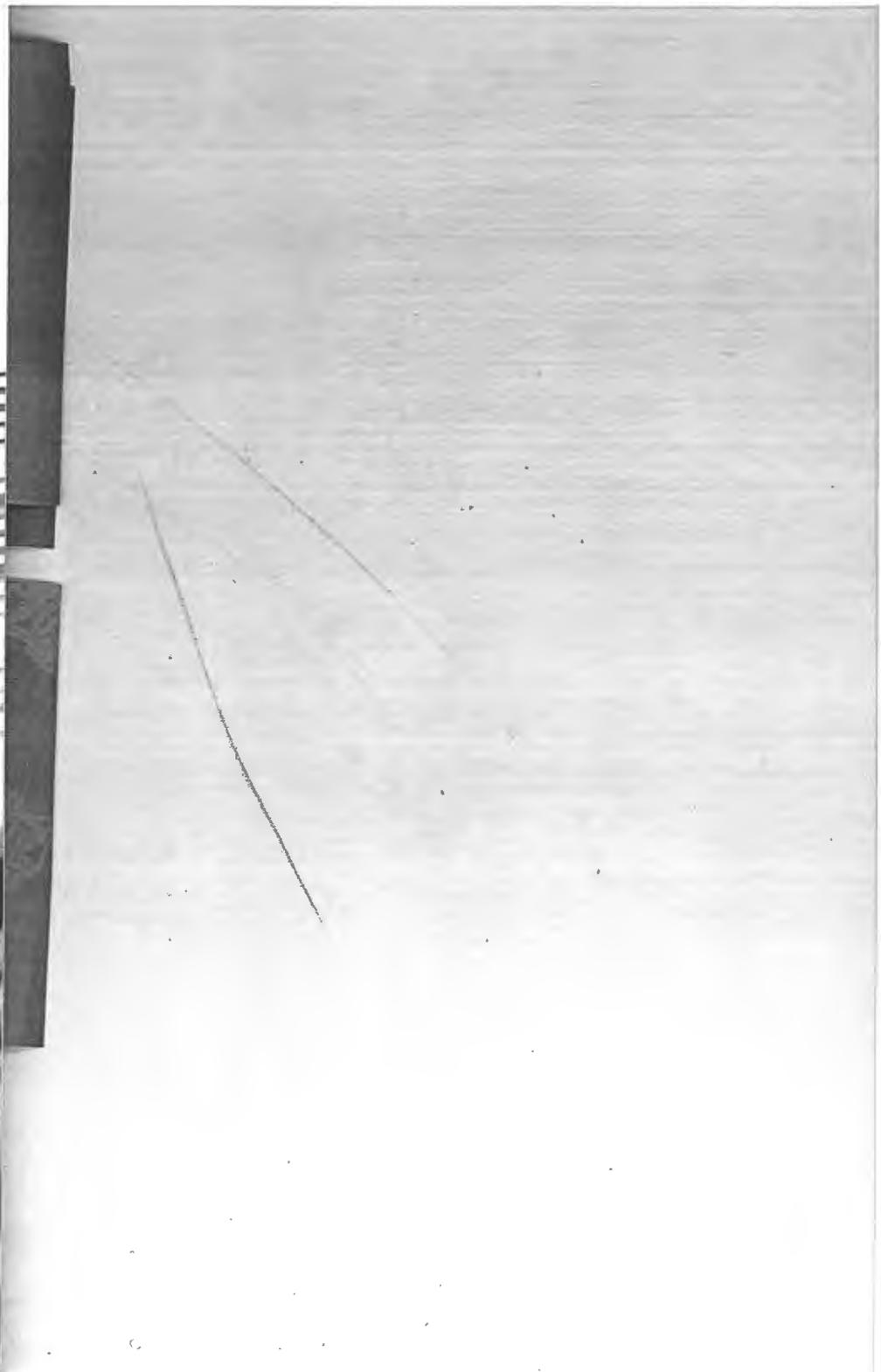


African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms

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‘Yorubas Don’t Do Gender’:
A Critical Review of Oyeronke
Oyewumi’s *The Invention of Women:
Making an African Sense
of Western Gender Discourses**

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf

Discourses on Africa, especially those refracted through the prism of developmentalism, promote gender analysis as indispensable to the economic and political development of the African future. Conferences, books, policies, capital, energy and careers have been made in its name. Despite this, there has been very little interrogation of the concept in terms of its relevance and applicability to the African situation. Instead, gender functions as a given: it is taken to be a cross-cultural organising principle. Recently, some African scholars have begun to question the power of gender to explain African societies (Amadiume 1997; Okome 2001; Nzegwu 2001). This challenge came out of the desire to produce concepts grounded in African thought and everyday lived realities. These scholars hope that by focusing on an African episteme they will avoid any dependency on European theoretical paradigms and therefore eschew what Babalola Olabiyi Yai (1999) has called ‘dubious universals’ and ‘intransitive discourses’.

Some of the key questions that have been raised include: can gender, or indeed patriarchy, be applied to non-Euro-American cultures? Can we assume that social relations in all societies are organised around biological sex difference? Is the male body in African societies seen as normative and therefore a conduit for the exercise of power? Is the female body inherently subordinate to the male body? What are the implications of introducing a gendered perspective as a starting point for the construction of knowledge about African societies?¹ What are the advantages and disadvantages of using explanatory categories de-

veloped within the North to the understanding of different African realities? Most of these questions have been raised in a number of articles, but it is in the book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) by the US-based Nigerian theorist Oyeronke Oyewumi that we find a sustained argument against the concept of gender in Africa.

