

A COMPANION TO GENDER HISTORY

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gendered Themes in Early African History

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Writing Gender into Early African History¹

Rock art in southern Africa, some of it perhaps more than four thousand years old, depicts sexually ambiguous figures, with long, sinuous lines, often painted in red or white, emanating from between splayed legs. In the savannahs of central Africa, the notion of “kingship” fails to convey the nature of a royalty whose very essence rests on the duality of male and female. On the east African coast, groups of men and women, affiliated with each other through their mothers, controlled the inheritance of luxurious stone homes that merchant men from across the Indian Ocean hoped to use to achieve their aspirations of setting up shop in the thriving entrepôts that were Swahili cities more than a millennium ago. In the middle Nile valley state of Meroë, Queen Amanitore’s portrait – full-figured and bellicose – appears on the outer wall of a temple complex whose architecture owes much to post-Pharaonic Egypt. In central Nigeria, probably female artists working in clay from as early as 700 BCE produced arresting portraits of men and women in characteristic poses and distinct sartorial style. Upriver, in and around the Middle Niger Delta, people fashioned terracotta figures of men and women which they used to ensure health and wealth. More than a thousand years ago, in the region around the Great Lakes of central Africa, men and women who had lost their children or their capacity to procreate, for social or biological reasons, invented new institutions of healing based on possession by the spirits of important, departed figures. When they were childless women, the mediums for these spirits retained a central role in social reproduction not based on biological imperatives: they helped others become parents.

Readers will recognize the gendered nature of some of these snapshots, while others of them may be hard to understand. They reflect the vast reach of gendered identities and social relations in Africa south of the Sahara. Writing these histories opens up new vistas onto the category of gender itself; not least by challenging some of the analytical grids that readers might bring to this text.

African history between 2000 BCE and 1400 CE reveals distinctive arrangements and intersections of the categories of gender, age, class, and status. Different vectors

of experience and agency shift the content of the category of gender itself, as class or age or status each constitutes situations and contexts that inflect (or actually efface entirely) a gendered meaning and experience. Histories of ancient African gender relations and of thinking about gender relations will force us to highlight one or more of these categories, sometimes to the extent that they eclipse the embodied vessels that often bear gendered thinking in the Western tradition.

The diversity of gendered experience and ideology in Africa before 1400 CE and the unconventional and uneven body of historical sources shape the texture of the narratives we can compose. A judicious mix of compressed regional histories and focused case studies of the richest sources is the best way to meet the challenge. As it is, much of importance in ancient African history falls through the cracks of an analysis privileging gender, even if this analytical lens reveals much that is new. We should leaven the necessity of thinking about gender historically with the danger and difficulty of translating ancient gender relations and placing them in a sequential narrative respectful of contingency, structure, and agency.

Ancient African gender history cannot be written in the same way as gendered histories of the West during these centuries, not only because specific cultural and material contexts differed, but because the evidentiary basis for writing such stories also differs, sometimes profoundly. Thus, historians of gender have moved beyond the limitations of literate sources and drawn on the plastic and performance arts, architecture, and archeology. All these sources exist, in some combination, for different parts of the continent at different times. In addition, historical linguistics can be a major source for a social history of gender in Africa before 1400 CE.

This chapter embraces the notion that healing practices and transitions in the life cycle were central to making gender historically. Such practices and transitions socialize bodies and locate them in a complex spatial and temporal social field. Power and property, on the other hand, were central to performing gender historically. Gendered persons used them to promote or depart from norms of gendered practice. This crude binary offers readers some leverage on the following survey of gender and early African history between roughly 2000 BCE and 1400 CE, in tropical Africa's major sub-regions. Readers interested in a particular geographic zone of the continent can move to the relevant section. Generalizations about early African gendered histories before the fifteenth century CE appear at the end of the essay.

Southern Africa

Major changes in food production developed in Africa south of the Zambezi considerably later than in the rest of the continent. Archeological evidence for domesticated livestock and farming begins to turn up around two millennia ago. In foraging societies, a major change in bodily practices seems to have unfolded across the millennium after 2000 BCE. Stable carbon isotope analyses of skeletons from this period reveal that men began to eat more marine foods while women ate more terrestrial foods. Perhaps this evidence implies a new, gendered division of work, in which men concentrated on collecting shellfish and women concentrated on collecting and processing plants. Or, perhaps, the fact that men and women ate different foods was itself a constituent of newly gendered identities. Scholars of this period have made important advances in revising the classic gender stereotypes of "man the hunter"

and "woman the gatherer" and their work continues to inform a growing sense of the variability of gendered work and consumption over time and perhaps a growing sense of doubt about attributing embodied gendered identities to any of these materials, including the copious rock art of the region.

Studies of the vast and complex corpus of rock art in greater Southern Africa have linked many of its styles to communities ancestral to today's San-speakers. Some scholars have used ethnographic studies of nineteenth and twentieth century San societies as sources to interpret the rock art by analogy. Feeling that they find compelling and complex correlations between the content of rock art and oral historiography, material culture, and social practice in recent San society, they "read" into the art a set of interpretations of diverse and changing meaning.

One scholar, Anne Solomon, has "read" the densely detailed and layered ancient gynandromorphic figures – figures that mix male and female – in the rock art of South Africa's Drakensberg Range and found in these images messages concerning creation and the social order, the symbolic order of male and female bodies, health and illness, prosperity and want, life and death, fertility and fecundity. Many of these associated messages are expressed in something called a trance dance – at once a domestic and a social performance that converts potencies in people and animals into capacities to hunt, heal, and hurt. These images elegantly attest to a joining in a single figure of male and female meanings and capacity related to health and fertility. They work to reinforce a pervasive emphasis in San oral texts on gender and sexual difference – by joining them – at the same time that they express a freedom from literal representations of physical sexual difference. Solomon reads in these images a relationship between initiated women and hunting.² In this light, stories told by San-speakers to ethnographers working in the nineteenth century explain that an initiated woman should only eat meat shot by her father because her saliva might neutralize the power to kill inherent in other hunters' arrow poisons. Using ethnographic analogy, this story can be read "back into" the images of emission lines running to arrows and thence to an image of an antelope. These pictures narrate the risks expressed in words and they can work together to advance claims that adult women endanger hunting and, implicitly, the prosperity of a group. Among hunters and gatherers, rock art juxtaposed aspects of differently gendered capacities.

The organization of space in farming and herding societies – especially those who built the many stone towns found on the Zimbabwe plateau and as far away as Sowa Pan, in the eastern Kalahari – introduced new elaborations on gender relations. At some of these earlier sites, such as Schroda, near the Limpopo River, in the lands below the Zimbabwe escarpment, archeologists have found numerous clay figurines of people, birds, wild, and domestic animals. Sometime in the seventh and eighth centuries CE, people broke the figures before they buried them in pits. The ones that represented people showed them with enlarged buttocks and body scarring. The meaning of the enlarged buttocks is difficult to interpret, but scarification and the "disposal" of such figurines brings to mind images of initiation rituals, during which young persons are ushered into a new phase of their lives, a phase that marked the effective beginning of living a gendered life. Scarified bodies were inflected by categories of meaning concerning gender and age and, perhaps, descent and lineage. For young girls, a puberty ritual included scarification and marked the beginning of her capacity to bear children and thus, the onset of her reproductive powers with its

promises and pitfalls. For young boys, initiation into age grades – also including scarification – marked the beginning of his capacity to join collective work groups, to accumulate wealth in things (like the skins of hunted animals), and to prepare for fatherhood.

