

## Conversation

### **Desiree Lewis talks to Molara Ogundipe, leading feminist theorist, poet, literary critic, educator and activist, about the interface of politics, culture and education.**

**Desiree Lewis:** You grew up in a context where "gender politics" was not named as such and where, relatively speaking, the climate that currently supports radical women's writing and actions did not exist. How did your informal educational experiences affect your consciousness and politics?

**Molara Ogundipe:** We must remember that there were radical outlets for women in indigenous African cultures, and in our colonised societies, contact with Europe brought with it the inheritance of European movements and social concerns. So there were inheritors of the British suffragette movement in Nigeria, while my mother, a teacher's college professor, was a practitioner of many of the radical ideas of the Victorian period about women. My perceptions of gender hierarchies were sharp growing up. I was raised with a male sibling as well as female and male wards living with my mother. I was much of a tomboy then. I did not have any important position in my nuclear family of five children, meaning I was neither first nor last boy or girl. No position! I could also see that boys had advantages, even though my progressive mother made all the boys in her house, including my other brothers, do housework. They learned to sew, knit and embroider! She also made us share the housework with the house help or servants. She said her children could not grow up spoiled while others learnt to be effective and efficient. So from very young I had a healthy attitude towards class differences, having been raised to respect everybody in the work they did.

Gender hierarchies were so sharp for me that I always wondered as a pre-teen whether marriage was a good idea. Many folktales and other forms of informal educational modes existed to help prepare women for accepting male dominance in marriage. I saw marriage in the Christian world I was in as restrictive, though my mother was a suffragette, if there was any such thing. I say "Christian" world because I could also see that women in the local, un-Westernised society around us had different values and freedoms. Within Yoruba marriage, the woman was culturally expected to defer to the husband. Yet Christian marriage restricted Yoruba women of my mother's generation in an unusual way (dress, freedom of movement, association, and gainful work outside the home beyond the financial control of the husband). There were dignifying and structurally important roles for women in Yoruba culture, even within its patriarchal assumptions, and some would say, androgynous cultural practices and cosmology of the Yoruba, expressed in the philosophical fount to the culture that Ifa Divination Poetry with its thousands of verses. One argument is that women were weighted equally with men as human beings, but had to defer to men in certain contexts, while men deferred in others.

**DL:** That is fascinating. How was this reflected in your family?

**MO:** My mother took her place very firmly as a leader in many structures, though in the family, she conceded first place to my father ceremoniously. She acted in perfect polite etiquette to my father. He was the titular (but mild, witty, and very playful) head of the home, though the family finances and other responsibilities were taken care of by both of them. Her politics can be described in terms of her commitment to the emancipation of women within a patriarchal context, not feminist as such. Unlike my mother, many Yoruba women accepted the domestication of women introduced by Christian and British Victorian ideals, because the acculturation came with literacy, other skills, and opportunities that the women wanted for historical reasons. The usual view of the Yoruba people is that if people write somewhere, then they, the Yoruba, must also write - generally do other exploratory things done in the world such as travel, trade, make, use or devise guns, books, or electronic gadgets, etc. This attitude explains much of Nigerian behaviour and values today. The Yoruba, like many other Africans, believe in widening their cultural treasure house with new knowledges, new

experiences. Yoruba civilisation has always been expansive and accommodating. You will find many foreign words from other languages such as Hausa and Arabic in addition to European or Asian languages in Yoruba; you will find Islamic references in Ifa, and so forth. I suppose that is one of the reasons the culture has survived well in the diaspora, in Cuba and Brazil, for instance, where the captive Africans were not separated or too isolated one from the other. Like English, Yoruba has gained one of its strengths through absorbing. Borrowing by the Yoruba is not a weak-minded imitateness; it is seen as the nature of humanity, I guess.

Within Yoruba philosophy, the belief that one must know what is going on in the world is highly valued; one must "have one's eyes widened" - a translation of the Yoruba word for "civilisation". Translated literally, "ilaju" in Yoruba means "the widening of eyes", while "civilisation" is from the Latin "civis" meaning "city". Living in cities was a definition of civilisation for the Romans and the borrowers of their culture and ideas, but not for the Yoruba, who also lived in cities. They were one of the African peoples who lived in cities and towns, not only villages, before the coming of the Europeans. All this leads to the point that we need to define "radical" for this conversation and discourse.