Constructing a Yoruba World-Sense

The central thesis of Oyewumi's provocative book *The Invention of Women*, is to deny that gender is a fundamental social category in *all* cultures. Drawing her examples from the Oyo-Yoruba in western Nigeria, Oyewumi argues that gender has not historically been an important organising principle or a first order issue. She suggests that in European culture and intellectual history, participation in the *polis* and cultural significance is determined by the meaning ascribed to the body. Contra European discourse, biology was not used to explain or establish social relations, subjectivity, positioning and hierarchy among the Yoruba. Here, her argument resonates with other critiques of the European schism between 'mind' and 'body'. The body is regarded as the site of irrationality, passion and moral corruption. The mind, in contrast, functions as the seat of reason and restraint.

This dualism enabled the association of certain groups with the body and physical functions, and others with mind and reason. Those conceived as irrefutably embodied were visibly marked out for enslavement, oppression and cultural manipulation. For Elizabeth Spelman, the oppression of women is located in 'the meanings assigned to having a woman's body by male oppressors' and the oppression of black people has 'been linked to the meanings assigned to having a black body by white oppressors' (1989: 129).

Oyewumi attributes the biologising of difference to the primacy of vision in European intellectual history. Privileging the visual facilitates an emphasis on appearance and visible markers of difference. She concludes that the entire western episteme bases its categories and hierarchies on visual modes and binary distinctions: male and female, white and black, homosexual and heterosexual *etcetera*. The physical body is therefore *always* linked to the social body (Oyewumi 1997: xii). In contrast, African cultures are not and have not historically been ordered by vision, but rather through other senses. In this way, she suggests that the notion of a 'worldview' is only appropriate to the European context. She proposes that 'world sense' better matches the African way of knowing.

At base, Oyewumi contests the idea that a western categorical schema for understanding society and social dynamics can simply be exported elsewhere. Students of Africa, she insists, must recognise that a greater degree of conceptual sensitivity is necessary for understanding non-western social structures, specifically the Yoruba, where a different structuring principle is in operation. For example, instead of the visual logic informing social division and hierarchy through

structures such as gender, sexuality, race and class, Oyewumi argues that it is *seniority* that orders and divides Yoruba society.

Seniority refers primarily to chronological age difference. It 'cuts through the distinctions of wealth, of rank, and of sex' (J.A. Fadipe cited in Oyewumi 1997: 41) and is not aligned with biology. However, it also refers to an agent's positioning within the kinship structure. An insider (or extended blood relation) is always senior to an outsider who is marrying into the family. For the insider, seniority is based on birth-order: the first-born is senior to all the other children. For an outsider marrying into the lineage however, seniority rank depends on how many children (including blood relations) are already part of the lineage. Seniority is therefore always *relative* and context-dependent: 'no one is permanently in a senior or junior position; it all depends on who is present in any given situation' (Oyewumi 1997: 42). Nevertheless, as an ordering power in the Yoruba context, seniority operates in terms of a patrilineal system: a fact which remains problematically under-theorised in Oyewumi's account.

Oyewumi's claim for the absence of gender in Yoruba culture and the centrality of seniority as an organising principle is based on two factors:

- a) There is no mark of gender in the Yoruba language, unlike seniority, which *is* linguistically marked and an essential component of Yoruba identity.
- b) Yoruba social institutions and practices do not make social distinctions in terms of anatomical difference.

She elaborates the first claim by arguing that language is central to the formation of social identity. Language 'represents major sources of information in constituting world-sense, mapping historical changes, and interpreting the social structure' (1997: 32). Yet, African languages have not been taken as seriously as they ought to by students of Africa. Rather, western conceptual categories are used to capture knowledge about Yoruba cultures and indeed many African societies, thereby, creating epistemological dependency and laziness. Oyewumi argues that this dependency leads 'to serious distortions and quite often to a total misapprehension of Yoruba realities' (ibid: 28). For example, in Yoruba language, gender distinctions *only* occur in terms of anatomical sex difference, unlike many European languages, where the category 'woman' or 'female' is often excluded or marked as 'other' to 'man' or 'male' who functions as the norm.

The absence of a cultural or symbolic layer of meaning to gender distinction in Yoruba means that there is no noun equivalent to 'woman' or 'man' – these terms simply cannot be translated. Instead, the only distinction possible is between female and male – what Oyewumi refers to as 'ana-male' and 'ana-female'. Consequently, the word *obinrin*, erroneously translated as 'female/woman',

[...] does not derive etymologically from *okunrin*, as 'wo-man' does from 'man'. *Rin*, the common suffix of *okunrin* and *obinrin*, suggests a common

humanity; the prefixes *obin* and *okun* specify which variety of anatomy. There is no conception here of an original human type against which the other variety had to be measured. *Eniyan* is the non-gender-specific word for humans (ibid: 33).

In the Yoruba language, social positioning and identity is derived through a complex and dynamic web of social relations. It is not determined by anatomy. To turn Freud on his head, 'anatomy is not destiny'. *Obinrin* (female) is not subordinate to, or powerless against, *okunrin* (male). Neither is she symbolically or normatively inferior to him. Similarly, *okunrin* is not privileged over *obinrin* on account of his biology. In addition, names, occupation, profession, status and so on are not linguistically marked by gender. 'There are no gender-specific words denoting son, daughter, brother, or sister. Yoruba names are not gender-specific; neither are *oko* and *aya* – two categories translated as the English husband and wife, respectively (Oyewumi 1997: 28). Therefore, categories that have the mark of gender in English have no equivalence in Yoruba.

