

All the ‘Africans’ are Men, all the “Sistas” are “American,” but Some of Us Resist: Realizing African Feminism(s) as an Africological Research Methodology

by

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Abstract

Within Africology, there has been long-held sentiment that feminism, feminist consciousness, or any train of thought that interrogates the condition and/or position of women, be it social, economic, political or the like, is an import of the West and therefore inapplicable in the global African context. While it is true that Western feminism has served functionary of European and North American imperialism, the fact remains that in these contemporary (neocolonial) times, issues of gender inequality, gender discrimination, and gender oppression are realities throughout the Diaspora. As such, issues related to gender politics must *at the very least* be considered if not appropriately addressed by Africologists. The question remains, however, “From what theoretical perspective and/or methodological framework are we to proceed?” The current article argues that African Feminism, as articulated in the works of Aidoo, Boyce-Davies, Nnaemeka, Nzegwu, Ogundipe-Leslie, Steady, and Taiwo, is an *inherently* African-centered methodology, and as such one attendant to the form and function of Africology -- one capable of providing an investigative framework for addressing issues of gender relevant to the global African community.

Since its inception, Africology (Afro-American/Black/African American Studies) has had to address questions related to its vision, purpose, structure, function, nomenclature, theoretical foundation(s), and attending methodologies. The discipline has similarly been challenged in regards to its treatment of topics and issues related to gender (read: Black women). Although significant strides have been made to establish the field of Africana (Black) Women's Studies, there has been neither pervasive agreement upon nor adoption of an analytical framework with which to attend to gender/gendered issues. Indeed this discrepancy reflects arguments concerning the place for gender within the discipline, namely those that question the necessity of gendered analyses and further position them problematic. According to Asante and Mazama, co-editors of the *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*, "definitionally, [Africology] must deal with black people, with no regard to gender" (xxxix). While they concede that "gender is necessarily a factor to be raised in any critical, political, economic, behavioral, or cultural discussion," they also instruct that "it is not the core of [Africology]" (Asante & Mazama xxxix). Then again, in the second edition of the *African American Studies Reader*, Norment asserts that "[the] decision to create space and place for [our] sister's voices is both an historical corrective as well as a pedagogical measure offered to make sure that gender does not cloud our vision of the future of the discipline" (xxxvii). While Asante and Mazama argue against a separate female-centered paradigm or a separate space within which to address gender (xxxix), Norment supports the position of such scholars as Hull, Scott and Smith who argued for the an autonomous academic entity – Africana (Black) Women's Studies (xxxvii).

Variable arguments for the place of gender in Africology have led to varying models through which to approach gender within the discipline and in many ways have thwarted the emergence of a primary methodological framework with which to examine gender. In many constructions of Africology that locate Africana (Black) Women's Studies as an area of concentration/focus, the inclusion of key women in Africana history and the highlighting of Africana women's perspectives do not necessarily entail *analyses* of gender nor presume a guiding theory or methodological framework. Similarly, in those constructions of Africana (Black) Women's Studies as an autonomous entity, gender inclusion does not imply gender analyses. Irrespective of configuration, when it comes to questions related to which applicable theories/methodologies prove instructive to the discipline, when the consensus remains that Western (read: White) feminism(s)ⁱ, given its Eurocentric agenda, cannot adequately address the concerns of Africana communities. While many scholars of both configurations are guided by and/or rely upon any combination of Black Feminism (ala Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, Dolores Aldridge, bell hooks, and the like) Womanism (ala Alice Walker and Katie Canon) and Africana Womanism (ala Clenora Hudson-Weems and Nah Dove), many other scholars guide themselves.

As the discipline continues to search for an applicable paradigm through which to appropriately address the issue of gender for and within Africana communities, this article argues that African Feminism (s), as articulated in the works of Aidoo, Boyce-Davies, Nnaemeka, Nzegwu, Ogundipe-Leslie, Steady, and Taiwo, is an inherently African-centered methodology, and as such, one attendant to the form and function of Africology -- one capable of providing us a relevant and centered investigative framework.

