

Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, ed., African Women & Feminism:
Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood (Trenton:
Africa World Press, 2003)

3.
**FEMINISM AND AFRICA:
Reflections on the Poverty of Theory**



Olufemi Taiwo

African scholars in the humanities and social sciences labor under a burden imposed by the misrepresentation, falsehoods, and half-truths which characterizes much of Euro-American scholarship on Africa. African historians spent the 1950s and 60s trying to refute the racist contention, ridiculous as it must sound to contemporary ears, that Africans had no history before the arrival of Europeans. It is no accident, therefore, that a nationalist problematic still dominates much of African historiography. Much of the substantive academic philosophizing from Africa is of recent origin. During most of the 1970s, valuable time was needlessly expended on the question of whether or not African philosophy even exists. Many African scholars sojourning in Europe and North America, either as graduate students or teachers, have encountered what amounts to a culture of misrepresentation and have spent time and energy assailing it.

Every time African scholars are forced into these sterile but needed efforts to assert that we *are* or we *think*, the urgent tasks of identifying and explicating *what* we are or *what* we think remain undone or only partly done, and the possibility of a genuine dialogue with other world civilizations is aborted. The world, especially the Western world, and we ourselves, are the worse for it. We must decry this unfortunate situation and lament the fact that an end is nowhere in sight. But we must not despair. We must continue, in spite of all odds, to struggle against the misrepresentation of our situation in Western (that is European and North American) media, scholarship, politics, history, and other areas.

This paper is a response to a manifestation of this culture of misrepre-

sentation in the area of women's studies. It would not have been necessary had I not noticed that the culture of misrepresentation is alive and well, even if largely unacknowledged, in feminist writings about Africa.¹ In what follows, I shall cite evidence to buttress my claim and indict those who perpetuate this culture. But first, a clarification.

Anyone who is familiar with women's studies must think that there is a paradoxical ring to the title of this paper. The paradox lies in the fact that whereas feminism is suffused with theory, in its application to Africa and in feminist writings on or about African women, one finds a profound poverty of theory. Before I explain the nature of the poverty, it is necessary to explain what I mean by theory.

We never apprehend reality directly or *immediately*. The categories with which we analyze, organize, and synthesize phenomena as interconnected and internally coherent wholes are theories. In this paper, however, I am using theory as applied to whole, synthetic, identified, and individuated phenomena—i.e., the business of establishing patterns of determination in diverse phenomena. This is what natural scientists do with nature and what social scientists do with social phenomena. To relate this conception to the issue of feminism and Africa, I will use "theory" to refer to the conceptual tools with which we identify patterns of determination in social phenomena regarding women and their place in society—that is, I will find out the whats, hows, and whys of the situation of women, in our case, in Africa; the causes, courses, and consequences of regularities discernible in the social phenomena concerning women. By so doing, I hope to facilitate an understanding of the realities of African women, a fundamental precondition for the more arduous task of changing for the better those realities that require transformation.

It may be urged against my title that theories of the sort I have described abound in feminism. So why talk of the poverty of theory? Let us explain the notion of poverty. Poverty can refer to two things, among others: an absence and a deficiency. An absence must be taken in its literal sense: an emptiness, a void. The poverty of theory where it refers to absence can mean the utter lack of theory. But poverty may also refer to an insufficiency: not the lack of the thing (theory), but its presence in insufficient quantities or the presence in it of too few building blocks, for example, data. Insufficiency may itself be of two kinds: it may be used to refer to inadequacy or to incorrectness—either way, we mean it is not good enough. And it may be used to refer to irrelevance—that is the theory proposed is not suited to the reality it purports to explain. In other words, there is a lack of fit, a disjuncture, between theory and reality. As will presently become clear, feminism, the kind that I treat here, suffers from a poverty of theory in the various forms just adumbrated.

I should point out that my focus in this paper is in those variants of

feminism that claim to be interested in the liberation of women worldwide. For in most of the feminist writings that dominate the discourse in the United States and Canada, the same provincialism is prevalent that afflicts the thoughts of their male counterparts. In fact, one can say that poverty-as-absence is the dominant feature of American feminist writings that affirm, wittingly or unwittingly, an identity between American women's experience and the experience of women *simpliciter*.² Those who concern themselves with Africa usually fall within the socialist-feminist or the Marxist-feminist categories.³ The differences between them matter less, given the aim of this paper. My primary concern is with theory; politics, although relevant, is secondary.

The distinction between feminists and Marxist-feminists turns on the level of emergency which either of them gives to the women's struggle in relation to the class struggle against capitalism. For Marxist-feminists, feminist issues are not placed on the level of primary emergency. The oppression of women is seen as only one form of oppression, one which is an integral part of capitalism. For them, while there is need to struggle against women's oppression, national oppression, racial oppression, and so on, such a struggle should not be allowed to obfuscate the ultimate goal of overthrowing the basis of all oppression in the present epoch—capitalism. For feminists, however, feminist issues are primary. In fact, radical feminists see "feminist issues not only as *women's* first priority, but as central to any larger revolutionary analysis" (Firestone 1970:37). Socialist feminists try, on the other hand, to combine what they see as the best insights of radical feminism and Marxism. In this view, it is not the case that Marxian class analysis is incorrect but that it is inadequate for the purposes of women's liberation. Gender analysis must combine with class analysis. Gender struggle and class struggle are both of primary and equal importance. In dealing with women's oppression, we are not dealing with one system (capitalism) of which the oppression of women is a feature. We have two systems (capitalism and patriarchy), the first of which oppresses everyone through class rule and the second of which alone can explain the oppression of women *qua* women. This is what has come to be known as the Dual Systems Theory.⁴

What I have tried to do in the last few paragraphs is to render, in a capsule, the distinction between the two groups of feminists I am considering in this paper. I have chosen to focus on these two categories because they are the loudest in their verbal and written professions of commitment to the cause of women's liberation in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Others are simply unaware of Africa or can't be bothered about it. It is among the former that the diverse manifestations of the poverty of theory are most to be found. As we would say in Yoruba, *O n pami, o lo n gbami* (You are killing me but you insist that you are saving me): in succumbing, wittingly or unwit-

tingly, to the danger of the poverty of theory, these authors are actually demeaning the peoples of Africa, women as well as men, in the name of representing them. How does the poverty of theory express itself?

