

# Review

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Marjorie Keniston McIntosh. 2009. *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana: Indiana University Press

*Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change* provides a detailed historical documentation of the multiple productive and reproductive roles that women in various parts of Yorubaland performed, both during and after colonialism. McIntosh has carefully researched their organisations, activities and actions in various social, political, religious and economic sectors, while also attending to their multiple roles and responsibilities as daughters, mothers, wives, sisters and in-laws.

McIntosh divides the book into three major historical periods: the period preceding the imposition of British rule (1820–1893), the colonial period (1893–1960), and the period following the end of British rule in 1960. This is an ambitious project to undertake, as the Yoruba exhibit multiple cultural variations even within a single period. McIntosh does an admirable job of analysing and explaining the important roles women played in all periods. Once again, we see the complexity and richness of women in Yorubaland – from market women to farmers, to priestesses to teachers, nurses and midwives. As such, her study provides a valuable counterpoint to a prevailing discourse on African women that centres on their marginalisation and victimhood. The women McIntosh describes are agents and architects of their lives and livelihoods. Furthermore, the sheer variety of their lives illustrates the complexities of gender roles that change over time and are profoundly inflected by class, marital status, educational background, membership of organisations, and religious affiliation. McIntosh is careful to point out that she is using the term Yoruba to refer to “people who speak any language or dialect within the Yoruba linguistic family” (7), noting that there are marked regional differences.

She observes women’s adeptness at taking full advantage of whatever educational opportunities became available, in the face of the prevailing

gender inequalities. Women were hampered by colonial racism that saw inferior, subordinate educational opportunities being offered to women. This was in keeping with the European belief that African women were only worthy of vocational education, as there was no room for other roles for them in the colonial administration, economy, or the wider society they envisaged. Despite this legacy, girls and women found greater educational opportunities both in Nigeria and abroad towards the end of the colonial era, even though this was still gender-based and directed them into them into “suitable” careers – in nursing, midwifery and teaching.

McIntosh argues that because Yoruba women could and did make decisions concerning their lives and the lives of others, they exercised agency. In other words, they had power and control and although the colonial experience constrained this in many ways, women were determined to circumvent the system for their own economic and social gain. This was particularly evident in her discussion of the role of missionaries’ attempts to introduce Anglo-European Victorian values and attitudes. Yoruba women thus faced multiple demands as they were expected to trade to earn money to support themselves and their children, but they were also to work on their farm plots, as well as on those of their husband’s family. They were in no position to withdraw into domesticity, but had to remain active in various economic sectors, continuing to engage in everything from trading to weaving, to dying cloth, to cooking and selling food. In addition, they rejected the missionaries’ views that women should not play a visible and active role in the church. When it was evident that their roles would be diminished or eliminated in churches, they, along with men, formed breakaway African churches.

McIntosh sets out to examine whether there were aspects of colonialism that served to advance the security and social status of Yoruba women. She does this by examining court cases and court decisions, especially as they pertained to marriage, divorce, child custody, and widow inheritance. There is good evidence that both women and men in Nigeria used different aspects of colonialism to advance their social and economic agendas. McIntosh examines cases in which women took it upon themselves to sue their husbands for divorce, child custody and maintenance, reading these as demonstrations of individual agency rather than through a human rights framework. At the same time, men reverted to the Native Courts to demand return of the dowry, or to retain custody of the children of their marriages.

McIntosh analyses the agency of women in the section that addresses

economic organisations and protests. She describes a number of organisations (market associations) from the 19th century into colonialism that women established and ran based on particular commodities such as cloth, poultry, beads, pots and pans, and fish. There were also market associations which represented women who engaged in crafts and services. Women voted to elect the leaders of the associations and they were “responsible for the overall supervision and maintenance of the market, and they resolved disagreements between people in various sections of the market and acted as guardians of the women and their children” (227). This was not the practice throughout Yorubaland as men and male officials continued to make important decisions. In terms of the women establishing and participating in the market associations, McIntosh does not reveal their religious affiliations until she addresses the connection between the economic organisations and the protest mounted by Muslim market women in Lagos during the 1930s and 1940s. She explains the difficulty of Christian and Muslim women building a coalition because although they “were Yoruba women, they were divided into two groups: a large number of market sellers, the majority of whom were Muslim and had gone through no more than primary school; and a much smaller number of well-educated Christian women” (231). She explains how the educated elite women supported the concerns of the Muslim market women, including around additional taxes and higher rents for their market stalls. During the 1930s and 1940s, Muslim and Christian women cooperated against the imposition of additional taxes and their lack of representation in local government. Although Christian women’s associations did not enter into formal alliances with the Muslim market women’s associations until 1957, the differences in educational and class backgrounds did not prevent them working together on colonial policies which they believed undermined the economic interests of women.

