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#### Film

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## SECTION THREE

### The Politics of (Self-) Representation

#### 7

### A Historiographical Study of the Works of LaRay Denzer, Bolanle Awe and Nina Mba

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The institutionalization of African women's history did not take place until the late 1980s. Prior to this period, historical research on African women was neglected to the extent that the UNESCO General History of Africa, one of the most comprehensive readings on African history, treats women's history ephemerally. This skewed emphasis is equally true in regard to the Groundwork of Nigerian History, a specially commissioned project aimed at providing a comprehensive and accessible knowledge of the history of the Nigerian peoples (Awe, 1991: 211-212). Paul Zeleza, a leading Africanist, explores the male-centered nature of major textbooks on African history and their conspicuous neglect of women's historical experience (Zeleza, 2005: 207-232). The poor scholarly attention given to women's history should not be taken to mean that historians interested in this aspect of African history were not making a case for its integration into the curriculum of mainstream Africa's past. Instead it seems that mainstream African scholarship—dominated largely by men—was just uncritical or



unconvinced of the need to accept these claims, including the sources and methodology of the emergent historians of women.

But in spite of its difficult beginning, women's history is now one of the most versatile and dynamic areas of Africanists' scholarship. Not only do departments in various universities in and outside Africa now flaunt courses on African women but research centers and female-specific professional associations aimed at promoting scholarship on women now exist as well. Academic conferences and symposia on women and gender in Africa are regularly held in various parts of the world. Proceedings of such conferences and professional meetings are often published in book form, thereby adding to the growing body of literature on women and gender studies (Nnaemeka, 1998; Cole, Manuh, and Miescher, 2007 among others). Collaboration between Europe and North America-based scholars, and their African counterparts has increased tremendously in spite of the protracted ideological ferment which cut across the confines of race, gender and sexuality, the cross-cultural conceptualization of feminisms and the cultural geography of women's experience (Nnaemeka, 1998; 2005; Cole, Manuh and Miescher, 2007; Chuku, 2002: 79-81; Oyewumi, 1997; 2003: 1-24; 2005: 3-21).

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the ideological origin of African women's history by examining the contributions of LaRay Denzer, Bolanle Awe and Nina Mba, three of the prominent founding mothers of women and gender studies in Africa. Women's history, like most areas of specialist studies, developed as an ideology aimed at correcting misrepresentation, as well as legitimizing the importance of a sidelined group in the historical experience of the larger entity. If mainstream African history developed in the late 1950s as an ideological weapon of nationalist struggle and as a defensive historiography against Eurocentric representations of Africans as peoples without history who thus had to be placed under colonialism, women's history emerged as a counter discourse against the unscrupulous assertion that all women of the world share the same experience of patriarchal exploitation and the error of using the Western gaze in examining African women's experience. It also sought to challenge the mainstream African scholarship that paid only lip service to women's historical experience.

The careers of these pioneering historians of women were shaped largely by two overarching challenges, one primarily external to Africa and one internal. While the idea of a homogenization of women's experience of patriarchy came from Western feminists who were/are uncritical of local peculiarities and variations such as the effects of colonial rule on the role and status of women or if it was/is an external impetus, the sidelining of women's historical significance is largely an internal African epistemological challenge. Hence, the mainstream African history was largely responsible for repressing African women's history.

Aside from producing massive work on African women and gender, Denzer, Awe, and Mba all played active roles in the establishment of the Women Documentation and Research Center (WORDOC), the first facility dedicated to research on African women in Nigeria (Awe and Mba, 1991: 859-864), supervised the first set of doctoral dissertations and honors projects, and introduced courses on women in their respective universities. Awe played a significant role in the establishment of ministries of women's affairs at both federal and state levels in Nigeria (Olaoba, 1999: 58). While Awe and Denzer taught history at the University of Ibadan, Mba was a faculty member at the Department of History, University of Lagos.<sup>1</sup> Awe's work focuses more on historiography and women in the precolonial period (roughly before 1900). Mba and Denzer work more on colonial women's history (c. 1900-1960). In all, Denzer has contributed to Nigerian women's history more than any historian of the country. If J.F.A. Ajayi is widely recognized as the doyen of mainstream Nigerian history, Denzer is indisputably the dean of Nigerian women's and gender history.

I decided to review the scholarship of these scholars in a single piece because they all share a similar ideology and orientation about women's history.<sup>2</sup> Although they draw the largest chunk of their data from Nigeria, the most populous black nation on earth, their cardinal arguments—that local peculiarities rather than Western conceptions should influence data analysis and discourses—make their scholarship of Africa-wide importance.

