African Feminisms

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Abstract

What does feminism mean and comprise in Africa? Is there a distinctly African variant, and if yes, what makes it so? These questions have been debated vigorously in the last 40 years by African women scholars who variously seek to defend and advance the broad project of feminism in Africa, if not always by this name. The chapter offers a critical review of the different theories and models of "African feminisms" that have been put forward. While there is a consensus that African feminisms must be attuned and responsive to the conditions of African women's lives, a central point of contention concerns the nature and status therein of "culture" and "tradition" and what some deem essential and irreducible African difference. The chapter argues against even weakly essentialist theoretical accounts of African feminisms, above all because these presume an

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authentic African female subject of concern and thus exclude others who do not fit the mold. A view of Africa as the contextual rather than essential ground of African feminisms allows instead for the emergence of a feminist politics for all African women in their immense diversity.

Keywords
Feminism(s) · Feminist theory · Essentialism · Cultural imperialism · Anti-imperialism · Politics of authenticity

Introduction

"All over Africa, African feminists are theorizing our feminisms and we would do well to listen to them" (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, p. 228). The dominant association of feminism with the West, and the recurring complicities of Western feminisms with Western statecraft and cultural imperialism, makes it imperative for African women to stake and differentiate their theoretical and other positions and therein also resist being spoken for by not only Western women but African men too. But while the geopolitical economies of African feminist knowledge production continue to demand this kind of "speaking back," in the literature as a whole this is not the ultimate impetus or purpose. The central concern is to define a feminist politics and praxis *for* African women, one that speaks to their lives and challenges. Hence Obioma Nnaemeka writes that "to meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to Western feminism but rather to the African environment that one must refer. African feminism is not reactive; it is proactive. It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment" (1998, p. 9).

This chapter offers a critical review and discussion of African women's scholarly theories and models of African feminisms, from the tendency in this literature to historicize as a means to legitimate any such gender politics in the African context to debates over what it should be called and the range of issues that are or should be of concern. A number of scholars, among them the first to engage in this intellectual work in the 1980s, take the view that African feminisms must be steeped in and distinguished by what they deem a fundamental African difference or exceptionalism, as manifest in "culture" (e.g., Amadiume 1987). The chapter surfaces the often-problematic implications of these kinds of theoretical positions and shows how more recent and arguably more pragmatic contributions to the debate have sought to move beyond them, conceptualizing and broaching "Africa" as conjunctural and contextual rather than essential. The chapter suggests, however, that there is still need for robust anti-essentialist theorizing of African feminisms and their subjects, African women, in all their diversity.

Historical Foundations

A foundational concern and strategy in the literature on African feminisms is to assert that the fact of women enjoying, expecting, and/or struggling for rights, dignities, and opportunities is "indigenous" to Africa, and "tradition," not imported, externally imposed, or newly conceived (e.g., Steady 1989; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Kolawole 1997; Amadiume 2000; Oyewumi 2003). More to the point is that "African women did not learn about self-assertion *from the West*" (Kolawole 1997, p. 10, emphasis added). There are differing views about whether and to what degree precolonial African societies were "patriarchal" versus characterized by "gender complementarity" (e.g., see Bakare-Yusuf 2003 for a brief overview). But widely agreed is that African women tended to have greater spheres of autonomy and authority than their Western counterparts and that they actively resisted the infringement or curtailment of their freedoms and domains, including by colonial administrations. Among women's strategies and resources for resistance were equally traditional and often distinctly female practices and symbols: "witchcraft"; stripping naked to shame their oppressors; "genital cursing" and verbal obscenities, insults, and taunts; striking from their vital socioeconomic roles as market traders; and so on (e.g., see Amadiume 1987).

In view of these histories and traditions, as well as the example of "the great matriarchs" (Amadiume 2001, p. 55), politically and/or culturally powerful female figures such as queens and priestesses, a certain rhetorical contention emerges in the literature that women in Africa were "feminist before feminism," that is, engaged in agentic, self-determined, and typically collective advancement of their particular interests well before the advent of a modern, self-named, and putatively overarching women's movement (e.g., Oyewumi 2003). This line of contention, and the frequent recourse to history upon which it is based, serves multiple important purposes. One is to claim and defend the cultural and moral belonging and propriety of present-day feminisms in Africa by tracing their origins to precolonial and thus non-Eurocentric times and mores. For instance, in a short piece introducing the explicitly feminist political organization "Women in Nigeria," founded in 1982, Altine Mohammed and Bene Madunagu cite "the long history of women's resistance, activism and associations in Nigeria," and what they call "indigenous 'feminisms,'" to contend and conclude: "Therefore, 'feminism' or the fight for women's rights and interests [in Nigeria] is not the result of 'contamination' by the west or a simple imitation as divisive opponents like to charge" (1986, p. 103).

