
Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion & Culture*, London: Zed Books, 1997, x + 214 pages.

Reviewer: *Blair Rutherford*
University of Regina

If one takes seriously the central message about identity politics and Africa in this latest book by the author of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, it presents difficulties for people like myself to review this collection of essays by Ifi Amadiume. Professor Amadiume, who herself received a doctorate in anthropology from the University of London, argues throughout *Reinventing Africa* that it is necessary to trenchantly critique the eurocentric, middle class and patriarchal biases inherent in anthropology as a discipline in order to clear the way for carrying out what she calls a social history of Africa that is more faithful to the historical realities of the continent. Although I am partial to criticisms of patronizing and hegemonic tendencies in both anthropology and African studies more broadly that are informed by "anti-essentialist" theoretical imaginaries and political goals that typically fall under the "invention of" literature, my non-African origins, gender and politics that fall outside pan-Africanist concerns make my qualifications to review this book, let alone carry out research in Africa, suspect from Amadiume's perspective. Instead of bowing to this prohibition, I will indicate some of the locations of Amadiume's interesting arguments, suggesting that ultimately she is more of an anthropologist than she wishes to be.

Of the 10 essays in this book, two are original and eight come from earlier publications of, or more commonly, public lectures given in, the early 1990s. The essays deal with common themes such as racism, gender, feminism, matriarchy, classism, religion and how these are interwoven in both dominant academic studies of Africa that, for her, misrepresent the African identity and those works that "answer back" to such literature, like her own and, especially, that of the Senegalese historian and pan-Africanist, Cheikh Anta Diop, whose "African historical sociology" acts as a jumping off point for her "social history." Drawing on her own research in the 1980s amongst the Nnobi, an Igbo group in Nigeria, Diop's arguments, and her critiques of a rather limited, if not dated, number of anthropological works on Africa (mainly by Fortes, Meillassoux, Ter-

ray, Riesman, and Bloch), she expands her argument from her earlier book by not only providing a materialist theory of the dialectical tension between matriarchy and patriarchy in African societies but also by explaining the patriarchal biases of European anthropologists and feminists through the history of their sociocultural formation.

Following Diop, Amadiume explains the violence and patriarchal moral philosophy of Europeans as arising from their Indo-European origins over five thousand years ago. This, she argues, not only explains the Atlantic slave trade, the violence of European colonialism in Africa and its continuation by postcolonial elites but also why Western feminists focus their struggles on the work-place and universally view the family as inherently patriarchal. In contrast, Africa social relations have contained a contradiction between the autonomous matricentric unit, which has led to the ideology of "the motherhood paradigm," and broader, patriarchal polities. In her view, the African family has served as the basis of matriarchy in terms of goddess-based religions, strong ideology of motherhood, and a general moral principal rooted in love, which has led to alternative forms of power for women and for decentralized polities in tension with patriarchal centralization. In her model, conquests by patriarchal "outsiders" like Islamic Arabs and Christian Europeans have strengthened the patriarchal side of African social relations. Yet, the motherhood paradigm has continued as African women seek to defend their autonomy. But Western anthropologists and feminists have missed this matricentric unit given their inherent European patriarchal understandings of the family and thus view African women only as victims of African men.

This argument forms the foundation of analysis for most of her chapters, though some provide quite textured investigations of, for example, social movements and women's organizations in Nigeria. But this core argument shows how Amadiume's book goes against the anti-essentialist grain of much current North American (feminist) anthropology of Africa. Her critique of this view is largely implicit, with only a brief disparaging comment here and there about "anti-essentialist" feminists. Much of the dominant anthropological and feminist approaches to African studies today stress imagined and performative identities, the complexity of the multilayered dialogues that comprise the historical realities of the continent,

and the need to specify one's study in the discursive grounds of specific and localized locales, including that of the anthropologist herself. In contrast, Amadiume's argument is based on essentialized identities (if not naturalized, as occasionally she turns to biology for rooting practices regarding African women), a relatively simple narrative of African historical processes, and an ease in moving from her study of the Nnobi in the 1980s to Africa writ large.

