

CHAPTER SEVEN

OF HISTORICAL VISIBILITY
AND EPISTEMOLOGY:
HISTORY AND HISTORIANS
OF NIGERIAN WOMEN

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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 volumes on African history, treats women's history ephemerally.¹ This skewed emphasis is equally true of the *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, a project commissioned by the Historical Society of Nigeria to provide a comprehensive and accessible knowledge of the history of the Nigerian peoples.² The inadequate 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 mainstream of Africa's past. Rather, it seems that mainstream African scholarship—dominated largely by men—was just uncritical or unconvinced when it came to accepting the 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 Africanist scholarship. Not only do departments in the various universities in and outside Africa now offer courses on African women, but research centers, journals, and professional associations aimed at specifically promoting women's scholarship now exist as well.³ Academic conferences and symposia on women and gender in Africa are regularly held in various parts of the world.⁴ Proceedings of such conferences and professional meetings are occasionally published in book form—thereby adding to the growing body of literature on women's

and gender studies.⁵ Collaboration between Europe- and North America-based scholars and their African counterparts has increased tremendously in spite of the protracted ideological ferment, which cuts across race, gender and sexuality, cross-cultural conceptualization of feminism, and the historical geography of women's experiences.⁶

This chapter investigates the ideological origin of Nigerian women's and gender history by examining the pioneering scholarship of Bolanle Awe, LaRay Denzer, and Nina Mba.⁷ Awe, a Nigerian, retired from the University of Ibadan's Institute of African Studies in 1998 after an impressive teaching and research career covering more than three decades.⁸ Mba, originally from Australia, married a Nigerian and moved to the country in 1967. She died in 2002 at the age of 58.⁹ Denzer, a United States citizen, was a faculty member at the University of Ibadan from 1982 until 1998. She also served as the chair of the university's History Department between 1995 and 1997. The trio received their doctorates from Oxford University, the University of Ibadan, and the University of Birmingham, respectively. These pioneering historians vigorously pursued their agenda of creating visibility for women's history by adopting the following approaches: (1) delving into the biographies of prominent heroines;¹⁰ (2) examining the changing political and economic status of women since the precolonial period;¹¹ (3) exhuming women's contributions to nationalism and decolonization;¹² (4) raising pertinent historiographical questions about women and their place in history;¹³ and (5) establishing a research and resource center for women's studies, organizing conferences, and collaborating with scholars on a worldwide basis.¹⁴

Although historians of Nigeria have carried out critical historiographical work on "mainstream" historical scholarship, they have largely neglected that of women's and gender history. The purpose of this historiographical chapter on women and gender in Nigeria is not only to make accessible the stores of knowledge produced by historians, but to map the changing character of the relationship between knowledge and power. Moreover, there is inherent value in appreciating the influence that pioneering scholars have had on younger generations of thinkers, and in highlighting the ongoing dialogue between "new" and "old" historiographies. I posit that one of the best means of coming to terms with the evolution of academic scholarship and the varied approaches to studying peoples and societies is by engaging how prominent scholars have grappled with the wondrous task of creating academic visibility for historically marginalized groups.

Women's history developed as an ideology aimed at correcting the misrepresentation of the place of women in history. The pioneers of this field were deeply interested in showing that, like men, women also contributed to the great civilizations of Africa that are persistently referenced as indicators of Africans' glorious past. Thus, if mainstream Nigerian history developed in the late 1950s as an ideological weapon of the nationalist struggle and as a defensive reaction against Eurocentric representations of Africans as peoples without history who had to be placed under colonialism, women's history emerged as a counterdiscourse against the marginalization of women in the history of state and empire building. In addition, it sought to challenge both the widespread notion that all women of the world share the same experience of patriarchal exploitation and the attempt to study African women strictly through the lens of Western historical formation.¹⁵

Hence, Mba's, Awe's, and Denzer's careers were shaped by external and internal challenges. While the idea of the homogenization of women's experience of patriarchy came from Western feminists who were and are largely uncritical of local peculiarities and variations such as the effects of colonial rule on the role and status of women served as an external impetus, the sidelining of women's historical significance is largely an internal African epistemological challenge.¹⁶ In other words, mainstream African history was largely responsible for repressing African women's history. Men dominated the academic study of Nigeria because they had a head start in education and career opportunities that were not readily accessible to women. It is not out of order to identify the late start for women's history as one of the legacies of colonialism.

I examine the works of these scholars as a single piece because they all share a similar ideological orientation toward women's history. Although their work focuses primarily on southern Nigeria, their cardinal arguments—that local experience and knowledge rather than Western conceptions should influence data analysis and discourses—make their scholarship of Africa-wide importance. They belong to the same generation of thinkers who created credibility for women's and gender studies as a viable subfield of Nigerian history. Even when they tackle similar subjects such as the place of colonialism in African history, they provide highly complementary conclusions that enhance our understanding of women's historical experience.

Challenging the Homogenization of Women's Experiences: Methodological Issues in Nigerian Women's History

One of the most dominant discourses on women and gender in Africa is the refusal by Africanists (mostly African-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 *Invention of Women* and other notable publications, Awe is probably the first Nigerian academic to openly identify the imposition of this Western feminist discourse.¹⁷ In her reflection on the 1977 Conference on Women and Development held at Wellesley College, Awe criticizes the assumption that women—irrespective of culture, time, and place—are subjected to the same form of patriarchal exploitation. She admonishes scholars to examine the actual experiences of women from a local perspective instead of a sort of general/global outlook. African and Western societies, Awe reminds us, did not share the same historical experience. Historical differences like Western imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and neocolonialism have far-reaching consequences for the role and status of African women—making their experience different from their Western counterparts.¹⁸ According to Awe:

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.¹⁹

Her solution to the misrepresentation of African women's experience is that Africa-based scholars who understand the cultural landscape should lead the scholarly investigation into 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.²⁰

She also calls for the establishment of research facilities for collecting data, outlining research priorities, getting research grants, initiating projects, and brainstorming for the government on women-centered issues. 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 by their African counterparts. Her affirmation is like a manifesto or theoretical framework that can guide the interpretation of African women's history. She was also aware of how Western academic perspectives dominated African discourses until the birth of modern African historiography in the late 1950s. Similar to Dike's defensive argument that African history should be studied from the perspectives of Africans, Awe advocated that African women's history should be studied from the perspective of African women, with due recognition of significant historical developments and forces like colonialism that shaped their experience in diverse ways and produced contradictory outcomes.