Mohammed and Madunagu's (1986) particular assertion is directed explicitly to those who oppose anything akin to feminism in Africa on the grounds that it is "unAfrican" or in other words antithetical to "true" or "authentic" African values and identities (see Dosekun 2007 for an elaboration and critique of such views). But in this, as in the literature as a whole, the move to root African feminisms in African traditions is itself also thoroughly anti-imperialist. It is a move to reject any presumption or perceived need by Western feminists to bring feminism to Africa, which is to say "*their* feminism"; to reject, then, Western universalist models and teleologies; to assert African women's capacity and self-reflexivity to define and

understand their own conditions, needs, and means; and to clear and begin to map the grounds for this self-definition. There is a consensus in the literature that African feminisms must be attuned to the conditions of African women's lives, responsive to and precisely concerned to lighten the many and multifaceted loads that they bear. But if the principle is agreed, it is in the detail of what it comprises, and how and why so, that significant points of debates and divergence begin to emerge. One of the first debates is the name or language with which to even proceed.

The Politics of Self-Naming

Noting that the mere word "feminism" is highly contentious to many Africans, associated with Western imperialism and racism or at least race-blindness, as well as "man hating" and "lesbianism", a number of scholars propose that it is easier and more efficient for African women to simply bypass it, to "avoid the distractions attendant with the name" (Ogunyemi 1996, p. 116). Doing so would also communicate clearly from the outset that African feminisms differ from others in their particular concerns, critiques, and style; that African women define their agendas quite literally on their own terms (e.g., Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: Ogunyemi 1996; Hudson-Weems 1995; Kolawole 2002). "The most acceptable alternative [name to feminism] appears to be womanism," according to Mary Modupe Kolawole (2002, p. 95). The term "womanism" was coined separately but almost simultaneously, in the mid-1980s, by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, a Nigerian literary scholar, and Alice Walker, an African-American writer (Ogunyemi 1985, p. 72). For both, womanism is a black nationalist standpoint theory; it starts from and seeks to act upon the necessarily intersectional and vernacular ways of seeing, knowing, and imagining that emanate from black women's lived experiences. Ogunyemi initially theorized womanism for and in terms of an imagined global black community, writing that the final aim of the ideology was "the unity of blacks everywhere under the enlightened control of men and women" (1985, p. 71). However, she later moved to distinguish between African and African-American womanism, taking the view that, in fact, not unlike (white) feminism, African-American womanism overlooks the "particularities" of life *in Africa* (1996, p. 114).

Ogunyemi (1996) does not make this distinction as a critique of African-American womanism per se, more in recognition of difference within blackness. By contrast, Clenora Hudson-Weems (1995) is stridently dismissive of African-American or what she calls "black womanism" and at the same time committed to the ideological and symbolic unity of continental and diasporic Africans. Because Alice Walker (1983) famously characterized womanism as a shade of feminism, Hudson-Weems deems it aligned with a white ideology. For the semantics of their self-naming, she deems "black feminism" and "African feminism" also so aligned. In place of these names, Hudson-Weems declares "Africana womanism" to be the "natural" one for an ideology for all women of African descent, where Africana designates an ancestral racial and ethnic community, a community that she presumes also natural or given (1995, p. 22).

Besides womanism and its variants, other proposed names for African feminisms include “motherism” (Acholonu 1995), “femalism” (Opara 2005), and “Stiwanism” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). The first two of these names directly reflect the substance of the distinct ideological models to which they refer, which, as discussed briefly in the next section of the chapter, center on motherhood and the female body, respectively. Stiwanism derives from the acronym STIWA, which Ogundipe-Leslie coins, standing for “social transformation including women in Africa” (1994, p. 230). Communicated in and by the name is that the concern is squarely the continent of Africa and those who continue to reside there, not the diaspora. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) further explains that, as opposed to the separatist associations of the name feminism, in the name Stiwanism, it is indicated that the ideological aim is neither to replace nor fight with men but to *incorporate* women, to bring them in as co-participants in Africa’s development. This is a goal to which no one could reasonably object, she reckons. Thus she proffers the new name as highly strategic for African feminist purposes, although arguably it is stylistically clunky or unwieldy.