The Zimbabwe Culture

From these and other roots, late in the thirteenth century CE, people began building stone structures and making the place we now call Great Zimbabwe. This city grew up on a southerly promontory at the edge of the plateau, more than 250 kilometers and a thousand feet higher than Schroda. People reckoned wealth and power in a number of ways at Great Zimbabwe, cattle being chief among them. Cattle were important sources of food – milk for ordinary people and milk and meat for elites. They may also have cemented ties between lineages as part of creating marriages. If so, then cattle embodied social ties, and their transfer between lineages as part of a marriage, or their use as gifts to young men in return for their allegiance and support in times of political or military crisis, meant that they could be used to mark and track the course of building webs of patronage. Ethnographic analogy informs these claims because available archeological evidence merely attests to the presence of many cattle in and around Great Zimbabwe, and suggests that elites and commoners used cattle differently. It does not tell us anything very clear about marriage patterns and patronage systems.

Scholars have recognized a pattern of towns contemporaneous with Great Zimbabwe, which they call the “Zimbabwe culture area.” From the tenth century onwards, this grew into a complex and hierarchical society, resting at once on ancient systems of regional trade in cattle, foodstuffs, metals (especially gold and copper), together with ivory and other hunted products. It also rested on connections between local branches of production and transcontinental regimes of demand and supply for commodities like cloth, beads, ceramic and glassware. Great Zimbabwe sat at one of the hubs of this system and gender relations may well have formed a key axis along which goods and commodities flowed.

Some scholars implicitly argue that fertility drove the development of Great Zimbabwe and its satellites. They claim that the increased production of surplus foodstuffs, which underwrote the regional and transcontinental trading systems, could only be achieved by applying more human labor to an environmentally marginal setting for farming and herding. Technological innovations appear to have been rare, they claim, leaving population increases as the only way to bring more labor to bear in production. Scholars often promote this scenario to prepare the way for arguing the importance of environmental degradation to the decline of Great Zimbabwe in the fifteenth century CE. They rarely address the burdens placed on and challenges faced by the men and women who achieved the population increases implied in the model.

Perhaps initiation and puberty ritual were designed, in part, to produce more adults by streamlining and rationalizing the moments at which they could begin their careers as adults. Perhaps men and women called on spirit-mediums and healers to insure reproductive success and the health of children, as more and more men and women sought to have and to raise more children. The goal of achieving high

fertility might have had an impact on gender relations at a number of levels. Lineages rich in cattle could use those resources to contract more marriages for their men. Leaders in powerful lineages could draw on a wider range of client families when raising armies to defend pastures, farms, mines and trade routes. These questions in the history of gender in southern Africa before the fifteenth century CE still largely lack answers, but that could change once scholars use historical linguistics and comparative ethnography to reconstruct inheritance practices and health and healing practices and theories across the full range of Shona dialects.

Central Africa

North of the Zambezi, the central African plateau rises in subtle undulations until the gentle topographic waves peak and begin to descend toward the Upemba Depression and the headwaters of the many great rivers that feed the Congo, the greatest river by volume anywhere in Africa. Scholars have combined a rich archeological and art-historical record with comparative linguistics, historical ethnography, and even oral traditions to reveal a rich and compelling gendered social history of the Greater Congo Basin. Scholars working with archeological and historical linguistic evidence have concentrated, so far, on basic questions of regional settlement histories and branches of production. In the last two thousand years BCE, the gradual development of settled, eclectic farming life unfolded in close concert with creating new social relationships between farmers, fishers, and keepers of small-stock and their autochthonous neighbors who were hunters and foragers. We can say rather more about gendered history in the Greater Congo Basin for the period beginning after the middle of the first millennium CE and especially for the period after 1000 CE in regions where increasing political complexity – often without centralization – produced plastic and oral arts enmeshed in those very politics. Three examples are particularly rich: the development of iron-working in west-central Africa; the importance of gender systems to Luba royalty; and the historical phenomenon of the “matrilinial belt” of south central Africa.

The Inner Congo Basin: Metal, work, and style

In central Africa, and most of the rest of the continent, men have dominated smelting and smithing; such work and the social groups it creates formed key milieu for making men masculine. The widespread fact that men do this work has been taken to reflect its great antiquity. No single narrative line for the history of iron-working may be worked out in central Africa but archeological and linguistic evidence both indicate multiple centers of development concentrated on the eastern and western edges of the Basin, with much diffusion and innovation, beginning early in the last millennium BCE and becoming fully established in places like the Upemba Depression by the end of the first millennium CE. This pattern points up just how important male work was in providing key goods that induced traders to create long-distance links between different zones in the Inner Congo Basin, especially later in the first millennium CE.

One scholar, Colleen Kriger, has worked on the history of iron-working in central Africa with great results. She has argued that the smelters who made iron bloom from

ore and the smiths who took that bloom and made fungible items with it, were central to the creation of greater wealth and social complexity. From the ninth to the fifteenth centuries CE, smiths produced two classes of metal objects: ornaments and charms that people wore and implements that they used in war, farming, hunting, and craft production. In the Upemba Depression smiths also produced copper and iron currencies in various shapes. These items were fungible too, for smiths could convert a set of worn out hoes into a bar of iron currency or they could turn a bar of iron into an axe. Senior smiths were not only metallurgists; they changed currency, influenced the development of new object forms, shaped new styles for executing them, and trained the next generation of such experts.³

One of the key elements of the power enjoyed by smelters and smiths lay in their having joined a language of human parturition to the production of iron materials. Appropriating the grammar of the capacity and experience of reproduction to the task of smelting and smithing is widespread in central Africa. Much has been made in the scholarly literature about the significance of this ideological "move" for the promotion of masculine authority. It might seem obvious that when men decorated their furnaces with clay breasts or spoke of the bellows and tuyères as impregnating their furnace they sought to usurp or, at least, to share in the respect brought to women when they gave birth. But the fact is that iron-working is not the only technology that is gendered, nor is it clearly connected in any way to the political control of women by men. If we see reproduction itself as a transformative process, converting fluids into persons, then whatever other ideological work the analogy might serve, we can see rather more clearly why it serves so often and compellingly as a metaphor for smelting, which converts rock and sand into metal.

Luba royalty, art, and gendered power

In and around the Upemba Depression, a remarkable sequence of archeologically attested developments began to unfold in the middle of the first millennium CE. Historical analysis of the rich material culture excavated from the complex mortuary sites in the Sanga area of this zone of the Luba heartland reveals a dramatic story of political complexity, gendered power, and monarchy. The drama of this story is heightened through the exploits and foibles of Luba's leadership as conveyed in their oral historiography.

When monarchy developed sometime between 950 and 1250 CE, it took a characteristic shape around the dualistic power of male and female leaders. After the fourteenth century CE, the archeological record reflects a radical break with this tradition and suggests the ushering in of a new conception of monarchy and a more expansionist state. But, in this later period and in the eras prior, Luba kings formed alliances with powerful women who served as ambassadors and advisors; very often they served as the linchpin in strategic marriages with chiefs who controlled territories at the fringes of the heartland. The duality of monarchical power is nowhere more powerfully expressed than in Luba art, especially the plastic arts of wood and metals.

Oral historians tell that *Ina Nombe* or *Lolo Nombe* was the founding ancestress of Luba royalty. In these stories about the genesis of Luba royalty, and echoed across a wide range of sculptural forms, the ancestress is represented as the keeper of secret royal knowledge. But Luba royalty involves the pairing, cycling, or alternating of

male and female capacities in ways that rendered royal symbolic and discursive power a most ambiguously gendered one. At the heart of this ambiguity lies a claim that kings' spirits are contained in a female spirit-medium's body. As the claim would have it, only a woman's body is "strong enough" to retain the royal spirit – to endure the danger of its presence – while it possesses her and speaks through her from the land of the dead. Women who worked as royal spirit-mediums understandably had great influence and they are remembered in oral tradition.