Awe's vision for greater participation of Africa-based scholars in investigating African history was not realized, even with the establishment of the Women's Research and Documentation Center, a research outfit she helped establish in 1987.²¹ North American and European feminists armed with Western ideas of gender relations and patriarchy continue to monopolize discourses on gender and sexuality in Africa. What factors account for this Western monopoly of knowledge? In an editorial in the 1991 *Signs* special issue on African women, Awe, as lead editor, and her collaborating editors (Susan Geiger, Nina Mba, Marjorie Mbilinyi, Ruth Meena, and Margaret Strobel) lamented the impact of economic recession and poor access to academic facilities on production of knowledge. The editorial comments that because of inadequate access to teaching and research materials in Africa, scholars based in Europe and North America dominate the discourse on African women: "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."²²

The editorial comments dovetail with the problems Awe encountered while trying to get her *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* published. She recalls 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.”²³ Although Nigeria’s economic strangulations negatively impacted the university system, a few dedicated scholars like Awe, Mba, and Denzer continued to weather the storm, producing well-researched histories that place Nigerian women at the center of their own experience. By the 1990s US- and Europe-based African scholars joined their Nigerian counterparts in rendering African-centered narratives about the changing status of women. Detailed historical analyses of gender and power focusing on the importance of language and cultural geography in molding the experience of women across societies and time took the center stage. In a nutshell, instead of searching for general assumptions about women and agency that had roots outside the African academic and cultural landscape, scholars have dug deep into the history of specific ethnicities and the place of women within them.

It is important to note that scholars, regardless of their location or base, are aware of and have been sensitive to the need to tell women’s stories endogenously.²⁴ An anthology published in 2007 addresses the politics of location, identity, and production of knowledge about gender and women in Africa. Instead of treading the vociferous route of polarized identity politics that has characterized discourse on gender in Africa, the editors and contributors 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.²⁵ Identity and location of production of knowledge should represent not a sort of binary opposition, but friends and partners in progress. The lineup of contributors and editors, which includes scholars from West, southern, and East Africa as well as from Europe and North America, validates this lofty mission.²⁶

Aside from the idea of homogenizing women’s experience, the absence or presence of homosexuality in Africa has become another subject involving tension between Western and African-born scholars. While the former occasionally relied on fragmentary and often incoherent information about same-sex affairs to legitimize the presence in Africa of homosexuality—a practice some Africans persistently construct as “alien,” “nonnormative,” “un-African,” “Western import”—the latter generally believe that certain observable traits of affection between people of the same sex should not be eroticized.²⁷ For example, in the preface to her widely read book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Ifi Amadiume categorically states that woman-to-woman marriage among the Nnobi Igbo should not be confused for lesbianism, arguing that support and cooperation between women “do not imply lesbian sexual practice.”²⁸ Amadiume directs her argument at black American lesbians who adopt

“prejudiced interpretations of African situations to justify their choices of sexual alternatives which have their roots and meanings in the West.”²⁹

Women and Historical Visibility: The Precolonial, Colonial, and Postindependence Eras

As we have seen, modern African history emerged as men’s history and as a defensive response to the Eurocentric propaganda that Africans required external political agency because of their inability to govern themselves. Commenting on male-centered interpretations 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.”³⁰ In the preface to her *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, the first book-length academic monograph on Nigerian women’s history, Mba shares Awe’s views about the “imprisonment” of women’s experience in mainstream Nigerian history: “In the literature on twentieth-century Nigerian political history by both historians and political scientists, the role of women has generally been relegated to the footnotes.”³¹ Even when women’s activities are mentioned, they are reduced to the impact of colonial policies on them, not on women’s perception and understanding of their own power or influence in the society.

It was obvious that a new history that would recognize the contributions of women to African experience had to be written. Writing women into history was necessary to unveil the extent of power they wielded and the roles they played in the development of their various societies in the precolonial and colonial periods. It is therefore a project targeted at creating visibility and voice for a group whose experiences were sidelined in mainstream historical knowledge. This project was anchored on Awe, Mba, and Denzer’s shared conviction that women contributed greatly to all aspects of state and empire formation: from waging wars and making peace to providing the economic foundation and resources that enhanced political stability and the flourishing of cultures, values, and ideas. It was thus a counternarrative that seeks to integrate women into the conventional narrative of heroic exploits, which tended to be considered a male preserve. Location helped Mba, Awe, and Denzer to adequately rise to this occasion: their base in Nigeria—one of the birthplaces of modern African historiography—provided the intellectual

arena to showcase their ideas, test their assumptions, and create the necessary academic awareness for professional study of women's issues and gender.

At the outset, the availability of credible and accessible written sources—especially on the precolonial period—posed a major challenge to these pioneering scholars. They scaled this hurdle by relying on oral tradition, a genre of sources that helped create legitimacy for modern African history from the late 1950s. Oral traditions supplemented the scanty references to women's activities recorded in the traveling journals of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missionaries, merchants, and explorers. Public history—sometimes condensed into music, proverbs, and popular sayings—of towns, lineages, and communities is replete with the stories of women's heroism and agency. Some praise names provide a much needed window into the nature of women's social and political existence before the imposition of British colonialism.³² Although colonial archival materials contain information about women during the colonial period, they are often incoherent and biased. Colonial narratives generally treated women as objects, not subjects, of history. Indeed, women's activities only received serious documentation when they challenged the exploitative character of imperialism or when they posed a danger to the prevailing status quo.³³ Colonial bias toward women in the archival documents is not surprising: imperialism was a male-centered project par excellence—created by men and for men.³⁴ The paucity of documentary colonial archival materials on women necessitated the use of another body of sources—namely, life histories. Denzer, Mba, and Awe were able to collect a large body of oral information because when they began to write in the 1970s and 1980s, most of the prominent women politicians and nationalists were still alive.