According to socialist feminists, whereas Marxism can explain the exploitation of women as workers, capitalists, and so on, it cannot explain the exploitation of women as women. For it is not capitalism which is responsible for the oppression of women; rather it is *patriarchy*. According to Heidi Hartmann, patriarchy is defined "as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (Hartman 1981:14). Patriarchy is seen as constituting a separate and autonomous totality of relations independent of the economic relations of production rooted in capitalism. Even though patriarchy is hierarchical and, implicitly, some men are dominated by other men, both male dominator and male dominated are united in their common objective of dominating women. In order to support the independence of patriarchal relations of the determining influence of the capitalist mode of production, defenders of socialist feminism assert that patriarchy has a material base which lies "most fundamentally in men's control over women's labour power" (Hartman 1981:14). Through patriarchy, men exclude women from access to the essential productive resources in society and channel their sexuality in the direction of producing and rearing children. When a theory that apprehends reality with only two categories—"men" and "women"—confronts Africa, the result is a litany of confusion and nonexplanations.

The theory is not equipped to deal with the complexity of the African, nor with any other situation. Talk about Africa's bewildering diversity is one of the real legends of all time. It is quite diverse in its demographic constitution, the cultural practices contained within it, its history, and so on. One assumes that this forbidding diversity will, at the least, have a sobering effect on any researcher interested in truth to approach his or her subject with considerable respect. In other words, any researcher working on Africa will be less prone to generalizations, to asserting uniformities in advance of more adequate knowledge and information about the peoples and cultures of the continent. This is an important point. Most aspects of African life and thought remain unresearched or underresearched. The reasons for this go beyond the scope of this paper. One consequence is that for most areas of life and thought, even the most diligent scholar must lament the paucity of relevant and useful data. But a disinclination to generalize on the basis of limited evidence and respect for the diversity of African phenomena are a rare in feminist theory as applied to Africa. This is one aspect of the poverty of theory that I speak of in this paper. I give some illustrations, beginning with

the sexual division of labor.

Almost every human society can be said to have had some variant or other of the sexual division of labor. It is perhaps the first division of labor known to history. The sexual division of labor may or may not be based on superordination and subordination. Either way, one must never discount the exigencies of coordination that are forever present in even the most primitive divisions of labor. Many African societies have had variants of the sexual division of labor. I grant that some may have been structures of domination and others purely technical. This would have to be established for each society at given periods in its development. Any judgment on the peculiar character of a given division of labor, however, can only come at the conclusion of an analysis; it cannot be a presupposition of one.⁵ And it is not an exaggeration to suggest that we know very little of the history of diverse social formations on the African continent in both remote antiquity and the period just before the irruption of European colonialism and capitalism.⁶ Hence one must draw conclusions with ample caution and hesitation. But caution is exactly what feminists find extremely difficult to exercise.

For some of them, *a priori*, the sexual division of labor is *prima facie* oppressive. The reason for this manner of proceeding is easy to locate. Recall that the two concepts in their theory are "men" and "women." Given that all societies hitherto have been patriarchal societies, it stands to reason, *ex definitione*, that they all have been oppressive of women. When you add to this situation the fact that women's contributions have historically not always been fully acknowledged and have often gone unacknowledged, one begins to understand the reception that greeted Ester Boserup's book, *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. (Boserup 1970) As Lourdes Beneria and Gita Sen have pointed out in their reexamination of the contributions of Boserup to women's studies:

When Boserup's work was published in 1970, it represented a comprehensive and pioneering effort to provide an overview of women's role in the development process. In the literature on development the specific role of women had been largely ignored, particularly the question of how development affects women's subordinate position in most societies (Beneria and Sen 1981:279).

Boserup contended that women's role as food cultivators around the world has usually remained unacknowledged, the reason being that the "subsistence activities usually omitted in the statistics of production and income are largely women's work" (Boserup 1970:163.) Boserup's work and her record of the predominantly female labor in agriculture that goes largely unreported has become cant on the lips of feminists. If any "facts" were needed to buttress

their point about patriarchy, Boserup supplied them.⁷ Since then we have been treated to homilies and polemics on the evils of patriarchy in Africa.

Every new paper or chapter on women in Africa opens with a recitation of how women do sixty to eighty percent of agricultural work in Africa. Ruby R. Leavitt asserts:

In view of the important role of women throughout Southeast Asia in producing essential staple foods, it is surprising to find a statement by so distinguished an anthropologist as Margaret Mead to the effect that men everywhere are the primary food producers.... At any rate there is no question that in Africa virtually all rural women do farm work "and the agricultural force is predominantly female". In Africa, especially south of the Sahara, where shifting cultivation is practiced, men usually fell the trees to clear the land, but women remove and burn the trees, sow and plant in the ashes, weed the crops, and harvest and store them (Leavitt 1971:287).

In a paper on women and development in Northern Zambia, we find the following:

It is important to stress that my definition of the basic unit of production as a woman plus her dependent children is limited to cultivation. In other spheres the unit often differs; in the case of hunting and fishing, for instance, men constitute the basic unit of production. But if, at least for cultivation, women and their children constitute the basic unit, where do men fit in? Are men simply to be tacked on in some spiteful feminist parody of the male bias of so much anthropological and sociological writing? No. The key point is that *men gain access to the products of cultivation primarily through their relationships to women* (Emphasis added) (Crehan 1983:59).