Contemporary Luba people describe the ubiquitous geometric patterns on so much royal art – staffs, *lukasa* (wooden memory boards used as simulacra of the royal domain), knives, and axes, among other things – as cicatrization or "scars." In the Luba Heartland today, people say that scars hide secret knowledge, the secret knowledge possessed by chiefs and royals. In the case of female figures created in wood and meant to serve as containers for the spirits of departed royals, their "skin" is busy with cicatrized patterns that allow them to be "read" as erotic and social beings, as persons in the making. Given that such figures were intended primarily for the male, chiefly gaze, their grammar says much about gender and sexuality in this fascinating monarchy. These female figures have deep ebony skin tones, elaborate hairstyles, complex patterns of scarification, and elongated labia.⁴ The close interconnections between *eros*, femininity, spiritual power, and royalty reflects the fact that some women in Luba-speaking societies played extremely important roles as spirit-mediums, and that the category "woman" played an extremely important role in elaborating ideas about power and efficacy.⁵

Central Africa's matrilineal belt

In the savannah zones stretching from eastern Angola to the central East African coasts, scholars have long noted a gendered politics that embraced the power of adult women and promoted it as central to social life. They call this zone the "matrilineal belt," but that moniker places undue emphasis on the nature of lineage forms and their politics. It underplays other aspects of political power – some of which are familiar from the Luba setting and from Schroda – such as the maintenance of separate spheres of economic and political action, the importance of female puberty rituals, and the creation of a "female sexuality" that emphasizes fertility and pleasure. The central features of social life in the "matrilineal belt" probably existed prior to 1400 CE but they did not come into existence together nor did they remain unchanged from the largely nineteenth century descriptions on which scholars often draw for the ethnographic analogy. Ideologies and institutions like lineality, age-grades, and matrifocality, were tools people used to live their lives, not "hardwired" code that Central Africans reproduced blindly. None of these "traits" is unique to this zone of Central Africa, but their unique combination here lends a distinctive air to the region and raises important questions about their historical development.

The entire zone now called the "matrilineal belt" suffers from a combination of poor soil fertility and erratic rainfall regimes. These physical facts nurtured a commitment to an eclectic and shifting cultivation system by the farmers who live in these lands. Mobile settlements and changing needs for farm labor reward communities with flexible senses of membership not tied to the ownership or control of fixed property, especially landed property. This sort of flexibility is the hallmark of matrilineal

systems, in which lineages tend to be shallow, status flows from achievement rather than ascription, and outsiders are easily recruited to join a settlement.

A lot of the scholarship on matrilineality has highlighted the transmission of rights in persons and things, rights very clearly passed on from adult man to adult man, in a patrilineal setting. These rights are not so easily transmitted from man to man, in a matrilineal setting. Yet, what is a problem for men converts women who are mothers into nodes of complex, ordered, and wider social relationships. The study of matrilineal societies, especially in this part of central Africa, has been very important for undermining the view of universal male dominance. Indeed, this work has pointed out the utility of looking at gendered histories through a lens of "parallelism." It helps to think of adult men and women less as in perpetual conflict than as operating in and controlling different zones of social life.⁶

In the Lunda-speaking societies of south-central Africa, this separation takes clear and compelling form. Men seem out of place in villages, where women are busy with the quotidian tasks of organizing labor in their fields, transporting, processing, and preparing food, and making repairs on their houses, building pots, weaving baskets or mats. In the village, men would be seen sitting around talking and drinking beer, their inactivity a stark contrast to adult women's busyness. This is because men work in the forest and think of themselves as hunters. In the forest they fish, trap birds and animals, gather honey, insects and wild plant foods, and collect building materials and medicines. This gender segregation is explained by an ideology of independence that argues that adult men and women voluntarily associate with each other. Gender politics in this setting revolved around negotiating the benefits of conviviality, culinary diversity, and sex without giving up autonomy and independence. At the risk of caricature, this model does convey the sense of gender parallelism common to many societies in the "matrilineal belt."

East Africa

In the well-watered lands north and east of the central "matrilineal belt," gendered social relations and identities developed in recognizable but distinct trajectories. The basic environmental and agricultural equation was decidedly richer and more varied. Ecological diversity in a relatively confined area combined with a rather more reliable regime of rainfall meant that the potential for surplus food production was high. Surplus food formed the basis for social hierarchies.

Between the Great Lakes

Historical linguistic evidence for the growth of specialized vocabularies relating to bananas and their many different cultivars and to the patterning of colors on cattle hides and to the shape of cattle horns all attest to the progress of these specializations. As societies invested in one or the other of these branches of production, they created a growing demand for the lands best able to realize this potential for surplus production. This, in turn, drove the development of a hierarchical political culture in which gender played a key role.

Long before we can speak of the sort of imperialistic powers that later characterized the states in this region, efforts to coordinate and channel the wealth in people

and in things delivered through local agricultural abundance turned on matters of fertility. People in the Great Lakes region invented new words for the condition of an adult who died childless. What had surely been a well-known condition prior to this period now raised an alarm worthy of neologism. Oral historical evidence touches on this alarm by expanding on how to grapple with it. Some of these traditions were told at court and some were told in commoner homes, but they all discuss the invention of a new sort of spirit and its medium, called *muchwezi* (singular), who could return from the land of the departed and grant health and prosperity to its supplicant. The traditions tell us that this spirit required no special kinship connection with those whom it possessed and helped. Unlike the spirits of lineage ancestors and their mediums, the *muchwezi* could help anyone, not simply kin. The social challenges of infertility and childlessness made service to *bachwezi* (plural) spirits attractive options for both men and women because it gave them social standing and a community in which to thrive in the absence of biologically produced children.

It seems no coincidence that dynastic traditions about the region's earliest kings and queens – who ruled perhaps as early as the fifteenth century, but who surely modeled aspects of royalty with much older roots – should be so concerned with these developments. The rise of a new form of healing that lay beyond the control of particular lineage heads, the concomitant reduction in the status and efficacy of lineage spirits, and the relations between these developments and a set of emerging political centers was of the greatest moment for leaders. Royals were extremely concerned to maintain the force of their claims to represent and defend the health and prosperity of their followers and their herds and fields. These *bachwezi* mediums, priests and priestesses, represented a clear threat to that royalist claim. Indeed, portions of dynastic traditions that speak about later kings and queens, who ruled in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dwell at some length on the threats to centralized political authority posed by powerful shrine centers, like the one at Mubende Hill, south of Bunyoro. Mediums, priests, and royals waged an ideological battle over the claim that prosperity was a condition that they could restore and protect. But they were also battling over the position of women as the source of new generations in archly patriarchal polities. When childless adult women became *bachwezi* mediums, they took important steps to speak for themselves in this struggle by serving as vessels for the spirits of the departed persons who were the first “*bachwezi*.”

Swahili urban life and the gender of the house

In the eighth century CE, at the latest, an urban, mercantile world emerged on the east coast of the continent. Gendered social relationships and ideologies shaped much of Swahili history in this cosmopolitan world. Given the fact that Swahili dialects belong to the large “Bantu” group, the social history of gender might be expected to share much with other Bantu-speaking groups touched on in this essay. Yet, gendered history in Swahili societies was unique, as well, and no single pattern may be said to characterize the entire zone of Swahili-speaking societies. Gendered power on the Swahili coasts of east Africa included prominent roles for both male and female political leaders and a distinctive matrilineal source for titled leadership positions in Kilwa, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy city on the Swahili coast in the last several centuries of our period.

