Reviews

Emergent Masculinities: Gendered Power and Social Change in the Biafran Atlantic Age by NDUBUEZE L. MBAH.
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With Emergent Masculinities, African scholarship on gender, the pre-colonial and Atlantic world, slavery and colonialism has reached a turning point. For decades, scholars of Africa have emphasised the significance of the Atlantic age in local transformation of gendered power. They have also insisted that gender practices vary across location and from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial eras. The scholarship on African gender has focused overwhelmingly on patrilineal societies. We know little about matrilineal societies with dominant matrifocal religious principles and ferocious female political authority. Only few scholars have connected the pre-Atlantic slave trade era with other periods in African history and demonstrated how changing times brought new conceptions of honour and respectability. Fewer have emphasised the connections between male and female masculinities. However, to the best of my knowledge, no other scholar has put all these into a single analytical framework, as has Ndubueze Mbah. In addition to relying on existing vocabularies, time frames and discursive parameters, Emergent Masculinities develops powerful arguments, deploys previously unused sources, and sets a new standard for studying African history of gender, masculinities and the Atlantic world.

Perhaps the most profound idea of the book is what Mbah terms ‘gendered Atlanticisation’, which he describes as the massive transformations in sexuality, gender and institutions within pre-colonial African societies due to trans-Atlantic socio-political and cultural exchange, as well as how African gendered agencies shaped Atlantic processes and outcomes in the Americas. In calling for both historical and anthropological modes of knowledge acquisition and data-gathering, this work engages how the mobilisation of local economic and political forces of the Atlantic world through local institutions transformed gendered identities. Atlanticisation allowed men to accumulate power over women and paved the path for a transformation from pre-colonial female socio-political superiority to male political and economic dominance in the colonial era, and the rise of hegemonic masculinities (*ufiem*). With specific focus on Ohafia-Igbo performative and oral traditions depicting the Bight of Biafra’s gendered Atlanticisation, the author mobilises the complex idiom of ‘cutting a head’ to underscore how local people in the region localised changes in the Atlantic world.

Mbah then maps out the core periods in the transformation of gender roles in Ohafia-Igbo. Before the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade in the area, men exhibited hegemonic masculinity by returning from war with human head trophies. This would be replaced during the era of slave trade (1750s to 1840s) by slaves. Under colonial rule, the core paraphernalias of hegemonic masculinity or things that confirmed *ufiem* changed from human life possession to symbolisms of modernity.
and global consumerist culture, including but not limited to, acquisition of academic certificates (both home and abroad), construction of modern buildings, cash and automobiles. These tangibles of worldly possessions were complemented through cultural sites like war dances through which hegemonic masculinities were performed and reinforced. Yet *ufiem* was not a male exclusive practice – women also performed it either independently or when they supported economic and ritual activities that enhanced it. What is more, if what constitutes *ufiem* changed before the Atlantic slave trade through the colonial eras, the identities of men involved also went through significant transmutation.

This becomes apparent in female masculinities (*ogaranya*), which goes beyond acquisition of wealth and power to include the social construction of wealth and power. In addition, *ogaranya* challenges Euro-centric ideals of patriarchy, while also giving powerful people control over the reproductive capacity of subordinate men and women. By engaging in what performative forms of socio-political power embodied, Mbah invites his readers to reconsider stale ideas about violence and limitation of European colonialism. Different chapters engage the biographies of men and women who performed diverse forms of masculinities in changing context. Interpreting a dense trove of oral history of *ufiem* and *ogaranya* allows Mbah to read indigenous conception of power against colonial archives and come to terms with how people remember and tell gendered stories. History, in his hand, goes beyond what transpired in the past and is documented in oral tradition, to include performative acts, rituals and reenactments that dramatised the past for contemporary consumption. The diversity of Mbah’s sources is another major contribution of this work. Reading oral sources and performances, including war dances, requires an advanced understanding of nuances of the spoken and the unspoken, the visible and the invisible, and everything in between.

Mbah insists that a *longue durée* approach to African history of Atlanticisation, which involves linking massive transformation in gender construction with changes in political and economic power from the 18th to the 20th centuries would enhance our understanding of how local institutions appropriated or worked the global exchange to meet their own needs. This approach allows the author to treat historical timelines as porous entries through which practices and ideologies moved freely while also undergoing massive transformation along the way. Unlike previous studies which tended to engage how Atlantic ideas shaped local practices, *Emergent Masculinities* is concerned with how Africans mobilised both traditional institutions and the colonial architecture of power to ‘assert their will over others, including preexisting traditional authority holders’ (3).

Clearly written and rigorously researched, *Emergent Masculinities* should stand the test of time, not just because of the timelessness of the ideas espoused but because of the brilliant way it is presented. It should shape how new studies can examine masculinities both from local and Atlantic perspectives, and from the significant agency of indigenous institutions of power.

SAHEED ADERINTO

Western Carolina University