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UFAHAMU
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UFAHAMU accepts contributions from anyone interested in Africa and related subject areas. Contributions may include scholarly articles, political-economic analysis, commentaries, review articles, film and book reviews and poetry. Manuscripts must be between 20-30 pages, clearly typed, double spaced, with footnotes on separate page(s). Contributors should keep copies of their manuscripts. The Editorial Board reserves the right to edit any manuscript to meet the objectives of the journal. Authors must submit two copies of their manuscripts and a brief biographical note, including position, academic affiliation and recent significant publications, etc. All correspondence - manuscripts, subscriptions, books for review, inquiries, etc. - should be addressed to the Editor-in-Chief at the above address.

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CONTENTS

Contributors

Editorial.....	1
Introduction.....	3

ARTICLES

Oral Field Techniques and Women's History: The Case of Owan Nigeria Onaiwu W. Ogbomo.....	7
A Question of Subjects: The "Female Circumcision" Controversy and the Politics of Knowledge Sondra Hale.....	26
Rational Actors or Moral Economists: Gender Relations and the Peasant Family in Sub-Saharan Africa Zine Magubane.....	36
West African Women: Some Considerations Bridget Teboh.....	50
Marriage, Tradition, and Womanhood in Hausa Society: Women's Perspectives Elhadji Oumarou Chaibou.....	63
BOOK REVIEWS.....	77
Emecheta, Buchi. <i>Kehinde</i> Matthew J. Christensen	
Aidoo, Ama Ata. <i>Changes: A Love Story</i> Kendahl Radcliffe	

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EDITORIAL

While issues of gender have in all probability existed throughout the evolution of humanity, it has only recently been the case that scholarly analysis regarding the dynamics of gender has begun to take a more prominent position in academia. The increased demand for gender studies has led to the creation of gender-related courses and curriculums at universities and colleges throughout the U.S. and abroad. Clearly, these teachings should not have to be demanded, but should be included in any well-balanced college catalog. In an effort to help illustrate the need for this balance, *Ufahamu* has published this special issue that deals specifically with issues of gender in Africa. It is hoped that through reading the enclosed articles written by both students and professional scholars, readers will begin to understand how gender studies in Africa differs from those in other parts of the world, and how it often comes into conflict with non-African gender paradigms while essentially striving for the very similar goals of gender equality, parity and female emancipation.

By encouraging debate and dialogue on issues of gender, *Ufahamu* and its sponsor the African Activist Association hopes to fulfill our original mission of working to correct misperceptions of Africa and her societies. Unfortunately, the false representations of African cultures and peoples that prevail in popular media are not limited only to the outlets of mass communication. Far too often such representations find their way into classrooms and scholarly institutions the world over, and while *Ufahamu* claims no patent on truthful discourse, it does endeavor to present a variety of perspectives from which knowledge may be gleaned that is more akin to the reality called Africa.

It is for this reason that *Ufahamu* has decided to devote an entire issue to scholarly works that deal exclusively with gender in Africa. Not all of the articles in this issue agree with one another, nor are they derived from similar paradigms of thought. Each one, however, presents a valid perspective on the roles of women, feminism and gender studies in the context of Africa. It is for the reader to decide which idea or combination of ideas best reflects the true nature of the issues being examined. By asking the reader to make such decisions, *Ufahamu* is attempting to avoid the dogmatism that too easily smother free thought and stifle the genesis of future ideologies. Only when all views are presented and considered in the debates on gender, including those presented in the beautiful, yet flawed, National Geographic style of documentation, will we begin to comprehend the real dynamics of gender in Africa and how those dynamics are eventually played out.

It is hoped that all of the articles contained in this issue will challenge readers to reconsider their own ideas about gender and

feminism, particularly when it comes to applying those ideas to foreign societies and cultures. Certainly, *Ufahamu's* ability to present our readers with this particular issue would not have been possible without the efforts of our two guest editors, L. Lloys Frates and Christine Choi Ahmed. Both Ms. Frates and Ms. Ahmed put considerable time and energy into the completion of this issue and I would like to thank them personally for choosing to contribute to such an endeavor. Their considerable knowledge and expertise helped me make sense of a discipline in which I am not well-versed. It was only with their aid that *Ufahamu* is able to present its readership with an issue as timely and important as this one.

