

# DECOLONIZING GENDER STUDIES IN AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the modernist agenda, which bestowed upon Africa colonial imperialism, destroyed the African identity. It is the argument of this paper that the lost African identity can be reconstituted and reconstructed through Gender Studies. Rather than focus on the meaningless struggle between the African man and woman, Gender Studies should, during the new millennium, address the problems of famine, poverty, disease, poor education, poor communication, conflict - in a word, underdevelopment. These problems are, it is important to note, trans-gender. But more than anything else, Gender Studies should also highlight the crucial achievements Africa has so far made in science, politics economics, medicine, technology, art, music and education. On funding, the paper points at the need for African intellectuals and governments to look for alternative sources of funding for Gender research. This is the only way Africa can effectively dismantle forms of knowledge authored and authorized by the West. The paper concludes that through Gender Studies, Africa can rediscover its lost knowledges and construct an identity that is different from the one based on Eurocentric traditions. In this way, the continent will hopefully experience the advent of a meaningful renaissance.

## 1.0 Introduction

The onset of the new millennium in Africa has coincided with the continuing crisis of modernity. Through colonial imperialism, modernity introduced to Africa the imposing culture of the Western European Enlightenment. Fundamental to the Enlightenment project was a deliberate attempt by the European intellectual machinery to explain human existence through certain all-inclusive paradigms. The belief in scientific rationalism, universal culture, universal truth, order and even religion forms the spinal cord of the modernist scheme .

It was during the era of colonialism that Africans came to learn that what was often seen as universal to humanity had been exclusively and purposefully derived from the culture and perceptions of the Western European person. As a result, the imperial project in Africa trained colonial subjects to perceive things only from a European standpoint. Effectively, the colonial enterprise undertook to criminalize and atomize the culture and values of the African, with the result that Western ideals came to inform all the intellectual discourses about the African people both during the formal and the hegemonic phases of colonialism. This intellectual propensity, it seems to me, has tended to influence the way in which the African people confront the many problems facing the continent. As Mahmood Mamdani observes, Africa remains entrapped in 'history by analogy' whereby Africa is either exoticised or simply represented as part of European history (Mamdani, 1996: 8-11). In both extremes, Africa's specificity is denied. The questioning of European forms of knowledge with its universalist prescription is a task that has been undertaken by post-structuralism. However, the notion of the colonial subject is one that is central to post-colonial theory for it affects the manner in which colonized peoples come to terms with the conditions which entrap them. It is the perception of their conditions of domination that is vital to their being able to develop strategies for resistance (Ahluwalia, 1999:314).

One crucial field which is dominated by European-centred discourses and which could be an attractive platform for counter- hegemonic resistance is the field of African Gender Studies. But what are Gender Studies? In a broad perspective, Gender Studies represent a body debates, which interrogate the various ways in which the identities of masculinity and femininity have influenced patterns of human life. For Africa, Gender Studies embrace a profound intellectual effort to query the diverse ways in which both the African woman and man have been represented through Western dissertations. Furthermore, Gender research in Africa entails an attempt to highlight the effects of biased Western gender confabulations on Africa and how European prejudices about Africans could be changed. Consequently, Gender Studies include but are not synonymous with women studies. In this paper, I argue that since Gender Studies are critical in addressing the African problems, they require urgent decolonization.

### 1.1 The African Problems : Some Historical Reflections

For over four hundred years now, there has been a devastating Western fantasy about Africa. Indeed, this hallucination has been nurtured within the literary tradition of European and American popular writing on Africa (Hammond and Jablow, 1992:8). From these writings, the Africa which emerges, is a myth. To be fair, every myth has place and function in the society which created it. Myths support cultural values and mediate point of stress. Colonial rule in Africa was fundamentally predicated upon on the Western myth of Africa. The points of stress in the fable were that Africa was backward and sub-human.

The British have written about Africa in many literary forms. In the earliest contact periods, and for a long time there after, the predominant type of writing was the narrative of trade and exploration. As the British became increasingly committed to Africa, there appeared many new kinds of writing. For example, writings which included polemic tracts and romances dealing with issues of slavery and colonialism, memoirs and reminiscences, accounts of

travels on the Dark Continent and an ever-increasing number of novels began to assume greater significance. Fiction did not really hit its stride until the end of the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, it had become the outstanding type of popular writing. Fiction, however, does give more forceful phrasing because of the concentration of each novel on one single complex of images. For example, Marguerite Steen's work, *Twilight on the Floods* (1949) focuses on Africa as dark, alien and evil. Within this imagery the author elaborates upon the convention of the brooding and implacable jungle and the uncanny powers of African witchcraft (1992:10). In the same fashion, Richard Llewellyn's *A Man in Mirror*, (1961) stresses the image of Africa as an open sunlit land inhabited by 'noble savages'. And in her work, *The case of Africa Freedom* (1944) Joyce Cary observes that:

*The stagnation of Africa is chiefly due to the jealous tribal law which forbade any man to be wiser or cleverer or richer than his neighbours. For thousands of years, Africa, like a modern dictator has oppressed the natural freedom of the mind, and thrown away all its increases (p. 135).*