Scholars often discuss the paradigmatic origin of African women's history (see, among others, Awe and Mba, 1991; Ogbomo, 1997; Zeleza, 2005; Odejide, 2002: 1). However, none of them have seriously



considered placing the scholarship of my subjects within the framework of their role in inserting women's history on the map of erudition.

### Challenging the Homogenization of Women's Experiences

One of the most dominant discourses on women and gender in Africa is the refusal by Africanists (mostly Africa born) to accept the homogenization of women's experience by Western feminists. Although this paradigm has influenced well-received and award-winning works like Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women* (Oyewumi, 1997), and other notable publications (Ogbomo, 1997; Achebe, 2005; Chuku, 2005 among others), Awe is probably the first scholar to openly identify this shortcoming of Western feminist discourse. In her reflection on the 1977 Conference on Women and Development held at Wellesley, Awe criticizes the assumption that women irrespective of culture, time and place are subjected to the same form of patriarchal exploitation. She believes that scholars should look at the experience of women from a national or local perspective instead. African and Western societies, according to Awe, did not encounter the same historical experience. Historical differences like colonialism and neocolonialism have far-reaching consequences on the role and status of women, thus making African women's experiences different from their Western counterparts (Awe, 1977: 314-316). According to her,

Questions at the Wellesley conference – for example, women's relationship to power, or male and female perceptions of women – would have been more meaningful in a historical perspective. Answers to such questions would both give an insight into the virtually total neglect of women's contributions by the powers that be during the colonial period and provide a useful framework for the examination of women in the transformation of former colonies into developed nations. Such a historical approach will also give leads into research needs and priorities. (Awe, 1977: 315)

Her solution to the misrepresentation of African women's experience is that Africa-based scholars who understand the cultural landscape should lead scholarly investigations of various aspects of women's history. In her words:

While the observation of the foreign researchers can be useful, the time has now come when emphasis should be on indigenous scholars; by virtue of their permanent membership in their society they are likely to have a better insight into its problems and the areas that need closest attention. Because of the present position of women in developing countries, research on women must also be policy oriented, but initiated by local scholars who can best indicate priorities. (Awe, 1977: 315)

She also called for the establishment of research facilities for collecting data, outlining research priorities, getting research proposals, initiating projects, and generally brainstorming for the government on matters that affect women.

It is important to state that Awe was writing at a time when African women's history had yet to receive any significant scholarly attention either by Western scholars or their African counterparts. She was clearly responding to various propositions expressed in public discourses and general assumptions about women in published works during the 1970s. Her affirmation is like a manifesto or theoretical framework that should govern or guide the interpretation of African women's history. Certainly, she was also aware of Western academic imperialism, which dominated African discourses until the birth of modern African historiography in the late 1950s. If Kenneth Dike (a pioneer of mainstream African history) defensively states that African history should be studied from the perspectives of Africans, Awe's agitation is that African women's history should be studied from the perspective of African women with due recognition of significant historical developments/forces like colonialism which have far-reaching effects on the role and status of women during the precolonial, colonial and post-independent periods of African history.

Awe's stance did not forestall an epistemological crisis that would later come in the 1980s and 1990s when women's history finally found its root on the soil of mainstream or, to use Zeleza's term, "malestream" African history (Zeleza 2005: 208). And Awe's dream of greater participation of Africa-based scholars on African women was not realized even with the establishment of WORDOC, as Western feminists armed with North American and European ideas of gender relations, and adequate research resources began to monopolize discourses on gender in Africa.



What factors account for this situation? In 1991, Awe, as the lead editor, and her collaborating editors (Susan Geiger, Nina Mba, Marjorie Mbilinyi, Ruth Meena, and Margaret Strobel) of *Signs'* special issue on African women lament the impact of economic recession and poor access to academic facilities on the involvement of Africa-based scholars in research on women. The editorial comments that because of inadequate access to teaching and research materials in Africa, Europe- and North America-based scholars dominate the discourse on African women. Important portions of their comments on this crisis of the production of knowledge are worth quoting:

Prevailing socio-economic conditions in African universities are not conducive to the production of knowledge. Scholars situated in the impoverished or beleaguered institutions lack the time or resources (libraries are in shambles; there are few current books or journals) to produce scholarly work. With greater access to resources, US and European scholars publish more about Africans than do African scholars. (Awe et al., 1991: 645)

The editorial comments dovetail with the problems Awe encountered while trying to get her *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* published. She laments that, "publishers after publishers declined to take on the manuscript because they decided that the time was not ripe for the publication of a book on Nigerian women and that such a book would not have much market value. No Ministry of Education would at that time adopt it as a textbook for schools" (Awe, 1992: v). The proceedings of a symposium on "The Impact of Colonialism on African Women" organized by WORDOC in 1989 had not been published as of summer 2009. The bound manuscript is in a dilapidated state. Some of the pages were missing. The spine looked very weak and unable to hold the pages.