The Precolonial Era

Historians have traditionally used the sociopolitical cum economic situation in precolonial Africa as a yardstick for gauging the impact of colonialism on Nigerians and Africans at large. As one of the eras in African history, the precolonial period is significant for it demonstrates the extent to which societies could manage their own affairs independently and creatively. The invention as well as evolution of core aspects of most African cultures is traceable to this period. Although external contacts dating back centuries impacted certain historical aspects of state formation, historians generally contend that the core components of African civilizations are indigenous to the continent. This defense of the

originality and indigeneity of civilization to Africa found expression in the counteracting of Eurocentric ideas that pointed to evidence of influences from sophisticated cultures extraneous to the continent.³⁵ In researching the history of the precolonial period, scholars harken back to the political developments that produced influential African men who in turn contributed immensely to the development of their various societies. Although such stories of big men in history tend to be exaggerated, a genre of history that spotlights the brilliance of African leadership served its principal goal of challenging the rhetorical charge of African political systems' backwardness.³⁶ As significant as this project was, it was imbalanced in that it focused only on elite men in Africa's historical process. Women did not receive the merit they deserve as empire and state builders, political stabilizers, and cultural forces to be reckoned with.

In redressing this jaundiced disposition toward women's historical agency, Awe, Mba, and Denzer turned to the careers of great women and chieftaincy institutions. Awe's anthology *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* clearly establishes the immense power women wielded as queens, priestesses, royal wives, princesses, and so on, in precolonial Nigeria.³⁷ They not only led wars of territorial expansion but also ruled over large domains in peacetime.³⁸ The stories of Inkpi of Igala, Moremi of Ile-Ife, and the queen of Duara as narrated by Awe validate the creative ingenuity of women in business, politics, unification, territorial expansion, and defense.³⁹ These women, according to Awe, "participated in the events that brought new dynasties and governments into power. On each occasion, they displayed a tremendous sense of patriotism and sacrificed their most prized possessions; they played the part of the saviours of their societies in preventing disaster and hardship."⁴⁰ On Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, Awe demonstrates how this powerful woman used her wealth and social influence to help Ibadan, the most militarized state in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, in its numerous military exploits.⁴¹ She financed military expeditions and allowed her hundreds of slaves to work for the state. Although her male counterparts in the council of chiefs would later conspire to terminate her obviously increasing influence, Efunsetan, as Awe explicates, epitomizes the indispensable roles women played in the political processes leading to the consolidation of statehood.

The impressive exploits of Efunsetan Aniwura, Moremi, and Inkpi are no exception. Drawing from oral traditions and written sources, Denzer demonstrates that between the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, six women 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 (1511–52).⁴² The twelfth *deji* (*oba*) of Akure was succeeded by his daughter, Eye Aro Obabinrin. Even oral traditions of Ile-Ife, the spiritual home of the Yoruba, recalled that two women were crowned as *ooni* (king); and in Oyo, a major Yoruba polity, a woman named Orompoto commanded an impressive cavalry that significantly expanded the frontiers of the empire.⁴³ A more detailed cross-cultural evolution of women's political and economic power in precolonial times is given in Mba's foundational work, *Nigerian Women Mobilized*. Unlike Awe and Denzer, who focus on Yoruba women and the elite, Mba gives attention not only to the political power of Yoruba women but also to that of women of other ethnicities in southern Nigeria, such as Igbo, Benin, Itsekiri, Ijo, Kalabari, and Efik.

Awe, Mba, and Denzer remind us that it is misleading to conclude that the totality of women's precolonial past revolved around political leadership, state formation, and empire building. The history of women in precolonial times is incomplete without the experience of "ordinary" women who produced the resources and supplied the labor that kept the leaders in power. Women's involvement in agriculture, craft making, and long-distance trade not only provided the essential materials that sustained life, but created the necessary balance in societies that practiced a flexible and complementary division of labor and production. A careful reading of the enormous data presented by Mba, Awe, and Denzer reveals that women's influence in the political, economic, and religious/spiritual spheres varied from culture to culture and was shaped by divergent cultural and physical geographies. Indeed, this counterdiscourse against the homogenization of women establishes that the practices and performance of gender varied across time and space—even within the limited area of southern Nigeria. For instance, Denzer points out that while Igbo women were involved in farm cultivation, their Yoruba counterparts chiefly harvested and marketed farm produce.⁴⁴

As varied as women's political and economic roles were in precolonial times, a certain thread runs through their experience. Unlike in Western societies where women were treated as inferior opposite of men, in southern 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."⁴⁵ The cumulative

importance of research on precolonial women's history is that it establishes the historical context of the "powerlessness" of women in colonial and postindependence Nigeria. If a majority of Nigerian women were victims of state oppression and did not make economic headway in the colonial and postcolonial eras, it is because colonialism introduced new hierarchical ideas of gender that placed them in subordinate positions.

Women and Historical Visibility: The Colonial Period

The incorporation of the Nigerian geographic area into the vortex of colonialism produced far-reaching consequences that 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. Virtually no aspect of African customs and values (including sex and sexuality) was immune to the formidable force of colonialism.

Awe, Denzer, and Mba 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."⁴⁶ Mba made a similar comment: "The position of women in southern Nigerian society was both diminishing and enhanced under colonialism."⁴⁷ 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 somewhat transformed), while new developments occasioned by the political, legal, and administrative machinery of colonialism enhanced the emergence and consolidation of new patterns of gender relations.

The body of work produced about women and gender in colonial Nigeria therefore focuses both on the intended and the unintended consequences of imperial politics, nationalism, women's resistance to colonial rule, and the contributions of women to decolonization. Although women lost some of the power they wielded in precolonial political structures, they benefited from the colonial government's legalization of such practices as divorce.⁴⁸ While traditional customary laws made divorce difficult to seek, colonial laws afforded women the right to get out of unhappy marriages.⁴⁹ Divorce cases mostly initiated by women increased tremendously, especially in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Divorcées remarried and sought relationships that helped them achieve their life goals.

Apparent elements of continuity and change complement the contradictory outcomes of colonialism. In the case of the female chieftaincy institution, adaptation to the new imperial status quo varied from culture to culture. It was also shaped by the personality of the women, and the type of relationship they established with the council of chiefs, on the one hand, and the colonial masters (district or resident officers), on the other. In a study of Ibadan politics and society, Denzer examines how the *iyalode* female chieftaincy institution adapted to unprecedented political changes precipitated by imperialism.⁵⁰ Although the *iyalodes* lost their powers to keep slaves and support military exploits, new administrative arrangements transformed their identity and added new roles to preexisting ones. Not only did the female chiefs lead market women in resisting the imposition of a direct income tax by the colonialists, but the British came to depend on them to garner support for wartime policies. As it happened, the *iyalodes* and other prominent chiefs became indispensable to the colonial matrix that occasionally required women's support and mobilization for collective gains.⁵¹ During the period of decolonization and party politics, the *iyalodes'* position according to Denzer was strengthened as they became a major force assisting the realization of politicians' ambitions.

