

BOOK REVIEW

Kathleen Sheldon. *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. xvii + 330 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Footnotes. Bibliography. Index. \$40.00 Paper. \$80.00 Cloth. \$39.99 Ebook. ISBN: 978-0-253-02722-1; ISBN: 978-0-253-02716-0; ISBN: 978-0-253-02731-3.

Despite the obvious enormous challenges that arise when producing a book that covers the experiences of African women from all parts of the continent and from as far back as the emergence of early human societies, Kathleen Sheldon has successfully completed this task, one that scholars have shied away from for the last couple of decades. *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century* achieves a readable synthesis of the immense body of knowledge about African women that has been produced over the last several decades and provides a clear, focused narrative with cohesive analytical threads that is particularly suited to an undergraduate audience. Following in the footsteps of Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Beth Raps (co-authors of *African Women: A Modern History* [1997]) and Iris Berger and E. Frances White (co-authors of *Women of Sub-Saharan Africa* [1999]), Sheldon offers an updated text that is reflective of the current state of the field of African women's history.

African Women is organized chronologically, with the first three chapters covering the long pre-colonial history of African women. The value of these chapters is that for the undergraduate reader, there are clear examples of how African women contributed to political, social, cultural, religious, and economic developments in pre-modern Africa. Sheldon is consistent in placing women at the center of the historical narrative, an important perspective to present to students. For example, in Chapter 2, which focuses on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when an increasing European presence affected agricultural activities and expanding trade, Sheldon asserts that "women in communities along the West African coast had emerged as key figures in the growing international trade networks" and that they were "actively exporting slaves and trade items such as ivory, beeswax, animal hides, and kola nuts...iron bars, firearms, gunpowder, brandy, and glass beads" (37). Sheldon clearly highlights African women as agents of change and as dynamic, adaptive members of their societies.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer a close examination of African women during the colonial period, with emphasis on the more personal as well as the public

experiences of women under colonialism. Sheldon is adept at informing her readers about the gendered nature of colonial experiences. In her introduction to Chapter 4, for example, she establishes her analytical position when she explains, "...women were subjected to particular kinds of repression related to their work in agriculture and as traders, because of their role as mothers, and because of their impact in local political events prior to European incursion" (92). In addition to her clear argument that colonialism was a gendered experience, Sheldon further complicates the discussion by exploring other factors that also created different experiences of colonialism, such as ethnicity, religion, and the unique approaches and policies of the various colonizers. Finally, Sheldon asserts that some women's experiences were better than others. In these chapters, Sheldon challenges her readers to pay close attention to complex questions about how colonialism was a gendered system which resulted in gendered experiences as well as about how colonialism created opportunities for some Africans while it repressed others.

The last four chapters explore the role of women in independence movements and in the post-colonial period. These chapters offer numerous case studies, including women leaders of nationalist movements, women as the backbone of resistance campaigns, changes in agribusiness that affected women, the emergence of women's studies programs and academic feminism, and the even more contemporary issues of HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, sexuality, women in the production of arts and film, and women as peace activists. Undoubtedly, these chapters will prove particularly interesting and exciting to the undergraduate reader.

African Women is not without its faults. Although the title seems all-encompassing, the consideration of north African women is sparse. This text is well suited for those wanting to learn about women in sub-Saharan Africa but less so for readers interested in the entire continent. Chapters 4 and 5 on the colonial period could have pulled more significantly from some of the rich scholarship on the experiences of African women under colonialism published in the last twenty years. While Sheldon made strong use of seminal research from the 1970s through the 1990s, case studies from some of the excellent work being done by more recent historians of the colonial era would have enriched her discussions and helped the text to feel more current, especially in Chapter 4. Finally, by its very nature as a study on such a broad topic and time period, this book had to rely at times on generalizations. Complexities, subtleties, and deep analysis were sometimes lacking, with Sheldon having to opt for brevity and accessibility.

The strengths of this text are many and overshadow the weaknesses. Sheldon discusses the issue of sources consistently throughout the book, offering reminders of how scholars piece together historical narratives. Sheldon's steady writing style and the analytical threads she weaves throughout the entire text make this comprehensive coverage easy to digest. Her identification of key topics within each chapter will prove handy for instructors and students seeking launch pads into topics to explore further and

will spark discussions on many topics. Perhaps most importantly, Sheldon's book does not compete with or excessively repeat the earlier iterations of broad examinations of African women but rather builds upon and updates, based on the growing body of scholarship on African women. Sheldon has made an important contribution to the field of African women's history with this text, and *African Women* will become a staple in undergraduate courses while also serving as a handy reference text for graduate students and scholars.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Bangura, Joseph J. 2012. "Gender and Ethnic Relations in Sierra Leone: Temne Women in Colonial Freetown." *History in Africa* 39: 267–92. doi:10.1353/hia.2012.0003
- Candido, Mariana P. 2015. "Engendering West Central African History: The Role of Urban Women in Benguela in the Nineteenth Century." *History in Africa* 42: 7–36. doi:10.1017/hia.2015.16.
- Schler, Lynn. 2004. "Writing African Women's History with Male Sources: Possibilities and Limitations." *History in Africa* 31: 319–33. doi:10.1017/S036154130000351X.