#### **African Women, Power and Historical Visibility: Precolonial and Colonial Periods**

As we have seen, modern African historiography emerged as men's history, and as a defensive response to the unscrupulous and Eurocentric idea that Africans required external control because of their inability to govern themselves. Commenting on what one can call a "malocentric" interpretation of African history, Awe opines,

"While building up their own picture of African society, as distinct from western notions of that society, African historians seemed to have inherited a certain degree of Western bias, in that they have perpetuated in their writings the masculine-centered view of history; in explaining human experience in Africa, they have accepted the male experience as the norm while African women in consequence became anomalies" (Awe 1991: 211).

By the 1970s, it was obvious that a new history that would recognize the contributions of women to the African experience had to be written. Writing women into history was needed to unveil the extent of power women wielded and the roles they played in the development of their various societies in precolonial and colonial periods. Writing women into history is therefore a project targeted at providing historical visibility and voice for a group whose experiences were sidelined. What is more, women's history is important in showing the differences between African women's experience and that of their Western counterparts. Positionality and locality helped Mba, Awe and Denzer to adequately rise to this occasion: the fact that they were based in Nigeria, the birthplace of modern African historiography, gave them the opportunity to adequately take up the challenges of "re-writing" African history.

The trio vigorously pursued their agenda of creating visibility for women's history by adopting the following approaches: (1) delving into the biographies of prominent heroines during the precolonial and colonial periods (Awe, 1977: 144-160; Mba, 1992a: 75-88; 1992b: 135-148; 1982; with Johnson-Odim, 1997; Denzer, 1998); (2) examining the changing status of women during the colonial as well as the precolonial periods (Denzer, 1994: 1-39; 1992: 116-139; 1989; Mba, 1982); (3) exhuming women's contributions to nationalism and decolonization which had hitherto been buried by the "malestream" African history (Mba, 1982; Denzer, 2004 (4) raising significant historiographical questions about women's history (Awe, 1977: 314-316; et al., 1991: 645-649; Denzer, 1994: 1-39); and (5) establishing a research center (WORDOC), for collecting and analyzing women's political, social and economic engagement with society (Awe and Mba, 1991: 859-864).

The paucity of written sources of precolonial women's history meant that these historians were going to depend largely on oral



traditions, a genre of sources that created legitimacy for modern African history. Oral traditions supplemented the scanty reference to women's activities recorded in the traveling journals of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missionaries, merchants and explorers. The paucity of documentary colonial archival materials on women necessitated the use of another genre of sources, namely, life histories. Because my subjects started writing during the 1970s and 1980s when the major heroines of political activities in colonial Nigeria were still alive, they had access to an enormous body of oral evidence which helped them to properly interpret and evaluate the versatility of women's political mobilization during the colonial period.

### Precolonial Period

The precolonial period was characterized by women's role as givers and takers of power. Awe's anthology *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* clearly establishes the immense power women held as queens, priestesses, royal wives, princesses, etc., in precolonial Nigeria (Awe, 1992). They not only led wars of territorial expansion but also ruled over large kingdoms in peacetime. The story of Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan as narrated by Awe validates the creative ingenuity of women in business and politics. Efunsetan used her economic and social status and influence to help Ibadan, the most militarized state in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, in its numerous military exploits (Awe, 1977: 144-160). In a broader study of Iyalode (a Yoruba female chieftaincy institution), Denzer takes a *longue duree* approach, looking at how the institution adapted to major political changes before and after the imposition of alien rule (Denzer 1998).

Women's political influence transcended their membership in traditional political institutions like the Iyalode. Drawing from oral traditions and written sources, Denzer demonstrates that the Yoruba of modern southwestern Nigeria probably had the most impressive tradition of producing female kings in the precolonial period. Between the mid seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries, six women, as Denzer shows, appeared on the list of Ilesa kings, while three princesses became the *Awujale* (king) of Ijebu Ode before 1760. The fifth *Ewi* (king) of Ado Ekiti who reigned in the sixteenth century was a woman named Yeyenirewu, reputed for her progressive leadership, generosity

and peaceful expansion during the forty-one years of her reign (1511-1552) (Denzer, 1994: 8-20).