The reconfiguration of the criteria of female elitism is also a feature of colonial transformation. Whereas elite women in precolonial times were wealthy aristocrats and/or members of influential traditional councils, royal families, religious groups, and secret societies, Christianity and colonialism paved the way for the rise of another class of women—those who received Western education.⁵² Such women became elite by virtue of their acquisition and exposure to Western education and social customs and access to the political infrastructure of colonialism. Although numerically few in number, these women, including Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa and Oyinkan Abayomi, were highly influential. Some of them were direct descendants of Christian converts and ex-slave returnees from Sierra Leone and the Americas who spearheaded the first phase of cultural nationalism in Nigeria during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵³ As Mba and Denzer demonstrate, they worked for the government as nurses, typists, teachers, and welfare and education officers. They also formed pressure groups such as the Lagos Women's League, the Nigerian Women's Party, and the Federation of Nigerian Women's Associations, which denounced some "uncivilized" customs that obstructed women's upward mobility.⁵⁴ Mba shows how the new elites initiated what can be regarded as "the first wave of feminism" in Nigeria. Before the appearance of Mba's *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, mainstream African history treated

nationalism as solely a male story—thus sidelining how women established voluntary associations and pressure groups to demand 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 British male colonial administrators—to contend with, their female counterparts, as shown by Mba, contested both Africans and British chauvinism.⁵⁵

Women's political mobilization occasionally defied gentle politicking—exemplified by writing petitions to the government and staging peaceful protests—in demanding better living conditions for women. Women of colonial Nigeria, as in precolonial times, were willing and able to take up arms against the colonialists whenever the situation warranted. 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 battled the government to avoid impending economic stress and register their grievances against the system that threatened their means of livelihood.⁵⁶ Women, traditionally indexed as weak and submissive, shocked the entire infrastructure of imperialism, not only in Nigeria but throughout Africa. The war, besides compelling the colonialists to abandon the unpopular "Warrant Chief System," led to serious administrative interest in the history of gender and social relations before the establishment of colonialism. Mba and other historians, including Adiele Afigbo and Judith Van Allen, have argued that the "Women's War" served as one of the preludes to nationalism and decolonization.⁵⁷ After critically examining the testimonies given by women at the numerous commissions of inquiry set up after the conflict, Mba concludes the "women's war was very much a feminist movement in the sense that the women were very conscious of the special role of women, the importance of women to society, and the assertion of their rights as women vis-à-vis the men."⁵⁸ The story of colonialism and gendered violence can also be found among the women of present-day western Nigeria. In a book-length biography of Funnmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the "lioness of Lisabi," Mba and coauthor Cheryl Johnson-Odim uncover how Abeokuta women waged formidable protests against both the colonial and the traditional authorities. Ransome-Kuti's 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."⁵⁹

The above analysis implies that colonialism went beyond the political control of one society by another; it extended as well to the infiltration of ideology, customs, and values that are extraneous to Nigerian society and its established norms. Although most of Awe, Denzer, and Mba's

scholarship deals with the political aspects of women's lives under colonial rule or how they resisted and responded to the colonial state's policies of marginalization, some of their works examine such aspects of colonial institution as girls' education, connecting it to the larger imperial practices of molding Nigeria in the British way. In a piece on training in domestic science, Denzer draws on missionary and colonial records to establish the changing perceptions of girlhood education and the idea of domesticity.⁶⁰ Until the late 1920s, the missionaries were principally responsible for spearheading Western education, to which the colonial government paid lip service. The missionaries established domestic education to prepare girls mainly for roles as wives and mothers in accordance with their broader project of gaining converts. Hence, they basically imported the Victorian idea that women's place is in the home. According to Denzer, the missionaries' idea of domesticity did not wholly contravene the Yoruba's—women were also expected to cook, clean the house, raise the kids, and perform all the main domestic chores.⁶¹ However, unlike the middle-class European women who were mainly confined to the private domain, Yoruba women also participated in long- and short-distance trade, public politics, and religion. Thus, Yoruba women, as Denzer establishes, played both private and public roles.

Denzer unveils how leading educators of the period came to realize the importance of hygiene, orderliness, politeness, comportment, and so on that domestic education offered. If the missionaries felt that domestic training would help raise a new generation of middle-class Christian wives, the colonial state in addition to this saw it as a means of improving the health of the citizenry, especially in the areas of maternal and infant mortality. Implicitly, the focus on domestic science from the mid-nineteenth century laid the foundation of the marginalization of women in politics. Whereas men were prepared to take up public responsibilities as wage earners and laborers, women were prepared, by missionary and domestic education, mainly for the courtyard. Despite these negative consequences of domestic science, Denzer opines that some women were able to translate skills like dressmaking and needlework into commercial enterprises; the number of seamstresses, most of whom went through missionary and colonial-style domestic science training, grew rapidly from the 1940s through the 1960s in response to the demand of educated women who craved Western-style attire.⁶²

The story of girls' education is also closely connected with women's employment in the colonial service. According to Denzer, in a study entitled *Women in Government Service in Colonial Nigeria*, the limited access to girls' education before World War II was principally responsible

for their lack of opportunity in the colonial service. In addition, the curriculum of missionary and early colonial education was tilted toward preparing women for their roles as mothers, not as active participants in the colonial state's administrative and political affairs, Denzer notes. The Lagos Women's League and Nigerian Women's Party put pressure on the colonial government to open up opportunities for girls' education. They also demanded the recruitment of women into government service, condemned the hiring of white women (mostly wives of European officers) in place of African women, and fought for equal pay for men and women.⁶³ The earliest women employees worked as hostel matrons. Eventually, the Department of Medical Service employed more women than all other government departments combined.