And then there are those who insist on feminism. Abena Busia argues that for African women to abandon the name is to cede ground, to “los[e] a power struggle” from the outset, and unnecessarily so (cited in Kolawole 1997, p. 39). Cheryl Johnson-Odim (1991) argues, similarly, that it is a “retreat” from an ongoing global conversation about what feminism is or should be and how it can truly address the concerns of all women. Retreating risks siloing African women and the issues and challenges that they face and therein risks reinscribing commonplace notions of incommensurable African difference. In Johnson-Odim’s words, it risks “losing sight of the fair amount of universality [that exists] in women’s oppression” (1991, p. 316). Or, if the notion of gendered universality is too strong, contentious, or even dangerous for African women to invoke in this context, we could say that the risk is of losing sight of the many grounds and opportunities for dialogue, alliance, and solidarity-building with other women elsewhere, self-named feminists especially. All the above risks the continued production of feminist agendas that do not speak to African women but are nonetheless *applied* to them. Joe Oloka-Onyango and Sylvia Tamale (1995) provide a concrete illustration of this last point in their discussion of the urgent need for African feminists to participate in international legal feminist efforts to theorize and codify women’s rights as human rights, or else see laws and principles drafted on their behalf.

Explaining that she is convinced of neither the need for nor efficacy of alternative names for African feminisms such as Stiwanism, Amina Mama quite correctly points out that “changing the terminology doesn’t solve the problem of [white] global domination. . . [of] northern-based white women’s relative power to define” (cited in Salo 2001, p. 61). She and others argue that rather than renounce the name feminism, the greater and more strategic imperative for African women is to (re)define it for themselves. In Mama’s words: “I choose to stick with the original term [and] insist that my own reality inform my application of it” (cited in Salo 2001, p. 61). Elsewhere, she is quoted as saying that the challenge for African women is to “retain the concept of feminism and make it our own by filling the name with meaning” (Mama, cited in Essof 2001, p. 125).

The discursive struggle and stakes are not only with white or Western feminisms. Desiree Lewis argues that African women denouncing the name (and praxis of) feminism as Eurocentric "placates the unease of patriarchal nationalism" (2009, p. 211). Arguably we hear something of what Lewis is getting at when, as part of her case for Stiwanism, Ogundipe-Leslie notes that "the word 'feminism' itself seems to be a red rag to the bull of African men" (1994, p. 229), the suggestion being that African women therefore should not taunt, inflame, their men with it. Ogundipe-Leslie further explains some Africans' discomfort with the word feminism thus: some "find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening. . .. Some who are genuinely concerned with ameliorating women's lives sometimes feel embarrassed to be described as 'feminist'" (1994, p. 229). While it may be highly strategic and pragmatic to give up the name under such circumstances, to do so is nonetheless to accede and lend force to them. It is to "affirm" or "confirm" that feminism and a concerted focus on women's issues are offensive and so on. It is also to reproduce an uneven gendered burden on women to assure others' comfort, even, in this case, in the context of attempting to resist the discomforts that others visit upon them! Most importantly, as Lewis (2009, p. 211) further argues, calls for women's activisms in Africa to be called anything but feminism because the name is too discomfiting de-radicalize and depoliticize these activisms. Arguably this is all the more so when the call comes from within.

Lewis (2009) does not make the above points in relation to African women's scholarly debates over the names and discursive terms with which they should be theorizing and working, although they are clearly highly salient here. Her concern is the discursive and practical threats posed to feminism in Africa by the "gender industry," that is, the development-oriented mainstreaming, institutionalization, and even commodification of "gender," "women's rights," "women's empowerment," and so on. The fact and growing ascendancy of this industry, widely understood as neoliberal, and the fact of its past and latent potential co-optation by anti-people agendas render all the more crucial the semantic and ideological distinction of feminism. Mama (1995) differentiates feminism from what she calls "femocracy" or "feminine autocracy" in the African context, for instance. The former refers to "the popular struggle of African women for their liberation from the various forms of oppression they endure," while the latter refers to the activities of politically elite women in the 1980s and 1990s, such as first ladies, who capitalized upon growing international concern with women's status to further their particular interests and to legitimate the authoritarian regimes of which they were part (Mama 1995, p. 41).

Theorizing from the ground up, well cognizant of the many factors that militate against women's substantive empowerment in Africa, the African Feminist Forum (AFF), an umbrella organization founded in 2006, asserts in no uncertain terms the need for African women to name and proclaim themselves feminist. In what Josephine Ahikire (2014, p. 7) describes as an "audacious positioning of African feminism as an ideological entity in the African body politic," the AFF charter declares:

> We recognize that the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political, and the process of naming is political too. Choosing to name ourselves Feminist places us in a clear ideological position. By naming ourselves as Feminists we politicise the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for transformatory analysis and action. We have multiple and varied identities as African Feminists. We are African women – we live here in Africa and even when we live elsewhere, our focus is on the lives of African women on the continent. Our feminist identity is not qualified with 'Ifs,' 'Buts,' or 'Howevers'. We are Feminists. Full stop (2006, p. 4)

It would seem that this is also the current view in African women's scholarly writing on the matter and that the debate over whether or not we need alternative, Africa-specific names is for the most part settled: in the literature "feminism" is the nomenclature that predominates.

