Online Article

'(Re)Centring African Epistemologies: An Intellectual Journey'

The Acceptance Speech for the 2021 Distinguished Africanist Award

Mo f 'ire fún Ọ̀ṣun
Mo f 'ire fún Ọya
Mo fọ ire fún gbogbo àwọn ìyá́

Afimọ̀ f'obìnrin

Iye wa táa pé nímọ̀

Afimọ̀ jẹ t'Ọṣun o, Iye wa táa pé nímọ̀

Ǹjé́, ẹ jé́ ká wólẹ̀ f'obìnrin Obìnrin ló bí wa
Ka wa to dènìyàn
Ẹ jé́ ká wólẹ̀ f'obìnrin Obìnrin lọ́ b'Ọ́ba
K'ọ́ba ó tó d'Òrìṣà̀

Ore Yeye o!

Oyeronke Oyewumi

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Welcome. I was just paying homage to Orisa Osun, the creator and Mother Deity of knowledge and creation.

Greetings from Yorubaland and New York! Good day everyone, wherever you are in the world.

My name is Oyeronke Oyewumi. I am the recipient of the 2021 Distinguished Africanist Award of the ASA.

I dedicate this award to my late mother, Igbayilola. Indeed, this is a time of honour, as her name suggests.

The Distinguished Africanist Award was established in 1984. In the thirty-eight years since this award has been conferred, nineteen (50 per cent) have been given to white men, ten to African men, six to white women, two to African-American men, and one to an African-American woman. No African woman has ever been recognised with this award. Thus, I am the first African woman to win this prestigious African Studies prize.

I received the news that I had won the African Studies Association's Distinguished Africanist Award on September 14, 2021. I am humbled by its immense significance, on discovering myself suddenly in the company of earlier winners such as Akin Mabogunje, Ali Mazrui, Sara Berry, Pearl Robinson and Edmond Keller. This made me realise how impressive is this club into which I have been admitted, and how fortunate I am that my work has been recognised as being as noteworthy as the winners who have come before me. It is clear that, in each generation, very few will receive this honour.

The focus of my research is on gender, hierarchy and the construction of knowledge. My work exposes gender as a colonial category calling into question the Eurocentric idea that gender categories are natural, universal and inherent in the way in which human communities have organised and thought about themselves. My body of work includes two monographs, three edited books and numerous journal articles and book chapters.

At the centre of my oeuvre is the book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. An extended sociological disquisition on gender, *Invention* argues that the narrative of gendered corporeality that dominates Western interpretation of the social world is a cultural discourse and cannot be taken for granted in another cultural milieu. The book offers a comparative-historical account of the construction of social categories like gender, both in Western culture and in Yoruba society of southwestern Nigeria. Drawing evidence from family organisation, language, the division of labour, religion and oral traditions, I show that gender was not originally part of the Yoruba conceptual framework for making sense of the social world. The finding that, historically, there were no gendered names, no gendered pronouns, no gender-specific kinship categories or gender-exclusive institutions in Yoruba communities brought to light the existence of a different epistemology. My research caused a paradigm shift in the academic study of gender.

I was born in Jos, Nigeria, into a huge Yoruba family. ('I have 26 siblings! I am number 8'. This is how I usually introduce myself to students.) I would be remiss if I did not say that growing up as a Yoruba in an admittedly privileged though immigrant setting in Jos, far away from the legendary Yoruba towns, primed me for my career in academia. Spending my early years in a space that was not Yoruba-dominant attuned me to the fact that there are different ways of being and ingrained in me a profound understanding of the Yoruba saying, '*Ona kan ko w'oja*' (There is not one road to the market). My early childhood experience in a cosmopolitan city like Jos taught me the importance of appreciating diversity of all kinds, most significantly in religion, culture and ethnicity. I developed in my very early years a deep awareness of the various languages and cultures that surrounded me, and this openness to other ways of being was later to become quite beneficial in my scholarship.

I attended the University of Ibadan, the premier Nigerian University, for my undergraduate degree and benefitted from the scholarship and mentorship of the late Professor Peter Ekeh, who was my teacher. When I was preparing to apply to graduate school in the United States, he gave valuable advice and shared with me his own experience of doing a PhD in sociology at UC Berkeley. As it turned out, I followed in his footsteps to his old department. His pathbreaking research on the state and the two publics influenced my own research, particularly as I was thinking of how gender is implicated in the operation of publics in the post-colonial state. Today, in appreciation, I invoke his spirit.

My relationship with the ASA started in 1984, when I attended my first annual meeting in Los Angeles. I was beginning my second year in graduate school, having enrolled in the Sociology Department at UC Berkeley in the fall of 1983. There was a small Center for African Studies at UCB, which provided a focus for the African Studies campus community, but there was not much of a campus-wide African Studies curriculum. Congratulations to my friend, colleague, and a member of my cohort at Berkeley, Martha Saavedra, the current Associate Director of the Berkeley African Studies Center, who received the ASA's 2021 Outstanding Service Achievement Award. I found that there were few Africans at Berkeley. Over the years, attending the ASA annual meeting became a necessity for me, a rare opportunity to congregate with my fellow Africans. Attending the ASA conference got even better as the numbers of African women increased, transforming the intellectual (and sartorial!) character of the organisation. Every year, I look forward to the sorority of the 'gele'[1] squad!