It is curious that the writer of the passage just quoted does indeed believe that she is different from the anthropological writers she implicitly criticizes. After all, for her and for them, in this and other areas as well, the men reap where they do not sow. They appropriate women 's produce just by virtue of being male. Kate Crehan cites the ideological constraints on women to give to the men the products of their agricultural labor. Ultimately, these and other feminist writers about Africa insist that women are the mainstays of African agriculture.

Reading all these assertions about women and agriculture in Africa, one often wonders what the men do while the women are busy breaking their backs on the fields. I will let some of these writers speak for themselves, beginning with Barbara Deckard:

In Africa, for example, the women used the hoe to conduct almost all of the agricultural production, while the men limited themselves mostly to hunting and warfare. The advent of European colonialism ended the intertribal war activities of the men. Since the African men then appeared idle to the Europeans, they used every means to force them into farming. The Europeans believed that agriculture is by nature a male job. Therefore, they never perceived that almost all African agriculture was done by women (Deckard 1975:239).

Leavitt writes:

Before European colonization the chief occupations of the African male were warfare, hunting, and felling trees. When Europeans abolished intertribal warfare, the men seemed to be idle most of the time, and the Europeans stigmatized them as lazy.... To the Europeans, 'cultivation is naturally a job for men', and African 'men could become far better farmers than women, if only they would abandon their customary "laziness"' (quoting Boserup) (Leavitt 1971:287).

Of course both writers draw their evidence from Boserup, using almost exact wording. But neither of these women is convincing. In the first place, due to intellectual indolence and imperialist arrogance, they keep referring to "Africa." One gets the impression that Africa is as homogeneous as the inhabitants of a beehive. No sociologist would regard Paris or Toronto as a homogeneous entity, and Toronto has only slightly over two million people. But Africa is "Africa" and it is said that Africans all look the same. References to Africa as if the continent were a homogeneous village are clearly nonsense. Perhaps it needs to be said again and again that long before the ancestors of these feminist descendants of Count de Gobineau even knew of the existence of the African continent, this continent had generated cultures of varying degrees of material and ideological development. Whereas some might have looked like what is described by the feminist writers cited above, clearly not all did.

In the first place, it is problematic to say that African men did not engage in agriculture until they were forced to do so by Europeans. For a continent that is regarded as the birthplace of agriculture, it would be strange indeed if men did not take part in it until the nineteenth century. Secondly, only a culpable penchant for homogenization would lead one to put a continent of Africa's diversity and complexity into a monocultural or simple cultural frame.⁸ Thirdly, there is evidence that men *did* practice agriculture. Consider the following:

Although there was no actual prohibition of women from hoeing and plant-

ing in kitchen gardens inside the towns, the Yoruba, as a whole, did not make use of the labour of women on their farms in these capacities. Women were only expected to harvest crops.... The more important part of women's work on the farm, however, consists of changing the form of the various crops harvested so as to bring them a stage or two nearer the point of ultimate consumption (Fadipe 1970:147-8).

Reading Boserup and the others, one who is not familiar with African history is likely to get the impression that all that African men did before European colonialism was kill game (hunting) and kill one another (intertribal warfare) and that European colonialism in fact saved the continent of Africa from itself. This is profound ignorance masquerading as scholarship, and it is even more offensive because the scholars concerned show no hint of embarrassment.⁹ Their imperialistic arrogance, however, is undercut by the poverty of their theory.

Given the fact that these scholars have not bothered to study reality and allow it to guide and discipline their theoretical flights of fancy, it is no wonder that they do not even begin to pose the relevant questions; much less are they competent to give the right answers. The problem lies in the theory that sees men and women in antagonistic relationships in which the women always are the victims. Such a theory is apt to ignore the profound cleavages—class, ethnic, national, and so forth—among African men and women *qua* men and women in fighting imperialist and neocolonial domination of various African countries. As Achola Pala reminds us:

The position of women in contemporary Africa is to be considered at every level of analysis as an outcome of structural and conceptual mechanisms by which African societies have continued to respond to and resist the global processes of economic exploitation and cultural domination. I am suggesting that the problems facing African women today, irrespective of their national and social class affiliations, are inextricably bound up in the wider struggle by African people to free themselves from poverty and ideological domination in both intra- and international spheres (Pala 1977:9).

Bolanle Awe observes:

Many of our assumptions about the universality of female interest and objectives are questionable. Apart from the distinctions of class, occupation, environment, etc., the position of women differs nationally and, even more significantly, from Third World to developed countries. The problems of women, therefore, have to be examined within many contexts and with an awareness of differences (Awe 1977:314).

It is exactly these differences and specificities that feminism willfully blocks out of its theoretical mindset. To confront these differences is to unearth the ugly fact that women never experience their oppression in the same ways; the wife of a wealthy peasant, for instance, may not be "a typical rural African woman," and the possibilities of accumulation may vary from place to place and from class to class. These differences have generated serious divergences among African women concerning their understanding of their situation. That was why, for example, a few African countries sent two delegations each to the Beijing Conference and why, in Nigeria, two of the umbrella women's organizations, the National Council of Women's Societies and Women in Nigeria, are ideologically opposed to each other.

The poverty of theory has another significant dimension. One of the central aims of feminists is the reclamation of the power of naming and language for women. One cannot overstress this political goal. Language has usually been the prime tool with which oppressors have defined those whom they oppress and the vehicle through which the oppressed interiorize the images of themselves fabricated by their oppressors. It is ironic, therefore, that feminists could be charged with appropriating the power of naming from some other women. I suggest that feminists do indeed deny the power of naming to African women and that one of the goals of women's movements in Africa is, and for some time to come will be, to reclaim language and the power of naming from feminist pretenders to theory.

