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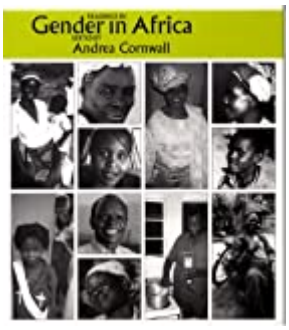

Andrea Cornwall, ed. *Readings in Gender in Africa.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. vii + 247 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-85255-871-3; $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34517-2; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21740-0.

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African gender studies have come a long way. This is, perhaps, the first and lasting impression left by the latest volume of the Readings in Series, which must be lauded for publishing representative selections of the "best and most exciting work in fields where standard textbooks have hitherto been lacking." To fulfil this promise (quoted above from the series' own advertisement) is a daunting challenge. Thus, Andrea Cornwall had her work cut out when taking it up for the trans-disciplinary and fast-moving field of studies of gender in Africa.

The volume consists of twenty-eight essays plus the editor's introduction on perspectives on gender in Africa; all but the two original contributions prepared for this volume by Lisa Lindsay and Stephan Miescher respectively (both on masculinities, a fairly new topic in African gender studies) were published previously in journals and edited collections. The original publication dates of the chapters range from 1975 to 2003. Thus, they cover the three decades that have witnessed the bulk of African gender research and the profound social transformations reflected in and perhaps, to a small degree, resulting from gender research on the continent.

Except for the odd political scientist, sociologist, or geographer, anthropologists or historians wrote most of the essays. This is unsurprising not so much because Cornwall, as an anthropologist herself, may be most familiar with this body of literature. Instead, as her introduction amply demonstrates, the preponderance of these two disciplines is owed to the fact that, in African gender studies, anthropology and history have indeed spoken closely together in historically grounded ethnographic studies as much as in ethnographically informed historical research. Together, they have much dominated the field since African(ist) gender studies emerged in the wake of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.[1]

Cornwall's insightful introduction leads through three decades of feminist scholarship in and on Africa and introduces some of the principal themes in the study of gender in Africa. It demonstrates that the study of gender is inextricably linked to academic "fashions"–some passing, others of more profound significance–as much as to (feminist) scholars' own shifting personal and political perspectives.

Cornwall identifies two contradictory sets of images at the core of arguments in Africanist gender studies: "woman-as-victim" and "woman-as-heroine" (p. 1). The woman-as-victim conceptualization situates African women as powerless and voiceless victims of ever-deepening oppression rooted in layers of male-supremacist "tradition," colonialism and "development." This representation is polarized by a countervailing set

of images that cast African women as "feisty, assertive, self-reliant heroines" (p. 1).

Cornwall argues that the shifting emphasis on one or the other of the two alternatives, as well as alternating narratives within Africanist gender studies, tells more about the shifting preoccupations of Western feminists than about African realities. In the 1960s, the earliest feminist publications on Africa depicted African women as strong and resourceful heroines; they argued against the earlier depictions of "oppressed" African women by protagonists of the "civilizing mission" discourses during the colonial era, particularly Christian missionaries and some colonial administrators, as well as by many, generally male, anthropologists. She particularly engages with Denise Paulme's early edited volume, *Women of Tropical Africa* (1963), as a significant example of the "(African) woman-as-heroine" discourse. In this small body of literature, African women featured strongly as queens and in other positions of social, political and cultural authority. Cornwall links this set of images to the demands of early second wave feminism in the West, which advocated (Western) women's "right" to equal access to and say in the political and economic spheres. To the feminist activists and scholars of the 1960s and early 1970s, African women in authority presented living examples of a different, more women-empowering, gender regime.

The following two decades, however, saw a definite heroine-to-victim shift in the representation of African women. Cornwall suggests that this was owed, in the first place, to the axiomatic status of the public/private divide in Western feminist thought from the mid-1970s through to the late 1980s (p. 3). Western feminists, including scholars of Africa, were almost universally preoccupied with the "status of women" in production and reproduction, which made for unquestioned certainties and sweeping generalizations: "Virtually all took for granted a unitary category, 'woman,' which left little scope for ambiguity, nor indeed for attempts to make sense of other dimensions of women's lives and relationships. It also left men's gender 'roles' and identities unquestioned and largely undescribed" (p. 3).

