

Spring 2001

Response to Amadiume

Katherine Nelson
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl>

Recommended Citation

Nelson, Katherine (2001) "Response to Amadiume," *Macalester International*: Vol. 10, Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol10/iss1/10>

This Response is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Global Citizenship at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester International by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Response

Katharine Nelson

I would like to start by thanking Professor Amadiume for her presentation. Also, I would like to express how thrilled I am to be up here and to be involved with the International Roundtable. Responding to this essay has been simultaneously an enormous challenge and immensely rewarding for me. I am not a feminist scholar and my presentation is not so much a critique of Amadiume's paper as it is an examination into many of her ideas and a push for further clarity. I would therefore like to begin my response by posing two large and complex questions at the root of Amadiume's essay:

1. Are the forces of modernization, often constituted as Western modernization, a direct challenge to the African women's movement?
2. Can development occur on a national or large scale and avoid the confines of Western patriarchy?

Preliminarily, I would like to say that no, I believe modernization can in fact be a useful tool to African feminism; and yes, development can and must occur on a national and large-scale level.

Amadiume's argument is threefold. First, colonialism and imperialism have introduced Western forms of patriarchy that have had a negative effect on African women. Second, elite, Western educated African feminists do not speak for the female majority, and stronger forms of African feminism lie in the older generations. Third, national development programs are patriarchal, but grassroots development is the best means of reaching African females. I do not disagree with any of these fundamental points; however, there were certain areas of the essay I found vague or incomplete.

My response will be divided into four sections. First I will deal with dualisms. I choose to do this because I believe that while Amadiume's arguments are powerful, many of the points tend toward extremes. The first dualism I discuss involves history, and I will stress the importance of both pre- and postcolonial histories in the formation of African identity. The second dualism addresses the dichotomy of Western and African feminisms and suggests that these two need not be mutually exclusive. The third section of my response will address Structural

Adjustment Programs (SAPs), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, and suggests that while I support Amadiume's critique of SAPs, I emphasize that national and large-scale development is still fundamental. Finally, I address the issue of polygamy.

Dualism is the binary oversimplification of issues and, thereby, focuses on difference rather than similarity. One dualism that emerges in comparing the West to Africa is that of the West representing the future while Africa represents the past and traditions. Hegel wrote Africa "is no historical part of the world . . . what we properly understand by Africa, is the unhistorical undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature.¹ In Hegel's mind, only the West has a notion of progress. Africa is not a part of history because it is not "progressing." Using this logic, Africa becomes an embodiment of the past. The obvious result of this dualism is the Western view of Africa, and specifically African women, as backward and powerless. On the other hand, the West becomes equated with modernization. The West is the developed man, the modern man. Development becomes a process of modernization and Westernization and is equated with the loss of culture, the loss of tradition, and the loss of Africanism.

Many African feminists, including Amadiume, have attempted to thwart this binary opposition by writing about powerful women in African history. Such studies are essential for viewing African women as individuals rather than a mere powerless oppressed group. However, such studies cease to be productive when African history becomes romanticized. Under colonialism and imperialism, African women have been increasingly marginalized from positions of power. Nevertheless, the development of sexism cannot be attributed to colonialism alone.² Mei-Tzi Imam coined the phrase "the Golden Age of Merry Africa"³ to describe the tendency to idealize Africa's past as a "Garden of Eden" where equality reigned and there was peace and harmony. Therefore, while a celebration of the past is helpful in fostering contemporary identity, romanticizing the past jeopardizes contemporary clarity.

Amadiume's analysis of the historical effects of colonization and imperialism on African women is well taken. Yet, one area I found neglected is a historical examination of the effects of the nation-state on African women. Amadiume points out that the African nation-state is neither independent nor sovereign due to continued imperialist pressures. Nevertheless, the African nation-state has had a tremendous impact on the lives of its citizens and many of the problems of

African women are, in fact, internal problems. I would now like to briefly comment on the relationship between nation-states and African women by focusing primarily on the thoughts of two Third World feminists: Amina Mama and Geraldine Heng.

Third World feminism and nationalism grew out of the same soil at the same historical moment. From the 1920s to the 1970s, colonial independence movements and founding nation-states often evoked women as upholders of traditions, customs, and culture. Geraldine Heng notes how this representation is evident in nationalist language referring to the "motherland," the "mother tongue," and the "mother culture."⁴ At the same time, Amina Mama discusses how African nationalism spoke of damaged African manhood, and the need to rediscover African masculinity.⁵ Thus, the state and feminism have since grown into direct and dangerous opposition. Geraldine Heng notes that the state is at best a fiscal beneficiary of the exploitation of women and at worst an active agent in the structuring of that exploitation.⁶ She further argues that the nation-state has played a vital role in the delegitimization of African feminism. The state, she says, has divided modernization into two distinct categories, technological and social. Anything in the first category is positive; anything in the second category is negative. The African state thereby connected feminism to social Westernization and hence declared feminism undesirable and dangerous.