It is dangerous to use kinship “systems” to draw conclusions about how people actually negotiated their interpersonal and group relationships because people notoriously do not follow the rules. However, machinations for succession to Kilwa’s titled positions, marriage practices which brought a man to live in his wife’s family’s house, and the disposition of use-rights to certain categories of land found outside of towns and villages ran through groups of persons affiliated with each other through common mothers or sets of sisters. In these settings, then, Swahili-speakers (and other speakers of Bantu languages who lived in the immediate hinterland of the coast) crafted strategies for gaining access to these political and productive resources within a universe of possibilities bounded, in part, by affiliation through women.

One of the dominant interpretations of Swahili society in the centuries immediately following the turn of the first millennium CE, argues that mercantile men from the Arabian peninsula sought to gain access to local political titles and the use-rights to land and resources that often came with them, by marrying the daughters of local rulers.⁷ We are told by an oral historian of the later nineteenth century, that the first Sultan of Kilwa – a Sultan Ali – married the daughter of a coastal chief, Mrimba. They lived together peacefully, “then Sultan Ali persuaded Mrimba’s daughter and said: ‘tell your father, the Elder Mrimba, it is best for him to leave Kisiwani and live on the other side on the mainland. For it is not suitable for him to live in the same place as myself: it is not correct, for he is my father-in-law’.”⁸ It would seem that Sultan Ali, after an initial period of residence with his wife’s lineage, grew intent upon founding a separate household, with Mrimba’s daughter – the Sultan’s nameless wife – joining him there.

By marrying into a wealthy set of matrikin, newcomer men sought to establish control over the large stone houses that have been distinctive features of Swahili towns for more than a thousand years. When properly kept up by the families and lineages, which act as trustees (*waqf ahli*), these buildings express a moral purity and grant to their owners a material form of high status.

Persons and things (like buildings) invest each other with values, especially the value of grasping Islamic theology and practice, composing, performing, and patronizing fine poetry, music, and dance, as well as achieving high competence in transformative work, such as potting, metallurgy, and carpentry. Some scholars claim a gendered distinction in the source of these “achievements.” They claim that men earned and maintained these achievements largely as a function of the rank enjoyed by their family, and that women gained them primarily by their individual capacities. Beyond these ideologies of patrician “status,” it is clear that many patrician women held rights to forms of material property that included slaves and trading ships.⁹

Northeast Africa and the Middle Nile: Aksum, Napata, and Meroë

The mercantile state of Aksum, whose capitals lay in the interior of the Ethiopian highlands, enjoyed its most productive period during the early centuries of the Common Era. When king Ezanas converted to Christianity, sometime very near 324 CE, Aksum was already one of classical antiquity’s great cultures. Today, Ethiopian and Tigrayan Christians tell of their faith by holding that the Queen of Sheba resided – and the Ark of the Covenant now rests – at Aksum, the second Jerusalem. With

metropolises, transoceanic and other long-distance trading ties (reaching as far as the western Mediterranean and India), its own currency, and a complex relationship with its agricultural hinterland, the world of Aksum was a hierarchical and cosmopolitan setting in which gendered identities and social relationships might appear familiar to readers conversant with the Hellenistic and Arabian worlds of the last few centuries BCE and the first several centuries CE. The available historical record favors the experiences and expressions of the wealthy and the powerful. As is so often the case, we are left to speculate about the character of gendered life in Aksum's towns and countryside.¹⁰

Conversion to Christianity began at the top and center of Aksumite society; with the royal household. According to the well-known account of Frumentius, a Hellene from Syria (and a future Christian Bishop) Ezanas' mother was a principal conduit for Christian teachings and practice, bridging the generation between Ezanas and his father, Ousanas Ella Amida, who had welcomed Frumentius to his court in the first place. Royal men and women may have been attracted to Christian life for different reasons.¹¹ The dynamics of royal power might illuminate these differences and open up new dimensions to gendered experience and aspiration in ancient Aksum.

Aksumite royal dynasties sought to retain power by creating ties to powerful clans through marriage. A king's wives very likely came from among the leading clans in the countryside – their sons displayed their mother's clan name in their royal title – which cultivated rural support for royals in the metropolis. The principal evidence for deducing that Aksum's clans were matrilineal clans comes from a compound name in the royal title which, over a period of more than 250 years (ending in the middle of the sixth century CE), distinguishes clan names for each successive ruler. In the case of Ezanas' accession, his mother's capacity to organize support for him very likely moved along lines of clan loyalty and patronage. The fact that succession appears to have been patrilineal strongly suggests that these clan names refer to matrilineal clans. Perhaps Ezanas' mother moved toward Christianity in the hope that a Christian son might better manage Aksum's affairs in a world where Constantine had just converted, in Rome. In undertaking such a move, she may well have had the support of her clanmates; the very ones who would have been instrumental in supporting Ezanas' accession.

Dressing like king and queen in Napata and Meroë¹²

Just as was the case later, in Aksum, the collection of duties on trade in luxury goods provided leaders in the states of Napata and Meroë with the resources to field military forces. Kushite armies conquered and ruled in Egypt, constituting the twenty-fifth dynasty of Taharqo. More commonly, armed force was directed at neighboring Beja pastoralists who regularly threatened the steady flow of primary products – luxury and subsistence – through the middle Nile and beyond, to the Red Sea. These familiar duties and undertakings of royalty stand out in Napata and Meroë for one simple reason: they were not uncommonly organized and led by powerful queens.

Co-regents were regular features of Kushite monarchies, from at least 170 BCE until early in the Common Era. Sometime after about 50 CE, stonemasons created a famous relief of King Natakamani and Queen Amanitore on the pylon of a temple built by these two royals at Naqa, upriver from Meroë. The scene depicts each of

them holding the hair of a collection of their enemies whom they are both about to smite with great broadswords, held high above their heads. Both Amanitore and Natakamani occupy equally prominent positions, wear similar regalia, and carry out the same activity. In other depictions their equality is strikingly clear, most notably a coronation ceremony where, among other things, the queen received her royal title, *Kandake*, a term that appears in Acts 8:27 as a mistaken reference to an individual "Queen of the Ethiopians."

The iconography of the ruling office was gendered male and it was used to legitimate and integrate *Kandakes* who took the throne by means other than inheriting it from their husbands. Succession to high office is hard to pin down from the available sources, but in one important source – the Coronation Stela of Aspelta (found at Jebel Barkal, in Napata, early in the sixth century BCE) – King Aspelta claims descent from an ancestor seven generations removed from him through the maternal line. The significance of the matriline to Aspelta may reflect nothing more than the contemporary strength and worth to his rule of his maternal relatives. Indeed, other inscriptions refer to an undifferentiated group of "royal brethren" as constituting the potential pool of future kings. In the absence of a royal clan – whose leadership could direct struggles for succession – and in the presence of a powerful priesthood, such a circumstance placed great value on the ability of mothers of the "royal brethren" to marshal support and influence among the priesthood on behalf of one or another of their sons' designs on the throne. The *Kandake* may have referred to the woman who "made" the king, in either or all senses: biological, spiritual, and political.

The ostentatious displays of the sartorial trappings of royal power drew male and female leaders into a highly gendered pageant of luxury consumption that conveyed a clear iconography of royal standing and mixed Egyptian and Kushitic grammars of royal power. Upper and middle classes are depicted on their burial stelae where both men and women appear clad only in their jewelry. Women are more frequently depicted bare-breasted and wearing long skirts with elaborately worked fringe. Peasants are also depicted – on pottery – most often wearing nothing or only a loincloth of sheepskin. Both men and women of all statuses wore jewelry and in the earlier centuries of Kushite power – until the middle of the last millennium BCE – the styles were distinctively local.