**DL:** Yes, I'm interested in your raising the issue of what kind of radicalism you were influenced by...

**MO:** Are you using the term in the senses attributed to it since the 1960s' American women's movement or in the leftist political sense? I am applying it myself in its etymological sense: radical from radix (Latin for "root"). In that sense, being anti-colonial and reclaimant of our African/Nigerian heritage/roots was radical, trying to change something from the roots or dealing with deeply rooted issues. I was fortunate to be the child of educators, missionaries within Nigeria who set up schools in many places at the same time that they planted churches. Our school, named the Swedenborg Memorial School, also had a radical curriculum that included African history (and this in the forties!) and compulsory education in the local language till the fourth year of primary school. My father was a bit of a radical himself, at least a theological radical, for he raised us as Swedenborgians in those days. My father was one of those old-time intellectuals who sought new explanations of and solutions to human experience. So imagine me growing up as a Swedenborgian in rural Nigeria! I plan to write about that elsewhere. Emmanuel Swedenborg, you will recall, influenced William Blake. Swedenborg believed that there were several levels of heaven and the highest was called Celestial. And that was the realm that the blacks of the world or Africans inhabited. That attracted my father who was born in 1896. Swedenborg also had a special doctrine of the Trinity.

My father's generation and those before his, though Christian, resented the construction of Africans as "savages", "heathens", etc. who had no idea of God before the coming of the Europeans. These generations and a few thereafter put a lot of energy into retrieving the African world, like many South African educees of the early period of colonial encounter, such as Solomon Plaatje before my father's generation, and later, the founders of the ANC in South Africa, for instance. My parents' generation consisted of nationalists that saw themselves as cultural pioneers who would take over politically from the British. They were consequently more committed to retrieving African cultures by teaching our languages, history, and culture than Nigerians today, in my opinion. Generations today that run the country seem to be more committed to becoming Westernised or globalised for the job market, to the extent of producing or raising children who neither know their own histories nor speak their own languages. For decades after independence in the 1960s, however, many African scholars did much for the teaching of history, but I gather that now in some countries, following experiences with the IMF, the teaching of history has been interdicted! To be radical then when I was growing up was to be anti-colonial and to be committed to

knowing our way of doing things, our view of the world.

My perceptions of gender hierarchies as a young girl were such that I always tried and succeeded at beating the boys at whatever they did. I discuss that in an interview in *In their Own Voices*[1]. An interesting point regarding that, however, is that Yoruba culture loves and respects women who are smart and effective at whatever they do. Ours is a culture that privileges knowledge - as Henry Drewal, that perceptive student and professor of African culture insightfully perceived and centralised in his analyses. In Yoruba culture, which values knowledge over and above everything else - including money and material wealth, considered (through proverbs and philosophical sayings) to have far less importance than people, a girl who appeared mentally gifted was hallowed, praised and pampered - as in my "oriki" (praise name): Ayinke. That reception was always mine in school at every level in Nigeria. When you combine that with not being bad-looking, men give you royal treatment. However, gender issues arise over your choice of men. Very often too, Nigerian men, like most men of the world, are scared of intelligent women as they also are of educated ones. One colleague of mine said that having a wife with an MA was good, but having one with a PhD was "overdoing" it. That was in the 70s and 80s; now that there is a rash of female PhDs in Nigeria, I wonder if the attitude has changed.

Choosing a black Jamaican mathematician, Sorbonne-trained and Francophile but with some American acculturation, as my husband (now ex-) lost me many of my national male fan club! Some of us do not just theorise the African diaspora. We lived it intimately! I gathered much later that my action was seen as a slap in the face of all Nigerian men, even though I was not aware of their interests, nor were they expressed to me by these offended men - not to a woman who made a first class honours degree from the University of London, I guess. Never mind that this man loved Africa as much as any of us and was more intellectually informed about her than most nationals. Never mind that my ex-husband was also from a Garveyite family that had espoused and lived the tenets of going back to Africa. He carried on the tradition of returning to Africa and being committed to African reconstructions. I met him on the campus of the University of Ibadan, where he had "come back" to work and settle. He was actually personally very popular on the campus for his strong identification with Africa and Africans, which was expressed politically and professionally. He was a personal friend of Cheik Anta Diop in a circle of African and African-American scholars and artists in Paris in the fifties and sixties. This circle included Richard Wright and Chester Himes. While Leslie was not close to James Baldwin, he was to Cheik Anta Diop, whom he used to meet at the Caf   de Tournon in Paris in the summers. Those were days before Diop was acclaimed, when he was still working alone as a very brave, persecuted but very determined intellectual.