Nigerian Women and Historical Visibility: The Postindependence Period

Nigeria's attainment of self-rule in 1960 heralded new developments, which had far-reaching impacts on the experience of women, the kinds of history written about them, and the methodology deployed. The culture of violent takeover of government in postindependence Nigeria deprived citizens of their democratic rights to elect their leaders, militarized the state, and further worsened the ability of women to mobilize for institutional reforms. In general, the postcolonial African states, managed entirely by elite African men, continued to pay lip service to women's agency. Hence, the demise of colonialism did not end the marginalization of women in African politics but merely transformed it. Mba sums up the similarity between Nigerian women under colonialism and under self-rule, "Colonial and military states affected women similarly in terms of structures and style of government. Both operated a bureaucratic centralism in which women were either not represented or only marginally so."⁶⁴

Awe's, Denzer's, and Mba's works on postcolonial history continue to follow the pattern of unveiling women's engagement with the state in the areas of political participation, activism, and the birth of scholarly research on women and gender. Mba's work on women and postcolonial institutions titled "Kaba and Khaki" critically underscores the quest by women to create political agency under military dictatorship.⁶⁵ The military that seized power from democratically elected male leaders in January 1966 claiming that the country's extant resources had been poorly managed did not consider women as important political actors. According to Mba, women responded to their political marginalization by forming radical and grassroots-based pressure groups such as the League of

Women Voters (1978) and Women in Nigeria (1982).⁶⁶ The appointment of a few women to administrative positions—in response to fervent agitation—did not really translate into the empowerment of the vast majority of women. The stumbling block erected by the military administration coupled with internal divisions within the women's movement, Mba opines, best explain the inability of women to effectively mobilize for institutional transformation.

Military dictatorship (like civilian rule) in postindependence Nigeria was an anomaly—not only because it deprived women of serious political participation and continued some of the practices of the colonial masters, but also because it made influential women the target of state-sponsored violence. No other work appropriately captures the intersection of wealth, power, politics, and state-sponsored assassination than Denzer's piece on the political circumstances leading to the murders of Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, the wife of Chief M. K. O. Abiola, the presumed winner of the 1993 presidential election; Alhaja Suliat Adedeji, a wealthy Oyo State politician; and Chief Esther Bisoye Tejuoso, the *iyalode* of Egbaland.⁶⁷ Although these women belonged to different generations and acquired their wealth in different spheres of the economy, they were all involved in the muck of politics at the national, state, and grassroots levels. According to Denzer, they were involved either in campaigning against the draconian policies of the military leadership and aspiring to become the First Lady (as in the case of Abiola) or attempting to adequately reposition themselves in the politics of their state and community (Tejuoso and Adedeji). Although several critics of the military leaders between 1985 and 1998 were murdered in an extrajudicial manner, the assassinations of Abiola, Adedeji, and Tejuoso in 1996 added a new dimension to political oppression: the public felt that women, as mothers and wives, should not be direct victims of state brutality. Commenting on the paradox of wealth and fame, Denzer opines, "Wealth accumulation and display signifies social independence, but it also entails risk and invites envy. . . . Their political engagement represented a commitment to deploy part of their wealth to actualize their ideas about development and nation building. Tejuoso, Adedeji, and Abiola demonstrated their independence from their male colleagues and showed that they could underwrite their political aspirations through their personal resources."⁶⁸

The crisis of development that engulfed Nigeria, like other African states, negatively affected all people regardless of gender. However, economic stagnation seems to have greater impact on women because of their colonially rooted history of economic disempowerment. In a very impressive story of the impact of structural adjustment programs (SAPs)

and devaluation on Ibadan and Lagos, Denzer unveils the contradictory impact of this controversial economic program on the women's garment and fashion industry.⁶⁹ At the outset, SAP brought new opportunities for women seamstresses and tailors who capitalized on the prohibition of imported readymade cloth into Nigeria to launch dressmaking and fashion design businesses. However, during the 1990s, the weakness of Nigeria's currency (naira) against other world currencies, unemployment, and poverty negatively impacted the garment industry.⁷⁰ As Denzer notes, tailor-made dresses could not compete with secondhand clothes (locally called *okrika*, *tokumbo*, *bend-down boutique*, and *bus corner*), which were cheaper and widely available in the major markets. In addition, apprenticeship which supplied much of the labor in the business, and entrepreneurship declined as the cost of setting up a tailoring business increased due to the devaluation of the naira. This is definitely one of Denzer's most impressive works focusing on "ordinary" women as against the elite.⁷¹ Utilizing rare newspapers and hundreds of interviews, Denzer takes a penetrating look into the economy of dressmaking and the fashion industry, situating it within the epileptic character of the Nigerian state. She tells the story of the adaptation of tailors and seamstresses to Nigeria's fluctuating economy and the internal politics of tailors' associations that manifested amid the conflict between old and new ideas about "modernizing" the profession.⁷²

But not all of Awe's, Denzer's, and Mba's works focus mainly on women as heroines, agents of social change, or victims of colonial and postcolonial patriarchy. Some focus on women's contributions to the career of men whose professional and private existence was shaped by postcolonial realities of nation building and neocolonialism. In her essay on Fela Anikulapo Kuti, one of Africa's most iconic artistes and social critics, Denzer unmasks how his musical career was positively influenced by his mother (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti), his legal wife (Remilekun Taylor), his mistress (Sandra Izsadore), and dozens of other wives, some of whom were his dancers and staff.⁷³ Indeed, few scholars know how his relationships and contacts with these women of different ethnicities, generations, and ideologies impacted his views about the relationship between the citizen and the state, on the one hand, and the state and the international community, on the other. Furthermore, although academic and popular literature persistently reference women's contributions to men's lives, very few scholars critically engage the impacts women have in their various aspects and stages.

Having learned about the anticolonialism movement, pan-Africanism, Marxism, and Yoruba spirituality from his mother; and gaining exposure

to civil rights issues and Black Power through Sandra Izsadore, Fela stormed the musical scene and became one of the most controversial African artistes of all time. As Denzer demonstrates, his dozens of wives not only provided sex, which Fela considered as a major energizing force for his creativity, but also served as links between him and his ancestors. If writing about Fela's political ideas and public persona is controversial because of his eccentric lifestyle (especially his smoking of Indian hemp on stage), then writing about the women in his life definitely requires even greater caution. Denzer attempts to reconcile some of these contradictions by contextualizing his conduct, which was deemed unacceptable by some highly placed Christian members of the Yoruba elite, within the framework of his critique of poor governance and neocolonialism. As Denzer notes, "Fela's ideology focused on the primacy of reclaiming and reconstructing African cultural tradition, democracy, equity, personal freedom, and sex."⁷⁴ Women were attracted to Fela, not just because of his stardom, but because he provided them with a livelihood and shelter, which the Nigerian state deprived its citizenry of.