African-Centered Methodology: From whose Center are we Operating?

In designing research projects, researchers must approach their studies using a certain paradigm or worldview, a basic set of beliefs or assumptions to guide their inquiries. These assumptions involve the nature of reality (ontology), the constituency of knowledge (epistemology), the role of values in the study (axiology), and the process of research (methodology) (Azibo 423-424).

African-descended researchers and scholars have long argued for a theoretical paradigm grounded in the cultural and historical experiences of African people. Given the hegemony inherent to Western, Eurocentric paradigms, research conducted under its guise has often yielded results that position Africa and her people as inept, abnormal and dysfunctional (Akbar 412-413). Thus in an effort to liberate Africa and studies conducted on, within, and in relation to Africa from such ethnocentric and “intellectual[ly] arrogant” evaluations (Kershaw 160), the African-centered perspective emerges as a “culturally specific methodological approach to the study of Africana culture, people and experiences” (Carroll 71).

While the current use of “African-centered perspective” seemingly denotes a unified and cohesive approach, it is important to note the variable terminology used in its articulation, namely “Afrocentric,” “Africa-centered,” and “Africentric.”. Afrocentricity, according to Molefi Kete Asante (1987), means “literally placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior” (6). More specifically, Asante asserts that it is “a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African ...[such that African] people, concepts, and history [are studied] from an African world view” (Asante, 1991, 171). The degree to which research is Afrocentric is often determined by the researcher’s location, or centricity/centeredness, which informs the language s/he employs, the direction of his/her sentiments, themes, and interests, as well as his/her attitude toward certain ideas, persons, or objects. Thus, it is when, and only when the researcher’s language, direction, and attitude are centered within an “African cultural territory” that it qualifies as Afrocentric (Asante, 1999, n.p.).

In articulating “Afrocentrism and the Afrocentric Method,” Terry Kershaw lists the following four assumptions of Black Studies guided by Afrocentricity:

1. *That Black experiences are worthy of intellectual pursuit;*
2. *That the historical and contemporary experiences of people of African descent can prove instructive about human relations;*
3. *That the cultural, historical and contemporary experiences of African descended people are unique;*
4. *That one of the most significant tasks of an Afrocentric scholar is to help develop tools that help generate knowledge designed to describe, analyze and empower people of African descent to change negative social forces into positive social forces as they impact on life chances (161).*

Kershaw further reminds us that knowledge production within the social sciences and humanities tends to be culturally specific, and as a consequence, the particular knowledge generated is designed to articulate particular and most often Eurocentric ideological and philosophical worldviews, and further serves the interests of proponents of those ideologies and worldviews. Thus, in Kershaw’s assessment, if knowledge and similarly a discipline (Africology) about African people is to be liberating for African people, it must be both at the same time historically and culturally specific, and practical and solution-oriented.

The degree to which a particular paradigm will be useful to the study of gender and gendered issues as they relate to African people is dependant upon the degree to which the said paradigm is “rooted in the cultural image and interest of African people...and reflects the life experiences, history and traditions of African people” (Nobles, as cited by Hill). More specifically, as we acknowledge the culture unity of Africa, we must also be reminded that there exist many African cultures. Thus, in the analysis of the contemporary lived experiences of African people, the analysis must be further grounded in the cultural and historical *specificity* of the locale. As we attempt to establish the appropriate paradigm through which to examine issues of gender, the question remains “From whose center are we are operating?”

Big Sister?: The Problem of Black Feminism, Womanism and Africana Womanism

“Sisterhood”

white sister told me
all women are one
united in de face
of chau’vism
(pa’don my engilis)

I smiled

pa...paa
pa..tria..archy is the cross
women carry, she charged
we must unite
to fight it
with all our might

I laughed...

racked by spasm
my head jerked back
and crazily wobbled
from side to side.
pampered sister titillates herself
to frenzy with quixotic tales
of male ‘xploitation.

I...

“dumb” black woman
laughed mirthlessly on
flicking away tears
of pain from eyes.