There were hidden cultural issues with some of my homeboys: the seeming betrayal of Yoruba men and culture, a failure to produce children who were totally Yoruba in culture and genes (however that is conceptualised and ascertained). There were nationalist issues: the imputed betrayal of Nigeria as a nation by my marital choice, including my removal from my home milieu to a West Indian island far across the seas or to the United States, to far-off lands where strange people live. That was in the sixties. Today, political developments leading to the brain drain have turned Nigerians into international migrant labourers and denizens of places such as Greenland, Sri Lanka or the Fiji Islands that are remote from Nigeria. Few think that way today about a woman's absence, but then, and maybe still now, a woman was supposed to contribute to her cultural group by producing children within the group to guarantee the survival of the group as species, I suppose. Among the Benin in Nigeria, as with some other African peoples, women who do not have children are buried outside the confines of the city or village, for they are considered not to have contributed to the biological life of the group.

**DL:** You are raising issues at the centre of many debates about the status of women in relation to pre-colonial Africa. Can you comment on your experiences in relation to this?

**MO:** Yes indeed. I shall come back to the question of the status of women in pre-colonial Africa. Mainly, however, without delving too deeply, women are frequently the source of contests between individual men or groups of them. I would not say as possessions as some anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss or Gayle Rubin theorise. At least, not among the Yoruba where you have condemnatory proverbs about a woman who lets herself be mixed up or packed up with her husband's property. Still, the drama of men fighting over women emotionally or otherwise can be extreme. One of the strongest of men's emotions regarding me was that their national jewel not be defaced, or something to that effect. Yet such drama is not confined to Africa; each human group wants to maintain its own integrity and keep its own members, leading to the expression of many virulent human emotions.

Nonetheless, to be fair, there were also very positive emotions involved, such as the men of one group defending the interests of a particular woman as a member of their group, for instance. Yoruba men ganging up against a foreigner messing with a woman of their nationality. But I want to stress that women are valued as people by many men in parts of Africa, not just as personal stock or animals and owned things, as the stereotyping of Africa goes.

The topic of women's statuses in pre-colonial Africa is extremely vast. Nonetheless I would like to say, as I have said in many places elsewhere, that women's status in Africa should not be judged only by their status in marriage. In the cultures above in which women were excluded in burial for not having children, women also had other high and important roles in their societies. So when we look at a structure such as marriage, we must not generalise about the findings there to form conclusions about other structures within the same society such as government, political structures or even structures such as siblinghood, the birth family, lineages or seniority systems. Very importantly, we need to bear in mind that one woman had different statuses as her life progressed. We therefore also need to do diachronic studies of the women we talk about. A woman, named Y for instance, can be a girl-child who then goes through puberty, becomes a wife but is also a sister, an aunt, a trader or house help who could become a chief in later life as her life progresses as she ages. She can proceed to be an elder, a family leader, a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, a prophetess and seer at her church and a relatively well-to-do woman. How do we measure the gender oppression of such a woman in her society? We need to move away from the dichotomous evaluation of the woman's identity in diametrical opposition to a man's that occurs in Western studies. We need more refined and perceptive analytical tools.

We must also not forget that marriage could concomitantly be oppressive to men in pre-colonial Africa. Not all men wanted to marry many women, could afford to, or wanted to marry them. They did so to observe the priorities of political and kinship politics. Not all the men at all times wanted to have the responsibility of sleeping with all the women willy-nilly and by a home calendar. Some of the men also had preferences. Moreover, men often had to take up many tasks and duties, financial and otherwise, in order to have their women. This now standard position of seeing African women as sole victims, a view perhaps inherited from foreign and missionary perspectives, clouds our perceptions of women in pre-colonial Africa. In a systemic analysis, we can also see points of oppression for men, points that our men cleverly often try to change to their own benefit. What we must confront is that our men usually want to move into the future by using what is advantageous to them in pre-colonial cultures while wishing that women stay in the past. Women are expected to be bound by negative cultural formulations while men move into modernity without the tasks and duties of their cultural pasts. To demonstrate the usual opportunistic attitude towards the past, consider for instance men's opposition to polygamy when women mobilised in South Africa to

render legal all the women of such unions! Culture was quickly dropped when it hurt their pockets or pay-checks!

Marriage in my nuclear upper middle-class family dramatised for me many cultural and personal gender problems. For one thing, the wife loses all or much of the support systems that are built into the African family systems. Marriage also sharpened my awareness of women's subordination to a spear point. I discovered that the Yoruba woman had more private and public spaces and respected roles than pre-feminist American middle-class women. They needed Betty Friedan; we already had the right to work outside the home and secure our material needs. I was moved from the context of female assertiveness that I was raised to express to realise that there was an undeniable need for feminist re-constructions and transformations of family patterns and society. This meant recognising the ways in which we, African women, were ahead through our cultures, and condemning the poisonous aspects of borrowed cultures, including the belittling parts of our own inherited cultures. I am referring particularly to the status and roles of West African women in general. These were diverse and relatively high, and included the positive valuations of African women by our men outside marriage. I was also concerned with the erosion of the foregoing and the limitations introduced by modern nuclear families in Nigeria, which are governed by a mish-mash of Western, Islamic and indigenous family laws. We need to notice that chosen "traditional" family patterns are often those that support the new patriarchies.