In the *African Witch*, (1951), the same author notes that:

*..all intelligent, good looking persons [in Africa] are exposed to jealousy and jealousy is the subconscious source of hatred which produces injurious fear, and from fear an accusation of witchcraft. In this way, Africa has destroyed every year, for some millions of years, a large portion of its more intelligent and handsome children (p. 8).*

According to Tom Stacey (1961):

*Africans have remained for thousands of years at virtually the same level of culture. They seem almost alone among the major races of the world to have halted in the stone age, too comfortable to go any further (p. 158).*

The above examples illustrate the depth of the Western beliefs about Africa. Further, these examples produce images which are built out of a stock of stereotypes formulated in highly conventional idioms and metaphors. From the onset, it seems to me, there existed a dependent correlation between the image of the Africans and that of Europeans. Where the Europeans are brave the Africans are cowardly; where the Africans are carefree, the Europeans are beset by anxieties; where the Europeans are gracious in granting favours, the Africans accept them without gratitude. It is an endless circuit of binaries.

Essentially, there are two sets of projections which inform the European interaction with the Africans. First, the Africans represent a pejorative negation of all the good traits of the Europeans. In this set of images, the African is considered lewd, instinctual, thoughtless, in short beastly, and savage. The second depicts a nostalgic view in which the Africans represent the former, now lost, values of the European. In this projection, the African is the 'noble savage' an image restricted to particular tribes and individuals. No wonder through this protuberance the Maasai people of Kenya came to be referred to as noble savages (Cameroon 1956: 164).

Although it is not our intention in this paper to engage ourselves in refuting every biased European claim about Africa, it will nevertheless be harmless to address at least one overwhelming prejudice. A major stereotype and one whose longevity and perseverance seems able to override any contradiction is that Africa is static, unchanged since the Stone Age, because Africans have neither creativity nor desire to bring about change. Notably, when early explorers first encountered the great stone ruins at Zimbabwe, they were hard-put to account for them. In their views, the ruins were remains of structures too complex and advanced in building technique and design to be a product of native African builders (Hammond and Jablow, *Op. cit.*: 1992:16). They were explained in pseudo-history as the remains of King Solomon's miners or the ruins of Biblical land of Ophir. Yet, there is incontrovertible proof from the data of archaeology, geography and history that the site was built by the local African population using the available local stone and familiar iron tools. Similar historical developments in the great empires of East, Central and West Africa demonstrate the artistic as well as the social sophistication of the African, thus exposing the invalidity of the notion that the African has been static, uncharged, and deficient in creativity.

Early literacy works and films which appeared about Africa continued to emphasize the African homogeneity and stagnation. But along with the popular modern literacy tradition, there slowly developed a separate scientific tradition. Accelerated European economic and political expansion as well as the growth of industry and empire spelled progress. Faith in progress became incorporated into the scientific doctrine of unilinear evolution. This theory held the concept of a single ladder of development with white Christian Europeans securely ensconced at the top and all others arranged by rank on the lower rungs (*ibid*: 14).

However, the concept of unilinear evolution is inherently racist and ethnocentric. The Eurocentric logic, which gave impetus to the operational anthropology of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, provided an unquestionable but 'universal' scientific rationale for all humanity. It is this tradition which informed the modernist project. Within the enterprise of modernity, therefore, cultural and physical differences from the European were exaggerated and disparaged. Sharp contrasts were drawn between black and white, Christian, and pagan, civilized and savage. European dominance made this contrastive points of view the mirror of social and political reality.

The imposition of colonial rule in Africa was thus driven by two cardinal goals. First, it focused on the continuous emphasis on the above and many other stereotypes about Africa and second, colonial rule aimed at dismantling African social, political and economic structures with the sole purpose of creating a European personality out of the African being. As a result, the colonial agenda undertook to train Africans to hate themselves, their values and their uniqueness. For instance, Europeans told Africans that the scantiness of the African dressing was an expression of backwardness. Yet no European was willing to consider the fact that the scantiness of the African dressing merely reflected an adaptation to the hot tropical climate. In contrast, the ample clothing of Europeans was never viewed as part and parcel of their uncompromising attitude toward the tropics (or as a response to the temperate climate of Europe) but as evidence of their impeccable modesty!

In brief, the European presence in Africa before and during the colonial period was informed and rationalized by myths and stereotypes about Africa and the Africans. Caught within the narrative of myth, Africa was ruthlessly exploited by Europeans in the name of spreading civilization. However, the so-called civilization came to represent a conscious effort by the West to Europeanize Africa from head to toe without recognizing the rich values that permeated through the social, political and economic facets of the African lifestyles. Predictably, the new colonial culture in Africa signified the introduction of European education systems, European nation-states, European administrative structures, European economic and social values as well as European languages. By the end of formal colonialism, African countries had been irreversibly tied to Europe and America that authentic liberation really became an endless mirage.

Obviously, independent African nations inherited European myths about Africa. But this also posed serious challenges for the people of the continent. Invariably, post independent Africa found itself in an intellectual crisis whereby the people of the continent could only study and understand the African man and woman through and from a European perspective. Efforts to interrogate the problems of Africa from an African standpoint have for long been frustrated by many European-tailored obstacles including linguistic, financial, educational, and political as well as economic barriers.