During the joint reigns of King Netakamani and Queen Amanitore, at the time Christ was alive, some of the most impressive Kushite temples were built at Naqa. The dramatic carvings on their pylons depict the royals in a bellicose pose that combines Egyptian and Meroitic imagery to express clearly the claim that male and female ruled together as protectors and conquerors. In one particularly striking image, the Meroitic lion god Apedemak is shown touching both king and queen – with one of his two pairs of hands – at the same time that his other pair of hands grasps a bunch of plants.¹³ This complex image expresses a semantic bundling of royal power to kill and protect with royal capacity to ensure prosperity. This bundle is widespread in African royal ideology; its explicit connecting of male and female is rarer, however.

As Kushite ties to the Red Sea and Mediterranean worlds grew in complexity and regularity, so too did the jewelry styles become more cosmopolitan. The royal worlds of the middle Nile and the Ethiopian highlands drew men and women into an increasingly intercommunicating and integrated world of trade and consumption where

styles traveled far and wide and where local and regional violence were essential to the "health" of the system. Not unlike today's world of global fashion, regional warfare, and imperial struggle, men and women in Saharan, Nilotic, and Ethiopian Africa before the fourteenth century CE, participated in shaping this world through their demand for particular goods, through their labor and trade, and through their political cultures of hierarchy, gender balance, and cosmopolitanism.

West Africa's Middle Niger Valley

The town of Jenne-jeno, or Old Jenne, stands as West Africa's earliest urban world, a distinctive form of city life in comparative world history. In the following millennium, Jenne-jeno grew into a booming city connected to the far corners of Africa, Europe, and Asia and home to perhaps as many as 20,000 residents. As many as another 30,000 lived in satellite towns built on tells that sat above the high water marks of the flooding Niger, within a 1 km radius from Jenne-jeno. By 800 CE, other towns and cities – built on a similar model of clustered specializations – dotted the western edges of the great Middle Niger Delta. During the next four hundred years some major changes swept the region. Increasingly, Sahelian West Africans welcomed mostly Maghrebian and Andalusian Muslims into their towns. After about 1000 CE, Muslim families moved out of these Sahelian cities and into the countryside and Africans began the long process of domesticating Islam, making it their own. In the midst of this ferment, West Africa's first imperial powers took shape, at Wagadu very late in the first millennium CE, followed by Sosso and then by Sunjata's Mali.

Statues and status at Jenne-jeno

The terracotta statuary from the Middle Niger Delta for which we have established archeological provenance was produced during the early centuries of the Maliempire which were also the last few hundred years of Jenne-jeno's existence.¹⁴ These statues represented the ancestors of different families who dominated different quarters of Sahelian cities, like Jenne-jeno. After the fourteenth century CE, these statues gradually disappeared from urban settings, retreating into distant towns and villages. This may well have reflected the triumph of an urban West African Islam that transformed both Islam and Mande spiritual practice.

Many types of terracotta depict men as hunters and warriors. Such persons could also take other shapes, such as those of a crocodile or a snake, when their bodies had died and their life force had moved away. Many statues depict women with young babies, or women in an ecstatic trance, with bulging eyes. Scholars believe that women used such figures to resolve problems with fertility or risky pregnancy. The individuals, families, and artisan corporations who commissioned their production may have used them as recipients of sacrificial offerings designed to activate the power of the spirit and to induce it to act on the supplicant's behalf. Statues often depict women and men with bulging eyes and it is a commonplace in West Africa for divinatory objects to speak and convey spiritual power to a supplicant. If these figures represented the departed spirits of the earliest residents in the Inland Niger Delta – as many informants have claimed – then that primacy conferred an authority on those ancestors that rendered statues of them quite powerful. People used them to pursue

basic goals in life, such as becoming pregnant, delivering safely, finding a spouse, having rain, being cured of a disease, and so on.

Yet, not all such figures may be interpreted in so straightforward a manner. One statue from the Middle Niger Delta, made sometime between 1100 and 1400 CE, depicts a stern-faced female with two figures, one male and the other female, climbing up her chest. But the climbers are not infants or children – they're clad just like the woman on whom they climb and one of them even wears a beard. This figure very likely represents the spirit of a founding matriarch and shows that women who successfully navigated the challenges of motherhood could enjoy continued power and authority long after their tired bodies had ceased to live.¹⁵ At least before the era in which Jenne-jeno was abandoned – certainly before 1400 CE – female power was strong and potent in the Middle Niger Delta.

Imperial gender Male and female, elder and junior and their quests for power, these tropes mark the regional bardic tradition about the life and times of Sogolon and Sunjata, the mother-son duo credited with founding imperial Mali. Convention places them in the thirteenth century CE. They are remembered because professional performers have told versions of Sunjata's life story for a very long time, beginning no later than the 1350s CE, perhaps some two long generations after the passing of the historical Sunjata.¹⁶ The epic is composed of three story-cycles: the circumstances of his mother's giving birth and his childhood; his growing up and exile; and his victorious return to the Mali heartland.

Strongly gendered themes run throughout these stirring treatments of injustice reversed, heroic achievement, collective responsibility, mystical power, military prowess, and, most prominently, the career of an immensely powerful mother-son duo. Sogolon Wulen Condé is a powerful woman whose capacity flows from her long experience as a single woman. She comes to the king's compound as the younger sister of a notable woman from an ancient polity, a woman who can take the shape of a rampaging buffalo and who, in many versions of the epic, gives to Sogolon her legendary ugliness and who sacrifices herself so that Sogolon may marry and enjoy her reproductive powers. But her son Sunjata's lameness brings him ridicule until late in his childhood, when he receives a great iron rod that he uses to pull himself to his feet. In the process, he bends the iron into the shape of a bow – his first act of transformation, his first accumulation of power.¹⁷ Hunters use bows and blacksmiths produce iron rods. These kinds of labor produce much power and the fruits of this work bear that power, too. Sunjata's lengthy childhood, like his mother's lengthy experience as a single woman, allowed him to accumulate that power.

The epic explores the gendered world of early Mali along two axes. One highlights the exploits of an innovative but potentially dangerous hero, who goes into exile from his birth home, and collects power and knowledge on this journey. Mande speakers call this *fadenya*, literally "father-childness." This broad meaning builds on the narrower meaning of rivalry between half-siblings in a generic household with one father and two or more mothers. The conflict destroys the household – brothers and sisters will have to move off to found their own households – but the new households created by these rivalries are central to the reproduction of social life. Thus, on the grand stage of the epic, *fadenya* is the socially destructive but necessary axis of Sunjata's young adult years, his years as a warrior.

The affectionate ties expected to develop between full siblings, which Mande-speakers call *badenya*, literally “mother-childness,” provides a second axis on which social life and imperial history unfold. Here, mother and full siblings help each other navigate the challenges to accumulating power and wealth. *Badenya* is both the solidarity of the uterine kin-group – symbolized by the home – and the heartland of imperial Mali itself. For, having successfully accumulated power and wealth, while in exile and with the help of his mother and full siblings, Sunjata wins a series of battles against the allies of his enemy, Sumaworo of Sosso, and eventually defeats Sumaworo himself, as a prelude to his triumphant return to his birth home, to claim his title as the Lion of Manden, the founding king of Mali. His life, and the lives of his family members (both male and female) represent the ideal melding of *fadenya* and *badenya* at all levels of social life: the individual, the family, the primary polity, and the imperial system.