My politics was also affected by my encounter with scholars and teachers who were either Africans in Africa, Europeans, and American-educated Africans or scholars and friends who came from other countries with different intellectual traditions, that were neither British nor European. I had been educated within the British traditions of knowledge as an overlay to my Yoruba traditions. It has been said that life in the United States radicalises, for it brings the non-American into contact with the nakedness of everything - capitalism, racism, the domestication of middle-class women, the worship of money, the iconisation of men as indestructible and pugnacious (the Marlborough man!), extreme individualism that distorts the beautiful values of human rights, provincialism and extreme parochialism. All this in the midst of abundant information, material wealth, and so on. The encounter with American-educated scholars has always had a radicalising effect on Africans for they came from people-oriented cultures (before the post-independence and post-IMF monetary devaluations, massacres, the militarisation of the continent, the introduction of pandemics, the politics of poverty and so forth). You will recall that many of our most redoubtable (at the beginning) anti-colonial politicians in Nigeria, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, were American-educated, challenging our British idiosyncrasies and shibboleths, and speaking from the traditions of the French revolution, and before it, the American one. The ideas of republicanism, the sacredness of the individual and democracy derived from the human rights ideals of Native Americans, in particular the Iroquois nations living around New York. Remember that the Pilgrim Fathers and other immigrant Americans were fleeing oppressive monarchies in Europe where those ideals were nowhere to be found. Meeting with American-educated intellectuals can be said to have affected my politics, which was cultural nationalist when I was a young woman. I also encountered ideas globally, from east and west, in my education, travels and reading. I was at one time a student of Oriental spirituality.

Most men do not like women concerned with social transformations that shake the roots of their male dominance. As a colleague of mine said to me at Ibadan University: "No man wants a revolution in his kitchen". This was in the eighties, and a female college professor's space was still considered to be the kitchen. The speaker himself was married to a doctor! In the AASA world (Africa, Asia, and South America) however, our discourse about this professor and his doctor wife must be influenced by the existence of house help and servants, and how that fact intervenes in gender roles in the home and interrogates the class

drama between a woman and her domestic servants.

**DL:** You have named yourself as a Stiwaniist in your book, *Recreating Ourselves*.<sup>[2]</sup> What does the naming mean? What does it imply about your educational and political influences, and your intellectual and political priorities?

**MO:** I have named myself as a Stiwaniist to pinpoint my position within feminisms, which I define as a cluster of ideologies or as movements for gender equity and democracy. In that essay, I advocated that we needed always to speak of feminisms rather than "feminism", since there were so many perspectives and differing social needs that we needed to articulate and address. Stiwaniism or Stiwaniist comes from the acronym STIWA - Social Transformations in Africa Including Women. The reason for the acronym was to move us away from defining feminism and feminisms in relation to Euro-America or elsewhere, and from declaiming loyalties or disloyalties. I felt that as concerned African women we needed to focus on our areas of concern, socially and geographically. I am concerned with critical and social transformations of a positive nature in Africa, positive meaning, "being concerned with everything that maximises the quality of life of Africans and their potentials too". At that time, when I introduced the word, I was trying to take our discourses away from arguments about being or not being Westernised and imitative.

The implication of that title seems self-evident - that my analysis of gender problems is systemic, that we needed to transform the continent structurally within states and within families, and that this historical activity should happen with the collaboration of both men and women. Some critics felt that the term was not strong enough. But I am not about adversarial relations with men or about men hating. We give birth to men, we raise them too (sometimes and unfortunately to oppress other women), we marry them and are related by blood to them, so it would be pointless or sick to hate them. I am saying that we are indissolubly linked with men; therefore, we have to work out ways of co-existing harmoniously and effectively, if not joyously, with them.