A critical image stemming from the hardy perennial, the Dark Continent, personifies Africa as a woman. In it is expressed the quintessence of the lure of Africa, for the continent appears as an irresistible woman, but one whose beauty is a snare and an enticement to destruction. Like the strange woman, of Proverbs, many men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to Hell. (*Ibid.* 148). In her best-selling novel, *The Sun is My Undoing* (1941) Marguerite Steen demonstrates the pejorative image of Africa when she says:

*Africa is a woman, a dark devastating witch of a woman, coiling herself around you like a snake, making you forget everything but her burning breasts.... listen to the drums of Africa reminding every man of things he forgot ...when he left his mothers womb (1941:319).*

This offensive image suggests the commitment by European scholars to draw parallels between acts of conquest and sex, parallels between the conquered country and the raped woman. Indeed, the image, which obtains here, is that there is no man in Africa; rather there is only a woman to be conquered by a European man. Basically, the same image seems to signify that all Europeans (including European women) are men ready to conquer women (in this case all African men and women)! This sort of presentation of Africa and Africans should be interrogated and dismantled by Gender Studies. The European idea of a man as a creature destined to conquer a woman should not be demystified anywhere in Africa and Gender Studies should highlight and expose the futility of this strange line of thinking.

The women of Africa have often been incorporated into the European fantasy of the continent. For example Stuart Cloete bluntly comments about the women of Africa in the following ways:

*One is suddenly aware of the immense fecundity and sexuality of Africa. Many of the women were beautiful once you become used to African beauty. One could see why they were all women. They were in a sense without souls. They were bold and without innocence. They said with their dark eyes; we are women. You are a man. We know what you want (1958:51).*

This kind of writing depicts the African woman as irrational and only guided by instincts. It also presents the African woman as a sex object ready to satisfy the needs of a man. She leaves for the needs of men but not for her

own needs. She is all body without mind or soul. African women are presented as inferior and speechless beings, housekeepers, and breeders. As Joyce Cary observes:

*The girls and women [of Africa] know that speech is non-of their business. They do what they are told. They fix their sleepy eyes on the speaker and allow their usual trains of feelings to continue (Cary 1961:170).*

Consequently, an African woman's role is limited to sexual and commercial labour: satisfying the sexual needs of men, working in the fields carrying loads, tending babies and preparing food, (Hammond and Jablow, 1992:150). Yet, no serious intellectual in Africa today can take the foregoing prejudices as all there is to an African woman. Unfortunately, however, the current African intelligentsia has been socialized directly or indirectly in the Western cultural tradition, which in one way or another, has little respect for African women. As it is clear from the above examples, the lack of respect, which the African woman faces today, originates from the European rather than from the African customary prejudices about women. Because Africa has undergone rigorous Westernization, European prejudices about the African woman have been shamelessly domesticated by some Africans themselves to the extent that today, some people think African men are naturally born to despise women!

But one crucial point to note here is that European biases about Africa are not only informed by racism but also fueled by the white man's ignorance of the African social institutions. It is the duty of Gender Studies in Africa to change these images and illuminate African institutions from an African perspective. All the institutions of Africa, including those revolving around the different forms of marriage such as monogamy and polygamy, religious practices, medical habits and sexuality should be given a fresh interrogation for the sake of Africa. European-based discourses on all these and many more African practices have created forms of knowledge that have profoundly contributed to an increase rather than a decrease to Africa's problems.

The image of the African man in Western literature is equally offensive. African men have been depicted as thoughtlessly cruel and savage (Baker, 1866: xxii). African men are also been described as grown-up children who dance and play while singing some song over and over again. They are greedy, cunning, and easily excited to laughter and to tears; their anger is madness. Like children, they are cruel, they pilfer on the sly, and 'beg, beg,' without any feeling of shame (Reade, 1864:359). Is this part of the reason why Africa is permanently tied to donor funding? Can't Africa change this attitude and stop begging as a way of dismantling the foregoing myth? Are there no non-Western options to Africa's development problems? Probably, through the African renaissance programs such the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), current efforts by African citizens and leaders to look for new strategies for Africa's growth represent a major step in the right direction of dealing with the Western biases about the continent.

In general, both the African man and woman are in the Western European person's consideration unable to think in abstract terms. Africans are said to lack any notion of time or relationship between cause and effect, symbol and object (Hammond, *Op. Cit.*, 140). One European personality goes even further to describe Africans as lacking capacity for a true language (Griffin, 1960:116). Furthermore, the conventional treatment of African arts is a striking negation of the intelligence and creativity, of the African people. Often, the African artist supposedly produces art only out of the well springs of race and instinct. Since the European writers see no evidence of purposeful design, aesthetic canon as well as individual talent, or training, they in effect deny the existence of any creative art in Africa. What, therefore, passes for art is but an expression of innate Africanism that mirrors the nightmare of tribal mind (Huxley, 1954: 292). How much intellectual effort in Africa is at present going into the enterprise of dismantling this myth when as it seems to me, the practice all over the continent is to glorify European writers, musicians, architects, scientists and thinkers?