The drama presents profound ideological statements on gender, in part through a Mande metaphysics of power and capacity. In the stories, women appear to possess two modes of power. Some women possess great capacity to manipulate and collect the vital power that Mande-speakers understand to run through and constitute all things, whether sentient or not. This power, called *nyama*, may be accumulated through acts of transformation, such as hunting, potting, smelting and working metals, and speaking. But accumulated *nyama* is dangerous to those lacking the ability to use it. This ability accrues to individuals who can encounter *nyama* during their work without it overwhelming them. The ability is called *dalilu* and it might be translated as “occult power or secret means.” *Dalilu* and *nyama* are ethically neutral and genderless, their capacities for good or evil depend utterly on how she who possesses them actually uses them. Mothers may be understood as sorcerers because they have produced new life, a miraculous power that men cannot match and that barren women lack. A hero may use the *nyama* he has accumulated to organize or to destroy, but a heroine may use hers to create new life, as well as to organize success and prosecute victory.

Men derive their power and authority by releasing and accumulating *nyama* through acts of transforming one thing into another – making a live animal dead in hunting, making a lump of metal into a fine bracelet at the smithy. Women derive their power from similar acts of transformation – turning clay into pots or turning the bodily fluids of sex into a baby. While these representational grammars may seem stereotypical to some readers, it is clear that each of these forms of labor creates power and raises questions about the authority to appropriate that power. The stories naturalize the different sorts of work that men and women do, and they exemplify the ideology of complementary relations between the fully mature genders that we have encountered in so many other parts of the continent before 1400 of the Common Era.

According to one scholar, David Conrad, the epic itself, and many other examples of what the bards call “ancient speech” or *kuma koro*, represents powerful women in two basic genres. One sort, like the hero Sunjata’s mother, Sogolon Wulen Condé, is rich with *nyama*, whose legendary ugliness explains why she spent a long while as a single woman, accumulating *nyama*. She plays many active roles in ensuring the success of her son’s political and military affairs. In the stories sung by bards, these women are often represented as the biological mother of the heroine or hero. Other

women are heroines in this story by dint of their personal strength and influence in zones of action defined ideologically as female. Such characters may be either the key to success or an ambiguous source of both fecundity and destruction. One iconic example of this sort is Sugulun Kutuma, Sunjata's full sister, who steals the secret of Sumaworo's *dabilu* without the benefit of her own occult powers, while a prisoner at his palace. In the grammar of the epic, both young women and mature mothers have power and capacity without which imperial Mali would not exist.

Yet we may see in this neat economy of gendered power a very real struggle between men and women. Women were the instruments of men's success. Men sought to benefit from and contain women's power, lest it overwhelm them. Male bards often cast powerful women as untrustworthy, dangerous, and seductive. Conrad has called this motif the "femme fatale" in an effort to throw open the question of male anxiety about female power.

Imperial Malian ideology – the ideologies produced and consumed by the free and high-status Malians – clearly used gender to grapple with the contradictory impulses of heroic innovation and responsible conservatism. Women (especially mothers) and men (especially young men) possessed complementary powers required for building imperial alliances, reproducing them, and expanding them. If their gendered labels – *fadenya* and *badenya* – seem familiar to us, the Epic cycles make equally clear that these impulses operated in everyone's life. So, too, did the tension between them. The well-lived life inhabited the tension between these poles. Both man and woman had to face this challenge. In the historical context of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when imperial Mali entered the world stage, these challenges were formidable indeed. Not every member of Mande society, nor every group therein, was equally able to meet them.

Art and Gender in Ancient Nigeria

The histories of some of the most famous artistic traditions of Nigeria – Nok, Ife, and Benin – involve considerable rupture, diversity, and in some cases mutual influence. Artists in these traditions used terracotta, wood, stone, and various metals (mostly brasses and a few bronzes). Scholars who have studied the more recent plastic arts in West Africa, have noted a broadly gendered division of practice. Mothers and older women tend to work in clay and fathers and older men tend to work in wood and metals, though a person's standing within a particular kin-group, and that kin-group's standing within the larger community, may have had as much influence on who made such art as did their gender. Individual differences in skill and interest must also have played a role.

For many millennia, artists have executed commemorative heads and portraits in terracotta, often on commission. Given the complex gendered nature of work in clay, it seems beyond doubt that the tremendous corpuses of terracotta sculpture, vessels, and figurines were produced by both men and women artists. More recently, perhaps as early as the ninth century CE, in southern Nigeria, artists have worked by lost-wax casting of brasses and bronzes.¹⁸ In these media, it seems likely that men and women may have worked together, since women may well have modeled the clay cores that men used to sculpt the figure in wax, before covering it with a clay shell and investing it with molten copper or brass.

Nok figurative sculpture

The "Nok" terracottas are complex and visually arresting traditions of figurative sculpture, created over a period of some eighteen centuries, beginning perhaps as early as the ninth century BCE, but clustering most densely between 700 BCE and about 500 CE.¹⁹ Most of the known terracottas came from two sites, Nok and Jemaa, very near to each other and close to the geographical center of modern Nigeria. The iconography of these figures reveals a stunning sense of gendered identity and practice in early Nigerian history.

The iconography of the sculpture, though based on only a few classes of forms, reveals leaders, healers, and high-status men and women in various poses – standing, sitting, and genuflecting. Besides these distinctive poses, the great care given to rendering coiffures and jewelry and the realism applied to facial features strikes the viewer immediately. About two-thirds of the complete figures are male, wearing beards, moustaches, or penis sheaths. Female figures wear loincloths and have bare breasts. In the middle of the twentieth century, men and women living east of Nok, on the Bauchi plateau, dressed in strikingly similar fashion. Hairstyles do not correspond to biological sex; men and women may each wear any of a variety of strikingly elaborate coiffures. But poses do seem to correlate with sex. Standing figures are predominantly female, while those who genuflect or who rest their chin on a kneecap while sitting are almost entirely male. The absence of supporting sources makes deeper interpretations of the gendered meanings contained in these figures impossible.

The absence of supporting sources forestalls deeper interpretations of the gendered meanings contained in these figures, yet they seem somewhat similar to the power-laden statuary from the Middle Niger Delta that we have just examined. Without implying a simple diffusion between the two centers, it is easy to see the Nok figures as part of the healing institutions of possession and propitiation so important to an individual's and a village's life.

Ile-Ife Perhaps no artistic tradition in Africa has attracted more scholarly and popular attention than the lost-wax brass and bronze castings from southern and southwestern Nigeria produced since 800 CE. The combination of technical skill and aesthetic complexity, and their obvious importance in royal regalia and pageantry and, in wooden forms, in the daily life of ordinary folks, also singles them out for special attention. In and around the fabled city of Ile-Ife (literally "home-spread") female and male artists executed a remarkable body of these castings. Yoruba-speakers tell us that life began and spread outward from Ile-Ife and archeologists tell us that people have lived there since the middle of the fourth century BCE, perhaps surrounded by a "city wall."²⁰ Working first in terracotta and then in stone and lost-wax castings in brasses and bronze (between roughly 800 and 1500 CE), artists made increasingly naturalistic sculptures. The sculpture developed along a stylistic trajectory from minimalism, between 800 and 1000 CE, to naturalism, between 1000 and 1400 CE, to expressive and stylized forms after 1400 CE. These broad phases matched the flowering of Ile-Ife itself.