In the extant international political economy, Western feminists stand in a relation to the women and men of Africa in exactly the same manner as their male counterparts do. There is no doubt that at the worst of times, feminism is an aspect of the imperialism of culture. In exactly the same way as Christian missionaries defined our foreparents as pagans before forcing them to become children of God, feminists desire to demonize African men in the name of saving African women. This is easy for them to do. Feminists, by virtue of belonging to the dominant capitalist economies which oppress the rest of us, have all the resources—capital, journals, conferences, and so on—that make it possible for them to stake various portions of the continent and secure their deeds of conveyance over our realities merely by publishing one or two papers from one or two brief visits to Africa in the worst traditions of safari scholarship. They define our realities as backward and underdeveloped. Given what I said earlier about *a priori-ism* in the analysis of the sexual division of labor and the *prima facie* oppression of women, sometimes they do not even set foot in Africa before they feel qualified to pontificate on how oppressed African women are, even when most of them could not identify

an oppressed African woman when they saw one. But they can make unwarranted knowledge claims with little fear of being caught. After all, we are not in a position to vet their scholarship as they are to vet ours, and most members of their audience hardly know better.¹⁰ Ignorance multiplies, and the perpetrators get tenure on the basis of libels, half-truths, and untruths. Indeed, the political economy of "universal sisterhood" looks more like the makings of a new gold rush—the difference in this case being that the prospectors do not have to leave the coziness of their Boston, Santa Cruz, and London offices to be showered with the yellow dust of academic respectability.

Talking about Western ethnocentrism and perceptions of the harem, Leila Ahmed writes:

What compels one is not only that Americans by and large know nothing at all about the Islamic world, which is indeed the case, . . . : it is, rather, that Americans 'know', and know without even having to think about it, that the Islamic peoples—Arabs, Iranians, whatever they call themselves—are backward, uncivilized peoples totally incapable of rational conduct. . . . Just as Americans 'know', that Arabs are backward, they know also with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded. And they know this not because they know that women everywhere in the world are oppressed, but because they believe that, specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women (Ahmed 1982:521-2).

Ahmed's paper was published in 1982. It is a mark of how much truth is contained in the paper that a paper published in *Signs* two years later by Barbara K. Larson included the following:

The traditional role of an Arab woman has generally been one of subservience and subordination to men, with some variation in degree according to her class, way of life, and, more recently, degree of westernization. . . . For most women, the formal strictures of Islam and/or the prevailing codes of honour and shame reinforce patterns of subordination (Larson 1984:421).

That there is not a single reference to Ahmed's article in Larson's paper indicates the degree to which Western feminists listen to their (in this case, Arab) counterparts. Ahmed's article was published in *Feminist Studies*. Clearly Barbara K. Larson was not reading *Feminist Studies*. Nor did it occur to any of *Signs*'s referees to require Larson to show familiarity with Ahmed's work before accepting her piece for publication. No Arab or African scholar qualifies as required or even recommended reading.

I would like to give another illustration. Simi Afonja published a paper in *Signs* in 1981 in which she presented a nuanced discussion of the sexual division of labor in Yoruba country (Afonja 1981:299-313). There she struggled with the complexity of Yoruba life and tried valiantly to point out the dynamism of material processes in that life. In 1988, Jeanne Koopman Henn, a supposed authority on African women, wrote a paper titled "The Material Basis of Sexism: A Mode of Production Analysis," (Henn 1988:27-59) in which Afonja's paper does not rate even a listing in the references. But she had the presence of mind to cite a paper, about which I shall have more to say presently, by Kate Crehan that came out in 1984, and included as well several irrelevant but pseudo-sophisticated citations of works by Paul Lovejoy, the editor of the series in which the book is included, by Ernesto Laclau, Heidi Hartmann, and Wally Seccombe, and finally a book by Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, whose thesis the authors themselves had repudiated by 1988. Meanwhile, Simi Afonja, in spite of her extensive publication in industrial sociology, was not invited to contribute. In fact, the only contribution from the continent came from South Africa and this at a time when apartheid was still in force! Again, *O n pami, o lo n gbamii*. Apparently, neither the editor of the series, nor the editors of the anthology, nor those from whom Henn solicited reactions to her draft, nor the reviewers for the press, not one of them had either read Afonja in *Signs* or, if they had, thought enough of it to ask that Henn engage its arguments. I am suggesting that the Western feminist arrogance of which Leila Ahmed complained is especially serious in the case of Africa. Pala has protested the misrepresentation of African women's realities by these latter-day civilizers in feminist garb:

Like the educational systems inherited from the colonial days, the research industry has continued to use the African environment as a testing ground for ideas and hypotheses the locus of which is to be found in Paris, London, New York, or Amsterdam. For this reason, the primary orientation to development problems tends to be created on the basis of what happens to be politically and/or intellectually significant in the metropolises. At one time, it may be family planning; at another, environment; at yet another, human rights and women's social conditions. . . . I have visited villages where, at a time when the village women are asking for better health facilities and lower infant-mortality rates, they are presented with questionnaires on family planning. In some instances, when women would like to have piped water in the village, they may be at the same time faced with a researcher interested in investigating power and powerlessness in the household. In yet another situation, when women are asking for access to agricultural credit, a researcher on the scene may be conducting a study on female circumcision (Pala 1977:10).

