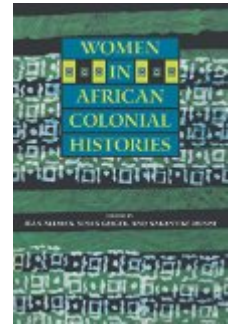


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, Nakanyike Musisi, eds. *Women in African Colonial Histories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. viii + 338 pp. \$54.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-253-34047-4; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21507-9.

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Exploring the Diversity of African Women's Colonial Experiences

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This volume is a sweeping look at women's experiences in, and interaction with, colonialism in Africa. The geographical balance is welcome: chapters cover the Portuguese, French, British, and Belgian empires and every major geographical region of sub-Saharan Africa. The actors in these chapters include royal women, midwives, spirit mediums, missionaries, nationalists, guerrillas, market women, urban dwellers, and more. The editors' claim that the chapters "challenge the notion of a homogenous 'African women's experience'" is not exactly ground-breaking (p. 1). Nevertheless, the book vividly illustrates the diversity of women's encounters with colonialism, and it demonstrates how chronology, the colonizing power, geography, and women's status all worked together to create that diversity.

Allman and her colleagues make no apologies for producing *women's* history, as opposed to gender history. Indeed the editors argue, as some others have done, that the move toward gender history—in which men, as well as women, are studied as gendered historical subjects—can, in some cases, serve to further the omission of women from historical investigation. Without constantly seeking to recover women's historical experiences, the introduction argues, gender history has no content upon which to stand; gender and women's history therefore inform each other. The volume only touches on this point briefly, but given the heated debate that still rages over

the relationship between women's and gender history, it would have helped to explore this further.

The focus of the volume is on women as agents who negotiated colonialism rather than as "hapless victims." Is this to some extent beating a dead horse? Women's and social history have grown up together and necessarily informed each other. At this point, it seems fair to say, there is a good-sized body of Africanist historical literature that treats women as agents, and the editors acknowledge this. The introduction correctly states that, nevertheless, there continues to be a great deal of work produced that never addresses gender or women; it also notes that other edited volumes on women in African history have focused more on colonialism's impact on women rather than on how women themselves dealt with colonialism. *Women in Colonial African Histories* also argues that the volume of literature on women and colonialism is now such that "we can begin to explore transnational and trans-colonial processes and to draw meaningful comparative insights into the ways women shaped and were shaped by the colonial world" (p. 2). In this spirit, most of the chapters attempt to situate its dominant theme within a comparative framework, noting the differences or similarities with what has been argued for other times and places within Africa. These comparisons are frequently quite brief, often a paragraph or less. Thus Jane Turrittin's essay on colonial midwives in French West Africa makes a passing reference to the training of medical auxiliaries in Belgian and British colonies; Holly Hanson's study of women's loss of political power in

Buganda explores comparable cases in somewhat greater depth. Other chapters make no comparative references. More could have been done with the comparative nature of the volume, certainly; but where they exist, even minimal attempts to situate the individual case studies in a larger context are greatly appreciated.

The other element which unifies the essays is that each includes the text of a primary source within the chapter. Most are at the end; a few are incorporated into the historical analysis. Methodologically, the presence of these sources—which range from life histories to court cases and colonial reports—offers readers a chance to see the materials which inform the scholars' work. Sometimes this adds little to the analysis as the most compelling material is already quoted in the text. But in the best cases, it enriches the text and offers more opportunity for thought and discussion, as well as offering the opportunity to show students in a classroom how history is done. In Victoria Tashjian and Jean Allman's chapter on how cocoa farming changed the meaning of marriage in colonial Asante, the transcribed interview at the end of the text reinforces the argument that conjugal labor changed under cocoa farming, but also raises issues the chapter does not raise, such as the development of

women's expectations that they would be granted a share of a husband's cocoa farm. In cases where colonial representation of women is an issue, the texts show readers firsthand the kinds of language that colonials used in talking about African women.

Probably the most frustrating thing about the volume is also its most valuable: the diversity of the stories that it tells, to the point where the reader struggles to find common themes despite the attempts at comparison or the unifying feature of reproducing primary sources. The lack of a conclusion in the book further underscores this sense of fragmentation. Indeed, there seems to be little shared by Tswana royal women engaging with Christianity in the 1890s, Nigerian women protesting warrant chiefs and the loss of their markets in 1929, Mozambican women participating in interracial courtship in the 1930s, and Guinean women violating gender norms in the nationalist movement in the 1950s. It reinforces the book's argument that women's experiences of colonialism were not monolithic but were instead shaped by multiple forces and agendas. But it also returns us to the question, posed by gender historians, of what if anything unites "women" as a historical category.

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