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QUEENS, PROSTITUTES AND PEASANTS:

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICAN WOMEN, 1971-1986*

By Margaret Jean Hay

The past fifteen years have seen the rapid growth of a distinct body of literature dealing with a relatively new topic: the historical experience of African women. Those same years have witnessed a rather dramatic shift in emphasis in the published works dealing with African women's history: the shift from queens to prostitutes, from heroines to victims. Toward the end of the period we can see a greater interest in the history of the average woman, particularly in her role as producer. It is that major change of focus that is the subject of the present essay, along with some concerns I have about the forms in which this research is published.

I have confined my analysis to published work by historians, because of the difficulty of compiling a representative list of unpublished papers and dissertations. Interdisciplinary scholarship is so strong in the development of works about African women, it is in some ways artificial to try to sort out a specifically "historical" perspective; I was curious nonetheless to examine the place African historians have accorded to women.

Although I have included a number of works by African scholars in my analysis (those, for example, by Elias Mandala, Agnes Aidoo, Bolanle Awe, and Maude Muntemba), I have not had access to a number of the relevant books and journals published in Africa, where, I suspect, a great deal more material about African women can be found.[1] I have therefore not attempted to define a separate "African voice" on African women's history.[2] Finally, I have confined my analysis to African women, although there appears to be a growing interest in the lives of Western women in Africa. (See for example Van Helten and Williams 1983.)

In this essay I shall deal first, and more briefly, with the forms of this literature, then move on to a more detailed discussion of the changing contents.

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[1] As well as in numerous seminar papers and student theses in African universities.

[2] A very exciting development in this regard is the new impetus toward reconstructing women's history at several university campuses in Nigeria; one of these is directed by Bolanle Awe at the University of Ibadan, with the support of Rina Okonkwo, LaRay Denzer, and others; another is headed by Kamene Okonjo, with support from Dalhousie University. These new organizations deserve communication and support from scholars elsewhere – sharing copies of recent articles, for example, and helping to build up their libraries.

Much of the literature on African women's history is both "fugitive"[3] and fragmented. It is fugitive because so much of the work is not in the mainstream of academic publishing, and thus not so easily accessible. In many cases, the basic units are not published monographs but half-completed (or never-completed) dissertations and unpublished seminar papers.[4] Furthermore, of the published works cited in the references at the end of this essay, the vast majority appear only in edited collections or special issues of journals – collections that may simply be disregarded by other historians and thus seem to reinforce the ghettoization of women's history. In addition, most of the major collections focusing on African women to date have been interdisciplinary in focus rather than historical. This is not an issue for any particular volume, but what it means over the long run is that articles of significance for African women's history are subsumed in larger collections where history is not the focus; they may very well influence work in other disciplines and yet be neglected by colleagues in history. For examples, articles of primary historical importance are included in Jules-Rosette 1979; Potash 1986; and Crummey 1986.

Yet articles on the history of African women do not appear with any regularity in the major journals of our profession. From the perspective of my own experiences editing such journals, I feel reasonably sure that the problem is more that such articles are rarely submitted to journals than that they are rejected. In most cases, the available or potential articles dealing with African women's history are solicited for a collection at an early stage. I am not arguing that we should stop producing or participating in these collective endeavors – indeed, in the best of them, I think it's quite clear that the significance of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts[5] – but I would suggest that we historians need to make a conscious effort to ensure that our work also appears in the mainstream.

There are shockingly few monographs dealing with the history of African women. In preparing this essay, I could think of only five book-length works that appeared between 1971 and 1986: the pioneer, Peg Strobel's work on *Muslim Women of Mombasa* (Strobel 1979); Claire Robertson's *Sharing the Same Bowl* (Robertson 1984); Nina Mba's study of political activity among southern Nigerian women (Mba 1982); Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (Walker 1982); and Kristin Mann's book on marriage among the educated elite in Lagos (Mann 1985). Over a fifteen-year period, that amounts to one book every three years, a startling figure considering the number of scholars active in this field. A sixth appeared in early 1987: Fran White's book on Creole women traders in Sierra Leone (White 1987).