However, all was not well in Yorubaland when it came to women who were enslaved or pawned. McIntosh explains how people who were enslaved or pawned could not be compared to those from Nigeria and other parts of the continent who ended up on slave plantations in the Americas. It is not important to delve into this issue in the review. However, it is notable to point out that Yoruba women were gaining and exercising agency and status through other women and men who were less fortunate, poorer, or less industrious, or women who were married to men who agreed to exchange them for monetary gain. The enslaved or pawned women’s labour was available to the woman

but also to her husband. Through the use of this labour, the household could also be enriched through reproduction, especially when the enslaved or pawned person married into the household. McIntosh also discusses women gaining agency through the labour of their co-wives, usually younger ones. The presence of a co-wife allowed older or first wives to engage in trading and other economic activities as they could stay away from home longer, engage in long-distance travel, and have another person responsible for the day-to-day running of the household. This situation benefitted the women who had the upper hand and resistance to it is evident in the number of women who fled from marriages, enslavement, and pawnship when the opportunity presented itself.

Some women were able to gain status and agency after accumulating wealth, titles, as well as relatives and others who were dependent on them. Again, the dependants, like the enslaved and pawned, could be men and women, boys and girls. It is not the reviewer's intent to claim that males were treated better under these arrangements. Yet, it is to point out that while women in Yorubaland were able to establish and maintain agency within a patriarchal system before, during, and after colonialism, this was often at the expense of other women who lacked similar resources, status and education.

McIntosh's emphasis on gender and how women exercised agency before colonialism contradicts the arguments made in Oyeronke Oyewumi's important book *The Invention of Women: Making of an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse* (1997). Oyewumi, unlike McIntosh, argues that gender is a western construct and was not found in Yoruba society. She demonstrates this by illustrating the lack of gender distinctions in the Yoruba language before the Atlantic slave trade and the imposition of colonial rule. She further argues that gender is not the important marker for social status. In other words, women were not automatically inferior to men as a result of patriarchy, but rather, social standing was based on seniority for both men and women. This allowed women to obtain power in their own right as senior sisters, wives, and in-laws. In sum, according to Oyewumi, the very concept or category of woman did not exist.

Nevertheless, there were clear duties that only women performed – cleaning, preparing food, and providing child care. These duties may not have left women in an inferior position, but they had to be fulfilled before all others. For those women who had resources, regardless of seniority, these could be delegated to other women, demonstrating power relations among

women that were not based solely on seniority. An older woman could be pawned or enslaved and a junior wife could control her labour. In this context, it becomes important to question whether widowed older women without children, grandchildren, property or status were better off than a junior wife who had a husband and children? Was an educated, professional, younger woman better off than an older woman who lacked property, dependents and titles?

From the McIntosh book, it appears that seniority was important, but it did not solely confer status on women or allow women to have agency. They needed resources in the form of money, dependents, land, and other property. It appears that no single category should trump the other – analysis of seniority should not trump gender or class, but rather, all three and others need to be fully analysed in order for us to get a better understanding on women's agency in Yorubaland and Africa.

The main disagreement I have with McIntosh is over the issue of agency. While it is very important for women to have it and to exercise it, obtaining it and exercising it at the expense of other women – the use of pawns, slaves, and junior wives to obtain economic enrichment – warrants some attention. I believe that McIntosh should have placed greater emphasis on these unequal relationships.

This book is recommended for courses in African women's history, African history, and Gender and Women's Studies courses. It is well-researched and documented and it covers a span of history that is invaluable to the broader understanding of Nigeria in general and the Yoruba in particular before, during, and after colonial rule. The book is well-written and organised and would interest readers who are new to African studies or African women's history.

## References

Oyewumi, O. 1997. *The Invention of Women: Making Sense of Western Gender Discourse*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.