In a review of a book by an Italian Marxist feminist sociologist written in the worst traditions of colonial anthropology, Amina Mama avers:

Cutrufelli [the author] mirrors African women's realities about as well as a handful of shattered glass, providing us with a fine example of the contradictions implicit in international feminism, universal sisterhood and other such loose concepts pervasive on the current international academic scene. We have recently been subjected to a barrage of books on 'African women', the majority of which have been researched and written by non-African women. The danger of such work is that of our intensified objectification, to use Fanon's term. By this he meant the process by which our reality is constructed by others (oppressors in the colonial and neocolonial contexts), to serve their psychological and political needs, and then projected on to us and internalised. In a context where our own interpretations and accounts are as yet largely unpublished, others become the experts on us, and this monopoly on knowledge about us must be seen as imperialistic. While some of this knowledge may be well researched, much of it is partial and particular, and does not serve our interests as a group, or our psychological and intellectual development. All that imperial feminism has meant here, is that it is European (and North American) women's preoccupations rather than those of men which have come into vogue (Mama 1984:253).

In the cases referred to by Pala we have poverty as irrelevance of theory, and for Mama, both an absence of theory and a malicious appropriation of African women's realities. It is a new form of imperialism.

If I am correct that feminist writings suffer from the poverty of theory in some of the ways I have described, it is right to reflect a bit on the consequences of this poverty. One consequence is that one invariably finds that many feminists use anthropological paradigms and concepts—concepts that they have not bothered to interrogate; concepts that are products of a racist, ethnocentric way of looking at Africans and their realities. Many of the papers read more like anthropological travelogues than serious attempts at analysis. What we find are cases of selective vision, which is manifested in two ways.

In the first place, there is an overweening, one is tempted to say unseemly, concentration on rural Africa. This is usually justified by the apologia that the rural areas are where most Africans live. This is quite consistent with the popular conception that the greater percentage of African labor is to be found in agriculture. Even if the numbers bear out this claim—it is becoming increasingly difficult to support in light of current developments in the continent—one is right to suspect that there is more to this concern than merely following the research subjects to where they live. To begin with, being in-

involved with agriculture does not necessitate being rural. At least such associations are not made in the American or Canadian cases. Were we to use the absence of what are generally regarded as urban trappings to define rural areas, then few places in Africa would escape the "rural" designation. But such an outcome is counterintuitive. For anyone who knows, say, Western Nigeria, also knows that it is more urban than Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, the Dakotas, Arkansas, or Mississippi, to mention just a few areas of the United States.

So why the fixation on rural Africa? I suggest that it is because the appellation fits the *a priori* conception of Africa as backward and its people as still mired in stages of evolution that so-called developed societies have superseded. In light of this, "rural Africans" who speak in "strange 'tribal' tongues" and have "quaint beliefs and funny cuisines" must be more "authentic" than the English-speaking, ale-swilling, Hume-quoting, Shakespeare-loving bourgeois sybarite of the African city. The problem is that it is only by deliberately *ignoring*—viewing selectively—the corruption of many areas by what are usually associated with urban populations that we can justifiably call those areas rural. It is not unlikely that the "rural woman" who is such a staple of feminist safari scholarship probably finished elementary school or at least had a few years of schooling, spends part of the year selling in the city and may also sell sorts of nonrural goods in the so-called rural area. Finally, such scholarship ignores the complexity of the so-called rural areas, some of which are seats of local government complete with state institutions, schools, hospitals, and, lately, banks, postal agencies, and so on. In presenting such unidimensional pictures of most of rural Africa, our feminists make simple what is complex and, in doing so, miseducate their audience.

The other manifestation of selective vision is generated by the feminists' theoretical parsimony. Theories are regulative principles which encourage us to seek explanations for social phenomena in one direction while turning us away from some others. Since there is little that a theoretical paradigm that can only accommodate men and women can tell the analyst, the pressure to fill the pages is satisfied by the usual colonial anthropological tactic of emphasizing the exotic at the expense of genuine study. In fact I want to suggest that much feminist writing about Africa is in quest of *exotica*. I give some illustrations.

Kate Crehan, in her paper, "Women and Development in North Western Zambia: From Producer to Housewife," (Crehan 1983)¹¹ could not resist the temptation to tell us that the Kaonde still view Europeans—any one—as know-it-alls. At the risk of boring the reader, I will quote her at length. There is sexual division of labor in Mukunashi, where she did her study. But there is some blurring of the lines in the possession of certain skills.

The only partial exception concerns the skills of certain individuals, both male and female, in divination and healing, though these too are matters of which most people have a fair degree of basic knowledge. This was brought home to me when I arrived in Mukunashi. As soon as my presence became known, people began coming to me, often walking many miles, to ask for western drugs and general medical aid. Since I have no medical training and had only a tiny supply of medicines, it seemed irresponsible to set myself up as some kind of dispensary. So at the risk of seeming callous, I tried to make it clear that I was not a doctor and could not offer treatment. Although people learnt that I was not a source of drugs, gradually I realised that my careful explanations about not being a doctor and not having any kind of medical skills were totally meaningless to the villagers. From their point of view I was a European and, therefore, obviously knew all about Western medicine, just as they all knew the essentials of Kaonde medicine. Throughout my stay, particularly after beer drinks when the alcohol had eroded some of the layers of customary politeness, I was periodically accosted by unsteady figures demanding that I exercise my European curative skills, my protestations of medical ignorance being greeted with knowing smiles (Crehan 1983:54).

I have read this article, which was published in the *Review of African Political Economy*,¹² several times, and I have not been able to discern the point of the story just quoted. If the inhabitants of Mukunashi had approached Crehan because she is a woman, there would be nothing worth recounting—after all, every male and female is expected to have some healing and divination skills. An alternative explanation might be that they had always had European health personnel. If this is the case, then there is nothing unusual in the association made by the residents of Mukunashi between being European and being a medical practitioner. Crehan's point seems to be that she was approached as a European *qua* European. If this is correct, how does this story differ from the stereotypical stories in which natives ascribe to the European some magical powers? If that is the significance of the story, it is not much different from old-time colonial anthropology. And Crehan poses as a feminist and her paper is published in a radical journal. Incidentally, the essay would not have lacked anything had this passage been omitted. But the lure of exotica was too great—more potent in this case because it was obviously unconscious. And it is even more significant that this titillating interlude escaped the leftist editors of the *Review of African Political Economy*.