The second dualism I would like to discuss is that Western feminism concerns sexuality and romance while African feminism focuses on political and economic power through female solidarity. As Amadiume pointed out, Western feminism has certainly spotlighted female circumcision, polygamy, and reproductive rights in Africa, but it does not follow that these two feminisms are therefore mutually exclusive. As Amina Mama notes, it is primarily radical feminism that has been outspoken on sexual and violence issues in Africa.⁷ According to Judith Evans, radical feminism places far greater emphasis on the differences of genders and is known for spotlighting sexuality.⁸ This is only one stream of Western feminism. Feminism in any country or geographic area is highly heterogeneous and based on individuals' experience. Western labor or Marxist feminism, for example, highlights discrimination against women in the workplace and divisions of class.

Nevertheless, there is one fundamental similarity among Western feminists that needs to be addressed: an oversimplification of imperialism and the postcolonial world. This criticism of Western feminism is now gaining voice in Third World feminism. Western feminism has highlighted the plight of the woman at the expense of other forms of oppression and this has led to a Western belief in the homogenous nature of women.⁹ Such homogenization stems from ignorance or underrepresentation of the power structure of postcolonial reality. Thus, in focusing solely on sexism, and deemphasizing other forms of discrimination, Western feminism creates bias. Nevertheless, all feminism has its base in opposition to patriarchy, a near worldwide phenomenon. While there will obviously be differences among feminisms worldwide due to historical, cultural, and geographic particularities, these differences need not override the fundamental affinities of all feminisms in their stance against patriarchy.

African feminism as an organized international movement is currently in its budding stages. Chandra Talpade Mohanty stresses the importance of focusing on both similarity and difference with regard to Western feminism in the building of Third World feminism.¹⁰ Amina Mama writes that African and European women have been inextricably drawn together in the dynamics of inequality since the dawn of colonialism. This type of analysis is pivotal. The oppression of women in Europe has had a direct impact on the oppression of African women through Western patriarchal colonialism and imperialism. What makes African women stand apart from their European counterparts is that they are dually vulnerable to oppression from European and African sources.¹¹

Now to address the second question I posed at beginning of my presentation: Can development occur at a national or large-scale level and, at the same time, avoid the confines of Western patriarchy? I argue that it must, despite the inherent difficulty. I focus on three issues: a discussion of the nature of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs); the role of the state in development; and the place of grassroots development.

The IMF was founded after World War II as a relief structure to aid countries with temporary balance of payments problems. SAPs, which become prevalent throughout the developing world in the 1980s, are a phenomenal extension of the IMF's previous role. The goal of SAPs was to remedy temporary balance of payments problems in developing countries that were consistently spending more than they were earning, thereby increasing their debt. The larger question of development has always remained within the purview of the World Bank.

In my opinion, this is the fundamental problem: the IMF extended itself beyond the scope of its mission. It is doing more harm than good because the IMF's goals, namely, balancing the budget and promoting trade, are usually different from those of local populations, that is, development. Criticisms of the IMF, such as Amadiume's, are well founded. Money is being steadily funneled to the rich, poverty has not decreased, environmental destruction is rampant, and the gender gap is not closing. Yet, the criticism of the IMF should take into account that this organization is functioning within the parameters of its purpose. The IMF was not created to assist developing countries with longer-term balance of payments problems and has proven that it may not be capable of doing so under its present operations. Nevertheless, despite previous failures, SAPs remain an integral component of Africa's hopes for development, and to end IMF lending would only cause further strain on African economies.

The IMF and World Bank need to work together for the benefit of sustainable development. The language of the literature needs to change. Rather than focusing solely on economic growth and increasing GDP, goals for development should include decreasing poverty, increasing employment, and elevating the status of women. There is some evidence that reform is taking place. In June of 2000, the IMF, the World Bank, the UN, and the OECD released a groundbreaking communal report on world poverty and the importance of changing the face of development to encompass far more than the restructuring of the budget. I would like to join Amadiume, therefore, in praising the protests in Seattle, Washington, D.C., and now Prague that are having some impact.

Furthermore, I feel that Amadiume's presentation underscores the fault of national governments in the disastrous effects of SAPs. We cannot place blame solely on the IMF. National governments certainly

played a large role in mismanaging national budgets. The IMF may have ordered decreases in spending, yet it is the decision of the national government whether decreases in spending translate into cuts in health and education, or into decreases in less crucial areas.