My educational and political influences were originally in the humanist, rationalist, and liberal traditions of Europe. Some scholars, including feminists, have identified these traditions as post-European Enlightenment. I was also reared on foundational Yoruba ideas about the centrality of knowledge, parity in social value between the sexes, and a functional gender democracy emblematised in proverbs such as: "If a man finds a snake and a woman kills it, (it does not matter) as long as the snake is dead." My political priorities concern the salvaging of Africa from all that has befallen her, and the corrections of the negative aspects of our indigenous cultures without necessarily using Europe as a model. For me, social ideas should emerge from a consciousness that thinks of what is beneficial to a human being as a person, not because the ideas occurred or are practiced in Europe or America. We need to overcome our endemic inferiority complex towards Europe and things "white," successfully implanted since our colonial education and through its curricula. We should think from our epicentres of agency, looking for what is meaningful, progressive and useful to us as Africans, as we enrich ourselves with forerunning ideas from all over the world including Europe and America. We should borrow in dignity, as did our forefathers and foremothers before the 1400s, that is, before the commencement of the Atlantic slave trade and its consequent theorisation of the inferiority of people of African origin.

**DL:** What challenges have you faced as a feminist in Nigeria? Can you speak a bit about your experiences at Ogun State University and the University of Ibadan?

**MO:** Ah me, what challenges indeed! When I began talking and writing feminism in the late sixties and seventies, I was seen as a good and admirable girl who had gone astray, a woman "whose head has been spoilt by too much learning". One of my male friends used to

laugh about me as someone who has climbed a tree beyond the highest leaf or beyond its leaves, to translate a Yoruba metaphor. And that is the current attitude towards feminist women all over Africa. Women can be popular and admired by most men until they begin to talk gender equality, and then you hear that no man wants a revolution in his kitchen! Even progressive and politically leftist men could not accept ideas of feminism. A renowned Marxist colleague and friend said: "And why should we?" He said men were not going to help women undermine men's gains within patriarchy.

Some leftist men had a nodding agreement with ideas of feminism, but could not practice them in everyday life, which led to my essay in *Recreating Ourselves on African Marxists*. In the Nigeria of the seventies, feminism was a new phenomenon. I was very isolated, because Nigerian women's movements were still working within the parameters of emancipation within an assumed and accepted patriarchal paradigm. I was teaching again after the sixties at the University of Ibadan, from 1973, before I went to chair the English Department at Ogun State University in 1983. The reaction towards feminism was often derisive and condemnatory. So strong were beliefs in the status quo that most of the scholars, including women, chose to ignore, undermine or dissociate from feminism. Scholarship in the area was not respected because of the inability to see it as a legitimate discipline. Prejudices were expressed in questions such as: Could the study of women be done, if at all, within literary criticism or sociology? Could feminist papers be evaluated and rewarded in academic terms? Could one obtain academic leave to attend feminist conferences or gatherings? At the time, these questions indicated major problems one could have with male sexist heads of departments. Now everyone has joined the bandwagon; men are now rushing into the field of feminist and gender studies, without studying or valuing the preceding works of women scholars, of course. Now the new deal is to teach women's literature and write about women as THE experts.

Ogun State was a new university concept modeled after the American land-grant universities. Ogun State had the vision to make every student undergo African studies and study agriculture, so they would be self-reliant. All students were bused out from campus to engage in farming in its theory and practice. In that exciting pioneer situation of building something new, it was easier for me to institute feminist ideas, actions, and working groups. Despite the dismay of the conservatives at that university, I was able to have some feminist impact on campus, particularly in the area of sexual harassment. We also tried to change the conditions of service for women in a positive way. It is interesting how many men did not wish to share marital responsibilities with women within their marriages, so that they could keep their male dominance. But that was in the eighties. Since then, political and national changes, including the devaluation of life in Nigeria following the IMF structural adjustment programmes, have led to the restructuring of roles within the family and within marriage. Women's contributions are now more publicly acknowledged and utilised.

**DL:** What led to your role as a founding member of both Women in Nigeria (WIN) and the continental network Association of African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD)?

**MO:** I was a founding member of AAWORD before I was a founding member of WIN. The experience of the one helped the other. For instance, we insisted and started with the democratisation of the structure of the group to pre-empt personal careerism or image building among officers. The need to have a more progressive and ideologically feminist movement than existed in Nigeria at the time led to my exertions with the founding of WIN. We at first received a lot of flak, and were stigmatised as crazy, trouser-wearing women with no husbands.

It was necessary at the time to change the discourse of women-in-development and the idea

of women being helped to rise by men - being permitted to live, so to speak. We needed a socio-structural and economic analysis of the sources of women's oppressions and rational analyses of the myths, traditions, and accepted ideas surrounding or undergirding the subordination of women. WIN came in time to do that. Ironically, WIN became one of the most respected of the women's groups - to the point of being threatened with co-optation by the government in the nineties.