Why would such colourless European and American musicians as Elton John, Madonna, Phil Collins and Brian Adams, for example, be treated with so much respect in Africa when our own Luambo Luanzo Makiadi, Miriam Makeba, Daudi Kabaka, Mbaraka Mwinishehe, Sam Mangwana are not even given appropriate attention by the media houses across the African continent? Isn't our failure to recognize our own female and male artists a confirmation of the Western myth that Africans have no art, no music and no creativity? Gender Studies must surely extirpate such myths by focusing attention on the study of African men and women artists while at the same giving minimal attention to Western artists.

Whenever African religion is discussed, it is presented primarily as phallicism shot through with fear. The 'tribal mind' has, from the European stand point, created religious ritual and gods in its own fear ridden image (see Fanon, 1967: 40-56). Cloete sees African religions as a fearsome package of blood, fertility and distraction filled with sacrifice, ritual murder, cannibalism, spirits, ancestors and witches'. (Cloete, *Op. Cit.*, 376). Yet, the spate of foreign religious fundamentalism in Africa today is a worrying concern. As if to run away from the Western representations of African religious practices, African citizens have been espousing alien religious practices with a sense of urgency. Europeans are happy with development because religious fundermentalism helps to keep Africans in dreamland as Europeans undertake the scientific research that is crucial in maintaining the Western domination of the world.

Christianity, it has to be admitted, was used to rationalize colonialism in Africa. Presently, Africans are ready to kill each other as they struggle to out-do themselves in professing alien faith. Notably, the fanatical believe in foreign

religious practices in the continent takes place concomitantly with the shameless condemnation of African religious habits. Many African governments have no respect for African religion and they do not encourage serious research on the traditional belief system in Africa. While Africa's traditional religious practices are summarized as path ways to Hell, volumes of work are produced on both Islam and Christianity. The dominant narrative of religion in Africa is the narrative of these two alien religions. These alien religions have without doubt perfected marginalization and domination of women by men to a fine art.

Glaringly, whenever European evangelists such as Bill Graham, T.L. Osborne, R. Bonke and Morris Cerullo have visited Africa, television and radio stations in such African countries as Kenya and Uganda have had to interrupt their normal business in order to cover long hours of religious boredom marked by fanatical sermons. Thousands of desperate sons and daughters of Africa attend such occasions with the hope of narrowing their imaginary distance with God through Eurocentric pastors. Africa's indigenous evangelists have never been taken seriously because they probably have links with the cursed biblical Ham! Gender Studies have therefore a duty not only to demystify the evangelism of European personalities but also to interrogate the subjugation of women in the European religious (and even Moslem) texts.

At the same, Gender research has an obligation to invest financial and intellectual energy in traditional religious practices. Again, it should be noted that a people without their own religious grounding can never be respected. The project of African colonization was partly to counter these 'backward' African religious practices while at the same time promoting, what the European consider to be truly human religion, Christianity (see p'Bitek 1970:40-56) ! Any discourse which excludes African religious practices from human religion requires the attention of Gender Studies because Western religion has in many ways shaped the way in which both the African man and women have been understood within the diverse family of humanity. Africa should borrow leaf from the Chinese, the Indians and the Japanese. Europeans respect these Asian communities because most Asians have stuck with their own religious beliefs. The relevance of indigenous religious practices to Asian development priorities is not a point of doubt. African Gender Studies should pick up this challenge and define the way forward for Africa. Is it, we may ask, enough for the African man and woman to merely refute the European claim that Africans had no religion or is it also a productive enterprise for African Gender scholars to highlight the profound significance of African religious practices to the development of the African Personality and identity?

It is not contestable that during this new millennium Africa faces many problems that require urgent attention. These problems include colonialism in its hegemonic form, diseases, poor communication, ethnicity, conflict, famine, poverty, and economic backwardness (Mazrui, 1980).

Furthermore, the continent is today struggling with problems posed by globalization and irrelevant education systems. But is that all there is about Africa? Only problems but nothing to be proud of? Doesn't the narrative of Africa's perennial problems fit in the Western stereotypes about the continent? The one-sided presentation of Africa as the 'sick man' of the world creates the fallacious impression that both the African man and woman are not doing anything useful for the continent. Through the ubiquitous Western media, in which Africans have little influence, and through Western controlled organizations such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the entire world is often informed that the African continent is doing nothing except creating problems for itself and for everyone. How can Gender Studies in Africa be effectively deployed to tackle the foregoing problems while at the same time highlighting the continent's achievements during this millennium? As the new millennium matures, it seems obvious that the African continent's success in tackling the above problems will depend on the extent to which it redefines its relationship with Europe and the United States. This should be done without the continent losing sight of the importance of maintaining a positive identity for itself, thus increasing the intellectual space for the Africa's achievements.

