POWER AND PERIPHERY:
STUDIES OF GENDER AND RELIGION IN AFRICA

ROSALIND I. J. HACKETT

Considering the great cultural and religious diversity of the African continent and the dynamic role of religion at all levels of African life, Africa would seem to offer fertile ground for generating studies of gender and religion. However, such is not the case. In addition to the political, cultural, and academic marginalization of Africa, there are the familiar reasons adduced in other contexts—namely that several of the earlier, classic studies of African religions were conducted by European and African scholars for whom gender was not an analytical category—what Ursula King calls “sexism by omission” (King 1995: 2). This paper examines practical, as well as theoretical and methodological, problems and prospects in studies of gender and religion in the vast African context. It is an overview and reflection, rather than a systematic and comprehensive survey.

On an autobiographical note, I should add that my own interest in studying women and religion in Africa was not originally intentional, but emerged as I was working on new religious movements in Nigeria, and more specifically on religious pluralism in the town of Calabar. Based on this research, I published an initial study of the diversity of women’s religious activities (1985). Following that I was asked to write more generally on women and religion in Africa (1994, 1995), which has led me to cast a critical eye over the literature.

For obvious reasons, notably the dearth of historical and descriptive data, there has been a tendency toward “additive” studies (e.g., Mbon 1987)—filling in the gaps created by androcentric scholarship. Sometimes these studies have adopted a sentimental and nostalgic overtone, waxing lyrical about the positive contributions of women—"the flowers in the garden"—and their important procreative and nurturing roles (Mbiti 1991; Omoyajowo 1991). The heritage of phenomenological comparativism and a predilection for the irreducibility of “religion” in the history of religions has not served the study of gender well, in that it has fostered a generalized, essentialized, and decontextualized view of religion. This is particularly inappropriate in the African context where indigenous notions of religion are far
less differentiated. The reductionist and idealist cul-de-sac does not
do justice to the subtleties and nuances of gender issues, nor to the
socio-historical realities through which women's religious power and
experience are constituted. Some studies have been more specific in
orientation, which is salutary, but they focus on the experiential di-
mension which is seen as the almost exclusive preserve of women,
and as tangential to, or detached from, social and political realities
(Gaba 1987).

It has been left to scholars in other fields—anthropologists (Boddy
1989, Shaw 1985), art historians (Drewal and Drewal 1983), oral
literature specialists (Barber 1991; Yai 1993), historians (Herbert
1993; Baum 1990), and theologians (Oduyoye 1988, 1993) to develop
more critical and creative approaches to female spiritual power and
ideas. They have highlighted the ambiguities and the shifting nature
of the concept of gender in many African societies. For example,
because several African languages make no gender distinctions, social
roles may be filled by either male or female (Amadiume 1987). Ac-
cordingly, Westerners are accustomed to, and import into their stud-
ies, more fixed notions of gender.

Avenues that have proved fruitful in exploring and understanding
women's religious activities in Africa are innovation, and independ-
ence, spirit possession and art. These studies bring out the nature of
power relations, complementarity and conflict, and raise the question
of the special nature of women's power. They also elucidate our
understanding of women's agency, often refuting conventional inter-
pretations of marginality and demonstrate how this agency is limited
or enhanced by religious associations and ideas.

For example, it has been impossible to ignore the important role
women have played in founding and leading many of Africa's new
religious movements. In fact, the very first recorded movement to our
knowledge is the Antonian Church, a breakaway movement from the
Portuguese Catholic Church in the Kongo kingdom of the early
eighteenth-century, which was led by the prophetess, Dona Beatrix.
Her call for Kongo Christian institutions served to revitalize the
Kongo kingdom and, two centuries later, to inspire messianic move-
ments in their struggle against colonial oppression (Biaya 1992).
Opinions vary as to the degrees of empowerment offered by these
churches and movements to women (e.g., Omoyajowo 1988 and
Jules-Rosette 1987; for full references see Hackett 1995). At very least
the activities of the women founder and leaders, as well as their