I looked up
from my chore
on the kitchen floor
where, new found sister
had orderd me to be
on knees

to scrub the floor clean
for the pittance she paid:
on knees
to scrub the floor clear
for sisterachy

Nkiru Nzegwu – 28/7/90 (Oyewumi 2003)

Though Black feminist, Womanist and Africana womanist perspectives continue to vie for the discipline's primary consideration, each regarding itself the more appropriate viewpoint, in their treatment (or lack thereof) of issues related to gender in African and African Diasporic spaces, it is argued here that Black feminism, Womanism and Africana womanism all present themselves in similar paternalist fashion as does Western feminism, often prioritizing a version of reality that is contextualized by their particular experiences of gender, namely as it is informed by the legacy and experience of being African in America. "From whose center are we operating?"

Black Feminism

In her highly-cited text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses U.S. Black Feminism in a Transnational Context (Chapter 10). While Hill Collins acknowledges that the "matrix of domination" experienced by Black women transcends U.S. borders, she also notes that the experiences of women of African descent globally will vary across space and time according to the specific organization of these particular matrices. Nevertheless, it appears that the purpose of engaging Black women transnationally, according to Hill Collins, is more for a better understanding of U.S. Black women, than it is for the women under study. She argues that "shifting to a global analysis..reveals new dimensions of U.S. Black women's experiences in the particular matrix of domination that characterizes U.S. society" (Hill Collins 231). What becomes clear is that in form similar to many Western feminists, Hill Collins situates the *experience* of gender as universal and conceives a "global gendered apartheid" of sorts wherein there exists, "the exploitation of labor of women of colour *everywhere*" (*Emphasis mine*) (Hill Collins 232). But who is defining what constitutes oppression – those within the society or those outside of the society? Given that she positions the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality as the ties that bond Black women globally with no mention of history or culture, and that she assumes that is possible for Black feminists to "[place] U.S. Black women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences," (Hill Collins 228) it appears that in this context, it would be through U.S. Black feminist eyes that we would have to witness what constitutes "exploitation" *everywhere*.

Womanism

Introducing her 1983 collection of non-fiction essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker defines a womanist as "a black or feminist of color" and further notes the relationship of womanist to feminist as "purple to lavender" (xii). For Walker, womanism, both as an identity and lens of analysis, is rooted in Black culture and concerns itself with the self-determination of all Blacks, both male and female. Missing from Walker's definition, however, is a disclaimer to what "Black culture" and which "Black people" she is referring – those in the United States who have had a particular experience with gender and racial oppression.

This specificity of Blackness can be witnessed in Walker's treatment of the sociocultural/spiritual practice of female circumcision, which she, like many other Western/Western-informed feminists/womanists, refers to as "female genital mutilation." Even at the level of naming we must question – "From whose center are we operating?" In both *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (a sequel of sorts to Walker's 1982 *The Color Purple*) and *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, Walkers' fictional depictions of female circumcision in "Africa," portray "Africa" and consequently African culture and people, in light not dissimilar to colonial explorers, scientists, anthropologists and missionaries – as backwards, primitive and in need of salvation from the West. From her descriptive comparisons of her characters' actions and behaviors to animals, namely monkeys, to her homogenization and miniaturization of Africa into one village, Walker seemingly functions with similar cultural arrogance as have generations of Eurocentric scholars, feminist and non-feminist alike, who have positioned themselves, if not the West (read: U.S.), as "Africa's saviors." For example, in the preface of *Possessing*, the audience is to realize the West as a safer space for female existence through Olivia, the young African-American daughter of missionaries. In this particular moment, Olivia recounts a conversation she had with Tashi, the young "Olinkan" (fictional African "tribe") girl around which the novel revolves. Tashi had been having reservations about "scarring" her face and being circumcised. Noting that one of the things the missionaries had intended to stop was "the scarring or cutting of tribal marks on the faces of young women," Olivia further warns Tashi about the danger involved with the circumcision. Through Olivia, Walker inserts the superiority of the West. Olivia tells Tashi, "nobody in America or Europe cuts off pieces of themselves" (ix). Clearly, this brief, yet powerful comparison of "America [and] Europe" to Africa overlooks the widespread popularity of *elective* cosmetic surgery, which unfortunately for many has indeed resulted in "mutilation." Overlooking the reality of one's experience for the sake of positioning it superior to the experience of the "Other" is nothing new. However, is this the attitude with which we are to approach continental and Diasporic African people, culture and phenomena? Later, in *Warrior Marks*, which represents Walker's journaling the experience of adapting *Possessing* to film, Walker's entry on her 49th birthday makes even clearer her perception of and relationship to "Africa." In writing about the things she is thankful for and happy about, she says,