Cornwall shows that more recently feminist scholars, particularly African-born writers, have increasingly contended that Western feminists often profoundly misunderstood the nature of gender and gender relations in Africa (p. 4). She cites the work of the influential, though rather controversial, scholars Ifi Amadiume and Oyewonke Oyewumi who have argued against the blanket association of African women with subordination. Such authors have argued that "gender" as understood in Western scholarship did not exist in African societies prior to colonization. Cornwall cautions, however, against the idealization of an African difference in which complementarity rather than conflict and hierarchy mark gender relations (p. 13). Instead, she advocates for theoretical and political contributions that engage with "the transmutability of gender identities in Africa and the range of relational subject positions taken up by women and men in everyday life [which] reveal a range of identities and identifications that undermine attempts to limit their frames of reference" (p. 13).[2]

Following the introduction, the book is divided into five sections, "Contested Representations: 'Gender' in Africa," "Reconfiguring Identities: Femininities and Masculinities," "Livelihoods and Lifeways," "Transforming Traditions: Gender, Religion and 'Culture' " and "Gender and Governance," each thoughtfully introduced by the editor. The sections cover most significant areas of gender research in Africa, and–especially when read in connection with the introduction–give a good sense of how gender research activities have been refocused over time, moving from the earlier emphasis on "African women" and their status in the economic, political and social arenas to more inclusive studies which now often focus on gender relations and on women's as well as men's gendered identities and aspirations, and do not shy away from close-up investigations of more "intimate" fields such as sexualities and spiritualities.[3]

It was revealing to read (or re-read) some of the classical papers by Western as well as African-born (and in some cases also African-based) gender scholars of the 1970s and 1980s–read from a twenty-first century critical perspective and compared to those chapters that were published more recently, the inherent reductionist and generalizing tendencies of the earlier contributions are striking.[4] It reminds us of how much of the more recent scholarship has come to take multiple identities and identifications as the starting point for careful explorations of gender and gender relations in Africa.

The five or six chapters of each section present case studies from different parts of the continent, which overall attempt a regional balance, although one might question the wisdom of (once again) confining Africa to those parts of the continent south of the Sahara. Southern Africa also appears somewhat underrepresented, with only one Zimbabwean and two South African focused papers as compared to, for instance, ten explicitly West African focused case studies, in addition to much pass-

ing reference to West and East African examples in evidence in some of the chapters that attempt continental overviews, for example, in the chapters by Josephine Beoku-Betts ("Western Perceptions of African Women in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries") and Aili Tripp ("Women in Movement: Transformations in African Political Landscapes").

The omission of North Africa and, particularly, the comparative negligence of southern Africa gives rise to a skewed perspective where the lasting impact of historical settler colonialism and the "importation" of minority populations from Asia and other parts of Africa appears strangely absent. The reviewer also misses studies that would address the gendered impact of intercontinental and transnational African migrations. I would have also liked to see some more detailed reference to the implications for gender and gender relations of the headlong rush into hypermodernity in some of the southernmost parts of the continent since 1990. Unfortunately, the only chapter drawing on the contemporary South African situation (Katharine Wood and Rachel Jewkes's " 'Dangerous' Love': Reflections on Violence among Xhosa Township Youth") fails to address these matters, although the relation between interpersonal violence, gender and the post-apartheid double-bind of (neoliberal) liberalization and political liberation has been discussed elsewhere.[5] To turn the argument on its feet, the less exotic elements of non-tropical Africa appear to be missing–gender analyses of new, and occasionally not so new, forms of multiculturalism and hybridity, and of the multiple modernities African women and men have produced, appropriating and redefining global cultural forms on the background of local histories.