On the contrary, it is seniority that is linguistically encoded in Yoruba: 'The third-person pronouns *o* and *won* make a distinction between older and younger in social relation' (ibid: 40). An example we can suggest to illustrate the social pressure of this distinction occurs when two Yoruba meet for the first time. They are quick to establish who is senior, junior or age-mate. In the absence of seniority status being agreed, the formal third-person pronoun *won* is used. Again, the desire to establish seniority and status achieves exaggerated effect in the fetishisation of names and professional titles or 'titlemania', as Ezeigbo (1996) observes. Thus people describe themselves, or are described, in a chain of titles for additional prestige: Doctor, Chief, Mrs X or Professor (Mrs) Y. According to Ezeigbo, the

love for titles has reduced some Nigerians to sometimes prefixing their professional designations to their names. Hence such titles which people outside this country would view as absurd: Engineer X, Accountant Y, Architect Z and Surveyor X. Some individuals who served the country in missions abroad, [...] have chosen to be addressed as Ambassador X or Y. Would it be a surprise if in future we encounter such appellations as Mathematician X, Scientist Y and Linguist Z? (Ezeigbo 1996: 38)

Since this mode of Yoruba sociolinguistics contrasts so strongly with western forms, Oyewumi argues that it is essential that indigenous categories and grammar are examined and not assimilated into English, as is currently the case. With regards to gender then, its absence in Yoruba language means that the 'woman' theorised in many western feminist discourses in terms of negation and limitation has no equivalent in Yoruba culture. Yoruba women are not perceived as 'powerless, disadvantaged, and controlled and defined by men' (1997: xii).

The absence of gender demarcation in language is reflected in a corresponding omission in social institutions and practices. Yoruba institutions are traditionally organised around *agbo ile* – a compound housing facility composed of a group of people with common ancestry, sometimes specialising in a particular occupation such as weaving, dyeing, hunting, drumming and so on. The lineage group situated in the compound is the site for the expression of social legitimacy, authority and power. Each member of a lineage (whether *ana-male* or *ana-female*) is referred to both as *omo-ile* (children of the house/insider) and *oko* (husband). As we have seen, the *Omo-ile/oko* occupies a privileged position vis-à-vis an *aya-ile* (*ana-female/wife/outsider*). Social hierarchy is thus structured in terms of an insider-outsider relationship, by which all *omo-ile* are automatically senior to incoming outsiders irrespective of their chronological age. A woman therefore, is not *intrinsicly* disadvantaged in relation to a man. As Oyewumi writes,

Although *ana-females* who joined the lineage as *aya* were at a disadvantage, other *ana-females* who were members of the lineage by birth suffered no such disadvantage. It would be incorrect to say, then, that anatomic females within the lineage were subordinate because they were anatomic females. Only the in-marriage *aya* were seen as outsiders, and they were subordinate to *oko* as insiders. *Oko* comprised all *omo-ile*, both *ana-males* and *ana-females*, including children who were born before the entrance of a particular *aya* into the lineage. In a sense, *aya* lost their chronological age and entered the lineage as 'new-borns', but their ranking improved with time vis-à-vis other members of the lineage who were born after the *aya* entered the lineage (1997: 46).

As well, social practices (such as the division of labour, kinship, profession and monarchical structures) are not ordered by gender difference but by lineage. Oyewumi critiques the dominant assumption in West African studies that equates man with farming and woman with trading as being without foundation. They are 'nothing but an imposition of an alien model that distorts reality and leads to false simplification of social roles and relationships' (ibid: 76). Occupation and status depend on how agents are positioned within the social field – a positioning that is always relative and contextual. Among the Oyo-Yoruba, for instance, both *okunrin* and *obinrin* are represented in trade and farming. Hence an *ana-female* could be an *aya* and *oko* (an outsider to one lineage, an insider within another) as well as warrior, diviner, hunter, farmer and so on. Nor are *ana-male* excluded from trading and food preparation, even if this food preparation is only for themselves and not for the family. In this respect, using a term taken from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we can say that Oyewumi points to the Yoruba as

having their own 'logic of practice'. It is the logic that Oyewumi wants most of all to excavate in order to produce indigenous knowledge.

There is much to be admired in Oyewumi's challenge to current assumptions. She is certainly correct to question the universalisation of gender as a fundamental organising principle in all societies and across time. To commit oneself to the assumption of gender is to remain unquestioningly embedded within a specific western intellectual tradition of critique. Of course, this does not mean that this tradition is itself fixed and unchanging. The point is rather that when 'foreign' categories are adopted uncritically, they *can* distort local structuring dynamics and modes of understanding. It is true that as a first order principle of inquiry, gender may well be insufficient to capture the complexities of Oyo-Yoruba social reality. However, the more general point is that the threat of mistranslation works both ways. Just as the western gendered terms of woman and man do not translate directly into Yoruba, neither does the system of seniority necessarily translate into other cultural contexts. In this case, the crucial issue is remaining faithful to the specificities of local cultural experience and social structure.

I also agree with Oyewumi when she argues that the way we enter the research field and the questions we ask will, in part, determine the results we will get. If a gendered question is posed in a society where seniority is more dominant, a gendered response will nonetheless result. Contemporary scientific paradigms such as quantum mechanics have shown that the frame of the experiment in part produces its own results: measuring for mass renders velocity indeterminate and vice versa. In quantum mechanics, as elsewhere in scientific and social scientific methods, the shadow of the researcher is always cast across that which is researched. And, within the phenomenological tradition, there is no 'object' outside the subject perceiving it: the seer is always seen, the toucher always touched. Concepts and categories are never 'objective' – they are always caught up in the dynamics of power relations and the field of culture itself.

Despite the persuasive force of her argument however, there are two highly problematic aspects of Oyewumi's proposition. First, we need to question her underlying methodology and theoretical assumptions of language and discourse. Second, her call for indigenous knowledge creates a problematic essentialism and authenticity.

A Problematic Methodology

In terms of Oyewumi's problematic methodology, I want to focus on three areas:

- a) the importance she ascribes to language as revealing a cultural essence;
- b) her understanding of the nature of power; and
- c) her assumptions about the relation between language and social reality.

A philosophical discussion of these issues will clarify the import of her arguments against the universal-ability of gender distinctions.