Conclusion

My primary objective in this chapter is to trace the evolution of scholarly research on Nigerian women and gender by critically engaging the scholarship of Nina Mba, LaRay Denzer, and Bolanle Awe. I argue that historiographical essays on careers of leading or pioneering historians are important to the appraisal of the diverse interpretations given to both well-known and obscure aspects of the human past. Since historians are primarily responsible for retracing the past, critical studies of their academic careers help to map the evolution, trends, and dynamics of branches of history, on the one hand, and the relationship between knowledge and power, on the other. In addition, since knowledge production operates on a continuum, the influence that older historiographies have on newer or emerging ones is important for shedding light into the changing interpretation of a society's past. Moreover, this chapter corrects an obvious imbalance in historiographical research. While scholars have studied how "mainstream" Nigerian historians tackle various aspects of Nigerian history, little is known about how women's historians grapple with the challenges of ventilating women's past.

As we have seen, Awe's, Denzer's, and Mba's careers are closely connected to the rise of academic research on Nigerian women. This chapter therefore serves as an entry into the relationship between agency and the production of knowledge. The relatively late start for women's

history as a subfield of mainstream Nigerian history is attributable, in part, to the dominance of men in researching the history of the country. The field of academic history in Nigeria is not unlike that in any country of the Western world, which, until the 1980s, translated largely to the history of men and their place in society. Hence from the outset, the task of writing women into Nigerian history—like the writing of Africans into world history—started as a defensive project aimed at exploring the fabulous achievements of women in state formation and empire building. While Dike, Ajayi, Obaro Ikime, and other pioneers of nationalist historiography researched the precolonial history of Nigeria to show the achievements of great men in building and ruling over large expanses of territory and the ability of Africans to rule themselves, Awe, Denzer and Mba have done something similar—researching and bringing into the limelight the careers of powerful women who devoted their entire life's work to advancing their societies. The highly impressive stories of great queens, queen mothers, female warriors, and chiefs validate the significance of female agency in the history of African civilization.

The scholarship of Mba, Awe, and Denzer was purpose driven: they taught and researched various aspects of women's history because of a shared conviction that African women should be studied in their own right. For them, women's history must be told through their engagement with the larger society and through the processes and narratives that placed them at the center of their own story. Women must be presented as active, not passive, participants in the making and interpretation of their histories. Denzer's, Awe's, and Mba's contributions to Africanist studies will stand the test of time not only because they were pioneering historians of women 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, particularly sexuality, and tended to concentrate more on the colonial and postindependence periods, their careers were shaped in part by the sociopolitical atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s and the politics of the production of knowledge at the time. Access to data also influenced their choice of topics as well as the periods covered. The fact that the Nigerian government's official documents produced since the late 1950s are as yet unclassified has meant that they and other historians have to wait to study the postindependence era in earnest. This certainly explains why the colonial period is the most studied period of Nigerian history.

Notes

¹ Bolanle Awe, "Writing Women into History: The Nigerian Experience," in *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, ed. Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Rendall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 211–12; and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Gender Biases in African Historiography," in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, ed. Oyeronke Oyewumi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 207–32.

² See Obaro Ikime, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980).

³ A prominent journal that publishes articles exclusively on African women is *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women's Studies*. Articles on African women and gender also appear in such highly rated publications as *Journal of Women's History*, *Gender & History*, and *Signs*. Research centers include the Women's Research and Documentation Center, University of Ibadan; and the Institute for Education of Women in Africa and the Diaspora, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

⁴ Examples include the annual Women in Africa and the African Diaspora Conference; the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Conference, University of Texas at Austin, March 2010; the first African Diaspora and Continental Women in Leadership Conference, January 2009; and "Black Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: Identity, Culture, and Politics," June 2000.

⁵ See, for instance, Obioma Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998); and Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher, eds., *Africa after Gender?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

⁶ Nnaemeka, *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power*.

⁷ Their names are listed in no particular order.

⁸ See the book edited in her honor: Ifeoma Isiugo-Abanije et al., eds., *Bolanle Awe: Portrait of an Academic and Activist* (Ibadan: WORDOC, 1999). As important as this volume is, Awe's contributions to gender and women's history do not receive critical attention.

⁹ Bolanle Awe, "Obituary: Dr. Nina Mba, 24th April 1944–14th January 2002," *Feminist Africa: Intellectual Politics*, no. 1 (2002): <http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/dr-nina-mba>.

¹⁰ See, among others, Bolanle Awe, ed., *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* (Lagos: Sankore Publishers and Bookcraft, 1992); Bolanle Awe, "The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System," in *Sexual Stratification: A Cross-Cultural View*, ed. Alice Schlegel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 144–60; Nina Mba, "Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti," in *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, 135–48; Nina Mba, "Heroines of the Women's War," in *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, 75–88; Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Emma Mba, *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); LaRay Denzer, *Folayegbe M. Akintunde-Ighodalo: A Public Life* (Ibadan: Sam Bookman Publishers, 2002);

LaRay Denzer, "Gender and Decolonization: A Study of Three Women Leaders in West African Public Life," in *Empires and Peoples in African History: Essays in Memory of Michael Crowder*, ed. J. D. Y. Peel and J. F. A. Ajayi (London: Longman, 1992), republished in Andrea Cornwall, ed., *Readings in Gender in Africa* (London/Bloomington: James Currey/Indiana University Press, 2004); and LaRay Denzer, "Women Chiefs in Ibadan Public Life, 1893–1997," in *Indigenous Political Structures and Governance in Nigeria*, ed. Olufemi Vaughan (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2004).

¹¹ LaRay Denzer, "Yoruba Women: A Historiographical Study," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 27, no. 1 (1994): 1–39; LaRay Denzer, "Domestic Science Training in Colonial Yorubaland, Nigeria," in *African Encounters with Domesticity*, ed. Karen Tranberg Hansen (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 116–39; Nina Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria* (Berkeley: University of California Press and Institute of International Studies, 1982); Nina Mba, "Kaba and Khaki: Women and the Militarized State in Nigeria," in *Women and the State in Africa*, ed. Jane L. Parpart and Kathleen A. Staudt (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989), 69–90.

¹² Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized*; Nina Mba, "Women in Lagos Political History," in *History of the Peoples of Lagos State*, ed. Ade Adefuye, Babatunde Agiri, and Jide Oshuntokun (Ikeja, Nigeria: Lantern Books, 1987); and Denzer, *Folayegbe M. Akintunde-Ighodalo*.