The "African" in African Feminisms

A handful of African women scholars propose to model African feminisms on values, traditions, philosophies, and/or cosmologies which they claim are African *inherently*. It follows, in their accounts, that these models are inherently and markedly distinct from those of the Western world. For example, rejecting Western feminism as a "radical anti-nature, anti-mother, anti-wife and anti-nurture ideology" (1995, p. 8), and "black feminism" (i.e., in the diaspora) as "synonymous with lesbianism," Catherine Acholonu proposes an alternative for African women centered on what she calls Africa's "matriarchal metaphysics" and the supreme cultural value that Africans place on nature and nurture (1995, p. 108). She terms this humanist and environmentalist ideology "motherism." Arguing in similar vein that nature and culture are not opposed in African philosophy as they are in the West, and that motherhood exemplifies this, being at once a biologically immanent state for women and a transcendental "choice" on their part, Chioma Opara (2005) proposes "femalism" as an African feminism that locates and celebrates African women's power in their reproductive and nurturing capacities, indeed biological organs. Motherhood is but one aspect and source of what Deidre Bádéjo (1998) affirms as the intrinsic dignity, strength, and beauty of the African woman. In Bádéjo's excavation of the "mythicoreligious foundations" of African life, such as relayed in oral tradition, "womanhood is power," and this power is "feminine, mysterious, and beautiful, and it exists as a complementary expression of the African man's power" (1998, p. 110). Hence she proposes that African feminism:

> embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It is always poised and centered in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical. African femininity complements African masculinity, and defends both with the ferocity of the lioness while simultaneously seeking male defense of both as critical, demonstrable, and mutually obligatory. (Bádéjo 1998, p. 94)

Other scholars also seeking to ground and fashion African feminisms in the "cultural and philosophical specificity of [their] provenance" (Nnaemeka 1998, p 9.) concern themselves not with the poetic, mythical, or metaphysical but with what they see as practice or lived tradition. If, for instance, Ogunyemi's African womanism is a "mother-centered ideology," it is not on idealist or romanticized grounds. Rather it is for materialist and subsequently quite strategic cultural and psychosocial reasons: because of the continued "African obsession to have children" (1996, p. 133); because of the individual and collective esteem and clout that this affords women as mothers; and because, unlike in the West, motherhood is considered a communal affair. If, conversely, lesbianism is not on the agenda, it is due to the "silence and intolerance" with which it is ordinarily greeted on the continent (Ogunyemi 1996, p. 133). Kolawole goes further to claim that to most Africans, lesbian sexuality is actually "a non-existent issue," being "completely strange to their worldview" and "not even an option to millions of African women" (1997, p. 15).

Positing the African worldview as family- and community-centered, Kolawole (1997, 2002) theorizes African womanism as an inclusive versus individualist, separatist, polarizing, or radical ideology. In particular, African womanism is not anti-men but understands, respects, and values the traditional complementarity and cooperation of the sexes. These are positions widely echoed in the literature (e.g., Steady 1989; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Hudson-Weems 1995; Ogunyemi 1996; Nnaemeka 2004). It follows for Kolawole (1997) that the ethos and style of African womanism are dialogical, encapsulated by a spirit of "umoja," meaning togetherness in Swahili. On the matter of womanist style, Ogunyemi contends that African women do not share the cultural predilection of Western feminists for "feisty" disruption: for "the headlines, the exposé, personal and public," for "confrontationally 'telling all'" (1996, p. 12). In place of confrontation, Nnaemeka (2004) concurs, what we find on the ground is a feminism of negotiation, compromise, accommodation, and so on, a feminism of no egos – "nego-feminism." Nnaemeka (2004) attributes this to the fact that conciliatory dispositions and strategies are highly valued and encouraged in an array of African cultures, as evidence of which she cites a number of proverbs from across the continent. Akachi Ezeigbo (2012, cited in Nkealah 2016) also invokes proverbs in her proposal of "snail-sense feminism." Naomi Nkealah (2016) explains Ezeigbo's central contention thus: that the African feminist would do well to heed the "common sense" of the indigenous snail. Just as this creature "traverses harsh terrain with caution, flexibility [and] foresight," so should the African feminist be or become a woman who "negotiates her way around patriarchy, tolerates sexist men, collaborates with non-sexist ones, avoids confrontation with patriarchs, and applies diplomacy in her dealings with society at large" (Nkealah 2016, p. 68).