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[3] I first heard Jane Guyer use the term in this context, and I am grateful to her for many stimulating discussions.

[4] Some of the most striking examples would include Alice Gold's research on Nandi women, Susan Caughman's work on West African women traders, and Sherilynn Young's work on the women of Mozambique.

[5] The major examples would include Robertson and Klein, 1983; Robertson and Berger, 1986; and, I would hope, Hay and Wright, 1982.

Despite the apparent ghettoization of African women's history, and a few startling examples where work by and about women has been largely ignored,[6] these new writings have already made an impact on the parent discipline. The pioneers in the field have been largely women, but it would be quite inaccurate to say that their work has been ignored by "the establishment." A large number of the best-known male historians have written one or more articles specifically focusing on aspects of women's history. (See, for example, Alpers 1983 and 1984a; Klein 1983; Crummey 1982; Mandala 1984; Chanock 1982; Thornton 1983; Spaulding 1982; Morrow 1986).

The Heroines: Queens in Politics and Commerce

Moving away from the forms of this body of literature to the contents, I want to sketch a rather dramatic change in emphasis that I see over the past fifteen years: a shift in emphasis from queens to prostitutes, as I've labeled it here. It will be useful initially to consider several examples from each category, to give us a sense of the literature.

In the late 1960s and even the early 1970s, there was a tremendous sense of excitement in rediscovering the African past, strong feelings of African nationalism and pride in the African historical achievement. Among historians, this excitement helped motivate a search for queens – a search for the glorious past, with a particular emphasis on the role of African women in traditional political structures.[7] Agnes Aidoo emphasized the central role of Asante queen mothers in the nineteenth century (Aidoo 1981), a role that had been overlooked by British colonial officials and male historians alike. Bolanle Awe drew attention to women political leaders in the traditional Yoruba political system (Awe 1977). In a similar vein, Claude-Helene Perrot examined the political initiatives of Agni women in precolonial Ivory Coast (Perrot 1973-76), and Joseph Miller (1975) highlighted the career of Queen Nzinga of Angola, who dared to defy the Portuguese.[8]

Writings about the participation of elite African women in nationalist movements emphasized the role of "queens" of a different sort – Constance Cummings-John and Adelaide Casely-Hayford, for example, are individual West African heroines whose lives have been highlighted in this literature. See

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[6]See, for example, the classic synthesis of African history by Philip Curtin, Jan Vansina, Steven Feierman, and Leonard Thompson (1978), where women are specifically mentioned on four of 600 pages. I am sure that if they were going to revise that work today, the proportion would be higher.

[7]I am using the term "queen" broadly and perhaps irresponsibly in this context to connote women who occupied important positions in the precolonial political system, and not merely the spouse or mother of a king.

[8]It is clear that scholars in other disciplines, such as Carol Hoffer (on Madam Yoko; see Hoffer 1976) and Judith van Allen (on the Aba "riots"; Van Allen 1976) pioneered research in these areas, and drew historians' attention to the traditional political roles of African women.

particularly the works by LaRay Denzer and Rina Okonkwo in the bibliography.[9]

In addition, intrigued by the apparent financial independence of African women, a number of Western scholars explored women's economic activities, with a particular focus on successful women traders, the "market women" of West Africa. There were enthusiastic accounts of semi-literate, self-educated women who traded in textiles, fish, or palm oil; the "merchant princesses" who owned trucks, built themselves European-type houses, and had their sons educated overseas.[10] (See, for example, George Brooks's description of early women traders in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau [Brooks 1976 and 1983], and Cheryl Johnson [1978] on Lagos market women.)

The result was a body of writing about African heroines, set primarily in West Africa; the thrust of the literature was to demonstrate women's social and economic autonomy, and the existence of "separate and nearly equal" political and economic roles for women.

