

## CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER: THE EURO-CENTRIC FOUNDATIONS OF FEMINIST CONCEPTS AND THE CHALLENGE OF AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGIES

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The last five centuries, described as the age of modernity, have been defined by a number of historical processes including the Atlantic Slave Trade and attendant institutions of slavery, and European colonization of Africa Asia and Latin America. The idea of modernity evokes the development of capitalism and industrialization, as well as the establishment of nation states and the growth of regional disparities in the World system. The period has witnessed a host of social and cultural transformations. Significantly, gender and racial categories emerged during this epoch as two fundamental axes along which people were exploited and societies stratified.

A hallmark of the modern era is the expansion of Europe and the establishment of Euro/American cultural hegemony throughout the world. Nowhere is this more profound than in the production of knowledge about human behavior, history, societies, and cultures. As a result, interests, concerns, predilections, neuroses, prejudices, social institutions and social categories of Euro/Americans have dominated the writing of human history. One effect of this Eurocentrism is the racialization of knowledge: Europe is represented as the source of knowledge and Europeans as knowers. Indeed, male gender privilege as an essential part of European ethos is enshrined in the culture of modernity. This global context for knowledge production must be taken into account in our quest to comprehend African realities and indeed the human condition.

In this paper, my objective is to interrogate gender and allied concepts based on African cultural experiences and epistemologies. The focus here is on the nuclear family system, which is a specifically European form and yet is the original source of many of the concepts that are used universally in gender research. The goal is to find ways in which African research can be better informed by local concerns and interpretations and at the same time, concurrently, for African experiences to be taken into account in general theory-building, the structural racism of the global system notwithstanding.

## Gender and the Politics of Feminist knowledge

Any serious scholarship on the place of “gender” in African realities must of necessity raise questions about prevailing concepts and theoretical approaches. This is a result of the fact that the architecture and furnishings of gender research have been by and large distilled from Europe and American experiences. Today, feminist scholars are the most important gender-focused constituency and the source of much knowledge on women and gender hierarchies. As a result of their efforts, gender has become one of the most important analytic categories of in the academic enterprise of describing the world and the political business of prescribing solutions. Thus, although our quest to understand cannot ignore the role of western feminists, we must question the social identity, interests, and concerns of the purveyors of such knowledge. In accordance with this “sociology of knowledge” approach, Karl Mannheim states:

Persons bound together into groups strive in accordance with the character and position of the groups to which they belong to change the surrounding world of nature and society or attempt to maintain it in a given condition. It is the direction of this will to change or to maintain, of this collective activity, which produces the guiding thread for the emergence of their problems, their concepts and their forms of thought. (1936:4)

Feminists as one such group have used their newly acquired power in Western societies to turn what were formerly perceived as the private troubles of women into public issues. They have shown how women’s personal troubles in the private sphere are in fact public issues constituted by the gender inequality of the social structure. It is clear that Euro/American women’s experiences and the desire for transformation have provided the basis for the questions, concepts, theories, and concerns that have produced gender research.

Feminist researchers use gender as the explanatory model to account for women’s subordination and oppression worldwide. In one fell swoop, they assume both the category “woman” and her subordination as universals. But gender is first and foremost a socio-cultural construct. Thus as the starting point of research, we cannot take as given what indeed we need to investigate. If gender looms so large in the lives of white women to the exclusion of other factors, we have to ask, why gender? Why not some other category like race for example which is seen as fundamental by African Americans. Because gender is socially constructed, the social category “woman” is not universal, and other forms of oppression and equality are present in society, additional questions must be asked: Why gender? To what extent does a gender analysis reveal or occlude other forms of oppression? Which women’s situation does feminist scholarship theorize well? And of which particular groups of women? To what extent does it facilitate women’s wishes, and their desire to understand themselves more clearly?

Many scholars have critiqued gender as a universal concept and have shown the extent to which it is particular to Anglophone/ American and white women's politics in the United States, especially. Perhaps the most important critique of feminist articulations of gender is the one made by a host of African American scholars who insist that in the United States there is no way that gender can be considered outside of race and class. This position led to the insistence on the differences amongst women and the need to theorize multiple forms of oppression particularly where inequalities of race, gender, and class inequalities are evident. Outside the United States discussions have focused on the necessity of paying attention to imperialism, colonization, and other local and global forms of stratification, which lend weight to the assertion that gender cannot be abstracted from the social context and other systems of hierarchy.

