



Review

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Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel.

Esi Sutherland-Addy and Aminata Diwa, eds.

Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2005.

Upon receiving this volume, I did not think it was possible for anyone to read through this intimidatingly large book in its entirety. Yet I soon found myself at its final line, and all I could think was “There’s got to be more!”

West Africa and the Sahel follows *The Southern Region*, in the intrepid “Women Writing Africa” project, which endeavours to re/write African women into global and African histories; a long overdue project. Africanists have taken on the challenge of reinstating Africans within human history; while feminists have pursued a similar task, seeking to restore women to accounts that have focused on men’s stories. Not surprisingly, neither front has yet been successful in including and representing African women. The resultant double silence re-establishes old myths: that the African woman has not been present in history; and neither has she documented (systematically or otherwise) the story of *her* own life and circumstances. These myths, and the historical omissions which they engender, fail to recognise African women as active agents of social, political and economic processes. The “Women Writing Africa” project is a welcome addition to a body of work aimed at debunking such notions and rehabilitating African women’s voices. *West Africa and the Sahel* offers a broad introduction to West African women’s history and literature through the songs, poetry and prose of West African women. The work is available in both English and French volumes.

To produce a representative anthology of West Africa presents a colossal challenge, considering the large and complex ground – geographically, linguistically, ethnically, culturally, historically and nationally – to be covered. I was acutely aware of this as I began reading the work, and was fearful of finding yet another hyper-generalised overview of “African women’s words,” without much attention paid to historical or cultural context. To negotiate this challenge, the team that produced the text consisted of over 150 researchers, translators and editors working in 26 languages. The countries representing

the region include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Conakry, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Togo and Guinea Bissau were excluded for what were described as “logistical reasons.” Justifying their regional scope, the editors state that they produced the volume with the goal of viewing the “whole region as one life zone through the recurring themes and tropes – both historical and literary – of women’s experience: most saliently women are organizers and the glue for their communities; women as subject to recurrent migrations, amalgamations, and fragmentations, including the colonial emphasis on women as central to the physical work of sustaining lives and families economically; women as crucially defined by their status as mothers” (xiv).

Besides the issue of representing the diversity of the places and times under study, I also wondered how the editors would represent the difference between women’s oral performances and written words. This is an important consideration as the performativity, artistic form and expressiveness of an oral text are, of course, lost or altered when it is transcribed to the written page. The introduction to the anthology addresses such issues, noting in particular the difficulties faced in dating oral texts. A lengthy paragraph is provided at the beginning of all texts and extracts, placing each piece into historical context. Furthermore, accounting for the great diversity of oral literature that exists, the editors state that their selections are representative for an investigation of “how women, by linking words, images, and rhythms, continue to transmit knowledge and aesthetic norms as well as insights about the complexity of relationships in society and the family. [From these we can] see how orature provides a forum for the power struggles between men and women, for the exploration of the boundaries of public and private spheres” (7).

I certainly found this to be true as I read through the oral texts. These texts also challenged me to re/think the notion of “space”, as it is a concept we often imagine within very rigid historical or geographic confines. As I looked at the pieces, I could empathise with the editors’ difficulties in dating them or in naming their authors, as the pieces have clearly been performed, adapted and transformed through time. One such example is “The Plump Woman Song,” which begins:

When the bony woman hears the drum beat the komkom-no-aci air,
 She springs up, then collapses on her bed.
 Her men-folk cry, Hide her! Hide her!
 The grandmothers cry, Let us hide her.
 The mothers cry, Hide her! Hide her!

The song ends:

Her co-wife retorts,
No hiding place, today!
The drums keep beating
No hiding place today for a woman who is so meager
You could lodge a balanites, an entire date palm and its roots,
In the empty space between her two buttocks! (94)

This song is performed at the opening of *Mani Foori*, a festival celebrating plumpness that takes place in rural Songhai-Zarma societies. It is dated 1972, yet Fatimata Mounikaila, who introduces the piece, notes that the first two lines of the last stanza (“As if the whole Kebbi army had swooped down on her, / As if the whole Zamfara army swooped down on her”) refer to two powerful Hausa states that rose in the early sixteenth century, with the Kebbi army in fact defeating the army of the Songhai Empire. This reference to such a distant history in what remains a contemporary performance certainly blurs my notions of history as being in opposition to the present. I found the song to be most interesting, particularly because of the equation of women’s attractiveness to the general well-being of a family or society, which certainly forms part of present hegemonic practice, although in this case, there is a very specific link to production and reproduction.

