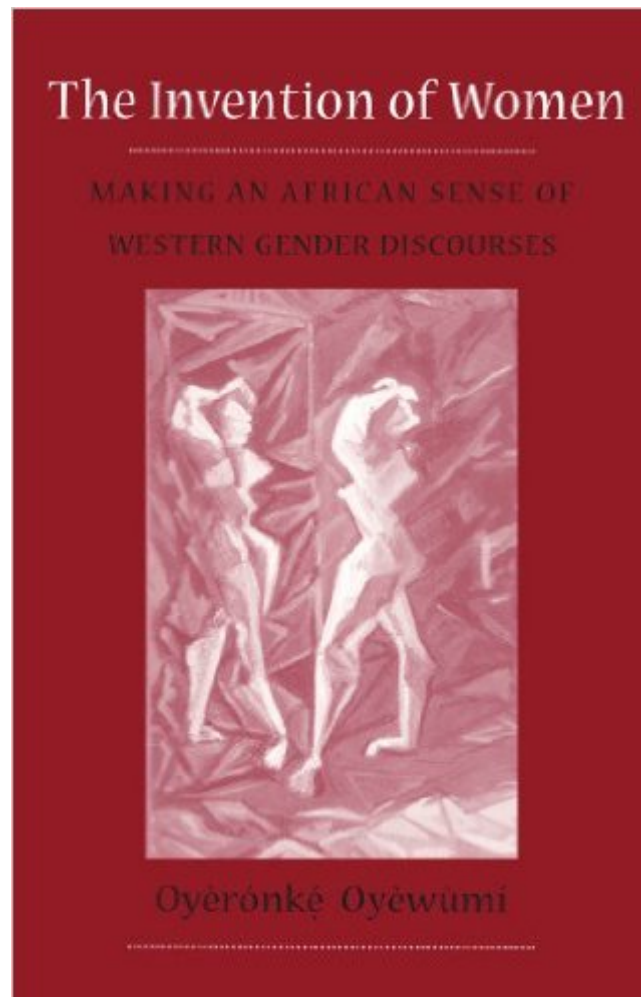


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Invention Of Women: Making An African Sense Of Western Gender Discourses



Synopsis

The "woman question," this book asserts, is a Western one, and not a proper lens for viewing African society. A work that rethinks gender as a Western construction, *The Invention of Women* offers a new way of understanding both Yoruban and Western cultures. Author Oyeronke Oyewumi reveals an ideology of biological determinism at the heart of Western social categories—the idea that biology provides the rationale for organizing the social world. And yet, she writes, the concept of "woman," central to this ideology and to Western gender discourses, simply did not exist in Yorubaland, where the body was not the basis of social roles. Oyewumi traces the misapplication of Western, body-oriented concepts of gender through the history of gender discourses in Yoruba studies. Her analysis shows the paradoxical nature of two fundamental assumptions of feminist theory: that gender is socially constructed and that the subordination of women is universal. *The Invention of Women* demonstrates, to the contrary, that gender was not constructed in old Yoruba society, and that social organization was determined by relative age. A meticulous historical and epistemological account of an African culture on its own terms, this book makes a persuasive argument for a cultural, context-dependent interpretation of social reality. It calls for a reconception of gender discourse and the categories on which such study relies. More than that, the book lays bare the hidden assumptions in the ways these different cultures think. A truly comparative sociology of an African culture and the Western tradition, it will change the way African studies and gender studies proceed.

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Customer Reviews

I read the 2003 edition of the 1997 book. It is about the Europeanization of African gender thought after direct colonialism, taking mostly the Nigerian Yoruba as an example. The author disposes of the Western standards of history, state and philosophy including the supposed African lack of all of that. She analyses the differences of Western feminism and pre- and post-colonial African matriarchies (or what's left of it). African hearing instead of European seeing at the top of the senses and the consequences of that; and mostly genderless Yoruba names. And why there is a sisterarchy between European and African feminists. While criticizing the Western gender dichotomy, she is also not so fond of too radical homogenizing of female and male. A fresh light on polygamy will challenge the Western feminist. She avers homosexuality as a foreign concept to Africa, which clearly is a half-truth at best. The word and literal/direct concept is European, the fact that females and males developed various cultural norms of love, sexuality and sociability among themselves isn't exclusively so. Read for example Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities. In that context she fails to elaborate on the preclusion of sexuality when women may "inherit" other wives. Her neglect of this topic, turning it into a taboo, is clearly one of the weaker points of this book. I am also astonished to read vocabulary like "race" in THIS book, as the concept of races is even more European and in fact racist. Overall, however, this book is recommendable for those interested in the subject.

Oyewumi is right to reexamine not only the Western binary gender categories that many scholars tend to impose indiscriminately on all societies but also to question the whole concept of sex as a universal determinant of social status or role. These categories must be questioned, not because they are necessarily false, but because every assumption must be questioned and replaced with more rigorously examined theory. Thus Oyewumi's discussion of how Western gender categories were applied to Yoruba women and have since been largely adopted as given is convincing and worth reading. Yet Oyewumi's own "invention" of Yoruba gender identity is even less convincing than the uncritical one she has deconstructed. She relied largely on her own intuition and not on concrete and verifiable facts to show that male/female distinctions were not socially salient in "traditional"

Yoruba society ("tradition" itself proving a problematic concept--even if her arguments are accurate, could there have been any time at which what she says was not true? Even though she attempts to escape this trap, pre-colonial "Yoruba society" ends up being a monolithic and timeless society). A large part of her evidence comes from the Yoruba language, which is not "gendered" like Western languages. For example, pronouns, adjectives, and many terms for social relations, are non-gender specific. This is true of dozens of West African languages (the Atlantic Niger-Congo and Mande languages, for example), even in societies in which serious gender disparities have been visible for hundreds of years. Oyewumi dangerously assumes that language simply mirrors social realities--that language is incapable of concealing oppression, inequalities, or stereotypes.

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