On gender roles, my subjects agree that unlike in Western societies and contemporary Africa, women were not subordinate to men in precolonial Nigeria. According to Mba, the "women's world was not subordinate to that of the men, but rather the two worlds were complementary. The political system recognized the separateness of the women's world by providing that women be represented in the government of the whole society in an institutionalized manner, as well as by granting women autonomy in their own sphere" (Mba, 1982: 290-291).

### Colonial Period

The incorporation of the Nigerian geographical area into the vortex of colonialism produced far-reaching consequences which cut across social, political and economic boundaries. The basis of traditional order was threatened as imported colonial laws, political institutions and social structures consumed the preexisting order. Not one of the myriad African customs and values (including sex and sexuality) was immune to the formidable force of colonial implantations.

My subjects agree that colonial rule represents a paradox, for it had both beneficial as well as destructive consequences for the status of women. In Denzer's words, "The imposition of colonialism generated complex social interactions—sometimes beneficial, other times diminishing—of women's roles and status" (Denzer, 1994: 36). Mba also made a similar comment, "The position of women in southern Nigerian society was both diminishing and enhanced under colonialism" (Mba, 1982: 67). They also believe that women's power under colonial rule can be evaluated in terms of continuity and change. In other words, the old precolonial order continued (albeit with some transformation), while new developments occasioned by new political, legal and administrative machinery enhanced the emergence and consolidation of new patterns of gender relations.

Although women lost some of the power they wielded as traditional chiefs in the precolonial political structures, they gained from colonial government's legalization and illegalization of some practices such as woman-woman marriage, divorce, child betrothal, etc. The British considered these practices "uncivilized"/"barbaric" and an impediment



to their professed "civilizing" mission in Africa. While traditional customary laws stigmatized divorce, colonial laws afforded women the right to get out of unhappy marriages. Divorce cases mostly initiated by women increased tremendously, especially in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Divorcees remarried men who had the social and economic capital to help them achieve their goals. The colonial administrators' condemnation of the above cultural practices should not be taken to mean that they cared for the advancement of women. Conversely, colonial laws that favored women were accidental and of course a product of power negotiation between the colonial masters and their African subjects.

The reconfiguration of the notion of female elitism is perhaps one of the most outstanding developments under colonialism. Whereas precolonial society defined female elitism in terms of wealth or membership in influential traditional councils, royal families, religious groups, secret societies, and others, colonialism reconfigured the basic components of elitism by enhancing the ascendancy of another class of elite, namely, the educated elite (Awe, 1976; Denzer, 1998; Mba, 1982). The emergent, female educated elites acquired Western-style education, worked for the government as nurses, typists, teachers, and welfare and education officers, formed pressure groups, and denounced some "uncivilized" customs that tended to limit women's access to wealth. (Mba, 1982; 1987; 1987: 135-148; Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997; Denzer, 1989; 2002; 2004). In her monumental monograph *African Women Mobilized*, Mba shows how the new elites initiated what can be regarded as "the first wave of feminism" in colonial Nigeria. Before the appearance of Mba's work (the first monograph on Nigerian women's history), the mainstream African history tended to treat nationalism as a male agency, thus sidelining how women, especially educated elites, established voluntary associations and pressure groups, which demanded the improvement of women's welfare and the removal of the shackles of colonial rule. While male nationalists had one major hurdle (that is the white male colonial administrators) to contend with, their female counterparts, like Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa and Oyinkan Abayomi, as shown by Mba, needed to deal with both African and European misogynistic tendencies (Mba, 1982: chapters 6, 7 and 8).

Although the British colonial government introduced Victorian ideas which placed women at the ebb of the political and economic ladder, women leaders were not going to take the sexist colonial administrators for who they were. The idea of female agency runs through Denzer's and Mba's biographies of Folayegbe M. Akintunde-Ighodalo and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, respectively. The women elite condemned all aspects of colonial policies that disfavored women. They not only demanded female secondary schools (which they eventually got in 1927, when Queen College was established), but wanted women to be represented in the policy-making organ of the colonial state (Denzer, 1992: 118-123). Lagos elite women also played prominent roles in the promulgation of legislations for protecting female juveniles from social, sexual and "moral" danger (Aderinto, 2007: 1-22). Apparently, it was only through this that the interests of women could be adequately protected and vocalized.