Founding AAWORD, earlier in 1977, gave us an early run-in with issues of identity, nationalisms and cultures, which later feminists in Africa had to confront and resolve. As the idea of AAWORD was first tabled at a conference at Wellesley College in the US, women of colour from Africa's diaspora were there. Some African women thought at the time that a continent-wide association was impossible, but we did it! African-American women were also founding actors and members, for example, Niara Sudarkasa who later became President of Lincoln University. The founding African actors, including myself, have been named in my book, *Recreating Ourselves*. Somehow, some members from Francophone Africa wanted a geographically all-African membership. Perhaps it was an error we made, for later the need for diasporal organisations arose. The distances between the head office and the membership in AAWORD also permitted all kinds of administrative sleights of hand. That is a fact from which we can all learn.

We had to define Africa as including the whole continent, which has undergone political, economic and cultural interactions, mergers and fusions for centuries. We rejected the concept of "sub-Saharan Africa" as foreign and divisive, if not even more mischievous. Then we also had to define being African. Would we include settlers (a hated term, but historically correct, in parts of Southern Africa), foreign nationals married to Africans, and naturalised Africans? We had, after all, included Arab women whose ancestors were settlers from the seventh century. These are issues that are being raised in your country, as I witnessed when I was living in South Africa in 1997 and 1998. Your whole country has had to deal with the issue of what constitutes "African-ness" in South Africa.

My experiences in AAWORD prepared me for playing leadership, conceptual and administrative roles in WIN. I was also a state representative within WIN, giving lectures, keynote addresses, participating in our annual conferences, and writing the foreword to the document we presented at the UN World Conference on Women in Kenya in 1985. At that time, the Nigerian government was not pro-women and its delegation was full of male civil servants! Since the appropriation of all women's movements by soldiers' wives from 1985, and First Ladyism in Nigeria and Ghana, and perhaps among other African countries, the government in Nigeria has somehow been forced to act more and publicly in the area of women's development as well as make oral and other fitful administrative gestures nationally. WIN was appropriated by the government in the days of the military as rulers in Nigeria. Our male members also played power games, while, I think, WIN itself became less ideologically clear. Nonetheless, WIN was (and still is) recognised as an association of vibrant, educated, and politically aware or politically sophisticated women who could articulate women's needs, which, unfortunately, could then be sanguinely manipulated by the powers that be, once they realised what these needs were.

Yet, however much we mock the opportunism of it all in the days of the military, that period led to the popularisation of women's issues and the creation of national awareness. The whole nation came to an acceptance of the existence of women's unhappiness and demands; the whole nation realised that there was an "issue of women". The soldiers and their wives dramatised it through programmes, rallies, public speeches, if nothing else. This has led to the arguably cynical growth of the industry of NGOs among some women. Moreover, since the public acknowledgement of women's issues in Nigeria, there has also been the usual African occurrence in which men take over or try to take over the fates of the

movements and their discourses while pretending to work for the women. Men take over our anguish (and the jobs that flow from it!) without understanding its sources or its nature; some even wish to tell us what to feel and what to demand. Again, it all boils down to the issue of power and its control.

**DL:** You have spoken and written about the importance of African women's knowledge production in different forms. I am thinking here of ideas raised a while ago - your seminal article, "The Female Writer and her Commitment" [3] and your more recent views about pre-colonial orature in a paper you presented at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) Symposium in 2002. [4] How has this knowledge influenced your own writing and teaching?

**MO:** I was raised with the awareness that women were deemed intelligent in West Africa at least, (and I am sure in other parts of Africa) and among the Yoruba in particular. I also knew that women were part of the knowledge systems of the Yoruba, also administratively as in the Ogboni among the Egbas (Abeokuta) and the Erelu in Ijebuland. You also find women in important traditional governmental roles among the Oyo as described in the History of the Yoruba by Samuel Johnson, that I read when I was about thirteen in our home library. Women were also part of many ritual systems and had medicinal and other scientific knowledges. In addition, women contributed to technology such as metallurgy through their work as blacksmiths and with other metals. One of our family wives has that knowledge. Our African cults and secret societies, despised by foreign religions and Western education, were really archives or sites of indigenous systems. The Yoruba, through their cults, for instance, had a germ theory of disease well before Louis Pasteur. They were culturing the smallpox bacillus before the advent of the Europeans in the Obaluaye cult, for instance. The historian, Winthrop Jordan, in his book, *White Over Black*, writes that an African slave passed this knowledge on to Americans on a slave plantation. The Yoruba understood electricity, among other scientific knowledges, for they used electricity politically to set ablaze the homes of opponents. It was politically important to our colonisers, therefore, to destroy African cults and secret societies because they were sites of indigenous knowledges as well as resistance.