These omissions are not so much due to an oversight on Cornwall's part, however, because these moments of African gender research in the social sciences (including history and anthropology) have indeed only been emerging over the past few years and have not yet been published widely.[6] While Cornwall's efforts to include texts authored by African-born and African-based scholars (not necessarily a common feature of academic enterprises engaging with the African continent) must be applauded, her analysis of theorizing in African gender research may have gained more significance if she had extended her disciplinary lenses beyond the social sciences to literary and cultural studies, which have demonstrated their capacity for feminist theorizing in Africa perhaps more than anywhere else. As Desiree Lewis has recently pointed out, feminist literary theorists in Africa have developed theoretical interventions to a far greater degree than those in the social sciences. Lewis sees a key reason for this intriguing development in the commonly followed approaches of social scientists on the continent who often work "with assumptions about relevant and politically grounded research focusing not on careful understanding of identities, relationships and social processes, but on clear cut 'issues,' with a view to practical, applied and immediate ways of addressing them." The study of fiction, on the other hand, Lewis argues, cannot easily be reduced to clear-cut "problems" or "issues"; therefore it "explicitly offers scope for exploration of social processes that a dominant academic culture in Africa, balkanized by instrumentalist agendas, national economic contingencies and dwindling support for rigorous intellectual work, seems to be steadily eroding."[7]

Lewis's poignant characterization of the dilemmas faced by African gender research moves the discussion beyond Cornwall's volume and into the future. Yet, the contributions to the publication under review already suggest, that, with the exception of a handful of metropolitan universities in South Africa and a few individuals with well-developed international networks that allow them access to contemporary literature and intellectual as well as activist debates, the gap has been widening between much of the recent social science gender research conducted by researchers based in Africa and the careful, reflective approaches developed over the past decade or two by African-born and other Africanist gender scholars based outside the continent. This concern needs attention.

In conclusion, Cornwall's effort must be commended. There can be no doubt that her introduction to the volume provides a very well conceived overview and reflection on the development of African gender research over the past three decades. The twenty-eight essays bring together well-known and widely read classics with more recent, in some instances less well-known work, which makes it a valuable resource for undergraduate and graduate reading. This collection will be much appreciated by those who are teaching on gender in Africa as well as by anyone who wants a thorough introduction into the field of African gender studies.

Notes

[1]. I speak of "Africanist" gender studies when I wish to emphasize the concerns of authorship located outside the African continent; in referring to "African" gender studies, I simply refer to the location of research in Africa, irrespective of whether the researchers are based (or were born) on the African continent.

[2]. My own anthropological and historical work on gender in Owambo, northern Namibia, for instance, demonstrates that gender is best understood as a construction relating to other forms of identity in different cultural discourses and that, at least in certain social historical contexts, people's identities included "gender" only as a rather contingent component, as I have argued for the case of women of the historical Owambo elites. Heicke Becker, " 'Let Me Come to Tell You': Loide Shikongo, the King, and Poetic License in Colonial Ovamboland," *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2005): pp. 235-258.

[3]. For a more recent, sensitively argued and closely researched study of spirituality and gender in an African context, see Dorothy L. Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters between Maasai and Missionaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

[4]. I deliberately refrain from a detailed discussion or even the "naming" of any of the older contributions to Cornwall's volume–I am concerned that singling out any particular publication in this context would deny justice to the historical development of African gender studies. Instead, I wish to emphasize the reading of these older texts as documents of the status of gender research and, perhaps, of the wider humanities and social sciences, particularly of anthropology and history, before the "reflective turn."

[5]. Robert Morrell, ed., *Changing Men in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001). See also Elaine Salo, "Negotiating Gender and Personhood in the New South Africa: Adolescent Women and Gangsters on the Cape Flats," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2003): pp. 345-365.

[6]. An excellent example of these emerging perspectives in gender studies is the work of Cape Town-based anthropologist Elaine Salo. See "Negotiating Gender and Personhood in the New South Africa," and her unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Respectable Mothers, Tough Men and Good Daughters: Producing Persons in Manenberg Township, South Africa," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2003).

[7]. Desiree Lewis, "African Feminist Studies, 1980-2002: A Review Essay for the African Gender Institute's 'Strengthening Gender and Women's Studies for Africa's Social Transformation' Project," (2003) available at `http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/`.

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