Her claims can be empirically, historically and politically challenged for their essentialist assumptions about Africa, Europe, gender, and anthropology. Interestingly, her study is anchored not only in Afrocentrism, with her Nigerian roots lending themselves to intuitive insight into what she calls the African grassroots reality, but also in classical anthropology and Western epistemology more broadly. Her project is globally comparative and legitimized by her reading of British social anthropology, which enables her to claim to scientifically find the underlying social organization of traditional African societies. From my interpretation, it is not anthropology she wants to junk, but to promote her own, Afrocentric version of anthropology.

Rather than dismiss her book as thus being contaminated by the Western episteme (which she does, for example, to V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*), her book is important as it shows how academic works draw on different discursive resources for various projects. Her project particularly speaks to those promoting pan-Africanism, especially in the African diaspora, and her chapters on the challenges of racism and patriarchy facing African women in the classroom, work and in feminist groups in England and North America are insightful and suggestive. While those anthropologists, feminists, and Africanists involved in "anti-essentialist" studies could call her book "strategic essentialism," such a label goes against the grain of her assumption of scientifically grasping the essence of African (and Indo-European) social relations and ideologies. It would have been beneficial if Amadiume engaged explicitly with this expanding literature of the 1990s, but nonetheless *Reinventing Africa* nicely shows that there are very different ways to imagine the "invention of" literature. Like myself, many may situate themselves differently in their anthropology and feminism, but Amadiume's book provides a worthwhile academic and political challenge that is sure to be popular amongst audiences sympathetic to pan-Africanist movements.

Lidia D. Sciama and Joanne B. Eicher (eds.), *Beads and Bead Makers: Gender, Material Culture and Meaning*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998, 317 pages (paper).

Reviewer: *Laurier Turgeon*
Université Laval

This volume brings together 12 articles originally presented at a workshop held in 1995 at Queen Elizabeth House, under

the auspices of the Cross Culture Centre for Research on Women at the University of Oxford. The contributions represent a wide variety of subjects, approaches, time periods and cultural areas. Topics range from the manufacture and trade of beads, to their different forms of consumption and their symbolic meanings, "with gender the overall theme" (p. vii). The authors come from an equally large number of disciplines: Literature, Archaeology, Design, Folklore, Anthropology, History and Women's Studies. Articles span a broad sweep of time from prehistory to the present and cover a wide array of geographical units: cities, regions, countries and even continents throughout the world.

Lidia Sciama provides an interesting overview of bead production, trade and consumption in the introductory essay. She draws attention to the major role of beads as a trade item in all parts of the world since prehistoric times. Glass blowing and bead manufacture have generally been considered a male occupation. Sciama points out that in Europe, although men were responsible for blowing and cutting glass canes to make beads, women would polish, finish and thread them and prepare them for shipment. In certain parts of West Africa, however, women are the principal bead makers. Trade in beads appears more gender specific: whether in Europe or Africa, men were usually responsible for their commerce. Beads have been used in most parts of the world, by both men and women, as a form of body adornment. Sciama explains this widespread use of beads as an efficient way of expressing beauty (the skin has always been considered the first canvas and art object), fertility (beads resemble ovaries, nipples and female genitals) and power (the magical properties of beads are used to acquire power and maintain health). She concludes that beads are of great significance at all levels of society and are "closely associated both with individual and group identity" (p. 17). Sciama's essay goes beyond a simple presentation of the articles in the book; it provides a good survey of recent bead research, including David Graeber's (1996) fascinating work on beads, money and regimes of value.

In Europe, Venice has always been at the centre of glass bead production which was generally assumed to be a male occupation. In her survey of the history of bead manufacturing from the Middle Ages to the present, Francesca Trivellato pays special attention to the role of Venetian women in the industry. Like most European medieval guilds, that of bead makers was based on the principal of male heredity and craft skills were passed down as property from man to man. Female labour was used much more, however, than indicated in official records. Bead stringing was usually done by women and they were also involved in the distribution and sale of beads at the local level. Men kept responsibility for the more lucrative long distant trades.

The following three articles deal with beads in Africa. Margaret Carey provides an overview of African beadwork. Gender roles in the manufacture of beads vary according to the materials being used (metal beads are usually made by men whereas shell beads are made by women), the uses