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### Africa after Gender?

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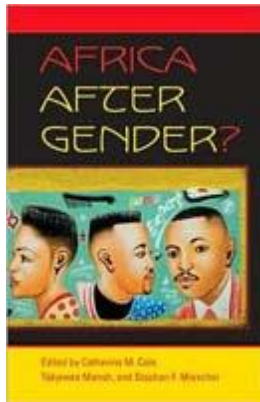
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## **H-NET BOOK REVIEW**

**Published by H-Africa, <http://www.h-net.org/~africa/> (June 2010).**

**Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, Stephan F. Miescher, eds. *Africa after Gender?* Bloomington Indiana University Press, 2007. 336 pp., \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21877-3.**

**Reviewed for H-Africa by Jacqueline-Bethel T. Mougoué, Purdue University**

*Dialogues on the Changing Discourse about Gender within African Studies*

**Africanists have been challenging the easy assumption that African gender studies are mostly informed by Western gender ideologies, theories, and methods. The contributors of "Africa after Gender?" attempt to debunk this generalization by highlighting the ways in which African gender theories and methods can "also" influence and contribute to Western gender studies. The editors of the text argue that this can only be done if there are more dialogues about gender studies between scholars based in Africa and those situated in North America and Europe. Thus, the book's overall purpose is to showcase such dialogues. The text has two main goals. The first is to "make a productive intervention in the dynamic of North-South relations, between scholars living and working in Africa and those who reside in Europe and North America." The collaborators "wish to move the discourse on gender in Africa beyond simple dichotomies, entrenched debates, and the polarizing identity politics that have so paralyzed past discussions" (p. 3). The second goal is to present an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach about gender in Africa. By following these two overarching concerns, the diverse authors of "Africa after Gender?" successfully speak to key debates in African gender studies.**

The introduction sufficiently describes the framing arguments of the contributors' works and their significance within African gender scholarship. The rest of the book is organized into four themes. The first devotes its attention to the volatility of new African gender identities. This section includes several well-written works, such as Lynn Thomas's piece which emphasizes the historical narratives (and academic importance) of school girl pregnancies in Africa. The second theme is about African activism -- its struggles and demands. This portion of the book includes Takyiwaa Manuh's chapter on the complexities of undergoing gender research in Ghana. The third theme explores a myriad of African perceptions of gender. Nana Wilson-Tagoe's work in this section stresses African women writers and the representation of their culture and identity in their literatures. Topics of gendered men/masculinity and issues of misogyny/seniority within African communities comprise the text's last theme. Lisa Lindsay's piece on the emergence of the male breadwinner in colonial Nigeria is one of the four essays worth highlighting in this last section.

A key strength of the book is embedded in its transcontinental, multidisciplinary, multiracial, and multi-gendered approach. For example, Sylvia Tamale is based in Uganda and Wilson-Tagoe writes from London. Contributors also come from a wide array of academic disciplines, such as history, drama, English, comparative literature, sociology, and social anthropology. This diversity reminds us of the evolving nature of the discourse of gender in Africa. Additionally, it supports the book's main aim of promoting dialogues about African and gender issues that span across multiple academic and geographic regions.

It is difficult to list all the subjects addressed in this excellent book. However, several essays stand out from the rest. One is "Gender after Africa!" by Eileen Boris. This chapter reflects on three interventions African scholarship brings to the reconsideration of gender as a category of analysis. The three issues Boris analyzes are the "unsettling relationship between the biological and the social that reinforces trends within feminist thought; a questioning of the privilege of gender over social attributes, especially age, lineage, kinship, and wealth, thus complicating understandings of 'intersectionality'; and a revealing of gender as an expression of power through historical struggles over colonization and liberation" (p. 192). The only shortcoming of this wonderful essay is that, at ten and a half pages, it is too brief.

A second chapter, "Dialoguing Women" by Nwando Achebe and Bridget Teboh, also exemplifies the strength of the book's content. The essay is an example of studies conducted by a growing number of scholars who are doing field research in their countries of origin. Achebe and Teboh's work outlines the

complexities of such research. Hailing from different African countries (Achebe from Nigeria and Teboh from Cameroon), these scholars highlight critical issues and questions about doing research in their respective native countries, such as: What does it mean to be an African and female? What are the highlights, the joys, and the tribulations of conducting research among one's own people? Using anecdotes from their own experiences, the scholars also reveal research methodologies they have utilized. This contribution clearly points to the empirically rich and theoretical and methodological importance of "Africa after Gender?"

A postscript in the book, "The Production of Gendered Knowledge in the Digital Age," also showcases the text's methodological and theoretical contributions. In today's world, more researchers are using modern technology to inform their work (e.g., chat forums). This excellent addition to the end of the book speaks to the complexities and importance of using modern technology to inform African gender issues. For example, the piece stresses the significance of online African feminist journals, such as "Jenda." The essay also emphasizes the ways in which African gender activism is informed by the use of technology. For instance, in Uganda, several organizations have used the Internet for community building and information sharing to address gender equality. This postscript reminds readers that African gender research methodologies and theories should expand beyond our physical realm and should also spill over into the world of technology, specifically the Internet.

A critical drawback of "Africa after Gender?" is the lack of greater regional diversity among the geographical regions of emphasis. Essentially, the essays focus mostly on African Anglophone countries. The countries that dominate the discourse on African gender issues are Ghana and Nigeria. Few Francophone African countries are addressed in the book, except for Teboh's research experiences in Cameroon and Eileen Julien's analysis of a French-language novel by a Senegalese woman ("Scarlet Song" [1981]). It is difficult to assert that this problem is unique to the book as it is also evident in other academic fields in the humanities. This is a problem even acknowledged by Marc Epprecht in his December 2009 article when he writes that Anglophone Africa dominates the production of knowledge and theorization about African sexualities in history.[1] The same can be said about African gender studies. More research from Francophone (and Lusophone) African countries would aid in redressing this problematic imbalance.

In sum, this is a truly remarkable and important book despite its drawbacks. This text offer a fresh and challenging analysis on African gender issues. Through dialogues, the collaborators are able to trace the significance of gender

**(as a concept and as a guide for action) within diverse African contexts. This book is very accessible and engaging for scholars and students at the graduate level. It should have widespread appeal to Africanists from all subfields, as well as scholars of women and gender studies. "Africa after Gender?" makes a significant contribution to African studies and illuminates the changing discourse of gender within African contexts.**

*Note*

**[1]. Marc Epprecht, "AHR Forum: Sexuality, Africa, History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1258-1272.**

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