Another aspect of this quest for exotica is the choice of subjects for study. African urban centers are hardly studied. The ways in which the ethos of capitalism and individualism have embroidered, challenged, distorted, and reordered the reality of Africans, rural and urban alike, are rarely highlighted

in the studies. This is not surprising. Talk of African equivalents of capitalist institutions is unlikely to arouse curiosity and, in any case, such talk will have to rely on male political scientists, anthropologists, and other scholars. Hence the overarching effort to strip various phenomena of their historicity. The result is that many Africans who read some of the offerings barely recognize their realities in them. For instance, Simi Afonja argues:

What is missing in studies of Yoruba women's economic activities, therefore, is an explanation of how trade is integrated with other areas of production and reproduction in an economy characterized by a low level of specialization. Also missing is an analysis of the social relations generated by this integrated economic structure and of the ways in which these relations have been altered by the transformation to commercial and industrial capitalism (Afonja 1981:300).

Meanwhile, a theory that is very limited in its applicability is likely to be a poor theory. Thus theorists are pressed to make their theories as general and as widely applicable as possible. Feminist theorists are no different, except that they start out with very few categories and this inexorably leads them to blind generalizations that are easily falsifiable. In fact, one might say that the fallacy of insufficient evidence has taken up residence in feminist theory and is doing quite well.

While the countries of the Third World vary tremendously in culture and social structure and, thus, in the position that women hold, they resemble one another in that they all are less economically developed than the countries that were discussed earlier (i.e., capitalist and socialist countries of Europe and North America). They remain very poor, rural, agricultural, with high rates of disease and illiteracy—in other words, they resemble countries in Western Europe in 1750 (Emphasis added) (Deckard 1975:239).

Similarly, Kate Crehan could not resist the urge to include the following in her introductory remarks:

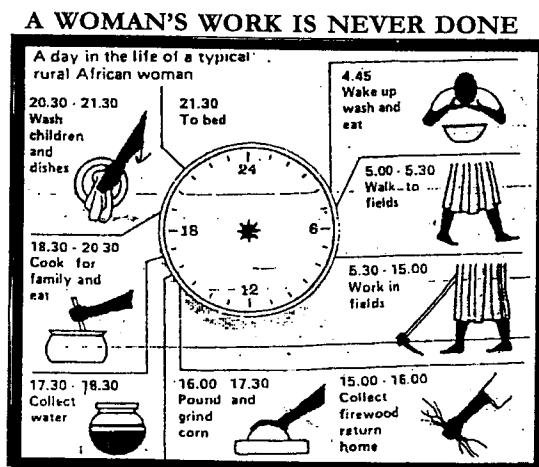
The research was carried out between 1979 and 1981 during which time I lived for 18 months in one small Kaonde community in North Western Zambia. The main research method used was participant observation. *Although the paper is in one sense specific and particular, the underlying processes described are similar to those found in many rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa (Emphasis Added) (Crehan 1983:52).*

In an article on the Kaguru we have the following:

The purpose of this study is to examine women's perceptions of how family relationships, land-holding customs, household power structures and other social and familial realities may stimulate or stymie the educational opportunities and household, agricultural and income-earning work of rural Kaguru women. Obtaining information from women themselves is essential for the formulation of policies and programs that are relevant to the needs of rural African women.... *While the situation of women in other societies may be different, many of the issues addressed by Kaguru women are relevant for other rural African societies* (Emphasis added) (Meeker and Meekers 1997:36).

The preceding quotes, especially the emphasized portions, typify the tendency to baseless generalization that we have identified. They follow the same pattern: What you disclaim in one half of the sentence you proclaim in the other. All such locutions must raise our suspicion. Why is it necessary to generalize from Kaonde or Kaguru women to African women at large? What is it about Kaguru or Kaonde women that magically transforms them into typical African women unless we already assumed the coherence of the phrase or have decided that all African women are the same? It is problematic enough, once one sets out with some respect for the complexity of one's subject matter, to speak of Kaguru women. How much more so will it be to speak of Tanzanian, not to talk of East African, or African women? This penchant for generalization must be traced to a fundamental lack of respect for the complexity of African life.

We find the most ridiculous example of the urge to generalize in the following cycle culled from the pages of the *Review of African Political Economy*.



Do the women typified in the cycle have friends? Do they ever exchange visits? Do they ever sit down with kith and kin to discuss family affairs or engage in other activities that take up part of the day of most families? Do they go to church? To the mosque? The fact is that women who lead normal lives are not fit and proper subjects to sate the thirst for exotica. A normal life for women in Yorubaland would depend on whether or not they live in rural areas or in urban centers, whether they are lower, lower middle, upper middle, or upper classes, and so on.¹³

Closely related to this quick resort to generalizations are the obscure concepts that are often substituted for hard and serious theoretical exertion. Most readers of this paper will be familiar with phrases like "traditional Africa," "traditional African values," "traditional African woman," "precolonial Africa," and so forth, which are in widespread use but are theoretically vacuous. Granted, Africans are partly to blame for the creation of this escape hatch from theoretical responsibility. African scholars started using these phrases to counter the previous descriptions of Africa as "savage" or "primitive." They themselves never really asked whether their substitutes are theoretically fecund. They are not. These substitutes are bogus concepts. For example, who is a "typical rural African woman"? In Nigeria, for instance, especially in those areas where Christianity and commerce have deep and long-standing roots, even the most rural of villages would not uphold the stereotype illustrated in "A Woman's Work is Never Done." This stereotype was inaccurate from the moment of the cartoon's publication in 1983, which predated the present cycle of economic crisis, when many rural households especially in Southern Nigeria were increasingly using kerosene stoves.