The foregoing kinds of claims about the culturally prescribed conciliatoriness of African feminisms are at direct odds with the precolonial histories of African women's "feistiness" that, as earlier noted, are mobilized and celebrated repeatedly in the literature, sometimes in the very same piece of work. An example is Ifi Amadiume's contrasting assertion: that the traditional culture of Igbo women is

one of feminist *militancy* (1987, p. 10). Conciliatory, militant feminism is not! Also at odds with some of the positions briefly outlined above is a growing body of scholarship that counters certain popular notions in Africa that same-sex sexuality is an exogenous phenomenon (e.g., see Tamale 2011; Matebeni et al. 2018).

The basic point to be made here is that views and experiences diverge as to what constitutes and/or follows from "African culture," "the African worldview," and so on, as does the evidence for them. Evidence and method are obvious weaknesses in those theories and models of African feminisms that insist upon some kind or degree of African autochthony and authenticity. Where the theories and models offer more than sheer assertion of what this putative state of Africanness comprises and means, where they offer more than sheer essentialism in short, the evidence that they mobilize is necessarily highly partial, selective, and flattened, stripped of the vast internal diversity, the inevitable change, and, perhaps most importantly, the inevitable *contestation*, in how Africans actually live in the present or lived in the past, to say nothing of what they might want or desire. By definition what the models also offer is a reading of said evidence that is therefore contestable as well. Thus in the very process of positing a reified Africanness at the heart of African feminisms, the fictiveness and unfixability of any such thing are revealed.

Also revealed is how deeply problematic it is to theorize and imagine "Africa" in this way for feminist purposes. That notions of African authenticity are invoked commonly against African feminisms was noted earlier in the chapter (i.e., feminism as "unAfrican"). The logics and effects of claiming authenticity are no less exclusionary, straitjacketing, and even symbolically violent when mobilized in defense, such as in the suggestions cited above that lesbians and lesbian issues are "not properly African" and therefore not of proper concern to African feminisms. We can see the problems of essentializing clearly, too, in Opara's (2005) positing of motherhood as a free, most laudable, and "most African choice" for African women. These claims are exclusionary if not also injurious to those women who cannot identify with them: those who have chosen not to pursue motherhood, those who desire but find themselves unable to become mothers for whatever reason, and those who are mothers but feel that they had little or no say in the matter. In the name of a fetishized Africanness, the theory of femalism reinscribes rather than resists what it claims is an African worldview in which childless women are failed subjects. Gwendolyn Mikell does likewise in her rather harshly worded remark that, culturally-speaking, "no self-respecting African woman fails to bear children" (1997, p. 9), a claim she makes as part of her larger contention that African feminisms are and should be "distinctly heterosexual [and] pro-natal" (1997, p. 4).

It is a well-established critical insight that "culture" easily can serve as or morph into a vehicle and alibi for conservatism and more. The problem with setting out culturalist grounds for African feminisms is not limited to conservatism though. Having deemed feminism "indigenous," "native," and "organically legitimate" (2000, p. 64) in Africa, Amadiume ascribes a fairly radical content and ethos to it, from the militancy already mentioned to a strident anti-elitism that seeks to redress class inequalities and oppressions between African women. She seeks to center women in rural poverty in African feminisms and to guard against the elision of

their experiences, voices, and concerns by urban women with higher levels of economic, social, and cultural capital. There are compelling material-political grounds to do so, but Amadiume's starting premise concerns which women are or are not "authentically African." She dismisses urban elite women as effectively colonized interlopers, "daughters of imperialism" (2000), in contradistinction to whom rural women are "daughters of the goddess" (2000) and "guardians of the matriarchal past (therefore, the very seat of African women's heritage)" (2001, p. 58). Zulu Sofola (1998) invokes a similar logic to brand the urban African woman "dewomanized" in the sense of alienated from her putatively traditional, essential womanly power. These kinds of claims romanticize and hypostatize both rural and traditional Africa and erroneously presume their hermetic separation from the wider world. They also beg the question that Nkealah asks of the similar fetishizing of the rural woman in Acholonu's (1995) theory of motherism: "does this mean that the urban woman has no contribution to make?" (2016, p. 64). We might add: does it mean that the problems the urban woman faces in or for her urbanity are not of import? What about the fact that the vast majority of urban women in Africa also live in poverty? And what about the issues that unite African women *across* class, space, and other internal difference? How can it *all* not be of concern to African feminisms?