The terracotta items range from very small to nearly life-sized, and include heads that were freestanding, vessels bearing animal and other figures, and many other

subjects and styles. The metalwork forms a much smaller corpus of some thirty pieces with great stylistic similarity, perhaps produced by a small number of artists over a fairly brief span of time. The presence of holes in the eyes and around the head suggests that when in use they were costumed, perhaps with beaded crowns, in the case of rulers, or with feathers and other strings of beads, in the case of diviners. Several of the brasses show pronounced striations on the face, and sometimes on the lower lip, reminding us of the power of bodily-markings to socialize and fix the person in a role and a status. Most interesting of all, many of the necks had large holes – some with remains of metal nails in them – suggesting that these heads had been mounted on something else: perhaps a wooden body, perhaps a stout pole used to carry as well as to mount them.

How did these figures “live” for those who gazed upon them, knew their whereabouts, or carried them? If figures such as these were designed to “bring down” a spirit from above – to give it form down here, on earth – then how were these forms arranged in a play, a ritual drama of meaning and efficacy? Male figures depict men as hunters, warriors, doctors or diviners, drummers, kings, wild animals, and as a woman’s partner. Female figures depict women as mothers, priestesses, birds, and as a man’s partner. Many of the heads were found in sacred groves, dedicated to one or another of the many deities in the Yoruba pantheon. This suggests that they were containers for the spirits of their likenesses and that they enjoyed many lives as useful bearers of the power to assist their supplicants in divining the correct choices to make at key crossroads in their lives. They were buried, dug up, and reburied. Odd collections of pieces and parts and entire heads and busts have been found together. The brasses found in this grove included figures of king and queen that may have served as their doubles during annual rites of purification and renewal. These figures were both containers of the deity Olokun’s capacity to bring wealth in the form of beads from overseas (or across large rivers) and they were objects of supplication intended to activate that capacity for a particular person. In the last few centuries before 1400 CE, the skill and volume of production of these items seems to have reached its height.

Of this rich tradition, perhaps no other figure represents the ideology of gender complementarity better than a paired queen and king found at Ita Yemoo, beside the road to Ilesha, just northeast of Ife. Made sometime between 1000 and 1200 CE, this complex sculpture expresses the gender parity that centered royal power and, at the same time, it copies a deeper argument about gender parity as the basis for founding communities and establishing governments. The royal pair grasp and wear the items of power, the things that symbolize their capacity to rule, their authority or *ashe*. Their crowns differ: hers is flanged, his is a tight cap. They are otherwise clad in virtually similar fashion. One scholar has observed of that linking male and female that it “is expressive of the cultural theme of the dependence of the sexes upon one another for the actualization of their essential natures (*iwa*).”²¹ Those essential – and essentialized – natures ensured and promoted the prosperity, health, and safety of the source of all life, Ile-Ifẹ even though their complementarity could not efface individual capacities to destroy and create.

Many brass objects present males and females as equals and many myths tell how the elders who founded towns and villages either traveled with these paired figures or commissioned a brass caster to make new ones.²² The representation of gender

parity encodes the opposition of different forms of power that may be symbolized by genitalia, which are invested with different meanings. Males and their penises may be both creative – sources of children – and destructive – weapons for killing. Women and their vaginas may be secretive and covert in their capacity to destroy and create. In story, ritual, and these paired brasses, male and female are not opposed so much as they bear complex complementarities that require each other. The emphasis on heterosexual complementarity is strikingly hegemonic.

Benin In the forest to the south and east of Ile-Ife, Benin city emerged at the turn of the first millennium CE, growing from ancient roots into a leading urban center by 1200. By the fourteenth century CE, rulers in this city were raising armies and undertaking a series of alternately expansionist and defensive moves. In a few hundred years Edo rulers expanded the gendered language of authority to include organized warfare. The largely ritualized capacity of rulers to take life – by sacrifice – was now supplemented by a form of social violence much harder to contain and control. The historical development of warfare is expressed clearly in the many brass and ivory plaques and sculpture from Benin.

The Edo-speakers who built Benin City, shared a deep past with their Yoruba and Igbo speaking neighbors and the phenomenology of Edo art shares some key concepts with its Yoruba-speaking neighbors. The concept of the head as the embodiment of a person's individual destiny and the notion of *ase* as the power to make things happen are common to the two societies. Important parts of the pantheon are shared as well, like many of the deities (*orisha*), such as Olokun. Edo artists focused strongly on the nature of power and capacity. Gender figured prominently in these representations, nowhere more so than in court art.

In their sculpture, Edo artists expressed gender differences through clothing, hair-styles, and, especially, tattoos.²³ With a few exceptions, such as the figures dedicated to Olokun, the giver of children, vernacular arts mute the depiction of sexual difference. Genitalia are not represented and the depiction of breasts does not always indicate sex. In Edo royal symbolism, beads figured prominently, but the richest beads were made from red coral, not from glass or stone. These striking red coral beads were used for everything from royal veils to full-length royal cassocks. They were held to contain power – *ase* – to transform things, to effect outcomes. Brass, ivory, and red coral beads were rare in Benin and only certain individuals could work with these media. Their restricted use expressed power and high standing.²⁴

Two sorts of altars – to the head and to the hand – and their furnishings convey core elements of a theory of action shared by commoner and royal alike. The “altar to the head” is the place where one makes offerings at annual ceremonies that are designed to help the head grasp an individual's destiny. The head is the seat of reason and a person's reason shapes a person's capacity to live out her life's core questions, to realize her potential. The “altar to the hand,” the right hand, is where one offers words and sacrifices designed to help secure the outcome of one's actions. The hand gets one the wealth and prestige one desires. Edo-speakers combine a notion of destiny with a theory of self-aware individual effort to advance a larger argument about the centrality of competition, self-reliance, and stamina to a healthy social body. Ordinary men and women, no less than royal men and women, could through a combination of destiny and deeds, enter historical memory by being enshrined in

local cults or recalled in masquerades and oral traditions. These successes could be gendered in ambiguous ways.

Commemorating queen-mothers in Benin royal art is a fine example of this. In the century just after 1400, according to published traditions, the *Oba* ("ruler") of Benin, Esigie (r. 1504–50), introduced an innovation in the titled structure of Edo royalty. He created the title of queen-mother, *Iyoba* (*Iya-Oba*, "mother-ruler"), bestowed it on his own mother, recalled as Idia, and built her a palace. Every ruler since that time has done the same. Idia became an icon of royal female power – a woman who went to war, a woman who used the power she had accumulated in her life to assist her son in becoming ruler of Benin, a woman who possessed enormous skill and knowledge in the healing arts. Any *Iyoba* had successfully competed with all the other royal wives – *iloi* – to bear the first son to a ruler. People understood that a combination of destiny and her individual effort had delivered this success to the *Iyoba*.

Idia's position in official and popular Edo history coincided with the moment when Benin came into contact with Portuguese traders, who fought as paid mercenaries in Benin's armies and introduced new arms and new forms of wealth to Benin, from the 1480s CE onwards. Her commemorative art often includes representations of these mercenaries. Idia is also represented as a priestess to her ancestral shrine. She thus bears the burden of conveying the deepest traditions of royal female power, which drift back into the days of the founding of Ile-Ife, and she stands as a figure most energetically engaged with the first phases of the historical era that ended, some might say, when a British force destroyed and looted the royal palace in 1897. She is not depicted as the female counterpart to her son, the *Oba*. Instead, she is shown wearing the clothing and headdresses of high-ranking chiefs. In the grammar of royal court art, the *Iyoba*'s power and standing are, in important ways, separate from her son's. This may represent the fact that her achievement in bearing the *Oba* reflects both her destiny to do so and her own individual effort and success in bringing that off.

