



## ***African Women: Early History to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

***Kathleen Sheldon***

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**Review by Laurence Schiller**

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There has not been a new textbook focusing specifically on the history of African women in a couple of decades, so Kathleen Sheldon's work is a welcome addition to the literature. Her two goals were firstly, to present a comprehensive, chronological, narrative of African women's history, understanding, of course, that it cannot be entirely inclusive; and secondly, to demonstrate that an understanding of women's contributions, not only to their families, but also to their societies, is critical to a proper understanding of the history of that continent. Her well researched work is important as a counterbalance to conventional histories of Africa which tend to be male centered and have often, except for the mention of an occasional female leader, treated women as simply an oppressed, victimized group, immobilized by poverty. Sheldon addresses this by presenting an excellent collection of cases and examples conclusively demonstrating the centrality of women in Africa throughout the African history.

Unfortunately, her work is flawed in several important ways. First, in her introduction, she states that she has drawn examples 'with sections on all regions of the continent' but, in fact, this is a work on Sub-Saharan Africa only, something that should have been made clear in the title. Second, and more seriously, the first

three chapters suffer from the chronological framework that she has imposed on the book. Important influences, such as the introduction of agriculture, iron working, Islam, and the arrival of Europeans, impacted different areas of the continent at very different times, over a span of several thousand years, and she would have been better served to focus on the nature of the impact of these events on indigenous societies, where there are great historical similarities, regardless of time frame. 'When' is more the concern of a general study, rather than this, which is more narrowly focused on the impact of these events on women, which is what she is trying to bring out in her narrative, not a chronological history, an especially difficult task for the pre-modern period.

Moreover, while she touches on women in Islamic societies, she does not really examine in depth how women's roles change when a society becomes Islamic, nor about the significant changes that occur in areas where there were radical Islamic movements, such as the nineteenth century West African jihad. She also uses creation myths more uncritically than she should to demonstrate women's power in early African societies. The result is a somewhat jumbled narrative as she jumps around the continent working her way to the modern period, where she is clearly more comfortable.

Her later chapters are distinctly stronger and reflect, I suspect, her area of primary research and knowledge. There, she has several excellent case studies and insightful discussions of topics related to women. Unfortunately, while Sheldon clearly has excellent command of African women's history, her command of African history as a whole is not as strong, most particularly in the pre-modern period. She comments, for example, that foraging societies are found in areas not suited for agriculture. That is not entirely true, for example, in the case of Tanzania's Hadza. Moreover, it fails to account for the fact that most surviving foraging societies were pushed into marginal areas by migrating or expanding agricultural and pastoral societies, as well as European settlers, which skews our view of how these societies existed in the past, as is clearly the case in southern Africa.

Another problem is her statement that matrilineal societies tend to be small scale agricultural societies, which is questionable considering the Asante Kingdom in West Africa and several large matrilineal states, such as Luba, in the Congo basin. Moreover, while she has presented a number of excellent case examples to demonstrate how women contributed to their society or exhibited power, she does not always link these examples up into a deeper narrative, leaving the reader to wonder, at times, why a specific example was included in a chapter. Instead, while the cases and discussion of issues are generally well done, the chapters often seem to be just a cluster of examples, separately good, but together, sometimes puzzling.

Finally, the book is marred by some inaccuracies; although virtually none of these particularly impact the narrative, they should have been caught before publication. For example, the author cites cotton as a major fact in the growth of slavery in the United States by 1780, when tobacco and rice were the major southern crops at that time (29); *Rwoth* is translated as 'king' but that is a European perception and *Rwoths* could be chiefs or simply influential elders; another error is that patrilineal succession implies primogeniture in the East African Inter-lacustrine states, which it assuredly does not (56). She misunderstands the difference between those who use KiSwahili as their first language and those who use it as a *lingua franca* (66); Moshoeshoe does not play an equivalent role to Shaka in creating the Mfecane (80) nor is the Mahdi simply 'a divinely guided member of the Prophet's family who would lead Muslims out of oppression' (122); Baganda is the term for the people of Buganda, not their language, which is Luganda (109); nor is Kisii

1000 miles from the coast of Kenya – it is only just over 400 (137).

It is not an easy task to write a general history text, and Sheldon's work will be useful for the teacher who wants to assign an updated text that brings most of the research on women's roles, power, and influence in African history into one volume. The bibliography will be especially helpful. On the other hand, it will be important for an instructor to use the work in conjunction with other texts to provide a deeper understanding of African history so their students can get the most out a text that has only partially fulfilled its potential.

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