Chapter 69
More Than Body Parts:
Theorising Gender Within African Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper questions the reduction of human experience and identity to anatomical determinism in which the category of 'woman' or 'man' becomes a universal concept. Through a review of literature on African gender, feminist and masculinity studies, it highlights how people are more than their body parts. It notes how identities are shaped by an intersectionality of various factors such as education, employment status, class, age, physical condition, nationality, citizenship, race and ethnicity. These factors can be spatial and temporal producing differing experiences of gendered lives. African scholars have built up a rich collection of work that repudiates the univerlisation of gender identities based on Western philosophical schools of thought. This work explores in detail current and historical debates in African gender studies.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender is widely used in Africa. What this concept precisely denotes remains fraught in contestations. This chapter is an analysis of gender scholarship and academic debates in Africa. It traces the tendencies and applications of the concept by governments, policy makers, academics, non-governmental organisations and African feminists. This paper questions the essentialising tendencies of many feminist scholarship which tends to promote western binary views of gender that reduce women to their vaginas and univerlise them into an underclass of victims under the overwhelming oppression of patriarchy. The existence of patriarchy in many societies in Africa is not disputed and that it subjugates women and relegates them to the private sphere is well documented. What is missing though is a nuanced understanding of how gender interlinks and interplays with various other forms of identity such as class, age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, nationality and status to determine our lives. To proclaim gender as the overarching factor in all situations is to hide various fascinating modes of identities which are constantly being created and recreated by active agents in their everyday lives. People are not only

their gender and there is no benefit to a binary understanding of men and women as opposing poles especially in Africa where women are so differentiated by many factors such as age and class that it is neither desirable nor possible to define them as a singular group. Distortions of binarism borrowed from western gender studies has been replicated in a 'copy and paste' of concepts and processes to explain African realities which are totally different. Chapter focuses on the fragility of the ways gender is inscribed on bodies and the ways in which power is expressed, negotiated, and ever present in gendered practices. This is important because not only gender studies but all other academic fields in Africa have to strenuously wade off the global division of labor in knowledge production. In this system Africa exists only as a 'field' to studied, analysed and understood; and never as a laboratory of vivid ideas and knowledges from indigenous people rooted in their life experiences. As Oyewumi (2004) argues, the study of Africa must start with Africa.

Gender is an all encompassing concept which affects not only how we live but how we see and perceive our world. Whilst gender is a fundamental element of our lives, it is not our whole identity. We are more than our body and to reduce us to our anatomical basis masks varying layers of multiple and competing forms of identities which define who we really are. Gendered lives in this way end up defining men as oppressors and women as the oppressed without understanding the context and local conditions which define and determine how women and men interact between and amongst themselves. People in all situations and locations, do not always interact according to gender. The argument that all women have been oppressed by all men throughout time and across all cultures is pessimistic, politically unpalatable, and scientifically unsound; it has created an easy target for a sexist backlash against more reasoned feminist positions (Stamp 1989). The chapter ultimately illustrates that in gender studies Africans need to focus more on the interplay of various context specific factors that determine a women's and men's position in society. Distinction between biology and social in understanding gender in Africa was pioneered by the work of Ifi Amadiume (1987) on the Igbo and Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) on the Yoruba (Boris 2007). These studies question Western epistemologies which are based on the Enlightenment which privileges sight over other senses. Oyewumi (1997:79) blames colonisation and differentiates Yoruba ontology from Western thus, 'The social category woman – anatomically identified and assumed to be a victim and socially disadvantaged – did not exist.'

BACKGROUND

Gender has become a catch phrase when discussing policy or academic issues across Africa. The type of gender being peddled however is problematic as it lacks a clear definition and fails to speak to the realities of women on the continent. Mohanty (1986) uses the concept of colonisation to note how women of colour in United States were critiquing the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women's movements. Such appropriation of knowledge has led to an understanding of gender from a western point of view. Oyewumi (1997) notes that the entire western episteme bases its categories and hierarchies on visual modes and binary distinctions: male and female. Such binaries falsify the experiences of black women and how they are defined by other factors beyond their biological make up. In their book Cole et al (2007:3) agree that there is need 'to move the discourse on gender in Africa beyond simple dichotomies, entrenched debates, and the polarizing identity politics that have so paralyzed past discussions.' It is thus important to understand the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle that shape women in Africa the knowledge that not all women are the same, nor are their

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