

Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (eds.), Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1976. \$15.25.

JUNE STARR

Department of Anthropology
SUNY at Stony Brook

Although important early studies of African women by western women exist—Leith-Ross's study of the Igbo women's riots in Aba in 1929-30, Hunter's study of Pondo women of the Cape, and Smith's biography of Baba¹—comparative research on African women by women social scientists really dates from 1960 when Femmes d'Afrique Noire, edited by Denise Paulme, appeared.² Those articles by women anthropologists, writing about the lives of African women, asserted three things: that the activities, values, and goals of African women differed from men but were as important to a comprehensive understanding of African cultures as the lives and aspirations of African men; that women researchers working with women informants could gain fascinating information and perspectives about women's lives which male researchers working with male informants had failed to reveal; and that tremendous distortions concerning African women were perpetuated in the name of social science when male researchers attempted to portray the lives of women

by interviewing African males.

How long it takes obvious methodological failures to be corrected. Women in Africa, a collection of eleven studies focusing on African women's activities beyond childcare, the hearth, and the home, is only now available. In its introduction, Hafkin and Bay point out that literature concerning African women has described them largely in terms of their relationships to men--as wives, mothers, and lovers. This means that that large portion of women's social and economic activities which take place apart from men has been largely unexplored, because in social and economic arenas women lead lives either complementary to or, at certain developmental stages, relatively independent of men. Thus, the essays in this volume fill a very important gap in our knowledge of African societies, because many of them detail female activities as traders, shopkeepers, participants in voluntary associations, political participants (either together with men or in "dual-sex systems"), and in making decisions which shape their own futures.

Hafkin and Bay also discuss how western biases about the role of women in society have been projected onto African women with disastrous results. This means that British colonialists in Africa refused to recognize women's political participation among such groups as the Igbo of Nigeria; that British and French colonialists so undervalued female farming that women often were removed from their own land under colonial rule; and that female farmers were further undermined, because colonial officials and European developers taught modern farming techniques only to men. Furthermore, in observing African women, Europeans often were dismayed by polygyny, child betrothal, widow inheritance, and veiling of Moslem women, but they rarely asked African women how they viewed these practices. Nor did these reformers take time to understand what the real complaints of African women were.

This new book attempts to right many of these failures. Two articles provide insight into the dual-sex system of the Igbo of Nigeria (Okonjo) and the Igbo women's war (Van Allen), while Hay's article documents how British colonial officials extracted labor and capital from the rural economy of western Kenya at the same time that they insisted African cultivators maintain their level of production. "The real burden of coping with this nearly impossible situation ... fell on the women, who remained at home while their husbands and sons sought outside employment" (p. 88). Robertson's study of non-elite Ga townswomen in Accra is particularly timely, since her research provides detailed information on women's abilities to handle finances and make commercial arrangements. Lewis's study of market women of Abidjan, Ivory Coast demonstrates how women sought through collective action to provide systematic capital accumulation, to reduce expenditures in buying goods from producers, and to defend their interests with authorities (p. 135).

Strobel describes how Moslem women in Mombasa, Kenya, learned collective action in women's associations. In the late 1950s, these groups successfully petitioned the colonial government for the same voting rights that women in other ethnic groups enjoyed. Their motivation sprang from ethnic competition and desires for prestige, rather than feminist consciousness. Brain discusses development projects in Tanzania to show that even when female farming skills were respected by developers, the needs of women were not taken into account because women were expected to put in the same eight hours in the fields that men did, and to do all domestic labor as well. Mulling's article explores the question of whether equal access to the means of production

necessarily correlates with social equality between the sexes. By distinguishing between access to means of production and access to political power, she finds that access to productive resources does not necessarily result in political power, because different valuations placed on sex-roles later may become the basis for political inequality (p. 240).

Taken as a whole, the essays are of high quality and well written. The introduction provides fresh viewpoints and thematic interpretation of the volume. This is a very important book, of interest to all persons involved in intensive study of African societies, economic development, and women's studies programs. It can be used in advanced undergraduate courses, and ought to be included in all graduate courses concerning Africa.

Footnotes

1. S. Leith-Ross, African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria, Faber, 1939; Monica Hunter, Reaction to Conquest. Effects of Contacts with the Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa, O.U.R., 1936; Mary Smith, Baba of Kano: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa, Faber, 1954.
2. Three years later this volume was available in English under the title, Women of Tropical Africa, University of California Press, 1963.