

# Invention Of Women: Making An African Sense Of Western Gender Discourses by Oyeronke Oyewumi

## Main idea:

"This book is about questioning the imposition of Western gender categories in Yoruba discourse" - page ix

This cultural logic is **bio-logic in nature**, meaning that the presence or absence of certain body parts determines social position.

**\*Bio-logic**" - using biology to organize our social world

**Unit of Analysis**- Oyo Yoruba culture, but findings in the study are applicable to other African cultures and societies. (without homogenization)

In the book, The author takes on the task of studying to understand *the epistemological basis of both Yoruba and Western cultures as it relates to gender discourse.*

## Caveat:

"This book is not about the so-called woman/feminist question." (not a book on feminism).

The woman question" is a Western-derived issue- a legacy of the age-old **\*somatocentricity**<sup>1</sup> in Western thought. It is an imported question, and therefore, it is not indigenous to the Yoruba world sense. (somatocentricity -meaning :The body/biology shapes our subjective/human experience)

The author, therefore, found it impossible to do a study on gender in the contemporary Yoruba community from a local/indigenous perspective because (somatocentricity is a western construct)! And she did not want to rely on disciplinary theories and conceptual ideas originating from and dominated by the West.

As the author's research work evolved, she begins to realize that the **fundamental category of "woman"** foundational to Western gender discourse did not exist in Yorubaland prior to sustained contact with the West. In Yorubaland, There were no such preexisting groups characterized by shared interests, desires, and social positions.



This was vastly different from what obtained in the West, where the cultural logic was based on the ideology of **Biological Determinism**<sup>2</sup> - *where biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world.*

This cultural logic is **bio-logic in nature**, meaning that the presence or absence of certain body parts determines social position.

**\*Bio-logic** - using biology to organize our social world

Feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith notes in page x: *"A man's body gives credibility to his utterance, whereas a woman's body takes it away from hers."*

The Author notes that if one wants to apply Western bio-logic to the Yoruba social world, one would have to invent the category of "woman" in Yoruba discourse (*Note to self: perhaps. This is where the book gets its title?*)

The body was and is still Corporal in Yoruba society, "but prior to the infusion of Western notions into Yoruba culture, the body was NOT the basis of social roles and inclusions or exclusions; it was not the foundation of social thought and identity."

### ***-On the dangers of Western Universalism.***

Due to colonization and the dominance of Western knowledge production, most Academic studies have wrongly assumed that "body reasoning" or biologic was present in Yoruba indigenous culture, and they have assumed Western constructions as universal- this has led to the uncritical usage of these body-based categories for interpreting Yoruba society historically and in contemporary times. The Author interrogates this universalism in her book.

### ***African Studies***

Historically and presently, knowledge production and dissemination have been the privilege of the West, and **Western biologic/ body reasoning/ biological determinism** have therefore been imposed on African society.

*"Western conceptual schemes and theories have become so widespread that almost all scholarship, even by Africans, utilize them unquestionably. Without attention to the global material dominance of the west, there can be no accounting for its continued hegemony in knowledge production."*

African studies/cultures/histories are often erased by unwarranted homogenization and the imposition of Western concepts into our realities, often importing issues and priorities that are foreign to the African world sense and even when African scholars try to validate the specificity



of the African experience, we are constrained to do so within the frameworks and parameters of European-derived categories of Knowledge.

## The motivation behind the Book

The Book grew out of the realization of Western dominance in African studies -prompting a need to examine the concepts underpinning discourse in African studies by consciously taking into account African experiences.

ALL concepts come with their own cultural and philosophical baggage, much of which becomes alien distortion when applied to cultures other than those from which they derive.

This study seeks to document why and how gender came to be constructed in the Yoruba society of south western Nigeria (colonized 1862-1960 by the British) and how gender is constructed as a fundamental category in academic scholarship on the Yoruba.

### **Major Question addressed:**

“What are the relationships between, on the one hand, bio-anatomical distinctions and gender differences as a part of social reality **and on the other hand**, gender constructs as something that the observer brings to a particular situation?”

The author interrogates the ways in which Western assumptions about sex/gender differences are used to interpret Yoruba society and in the process create a local gender system. She challenges ideas that:

- Gender categories are universal and timeless across societies.
- Gender is a fundamental organizing principle in all societies
- Universality and social uniformity of the category of “women”
- The subordination of women is universal
- The category of “woman” is precultural, fixed in historical time, and the antithesis to another fixed category of “man.”

The author posits that assumptions are as a result of the Western world sense that lacks a distinction between sex and gender, where physical bodies are always social bodies. In Yoruba society, the human body need not be seen as gendered evidence for social classification or social hierarchy. Males and females were not ranked by anatomic distinction and the social order required a different kind of (no gendered) map. One that was not bio-logic or assumed biology as the basis for social ranking

# Yoruba social structure: Seniority-based and Situational.

Precolonial Yoruba culture logic did not use the human anatomy as the basis for social ranking. A male was not inherently superior to a female.