To be doing work that will mean greater health and happiness to many. To be doing the work of protecting our children. To be in Africa. To realize Africans are doing OK, basically, if they'd just stop hurting themselves. And that I love Africa and Africans. That Africans have 'time' and 'space.' Westerners no longer have that. Africans really should be able to be wise, not just clever or smart" (50).

Reminiscent of the manner in which colonial scientists described the behavior and actions of African people as “clever” and “smart,” similar to the supposed keenness of monkeys, what Walker displays is her paternalist attitude towards “Africa” – an attitude rooted in a center outside of “Africa,” not just physically but culturally and perceptively. On what basis is Africans’ wiseness (or lack thereof) being determined? Who asked Walker to check in on whether “Africans are doing OK” and what made her think they were not? In comparison to what? In comparison to whom? Though Walker’s treatment of Africa in her two novels may be more reflective of her own personal attitudes towards “Africa,” if such scholarship is being presented under the guise of a womanist approach, we must at the very least regard the framework as suspect and thus exercise caution in its use.

Africana Womanism

Though positioned by Asante and Mazama as the “leading ideological position for many women in Black Studies,” one that scholars have been hard-pressed to “assert successfully a position in opposition” (xxxix), Africana Womanism is no better positioned to address issues of gender outside of a U.S. context than are Black feminism and Womanism. Hudson-Weems positions her framework, “Africana womanism,” not to be confused with Alice Walker’s “womanist,” as “a separate and distinct identity for the Africana woman and her movement” that is “grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women” (Hudson- Weems 24). Weems finds the terms “Black feminism” and “African feminism” problematic as they “naturally suggest an alignment with feminism, a concept that has been alien to the plight of Africana women from its inception” (19). According to Hudson-Weems, the terms and their corresponding theoretical applications prioritize sexism over racism and classism which are, as she puts it, the “prevailing obstacles in the lives of Africana people” (19).

Although Hudson-Weems contends that Africana womanism is grounded in African culture, one would be hard-pressed to actually realize the African *culture* she is referring to. In fact, much of her discussion focuses on particular Africana historical experiences, namely those related to the United States enslavement project. To her credit, however, she does briefly argue that there is a gender equality that exists in Africana communities “because in African cosmology..the woman at creation is equal to her male counterparts, which is not the case in European cosmology, which holds that the woman is an appendage (rib) of man” (Hudson-Weems 47). But is that the African *culture* in which her “framework” is grounded? Our cosmological consciousness does in fact impact our lived experiences, however, it does not preclude us from experiencing gender inequality at present. One cannot say with certainty that gender equality currently exists, particularly given that the voices of numbers of Africana women suggest otherwise.

What Hudson-Weems explicates as a *ideological* framework is rather a compilation of personality traits that a woman must possess in order to be a “true Africana womanist” : (1) self-namer; (2) self-definer;(3) family-centered; (4) in concert with males in struggle; (5) flexible roles; (6) genuine sisterhood; (7) strength; (8) male compatible; (9) respected; (10) recognized; (11) whole; (12) authentic; (13) spirituality; (14) respectful of elders; (15) adaptable; (16) ambitious; (17) mothering; and (18) nurturing. If an ideological framework provides us a grounding, a lens through which to ascertain knowledge and information, how exactly do these characteristics allow for any examination and/or interrogation of African (continental/Diasporic) phenomena? In her descriptions of these 18 characteristics, Hudson-Weems’ framework materializes as part and parcel of U.S. American perspective, particularly as many of her reference points are related the historical legacy of enslavement. How can these tenets be applied to contemporary analyses of the state of Africana societies, specifically where it was colonization, not enslavement that was an institutional reality? Is it possible that the peculiar experience of living in a colonial state impacts identity constructions of womanhood and the societal/cultural regard for it?