In her study of women in government service, Denzer shows how the elites improved women's access to the gains of the colonial capitalist state through education, demanded the recruitment of women into government service, condemned the hiring of white women (mostly wives of Europeans officers) in place of African women and fought for equal pay for men and women. None of the demands of the elites were granted without considerable agitation and time-wasting on the part of the government, as Denzer illustrates. Indeed, the idea of employing women in government service, which was first broached in the early 1920s, was not favorably considered until the early 1940s. Women government workers did not earn the same salaries as men until 1956 (Denzer, 1989). The elites also played important roles in the consolidation of domestic science training for girls by adopting a sort of hybridization of Western and African elements of gender roles (Denzer, 1992: 116-139).

Although women leaders largely adopted peaceful politicking (exemplified in the form of writing petitions to the government and staging peaceful protests) in demanding better living conditions for their people, they were willing to resort to violence whenever the need arose. The history of women and violence helps to ventilate another aspect of women's history - popular mass movement or grassroots mobilization. Mba's critical analysis of the famous



“Women’s War of 1929” (derogatorily christened by the British colonialists as the Aba Women’s Riot) espouses the creative ingenuity of how “ordinary” women waged war against the government in order to avoid imminent economic stress and settle age-long exploitation. As the first major women’s resistance to colonial rule, the War led to the dissolution of the “Warrant Chief System” which the women of modern southeastern Nigeria complained about and the introduction of “reformist” policies which impacted Africans’ attitudes towards nationalism and decolonization (Mba, 1982: 68-97).

The story of colonialism and gendered violence can also be found among the women of present day Western Nigeria. As Mba narrates, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, popularly called “lioness of Lisabi”, led Abeokuta women through the numerous phases of the colonial government’s excesses and exploitation. Her Abeokuta Women’s Union (AWU) is “credited with being the primary force behind the abdication of the traditional ruler of the Egba, Alake (King) Ademola II in January 1949” (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997: 63).

### Conclusion

Mba, Awe and Denzer’s scholarship was purpose-driven: they taught and researched various aspects of women’s history because of their conviction that African women should be studied on their own terms. Their contribution to Africanist studies will stand the test of time not only because they were pioneering historians of women’s issues and concerns but because of their creativity and brilliance, and the credibility of their methodologies, sources and claims. Although one could argue that they did not venture into certain areas of women’s history, especially sexuality, and tended to concentrate on the precolonial and colonial periods, it is indisputable that their scholarship was influenced by the socio-political atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s and the politics of production of knowledge of the time. Access to data also influenced their choice of topics as well as the period covered. The absence of government’s official documents produced since the late 1950s means that my subjects and other historians have to wait until this class of sources is declassified to study the post-independence era in earnest. This certainly explains why the colonial period is the most studied period of Nigerian history.

Obvious imbalances can also be noticed in the areas of biographies. Like mainstream African history, these writers of women’s history also concentrate too much on the elite women and paid limited attention to “ordinary” women. There is no gainsaying the fact that they inherited some of the biases of the mainstream African history which tends to neglect the roles of the “commoners” in historical experience. Like historians of mainstream African history, they can also be accused of focusing more on political history, while neglecting other aspects of women’s history, especially social and economic. This imbalance is being addressed by emerging women’s historians like Gloria Chuku and Nwando Achebe whose work explores women’s social and economic history.

A new anthology edited by Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher, among others, addresses the age-long politics of location, identity and production of knowledge about gender and women in Africa. Instead of treading the oft-repeated route of polarized identity politics that has characterized discourse on gender in Africa, the editors and contributors of this volume believe that collaboration between scholars of gender studies living and working in Africa and their North American and European counterparts is crucial for promoting healthy academic interaction and flow of information (Cole, Manuh and Miescher, 2007). In other words, the identity and location of the production of knowledge should not represent a sort of binary opposition but friends and partners in progress. The line-up of contributors and editors, which include scholars from West, southern and East Africa, Europe and America, validates this lofty mission (Aderinto, 2009).

### Notes

1. Awe (a Nigerian) retired from the University of Ibadan in 1998. Mba, originally from Australia, married a Nigerian and moved to the country in 1967. She died in 2002 at the age of 58. Denzer, (a United States citizen) was a faculty member at the University of Ibadan from 1982 to 1998. She currently teaches history at the Santa Clara University, USA. The trio received their doctorate degrees from Oxford University, UK, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and University of Birmingham,



- UK, respectively. Their names are arranged in no particular order.
2. Because of limited space, I have carefully selected the major works of these scholars that help to drive home the intent of this chapter. I dedicated an entire chapter to Awe's scholarship in my forthcoming co-authored book titled, *History and the Nation-State: Nigeria and its Nationalist Historians*, Rochester University Press. I am currently preparing another essay on Denzer which I intend to send to *History in Africa*.

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