Rejecting any manner or degree of essentializing, Lewis suggests briefly that African feminisms and feminists are African in and for their "focus on a continental identity shaped by particular relations of subordination in the world economy and global social and cultural practices" (2001, p. 5). In other words, "Africa" is simply the object and terrain of African feminisms and understood as a produced not given entity, moreover. Carole Boyce-Davies offers a similar view, suggesting that the specificity of African feminisms lies in their "specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies" (1986, cited in Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 32). "Culture," "tradition," "worldview," and so on enter necessarily into this, but not as fixed, essential, or determining, or, therefore, immune to questioning, resistance, or change. Boyce-Davies (1986) offers a helpful and highly pragmatic case in point, which is that African feminisms can respect the fact that motherhood is venerated in many African cultures and societies without making this their very basis or failing to ask after the politics in play.

Overall, what we could call the strongly essentialist theories and models of African feminisms in the literature, those that claim and advocate a deep and decisive state of ontological and even moral African difference (e.g., Acholonu, Amadiume, Bádéjo, Hudson-Weems), are in the minority. More common is that the African in African feminisms simply designates their contexts and concerns, always and rightly including culture. But even here it could be said, as a note of caution, that weak and seemingly convenient cultural essentialisms are often still potentially in play, or at least at the ready. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), for example, recognizes and resists that reified notions of culture are often used to discredit African feminisms and discipline African women, and she emphasizes that culture is and should be subject to agentic intervention and change. Yet she takes recourse to a relative culturalism herself when it seems to suit. Responding to a popular fear in Africa that feminism is a vehicle for lesbianism, she writes in defense, to reassure, that in actual fact, sexuality is not on

the list of African feminist concerns because the cultural context is one in which such a matter "tends to *be* private and *considered* private" (1994, p. 219, original emphases). The accuracy of the claim is disputable (e.g., see Tamale 2006). But even if it were the case that talking sex is "not African culture," we might then need to ask if and why African feminist responses should be to accede, to stay silent.

yes indeed

Agendas, Issues, and Strategies

The "bread and butter" issues on African feminist agendas, to borrow from Mikell's phrasing (1997, p. 4), are generally agreed in the literature. They include, in no particular order, poverty, gender-based, state and political violence, militarism and authoritarianism, imperialism and racism, religious fundamentalisms, child marriage, health and healthcare, and women's reduced or denied access to education, property, inheritance rights, and participation in political and civic life. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) categorizes the issues into six broad causative domains, namely, external oppression, such as from neocolonial economic institutions like the World Bank; "traditional" oppressions such as feudalism; African women's "own backwardness"; African men; racism; and "the [African] woman herself because she has internalized all these oppressions" (1994, p. 228). Thus, importantly, in addition to structural and "macro" considerations, she identifies the psychosocial as also key, as do others after her (e.g., Bakare-Yusuf 2003; McFadden 2003, 2018). Already noted is that she leaves sexuality out of consideration.

Writing in 2003, Patricia McFadden accuses African feminists of tending to silence or avoid women's sexuality due to a deeply ingrained, patriarchal fear of it. She advances a standpoint theoretical account of women's erotic power and self-love as a radical feminist resource, while Mama argues that at the very core of feminism, and thus unavoidable politically and analytically, are "struggles over gender-based violence, trafficking in women, sex work, sexual orientation and sexual pleasure" (2005, pp. 1–2). Mama's case is not merely for more African feminist attention to sexuality; as she and others note, sexuality is in fact much broached indirectly and/or instrumentally, in terms of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, reproductive health concerns, and sexual violence especially. Instead what Mama (2005) advocates is a radical reconceptualization of the very object(s) of concern, for feminist attention to sexuality as sexual politics. This shift has been underway in the literature from about the time of her writing in 2005. Signe Arnfred attributes this to the "pioneering endeavor" (2009, p. 152) of the African feminist scholarly journals, *Feminist Africa* (which Mama edits) and *Agenda*, both of which have had multiple dedicated issues on sexuality. The rise of the field of queer studies on the continent and beyond has been utterly indispensable too. Thus in the last 15 plus years, there has been a surge of research, theory, and activism concerning queer African subjectivities and communities, spaces, rights, and oppressions (e.g., see Matebeni et al. 2018). There has also been attention to erotic pleasure broadly construed (e.g., Tamale 2006; Mustafa 2006) and to the sexualization of women's bodies (e.g., see Bakare-Yusuf 2011).

