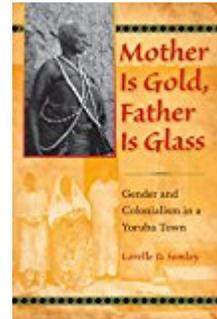




**Lorelle D. Semley.** *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. xvi + 235 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35545-4; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22253-4.



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## Byfield on Semley

Relative to other regions of Africa, Yoruba historiography is substantial. Nonetheless important new studies continue to be produced by scholars on and beyond the continent. In the past decade a number of important texts on women and gender relations in Yoruba society have become available and Lorelle Semley's text, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass*, is one of them. Semley argues that the Yoruba proverb which introduces the title of the book, "embodies the contradiction of gender relations in Yoruba history and culture," for it seems to "praise the value of women and challenges the image of patriarchal power in the household" (p. 3). She uses this proverb as an entrée into a nuanced analysis of the power and vulnerabilities of men and women in their gendered roles as mothers/wives, fathers/husbands during different historical periods. This text refines the discussion of gender and historicizes gender relations in Ketu as it was incorporated into global networks of trade and communication through the Atlantic slave trade, French colonialism, and transatlantic travel. Semley draws on actual and symbolic mothers and fathers to establish her argument and

offers an important critique of studies that approach the relationship between gender and power ahistorically.

Semley interrogates motherhood's "naturalness" and tries to understand the historical processes that shape the cultural and symbolic meanings associated with motherhood. She notes that the status of "mother" is not just based on biology, it is also a title bestowed on older women who exercise tremendous power within their households and the larger community. Rather than focusing on motherhood as a function of childbirth, she demonstrates the historical and changing symbolic power of motherhood. Using the concept of "public motherhood," Semley examines the power of symbolic mothers within the palace structure of Ketu, their demise under colonialism, and their reemergence in the postcolonial period. She argues convincingly that scholars have failed to recognize the dynamic relationship between public mothers and other important women of the court such as wives and sisters, and that the position of public mothers was already in decline in part due to the transatlantic slave trade. In the subtle shifts of these rela-

tionships, women's public political authority was in flux prior to French takeover of the kingdom. Although the rhetoric of the postcolonial period speaks of the rebirth of the Ketu kingship, the power relations and authority embedded in these titles are substantially different from those of their precolonial predecessors. In dialogue with Edna Bay's *The Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (1998), Semley offers an example that brings the analysis of court women into the postcolonial period.

*Mother is Gold, Father is Glass* also contributes to the expanding historical literature on marriage. Like the study by Jean Allman and Victoria Tashjian, *I Will Not Eat Stone: A Women's History of Colonial Asante* (2000), the collections by Dorothy Hodgson and Sheryl McCurdy, "Wicked" Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa (2001), and Stephan Miescher and Lisa Lindsay, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa* (2003), Semley demonstrates the centrality of marriage to both the missionary and colonial projects of social transformation. The French interpreted Ketu marriage practices as being in disarray and in need of change and modification since Ketu women deviated from French expectations. Ketu women did not always remain in one marriage or live with their husbands. However, marriage reveals much more than colonial social engineering. Collectively these scholars demonstrate that marriage is a critical avenue through which we can analyze changing gender and generational relations over time and locate those changes within broader historical processes. In Ketu, it became clear that by the early twentieth century young people were challenging the authority of senior men and women by eloping, and refusing to marry the spouses selected for them. By the 1940s and 50s youthful challenges increasingly took the form of interfaith marriages.

This book is very important to Yoruba studies for Semley has written about a Yoruba community that is sorely understudied. Most scholars of Yoruba society have focused on those Yoruba communities in Nigeria; as

a result Yoruba studies is largely wedded to the borders carved out by British and French imperial agents. Dr. Semley is one of a very small group of scholars writing on Yoruba communities outside of Nigeria. The comparative dimension of this work is important for it allows us to see how Yoruba communities under different colonial states maintain and nurture a Yoruba identity and how they engage this identity politically, culturally, and socially. Throughout the text she engages the scholarship on Nigerian Yoruba communities to highlight those aspects of Yoruba culture that remained common while their practice varied. Finally, Semley locates the evolution of Ketu's Yoruba identity in an Atlantic context, for Ketu is informed by developments in Nigeria as well as Brazil. *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass* joins the important works by J. Lorand Matory (*Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomble*, 2005), Kristin Mann (*Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900*, 2010), and Bay that demonstrate the contribution of the diaspora to the cultural and social history of West Africa. Integrating the diaspora allows Semley to employ a cross-cultural analysis of "mother" and "public mother" as she illustrates the ways in which the tension between women's power and vulnerability exist on both sides of the Atlantic.

The seven chapters, prologue, and epilogue are built on a diverse array of sources, including one hundred interviews, European travel accounts, reports of French colonial administrators, court cases, and the unpublished field notes of French photographer and scholar Pierre Verger. One strength of this study is its multiple layers of analysis—from the household to the international. This is also one of its challenges for there are times when the reader would benefit from greater attention to changing gender relations on the household level in Ketu. Nonetheless, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass* is a wonderful contribution to the literature on gender, African women, French colonialism, and the African diaspora.

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