The Victims: Prostitutes, Domestic Workers, and Slaves

Today, the heroines have largely disappeared, and much of the writing focuses on women as victims: as prostitutes, slaves, and domestic workers, in particular. Two events in the early 1970s helped define a shift in emphasis in our accounts of African women. One was Ester Boserup's book on *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (1971), which focused attention first on the preeminence of women in African agriculture, and second on the decline in women's productivity and status as something that could be directly traced to the impact of colonial rule. The second factor which helped reshape our visions of African women (as well as the prospects for Africa as a whole) was the 1972 publication of Walter Rodney's book, *How Europeans Underdeveloped Africa* – a signpost of the emphasis on dependency and political economy that have been so influential in African studies ever since. Nationalist pride in the Africa past – highlighted, for example, in the "Dar es Salaam school of historiography" – gave way to a new economic realism, as African nations confronted major political and economic crises.

The majority of scholars whose focus remained in the urban areas of Africa drew a more dismal picture of opportunities for women in towns – the newer studies were considerably less enthusiastic, and indicated that economic independence for women in colonial towns was only achieved through activities that were illegal, immoral, or both – looking particularly at beer brewers and prostitutes in the informal sectors of the economy.

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[9]See the works of LaRay Denzer (1976; 1981; 1987), Cheryl Johnson (1978), and Rina Okonkwo (1986). See also the recent biography of Adelaide Casely-Hayford by Adelaide Cromwell Gulliver, a sociologist.

[10]This historical work owes much of its inspiration to anthropologist Kenneth Little's glowing accounts of urban West African women, such as Little 1973.

By the late 1970s, we can note in the literature a new realization that women alone could not be a legitimate category of analysis – that one had to add considerations of class, age, ethnic identity, or religion, for example, to the distinctions between men and women. Historians began to fit studies of African women into the broader contexts of class formation, the emergence of an urban proletariat, and the presence of slaves or lower-status persons in society.

Much of the recent writing about African women's history in fact tends to cluster around two particular themes: the history of women prostitutes and slaves.

Several studies have documented the history of prostitutes in a particular urban area (Nairobi, Kinshasa, or Johannesburg, in particular) as a prism for understanding the intersection of changes in both rural and urban lives. Prostitution was seen as the major employment opportunity for unskilled African women workers.[11] Luise White (for Nairobi) and Charles van Onselen (for Johannesburg) are the best-known historians to work in this area (see White 1983 and 1986; and Van Onselen 1982), although historical research has been strongly influenced by the writings of anthropologists such as Janet Bujra (1975 and 1977), Janet MacGaffey (1986), and Kenneth Little's classic, *West African Women in Towns*. It would be gross oversimplification to say that Luise White portrays Kenyan prostitutes as victims – indeed, she presents them as individual actors shaping their own lives under often difficult circumstances. Nevertheless, the contrast with the earlier literature on queens is startling. The tendency to present African prostitutes and domestic workers as victims is much stronger in the South African literature.

The second focus of current interest clusters around the theme of women and slavery. It is evident that the slave trade and the presence of domestic slaves had wide-ranging implications for African women. As they tried to define "slave" in an African context, a number of scholars stumbled across the realization that it became rather difficult to draw the line between "slave" and "wife."[12]

Three examples will illustrate some of the ways in which the history of wives and slaves intersected:

– In an area of northern Sudan where women had previously been an important part of agricultural production, Jay Spaulding has shown how the presence and the relatively cheap cost of slave labor led men to substitute slave labor for their wives' labor in agriculture, and to impose "honorable seclusion" on their wives. Over the course of a century, "women forgot how to swim (across the river to their farms) and thus retired from production" (Spaulding 1982).

– In an area of the Congo where large numbers of men were either exported as slaves, or killed in the fighting that accompanied slave raids, John Thornton has argued that the imbalance in the population between men and

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[11]This was also documented for Kenyan women during the colonial period by sociologist Sharon Stichter. See Stichter 1975/76.