Knowledge production, quite evidently, is another crucial issue for African feminisms and strategy. Yaba Blay (2008) stresses the imperative for action-oriented research, while others note the need for theory, reflection, reading, writing, and creative practice too, that these are not luxuries rendered unimportant or unaffordable by the pressing material exigencies of life in Africa (e.g., Gqola 2001; Lewis 2009). There are cautions, however, that African feminist theory must have an ultimate social utility and not devolve into "navel-gazing" and "intellectual gymnastics" for their own sake – as in the West, is the suggestion (Nnaemeka 2004, p. 365). Many argue that simple binaries of "theory versus praxis" and "academic or activist" do not hold in the African context, in any case. Self-named "scholar-activists" like Charmaine Pereira (2009) know and write this intimately, from direct experience of institutional conditions in the academy that are at best challenging for feminist thinking and imagining (among many other things). Pumla Gqola (2001) makes the broader point that, not least for being excluded historically from the academy, African women theorize from the everyday and thereby redefine the spaces and modes of knowledge production altogether.

In view of all the above, African feminist scholar-activists have theorized and pursued a two-pronged intellectual strategy: entering and claiming space within the academy, with a view to transforming it from within, and organizing around it, building autonomous intellectual and research networks, including across national borders (e.g., see Pereira 2009). The profound challenges of the former task have been discussed in the literature, from institutional inertia to the depoliticization or siloing of feminist scholarship to sexual harassment (e.g., see *Feminist Africa* issues 8 and 9). Similar dynamics have been considered and experienced in relation to the institution of the state. Historically, the state has been the primary locus of African feminist activism, on issues ranging from women's political participation to the legal frameworks and protections that they need to exercise their full citizenship. This focus is attributed, among others, to the fact that many national women's movements emerged out of broader anti-colonial or liberation struggles and the political parties these birthed. South Africa provides an exemplary case, where many women involved in the struggle transitioned, with the African National Congress, into political office. Studying the South African trajectory post-apartheid, Shireen Hassim (2003) shows how the inclusion of women in the state machinery does not amount to redistribution or justice *for* women on the ground, the poor and rural especially. Elsewhere she (2005) proposes a typological distinction between "inclusion" and "transformation" as competing strategic feminist approaches to the state in Africa.

Responding directly to Hassim, Elaine Salo (2005) suggests that this dual typology is helpful but incomplete because African feminist activisms and movement-building increasingly look beyond the state to both regional and international sites and solidarities. Related is that the issues of concern, environmental degradation, say, or poverty, often are not and cannot be delimited to the national realm, where it also cannot be presumed that women constitute a natural or unified constituency. Referring to the South African case, Salo writes:

> As class and urban-rural divides widen in post-apartheid South Africa, increasingly cutting across traditional categories of race, what rurally-based impoverished black women might identify as key issues for social transformation, may very well have more in common with concerns of indigenous Native-American women on a US reservation than those of their black, middle-class, urban-based South African sisters. Consequently, a broad united national women's movement that cuts across South African women's diverse identities would have to be *worked for*, rather than assumed. . .. (2005, p. 4, emphasis added)

These crucial points apply equally if not all the more to *pan*-African feminist unities and solidarities; these cannot be assumed or naturalized, rather they must be fostered, achieved, and sustained. Salo's point is likewise salient for African feminist alliances with and inclusions within more global formations. Here Oyeronke Oyewumi (2003), Nnaemeka (1998), and others caution against facile and celebratory assumptions of a global feminist sisterhood. The mere language of sisterhood, Oyewumi (2003) suggests, assumes a universal female victimization and is perhaps more accurately rendered as "sisterarchy" (Nzegwu 1990), a pointed term about unequal relations between women globally which speaks again to the utter necessity for African women to demarcate and assert where they stand.

Gaps and New Directions

In 2003, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf wrote that African feminisms need a non-essentialist and non-culturalist theoretical account of African women that is "grounded in the complex realities of [these women's] everyday experiences" (2003, p. 1). Bakare-Yusuf (2003) outlines a phenomenological account herself, but almost 20 years later, her call has not been fully answered, and the urgent need for this very much foundational theoretical work remains. The chapter has touched upon different problems for African feminisms with insisting on authenticity, indigeneity, tradition, and so on, above all that exclusions of different kinds of African women, and realms of experience and concern, follow inherently. Shirin Edwin (2016) identifies a potential exclusion not discussed in the chapter thus far: Islam. She notes rightly that in some of the early and core scholarship on African feminisms (e.g., by Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Sofola 1998), Islam is othered as a foreign imposition, "unAfrican" again, and as a source of disempowerment for African women. Arguing that at the same time sub-Saharan African Muslim women tend to be overlooked in Islamic feminist thinking, of which the more predominant focus is the Middle East and Arab world, Edwin (2016) proposes the need for an "African-Islamic" feminist theory that attends to the specificities of such women's lives and faith, including the Africanness of both.