Interestingly, Hudson-Weems puts forward a scathing critique of both Black feminists and African feminists, charging that the Africana woman is “her own person, operating according to the forces in her life, and thus her name must reflect the authenticity of her activity, not that of another culture” (56). Note, however, that Hudson-Weems assumes the term “womanism” -- one that Alice Walker had previously put forth, one that Hudson-Weems also finds problematic in its articulated relationship to feminism . By her own estimations, should we not also question her ability to self-name according to the “authenticity of her activity?”

If any ideological framework is to be indeed African-centered, it must be functional, or as Kershaw instructs, practical and solution-oriented. Thus, it remains questionable whether Africana womanism is indeed African-centered, or as she would likely name it, Afrocentric. As articulated by Hudson-Weems, Africana womanism does not seemingly provide guidance or an investigative framework for addressing issues of gender relevant to Africana communities outside of the U.S.

How are we to engage gender and/or examine gendered phenomena without regard to the particular experiences of oppression (colonization *or* enslavement), victory (African liberation) and the primacy of culture, as it has been and is currently being lived? From what perspective are we to address gendered phenomenon that manifest *outside of the American context*? For those of us who recognize the centrality of culture in Africana communities, wherever they exist, and further call for the contextualization of particular phenomena by the specific cultural spaces and moments within which they take place, African feminism provides a functional research agenda with which to answer these questions.

Locating African Feminism within Africology

As has been the case within Africology, there has been long-held sentiment in Africa, and throughout the Diaspora, that feminism, feminist consciousness, or *any* train of thought that interrogates the condition and/or position of women, be it social, economic, political or the like, is an import of the West and therefore inapplicable in the African context. Like many of our Black Studies colleagues, several (continental) African figures and scholars argue that some of the fundamental assumptions of Western feminism are not befitting of African realities. Moreover, in estimation not unlike Clenora Hudson-Weems, “race and class issues are more important than gender issues...[and African] men and women need to unite against white hegemony, male and female” (Ogundipe –Leslie 207).

African feminism resists the universalization and consequent projection of Western notions and concepts and argues for an emphasis on culture in the description and subsequent analysis of African realities. However, African feminism reminds us that as we resist Eurocentric designations, we must also resist the tendency to “place the blame for all of [our] problems *entirely* at the doorstep of the West” (emphasis hers) (Nnaemeka 23). While African feminists acknowledge that Western feminism “is entangled with the history and practice of European and North American imperialism...[and has played a] role in the projection of Western culture and cultural forms” (Oyewumi, 2003, 3), and furthermore argue that the designation “woman” is not universal and thus, ‘women’ “never experience their oppression in the same ways” (Taiwo 53), the fact remains that in these contemporary (neocolonial) times, issues of gender inequality, gender discrimination, and gender oppression are realities in Africaⁱⁱ. The fact of gender complementarity and balance in our “tradition” and worldview does not preclude the imbalance and disharmony we experience today. According to Ghanaian feminist and critically acclaimed novelist and playwright, Ama Ata Aidoo, even

African traditional societies seemed to have been at odds with themselves as to exactly what to do with women. For although some of them appeared to doubt gender and biology as bases for judging women, in the end they all used gender and biology to judge women’s capabilities (47).

To “those who say that feminism is not relevant to Africa,” Ogundipe-Leslie challenges if “they [can] truthfully say that the African woman is all right in all these areas of her being and therefore does not need an ideology that addresses her reality” (223). Incensed by the suggestion that “African women cannot see their own situations and demand change without guidance from white women,” she enlightens that just as there were indigenous mechanisms of resistance throughout colonization, there were “indigenous avenues and channels for women’s resistance to injustice” in pre-colonial African societies, what she refers to as “indigenous feminisms” (223).

