

Aug-2018

Book Review: Women in Twentieth-Century Africa

Serena J. Rivera

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rivera, Serena J. (2018). Book Review: Women in Twentieth-Century Africa. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(6), 387-390.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol19/iss6/27>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

***Women in Twentieth-Century Africa.* By Iris Berger, 2016. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: xvi + 233 pp. illustrations, maps, reference and further reading, index included. Price not listed. Paperback.**

By Serena J. Rivera¹

The problematic dialectic of tradition and modernization has recently become a central topic in the study of African history, culture and contemporaneity. Historian Iris Berger adds to these discussions through a particular focus on the experience of women throughout the continent. Particularly in *Women in Twentieth-Century Africa*, Berger provides a detailed exploration of the way women experience(d) the tensions of the intersections of tradition and modernization, colonialism and post-independence, throughout the twentieth century. The study is reminiscent of more region-specific works, such as Signe Arnfred's *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique*. Rather than focus solely on specific European colonies and their colonial and post-independence experiences, Berger presents an overview of the varied yet similar experiences of women in Africa contending with male dominance both during the colonial period and beyond. The study that culminated in *Women in Twentieth-Century Africa* uses both quantitative and qualitative research, the sources of which range from literary works to firsthand accounts to statistical data, in order to explore the evolution of women's experiences throughout the continent and throughout the century. The field and historical research compiled in the study highlight the ways in which women throughout Africa negotiated their social positionalities during the end of colonialism, throughout post-independence and through the period of post-independence conflicts. Through this exploration, Berger uncovers the continued undermining and oppression of women's authority in Africa, despite their gains in power and influence in the political realm. Berger argues that men, holding the majority of political and influential positions throughout Africa in the twentieth century, particularly sought to hinder female power through the controlling of women's political influences and sexualities.

Eight chapters and an epilogue structure the study and the temporal progression is mostly linear, beginning in the late nineteenth to early twentieth-century and ending in the early twenty-first century. In Chapter 1: "Colonizing African Families," the author gives a broad overview of the ways in which the transition from the precolonial to the colonial period, as well as from slavery to abolition, changed social titles and other formalities but still kept African women oppressed economically, specifically with regard to their reproductive rights. A recurring theme throughout the book, the author begins the chapter with an anecdotal reference to a novel: *The Joys of Motherhood* by Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta. As is similar throughout the following chapters, the reference to the novel encapsulates the chapter's theme, which centers on the frustration women felt during the colonial period as a result of meager living conditions and despite their contributions to society via agriculture, business and care-taking duties. The inheritance of Western education from colonizers and missionaries further complicated the progress of women as the tenets of this form of education often clashed with traditional practices and focused mainly on domestic education. Berger pulls specific examples from various European colonies in Africa

¹ Visiting Assistant Professor of Portuguese and Spanish. Bridgewater State University, Department of Global Languages and Literatures. srivera@bridgew.edu.

in a way that can appear to detract from the singular experiences of each colony and equalize colonization processes. Albeit cumbersome the drifting in and out of each colony, Berger in so doing challenges the need to focus on regionalities through a highlighting of commonalities: the policing of women's lives throughout the colonies, legislative and societal oppression as well as the resistance women performed and the spaces of which they increasingly occupied.

Chapter 2 "Confrontation and Adaptation" moves to the imposition of Christianity in the colonies, which forced a diversion from traditional spiritual religions. Here, Berger argues that women became immersed in these new religious practices in order to better their lives under colonialism, using examples of specific individuals and movements to elucidate this idea. Chapter 3 "Domesticity and Modernization," explores women's investment in domestic education as a means of empowerment through their roles as mothers and wives. The Second World War provided the backdrop for this period of continued development and modernization across Africa. Berger, using specific examples from Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and Zambia, builds off the previous chapter and elaborates on women's navigation of nationalism via religion. The realm of religion became a space of self-expression, as a means to craft positions of power, and to reach out and help other women: "These women contributed to nationalist movements in important ways, transforming the widely accepted narrative that independence movements were the product of an elite group of Western-educated men" (65). Worth noting is that at each turn in which institutions attempted to oppress women, Berger offers the counter-narrative of women reworking the mechanics of these institutions to their advantage.

In Chapter 4 "Mothers of Nationalism," the author discusses decolonization processes and the ways historians have often neglected the contribution of women in these processes. Through elaborations on women's groups in Kenya, French Guinea and Cameroon, for example, Berger highlights how women fiercely challenged and resisted both colonial policies and the ways their male counterparts implicitly mandated female oppression. Chapter 5 "The Struggle Continues," begins with an anecdote about a young Kikuyu woman, Wangari Maathai, of Kenya who became the first east or central African woman to receive a PhD and the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize. Berger draws on this anecdote to emphasize the continued professional and personal challenges of women throughout Africa in the mid-twentieth century. Although, as Berger writes, "struggles for independence had drawn many women into new forms of political activity, heightening their expectations for a better life," figures such as Maathai discovered "African self-rule no more solved women's problem than it did other pressing dilemmas of poverty, economic dependency, or competition for scarce resources" (90). As a result of legal barriers, lack of access to credit and agriculture services, as well as other environmental factors, women struggled economically and politically to regain the authority they had in traditional systems, often being used as scapegoats for country ills. While, for Berger, "economic crisis; pressure from articulate, educated women; and the international women's movement continued to create conditions conducive to change" (104), conditions worsened for poor women as wars, coups, corruption and falling agricultural prices highlighted the evolution of struggles from colonialism.