Language as Cultural Truth

In order to deny gender demarcation, Oyewumi had to refer to a pre-colonial trajectory of anatomical difference, found in its purest form amongst the Oyo-Yoruba. Consequently, *okunrin* and *obinrin* can only assume symbolic, gender-based layers of meaning through the colonial project. She therefore infers that the original meanings of these words lie beneath the surface of colonial 'mis-projection and mistranslation. This line of argument echoes late nineteenth and twentieth centuries romanticist philosophers keen to articulate a sense of the power of classical Greece in terms of its parallels with the development of the European modern nation state. Etymology, and the desire to capture the 'original' meaning of German and Greek words, was exactly the method the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, employed in his theory of the historical destiny of the German *volk* in the run up to the Nazi regime in the 1930s.

In each of these cases, we detect a questionable understanding of how words convey their meaning across time, particularly; the idea that words have an 'original' meaning that can be accessed in some way or other. On what basis can one guarantee that a given word conveyed a given meaning at a certain point in history? Even if an earlier meaning is detected (an easier task in literate cultures with a history of dictionaries, but more difficult in historically oral cultures like the Yoruba), how can we be sure that this previous connotation is the *original* meaning? This problematisation is especially pertinent in the Yoruba context – given the plethora of contested origin stories that abound amongst the Yoruba.

A more accurate account of how words convey meaning across time would be one that emphasizes flux rather than stasis and conservation. Nietzsche's assertion that truth is a 'mobile army of metaphors' is more useful here:

'What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins' Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense.' (*The Viking Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann transl.)

This understanding of truth reveals how a word's meaning unveils the history of cultural or community projections upon it. Words are therefore like totems, bearing time-bound societal distinctions, yet lasting beyond each epoch of projec-

tion. It may well be that even the *history* ascribed to a word is in part a projection of the present. Thus, Oyewumi's claim about language revealing social dynamics can, at most, be half-correct. While *okunrin* and *obinrin* may appear to reveal little beyond anatomical difference; there is nothing in Oyewumi's argument that supports her assumption that this has always been the case.

The danger of resorting to etymological arguments is that they ultimately uphold an *authenticist* and *organicist* approach to language and culture. Just as Heidegger wanted to express the authentic destiny of the German people, so too Oyewumi is specifically interested in the traditions and world-sense of the *Oyo-Yoruba*. But how can she be sure that the Oyo-Yorubas are the true originators of Yoruba beliefs and social practice? Why, and on what basis, ascribe a linear history to words and their relation to origin myths? Why assume that one explicit meaning of a word forecloses and precludes other possible meanings of words? Alison Weir demonstrates precisely this point, in relation to an alternative non-essentialist conception of how meaning operates across time. She writes, referring to the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein:

For Wittgenstein, words could be better understood on the model of a rope that consists of a multiplicity of individual fibres: thus, the meanings of words can be better understood in terms of a multiplicity of interrelated usages. Once this model of language is combined with an historical model, it becomes possible to understand meanings as mediated through complex interrelations of different social practices in different contexts, through different discourse and institutions, which invest these concepts with multiple layers of meanings. Thus, the concept of 'women' already *includes* multiple and often contradictory meanings, and is already open to shifts and changes in meaning (1996: 121).

Ultimately, etymology can only 'work' if one assumes that a culture has in some way remained pure across time without discontinuities or paradigm shifts in collective self-understanding. As Weir's quote suggests, this belief is even further from the truth when we consider that a spatial (or synchronic) discontinuity can be added to the temporal (or diachronic) discontinuity of language meaning. The meaning of a word can often differ depending on institutional or praxial situations. Yet, Oyewumi claims to have uncovered a repository for the essential Yoruba system that transcends both space and time: its *essence* or *pure form*. Here, she succumbs to the age-old 'will to truth', the term Nietzsche applied to a fundamental desire in all western metaphysical writers since Plato to uncover *the* truth: a desire that must remain unconscious of the very assumption that motivates it — that there *is* a Truth (capital T) to be discovered. A more attentive listener to the Yoruba language and culture will not fail to notice the absence of such an essence or cultural authenticity.

The Language of Power

The second problematic area in Oyewumi's account relates to her understanding of power. Although Oyewumi presents power dynamics in the Yoruba social system as complex, context-dependent (being an outsider in one context, an insider in another) and relative (being senior to certain members of the lineage, junior to others), it nonetheless remains simplistic in another sense. The assumption that a particular variable of power is *the same everywhere*, in isolation from any other form of enablement or constraint, is an essential pitfall in her account. Even if one concedes that seniority is the dominant language of power in Yoruba culture, Oyewumi is wrong to conclude that it is indeed the *only* form of power relationship, operating outside of other forms of hierarchy.

In line with recent theories of power (such as in feminist and post-modern thought), I suggest that different modes of power are always working in terms of each other. No mode of power, be it gender, seniority, race or class, has the same value from context to context and from time to time. Neither is any form of power monolithic or univocal, existing in isolation from all other modes of social organisation. Instead, each variable of power acquires its *specific* value in the context of all other variables operating in a given situation. The consensus amongst many critical thinkers and feminists today is that the boundaries between different modes of power are often irreducibly blurred. For example, class difference works only through a specific constellation of effects that are articulated in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, geography and generation and vice versa. In turn, a pluralized, context-sensitive approach to class changes how we understand these differentiated standpoints. Each mode of power is like a thread, creating a pattern of significance only when woven together with other threads in a specific manner or situation (the family, the work-place, the city, the culture and so on).

Oyewumi's failure to take the interwoven nature of power dynamics seriously means that she cannot account for the complexity and nuances of seniority as it actually operates in Yoruba land. For example, she could not discuss how the ideology of seniority masks *other* forms of power relations or how its vocabulary often used to couch sexual abuse, or familial (especially for the *aya*/wife in a lineage) and symbolic violence. In this sense her theory of seniority becomes disturbingly naïve and politically dangerous.