The idea of area studies was new to me, as there was no such thing on offer at the University of Ibadan. It took years for me to start to make sense of American hierarchies of knowledge. A few months into my studies on the storied Berkeley campus, I noticed that I was being asked one recurring question: Why sociology? Why was I enrolled in a sociology department? I would patiently explain my interest and future research plans in Nigeria. Often, I was told that I should actually be enrolled in the anthropology department. I never quite understood the question until a few years later. When I asked why I must study anthropology, several of my peers informed me that sociologists studied their own societies, but anthropologists studied other societies. I said, 'Voilà, that is why I am a sociologist! I am African, studying African societies.' But what they were alluding to is the deeply ingrained racial and racist idea that sociology was founded to study modern societies, and Africa was not a part of the modern world. Africa was primitive. From this perspective, then, my presence in one of the top sociology departments in the United States was an anomaly, to say the least. This had implications for my job prospects, most especially after I got my PhD. I was getting schooled in institutionalised racism in the organisation of disciplines and knowledge production, but I did not even know it.

But the (trans)discipline that made a deep impression and impact on me at the early stage of my career, as a student and subsequently, was not anthropology but Black Studies/African American Studies. I discovered race as a social category, and as an important part of my very own identity. Despite the fact that I had enrolled in a Sociology of Race and Ethnic Relations course (never called sociology of racial oppression), taught by one of the top scholars, it was my involvement with the emerging interdiscipline of Black Studies that taught me about American society and provided me with practical knowledge that I needed in order to survive graduate school, and indeed life, in 'God's own country'.

It was fortuitous that the late Professor Barbara Christian, the pioneering top scholar of Black Feminism in the world, hired me as her teaching assistant. Today, I invoke her spirit! She was an amazing mentor, and in her classes I got more than an education on race; I also learnt much about the emerging academic discourse on feminisms and gender, amongst other things. Intersectionality was already baked into the syllabus. The insights I garnered on race and gender, most especially, made me understand my supposed place in the academy. It supplied me with the linguistic resources and tools with which to understand some of the puzzling things I was experiencing. Intellectually, a deeper understanding of the racialisation of knowledge—the racism and sexism that emanated from it—opened up unimaginable vistas that led to productive thinking. This understanding showed up in my writings, and in fact, the first chapter of my dissertation was titled 'White Woman's Burden: African Women in Western Feminist Discourse', a piece in which I was able to bring together my ruminations on European colonisation of Africa and racial hierarchy in US institutions of higher education.

In this vein, I acknowledge another mentor: Filomina Steady, Professor Emerita of Africana Studies at Wellesley College. A prolific author, she documented brilliantly many aspects of African women's lives at home and in the diaspora and taught us how to do meaningful work. I remember the first time I read her classic paper, 'Research Methodology from an African Perspective'. I must also recognise my mentor and counsellor, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Professor Emerita of Global Studies at Sarah Lawrence. Her original concept of womanism inserted a necessary African voice early in the discourse and provided a fruitful counterpoint to imperial feminism. An amazing counsellor and an encyclopaedia of knowledge, she dispenses great advice on everything.

With the publication of my book *The Invention of Women*, in 1997, and its expanding readership, I experienced a qualitative change in my interactions at the ASA annual meeting. Colleagues would approach me expressing their appreciation for the book, telling me how it opened up all sorts of productive questions in their work, and how it positively impacted their prospects for tenure. On more than two occasions, having just been introduced to an African colleague, I was getting ready for a hug but found myself unexpectedly lifted off my feet, as these colleagues exuberantly chanted praises in true *oriki* mode. These encounters were not gender exclusive. After witnessing a few of these effusive engagements, a friend remarked wryly, "Ronke goes to the ASA conference to meet her public!' I am grateful for the many colleagues who engaged with my work and exposed my writings to their students. I sometimes say the book *The Invention of Women* wrote me! Here, I must mention my former classmate at the University of Ibadan, colleague and friend Jimi Adesina, professor at University of South Africa, formerly at Rhodes University, who introduced and distributed my writings to colleagues, and to a generation of students in South Africa. One of the joys of the sabbatical year I spent in Pretoria was to discover that I had a following of young people.

I have edited three books; a fourth one is due out in 2022. These books represent collaborations with many colleagues. I admire their work and wish to acknowledge both their contributions to African Studies and their support for my own work. I cannot overstate the importance of community in enabling one's success.