In this paper, I want to add another dimension to the reasons why gender must not be taken at face value and specifically to articulate an African critique. First I will explore the original sources of feminist concepts that are the mainstay of gender research? I wish to suggest that feminist concepts are rooted in the nuclear family. This social institution constitutes the very basis of feminist theory and represents the vehicle for the articulation of feminist values. This is in spite of the widespread belief among feminists that their goal is to subvert this male- dominant institution and the belief amongst feminism's detractors that feminism is anti-family. Despite the fact that feminism has gone global, it is the Western nuclear family that provides the grounding for much of feminist theory. Thus the three central concepts that have been the mainstay of feminism woman, gender, and sisterhood are only intelligible with careful attention to the nuclear family from which they emerged.

Furthermore, some of the most important questions and debates that have animated gender research in the last three decades make more sense once the degree to which they are entrenched in the nuclear family (which is both an institutional and spatial configuration) is appreciated. What is the nuclear family? The nuclear family is a gendered family par excellence. As a single-family household, it is centered on a subordinated wife, a patriarchal husband, and children. The structure of the family conceived as having a conjugal unit at the center lends itself to the promotion of gender as a natural and inevitable category because within this family there are no crosscutting categories devoid of it. In a gendered, male-headed two-parent household, the male head is conceived as the breadwinner and the female is associated with home and nurture. Feminist sociologist Nancy Chodorow gives us an account of how the gender division of labor, in the nuclear family in which women mother, sets up different developmental and psychological trajectories for sons and daughters and ultimately produce gender beings and gendered societies. According to Chodorow:

The family division of labor in which women mother gives socially and historically specific meaning to gender itself. The engendering of men and women with particular personalities, needs, defenses, and

capacities creates conditions for and contributes to the reproduction of this same division of labor. Thus the fact that women mother inadvertently and inevitably reproduces itself. (Chodorow 1978:12)

Gender distinctions are foundational to the establishment and functioning of this family type.

Thus, gender is the fundamental organizing principle of the family, and gender distinctions are the primary source of hierarchy and oppression within the nuclear family. By the same token, gender sameness is the primary source of identification and solidarity in this family type. Thus the daughters self-identify as females with their mother and sisters. Haraway in turn writes: Marriage encapsulated and reproduced antagonistic relation of the two coherent social groups, men and women.” (Haraway1991:138)

The nuclear family however is a specifically Euro/American form; it is not universal. More specifically, the nuclear family remains an alien form in Africa despite its promotion by both the colonial and neocolonial state, international (un)derdevelopment agencies, feminist organizations, contemporary non-governmental organizations (NGOs) among others.

The spatial configuration of the nuclear family household as an isolated space is critical to understanding feminist conceptual categories. It is not surprising that the notion of womanhood that emerges from Euro-American feminism, which is rooted in the nuclear family, is the concept of wife since “ as Miriam Johnson puts it [In Western societies] “the marriage relationship tends to be the core adult solidary relationship and as such makes the very definition of woman become that of wife”. (19:40) Because the category “wife” is rooted in the family. In much of white feminist theory, society is represented as a nuclear family, composed of a couple and their children. There is no place for other adults. For women, in this configuration, the wife identity is totally defining; other relationships are at best secondary. It seems as though the extent of the feminist universe is the nuclear family. Methodologically, the unit of analysis is the nuclear family household, which theoretically then reduces woman to wife.

Because race and class are not normally variable in the family, it makes sense that white feminism, which is trapped in the family, does not see race or class.

Thus the fundamental category of difference, which appears as a universal from the confines of the nuclear family, is gender. The woman at the heart of feminist theory, the wife, never gets out of the household. Like a snail she carries the house around with her. The problem is not that feminist conceptualization starts with the family, but that it never transcends the narrow confines of the nuclear family. Consequently, wherever woman is present becomes the private sphere of women’s subordination. Her very presence defines it as such.