Kier Riemersma
Editor-In-Chief

INTRODUCTION

The African Woman represents the most de-centered of spaces, and she is represented as silent for the purpose of maintaining and sustaining doubtful authorities. Yet the systemic refusal to hear her speech is not the same thing as her silence.

—Abena Busia

In "mainstream" academic discourse African women are frequently represented as the "other", the invisible, the silent. In the tradition of *Ufahamu*, this special issue incorporates non-traditional scholarship by and about African women. In a group of diverse articles, providing both geographical and theoretical breadth, these scholars challenge the notion of African women as victims. They confront Western feminist notions in search of a uniquely African feminism, and in so doing, they take on many of the "bogey men" of African studies—female circumcision, polygamy, the role of Islam, the existence, or lack thereof, of a matriarchal society in the African past, etc. By examining the conceptualization of gender on the continent and in research about the continent, this issue offers an important and exciting look at new, "cutting-edge" scholarship in both African Studies and Women's Studies.

It is appropriate that this issue is being released simultaneously with the establishment of the Rockefeller-funded Center for the Study of Gender in Africa at UCLA. Like the aims of this Center and other efforts currently underway at UCLA and throughout the world, this issue of *Ufahamu* attempts to fuel and advance the debates surrounding the study of gender in Africa. To a certain degree, gender in Africa has been defined by outsiders as well as inhabitants of the continent. In the popular mind of nineteenth century American and European culture, the African woman became the personification of exotic, erotic, unbridled sexuality, as in Joseph Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*, or the participants in "exotic rituals" as in Richard Burton's *First Footsteps in Africa*. Similar images are found in twentieth century popular culture. In the last few years, when African women have been represented at all, it has been as poor, starving victims of their land and culture.

Identity politics continue to be important in statements by African women who reject the label of victim or refuse to be considered unconscious creatures born of a repressive society. Just as this issue provides alternative representations of African women it also attempts to create a better understanding of African feminism. What is this traditional African feminism?—a question Ama Ata Aidoo addresses in writing:

I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad, from Lapland. Africa has produced a much more concrete tradition of strong women fighters than most other societies. So when we say that, we are refusing to be women who always refused to keep quiet. We haven't learned this from anybody abroad.¹

Like Aidoo, in his article on *Oral Field Techniques and Women's History: The Case of Owan Nigeria*, Onaiwu W. Ogbomo argues that women had a great deal of power in pre-colonial Owan society. His article focuses on methodology. He challenges the notion that women do not have and/or do not keep history. His article is an attempt to "fill in the gaps" in pre-colonial history by focusing on the roles of women. Ogbomo does not, however, simply write a revisionist history that includes women, but drives the debate forward through the incorporation of "non-traditional" source material. It is his creative use of totems, shrine and goddess traditions, and myths that allows him to find women in the history of Owan. Although he acknowledges the usefulness of oral tradition and life history in the study of gender, he points out many of the inadequacies in these methodologies, especially for the study of early history. He includes a frank discussion of the problems he had in the field and goes on to illustrate that it is possible to write history across genders and therefore challenges men to play a more active role in the production of gender-inclusive history. In addition, he questions the existence of a matriarchy in the African past. In pointing out the fact that many Western feminists do not subscribe to the idea that a matriarchy has ever existed in any culture, Ogbomo questions their definition of matriarchy and, in coming up with an alternative definition, argues that Owan was, at one time, a matriarchal society and the desire to maintain aspects of such a society led them to emigrate from Benin. The importance of the article is two-fold: First, it provides us with a new perspective of the reasons for the migration to Owan, and thus a much-needed history of this society. Secondly, it points out a number of source materials that can be most useful in capturing the African past, and how one might go about utilizing them.

Sondra Hale writes about why she does *not* write about female circumcision. Like Ogbomo, she looks at the role Western feminists have played in the creation of images of African women. In this article about the politics of knowledge, she names past and potential problems in the study of African women. By focusing on the female circumcision debate, Hale recognizes and names the ethnocentrism and racism that has permeated discussions of gender in Africa, specifically those dealing with female circumcision. A Western feminist herself, she does a great deal of self-examination and explores possible alliances between

feminists residing in the West and those on the continent. In pointing out that we should respect and trust African women to define their own goals and deal with their own issues, Hale reinforces the notion put forth in all the other articles in this issue—African women do have agency, which, for the most part, has been underestimated in the past. Hale offers a challenge to scholars to create a multi-directional exchange of information that can work to benefit those on both sides of the Atlantic and in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres.