What really is traditional Africa? Is it Africa before the advent of Europeans? Or the one before the coming of colonialism? Is it Africa at the beginning of time or Africa of the fifteenth century? Who is a traditional African woman? Must she be totally innocent of formal education to qualify? Is she Muslim or Christian? Is she the same person in the urbanized culture of the Hausa and the Yoruba as in the village-based communities of Igboland? Of course it is a lot easier to invoke vacuous concepts like "traditional Africa" and the like than to work seriously to study Africa in its richest detail and with an awareness of the complexity of its social formations. Social formations are very complex phenomena, and they often have articulated within them several modes of production. Certainly, there usually is a dominant mode to which the rest are subordinate. It is this complexity that notions like "traditional Africa" tend to obscure. A very good example of the way in which these vacuous notions can vitiate analysis is Simi Afonja's paper, already cited. In this paper, we find references like "the African subsistence mode of pro-

duction," "Yoruba production modes," "traditional economic formations," without serious attempts to clarify what precisely each of these notions entails. She is, however, still better than many others because she, at least, tries to point out variations in the content and context of women's experiences. She insists that:

In order to explain the relationship between the cause and the effect of female subordination, therefore, one must analyze the continuity between historical and contemporary patterns of the sexual division of labour in production and reproduction. This is imperative in African studies, because the labels 'traditional' and 'modern', 'colonial', and 'precolonial', draw arbitrary lines through the historical process of change and, as Audrey Smock and Alice Schlegel suggest, encourage the analyst to transpose the phenomena of the present onto the past (Afonja 1981:300).

What emerges from the discussion so far is the need for feminists to take Africa seriously and to stop handling discussions about the continent as if they are talking about a borough in London. Taking Africa seriously means listening well to what African women themselves have to say. Feminists must restore to African women the power of naming and recognize the legitimacy and expertise of African women's voices. Serious efforts must be made to abandon the arrogant pretense to theory and its corollary assumption that African women have or know no theory. As Leacock recognizes, "it behooves Western feminists to listen to such women and learn from them, rather than prejudging or delimiting the many forms that struggle for women's liberation can take" (Leacock 1981:491). Taking Africa seriously means abandoning safari scholarship and the attitude that assumes knowledge where there is glaring and culpable ignorance. It will also mean that research will be adapted to the real need to promote knowledge rather than individual careers. Taking Africa seriously means confronting the specificities of women's oppression in various parts of Africa. Whether or not we will have a theory that can generalize across these diverse specificities will be the conclusion of our research: it cannot be the beginning. We should heed Pala's caution below:

In considering the issue of the impact on women of colonial and/or neocolonial socioeconomic processes, it is well to bear in mind that, although such processes have enslaved women in the reserves and exploited their labour while withdrawing men to work in wage-earning jobs, in reality wages alone cannot constitute an argument that men have benefited from those systems of oppression. In fact peoples who are dominated by a repressive regime, whether they are men or women, share a similar subordinate structural position vis-a-vis the dominant culture. What we must look for, then, is not how

African women lost their development opportunity during colonial or contemporary neocolonial periods (since our men have also suffered the same loss) but, rather, the differential impact of such socioeconomic conditions on men and women. (Pala 1977:11)

Perhaps I have painted too negative a picture of the field. I do not wish to suggest that the prospects are bleak or that all feminists are as insensitive as some of those I have cited. Far from it. My optimism is buoyed by the fact that there are feminists who have begun to address some of the issues raised here. In addition to those I have cited, there is the special issue of *FRONTIERS*, Volume 8, Number 2 (1983), devoted to the issue of Feminism and the Non-Western World and the quite refreshing introduction to the edition by Barbara Alpern Engel. Some other contributions would surely include the Reflections on the Conference on Women and Development held in 1976 at Wellesley College.¹⁴ What I have tried to do in this essay is to focus on some aspects of feminist writings about Africa that I believe portray a poverty of theory. If I have sensitized a few readers to the need for a little respect and caution, my job will have been done.

NOTES:

1. Some atonements have been made. But I have yet to see a vigorous criticism of some of the worst examples, on which I will focus here. It will not do to object to what follows by pointing out the various books and anthologies that have tried not only to portray Africa in a good light but have striven to present it in its complexity. That such instances are few and far between corroborates my thesis. More importantly, my hope in sharing what follows is to identify the many pitfalls that one often encounters in women's studies concerning Africa and call on scholars to work scrupulously in the future to avoid and correct them.
2. Take any text you care to choose. It always surprises me that the women who edit many feminist texts do not apprehend either the irony of passing off American women's experience as women's experience or the kinship between these feminists and their male colleagues who do exactly the same thing to them and to the rest of us.
3. I have omitted the uninformed references to the African experience to be found in Mary Daly, *Gyn\ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).
4. See Iris Young, "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory," in Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), pp. 43-69.
5. Some African women scholars have started doing the kind of regional investigations that are *conditio sine qua non* for any meaningful continental generalizations. See