Western civilization, which created the current nation-states through colonialism, gave Africa a culture which differentiates 'us' from 'them' (see Said, 1994). Within the Western text, African culture has been dubbed inferior while European culture has been designated as superior. The result of this experience has been tragic. Over the last four decades, Africans have lost a lot of valuable time chasing after 'superior' European cultural norms. This has been done in the hope of us winning recognition from the West. In economics, in politics, in education, in science and above all in Gender Studies, Africa has been struggling to espouse the Western -European identity. Because of this, our efforts to deal with poverty, disease, famine, and conflict have been less successful than might have been the case if we had introduced a strong African element in our problem-solving process. The net result of pursuing a European identity has been the creation of a fractured African self-looking for alien recognition. But as Benita Parry argues, the effect of the recognition of the fractured self, however, is the fixing of the marginalized Other into a position of silence (Parry, 1987). It is the quest to recover this silenced Other which gives postcolonial theory its impetus over other post-phenomenon including postmodernism. Ascribing agency to the formally colonized Other allows post-colonialism to insist that the subject has the capacity to act. However, the centrality of resistance does not entail a return to a past essentialized identity for there is no possibility of such return. Rather, it is the continual reconstitution of identity under different circumstances, which becomes important. It is a process which Edward Said captures in his assertion that the obliteration of binary oppositions challenges the 'fundamentally static notion of identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism' (Said, 1993:xxviii). Gender Studies in Africa should help to dismantle

both the binaries and the static identity nurtured in the imperial text. This is the only way Africa could positively address problems of disease, poverty, and underdevelopment

## 1.2 Transforming Gender Studies: challenges for Africa Today

At the beginning of this paper, we intimated that Gender Studies represent a body of discourses, which interrogate the various ways the identities of masculinity and femininity have influenced patterns of human life. The historical background we have provided has demonstrated how the Western European discourses have tragically represented Africa, the African man and the African woman in various literary works. We have argued that the Western representation of Africans has given the continent false identities which require serious interrogation.

However, within the conception of post-colonial theoretical thinking, Gender Studies should not just end at dismantling forms of knowledge authored and authorized by the West. In fact, as we have signified before, Gender research should also undertake to highlight the various achievements African men and women have acquired to date in the fields of education, art, music, agriculture, sports medicine, religion, politics, and economics. The reason why it is crucial to highlight such achievements is because there is need to demolish the narrative of Africa as the 'sick man' of the world, the home of conflicts, tribalism, famine, jealousy, instability, corruption and poverty. While it is important for Africa to tackle the foregoing problems, it is wrong for the continent's identity to be synonymous with the above shortcomings. Every society has its unique problems and unique achievements. It is therefore dishonest for anybody to stress and magnify only the negative aspects of a given society. Europe and America have many problems including those caused by crime, prostitution, religion, war and violence, but no African considers those problems as representing the identity of Europeans. During the twenty-first century, therefore, Gender research should endeavor to reconstruct both the African woman and the African man and go beyond the politics of domination, which, in my view, merely diverts debate from the critical problems, facing the African people.

The need for a new identity for Africa has been strengthened by the postcolonial thinkers such as Abdul Jan Mohammed, Conor Cruise O'Brien and Edward Said. Abdul Jan Mohammed argues that in their post independence experience, formerly colonized entities continue to promote the objectives and agenda of the colonial master. Jan Mohammed laments that, in its hegemonic phase, colonialism has destroyed the identity of the formerly colonized polities (Xie, 1997:10). In the same vein, O'Brien raises the issue of identity. For instance, in a 1985 panel discussion on the intellectual in the postcolonial world, O'Brien complained about his African and Middle East colleagues' passivity and indifference to the counterhegemonic struggle against the imperial text which had destroyed the identity of former colonial subjects. O'Brien observes that in the African countries he had visited, his academic colleagues seemed to show no interest in interrogating colonial residues and neo-colonialism (Said, 1989:44-63). Distinguished Palestinian scholar, Edward Said, on the other hand, recalls that while visiting a national university in one of the Persian Gulf States, in 1985, he was 'flabbergasted' to discover that English literature courses were rigorously orthodox and that young Arabs in Arab universities were dutifully reading Milton, Shakespeare, Woodworth, Asten and Dickens as if there were no connection between English and the colonial processes that brought the language and its literature to the Arab world (Said, 1994:25). It on the shoulders of both O'Brien and Said that I hang as I reflect on Gender research in Africa.

In many African countries, school curricula are dominated by the ideas and works of European thinkers. The history syllabuses both in African schools and universities are punctuated by the European presence in Africa. More, since the syllabuses are rooted in the traditional modernist agenda, the female gender occupies an inferior presence. What, one may ask, is the African gender balance in history syllabuses across the African continent? How much representation does the African man and woman carry in the literature syllabuses. While privileging the European man, the works of Shakespeare, Woodworth, Asten and Dickens do marginalize the European woman but completely ignore the African man and woman. Isn't it time Gender studies addressed this hiatus?