[12]In the Luo area of western Kenya where I worked, one common, rather affectionate way to refer to "my wife" is as "my slave," *jamwana*.

women led to a new emphasis on polygamy – the pattern of one man with four or five or more wives became the norm in response to specific historical circumstances, and was not part of cultural "givens" (Thornton, 1983).

– In areas of central and southern Africa that were disrupted by the slave trade in the nineteenth century, Marcia Wright has argued that the ability of men to acquire slaves as wives, and to sell their wives as slaves changed the roles of both wives and slaves, and made all women more vulnerable. (See Wright 1983a and 1984.)

I have presented an oversimplified picture of a body of literature that is more diverse and more complicated than this overview would suggest. It is also true that some studies focused on victims fifteen years ago, and that some of the most recent work still focuses on queens.[13] Nevertheless, over the fifteen years that historians have been consciously looking at the experience of African women, we can see a major shift in emphasis from queens to prostitutes, from heroines to victims – from the elite to the exploited.

One of the fastest-growing sub-areas of the field is the new body of literature on urban women in southern Africa: as prostitutes, beer-brewers, domestic servants, and factory workers. This work reflects the longer history of urbanization and the particular demands of the labor market in South Africa. It also reflects a subtle shift in subject matter from precolonial history to more contemporary topics. A good example is Iris Berger's shift from her earlier research dealing with women's religious roles in precolonial eastern Africa to her new work on the class consciousness of South African women factory workers (see Berger, 1976 and 1986).

A matter of possible concern in much of this recent work, however, is the relatively silent voice of the major protagonists themselves. Much of the recent work by Deborah Gaitskell (1979; 1983; 1984), Margaret Kinsman (1983), Julia Wells (1982; 1983), and Elizabeth van Heyningen (1984), for example, is based almost entirely on mission and archival sources; it rarely includes oral testimony. While in the South African case, the relative neglect of oral sources must reflect the difficulty of obtaining official permission, this neglect seems particularly unfortunate in pieces like Margaret Kinsman's work on the "subordination" of Tswana women (Kinsman 1983). Broad generalizations about the exploitation or subordination of women in another culture always raise questions about the writer's biases, and it seems to me particular care should be taken to focus on women's own testimony of their situations and not to put words in their mouths.

[13] A current example still very much in the unreconstructed "queens" tradition is Sweetman, 1986. Other contemporary work on heroines that is more broadly informed would include Denzer, 1987; Mba, 1982; and Okonkwo, 1986.

The History of Peasant Women: New Approaches

It remains to be seen whether the more recent focus on prostitutes and domestic servants illuminates the changing experience of the majority of African women much better than the earlier focus on queens and heroines.[14] It would seem that it is extremely difficult to capture the historical experience of rural women – the vast majority of African women.[15] There are a number of reasons why this is so, of course, and I suspect the principal one is the quality of the source material. The available historical documentation for African women in urban areas is many times greater than that for rural areas, and research clearance may be easier. In precolonial times, for example, the available travelers' accounts tended to focus on women at court or in major commercial centers rather than peasant women. (This was probably also a factor in the earlier emphasis on queens and traders).

There seems no question that most of the research on the history of rural African women will have to be based on oral data, but most historians prefer the sense of confirmation provided by complementary written materials. A number of recent studies are beginning to sketch some new approaches to get around the difficulties of source material. Because of their overwhelming concern with marriage, adultery, and divorce, early mission records can sometimes provide a wealth of information about rural women's lives and social relations. (Despite frequent references to missionaries' attitudes toward the proper role of African women, and the tendency of colonial officials to overlook their political and productive roles, there have been few detailed historical studies of missionary and official attitudes toward African women. A major exception is Bernard Salvaing's study of missionary attitudes toward women in Dahomey [Salvaing 1981]. He finds their arrogance to reflect a broad clerical antifeminism rather than cultural or racial prejudice.) The best-known use of mission records for women's history is probably Marcia Wright's reproduction of mission women's autobiographies in her *Women in Peril.* (See Wright 1984, Wright 1983a, and Alpers 1983.) Claire Robertson also used women's personal testimonies effectively when she interwove them between chapters in *Sharing the Same Bowl* (see Robertson 1984; see also Robertson 1983). Susan Geiger has begun an innovative project that centers on using women's life histories for historical research (see Geiger 1986, 1987).

