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Concubines and Power: Five Hundred Years in a Northern Nigerian Palace

Heidi J. Nast, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005; ix + 245pages. £20.00 (pb) ISBN: 0-8166-4154-4.

From a humble beginning as a field that struggled to gain legitimacy and recognition from the mainstream during the 1970s and 1980s, women's and gender studies is now one of the most versatile and dynamic fields of Africanist scholarship. With specific reference to history, historians of women and gender in Africa have furnished us with enormous data and arguments aimed at reinterpreting and reconstructing the representation of women as holders and administrators of power. In order to show the extent of women's power in precolonial times and to establish how the draconian policies of the colonialists affected women's role in politics and the management of power, historians of African women go back to the precolonial period. What do we see? In precolonial times, women wielded enormous power, which contributed to territorial expansion, trade development and the establishment and consolidation of civil order. If the colonialists felt they could do without women and passed laws that placed them at the ebb of the ladder, precolonial Africa did not only have women rulers but could not dispense with their role as givers and takers of power.

Aside fitting adequately into the well-established scholarship that explores women's role in politics in precolonial times in order to establish the effects of external contacts and European colonisation on the status of women in colonial and post-independent Africa, this book contributes to women and gender studies in number of other unique ways. How secluded royal concubines were able to wield power runs contrary to the well-received/general idea that representation/presence in the public space is cardinal to the acquisition and administration of power. Heidi J. Nast argues that state supported concubinage emerged at the Kano period (a Hausa city located in modern northern Nigeria) that became one of the three most important sixteenth century cities in Africa. She points out that royal concubines played a foundational role in the development of the state.

Nast's sources are unique. Historical studies, especially of Africa rarely use 'human geographical methods' for unearthing the past of the societies they study. Nast, a trained geologist is able to prove that geography is indeed the eyes of history through her elaborate examination of the various places of economic activities within the walls of Kano palace, the largest in existence in the entire West African region. Memory and place/geography are two closely interrelated themes in this regard. Nast cleverly 'allows the palace' to tell the history of women and power in the northern Nigerian city. She creatively uses names of different segments of the palace to establish the nature and extent of power and activities of royal concubines between the 16th and the 20th century. What is more, place names are delicate source materials for studying African history since their meanings and functions undergo transformation over time. But the author's careful use of oral traditions and material culture helps her to understand the layers of meaning and functions of place names in relation to her primary objective of unravelling the power of royal concubines in precolonial Kano society. Historians of Africa rarely use photographs to study changes in social and economic structure. The author's use of photographs takes this book beyond the confines of traditional historical studies, and makes it a work that would appeal to the intellectual sentiments of diverse readers, more importantly those interested in using material culture to re-trace Africa's past.

In order to understand the role of royal concubines in precolonial economy and Kano society, one needs a glimpse of the rights and privileges as enshrined in the holy Koran – since Kano, like most parts of modern northern Nigeria, was a theocratic state. While a man was permitted to have up to four wives, there was no limit to the number of concubines he could have – provided he could take care of them. Islamic laws permit men to divorce their wives but they could not divorce concubines that bore children for them, since technically they were not married to them. A master must not maltreat concubines that bore him children and indeed must provide for all their needs as long as they live. Concubines become free on the death of their masters while their children assume the status of the master upon birth – i.e. their children are born free. Of the numerous sources of royal concubines between the sixteenth century and the early twentieth centuries, the one that appeared most common were wars. A good number of royal concubines were prisoners from wars of military expansion – the hallmark of state formation and empire building.

By serving as representatives of the places where they were initially taken as prisoners, royal concubines were able to help foster economic, social and political relationships between and among states and empires. They readily served as consultants in matters related to their places of origin. Royal concubines monopolised indigo cloth dyeing; were organised into elaborate labour hierarchies and commanded enormous respect through the state. For the most part, they derived their power from the centrality of agrarian society, which celebrates human and earthly fertility. They were the main collectors of grains, Kano's primary tax; and managed grain proceeds and marketing. According to Nast, "The earliest palace then seems to have been organized sociospatially around considerations of fertility – earthly (grains and granaries) and human (children), both associated with the activities, places and bodies of royal concubines" (p. 5). Nast suggests that the royal concubines' womb practically and symbolically represented the site where the power of the state is located. The power of the state in this regard was children. Royal children were needed for the consolidation of the aristocratic culture, creating and fostering royal linkages among states and empires, and guaranteeing credible and competitive succession.

The institution of concubinage did not collapse immediately after the British conquest in 1903. Although the British showed stern opposition to domestic slavery and the slave trade, they were very lax in enforcing the abolition of concubinage because it did not directly affect the basis of colonial domination. The outlawing of domestic slavery in the late 1930s gradually set the motion for concubines' obscurantism. The palace structure went through a serious process of refurbishment between 1926 and 1990 with some parts destroyed to give way for modern architecture. With the destruction of sections of the palace where the royal concubines' political and economic activities were located, their influence in the newly established colonial administration dwindled considerably. Men gradually took over some economic activities such as indigo dyeing, which were of concubines' exclusive preserve, as Kano's economy was gradually integrated into colonial capitalist expropriation. What remained of the royal concubinage in early 2000 were a few title holders and relics of the five hundred years of concubines' power in a northern Nigerian palace.

In spite of its undeniable contribution to women's and gender studies, and historical methodology, Nast's work fails to address some significant themes about concubinage and power especially during the colonial period (1903-1960). Particularly, I thought she should have looked at how colonialism reconfigured the role and status of concubines, aside from the proclamation of concubinage – a direct consequence of the abolition of slavery in 1936. Several policies of colonial government, which include the imposition of Victorian norms of gender roles made women occupy a subservient position during the colonial period. The British destroyed the existing system but could not put in place new economic and social structure that would enhance continuous relevance of the concubines in the new colonial dispensation.

This book is an excellent addition to the growing body of work on women's and gender studies in Africa. The author uses a lot of political and economic history related data - this makes the book a good read on the history of Hausa society, of modern northern Nigeria and Africa in general. What is

more, hopefully, Nast's book will encourage historians of Africa to use historical monuments such as palaces to study women's history and African history in general.