Another case in point is the virulent abuse of power based on seniority in the student-teacher relationship in Nigeria. These abuses often go unchallenged because victims are loath to challenge the abuser in the name of 'disrespecting their senior'. What is at work here is not seniority. It is in fact another form of *power over* disguised as respect for the elder. It is therefore often a ruse for other forms of power. However, because Oyewumi wants seniority to stand alone as *the* dominant mode of power in Yoruba land, she simply cannot recognise blurred reality

for what it is. She must avoid *all* proven theories that stress the complex interdependency of one form of power upon another and the ways in which one explicitly manifested (and respected!) power often conceals other, more insidious, ones. Oyewumi's account thus resembles early forms of feminism that emphasised patriarchal oppression while ignoring many other forms of domination that women were, and are still being, subjected to.

Of course, Oyewumi's thesis regarding seniority in the Yoruba context differs from early feminist discourse in that she stresses power as *enabling* over power as *constraining*. However, the emphasis placed upon positive power serves to highlight the problems with her account. Only when isolated from all other conditioning factors can a particular variable of power (like seniority) appear to be wholly enabling. As soon as we adopt a more complex, interrelated notion of power, we can see that power as capacity always operates in the context of other forms of binding power or 'micro power' in Foucault's words. Hence, Oyewumi's foregrounding and celebration of Yoruba or African female power *need not* preclude an analysis of the ways in which they experience constraint and domination. Power-over and power-to are then seen as interdependent. To the extent that we ignore either form, we also *simplify* social reality and our understanding of the complex operations of power. It is precisely because Oyewumi *does not* recognise that seniority operates in differential contexts, intertwining with other variables and often functioning as a euphemism that shrouds abuse, that she can deny that gender distinctions or gender-based inequality are at work in Yoruba society.

Language and Discourse Becoming Social Reality

Simplifying the nature of power leads to the third set of fundamental problems with Oyewumi's text. Her etymological/linguistic method of reducing social reality to explicit discourse assumes that the prevalent meanings of words or discourse can completely capture social reality. Oyewumi completely flattens the relationship between language and reality by assuming that there is total isomorphism between the two. Although Oyewumi is right to argue that language *can* express reality, why should we assume that the realm of language, law, discourse or symbols is a perfect mirror or picture of social reality? On what basis should we ascribe a desire to articulate what really happens at the level of language itself? Oyewumi's text cannot answer these questions simply because she fails to make a distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* description – that is, between what happens at the level of language, discourse, symbolic or juridical norms on the one hand, and social reality or everyday lived experience on the other.

We can see this absence in her privileging of the anatomical as the basis of 'female' freedom. For Oyewumi, there are no barriers to *obirin's* activities in relation to *okunrin*. That is, the biological fact of being female does not interrupt or

determine (beyond the obvious fact of reproduction) the *social* perceptions of bodies. This 'gender neutrality' affords *ana-females* in the Yoruba context the freedom and capacity they enjoy. However, the fact that gender difference is not inscribed within discourse or marked within language does not mean that it is entirely absent in social reality. There is often a gap between what happens in law and social reality. It is precisely by not making a distinction between language and reality that Oyewumi is able to elide this possibility and assume that Yoruba women have the same power as men in their lineage.

It is easy to introduce examples that demonstrate the necessity of this distinction between language and symbolic representation on the one hand and social reality on the other. For instance, from the experience of post-apartheid South Africa, there is nothing at a discursive or juridical level that limits a black South African from acquiring the material and symbolic freedoms that white South Africans have long enjoyed. After all, South Africa has one of the most enlightened and progressive constitutions in the World. Yet, at the level of everyday lived experience, there are real inhibiting factors that limit the extent to which black Africans can participate in economic life and symbolic representation. Removing inhibitive barriers (from language and the law) is just the *beginning* of a long process to creating a just society.

The same story could be told many times over in different historical contexts – for instance, the difference between *de jure* legitimisation and *de facto* reality for African-Americans after the abolition of slavery and in present day United States. It is often the case that, in their everyday interactions, people (oppressor and oppressed) continue to act according to a dynamic of symbolic oppression that has long been considered outmoded from an explicitly juridical or discursive point of view. Hortense Spillers puts the point succinctly when she writes of the continued legacy of slavery in the contemporary situation in the States:

Even though the captive flesh/body has been 'liberated', and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise (1987: 68).

De jure and *de facto* modes of reality are therefore often considerably out of joint and at odds with each other. Recognising, and then accounting for, this difference then becomes paramount. In the case of women in the Yoruba context, the task, contra Oyewumi, is one of citing cases and frameworks of gender oppres-

sion or privilege that are not inscribed within the discursive/judicial sphere. For example, one may point to the fact that in a patrifocal society such as the Oyo-Yoruba, it is the *ana-females*, (as *aya*/wife) not the *ana-males*, who generally have to move 'out' to another lineage, becoming outsiders and subordinate in their spouse's lineage. And insofar as heterosexual coupling and motherhood is privileged, it is *ana-females* who have to marry out. Therefore, it is women who typically become inferior (whether as senior or junior wife) to men. Furthermore, because Yoruba women have primary responsibility for food preparation and child-care, they are much more likely to have the dual responsibility of nurturer and economic provider, both normatively female roles in Yoruba society.

Oyewumi passes over these statistical and normative probabilities by resorting to two strategies: first by questioning the value of statistics and then pointing to counter examples. Neither of these responses is at all adequate in the face of the critique developed here. Whatever one may think, the fact that probabilities can be calculated on the basis of statistics indicates a normative structure at work. Denying the validity of statistics then becomes a weak way of denying the existence of standardisation itself. It is true that even in the most unreconstructed of patriarchal cultures one could find accounts of powerful women monarchs, hunters, and so on. However, such counter-examples are the 'miraculous exception' within what is in reality a hegemonic framework (Bourdieu, 1977).

However, using experiences from 'miraculous exceptions' often neutralise the real dynamics of power relations and helps to mask oppressive regimes. Although some *ana-females* are both *aya* (in relation to their spouse) and *oko* (in relation to their lineage), or hunters and farmers, *ana-males*, as *oko*, do not have child-rearing responsibilities or food preparation for the family beyond providing for themselves during their stay in the farm. While one can sympathise with the therapeutic value motivating Oyewumi's desire to uncover a pre-colonial, harmonious and ungendered history, the evidence she uses to support her argument simply does not stand up to scrutiny. We cannot use the experience of princesses and privileged women to evaluate the position of all women in society or to deny the collective subordination of women. Instead, their experience (if at all) should be used to imagine new possibilities and fight inequality.