Two new directions in recent work suggest very productive approaches to reconstructing the historical experience of rural women: focusing on their history as producers, and focusing on changes in one aspect of social organization as a prism for viewing changes in women's lives. Much of the most exciting new work

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[14]The research on women as slaves is an important exception in this regard; looking at the position of women slaves does illuminate the productive and reproductive roles of all women.

[15]The group that has been neglected most seriously by historians, however, is pastoral women, although some of the new work by Jean Boyd concerns both urban and pastoral Fulani women (see f.x. Boyd 1986 and Boyd and Last 1985). A recent issue of *Ethnos* (1987:1-2) is devoted to women in pastoral production, with many of the case studies focusing on African women; the perspective is that of anthropology rather than history, however.

seems centered on women's roles in production and the great value of African women's labor. A number of different articles in Robertson and Klein (1983) stress the predominance of African women as slaves (and the consistently higher prices for female slaves) because of their labor power. Claire Robertson argues that girls were sent to school less often than boys because their labor was more critical (in Robertson and Berger 1986).[16] Examining changes in the technology of food production can highlight a great deal about rural women's economic roles. Maude Shimwaayi Muntemba describes women's agricultural role in the areas bordering the Zambian railway, and the ways these roles were affected by colonial rule (Muntemba, 1982; see also Hay 1976). Newer studies by Elias Mandala and Megan Vaughan focus on the relationship between gender relations and food production in Malawi (Mandala 1984, 1982; Vaughan, 1982, 1985, and 1986).

While anthropologists have long been interested in women's roles in the African family, historians have until recently neglected the history of families and family organization. The special (1983) issue of the *Journal of African History* on the family, Kristin Mann's book on marriage in colonial Lagos, and Pat Curtin's study of weddings and family history in Lamu were signs this is beginning to change.[17] Luise White sketched the changing forms of family organization in response to external pressure and exploitation in her pioneering essay on "Women in the Changing African Family" (White 1984), while Deborah Gaitskell (1983) portrayed the struggle of black South African women to maintain family life. One of the potentially most productive approaches in this regard can be found in two recent papers by Marcia Wright which focus on the intersection of productive roles and family relations. Wright pairs one aspect of material culture with a related feature of social organization and examines their changing relationship over time; in one case, she uses the introduction of the plough and patterns of divorce; in the second, she looks at changes in iron-working and in brideservice.[18]

Women's own perceptions of the major changes associated with the colonial period – in law, education, family status, and economic roles – is a major subject that still needs investigation. Kristin Mann's book on *Marrying Well* traces changes marriage patterns and in men's and women's perceptions of marital obligations among educated Christians in Lagos around the turn of the century (Mann 1985). One of the strengths of Mann's work is her careful

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[16]In a similar vein, anthropologist Jane Guyer cites male competition to inherit Beti widows as evidence that women's labor power achieved men's wealth. See Guyer 1986.

[17]JAH 1984; Mann 1985; Curtin 1984; the Hansen/Strobel article (1985) and Luise White's review article in *Signs* (1987) suggest the importance of working in this area but do not reflect the results of their own work.