A critical challenge of Gender Studies in Africa also resonates around the need to rethink dominant contemporary conceptions of gender and the notions of sex and sexuality that are intertwined with it (see Butler, 1990, Frye, 1983, Wittig, 1992). One reason for this urgency is that current Western categories of sex and gender continue to be treated as fairly rigid. Each member of the pair of the binary is understood as being in sharp opposition to the other. As a biological designation, one's sex is taken to be either male or female. Ambiguity of sex is disallowed, even to the point of surgically 'correcting' bodies whose physical features are indeterminate. Corresponding to and allegedly following from one's sex are one's gender and sexuality. Consequently, biological males are to be men who desire biological females only. In the same breath, biological females are to be women that sexually desire only men (Sullivan, 2000:24). Thus, in contemporary Western culture, the binary structures of sex and gender are interdependent with that of heterosexuality. As a result, to be a proper male/man or female/woman is to sexually desire a person and only those persons located on the other side of the sex/gender binary. To challenge the rigid confines of one's gender is therefore to commit gender treachery by challenging the hegemony of all three binaries - sex and heterosexuality as well as gender - and thus is to risk all the psychological, physical, emotional and financial punishments that are meted out to gender traitors in society. Of course, many do challenge those confines demonstrating that in the lives of at least some individuals, the gender binary is looser than its ideal admits (Seigfried, 1996:12). Yet even so, the ideal of binary remains rigid and powerful enough to make life very dangerous for those who attempt to blur its lines.

As we have indicated before, the Western conception of gender in its rigid form has been effectively reinforced by the Christian religious text (as well as the Muslim religious text). The two texts have a rigid definition of gender and sex namely that, a biological male is to be a man while a biological female is to be a woman. Both religious texts emphasize the man's domination of the woman and recommend that the sexual act should only take place in a marriage and along the heterosexual plane. Yet since Friedrich Nietzsche celebrated the 'Death of God' and of Western civilization, about a century ago, it has become more and more obvious that it is no longer viable for us to ground human life and indeed all existence in the rigid but universal rationalism of Western traditions. As distinguished American scholar, Robert Berkhofer cogently observes 'no longer can any single master-interpretive code be privileged as if one were somehow more correspondent to the real past than another (Berkhofer, 1995:72). Therefore, historical inquiry based on metanarratives, seems to me, the least attractive enterprise in contemporary scholarship.

It is important to observe that the modernist project against which Friedrich Nietzsche spoke is what legitimized colonialism in Africa. Modernist philosophers such as Hegel excluded Africa from the centre of human civilization and that is why it became morally justifiable to spread the values of the Enlightenment era to Africa through colonization (Hegel, 1944:93-99). Once colonialism had been installed, the rigid binaries about everything, including gender perceptions were imposed on the African mind. At this point, it is important to single out one European psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud for examination.

Freud argued that the biological man was the initiator of civilization and that no woman had a role in civilization (Freud, 1914; Rieff, 1959:97). Women according to Freud, were destined to nurse their narcissistic wounds and they did not even enjoy sex because sex was only necessary for women in so far as it enhances procreation. These stereotypes were handed over to the African man and woman through missionary education and other curricula. It is these misconceptions that Gender Studies should currently address. In Freud's view, women are simply 'small men' - castrated men with the common characteristic of a stunted penis (the clitoris). This physical feature is, to Freud, a mark of natural inferiority which women can do very little about. As Philip Rieff notes, 'not only does Freud aver that girls feel biologically at a disadvantage, inferior, because they do not possess the penis, he affirms that they are in the grossest sense something less than boys (Rieff 1959:17).

Elsewhere in this paper, we cited Marguirite Steen's assertion that Africa is a woman to be conquered. If we view this assertion within the Freudian perspective, then we will be forced to perceive Africa as a woman who lacks the European penis, something, which naturally justifies the continent's inferiority and backwardness! Metaphorically, the penis represents Europe's so-called superior civilization and the clitoris Africa's inferior institutions. When this deceptive Eurocentric logic is domesticated in Africa, it locally empowers the African man to oppress the African woman because of mere possession of the penis! In the same way, the African woman would thus feel inferior because of lacking a fully-grown penis. This intellectual's project is damaging to Africa and it requires the full attention of Gender research. It is an intellectual tradition which Africa inherited from its colonizers but which has persisted beyond the independence watershed. The situation is worsened by the fact that the African post-colony has yet to dismantle Western forms knowledge. That is why the West continues to exploit and humiliate continent.

The twentieth century political systems, ranging from Marxism to Capitalism, from Monarchism to Nazism, have systematically demonstrated approval of the Freudian project especially as it relates to women. In the twenty first-century, Gender Studies in Africa should grapple with the challenge posed by the Freudian psychoanalysis. As we congregate here in Cairo, we are obliged to pose one question: how many African scholars engaged in Gender research have critiqued the Freudian psychoanalysis? Are we aware that Freudianism has promoted irrational male chauvinism and undermined the progress of women in Africa? Can't Gender Studies make a difference during the new millennium?