These associations and representations of the *Iyoba* express an idealized image of a woman and her life cycle. She moved from being a daughter and a sister through the stage of being a wife and a mother to arrive at widowhood. She lived in a competitive relationship with other wives in a polygynous household, where among other things, she sought to conceive the husband's first son. Body image was important: a slender, well-proportioned and smooth-skinned look was the ideal. Manner was important, too: a restrained intelligence combined with a faithful submissiveness were ideals. This complex bundle of stereotypes expressed the terms and conditions under which women like the *Iyoba* could achieve political power and a degree of social immortality embodied in their sculpted forms. Yet, later historical records and oral traditions tell us about "troublesome" women, "runaway wives" and others, who were "envious" of their sisters or "quarreled" with their husbands. We will not see women like this in such media as royal court art even though the established path to female power, never easy to tread, was not for everyone.

Some Gendered Themes in Early African History

Gendered histories of ancient Africa rest on an overlapping set of categories that highlight significant common characteristics across much of the continent's history prior

to the fifteenth century CE. These categories include the practices and theories of health and healing, notions of property and knowledge, and modes of power and capacity. Together, these features of ancient African gendered history paint a vivid picture of complexity and innovation.

Health and healing was a field of great social importance, bringing together the making of gendered persons and knowledge about the core issues of living: relating body and spirit, keeping the circle of life intact through children, and mediating the corrosive or otherwise dangerous effects of centralized, instrumental power held by leaders – whether a priest of Amun or the head of a homestead. Knowledge of healing was shared, but not all fields of expertise were open to both men and women. Marking young bodies at the moment that their reproductive capacities emerged made them gendered persons, but initiation also propelled young people to a new point in the cycle of life. Facing the daunting challenges and potential rewards of motherhood and fatherhood, each person would have to draw on a number of pools of support to succeed as an adult: his or her individual capacity; membership in a lineage, a clan, a village, and other social or artisan groups; the capacity of departed relatives or illustrious leaders; complex theories of action and ethics expressed in relations between persons and gods. Further research into the historical development of health and healing and of capacities transferred or denied to people as they moved through the life cycle will enhance our understanding of how early Africans made gender.

Gendered forms of controlling property in Africa intersected historically with other categories, such as class, mode of subsistence, and life cycle. Women farmers controlled their granaries and the economics of labor allocation and seed distribution, but where men farmed, they controlled these things. Almost universally, women controlled food preparation, but upper-class women, including royal women, did no such work. Almost universally, men controlled metallurgical activities, including the making of weapons and jewelry, but in many settings, particular lineages or caste groups controlled this knowledge and royal women were often associated closely with warfare.

The conventional claim that women's power flows from motherhood would sound very familiar to many in Africa before 1400 CE, but the category of mother and motherhood was never limited to biological and social reproduction alone. Queen-mothers, common in African royalty, were powerful alliance-builders and kingmakers, skilled and knowledgeable healers, and often makers of war. These women were often post-menopausal, a condition which both blurred and defined gendered boundaries.

Similarly, the conventional claim that adult men possessed power as a result of their facility with destruction – as warriors and hunters – would be unexceptional to many residents in Africa before 1400 CE. But these categories were never limited to physical destruction alone. Older men and older women often had access to and wielded different modes of very similar powers to destroy and create.

Much remains to be done in writing the gendered histories of ancient Africa, but we have come a long way from the view that African history before the 1500s, if it could be written at all, was the history of trade and statecraft alone. As this chapter has made clear, we can now say something of value about the social life of ordinary men and women as well as rulers (even if we know little about earlier and later stages in their life-cycles); and about the philosophies of social justice and the ideologies of

social agency that both imbued gender with power and authority and marked off gender *per se* as of only limited importance in social life.

NOTES

- 1 This chapter will not deal with Islam in Africa, nor will it deal with Madagascar, and it will have very little to say on Saharan societies.
- 2 Solomon (1994), 346.
- 3 Colleen Kriger, *Pride of Men: Iron-working in Ninth Century West Central Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999), chapters 1 and 2.
- 4 The practice of elongating a young woman's labia – often as part of a longer period of transition to puberty – is common in Bantu-speaking Africa. It is understood to promote sexual pleasure for parties to sexual encounters.
- 5 Mary H. Nooter, "Fragments of Forsaken Glory: Luba Royal Culture Invented and Represented (1883–1992) (Zaire)," in Beumers and Koloss (1992), 79–89.
- 6 See James Pritchett *The Lunda-Ndembu: Style, Change, and Social Transformation in South Central Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).
- 7 Nurse and Spear (1985), 73–9. For the history of Kilwa, interpreted thus by Nurse and Spear, see (anonymous) "The Ancient History of Kilwa Kisiwani," in G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville (ed.) *The East African Coast: Select Documents from the first to the earlier nineteenth century* (London: Rex Collings, 1975), 221–6.
- 8 Anonymous, "Ancient History of Kilwa," 221.
- 9 From the later eighteenth century, with the growth of a plantation economy based on sugar, patrician women held rights in this sort of land.
- 10 Though part of the ancient world, Aksum's capital retained a distinctively Ethiopian layout, with elite buildings and burials in its center and lower-status, agricultural, and craft-making activities confined to outlying areas, separated from the center by open land. There were no defensive walls though its boundaries to the north and east were clearly marked with bilingual stone inscription.
- 11 The account comes from a contemporary Latin writer, Rufinus. He received it from Aedesius of Tyre who had been with Frumentius in the royal household at Aksum as a prisoner and servant. A full translation appears in Munro-Hay (1991), 202–4.
- 12 Kush refers to the lands up the Nile from Wawat, a territory immediately to the south of Egypt's traditional border at Aswan. Napata was the name of the region around a major religious complex of Jebel Barkal, just down stream from the fourth cataract. Today this entire region is more commonly known as Nubia after the Noba or Nuba-speaking peoples who moved into the region after the collapse of Kush. In Aksum, the place and the people were called Kasu or Kashta. Sometimes the territory of Meroë is included in the territory named Kush.
- 13 Pomerantseva (1994), 166, 168.
- 14 Looting has erased the archeological provenience of the majority of these pieces, making it very difficult to read them historically.
- 15 Herbert M. Cole, *Icons: Ideals and Power in the Art of Africa* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 74.
- 16 Ivor Wilks, "The History of the Sunjata Epic: A Review of the Evidence," in Austen (1999), 44–9.
- 17 David C. Conrad, "Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes: Female Power in Mande Epic Tradition," in Austen (1999), 189–229.

- 18 Specialists using the lost-wax technique for casting metal objects apply wax to a blank core, sculpt the wax into the image they desire to create, then cover the sculpted wax surface with clay, heat the entire thing, pour out the molten wax and replace it with molten metal. Thus "lost wax" or *cire perdue*, in French.
- 19 The new chronology rests on recalibrated carbon-14 dates from carbonized material from different sites bearing Nok sculptures. Thermoluminescence dates from the terracotta itself together with another set of carbon-14 dates from carbonized internal wooden structures inside some of the larger sculptures, push the dates back to 1000 BCE; see de Grunne (1998), 18–20.
- 20 See Henry J. Drewal, "Ifè: Origins of Art and Civilization," in Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun (1989), 45–76.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 66–71.
- 23 Only non-royal women tattoo their faces.
- 24 Amos and Girshick (1995); Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan, "Images of the Queen Mother in Benin Court Art," *African Arts* 26, 3 (1993), 55–63, 86–87; *idem*, "Iyoba, The Queen Mother of Benin: Images and Ambiguity in Gender and Sex Roles in Court Art," in Kaplan (1997), 73–102.

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