Over the years, I have received many accolades and much appreciation from students. I cannot describe the impact of my work better than two graduate students in African History, who took the time to inform me about the effect of my work on their own academic growth. Interestingly, although these comments arrived seventeen years apart, they were from two graduate students of African History at Yale, who did not know each other. First, Henry Trotter, a white American male student, wrote me a letter in 2004, seven years after the publication of *Invention.* The missive was hard copy, snail mail, and sent to my departmental address. This was at a time when email was not yet the currency for reaching people. I was impressed that this young man took the time to draft a letter in which he declared:

> 'What was so great about reading the book is that ... I asked myself many new questions about the experiences I have had in Africa, the histories I have read, and future research projects I will engage in. You have spurred me to rethink all my primary assumptions. Thus you have re-enlivened my sense of the world and its possibilities. Is there anything greater that an educator can do for a student? ... your point that we Western academics need to step back and re-think our foundational commitments is well taken.'

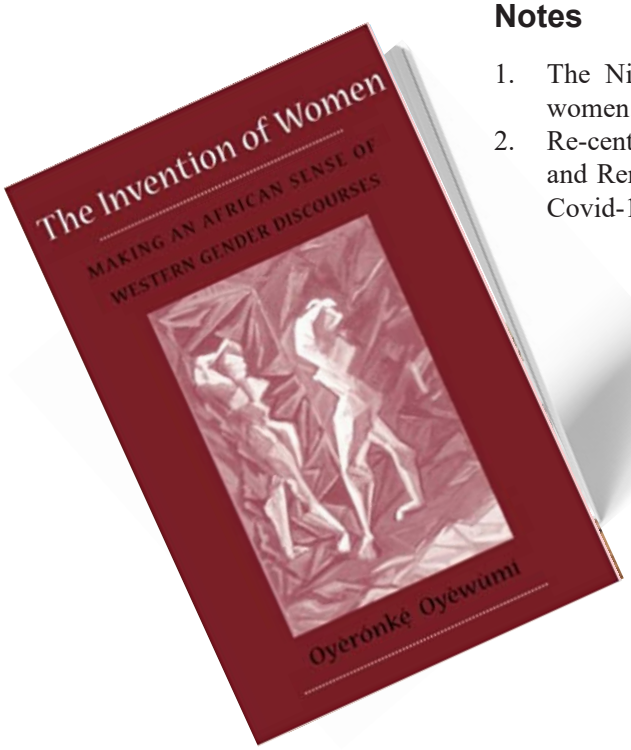
After the Distinguished Africanist Award was announced in September, another Yale student, this time an African woman, Marius Kothor, wrote:

> 'Like so many African scholars, I have been fundamentally transformed by Professor Oyeronke Oyewumi's scholarship. *The Invention of Women*, *What Gender is Motherhood?*, *Gender Epistemologies* (amongst many others!) are texts that have given so many of us the language and tools to make sense of the ways we are positioned within the world and the confidence to reclaim our epistemologies.'

On this momentous occasion, as I rejoice at this wonderful recognition, I cannot minimise the challenges we as African and Black people face operating in societies and institutions that are systemically racist and sexist. I am excited by the numbers and quality of young people coming into the academy, many of whom display an impressive clarity of vision about how to move forward and claim the future. These young scholars, our future Distinguished Scholars, inspire me with confidence about the future of the sort of scholarship that centres Africa, which is recognised by the award I am so honoured to have received.

Gender issues have moved to the very forefront of life and politics in the United States, what with the emergence of the LGBTQI+ movement and the fight for social justice, individuals choosing pronouns, the fight over who should have access to what bathroom, questions of which category trans people belong to, etc. On 27 October 2021, the United States issued its first US passport with an 'X' gender marker, acknowledging the rights of people who do not identify as male or female. All this is evidence that the Western gender paradigm—the Eurocentric model of rigidly defined, biologically determined gender binaries universalised through imperialism—has failed. But not before this bio-logic has contributed to the creation of Masculinist Monsters and violence against women, which is at an all-time high, not to mention the intersectional trauma that 'terrorfies' the lives of millions. In contrast, what research shows is that African social categories historically were fluid, non-binary, non-biologically determined (you don't need to choose your pronoun if you speak a host of African languages), nested in social institutions that were not gendered or gender-exclusive, focusing instead on generational reproduction. The African cosmic family is a paradigmatic example of the fluidity and borderlessness of social institutions. The family is understood to be vast, consisting of many who have passed on, few who are living, and countless who are yet unborn. Imagine if we were guided by such a vision. Would we be so cavalier and destructive of our Mother Earth, who sustains us?

It is time to centre Africa, as the theme of this conference[2] insists. Africa is a treasure trove not only of Benin bronzes, coltan from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and diamonds from Botswana. The real unmined gems are African concepts, ideas, values, ways of being and systems of knowledge and episteme. Let us stop burying Nobuntu, the mother of humanity. If anything, the lesson of the gender discourse is that we must look to Africa. Thank you.



Notes

1. The Nigerian head-tie worn by women.
2. Re-centering Africa: Resistance and Renewal in a World Beyond Covid-19.