Speaking of reproduction, the editors note the emphasis on African women as mothers of various sorts – be it of a nation, a society or a single child. I was particularly struck by this communal Igbo song, which illustrates the point:

Where is it from, eh? It is from the womb.
Where is it from, eh? It is from the womb.
A policeman – he is from the womb.
A lawyer – he is from the womb.
A doctor – he is from the womb (96).

Introducing two Igbo songs sung in celebration of birth, the editors explain that a day is set aside following a birth for women to rejoice with the new mother and also “to reaffirm themselves as a community of mothers. Underlying the joy is the relief that the new mother has escaped the fate of a woman denied her personhood and fulfillment because of her inability to procreate” (95). What I also find striking about the song above is the emphasis on social reproduction; the womb described does not just make babies, it produces policemen, lawyers and doctors, who will presumably perform vital social functions and add to the wealth of the society at large.

Motherhood also offers women an opportunity to make explicit social commentary, for example through the use of lullabies. As Esi Sutherland-Addy and Fatimata Mounkaila suggest, “while these songs function primarily to calm, celebrate, and affirm a child, other themes suggest a wider audience” (151). For example, the Sereer poem performed in present-day Senegal goes:

Ayo, my little one
 Keep on crying
 And I'll swap you for salt
 The salt will be seized
 And I'll come back in tears (151).

The notion that a person can be exchanged for salt reminds the reader that human slaves were indeed exchanged in such a manner. As the introduction to this and other lullabies suggests, a mother's fear of being shamed by a child functions obliquely both as a critique of a social order that was both oppressive to women and children, and (on a “larger” scale) as a critique of an economic system that reduced human beings to mere commodities. This poses a challenge to dominantly-held notions that women generally were and continue to be accepting of oppressive social orders.

Following a section on oral literature, the volume is separated thematically into specific time periods, with the section “Thirteenth Century to 1916: The Age of African Empires,” being the first to include both written and oral texts. One of these texts is a letter written in 1739 in a now unidentifiable African language, and then translated into Dutch Creole. This letter was written by “Marotta, now Madlena from Poppo Africa”, a female slave presumed to be from present-day Benin, to the Queen of Denmark. She wrote the letter at the Moravian mission established in St. Thomas, stating:

At the time I live in Poppo in Africa, I served the Lord Mau. Now that I have come to the Land of the Whites I don't want to serve that Lord. I do not have reason to serve that Lord; my heart is saddened because Negro woman cannot serve the Lord Jesus on St. Thomas. If the Whites do not want to serve the Lord, be that as it may. But if the poor Black brethren and sisters want to serve the Lord, they have to behave as if they were Maroons (123).

This letter, which critiques the hypocrisy of slavery, and uses the rhetoric of Christianity to justify freedom for slaves, is a significant example of African women's agency, not only in commenting on the oppressions they face, but in seeking paths to freedom as well.

I was very excited to come across several poems written by Nana Asma'u, who I discovered to be the sister of Ahmadu Bello of the Sokoto Caliphate. I remember learning about Ahmadu Bello and other such men, and the advent of Islam in West Africa, as an undergraduate in a course on the history of the region. I recall that my professor challenged us to imagine the social and political shifts that were occurring at the time, and to also consider people's relations to these changes. I asked how we could do so when all we learnt came from and usually was about men. As a class, we were then asked to imagine what it would mean to include women in our historical picture. I found the beginnings of an answer to this challenge when I came across the writings of Nana Asma'u in this anthology. It was like asking the famous question posed by Western feminists, "Where is Shakespeare's sister?" – and in the case of Bello, there she was! Aside from my excitement about there being a "famous sister," writing to match her "famous brother," the poems Nana Asma'u wrote are important in their own right. She was literate in Arabic and proficient in a number of local languages such as Fulfulde, Tamajaq and Hausa, and her poems were able to provide an alternative perspective to the works of her father and brother. Through her use of African languages, "she feminized the classical Arabic Jihad Literature, and in the process shifted its masculinist formulation" (124), as access to formal systems of education in which classical Arabic was taught were often unavailable to ordinary women. Developing these texts in a language accessible to women, from the perspective of women's gendered experience, represented a significant transformation.