- the works by Nkiru Nzegwu, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Nakanyike Musisi, and others.
6. Here I have in mind regional studies of those far off periods and a proper periodization of them rather than suspect generalizations that are obvious instances of the fallacy of insufficient evidence.
 7. They reject Boserup's more cautious approach and insistence on the significant differences in women's work across countries and regions. See Beneria and Sen, "Accumulation, Reproduction and Women's Role in Economic Development," p. 280.
 8. There are ready indices to identify this penchant in locutions like "Women in Other Cultures," which is about *all* women other than those of the Euro-American White variety; "The Precarious Socio-Economic Position of Women in Rural Africa: The Case of the Kaguru of Tanzania." The Kaguru are not even the majority in Tanzania. Not only that, they live in a very small part of the country. How one makes the leap from "Kaguru" to "Africa" remains both unexplained and unexplainable. In addition, by objectifying "The Kaguru," there is no room to apprehend the many ways in which different Kaguru live.
 9. I have yet to see an internal feminist critique of these views. Quite the contrary, whereas Asians have in part been able to fight off this intellectual imperialism, Africa has yet to get the respect it deserves in this area.
 10. This is an important point. I have often been tempted to collect the sometimes scandalous comments that referees write on our submitted and rejected manuscripts. Just take a look at the editorial boards of the "leading" journals and try to explain what qualifies some of their members to judge scholarship about Africa.
 11. The same one cited by Henn.
 12. *Review of African Political Economy* is a journal that prides itself, and not without good reasons, as a leading radical platform for alternative scholarship about Africa.
 13. For a rich description which captures in fascinating detail the complexity of life in Yorubaland as far back as the eighteenth century, see Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*. On division of labour and occupational specialization in Yorubaland, see T. M. Ilesanmi, *Olootu, Ise*.
 14. The Wellesley Editorial Committee, ed., *Women and National Development*, pp. 313-329. See also Zenebeworke Tadesse, "Women and Technology in Peripheral Countries: An Overview," in Pamela M. D'Onofrio-Flores and Sheila M. Pfafflin, eds., *Scientific-Technological Change and the Role of Women in Development* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 77-111; Stephanie Urdang, "The Last Transition? Women and Development in Mozambique," and Deborah Gaitskell, et al., "Class, Race and Gender: Domestic Workers in South Africa," both reprinted in *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 27/28 (1983); Gay W. Seidman, "Women in Zimbabwe: Post-Independence Struggles," *Feminist Studies* (10) 3 (Fall 1984).

WORKS CITED:

- Afonja, Simi. "Changing Modes of Production and the Sexual Division of Labor Among the Yoruba." *Signs* 7, no. 2 (1981). Pp. 299-313.
- Ahmed, Leila. "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1982). Pp. 521-522.
- Awe, Bolanle. in The Wellesley Editorial Committee, ed., *Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.
- Beneria, Lourdes and Gita Sen, "Accumulation, Reproduction and Women's Role in Economic Development: Boserup Revisited," *Signs* 7, no. 2, (1981), p. 279.
- Boserup, Ester. *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1970.
- Crehan, Kate. "Women and Development in North Western Zambia: From Producer to Housewife," *Review of African Political Economy* 27/28 (1983), p. 59.
- Daly, Mary. *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.
- Deckard, Barbara. *The Women's Movement*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Fadipe, N.A. *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970.
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1970.
- Gaitskell, Deborah, et al., "Class, Race and Gender: Domestic Workers in South Africa," *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 27/28 (1983).
- Hartmann, Heidi. "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in Lydia Sargent ed. *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.
- Larson, Barbara K. "The Status of Women in a Tunisian Village: Limits to Autonomy, Influence, and Power." *Signs* 9, no. 3 (1984): p. 421.
- Leacock, Eleanor. "History, Development and the Division of Labour by Sex: Implications for Organization," *Signs* 7, no. 2 (1981), p. 491.
- Leavitt, Ruby R. "Woman in Other Cultures," in Vivian Gornick & Barbara Moran, eds., *Woman in Sexist Society*, New York: Basic Books, 1971. p.287.
- Mama, Amina. "African Women Fight Back" *West Africa*, 10 December, 1984, p. 253.
- Meeker, Jeffrey and Dominique Meekers, "The Precarious Socio-Economic Position of Women in Rural Africa: The Case of Kaguru of Tanzania," *African Studies Review* 40, no. 1 (April 1997): p. 36.
- Pala, Achola. in The Wellesley Editorial Committee, ed., *Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. p. 9.
- Seidman, Gay W. "Women in Zimbabwe: Post-Independence Struggles," *Feminist Studies* No. 10, 3 (Fall 1984).
- Stichter, Sharon and Jane L. Parpart, eds., *Patriarchy and Class: African Women in the Home and the Workforce*, London: Westview Press, 1988.
- Tadesse, Zenebeworke. "Women and Technology in Peripheral Countries: An Overview," in Pamela M. D'Onofrio-Flores and Sheila M. Pfafflin, eds., *Scientific-Technological Change and the Role of Women in Development* Boulder: Westview Press, 1982. pp. 77-111.

- Urdang, Stephanie. "The Last Transition? Women and Development in Mozambique,"
Review of African Political Economy, No. 27/28 (1983).
- Young, Iris. "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory,"
in Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution*, Boston: South End Press, 1981.
pp. 43-69.

4.

**WHAT WOMEN, WHOSE DEVELOPMENT?
A Critical Analysis of Reformist Feminist
Evangelism on African Women**



Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome

Reformist Western Feminist Evangelism

Western feminist discourse on African women is characterized by what I will call reformist feminist evangelism. As such, it replicates the missionary evangelism exhibited by the seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonialists, missionaries, anthropologists, and sundry adventurers when they explored, brutally "pacified," Christianized, and colonized Africa. It was these Europeans who invented the notion of Africa as the dark continent and the African as the exotic antithesis of the enlightened, progressive Westerner. This invention continues to permeate religious and secular thought alike and remains pervasive in contemporary Western thought. (Mudimbe 1988:1-23) Mainstream feminist writings tend to portray African women as confused, powerless, and unable to determine for themselves both the changes needed in their lives and the means to construct these changes. Thus, Western feminists, acting like superiors who hand down valuable knowledge, define the relevant issues for African women, how these issues ought to be promoted and pursued, and what the end result should be.

There are striking parallels between the activities of contemporary feminists and the colonialist missionaries in Africa. Both groups actively prospect for converts through widespread proselytization that rejects all other sources of knowledge, casting them illegitimate and inferior. Western trends are idealized as both modern and desirable. Indeed, they are presented as the only pool from which viable solutions to human problems should be drawn. In