There is some scholarship in the vein, if not by the particular hyphenated name that Edwin proposes, which she seems to overlook (e.g., Hoel and Shaikh 2013; Baderoon 2015). Nonetheless, Edwin's (2016) critique is helpful in introducing the question of religion. It could be said that other than in its fundamentalist guises, religion is generally overlooked in the literature on African feminisms, faith all the more so. These are issues in need of attention, therefore. How do African feminisms

intersect with religion? If and where African feminists subscribe to a particular faith, how do they reconcile this with their politics? Theo Sowa (in Sowa et al. 2017, p. 199) suggests that an inability to address this last issue has cost the women's movement members. Edwin's (2016) distinction between both the lived positionalities and the consequent theorizing of Muslim African women in sub-Saharan versus North Africa also points to another set of important issues insufficiently addressed in the literature, concerning "Africa" as both geopolitical and racialized space and place.

Most often in the literature, it is the continent that is meant by "Africa," and more precisely south of the Sahara. North Africa and the diaspora tend to be excluded or omitted, then – both the diaspora constituted historically by the transatlantic slave trade, and the more recent formations comprising African migrants pushed or pulled to leave "home" for various reasons. These places and peoples must be brought more into African feminist considerations. Among other things, this would demand greater reckoning with race and processes of racialization and racism *in* Africa, not just of it, another marked omission in the literature beyond South Africa. This omission may be attributable to the fact that it is ethnicity rather than race that tends to have immediate salience in everyday life and consciousness on the continent, from the distribution of resources and political power to violence and conflict. But what then accounts for the conspicuous absence of ethnicity and ethnic politics in the theorizing of African feminisms? This too must be addressed.

In a recent contribution, McFadden (2018) suggests another direction in which African identity and its politics need theorizing for African feminist purposes, which is away from the collective toward the individual. She recounts from personal experience, and pain, of having had to "self-rescue" from what she had come to experience as the "dangerous, reactionary essentialisms" of the women's movement, as well as the creeping incursion of neoliberal logics and values (2018, p. 421). McFadden's (2018) questions of what it means to live an African feminist life at the present conjuncture are crucial; they are questions about feminist subjectivity, self-love, and self-care, indeed survival in Africa. How, for example, do or should African feminisms and feminists balance or reconcile commitments to the collective and communal with individuality and even individualism? What responsibilities do African feminists have toward ecological balance and sustainability? What does it even mean, at the individual and interiorized level, to be an African feminist? What kinds of conditions invite and sustain this self-positioning, or alternatively discourage it, which are also questions about the survival and renewal of African feminist movements, including intergenerationally, and questions about the various forms of exclusion, prejudice, and violence, intended or not, within them.

The conditions of and for African feminisms, and of and for African women more importantly, are ever-shifting and complexifying. The scholarly literature endeavors to keep up, and must. In addition to what has been outlined above, variously new, reconfigured, or simply still under-researched conditions, areas, and identities to which the literature must pay attention include but are not limited to queer life in Africa, including *pleasures*, a particular and deeply political omission that Zethu Matebeni and Thabo Msibi (2015) underscore; popular, media, and consumer

cultures, including, most recently "postfeminism" (e.g., Dosekun 2020); digital technologies, including the opportunities and challenges these pose for feminist activism; sex work, trafficking, and pornography; environmental degradation and extractive industries; deepening economic inequality; land ownership and (re)distribution and neo-imperialist land-grabbing, including from new directions; and regional and transnational feminist organizing.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed African women's theorizing of African feminisms, tracing the diversity of perspectives in the literature having to do with the issues to be addressed and their relative priority, the implications of feminist politics, and also self-naming for African women's cultural and familial identities, including their relationships with men, and the points of connection and disconnection or disagreement with Western feminisms, among others. What the diversity of theoretical perspectives shows is not only that there is no such thing as "African feminism" in the singular, as a monolith. It shows that, even in the plural, African feminisms are produced not *a priori*; African feminisms are constructs, contestations, and thus *cases to be made*. The chapter has made a case for anti-essentialist foundations in the theorizing, imagining, and "doing" of African feminisms, or, in other words, a refusal to fetishize, romanticize, or presume to pin down or dictate what Africanness and thus African womanhood comprise and look like, at the same time as anti-African racism and imperialism are equally refused. The case is for an uncompromising politics for the substantive empowerment of African women – *all* African women – "no ifs, no buts."

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