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From the Selected Works of Rebecca Gearhart Mafazy

Summer July, 2016

**PRIMARY SOURCES OUT OF CONTEXT -
African Women: A Historical Panorama by
Patricia W. Romero**

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/rebecca_gearhart/18/

The Journal of African History, Volume 57, Issue 2, July 2016, pp. 315-317
Cambridge University Press, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853716000220>

African Women: A Historical Panorama.

By Patricia W. Romero.

Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2015. Pp. xii + 359. No price given (ISBN 978-1-55876-576-4).

As Romero explains in the acknowledgements, her impetus for writing this book was to compile case studies that personalize the experiences of African women for students in her African women's history course (p. ix). The result is a chronological sampling of African women from pre-colonial times to the present, and from a wide range of countries south of the Sahara.

The chapters draw from a range of primary source documents: oral traditions, reports and letters by European travellers, traders, colonial officials, and missionaries, as well as excerpts of biographies and novels written by well known African authors. These sources vividly illustrate both the horrifying and heroic experiences of African women, but without sufficient context or analysis necessary for the average reader to fully comprehend them.

For example, in Chapter 4, titled "Transitioning," Romero draws attention to women caught in the turmoil that often resulted from the clash between African political and religious leaders, and colonial rulers and Christian missionaries. One case study is the Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1857 and the prophetess, Nogqawuse's, role in it (pp. 84-87). Romero includes excerpts of the Nongqawuse narrative without providing enough information on Xhosa social structure (kinship, descent and

inheritance, social stratification, gender roles), the political and economic system (control of cattle by chiefs and sub-chiefs, peasants' access to crops, land alienation), or Xhosa religious beliefs (role of ancestor spirits, healers and rain-makers, notions of purity and impurity) for the reader to understand the conflict between Xhosa peasants, their chiefs, white settlers, colonial officials, and Christian missionaries. Without this context, the reader is unable to discern the role of women in Xhosa society in the 1850s, or why a teenage girl (Nongqawuse) was able to compel people to kill cattle and abandon their fields. Romero's answer is that Xhosa "traditional beliefs" in ancestral spirits led to their downfall (p. 87). Rather than illuminating the ways in which African women have used their authority as healers, diviners, prophetesses, or in other roles to confront patriarchy, colonialism, and/or missionary intervention, Romero's conclusion is disappointing. Especially when considering the corpus of scholarship that effectively illuminates how African women have gained access to power, enhanced their autonomy, and improved their lives within the male-dominated spheres that constrained them.

Generally speaking, Romero provides little evaluation of her source documents save for commenting on the skewed viewpoints of some of the European authors on whose writing she draws. Such uneven scrutiny and lack of proper introduction to some of the primary documents she cites are obstacles to assigning this text to students. The gap between what European visitors, colonizers, and missionaries have to say about what African women think and do, and the likely motivations of the African women in question is far too wide for the average student to span. Teachers should also be forewarned of the graphic nature of the passages

that detail sexual violence against girls and women (gang rape, torture) in chapter 8 (pp. 242-245) so that students can be prepared for them.

In addition to the weak introductions to each section is the lack of synthesis at the end of each chapter, which would identify the mechanisms (customary and/or statutory laws, mode of production, marriage practices, gender roles, colonial intervention, war) that have constrained women as well as provided them with room to maneuver, in each cultural and historical setting. Much of the research that points to female support systems that have promoted collective agency among women in Africa—formal self-help groups and labor organizations as well as informal resource and work-sharing networks—is not included here. Romero could have made better use of Luise White's study of female prostitutes in Nairobi (p. 188), for example, or mentioned the role that the women's activist group, Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, played in President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Nobel Peace Prize (pp. 311-315). Yes, African women have been subjected to extreme poverty, violence, and injustice, and some outstanding individuals have triumphed over their trauma. These experiences should be recognized and the victories celebrated, as Romero does in this book. Yet fully understanding how social, religious, economic, and political structures created by men and women in Africa undermine as well as serve women in their respective societies would provide a deeper exploration of the panorama of African women's experiences.

Romero's final statement, "Traditions and customs do not give way easily" (p. 316) reiterates the theme running throughout the book, that generations of African women have been scarred by the regressive tendencies of their predecessors. This

line of reasoning obfuscates the shifting ideas, strategies, and adaptations African men and women have made to improve women's livelihoods over time. It is difficult to imagine contemporary college students reading this text without challenging Romero's underlying assumptions about the stagnancy of gender in Africa.

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