Once we recognise modes of oppression existing below the threshold of discursive analysis, we can then account for the difference between words, representations, laws and social reality. We can also identify Oyewumi's text as being caught up in the very modes of power she attempts to articulate. Because Oyewumi's thesis omits a *de jure/de facto* distinction, she can have no conception of *ideology* – a discursive framework that seeks to legitimate and reproduce certain norms of power and privilege. Without this conception, her thought itself is vulnerable to becoming trapped within the *ideology* of seniority, rather than simply describing it. By portraying seniority as the defining characteristic of Yoruba

power dynamics, in the context of a naturalistic and naive approach to the relation between language and reality, Oyewumi's text ends up uncritically adopting the very form of power she sets out merely to describe.

No one has expressed the dangers of such ideological capture better than Bourdieu. 'The most successful ideological effects', he maintains, 'are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than complicitous silence' (1977:188). Here, Bourdieu shows his acute awareness that social dynamics and modes of hegemony and repression often exist below the level of discourse and everyday speech. It also suggests that failure to *recognise* this process (by remaining silent about ideology) runs the risk of complicity and a too easy complaisance. This is clarified in the section that continues immediately after this sentence in *The Logic of Practice*:

It follows, incidentally that any analysis of ideologies, in the narrow sense of 'legitimizing discourses', which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies: this is true of all internal (semi-logical) analyses of political, educational, religious, or aesthetic ideologies which forget that the political function of these ideologies may in some cases be reduced to the effect of displacement and diversion, camouflage and legitimation, which they produce by reproducing – through their oversights and omissions, and in their deliberately or involuntarily complicitous silences – the effects of the objective mechanisms (1977: 188-9).

In this light, Oyewumi's attention to language, which appeared at first to be over-emphasised, actually turns out not to be strong enough. Nowhere in the text does she reflect critically on the apparent neutrality of biological difference at the level of language. Neither does she indicate that this language itself might be imbued with normative or ideological traces. She absolutely fails to suspect the potential affinity between power and language. Consequently, she uncritically restates the normative power of seniority.

Moreover, she has no way of addressing the complex relationships in which people 'play with' the normative structure of seniority to their own advantage. For example, as a junior, it might be in my interest to acknowledge the authority of a senior and show deference because it suits my own needs and purposes. In this case, my apparent respect is just that: an appearance. My 'respect' is not in reality motivated by the consideration that as an elder they are worthy of that status. Again, a senior may tacitly relinquish her seniority when she is dealing with a junior because the junior has economic or social capital which the senior wants to access. A case in point is where an elder brother may give up his status

of seniority in relation to a wealthier younger sister. Seniority thus becomes a 'game' that people can play to different effects and for various purposes. When we focus on explicit linguistic meaning and symbolic coding, then we miss out the gaps, the silences or the concealed meaning in any particular mode of address. Yet, in contrast to this playful, hybrid and pragmatic approach to the language of seniority, Oyewumi's book is replete with refusals to envisage any other way of viewing the Yoruba social system except as structured by seniority *qua* seniority.

Furthermore, the specific emphasis she places on the *Oyo* Yoruba (as opposed to all other geographic-cultural variants) most clearly reveals that her account itself represses difference and impurity in favour of ideologically-driven authenticity and purity. In this way, Oyewumi's text falls prey to a dubious manoeuvre that is commonly made by theorists striving to articulate an account of identity and social dynamics in opposition to the western norm – that of repressing the difference, the silences that inheres within the object of study itself. As Nancy Fraser writes of those involved in identity politics:

Stressing the need to elaborate and display an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identity, it [identity politics] puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture. Cultural dissidence and experimentation are accordingly discouraged, when they are not simply equated with disloyalty. So, too, is cultural criticism, including efforts to explore intra-group divisions, such as those of gender, sexuality and class. Thus, far from welcoming scrutiny of, for example, the patriarchal strands within a subordinated culture, the tendency of the identity model is to brand such critique as 'inauthentic'. The overall effect is to impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations. (2000: 112).

As I have stressed, the critique presented here does not deny the existence of seniority in Yoruba society both as a structuring form and rhetorical strategy. Neither does it disregard Oyewumi's attempt to show that it often dominates other modes of capability or constraint. The point of this critique is rather to argue that in claiming an irreducible difference between the Yoruba social system and western systems, Oyewumi undermines the differences that are already at work in the Yoruba context. Seniority may well take precedence over patriarchy in the Yoruba worldview. However, her account of language and its relation to social reality remains naïve. Her understanding of modes of power and how they operate is monolithic and therefore simplistic. Additionally, her conception of

the relation between *language* and power is silently complicitous with normative forces that she fails to articulate.

African Local Knowledge in the Plural

Oyewumi's fixation with an untainted linguistic and social indigeneity is ultimately motivated by a desire to assert the radical Otherness of African culture in relation to European. This desire to proclaim Africa's own unique culture, mode of being and hermeneutic tradition has a long tradition in African political and intellectual history, embedded as it is in the quest to contest European denial of African humanity and their global dominance. Oyewumi's project of highlighting a Yoruba cultural logic that is not polluted by Western gender demarcation or inequalities thus situates her in a long list of 'race' men keen to uncover and assert indigenous African knowledge and modes of self-representation (Anta Diop 1981; Cabral 1970; Azikiwe 1969; Nkrumah 1961). However, her desire to uncover a pure Oyo-Yoruba cultural framework that is anterior to colonial projects is deeply problematic and against the grain of the very culture she wishes to uncover. In this final section, I want to challenge Oyewumi's 'cultural insiderism' by sketching an alternative way of theorising about power dynamics and the production of knowledge in the Yoruba social system. This account still allows for sensitivity to differences in social systems (such as the relative absence of seniority in one context and its prevalence elsewhere) without falling into the trap of purity, authenticity and essentialism.