The Yoruba Ifa divination system, with its over 4000 verses of accumulated group knowledges, history and mythologisation of experience, included women among its practitioners, as it also acknowledged women and divined the female principle. It is well known that every babalawo worth his salt (priest of Ifa or "father of mysteries" in a literal translation) had to have a woman (a "mother" in the sense of "powerful female being who upholds the world") of knowledge backing him up as his resource person. This woman or "mother" is sometimes translated into "witch" in Yoruba everyday speech or English. But the idea of "witch" means a woman who possesses indigenous knowledges and mysterious powers. This kind of female being is not limited to the Yoruba. Later reading and research revealed for me the existence of such women in many African cultures, such as the Acholi in East Africa where women are the mediciners/medical practitioners, or among the Lovedu. The Rain Queen was not just a female husband to amuse anthropologists and latter-day tourists. She and her court controlled the scientific knowledge of her time, well before TV meteorologists - that is the study and control of the weather, including the making of rain.

In my college days, I encountered the tradition of women queens, the Sarranouia, in the Sahel, including my own Northern Nigeria, in her pre-Islamic days. In trying to research this in the 80s, I found resistance to the idea of a woman queen among some contemporary Northerners; yet history, oral and written, seems to confirm their existence in many ways. Queens Amina and Zaria are the most well known of the Hausa queens of Nigeria in a culture that privileged women before other intrusions. Perhaps not enough specific gender research has been done into how Islam, Christianity and colonial and external influences

affected such public and leadership roles of women. We need works that deal, not in passing but in focus, on examples such as the Lovedu queen-ship for instance, expatiated from a gender perspective. I would be happy to know that these works now exist.

I was saying at the CODESRIA symposium that African proverbs could be studied as social and philosophical vignettes of the cultures from which they emerge. Both men and women make proverbs, contrary to the mistaken view that women do not make proverbs. They are insightful analogies of human experience, wittily expressed in the best rhetorical forms of their contextual societies. It is not only "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed", in the words of Alexander Pope about wit, but also "what oft was observed or unobserved, and ne'er so well expressed". Proverbs indicate values as well as class and gender dynamics including other social realities of their contexts; they are also spoken from different perspectives. So the proverbs of the rich are sometimes different from those of the poor because their loyalties differ. An important caveat I would like to make in the use of proverbs for the study of women is this: Proverbs about women as wives do not articulate the position of all women in all roles and statuses for all time. Proverbs can also be historicised. Some scholars are making these mistakes.

The awareness of women's knowledge productions so early in my life, first of all, made me confident that I could do whatever I wanted to do. This was in addition to my mother's example, encouragement, and unflinching support even when I was a grown woman. Then this awareness prepared me for a maturation full of self-esteem and confidence - till I went to secondary school to be told by teachers of English nationality that Nigerian history began with Mungo Park. He was a "discoverer" like Cecil Rhodes, Speke, Stanley, and Livingstone and all such gentlemen whom we know so well. Then college history educated me out of this, after which, my own nationalism and anti-colonial research saved the day. The late fifties and sixties were also days of decolonised history, research, knowledge building and education in West Africa. Scholars like Basil Davidson in London, in addition to African historians such as Kenneth Dike, J. F. Ade Ajayi, Adu Boahen, including a naturalised African such as Abdullahi Smith, had a wide impact. Their books are still contributing to the retrieval of African achievements and civilisations. We need more black South Africans retrieving and writing on their own histories, as I found was necessary when I was studying the Xhosa and comparing them to the Yoruba.

My work, as a scholar, feminist, and intellectual in and from Africa is indissolubly tied to the teaching and reconstruction of self-esteem in Africa, in addition to whatever one can do to help save the continent from material extinction. Apart from the pandemics and starvation, the reported massacres are equally troubling. A Caribbean colleague of mine once worriedly asked me if we Africans ever think we could become extinct like some races we know, but never use as object lessons. Regarding self-esteem, no one needs this work more than African women, who have to work through the various overlays of historical distortion, religious influence, male manipulations of history, culture and traditions to reach a sense of themselves as women. The subjectivities of African women therefore concern me in their natures and constructions. I have done a book on this recently, which should be published soon. Part of its title is "Gender and Subjectivity".

**DL:** What has been the place of women's knowledge in dominant traditions of African knowledge and what would it mean to challenge existing canons of African knowledge production for students and in African educational institutions?

**MO:** African women's knowledge production is not much discussed or well known in the dominant and contemporary traditions of African knowledge. Whenever we say "women", the first thought that comes to most minds is children or cooking or satisfying men's sexual desires and other needs. Only a few scholars have explored the knowledge production of

women. The area needs to be researched and recorded and then generalised in the knowledge processes in our institutions. This is not to say that we need to restrict what I describe to African studies. The methodology should be used for everything we teach and learn; it should represent our attitude to the world, to existence, and whatever our minds touch. Women's knowledge production is an area waiting to be further "archaeologised", to use a Mudimbe term.

