and from country to country. Its key causes, however, are very similar throughout Africa.

With the transition to independence, new ruling parties rapidly set about consolidating the diverse and militant women's organisations that had mushroomed during the struggles against colonialism. The militancy and independence of women's movements in countries like Algeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe and South Africa rapidly dissipated as women's wings were yoked to the new ruling parties. With this co-opting of many grassroots and local women's movements, political lines of difference (which might have sparked off important realignments,

mobilisation and consolidation for radical women's organisation in the post-colonial period) were reduced to personality struggles and petty conflicts.

Tsikata demonstrates this situation in Ghana (1997: 393) while Gaidzanwa reflects on the co-option of the women's movement in Zimbabwe and South Africa (1992). Extending the argument to Kenya, Tripp shows how the Kenyan African National Union steadily increased its grip on women's organisations to turn the dominant *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* into a party wing eventually declared the sole representative of Kenyan women (2000:9-10). Lazreg develops similar conclusions in her discussion of how women involved in Algeria's armed struggle were later confined by the patriarchal agendas of post-independent Algerian nation-building (1994). In an important contrastive study, Tripp shows how Ugandan organisations were able to elude state co-option. Focusing on the concept of "societal autonomy", her study is an important discussion of conditions shaping the independence of Ugandan women's movements, a position that has generated the vigorous gender struggles in the country today (2000).

A final consideration in explaining the general impact of state policy on gender concerns the fragmentation and conservatism of postcolonial policy-making. Generalising about state policy on gender in the third world, Haleh Afsar writes:

Third World states in general...do not have coherent policies about women, nor do they usually have structural facilities for co-ordinating their decisions. Given the tension within bureaucracies and the almost total absence of discussion between the separate branches of the executive, it is not surprising to find the introduction of policies which have radically opposed implications for the lives of women and make at one and the same time contradictory demands of them. (1987:3)

Many of the pioneering feminist studies of African state policy today, including Tsikata's (1997), Tamale's (1999), and Tripp's (2000) demonstrate that it is often liberal or WID approaches that frame state policy and generate funding. Post-colonial governments, under pressure to democratise from donor agencies and an international community, have been quick to embrace ad hoc, piecemeal and uncoordinated gender initiatives. This creates situations where gender is arbitrarily woven into policy-making in the absence of any long-term vision or context for meaningful gender transformation. At times, legislation may be surprisingly radical. Yet this is often not connected to legislation in all areas, so that concerted policy-making in certain areas may be out of step with its absence in others, or particular pieces of progressive legislation may be undermined by unmonitored gender discrimination in the wider society. Tripp expands this bleak picture of state control over gender advocacy by showing how many African governments have regulated funding sources for progressive activism and planning (2000:10-11). By monitoring NGOs, many African governments have sought to ensure that funding potentially aimed at progressive and state-independent gender initiatives is channelled through the state's agendas for development and policy-making.

The coordination of gender advocacy mainly under the impetus of indigenous patriarchal anxieties about meaningful gender equity, external pressure and western prescriptions has had far-reaching consequences for women. Although the picture that emerges is of vigorous and high-profile gender activism, planning and policy-making, the reality is often evidence of government's nominal engagement with women's rights. Many African women scholars have critiqued postcolonial state initiatives in relation to the economy or health, implicitly offering guidelines for radical planning and policy-making in particular regions or throughout Africa. Yet it is usually the legacies and patterns traced above, rather than this insight and rigour that infiltrates policy-making.

The salience of the state in gender initiatives can easily create the impression that it offers a flourishing site or models for gender research and scholarship. It is easy to assume that the voluminous research, mechanisms and information generated by different governments creates an adequate climate for future work, especially when these are linked to donor support and international mechanisms. The fact that they have not done so poses a crucial challenge to African feminists seeking to forge connections between their work and radical activism, and to ensure that initiatives from civil society, rather than from the state, take responsibility for conceptualising and driving transformation and development in post-colonial Africa.