This alternative hypothesis emulates Weber's speculative thesis of the religious basis of modern capitalism in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Just as Weber points to a specific theological context in which capitalism developed, so too I will suggest that acknowledging the specific theological-aesthetic horizon of Yoruba culture provides insights into the structure of Yoruba social dynamics. In contrast to Weber's protestant monotheism however, I would propose that the Yoruba social system is inherently polytheistic.

Polytheism is not simply a plural relation to the spirit-world. It is an organising principle that goes beyond religious practice. It engenders a fluid and pragmatic attitude, not just toward gods, but towards all things, categories and concepts. Although contemporary Nigerian society (and contemporary Yoruba culture) is, on the surface, divided in terms of Christian and Islamic faiths, the deep structure of the society is polytheistic and ordered by the spirit world of the accommodative traditional gods. This theological background is revealed most readily in aesthetic practices such as dance and music. Polytheism in spirit translates into the aesthetics of *polyrhythm*².

Unlike the European spiritual tradition, there is no central transcendental ordering principle in the Yoruba context. Instead individual gods function to serve different spiritual needs. As a person's spiritual needs change across time,

so too does his/her theological allegiance. This does not mean that people change gods intermittently or have an attitude of 'anything goes'. Instead, polytheism involves living with several different moral or truth claims and negotiating the tension that arises from sameness and difference without excluding one or the other. In this light, Yoruba society more closely portrays the inter-relational and diverse power structures that post-modern theorists have described. There is no dominant line of power with a monopoly on truth. Rather, there is a shifting constellation of forces of capability and restraint. Under polytheism, truth does indeed become a mobile army of metaphors. At the level of discourse, no one interpretation can dominate. At the level of lived reality, enabling and constraining forces are always in contest with each other.

It is in this context that we contest Oyewumi's authenticist and essentialist account of the Oyo-Yoruba. Instead of privileging a specific cultural form as paradigmatic, a polytheistic take would highlight an intrinsic *internal* difference and differentiation, not entirely adducible to European imperialism, operating in Yoruba culture and society. The Beninese philosopher, Paulin J. Hountondji, has argued that inconsistencies, pluralism and discontinuities in African society cannot be explained solely by colonisation. It is necessary to recognise that:

Pluralism does not come from any society from outside but is inherent in every society. The alleged acculturation, the alleged 'encounter' of African civilization with European civilization, is really just another mutation produced within African civilization, the successor to many earlier ones about which our knowledge is very incomplete, and, no doubt, the precursor of many future mutations, which may be more radical still. The decisive encounter is not between Africa as a whole and Europe as a whole: it is the continuing encounter between Africa and itself (1976: 165).

Unlike Oyewumi's, this approach shows a fluid and open African society that is receptive to difference and change. Like Wittgenstein's metaphor of language as a rope, certain aspects of Yoruba culture extend across time and space, but there is *no* central strand ordering the whole. Instead, one sees an impure, bastardised and bastardising space, inviting inter-mixture and productive dialogue with its outside. For instance, in Yoruba land today, cable dishes protrude from mud houses; Nike is paraded in the bush; and Mercedes stickers are mixed amongst local fetishes in the bus driver's cabin. In these examples, Yoruba culture displays its polyrhythmic powers of accommodation, adapting to, and appropriating, external influences while concurrently transforming itself internally. Hence, the 'local' in 'local knowledge' is just as much about how post-modern and global cultural flows are articulated and expressed in specific contexts as it is about traditions that have been passed down and transformed across generations.

Indigeneity, if it exists at all, remain as cultural juxtapositions seamlessly linked via confident modes of cultural agency.

This approach also perceives discourse as being in perpetual conflict, thereby facilitating critical reflections on it. Even when, as in Yoruba land, the discourse of seniority may be hegemonic, other forms of duty, allegiance, capacity and limitation are also at work. Hence, discourses should be examined with a view to examining their prevailing 'logic of practice' and revealing whether they are concealing symbolic violence or are ideologically motivated. In the same vein, rather than concentrate totally on language and what is *said*, we can then analyse what is *done* or what remains unspoken, using statistics and other methods perfected over decades by anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists and philosophers. This is not to privilege action over speech or social reality over discourse and law. It is rather to place discourse *in the context* of practice and unmask how both are negotiated *and* manipulated. In this way, the distinction between *de jure* representation and *de facto* reality can be maintained for the purposes of a genuinely critical theory.

Polytheism helps to explain how Yoruba society absorbs change and difference, not how it has excluded it. It also allows us to move away from a totalising theory of *ultimate* truth or paradigm as articulated in Oyewumi's ideology of Oyo-Yoruba seniority. The Cameroonian theorist, Achilles Mbembe, echoing Nietzsche's critique of the will to truth, has argued that one feature of a *monotheistic system* is the belief in the notion of the '*ultimate* – that is the first and last principle of things. Speaking of the ultimate is another way of speaking of the truth ... that not only determines the foundations and goals of the world but provides the origin of all meaning' (2001: 215). A monotheist becomes so fixated on a single idea of culture that he/she blocks other stories dwelling within that culture. In figuring a pure Oyo-Yoruba social landscape, she refuses to open herself up to the mystery of divergences: the delicious and contradictory pains and pleasures of a Yoruba world of difference.

Often, when African thinkers assume that they are paying attention to local knowledge and realities, their own blind spots and epistemological principles become manifest. In Oyewumi's case, the blind spot is an unconsciously adopted conceptual monotheism. The metaphysics of monotheism that underscores her text shows how unwittingly western Oyewumi has become, despite her desire to ground her theory in a Yoruba cultural milieu. This contrasts with the kind of local knowledge I have presented here – cultural practices embedded in the spirit of Yoruba eclecticism and pragmatism. This local knowledge brazenly and playfully admits the Other into its frame in order to critique as well as work and rework a whole array of influences. It refuses the narcissism and singular imperialism of a monotheistic paradigm, such as that staged by Oyewumi.