Challenging existing traditions of knowledge would involve thinking about Africa or any society for that matter, firstly and always as a double-gendered cosmos. Not a world of men with women in the kitchen, women who are not even remembered as being on the farms too. Not a world of men with women as an afterthought or an intellectual coda to the work and writings that we do. It is including this knowledge in our curricula through our conceptual universe, in the texts that we teach, and in our pedagogical practices. Such doing is even more important in Africa, where self-esteem is highly eroded in relation to other nations, where the predominance of religious fundamentalism is preventing many Africans, especially the young, from knowing much or anything outside their religions.

**DL:** Your work has consistently stressed the importance of exploring such areas as identity, culture and language in relation to gender. Why are these discussions especially important to gender research and education in Africa today? And, maybe even more importantly, why is there so often a need for feminists and gender researchers who write or teach in these areas to defend their fields of interest?

**MO:** From my answers above, the importance of expounding identity and culture for gender research and education in Africa is perhaps obvious. Language is a vehicle of culture. Therefore, it is very important for communications at various levels as well as for research and education. The complexities introduced into our cultural understandings of our identities by history, ethnicity and social stratifications are still in the process of being researched and elaborated. Identities, culture and language are complicated by internal and external forces and development, and by historical and social issues. How do we understand each other across classes in Africa, not to mention ethnicities, to create gender models? For instance, within gender, how do we handle or change the differences in role expectations in various classes and cultures? What are the norms and the accepted practice for which women are not socially punished? Women should also be involved with determining such norms and practices. In what linguistic terms do we speak to our spouses? How do we change centuries-old attitudes towards domestic violence that affected recently the deputy vice-president of Uganda, and women of the country could not unitedly and unreservedly condemn the practice? How do we transmit our cultures in the foreign languages in which we speak to our children of the middle and upper classes, children who no longer speak our mother tongues due to biographical accidents or conscious efforts to Westernise them? How do we transmit gender democracy through gender-oppressive religions? How do we run countries where the ruling classes speak different languages from the classes they claim to represent without translations? How then can gender education and administration be established in ways that thrive?

These are questions to which we need to return and consider. We could seek answers to them in our contemporary gender work, in particular through dissertations on gender. South Africa is breaking new ground in answering some of these questions, while many women's groups in Africa have confronted some of the challenges and proffered some solutions or are working on them. Values and social history inhere in language as culture. Exploring and explicating identities and culture, especially its products such as the arts, oral, written and electronic, are important modes of research and education in our work on gender.

It is even more important today than before the 80s for feminists and gender researchers

who work or teach literature, language and culture to defend their fields of interest. Now the term "post-feminist" is being used as if the needs of feminism had been met. Gender research and social work have become not only a fashion, but also an industry. Carpetbaggers are on board, and these are not only men. They include women. We have the opportunism of careerism or simply something similar to international cash crop production; only this time, it is not cocoa, rubber, or tea being sold to foreign interest groups; it is gender. We have women and men gender workers who are not interested in the slightest in social change or the reform of anything. They are there for the money, for the present going that is good in terms of various forms of personal interests. Consequently, a certain scepticism is often generated about the seriousness of gender work; sometimes it is a mild wonder whether or not gender research and education will constitute a trend that will pass away like anything else. Yes, change is all we know, but for those committed to improving the conditions of women, the phase must not be allowed to pass away without serious social and psychological gains for women. Of course it has to be ascertained whether gender research and education constitute simply a "field of interest" for such workers, or are intellectual tools to be applied to the amelioration of the concrete existences of women. Some might say we could have gender scholars who just ponder the field as a profession, while others are activists who try to effect change. We could have both types separately or in one person. Perhaps there should be spaces for these two kinds of cultural production. I am certain, however, that ultimately both types of gender work will be more useful if they produced personal and structural changes at the familial, national, and historical level for women.

## Footnotes

- [1] James, A. 1990. *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk*. London: Heinemann.
- [2] See the essay "Feminism in an African Context", in Ogundipe-Leslie, M. 1994. *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*. Trenton: Africa World Press
- [3] See Ogundipe-Leslie, M. 1986. "The Female Writer and her Commitment", in Jones, E. and Palmer, E. eds. *Women in African Literature Today*. London: Heinemann.
- [4] "African Women theorizing Gender and Subjectivity", paper presented at CODESRIA symposium on African Gender Research in the New Millennium: Perspectives, Directions and Challenges", 7-10 April 2002.

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