4. Postcoloniality and African Feminisms

The situation mapped above raises the importance of strategising for feminist capacity-building and research on a number of levels. Of importance here are not only efforts to enhance the quantity of the enormously important feminist work on the continent. Possibly even more urgent is the need to develop capacity-building and networking projects that address the entrenched discursive and structural legacies traced above. The legacies I have described indicate that levels of networking need to be qualitatively transformed in order to foster strong communication and fruitful cross-disciplinary exchanges. To challenge the fragmentation of knowledge and representation originating in anthropology's dominance, it is crucial to encourage communication among scholars, students and researchers who are often confined to their different niches. Secondly, reinstating an ethos of critical debate and intellectual rigour is a vital way to forge fruitful exchanges between activism and academia, to contest

the current separation of activism from academia, and to undo the misconception that gender advocacy and activism can dispense with rigorous intellectual work.

Already there have been a number of exciting collaborative and networking initiatives that contest the legacies and elements reviewed above. Development organisations and research networks such as CODESRIA, the Southern African Regional Institute for Policy Studies (SARIPS) and the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) have been hugely influential in shaping regional intellectual, cultural and political agendas. Specialist networks and organisations dedicated to particular areas for women's empowerment, like Akina Mama wa Afrika (AmwA), the African Women's Leadership Institute, Femmes Africa Solidarite (FAS), which concentrates on peace-building), ABANTU for development, dealing with organisations and development, the Council for the Economic Empowerment of Women in Africa (CEEWA), Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF), AMANITARE, a recently launched organisation concentrating on reproductive rights and gender-based violence, and the Association of African Women Scholars (AAWS), which has consolidated scholarship in Africa and North America, have considerably strengthened the work of those formed in the eighties.

This tradition has allowed feminist intellectuals to "institutionalize their presence, to articulate agendas for African feminism by facilitating research and activism by African women scholars [through organising] workshops on methodology, women and rural development, reproduction, the mass media and development assistance" (Mama, 1996:6). These networks have also offered foundations for the much-needed debate and conversation likely to address the structural legacies traced above. One of the key effects of this conversation would be to instil a strong ethos of cross-disciplinarity in African feminist scholarship. Another effect would be to strengthen traditions of intellectual rigour and so invigorate the politics, research and advocacy that have been insidiously undermined by technicist and state- or donor-driven developmentalism.

Cross-disciplinarity and boundary-breaking have long been celebrated as keys to the success of feminist intellectual intervention. A definitive characteristic of second-wave feminism was the way it questioned the conventional schism between activism and academia. Moreover, disciplines blended and fused in rich and exciting ways, resulting in a pattern that made gender and women's studies in the seventies and eighties extremely difficult to place in disciplinary terms. Women and gender studies teachers were frequently drawn from a range of disciplines, while course-work and research were often emphatically and proudly situated inbetween conventional boundaries.

Although it has become increasingly clear that understanding gender dynamics and promoting gender transformation requires us to explore intersections in terms of connections between disciplines, fields, power relations and identities, enthusiasm around interaction and interdisciplinarity has not developed as far as it might in the field of African women and gender studies. There are clearly a host of reasons for this, reasons that must include the constraints on African feminist scholars to sustain inter-disciplinarity in universities with very different priorities, insufficient time for exploratory research beyond conventional disciplines or limited opportunities for conference travel and scholarly collaboration. Located in disciplines where we are often constrained by heavy teaching loads or administrative duties, sometimes unaware of each other's work because of the relative paucity of African conferences in our field; unable to visit other countries and universities because of limited funding from our universities for research and conference travel; and pressured to take up important yet exhausting ideological and political battles in unsupportive institutional environments, as African feminist scholars we have far fewer opportunities to network effectively and consistently than many feminist academics in the West.