Yoruba society was hierarchically organized, and the ranking of individuals was based on seniority- usually defined by age (still prevalent today)

Another difference between Yoruba and Western social categorization was the **situational nature** of the Yoruba social identity. Before the sustained infusion and intrusion of Western categories, the social position of people constantly shifted in relation to those they were interacting with, so social identity was relational and not **essentialized**. In contrast, it was essentialized in the West with male and female gender identities deriving from anatomy. And the essential gender identities attach to ALL social engagements no matter how far removed from issues of reproduction they may be. For example, for many years, women in the West were denied voting rights based on their womanhood.

Other examples of genderization of professions: professional lexicons contain phrases such as “woman pilot” woman president, “professor emerita”

The author states that the concentration of feminist scholars on the status of women as disadvantaged, powerless, controlled, and defined by men does not/ did not hold sway In Oyo Yoruba society. There were no women defined in strictly gendered terms, so the concept of **“woman” as it is used /invoked in scholarship is derived from Western experience, history and culture and western bio-logic/ biological determinism.**

The author questions the assumption of gender hierarchy/male privilege/ male dominance Western scholarship and in ancient Yoruba society, and she posits that there is evidence to show that there has not always been the case of male Dominance in Yoruba life both historically and in present day. Eg, in 1996, there were two female village heads (Baale) in Ogbomosho.

She also argues that concepts and theoretical formulations are culture-based/bound, and scholars are not just recorders but participants in the research process.

**Very important:** Scholars assume that present-day “customs” are always rooted in ancient tradition; this is not always the case, as some traditions are new, imported, and superimposed! In light of this, the author argues for a cultural, context-dependent interpretation of social reality. Important! Context includes the social identity of the researcher, location of research, the relationship between the researcher and social reality, and what else?

**Discuss:**



- What does the author mean when she says: Gender, like beauty is in the eye of the beholder? By writing about any society through a gendered perspective, scholars write gender into a society where they may not necessarily have existed. She states that the prime paradox of gender is that in order to dismantle the institution, you must first make it very visible, - Judith Lorber. **Agree?**
- **How have gender constructs been imposed acontextually??**
- **How can historical, biological facts be interpreted and construed outside the cultural frame of reference from which they derive??**
- **What does** cultural, context-dependent interpretation of social reality mean to you? le researchers identity,
- Silvia Federici said “The body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been to the male waged workes, the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance.” - Does this resonate? Can you relate? How so?
- Add questions/prompts on Biologic.

## Language Notes

Gender neutrality of the Yoruba language but emphasis on seniority  
Gender cannot be determined by the Yoruba language

O and E (junior/senior)

Mo ti fun (I have given him/her -junior)

Mo ti fun won (I have given him/her- senior/ or more than one person)

He/she has gone- O ti lo

For senior/plural: Won ti lo

He/her= oun

His key/her key = Kokore e

HE/SHE IS MY FRIEND = Ore mi ni

# Chapter Breakdown:

1. **Chapter 1: Visualizing the Body : Western Theories and African Subjects-**  
Discussion date October 18th, 2023- Reviews how Western social thought is rooted in biology, using the body as the bedrock of social order. It also looks at the dominance of the West in the constitution of knowledge about Africa (often without cultural and societal context) and the implications of this privileged position of the West and its dominance in knowledge production and African studies.
2. **Chapter 2: (Re)constituting the Cosmology and Sociocultural institutions of Oyo-Yoruba-**Examines Oyo Yoruba society on its own terms outside the gendered lens of the West (which has often led to a distorted/ skewed perception)
3. **Chapter 3: Making History: Creating the Gender: The Invention of Men and Kings in the writings of Oyo oral traditions-:** Discusses how scholars apply/infuse Western paradigms on gender into their “work” in Africa. The Author uses the history of the old Oyo state to question and reconstruct the past as it relates to the gendering of history.
4. **Chapter 4: Colonizing Bodies and Minds: Gender and Colonialism-** Analyzes colonization as a multifaceted process that stimulated/ jumpstarted the institutionalization of gender categories in Yoruba land.
5. **Chapter 5: The Translation of Cultures: Engendering Yoruba Language, Orature and World sense-** Interrogates the impact of Yoruba/English bilingualism on Yoruba society and the translation of Yoruba oratory into English, Given that English is a gender-specific language.

**Yoruba Orthography:** If there is a desire to learn this in a practical way, a free session can be arranged for the collective.

## GLOSSARY

1. **Somatocentricity** is the idea that our perception and interpretation of the world are closely tied to our physical body and the sensations it experiences. It underscores the role of our body in shaping our subjective experience and understanding of the world.  
-Somatocentrism is a cultural value system in which biological determinism is the basis for social organization.



2. **Biological determinism**, also known as genetic determinism, is the belief that human behavior is directly controlled by an individual's genes or some component of their physiology, generally at the expense of the role of the environment. Oyewunmi speaks about Biological determinism as a filter through which all knowledge of society is run ( as long as social actors are presented as ***groups not individuals*** and as genetically constituted, there is no escape from BD)