¹³ Awe, "Writing Women into History," 211–20; Bolanle Awe et al., "Editorial," *Signs* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 645–49; Bolanle Awe, "A Brief Overview of Nigerian Women's Studies," in *Setting an Agenda for Gender and Women's Studies in Nigeria*, ed. Amina Mama (Zaria, Nigeria: Tamaza, 1996), 3–12; Denzer, "Yoruba Women," 1–39.

¹⁴ Bolanle Awe and Nina Mba, "Women's Research and Documentation Center (Nigeria)," *Signs* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 859–64; and Abiola Odejide, "Profile of Women's Research and Documentation Centre, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria," *Feminist Africa* 1 (2002), <http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/profile-of-women-s-research-and-documentation-centre>.

¹⁵ Mary Osirim, "Women's and Gender Studies in English-Speaking Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of Research in the Social Sciences," *Gender and Society* 18, no. 6 (2004): 685–91; Josephine Beoku-Betts and Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi, "African Feminist Scholars in Women's Studies: Negotiating Spaces of Dislocation and Transformation in the Study of Women," *Meridian* 6, no. 1 (2005): 113–25.

¹⁶ For a full discussion of the evolution of Nigerian women's history, see Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto, *Nigeria, Nationalism, and Writing History* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 82–96.

¹⁷ See, among others, Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Oniawu Ogbomo, *When Men and Women Mattered: A History of Gender Relations among the Owan of Nigeria* (Rochester, NY: University

of Rochester Press, 1997); Nwando Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900–1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005); Nwando Achebe, *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); and Gloria Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁸ Bolanle Awe, "Reflections on the Conference on Women and Development, Part I," *Signs* 3, no. 1 (1977): 314–16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 315.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Odejide, "Profile of Women's Research."

²² Awe et al., "Editorial," 645–49.

²³ Bolanle Awe, introduction to *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, v.

²⁴ Cole, Manuh, and Miescher, *Africa after Gender?*

²⁵ Saheed Aderinto, review of *Africa after Gender?*, ed. Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), in *Ethnic and Third World Review of Books* 9 (March 2009): 21–22.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ See N. Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); and Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, eds., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

²⁸ Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987), 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Awe, "Writing Women into History," 211.

³¹ Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, viii.

³² See Denzer's work on *iyalode* chieftaincy among the Yoruba.

³³ Here I have in mind the numerous riots and acts of resistance such as the Women's War of 1929. See the section on women under colonialism in this chapter.

³⁴ For more on the male-centeredness of imperialism, see Philippa Levine, ed., *Gender and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press).

³⁵ Here I have in mind the infamous Hamitic hypothesis. For more on this see Philip S. Zachernuk, "Of Origins and Colonial Order: Southern Nigerian Historians and the 'Hamitic Hypothesis,' c. 1870–1970," *Journal of African History* 35, no. 3 (1994): 427–55.

³⁶ For a critique of nationalist historiography, see A. Temu and B. Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique* (London: Zed Books, 1981).

³⁷ See Awe, *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*.

³⁸ Bolanle Awe and Omotayo Olutoye, "Women and Warfare in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland: An Introduction," in *War and Peace in Yorubaland, 1793–1893*, ed. Adeagbo Akinjogbin (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1998), 121–30. On Madam Tinubu, another prominent nineteenth-century woman, see Oladipo Yemitan,

Madame Tinubu: Merchant and King-Maker (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1987).

³⁹ Awe, "Saviours of Their Societies," 3–9.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Awe, "Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura," 57–71.

⁴² Denzer, "Yoruba Women," 8.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7. For more on Igbo women's economic activities, see Chuku, *Igbo Women*.

⁴⁵ Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, 290–91.

⁴⁶ Denzer, "Yoruba Women," 36.

⁴⁷ Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, 67.

⁴⁸ Olatunji Ojo, "More than Farmers' Wives: Yoruba Women and Cash Crop Production, c. 1920–1957," in *The Transformation of Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola*, ed. Adebayo Oyebadde (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002), 383–404.

⁴⁹ For more on women and divorce under colonial rule, see Judith Byfield, "Women, Marriage, Divorce, and the Emerging Colonial State in Abeokuta (Western Nigeria)," in *"Wicked" Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, ed. Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl McCurdy (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001), 27–46.

⁵⁰ LaRay Denzer, *The Iyalode in Ibadan Politics and Society, c.1850–1997* (Ibadan: Sam Bookman Publishers for Humanities Research Centre, 1997); LaRay Denzer, "The Iyalode in Ibadan Politics and Society: A Preliminary Study," in *Ibadan: An Historical, Cultural, and Socio-Economic Study of an African City*, ed. G. O. Ogunremi (Lagos: Cargo Press and Oluyole Club, 2000).

⁵¹ Denzer, *Iyalode in Ibadan Politics and Society*.

⁵² Awe, "The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System," 144–60; and Denzer, *Iyalode in Ibadan Politics and Society*. On marriage and gender among the educated elite women of Lagos, see Kristin Mann, *Marrying Well: Marriage, Status, and Social Change among the Educated Elite in Colonial Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁵³ For more on this class of Africans see, among others, Jean Herskovits Kopytoff, *A Preface to Modern Nigeria: The "Sierra Leonians" in Yoruba, 1830–1890* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965); J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891: Making of the New Elites* (London: Longman, 1965); and Patrick Cole, *Modern and Traditional Elites in the Politics of Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁵⁴ Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, 214–33; Johnson-Odim and Mba, *For Women and the Nation*; Denzer, *Folayegbe M. Akintunde-Ighodalo*; LaRay Denzer, *Women in Government Service in Colonial Nigeria, 1962–1945* (Boston: Boston University, African Studies Center, 1989), 1–21.

⁵⁵ LaRay Denzer, "Introduction," *African Studies Review* 25, nos. 2–3 (1982): 1–4.

⁵⁶ Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, 68–97.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁵⁹ Johnson-Odim and Mba, *For Women and the Nation*, 63.

⁶⁰ Denzer, "Domestic Science Training," 119–39.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Denzer, *Women in Government Service*.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁵ Mba, "Kaba and Khaki."

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ LaRay Denzer, "When Wealth Kills: The Assassination of Three Yoruba Businesswomen, 1996," in *Nigeria's Struggle for Democracy and Good Governance*, ed. Adigun A. B. Agbaje, Larry Diamond, and Ebere Onwudiwe (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 2004), 303–21.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 320–21.