The positive impact of interdisciplinary conversation is attested to by trends in gender research that draw on a variety of fields and marshal a range of theories or genres to bring fresh insights to bear on particular subject. Laetitia Mukurasi's *Post Abolished* (1991) springs to mind here. Exploring the iniquitous mechanisms preventing and circumscribing women's access to higher paid economic activities *Post Abolished* is a powerful autobiographical account of the author's battle against gender discrimination in Tanzania despite this country's progressive postcolonial policies. Appraising the discriminatory landscape that women workers confront, the book uses testimony and personal narrative and so enlists a genre that is often marginalised in mainstream scholarship. A study which is similar in orientation but which has the advantage of incorporating a concise introductory analysis of patriarchy and feminist research methodology is Ngaiza and Koda's *The Unsung Heroines: Women's Life Histories from Tanzania* (1991). Contributors include both established and new writers dealing comprehensively with the experiences of women ranging from migrants and peasants to urban housewives. These works are notable both for the ways in which they draw on different styles and genres and for their holistic appraisals of African women's experiences. It is clearly demonstrated that economic activity, politics and interpersonal or domestic relations are inextricably linked, even where the focus may be on a particular facet of women's social experience.

Other important developments have occurred in research with strongly literary or cultural orientations. Of importance here are ways in which a cultural or literary focus is deployed to shed light on broader questions of subjectivity and political expression. A pivotal subject here has been motherhood, with many literary critics focusing on the centrality of social and symbolic motherhood for African women to raise general concerns about ways in which women have been defined in ideologies of domesticity and to explore women's subjectivities and self-

perceptions. The anthology edited by Susheila Nasta, *Motherlands* and, more recently Nnaemeka's edited collection, *The Politics of (M)othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature* (1997) are highly suggestive here. In the studies of diasporic African women's writing in these key anthologies, a range of critics bring different political perspectives to bear on their reading of women authors' concerns. At the same time, they unravel the contours and histories of the looming mother motif in African women's subjectivities.

Much cross-disciplinary research reveals an emphatic commitment to the transformation of gender relations. It is acknowledged that power relations between men and women are complex, multi-dimensional and pervasive, and that a diversity of tools and angles are needed to disentangle and contest them. Rather than simply registering women's locations and identities, or narrowly compartmentalising "women's struggles", this work intricately explores and challenges gender dynamics as the confluence of networks that shape men and women's relations vis-à-vis numerous past and present circumstances of power and control.

Having highlighted networking and conversation as the basis for strategic interdisciplinary work, it seems significant to raise a caution about interdisciplinarity for interdisciplinarity's sake. bell hooks (1994) trenchantly observes in her discussion of the boundary-crossing in recent American cultural studies that it can easily define a new orthodoxy, with critics, researchers, students and scholars enthusiastically speaking the language of contestation and border-crossing, yet making very little effort to connect their ideas to practice. Our networking needs to be informed by the priorities and legacies that have thus far shaped the singularity of progressive feminist scholarship on the continent. While it would ideally enhance our research output and opportunities to grow, effective networking need not only lead to career consolidation and individual academic achievement. The agendas, priorities and directions that have thus far shaped progressive women and gender studies on the continent, especially the important collaboration and conversation between advocacy and women's movements and academia, would therefore be a crucial dimension of progressive exchanges and networking for activist-oriented interdisciplinary work.

5. Concluding Comments.

I have singled out three major constraints in women and gender studies and gender advocacy in Africa today. At one level, these have led much African gender research to become overly preoccupied with endorsing a "difference" predicated on colonial imagining of Africa. At another level, the content of research and politics has often been constrained by technicism, state interference and the role of developmentalist discourses in shaping technologies of gender, rather than fostering critical intellectual debate. By way of conclusion, I want to highlight the paradigm shift which largely informs the radical work and focus on interdisciplinarity traced above.