Chapter 6 "'Messengers of a new design': marriage, family, and sexuality," begins with an analysis of Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ's first novel *So Long a Letter*, which explored the dilemmas educated women confronted post-independence as they navigated the balance between tradition and modernization. Berger notes how debates regarding FGM, birth control use and the treatment of HIV/AIDS moved to the foreground and polygyny, bridewealth, rites of passage, and inheritance laws also remained contentious post-independence. Chapter 7 "Women's rights: the

second decolonization?” opens with the 1994 first democratic election in South Africa, which resulted in accelerated progress in the realm of gender equality and female representation in government. In 1995, the UN Fourth World Conference on Women helped further establish Africa and African women in this new political climate. Civil unrest and civil wars in countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda clouded positive forward movement, however. Berger concludes that the twentieth century ended on contradictory note for both women’s and human rights. Wars were coming to an end but post-conflict resolutions still presented issues. There was a chance for new political voices but “nonetheless, continuing political clashes, along with poverty and dislocation, global economic pressures, and the threat of HIV/AIDS persisted, endangering women’s lives and their sense of security” (175), increasing the gap between privileged and impoverished women.

In Chapter 8 “Empowerment and inequality in a new global age,” Berger highlights the correlation between increased enrollment of women in education and late twentieth century political advances. Here the author pulls from Zimbabwean novel, *Nervous Conditions*, to highlight the struggles of educating girls and women across postcolonial Africa as they confronted social pressures to marry. In addition, although policies went into effect to help increase enrollment in schools, they did little to combat longstanding prevailing attitudes against the education of women. Nevertheless, as Berger highlights: “by the end of the twentieth century, the vastly increased numbers of educated women had created new professional opportunities in politics, government, education, business, and intellectual life in many African countries” (180). Yet, at the same time, HIV/AIDS intensified gender inequality, creating fear and distrust in marriage systems and clashes between the people and their governments with regard to the provision of medicine and treatment for these issues. Turning back to the ways women turned to religion in the search for spaces of empowerment, Berger highlights the increasing popularity of Pentecostal churches in the late twentieth century as a result of their openness to having women leaders. Church leaders in general, Berger writes, “challenged women to confront the status quo, to assert themselves in both religion and society, and to strive for personal achievement by building their self-esteem” (193). Islam also gained a following in the 1990s as it shifted the blame of social ills in countries like Niger from women to immorality.

The epilogue “Contradictions and Challenges” calls upon Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking’s play, *A New Earth*, to provide a conclusion regarding the progress of women in Africa over the last century. In referencing Liking’s work, Berger recapitulates the notion that throughout the twentieth century, colonization and the European creation of “civilization” in Africa, resulted in the collusion of colonizers, African men and missionaries in the creation of legislation that maintained control over young women, and specifically over their bodies, to which women resisted. In discussing the myriad of ways in which women persisted and resisted against oppression from various angles throughout the twentieth century, Berger ultimately cites education as the key factor in helping women embrace new identities.

As many other critics and historians have noted, independence from European colonial rule did not equate to liberation for women. Progress in education and politics for women was often countered by various setbacks throughout the century. As Berger writes: “by the 1980s, the austerity policies imposed on debt-ridden governments forced many women to make new economic demands on their husbands to contribute to clothing, food, and school fees for their families” (201). At the same time, the increased involvement of women in politics, women’s movements and armed struggles, particularly in southern Africa and the Portuguese colonies began to undermine and erode patriarchal dominance. Berger ends the study by calling upon South

African journalist Sisonke Msimang's words regarding the efforts of women's organizations in the weakening of resistance efforts by those in favor of a male-dominated system. While there is still much progress to be made, Berger sees the efforts by women throughout the twentieth century as a sign of hope for a more egalitarian future.

While the book meaningfully elaborates on the social and political positionalities of women within the problematic dialectic between tradition and modernization throughout the twentieth century in Africa, the lack of organization tailored to specific colonial experiences reads somewhat problematically. Is it truly possible to highlight commonalities of experience among women throughout Africa without calling strict attention to the unique colonial experiences and their respective imperial powers? Does this method negate the nuances of the different European colonies? And what does focusing more on women in English and French colonies versus Portuguese colonies, for example, imply? Notwithstanding the questions this reading provoked, this reviewer believes that *Women in Twentieth-Century Africa* would make a valuable contribution to university courses in women's and gender studies, African studies (history, literatures and cultures), and anthropology. The study ultimately demonstrates through a rich variety of sources the resilience of women in the face of repeated and evolving forms of oppression, particularly by their male counterparts, both during the colonial and post-independence periods.