Another weakness in Oyewumi's argument is the assumption that an egalitarian and anatomical relationship between the sexes has been erased since colonialism. The question that arises here is this: why should we assume that pre-colonial structures could be so easily wiped out? Examples of retained spiritual and aesthetic traits of diasporic Africans since the Middle Passage indicate that such structures can survive even the most violent of upheavals (Sturkey 1987; Sobel 1987). Thus, Oyewumi needs to explain how gender egalitarianism was erased through indirect rule, whereas the passage across the Atlantic did not completely erase other structures of African society.

I suggest that the adoption of a 'colonial' gender ideology in Yoruba society cannot be easily explained as an erasure of earlier form. It makes more sense to assume that there must have been an element within Yoruba culture itself - a 'cultural fit' between an unmarked gender ideology in Yoruba society and gender coding in European culture that allowed for easy adaptation of colonial rule. This is not to deny the violent disruption wrought by the colonial processes. Rather, it makes the case that cultural actors are more strategic, albeit tacit, in their response to change and innovation. As an elderly Malian Imam cited by Hecht and Simone states while discussing the ending of the practice of female circumcision: 'Change must discover unexpected reasons for its existence; it too must be surprised at what it brings about. Only in the tension between the old and new does the elaboration of a moral practice occur' (1994: 17). Therefore, constructing differential African realities from within, through a polytheistic discursive practice, indicates that Yoruba society, in all its plurality, already had the *potential* to absorb external schemas and power dynamics. Again, this absorption is always critical, playful and pragmatic - rather than dogmatic, authenticist or essentialist.

Here then is the final difference between the account of seniority found in Oyewumi and the more hybrid version of the Yoruba social system I have suggested. Oyewumi ultimately *rejects* any form of western categorisation as inappropriate to different contexts, such as Yoruba society. In this case, gender distinction, as with her highly dubious reference to homosexuality, can only be seen as a 'western import'. In contrast, Yoruba society's polytheistic form shows it is more ready to accept and absorb difference than Oyewumi admits. Hence, beneath the surface of language, gender distinctions (as with other allegedly second-order modes of power structure) have always been at work in Yoruba society. The only thing western discourse has done is to articulate it and invite more work on it, thereby raising it to a critical discursive plane.

I argue therefore, that we must refute an oppositional and rejectionist attitude towards theoretical models and vocabularies derived from elsewhere. As I have indicated above, perhaps the biggest irony of Oyewumi's text is that it is ultimately very 'western' in its unconsciously monotheistic approach to difference.

Instead of an intrinsic but inclusive idea of difference, Oyewumi invites us to think of difference in exclusionary and oppositional terms. In this way, she rejects western theory only to commit mistakes that have long been criticised *within* its terms. Her account is ultimately ideologically driven by an essentialist will to ultimate truth that must reject the accommodative spirit in Yoruba theological and aesthetic tradition. A hermetically sealed African or Yoruba culture fearful of impurities and contamination has never existed. The desire for purity and a self-contained, referential self/nation, I submit, is a construction of the political and intellectual elite in pursuit of the ultimate truth.

In conclusion, the power and conviction in *The Invention of Women* call for further studies of gender and seniority in Yoruba culture and language. Despite her problematic assumptions about the nature of language and its relation to power, Oyewumi demonstrates the need to be careful about automatically importing foreign assumptions about the structure of any society being studied. All future gender research outside the west should therefore be mindful that there is a risk of projecting alien concepts either at discursive or praxial level into the text. Such vigilance will make it possible to examine various manifestations of gender inequality outside of discourse. It may also expose the absence of gender demarcation and discrimination; or reveal distinctive constellations of power (both as capacity and as constraint) in such a society. It is however unlikely that a result which privileges one mode of power over all others (such as Oyewumi's notion of seniority or the feminist reification of gender) will entirely escape a similar form of critique as that shown here.

Most importantly, we must reject outright any attempt to assign a particular conceptual category as belonging only to the 'West' and therefore inapplicable to the African situation. For millennia, Africa has been part of Europe just as Europe has been part of Africa. Out of this relation, a whole series of borrowed traditions from both sides have been, and continue to be, brewed and fermented. To deny this inter-cultural exchange and reject all theoretical imports from Europe is to violate the order of knowledge. It also simultaneously disregards the contribution of various Africans to European cultural and intellectual history and vice-versa.

Finally, asserting a polytheistic approach to understanding Yoruba (and other African) social dynamics does not necessarily imply an outright rejection of Oyewumi's theory about seniority. What is now required, however, is an open space where multiple, even contradictory structures and conceptual categories can be productively engaged in our theories. Only in this way can we understand and maintain African local knowledge in the plural.

Notes

- * This chapter is the paper presented at the CODESRIA conference on 'African Gender in the New Millennium: Perspectives, directions and challenges', held in

Cairo, 10–12 April 2002. A slightly different version of this paper has been published in *African Identities* Vol.1. Issue 1 April 2003.

- 1 Of course these questions are not new. Feminist anthropologists such as Henrietta Moore have posed similar questions alongside post-structuralist feminists with their theories of gendered identity that moves beyond the sacrificial logic set-up in second-wave feminist accounts of sexual difference.
- 2 We can speculate that there is a general relation between deep historical-theological structures (even in secularised societies) and aesthetic practice. Just as in the west, historical monotheism has led to or privileged monorhythmic practice (for example, 4/4 or 3/4 time in music), so too in Yorubaland, polytheism has nurtured and encouraged the development of polyrhythmic expressive practice. This relation between religion and rhythm certainly finds concrete confirmation elsewhere – for instance in the polyrhythm of Indian classical music and the structure of Hindu polytheism.

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