[18]Wright 1983b and 1984. Anthropologist Jane Guyer has suggested a related approach in her paper tracing the history of Beti widow inheritance as a background for the history of marriage and changing family relations. Widows are a valuable category for analyzing the role of state and society because they were considered the most valuable form of inheritable property in the late nineteenth century and the early colonial period - women represented capital and labor, political alliance, military strength, and trading partnership, as well as domestic service and biological reproduction. Thus widow inheritance came to be the most critical mechanism for accumulating wealth. See Guyer 1986.

integration of oral data and correspondence into the considerable body of archival and secondary sources she used. What is striking is Mann's ability to show how socioeconomic change appeared to the people who were living through it.[19]

The earlier work on women's role in nationalist movements mentioned above has not been maintained in recent years, and much of what has been written focuses on Nigeria. There are signs, however, that a new literature is emerging on the participation of East African women in nationalism and colonial rebellion, evident in Susan Geiger's work on women in TANU (see Geiger 1980 and 1987), Cora Presley's work on women in Mau Mau (see Presley 1986a and 1986b), and Cynthia Brantley's article on the role of Mekatilili in the Giriama rebellion (Brantley 1986). The recent literature shows a strong interest in women's resistance in South Africa, both rural and urban (see for example Lodge 1983, Wells 1982 and 1983, and Beinart 1987), but for some reason historians have been slow to document women's roles in African liberation movements.[20]

We are just beginning to see historical treatment of women's relations with other women – as friends, sisters, mothers, and daughters. One of the most impressive articles in this regard is Jean Boyd and Murray Last's piece on women as religious activists in nineteenth-century Sokoto. Their work focuses on women teaching and organizing other women in the cause of Islamic reform, and Jean Boyd's research has uncovered hundreds of pages of documents written by Muslim women in precolonial northern Nigeria.

The important works mentioned above in this paper still must be seen as only scratching the surface of any individual topic, while other important areas of women's lives still cry out for serious historical attention. Some of these would include women artists and the creative process; women's response to Western education (Robertson 1986 is one of few exceptions); women's participation in and perceptions of both Christianity and Islam (but see Kapteijns 1984); and studies of the differential impact on men and women of specific colonial and postcolonial institutions, along the lines of Martin Chanock's study of colonial courts in Zambia (Chanock 1982).[21] Despite the extensive interest in viewing women's position in the household, very little research has been carried out on the changing forms of marriage and family, and on women's perceptions of their own roles as wives and mothers. (Mann 1985, described above, is the outstanding exception.)

At the same time that we may lament the many important gaps remaining in our knowledge of women's history in Africa, I think we must acknowledge the

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[19]In a similar vein is Claire Robertson's tactic of interweaving the life stories of four Ga women through her broader analysis of political economy, as mentioned above (Robertson 1984).

[20]Major works in women's roles in resistance have been undertaken by political scientists and sociologists - the most influential work here probably includes Judith van Allen's classic article (1976) and Stephanie Urdang's research on women in Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique - but there are many fewer specifically historical studies.

[21]See the papers on men's and women's differential access to legal institutions during the colonial period in Hay and Wright 1982, especially Spaulding 1982, Crummey 1982, and Wright 1982.

fact that we are beginning to make major theoretical advances. This is reflected in a number of individual points made in the introduction to Claire Robertson and Iris Berger's collection on *Women and Class in Africa*; among their contributions are their demonstration that women's socioeconomic status cannot be subsumed under that of their husbands or fathers, that capitalist production has intensified women's petty commodity production, rather than the reverse, and their final blows to the older, more simplistic arguments that colonial rule was principally to blame for the decline in African women's economic status – that analysis must now be modified to include indigenous cultural forces and precolonial patterns of gender relations as well. Robertson and Berger also suggest that we now have to step back and rethink our basic chronological framework from a woman's point of view – a staggering challenge (Robertson and Berger 1986: 22). Other scholars attempting to understand the relationship of class and gender include Bryceson 1980 and Gaitskell, Kimble, and others 1984. Yet we are still far from having models for a comprehensive attempt to integrate women's history and class analysis; we can hope that several forthcoming collections on African women and class, by Sharon Stichter and Jane Parpart among others, will advance our methodological understanding.

So much has been done; so much is yet to do. Historians must push ahead with vigor, and with more attention to incorporating the voices of African women, to increasing our scholarly collaboration with our African colleagues, and to ensuring that works on African women's history stand proudly in the mainstream.

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