The article, *Rational Actors or Moral Economists: Gender Relations and the Peasant Family in Sub-Saharan Africa*, written by Zine Magubane answers Hale's call to examine the politics of knowledge by addressing theories of peasant societies and their inadequacy in addressing gender. An issue also raised by Bridget Teboh, Magubane finds the focus on the individual, rather than the collective, a great weakness in moral and political economy theories when considering gender. Like many feminist scholars, she re-examines the conceptualization of family and explores the way in which it is structured and the dynamics within it that are uniquely African. Interesting in Magubane's analysis is her use of ideas widely circulated in the West—"women have no access to productive resources, little voice in village decision making, and little or no authority over themselves or their children...."—to challenge Western theoretical conceptions of peasant societies in Africa. This is not a contradiction but clearly illustrates the way in which African feminists are picking and choosing from Western theory to create their own brand of feminism, some of which overlaps with that in the West but is, in its final form, an African creation.

In *West African Women: Some Considerations* Bridget Teboh employs examples from Nigeria to examine the way in which women in Africa have been studied and, in so doing, rejects many notions put forth in the scholarship. Like Magubane, she reveals the focus on the individual as both androcentric and ethnocentric, and thus examines the communal endeavors of women. Teboh's article discredits a widely-circulated idea that African women suffer some of the most extreme forms of oppression in the world by showing that, unlike in the West where a great deal of ageism takes place, women gain status with age and can actually "become men." She does not shy away from controversial issues such as polygamy and bridewealth, both of which she sees as potentially empowering for women. In viewing women as active agents in Africa and its history, Teboh spotlights many popular stereotypes and images of African women and, like Hale, challenges scholars to re-examine the way in which they go about defining and interpreting African women.

As we can see clearly through the female circumcision "frenzy," Islam has been labeled one of the biggest obstacles to the emancipation

of women on the African continent. Elhadji Oumarou Chaibou, in his article, *Marriage, Tradition, and Womanhood in Hausa Society: Women's Perspectives*, carries out a close reading of the biographical texts of two Hausa women and, in so doing, illustrates that the role of Islam is much more complex than many have argued in the past. Like the protagonist in Buchi Emecheta's novel, *Kehinde*, reviewed by Matthew Christensen, the two Hausa women show that a unique situation exists in Africa in that women are able to balance outside influences with more "traditional" customs and practices in a way that maintains elements of both. This examination gives insight into the lives of Muslim Hausa women, a result of which is the destruction of widely held stereotypes. *Baba of Karo* and *The Story of Gambo Sawaba* are pitted against work by such scholars as Barbara Callaway to illustrate the conflicting theories about the impact of Islam on women in Africa. Chaibou also challenges more positive, but highly romanticized, myths of African women like those put forth by Negritude writers, by disassociating womanhood from motherhood. Through her close reading of these two texts, the important roles played by women in Hausa society in both the private and public spheres are revealed. Like Magubane, she goes on to support the notion that women's roles of power date back into earlier, pre-colonial periods. She does not glorify Islam, but examines the complexity of the argument that Islam, with its practices of seclusion and veiling, is responsible for the oppressed condition of women in Hausa society.

Colonialism brought with it significant changes in women's access to power. It did not, however, render African women powerless. As the articles in this issue most aptly reveal, women continued to have agency and exercise power throughout the continent, albeit oftentimes in a greatly diminished form from that which preceded it. In examining women's access to power, these articles reveal much of the androcentrism and ethnocentrism put forth by Western scholars of Africa, including feminist scholars. The authors whose work is featured challenge us all to not only include gender, but examine the way in which we choose to study Africa more generally. Thus, the importance of this issue lies in the number of creative methodologies and theoretical perspectives are explored within.

Christine Choi Ahmed and L. Lloys Frates

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Ama Ata Aidoo, "From the Discussion," in Kirsten Petersen, ed., *Criticism and Ideology*, Uppsala Afrikainstitute, 1988, p. 183.