Amadiume calls instead for grassroots development. While grassroots efforts are a positive and essential means of achieving development, they can never fully replace larger, more centrally organized development schemes. Grassroots projects are adaptable and therefore designed to help the needs of local communities. There are, however, certain development concerns that are not achievable in local grassroots efforts. For example, Africa's population is three-quarters of a billion people, and reaching the entire population in small grassroots projects is unworkable. Furthermore, Africa depends upon major oil refineries, grain milling operations, and massive 1,000-mile long railways. Many facets of development require larger organization, such as basic infrastructure, roads, electricity generation, and larger capital-intensive industries. Development, for the time being, requires a critical participation of the state. It requires national budgets, national spending, and taxation. In this era of globalization, the nation-state may be losing some of its historical power, but it is still the main organizational unit by which interaction takes place. Local communities are not large enough to effectively participate in the global economy. Efforts at regionalism in Africa are perhaps an alternative to the nation-state, but the fact remains that effective development strategies require larger organization.

Finally, the issue of polygamy. Amadiume refers a number of times to polygamy but I found her own stance on the issue somewhat unclear. She presents polygamy in the context of a culturally biased documentary on Ashanti market women, and again in her discussion of Ama Ata Aidoo's book *Changes*. While in neither reference is there a clear position on the question, one gets a sense of affirmation of polygamy. I do not intend to condemn polygamy, but I would like to present my own ideas regarding polygamy and modernization as well as my own differing interpretation of the book *Changes*.

In traditional polygamy, the man presents the second, third, or fourth wife to his first wife for her approval prior to the marriage proposal. Traditionally, the co-wives are close; they live either together or

within very close proximity. The husband evenly allocates his time among his wives. This system has been possible because African marriage is not traditionally based on romantic love, but on survival or on larger societal interactions.

Modernization and globalization have distorted this traditional practice. In its new form, polygamy is a very different practice. For example, in much feminist literature, from Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* to Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*, the co-wives may never meet one another and the husband's time is not evenly divided among his wives. The husband may still ask for his first wife's permission, but in these novels it follows a long extra-marital affair. The first wife cannot truly say no. She can accept the second wife, or she can leave him. The vast majority of African societies frown on divorce so that for most women this is not an option. Co-wives may live in entirely different homes in different parts of the city, or even in different parts of Africa. African novels condemning polygamy are virtually all in urban settings and are all critiquing the effects of modernization on this practice. Aidoo has said, "the factors which made polygamous marriages work have broken down in the urban environment."¹² To turn to culturalist arguments in defending polygamy, therefore, seems problematic unless the discussion is limited to traditional forms of polygamy in rural environments.

Unlike Amadiume, I do not read *Changes* as a commentary on the institution of African marriage in general. This was a story of Esi, a modern woman who was incapable of a happy African marriage because she was an independent, career-oriented woman. She did divorce her monogamous husband and choose instead a polygamous marriage, but she is unhappy in it as well. By the end, she says it is not even a marriage and remains in it solely because she doesn't want to have a second divorce. *Changes* may have shown that monogamy is not a "bed of roses" but it certainly did not promote polygamy as a worthy alternative.

In conclusion, I think Amadiume's essay is effective in exploring the strength of African women in history, and charting the negative impacts of Western colonialism and imperialism on the daily lives of African women. Her arguments concerning the divide between modern elite feminists and the larger community of African women were also telling of the immense challenges facing the African women's movements. My critique points to the pitfalls of extremes and stresses the imperative of strengthening African feminist movements. Addi-

tionally, I emphasize the absence of attention to the role of the nation-state in terms of both its interaction with feminism and its role in the process of development.

Notes

1. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, p. 99.
2. Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World*, p. 21.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
4. Geraldine Heng, "'A Great Way to Fly': Nationalism, the State, and Varieties of Third World Feminism," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, p. 31.
5. Amina Mama, "Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence Against Women in Africa," in *Ibid.*, pp. 52–54.
6. Heng, p. 32.
7. Mama, p. 59.
8. Judith Evans, *Feminist Theory Today: An Introduction to Second Wave Feminism*, p. 62.
9. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Colonial Perspectives*, pp. 255–270.
10. Mohanty, p. 255.
11. Mama, pp. 45–50.
12. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, "Flabberwhelmed or Turning History on its Head? The Postcolonial Woman-as-Subject in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*," in *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, eds. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz, p. 294.

Bibliography

- Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Changes: A Love Story*. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1991.
- Alexander, M. Jacqui and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ed. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka and Gay Wilentz, ed. *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*. Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc., 1999.
- Bulbeck, Chilla. *Re-orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Bystydziński, Jill M. *Women Transforming Politics: Worldwide Strategies for Empowerment*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Evans, Judith. *Feminist Theory Today: An Introduction to Second Wave Feminism*. London: Sage Publications, 1995.
- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*. London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1949.
- McClintock, Anne, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Colonial Perspectives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds. *Third World Feminism and the Politics of Feminism*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean, and Renee T. White. *Spoils of War: Women of Color, Cultures, and Revolutions*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1997.

Sparr, Pamela. *Mortgaging Women's Lives: Feminist Critiques of Structural Adjustment*. London: Zed Books, Ltd., 1994.

Turner, Terisa E., and Bryan J. Ferguson. *Arise Ye Mighty People: Gender, Class, and Race in Popular Struggles*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994.