Theorizing from the confined space of the nuclear family, it is not surprising that issues of sexuality automatically come to the fore in any discussion of gender. Even a category such as mother is not intelligible in white feminist thought except if the mother is defined first as the wife of the patriarch. There seem to be no understanding of the role of a mother independent of her sexual ties to a father. Mothers are first and foremost wives. This is the only explanation for the popularity of that oxymoron: single mother. From an African perspective and as a matter of fact, mothers by definition cannot be single. In most cultures, motherhood is defined as a relationship to progeny, not as a sexual relationship to a man. Within the feminist literature, motherhood, which in many other societies constitutes the dominant identity of women, is subsumed under wifehood. Because woman is a synonym for wife, procreation and lactation in the gender literature (traditional and feminist) are usually presented as part of the sexual division of labor. Marital coupling is thus constituted as the base of societal division of labor.

Feminist sociologist Nancy Chodorow argues that even an infant experiences his or her mother as gendered being — wife of the father — which has deep implications in regard to the differential psychosocial development of sons and daughters. She universalizes the experience of nuclear motherhood and takes it as a human given, thereby extending the boundaries of this very limited Euro/American form to other cultures that have different family organizations.

## The Non-gendered Yoruba Family

Thus far I have shown that feminist concepts emerged out of the logic of the patriarchal nuclear family, a family form that is inappropriately universalized. In this section drawing from my own research on Yoruba society of southwestern Nigeria, I present a different kind of family organization. The traditional Yoruba family can be described as a non-gendered family. It is non-gendered because kinship roles and categories are not gender-differentiated. Significantly then, power centers within the family are diffused and are not gender-specific. Because the fundamental organizing principle within the family is seniority based on relative age, and not gender, kinship categories encode seniority not gender. Seniority is the social ranking of persons based on their chronological ages. Hence the words *egbon* refers to the older sibling and *aburo* to the younger sibling of the speaker regardless of gender. Seniority principle is a dynamic and fluid; unlike gender, it is not rigid or static.

Within the Yoruba family, *omo* the nomenclature for child is best translated as offspring. There are no single words denoting girl or boy in the first instance. With regard to the categories husband and wife, within the family the category *oko*, which is usually glossed as the English husband, is non-gender-specific because it encompasses both males and females. *Iyawo* glossed as wife, in English

refers to in-marrying females. The distinction between *oko* and *iyawo* is not one of gender but a distinguishes between those who are birth members of the family and those who enter by marriage. The distinction expresses a hierarchy in which the *oko* position is superior to the *iyawo*. This hierarchy is not a gender hierarchy because even female *oko* are superior to the female *iyawo*. In the society at large even the category of *iyawo* includes both men and women in that devotees of the Orisa (deities) are called *iyawo* Orisa. Thus relationships are fluid and social roles are situational continuously placing individuals in context-dependent hierarchical and non-hierarchical changing roles that are.

The work of social anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa on the contrasting characteristics of Africa-based family systems and European-based forms is especially illuminating. She points out that the nuclear family is a conjugally-based family in that it is built around a couple — the conjugal core. In West Africa (of which the Yoruba are a part), it is the lineage that is regarded as the family. The lineage is a consanguinally-based family system built around a core of brothers and sisters — blood relations. She explicates:

Upon marriage, couples did not normally establish separate households, but rather joined the compound of either the bride or groom, depending on the prevailing rules of descent. In a society in which descent is patrilineal, the core group of the compound consisted of a group of brothers, some sisters, their adult sons, and grandchildren. The core of the co-residential unit was composed of blood relatives. The spouses are considered outsiders and therefore not part of the family. (1996:81) [my emphasis]

In the Yoruba case, all the members of the lineage as a group are called *omo-ile* and are individually ranked by birth order. All the in-marrying females are as a group known as *iyawo ile* and are ranked by order of marriage. Individually, an *omo-ile* occupies the position of *oko* in relation to the in coming *iyawo*. This insider-outsider relationship is ranked, with the insider being the privileged senior. The mode of recruitment into the lineage is the crucial difference — birth for the *oko* and marriage for the *iyawo*.

If there was one role-identity that defined females, it was the position of mother. Within the household, members are grouped around different mother-child units described as *omoya* literally children of one mother — womb sibling. Because of the matrifocality of many African family systems, the mother is the pivot around which familial relationships are delineated and organized. Consequently, *omoya* is the comparable category in Yoruba culture to the nuclear sister in white American culture. The relationship among womb siblings just like that of sisters of the nuclear family is based on an understanding of common interests borne out of a shared experience. The defining shared experience that binds the *omoya* together in loyalty and unconditional love is the mother's womb. The category *omoya*, unlike sister, transcends gender.