Many radical third-world feminists have extensively deployed post-structuralist methods and theories, while insisting on the "postcolonial" as opposed to the "post-structuralist" or "postmodern". The use of post-structuralism in the work of certain feminists in Africa signals a major re-orientation away from earlier structuralist emphases in theory and methodology¹. For example, Pat McFadden, in a recent article on culture and resistance, draws on Said and Gramsci to explore discourse as a site of post-nationalist African feminist struggle (2001). Amina Mama has focused on subjectivity as an entry point into cross-disciplinary explorations of women's experiences and struggles in Africa. This approach informs much of her work on politics and the state, but it is most clearly outlined in her *Beyond the Masks* (1995), a study of black diasporic women's subjectivity that yields important comparative insights into the articulation of race, imperialism and gender in Africa. Marjorie Mbilinyi's work is similarly inflected by a critical engagement with post-structuralism. Defining her origins as "European/American" and redefining herself as a "critical Third-World feminist", she writes that "Identities or positions are the product of struggle and they represent an achieved, not an ascribed trait... 'Third World Feminist' connotes a critical analysis of the imperial relations, not a geographical location or physical trait" (1992:35). As her comments suggest, much recent work registers an emphasis on self-reflexivity and positioning for feminists. Increasingly, scholars are acknowledging that all representation and knowledge production are mediated, and that feminist research and practice, if it is not to betray its progressive thrust, is always relational and partial. Azza Karam's work on the Egyptian state (1998) is especially noteworthy in the way it directly brings Foucauldian analysis to bear on pressing questions of power in relation to postcolonial gendered practices and relations. Drawing on discourse analysis and demonstrating that power is not simply imposed from above, but infiltrates the way in which social subjects routinely police themselves, Karam offers important insights into understanding the tenacity and complexity of oppressive relations in postcolonial Africa.

The shift to post-structuralism has therefore focused on power at a range of levels, rather than on entities and constants clearly observable in real life. Efforts have been made to consider how the naturalised language and tools of scholarship are themselves implicated in multiple networks of power. The emphasis has also been placed on acknowledging how multi-layered oppression usually is. Overall, postcolonial interventions have the potential to expand work in some of the key growth areas for African women's studies and to open up for scrutiny hidden facets

¹ Structuralism here would include not only structural functionalist anthropology, but also Marxist, Nationalist and many early feminist paradigms that assumed singular causes of oppression and that were often insensitive to the multiplicity of power relations and the encoding of power in theory and discourse.

of power, subjectivity and society. The recourse to post-structuralism therefore, indicates a strategic, self-conscious and extremely selective borrowing of progressive resources in order to address specifically African concerns with gender and substantive development. Far-from signalling hasty efforts to "keep up" with the theoretical orthodoxy of the west, they are highly politicised and distinctively African forms of intellectual engagement.

By way of conclusion, it seems important to reflect on the role of modern ICTs in relation to the impact of poststructuralism in African gender research. What is postmodern is generally considered to be uncontainable, without boundaries, fluid, what upsets the securities that we have long cherished about knowledge, information and text. The internet is characteristically "postmodern" in the way that it opens up limitless opportunities for communication, writing and thought, in the way that it galvanises the proliferation of text freed from the mastery of authors, and in the way that – hypothetically - it makes all information the ownership of everyone. The internet is often equated with an *apocalyptic* postmodernity, with the impact of the modern information revolution being seen as an anti-humanist movement that has, in comparison with the industrial revolution, taken the world by storm.

From this point of view, the internet seems to occupy a place in an amorphous, dispersed and post-humanist global culture that is at worst hostile to and at best impervious to the agendas of culturally, socially and politically marginal groups. Yet to stress the generally postmodern effect of the information revolution can also mean ignoring the way that information technology is always used for particular political goals. ICTs are fundamentally a resource, requiring human agency and political intention in order to be used. In this sense, ICTs afford enormous possibility for the networking, reflection and rigour that can continue to invigorate African feminist thought. In devoting our energies to challenging conceptual and research work, therefore, we cannot risk ignoring the exciting resources and possibilities made available by a globalised "postmodern" world.

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