⁶⁹ LaRay Denzer, "High Fashion and Fluctuating Fortunes: The Nigerian Garment Industry under Structural Adjustment," in *Money Struggles and City Life: Devaluation in Ibadan and Other Urban Centers in Southern Nigeria, 1986–1996*, ed. Jane I. Guyer, LaRay Denzer, and Adigun Agbaje (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 93–114.

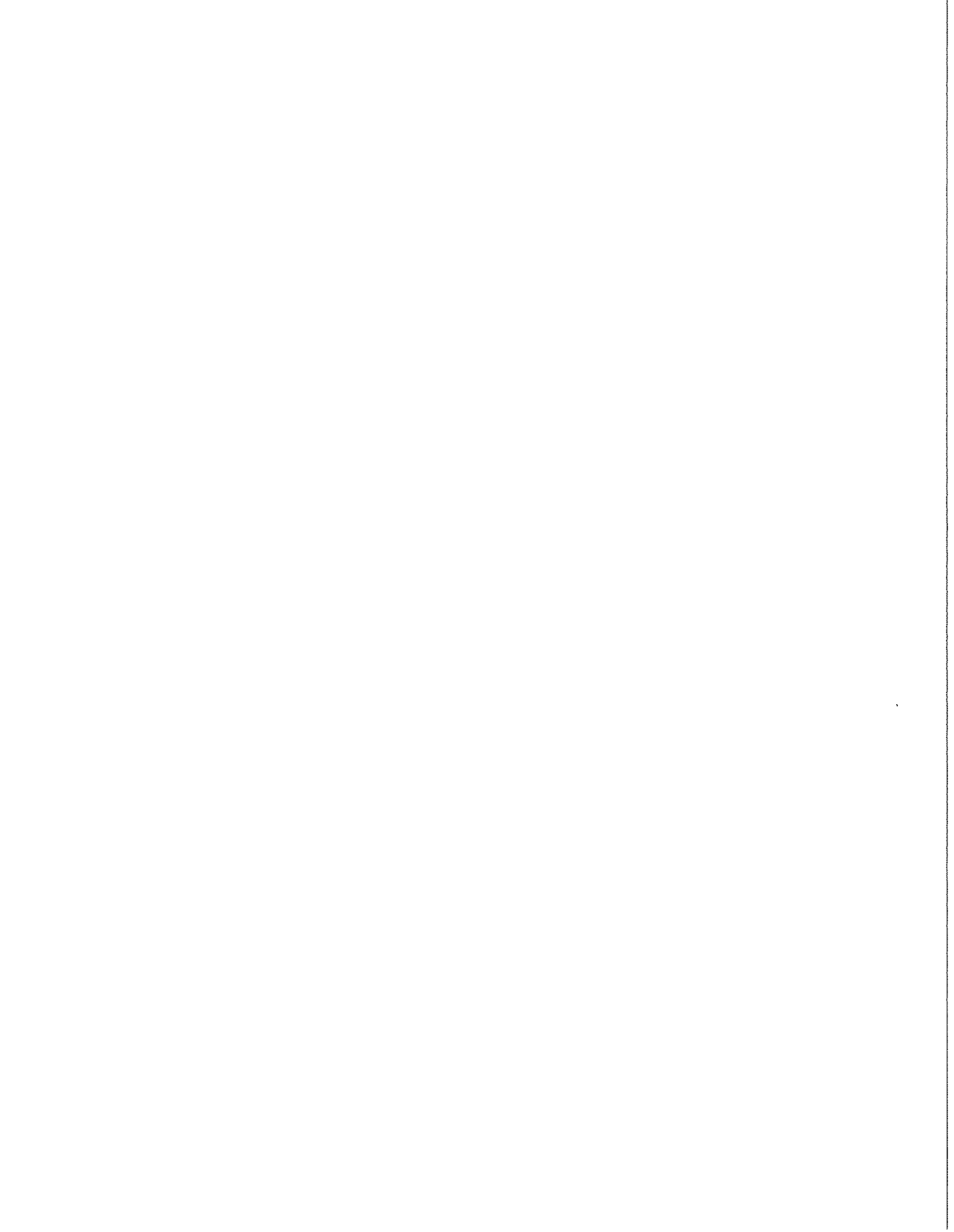
⁷⁰ For a more comprehensive study of the impact of the structural adjustment program on women, see Gloria Emeagwali, ed., *Women Pay the Price: Structural Adjustment in Africa and the Caribbean* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995).

⁷¹ Denzer, "High Fashion and Fluctuating Fortunes."

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ LaRay Denzer, "Fela, Women, Wives," in *Fela: From West Africa to West Broadway*, ed. Trevor Schoonmaker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 111–43.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 129.



PART III:
REREADING AND REWRITING
COLONIAL NIGERIA

CHAPTER EIGHT

“THE OWNER OF THE LAND”: THE BENIN *OBAS* AND COLONIAL FOREST RESERVATION IN BENIN DIVISION, SOUTHERN NIGERIA

PAULINE VON HELLERMANN
AND UYILAWA USUANLELE

In 1935, Oba Akenzua II, the king of Benin and sole Native Authority in charge of Benin Division under the colonial government of Nigeria, gave his consent to the Benin Forest Scheme, a system of intense forest management piloted by the divisional forest department. In doing so, he agreed to the reservation of 1,000 square miles of land, even though a substantial part of the division was already reserved. By the end of 1937, there were 2,631 square miles, 64 percent of Benin Division, under reservation, by far the highest percentage of reserved land in southern Nigeria.¹ How did such large-scale reservation, which has had significant consequences for the landscape and the people of Edo State to this day, come about? Was reservation enforced by the colonial government, or did Oba Akenzua II, and before him his father, Oba Eweka II, have some choice in the matter? If so, why did they agree to reservation with seeming “alacrity”?²

Forest reservation constituted an integral part of European colonialism in Africa and Asia, and has received much scholarly attention in recent decades. One body of work, which highlights the importance of ideas about environmental conservation and “wilderness” among colonial administrators in Africa, has shown how environmental crisis narratives about deforestation played a key role in justifying colonial interventionism.³ At the same time, forest reservation has been studied as a key arena of colonial territorialization, state making, and resource management.⁴ Forest reservation generally took place under the terms of “scientific forestry,” a system of forest management originally conceived in eighteenth-century