*Omoya* also transcends households; because matrilineal cousins are regarded as womb siblings and are perceived to be closer to one another than siblings who share the same father and who may even live in the same household. *Omoya* locates a person within a socially recognized grouping and underscores the significance of the mother-child ties in delineating and anchoring a child's place in the family; thus these relationships are primary, privileged and should be protected above all others. In addition, *omoya* underscores the importance of motherhood as institution and as experience in the culture.

## The Challenge of African Conceptualizations

The difficulty of applying feminist concepts to express and analyze African realities is the central challenge of African gender studies. The fact that western gender categories are presented as inherent in nature (of bodies) and operate on a dichotomous, binarily opposed male/female, man/woman duality in which the male is assumed to be superior and therefore the defining category, is particularly alien to many African cultures. When African realities are interpreted based on these Western claims, what we find are distortions, obfuscations in language and often a total lack of comprehension due to the incommensurability of social categories and institutions. In fact, the two basic categories of woman and gender demand rethinking, given the Yoruba case presented above, and as I argued in my book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Writings from other African societies suggest similar problems. A few examples follow.

Social anthropologist Ifi Amaduime writes about male daughters, female husbands, and the institution of woman marriage in Igbo society (Amaduime 1987) These conceptions confound the Western mind and therefore should not be imprisoned by the feminist framework. In the novel *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangarembga writing in a Shona context discusses the privileges of what she calls the "patriarchal status" of Aunt Tete a character in the story: "Now this kind of work was women's work, and of the thirteen women there, my mother and Lucia were incapacitated a little — Tete, having patriarchal status, was not expected to do much." (1989:133). We gather that aunt Tete is a woman, but she has "patriarchal status," which exempts her from women's work. The question then arises as to how the category "woman" is constituted in Shona society. Who then is the woman who does women's work? What does it all mean within the social organization of the society? Similarly, Sekai Nzenza Shand, writing about her Shona family in her memoir *Songs from an African sunset*, describes her mother's superior relationship to the varoora thus:

In her maiden village, my mother was looked on as the great aunt, or an honorary man; the varoora gave her respect due to a father and my mother could command them as she wished. They therefore

came to their ‘husband’s’ village to support her in bereavement.  
(1997:19)

Is Nzenza Shand’s mother a man (albeit an honorary man)? What does it mean?

Coming back to West Africa, Ghanaian linguist, Kwesi Yankah in his monograph on the Okyeame — spokesperson for Akan chiefs — he made the following observation: “an Okyeame is traditionally referred to as the ohene yere, the chief’s wife—it is generally applied to all Okyeame whether in appointive or hereditary positions.”(1995:89) He explains: “even in cases where a chief is female and her Okyeame is male, the akyeame is still a wife and the chief a husband”(89). This understanding clearly confounds the Western gendered understanding that the social role “wife” is inherent in the female body. Finally, historian Edna Bay writing on the kingdom of Dahomey states:

The king also married men. Prominent artisans and talented leaders from newly conquered areas were integrated into Dahomey through ties based on the idiom of marriage. Along with eunuchs and women of the palace, such men were called *ahosi*. Male *ahosi* brought families with them or were granted women and slaves to establish a line.  
(1998:20)

The category “women of the palace” mentioned in the quote, does not include daughters of the lineage. The females born into the lineage belong with their brothers in the category of lineage members, a grouping that derives from birthplace. These facts underscore the need to subject the category “woman” to further analysis and to privilege the categories and interpretations of these African societies.

These African examples present several challenges to the unwarranted universalisms of feminist gender discourses. From the cases presented, it becomes obvious that these African social categories are fluid. They do not rest on body type, and positioning is highly situational. Furthermore, the idiom of marriage that is used for social classification is often not primarily about gender, as feminist interpretations of family ideology and organization would suggest. Elsewhere I have argued that the marriage/family idiom in many African cultures is a way of describing patron/client relationships that have little to do with the nature of human bodies. Analysis and interpretations of Africa must start with Africa. Meanings and interpretation should derive from social organization and social relations paying close attention to specific cultural and local contexts.

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