In the introduction of her pioneering text, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, Filomena Chioma Steady concurs that given African woman's legacy of autonomy, self-reliance and survival exemplified by her continuous struggle with and resistance to multiple forms of oppression -- enslavement, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, poverty, illiteracy, disease, and sexual and economic exploitation -- they are to a large extent the original feminists (36). In this sense, then, "African feminism" is a tautology (Oyewumi, 2003, 33). However, if past is prelude, the challenge we now face is whether this "original" brand of feminism remains relevant to the current state of gendered affairs in Africa.

It should be noted that although they recognize inherent mechanisms for resistance and amelioration of gender imbalance within traditional African societies, many African women, Ogundipe-Leslie included, often avoid using the language of "feminism," in an effort to "deflect energies from constantly having to respond to charges of imitating Western feminism" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 229). Instead identifiers of "African womanism" and Stiwansim (an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) (Ogundipe-Leslie 229) are used. However, in these cases, regardless of the language used, the methodologies are the same. Though the process of naming is indeed important as we attempt to address issues of gender in the African-world community, the concern here is less with the language used than the usefulness of the framework.

In defining African feminism, both Ogundipe-Leslie and Nnaemeka assert that rather than one monolithic "African feminism," there instead exist possibilities for many "African feminisms." This pluralistic conceptualization "captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, and localized realities conditioning women's activism/movements in Africa - from the indigenous variants to the state-sponsored configurations in the postcolonial era" (Nnaemeka 5). Recognizing that attempting to delineate the exclusive parameters of the perspective is complicated by issues of language, definition, organization, and intricate modes of engagement, African feminists instead articulate their framework as "*what* they do and *how* they do it" (Nnaemeka 5). Thus, rather than provide an exhaustive definition, the African feminist framework provides a blueprint for action.

The African feminist perspective carries with it an ardent mandate for cultural contextualization. Already mentioned here was the homogenization of the category 'women' as a primary tenet carried by Western feminists, particularly in their treatment of "Third World Women."ⁱⁱⁱ African feminists take issue with this universalization as Western feminists fail to specify who is being spoken about, who is speaking for whom, or who is qualified to frame the issue (Nnaemeka 5). Another such assumption is the a priori "fact" of the subordination of women. As Taiwo contends, "any judgment on the peculiar character of a given division of [society] can only come at the conclusion of an analysis; it cannot be a presupposition of one" (49).

Still yet another Western feminist assumption is that the public and private spheres are separated into gendered spheres and thus privilege men who participate in the public sphere (Steady, 2005, 317). In many parts of Africa, such lines are not as rigidly demarcated. For Steady (2005), “if one is to believe the universal subordination argument, then one has to ignore the ways in which social location based on race, ethnicity, class, color and so forth confers power and privilege” (317). Power, for African feminists, is negotiated and negotiable, assessed in relative rather than absolute terms, and rightfully framed within cultural, historical, and generational contexts. To this extent, African feminists resist notions that the very fact of womanhood is itself a cause for oppression, that the identity ‘woman’ is often defined and furthermore dictated by the specific sociocultural contexts within which she exists, and further recognize that both “gender” and “power” have the potential to take on variable meanings in variable contexts. Thus the analysis of gender must be contextualized within the particular culture and society within which it occurs and for which it has implications.

In an effort to maintain its divergence from Western feminism, however, Nnaemeka dissuades us from defining African feminism(s) in relation to Western feminism, asserting that in order to meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to Western feminism, but rather to the African environment that one must refer. African feminism is not reactive, it is proactive. It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment. Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance (9).