In the section of the anthology titled "1916–1970: The Rise of Nationalism," I noticed that a lot more of the texts were written by individual women; the "great women" whose personal ingenuity, opportunities and perhaps privilege allowed them access to literacy and autonomy in ways denied to the women represented by the communal and oral texts. There were two exceptions to the types of women represented in this section: an interview and the testimony of a woman before a commission of inquiry. I really enjoyed the latter piece; the woman in question had refused to let the chief's census-taker count her and her animals, for fear that women too would be taxed like the men had been for some time. During her testimony, she unambiguously criticises the chief: "He knew I had some means and that is why he sent his boys to my house to do the counting first. I told him that I was once a rich woman, but that he has been taking money away from me I had now no money to pay tax" (173).

This testimony suggests how women protested unfair impositions by a colonial government. It also reveals, from a woman's perspective, how the colonial project's new forms of administration ignored and undermined women's traditional status.

From a similar position, P. A. Itayemi Ogundipe's short story, "Nothing So Sweet" (189), tells the tale of a young woman whose marriage is arranged at the age of two. Her future husband, who is illiterate, pays for her education in the hopes that she will later monitor his accounts and read and write letters for him. The young woman is unaware that her marriage has been arranged with this man until her education is halted. She is not interested in the arrangement and resists it for a long time. Yet because the man has provided for her family and paid the dowry, she is eventually forced into his home. Her only hope lies in her "European friends" at a nearby mission, and so for fear of the colonial government (which he associates with the mission), her husband allows her to go home, after which she runs to the mission where a space has been reserved for her to study nursing. When it appeared as though this woman had no choice, she invented some space for negotiation. Choosing to run away (to nearby missions, for instance) is certainly a choice many African women have made to escape such circumstances. The title of the story, "Nothing So Sweet," speaks of an open-ended freedom, reflected in the protagonist's final words: "I was free, *free* ..." (203).

The volume opens with lines from a poem by Tanella Boni, and three poems from her anthology, *There is No Suitable Word*, are included in the part that deals with the 21st century. I was particularly struck by the poem "Silence Came Reluctantly," which was included in a section commenting on how the "frequency, violence and extreme horror of the conflicts on the continent of Africa in the last decade of the twentieth century have provoked many African writers" (412). The poem reads:

Silence came reluctantly
 And crossed our separate paths
 At the intersection of life and death
 Power has stolen the key to our hearts
 And sold us spare parts
 To the kingdom of the amnesiac sun,
 Of the song of our most lunatic dreams.
 But we no longer dream you say:
 We buy our lives on a silver platter.

Here survival's law is etched in letters of fire:
Be silent and eat!
Quiet everyone, we're shooting!
Sing if you want,
Be gauge the truth of your words
And long live the Unrivaled Thought!

Having read songs of celebration and texts revealing women's negotiations of daily life as individuals and within communities, this poem is a sobering reminder of the immense devastation women on this continent have faced and continue to endure. It serves as a reminder of what it means for African women to be continually silenced and rendered invisible by violence in all its many forms.

Just as the volume was powerfully begun, it is closed on a similarly strong note, with an interview with Aminata Traore entitled "Africa Is Not Poor". Here Traore states:

It is clear that a new awareness must come to be, a new collective awareness which will go beyond the limits of the continent – this is the strength of Africa. When I say that Africa is not poor, I mean that Africa is not poor because of the richness buried below its surface. Africa is not poor because of its people's determination to live here, to live here with dignity, but also because of its people's intelligence and talent and of its sons and daughters who have built the rest of the world. If the so-called developed world has something to brag about, its pretensions to grandeur are, in a large measure, owed to the strength it drew from Africa (450).

This passage echoes the optimism I felt as I began reading the volume. The editors had spoken earlier of a number of competing interests as the volume was first conceptualised – tensions between African-born women and women of African descent in the diaspora; and between West African scholars and feminists and Euro-American scholars who were aware of the demands of the Western publishing market. Despite their differences, and despite the implications their conflicts would have had on the production of knowledge by and about West African women, I imagine that all these stakeholders felt pride upon the publication of the volume. As a southern African woman, I certainly felt that I too had been rehabilitated through the words expressed by women living in another region of Africa across different periods of time. Traore's closing comment alerts us to the potential wealth and unique resource represented by the experiences of African women on the continent and in the

diaspora. I would thus definitely recommend this collection as an introduction to the history and literature of West African women, expressed, for the first time, in their own voices. I look forward to future volumes.

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