More importantly, the constructed nature of gender binarism becomes particularly visible when we realize that other peoples at other times have had very different gender configurations. In the Use of Pleasure volume two of the History of Sexuality (1985), Michel Foucault demonstrates that masculinity in early Greek society was not dependent upon the gender of one's sexual partner, revealing how erotic behaviour between males was problematized then in very different ways than is now. The 'bardache' tradition of many pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Native American tribes was part of the non-binary gender system in which a third category gave anatomical males the option of assuming neither a masculine nor feminine role in tribal society. And arguably, a fourth gender category existed for many pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Native American tribes: the 'Amazon' or manly-hearted-woman, was an anatomical female whose social role combined traditionally feminine and masculine characteristics (William 1986). In Kenya, the Kikuyu community is matrilineal. Here, children carry a strong allegiance to women rather than to men and women have traditionally combined feminine and masculine characteristics without any problems. Among the Yao and Mukua of Tanzania, the husband moves to go and live with his wife's parents (Aseka, 2001 n.p). This gives women enormous powers. The foregoing examples demonstrate that rigid binarism in the study of gender in Africa is not only oppressive but also untenable. The last two examples also reinforce the fact that contrary to the Western stereotype that traditional African societies oppress and marginalize women, such proposition could be an exception rather than a rule. It is the Western, rather than the African traditional text, which is highly gender discriminative.

But gender configuration, as well as other aspects of identity such as race and sexuality, is constitutive of subjectivity in a way that is crucial to identity. As Judith Butler puts it, a person's gender constitutes a domain of

constraints without which a certain living and desiring being cannot make its ways (Butler, 1993:94). Without these constraints, it seems, one would not be the being that one is. This, however, brings us to the issue of Africa's problems once again. We have intimated that Africa faces the critical problems of poverty, disease, irrelevant education, conflict and famine. If Gender Studies have to be based on rigid binaries given by the West, then they have to espouse the constraints which go with either being a woman or a man. Will these constraints solve Africa's problems? I doubt. Africa's problems should be handled differently and Gender Studies should embrace a new identity that is relevant to the African condition. Indeed, constraints are irrelevant because they tend to exclusively reserve certain tasks for women and others for men thereby marginalizing and discriminating against one or both genders.

In the African continent, most of the people who think seriously about gender issues have university degrees or some college education. How many of these thinkers have argued seriously for the change in the content of college and university syllabuses so as to address the plight of both the African man and woman? Why has nobody advocated for the teaching of Gender Studies in Africa right from primary school to university? Are we still caught up in the web of the European marginalization of the African person? How can we hope to address gender problems in Africa when we still religiously teach the Freudian project in our African universities - a project which marginalizes women and which also gives undue power to men?

Today, in Africa, the sophistication of the African intellectual is measured in terms of the way in which he/she commands such European languages as English, Spanish, German and French. This has to change. The fight against Eurocentrism should also be linguistically based. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Kenya's foremost intellectual powerhouse has not only called for a linguistic overhaul of Africa's education systems but he has also cried out for the decolonization of the African intellectual mind (Roy, 1995:169-172). Gender Studies in Africa have so far been conducted through these alien languages yet the majority of people in Africa have only an elementary grasp of European languages. If Gender Studies have an objective of doing research about Africa and disseminating the research findings to the African audience, then there is need to promote the use of African languages. In the new millennium, gender scholars should not only insist that their ideas be translated into African languages but also impress upon the West on the need to embrace major African languages such as Hausa, Kiswahili, Zulu, Lingala into the internet.

As they stand today, Gender Studies in Africa have been a fertile platform upon which the West has used its immense economic resources to pit the African man against the African woman. The reason for the Western engagement in this destructive project has been to consciously to shift attention from the real issues. When the West installed colonial imperialism in Africa, it marginalized both the African man and the African woman. Furthermore, drawing from the modernist project of privileging men over women, European colonialism in Africa enhanced the marginalization of the African woman. Now we are being told that the African man is the one marginalizing the African woman. We are also being informed that both the Western man and woman are the actual friends of the African woman who is continuously suffering under the brutality of the African man. Is this argument tenable? As the African woman fights the African man, poverty looms large, education is unattended to, agriculture yields little, famine is common place, ethnic conflicts assume dangerous proportions and underdevelopment becomes the defining disease of the African personality. These problems provide Europe and America with an opportunity to be extremely 'philanthropic' and 'humanitarian' while they derisively depict Africa as the 'sick man' of the world.

It is not possible, during the new millennium, for both the African man and woman to work together to redirect their energies to the problems Europe and America created and are trying hard to obscure? Should the biological differences between the African woman and the African man binarize the continent into a protracted gender conflict? Is being a biological woman enough for the female gender to unreasonably identify with women even when those women are engaged in dangerous activities? Conversely, is being a biological man the only criterion for a male gender to identify with men even when those men are trumpeting unproductive male chauvinism? The point is that both the African man and the African woman are complex entities whose consciousness goes beyond the trivial binaries, which have been highlighted by the modernist project. In the fields of architecture, law, science, and the arts, both the African men and women should be known by their respective professions not by their gender.