African feminism(s), then, propose African-centered approaches to the study of gender in Africa “based on an understanding of African socio-cultural realities, feminist traditions and philosophies and...aims to develop gender-focused frameworks of analysis that can bring out the multiple and varied social locations of African women while maintaining their specific identities and priorities” (Steady, 2005, 314). Combining cultural, racial, sexual, and class dimensions of oppression, African feminism(s) posits “women’s liberation” as an aspect of human liberation and thus seeks to transmit a type of feminism in which we interrogate those structural patterns that distribute social justice between the two sexes. As such, in an effort to suspend distortions and misrepresentations in the understanding of gender relations, African feminism(s) further seeks to avoid what Ghanaian feminist Christine Oppong refers to as a “neo-sexist trap: the study of women, by women, for women” (ix), and instead examine the experiences, accounts, and observations of both women and men in the analysis of *any* particular issue, thus creating more holistic studies of Africans, by Africans, for Africans.

In articulating “An Investigative Framework for Gender Research in Africa in the New Millennium,” Filomena Chioma Steady emphasizes a reliance on African culture(s) and the African worldview in our analysis of social processes such that they are recognized as existing on a continuum that involves the past, the present and the future.

This genealogical lens requires that we not only examine the role and impact of the West in the construction of gender in African societies marred by colonialism, neocolonialism, and globalization, but that as Nnaemeka argues, “[we] look inwards for what ails [us]” (19). In consequence, an “African feminist consciousness recognizes that certain inequalities and limitations existed/exist in traditional societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others” (Boyce Davies 9). If our worldview prescribes complementarity/understanding as one of our core values (Kambon 30), then gender oppression was as much a problem needing resolution then, as it is now. We must concede that our worldview commands cooperation and collective responsibility, which means that in the interest of “survival of the group,” another one of our fundamental values (Kambon 30), an injustice against *any* one of us must be seen as an affront to *all* of us. As Ama Ata Aidoo instructs,

Every woman and every man should be feminist - especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer (47).

Thus, as we embark upon analyses of gender in Africa, it is equally imperative that we resist the tendency to indiscriminately regard those gender limitations specific to African culture(s) and cultural practices as acceptable in the name of “tradition” *and* that we refuse to place *sole* blame on the West for the importation of gender oppressive systems and structures.

In addition, we enthusiastically look to our worldview and the traditions of our culture(s) for vision in the advancement of solutions, carefully “[examining] African societies for institutions which are of value to women and [rejecting] those which work to their detriment” (Boyce Davies 9). Thus we use our culture(s) as the paradigmatic framework for producing action-oriented research capable of transforming society and empowering both women and men. And at the very least, this African-focused methodology will of necessity have to include one or more of the following: a historical perspective, a holistic perspective, multidimensionality, multiple time frames, multiple levels of analysis, multiple identities and realities, relational and dynamic contexts, comparative methods, oral history, life history, and so forth (Steady, 2005, 327).

Hence, if as Kershaw contends, the goal of our research is to generate knowledge with the expressed purpose of empowering African people to effect positive social change, we must arm them with knowledge of the ways in which the junctures of tradition, colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism, race, class, culture and gender have all historically served to inform African realities. Only then will we be empowered to shape our own realities. And as an *inherently* African-centered approach, the question of African feminism(s) being geared towards involvement, which intersubjectivity aims to contribute to improving the lives of African people with relevance and applicability to the African world, should no longer be in question.

Endnotes

1. It appears that the paradigm of Western feminism that African feminists (like U.S. Black feminists) critique is that which frames Second Wave Feminism, as articulated by Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. While Western feminism has since evolved and re-evolved to include more radical perspectives (end of Second Wave, Third Wave and beyond), such as Black feminism, postcolonial theory, transnationalism, and 'women of color consciousness,' in its treatment of and relation to African women, it appears that the paradigm reverts to the universalization of femininity and oppression characteristic of Second Wave feminism (i.e. female circumcision debates).

2. It must be noted that while Oyewumi (1997; 2003) argues that feminism in Africa is a hegemonic import of the West and further challenges the universal category of "woman" in African societies, particularly Yoruba society, she also takes issue with Ogunjipe-Leslie's (1994) characterization of Yoruba society as patriarchal and further accuses African feminists like Ogunjipe-Leslie of "importing Western concepts and categories into African studies and societies" (20).

3. Though she continues to subscribe to the designation, Mohanty (1985), among others, questions the production of "Third World Women" as a homogenous category in Western feminist discourse.

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