The spirit and argument of this paper is that there is need for Gender Studies in Africa to embrace a new identity. But that also means a fundamental shift in the structure, focus and objectives of Gender Studies. It means that Gender Studies will have to strive for relevance to the African condition. The question is: can the Western donors sponsor programmes that do not promote the European agenda? Yes, they can, but Africa must set the correct pace. In the field of Gender Studies, African intellectuals should come up with an alternative agenda and stress their intentions in dismantling forms of knowledge authored and authorized by the West. It has to be noted that the argument that Africa needs the West more than the West needs Africa is based on a false premise. Given its immense natural resources and its intellectual capital, Africa is strategically important to both Western Europe and America. Consequently, the Western democracies will still accept to spend money on projects which promote and enhance the African identity and difference. But Africa must first and foremost speak an African voice before Europe listens and deals with African as an equal partner. If we in Africa speak a European voice, we cannot definitely be given any meaningful attention by the West.

However, African scholars and African governments should also establish indigenous funding organizations on which to fall back when Europeans refuse to fund our programs. That means every African government and every

African scholar should make commitments to make frequent financial contributions towards research in alternative forms of knowledge on the continent. Such funds should go into research to Africanize school curricula and to establish new horizons in African medicine, science as well as technology. The culture of dependency should be minimized so that Gender Studies can address African problems from an African standpoint.

Take the issue of the Aids scourge which is ravaging the entire African continent. Europeans have taken advantage of this catastrophe in Africa to argue that Africans (both men and women) cannot control their sexual urge and that is why Aids is spreading fast. Other Western thinkers have attributed the spread of the disease to traditional African practices such as circumcision and wife-inheritance without considering the moral values of such practices in preserving the African identity. Does it make sense to say that traditional circumcision and wife-inheritance causes Aids? The fact is that Aids in Africa cannot be examined in isolation from the poverty the continent has suffered as a result of Western domination and exploitation. Can Gender Studies accept donor funding so as to sing this gospel of the African inability to control their sexual urge and to criminalize African cultural values when we know that the chief cause of Africa's problems is mainly external?

Closely related to the foregoing is the issue of research in Aids treatment. The universal science view fronted by the West assumes that no other sciences could generate the laws of gravity or antibiotics and that what has worked best to advance the West will and should work for other societies (Harding, 1994:303). Through this line of reasoning, research on the Aids cure have been concentrated in the Western capitals. The indigenous African medical output has been almost criminalized because it cannot fit in the scientific method of the West. But as we have intimated, it is oppressive and untenable to impose universal systems on the human population. Since Aids is killing both men and women in Africa, Gender Studies on the continent should highlight and support non-Western Aids research findings. Furthermore, gender scholars should expunge the offensive view that African medicine is concoction. Enraged by the apparent insensitivity of the European and American world to the African struggle against Aids, South African President Thabo Mbeki once remarked a few years ago that:

*Not so long ago in our country people were killed, tortured, imprisoned and prohibited from being quoted in private and public because their views were dangerous and we are now being asked to do precisely the same thing the racist apartheid did - because it is said there exists a scientific view supported by the majority against which dissent is prohibited. We cannot swallow everything from the West (Daily Nation, Nairobi April, 20,2000).*

And true, Gender Studies in Africa cannot swallow everything from the West. African Gender Studies should promote and highlight minority discourses in medicine, architecture, technology, history, art and music. Furthermore, Gender Studies should stop privileging both the Western European woman and man as models to be emulated by Africa. Through positive Gender research, Africa can initiate a new renaissance, which will hopefully create a new identity for both the African man and the African woman.

### **1.3 Conclusion**

It was the objective of this paper to highlight the need to decolonise Gender Studies in Africa. We have demonstrated that Africa faces many problems including those of disease, economic backwardness, irrelevant education systems, conflict and famine. Fundamentally, problems of disease, conflict, economic mismanagement, political intolerance affect all the men and women of Africa. Yet, a close look at the genesis of these problems seems to reveal that most of them have something (and sometimes every thing) to do with the installation and presence of Western institutions and forms of knowledge in Africa. The way forward is for Africans, especially African scholars, to recognize this reality and map our new intellectual strategies that are critical of the Western agenda in Africa. Thus, every effort should be made to work our programs which are both friendly and useful to the African man and woman. The paper has argued that those problems cannot be effectively addressed from the standpoint of European perspectives. Consequently, as a significant category of analysis, Gender Study offers us a critical platform for confronting the deteriorating African condition. Furthermore, through Gender research, Africa has a unique opportunity to build and espouse a new identity that would be free of Western control and domination. In the new millennium, former European colonizers in Africa such as Portugal, France, Britain, Spain and German along with their chief godfather - the United States of America, should be made to understand that they can only be partners rather than masters of the continent's development.

Overall, the paper has demonstrated that through Gender Studies, forms of knowledge authored and authorized by the West should be dissolved. We have given examples of how colonial textual influences in medicine, language and culture have undermined the struggle for progress in Africa. But more importantly, this paper has argued that the colonial project in Africa set out to deliberately obscure our achievements, thus rendering the continent deficient in creativity, art, music, science, education and language. We have recommended that, as part of its objective, the discipline of Gender should rigorously highlight Africa's achievements in the above fields so as to destroy the myth that all that Africa is made of today is problems and only problems. To be fair, a lot of good things are happening in Africa today but the West will not even mention them. It is our hope that the issues raised in this paper

will lay a fundamental foundation against which Africa can define its priorities and set the agenda for a new identity during the new millennium.

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