

MEASAAS W3915: A HISTORY OF AFRICAN CITIES

Female Agency in the African City

Women, Contestation, Agency, and Capital in
Rural and Urban Africa

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In Aminita Sow Fall's book, translated by Dorothy S. Blair, *The Beggars' Strike*, Raabi, a ten-year-old girl having just witnessed her mother acquiesce to her father's decision to acquire a second wife in lieu of pursuing divorce, voices her disapproval. Her mother, in the third-person restricted voice, frets that, based on Raabi's response, Raabi will never be able to "manage to put up with a husband" for a litany of reasons, including that "she has never had any time for the trivialities of life; always at her books; interminable discussions with her fellow –students about serious world problems: war, the exploitation of small countries by super-powers , rampant injustice, the dehumanization of society.[Raabi] can't stand compromises; she likes clear-cut solutions, where you stand up to be counted".¹ Although seemingly a budding thinker and feminist, Raabi defies the constructs set for her by her culture – her aspirations should include obedience and complete subservience alongside deference to her own needs to maximize the happiness of her husband. Though Lolli, Raabi's mother, is a seemingly strong character, she embodies a mindset mired in the bog of her community's traditional expectations of what a woman intrinsically *is* and should *do* instead of fully embracing her fleeting convictions asserting her womanly agency, equality, and independence. Agency of self is seldom fully realized in any marginalized population; ergo, recounting the progress that a group struggling to grasp the elusive faculty for socioeconomic self-determination has made on that expedition necessitates an investigation into the history of the mechanism (sexual power as embodied by prostitution) employed to achieve agency, its operation within particular social spheres, and barriers to agency's attainment.

Metaphorically speaking, Lolli represents the pervading Eurocentric conception of prostitution on a moral level whilst Raabi represents that held by the economically liberated women in post-colonial African cities. Prostitution, as defined in this paper and by Emmanuel Akyeampong in "Sexuality and Prostitution among the Akan of the Gold Coast c. 1650-1950," is "the commodification of casual sex."² In the context of African cities, it is almost an exclusively female profession; concurrently, it is an illegal profession, operating outside the conventional marketplace of commodities by exchanging sexual services for capital gains. Sex work, as it becomes more integrated in a given culture over time, functions to contest preconceived notions of sexuality and social identity for women – a supposition

¹ Fall, Aminita Sow. *The Beggars' Strike*. Longman Group, LTD. 1981. Pp 34-35.

² Akyeampong, Emmanuel. "Sexuality and Prostitution among the Akan of the Gold Coast c. 1650-1950". *Past & Present*, No. 156 (Aug., 1997).Pp. 145.

given credence by the case of female prostitution within the confines of African urban spaces. The rejection of Eurocentric “work culture,” as exemplified by discarding precepts of “respectable” work in favor of “illegal” employment outside of the predefined sphere of Western standards of ethics³, reinforces a rejection of colonialism and of the colonial structure imposed upon Africa⁴ and its dogmatic brand of capitalism angling to “generaliz[e] and legitimiz[e] an economic and social system” incompatible with tradition and cultural norms of African society.⁵

Historically, prostitution developed as a means for women to gain social and economic independence in the urban sphere over time as a response to the restrictions to female autonomy inherent in the traditional, patriarchal structures of the rural environment. African women, whether urban or rural, have yet to overcome all barriers to independence posed by vestiges of the patriarchal and, later, capitalist/colonial conception of “woman as property” pervading modern society through the façade of preserving African tradition and cultural norms in an increasingly heterogeneous and globalized society. Early, pre-colonial Lagos exemplifies the oppressive rural structure of the “compound” and cultivated the notion that women were lesser than men. Preceding Lagos’s development into an important African Slave port, the wealth and power of a given *baálé* (usually an elder male that effectively acted as the loci of authority in the spatially defined familial vertically or horizontally extended compound) was determined by the number of dependents “whose labor and allegiance he controlled.” Compounds inherently transformed their residents into commodities whose economic trajectory was directed by a *baálé* and divided on the basis of gender. Collection of dependent persons as a means of increasing his power within social, political, and familial domains was most easily achieved through marriage. “Family and household were usually the place where accumulation [of dependents and, thus, of wealth] began,” inscribing women as imperative to accumulation of wealth

³ Especially in colonial societies, the government attempted to impose moral standards inconsistent with African society on the people by passing laws intended to “civilize” the unclean masses.

⁴ European attempts to oppress their colonized masses into docility are encapsulated in “urban planning:” a system involving a myriad of structures aimed at controlling the non-European inhabitants for the purpose of maximizing their fiscal return to colonization. Though the definition of “urban planning” in the colonial context is contestable at best, there is a consensus that it involves some combination of architectural schemes attempting to artificially reproduce the colonized area’s culture, creation of racially segregated housing districts “scientific” reasons, alienation of worker from their labor to facilitate labor control, power structures reproduced through designations of “legal” versus “illegal” space and employment, and more.

⁵ Cooper, Frederick. “Urban Space, Industrial Time, and Wage Labor in Africa.” *Struggle for the City*. Beverly Hills: Sage. Pp 32.

as a consequence of their large role in “economic production and biological reproduction,” within rural society.⁶ Polygyny blossomed among wealthy elders: more marriages meant more women, more women meant more children, more women and children meant more dependent labor, more dependent labor meant greater wealth accumulation, and, most importantly more women a single elder caused women to become a scarce good and, by proxy, a symbol of status.

This agglomeration of women created a “serious imbalance in sex ratios” within rural society,⁷ alienating younger men from their elders and allaying their desire to be subjected to the rigid structures of Compound life to initiate the processes that inevitably led to the migrant male laborer.⁸ While some institutions attempted to mitigate the gender imbalance by allowing for a constant “supply” of single women to copulate with, as was seen in the Zambian mining compound described in “The Household and the Mine Shaft: Gender Struggles on the Zambian Copperbelt,”⁹ this practice simultaneously opened mechanisms for female sexual autonomy while facilitating in the production of stereotypes about the unruliness of women without the strict structure and systems of subjugation provided by marital relations.¹⁰ With the erection of gerontocracy and patriarchy all but solidified in rural society, the prospects of capital accumulation and upward class mobility shrank for the supermajority of persons. Land was passed down in accordance with the patriarchy: the elders benefitted from their

⁶ Mann, Kristin. “The Rise of Lagos as an Atlantic Port, C. 1790-1851”. *Slavery and the Birth of the African City: Lagos, 1790-1900*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press. 2007. Pp 26. The *baálé* functioned in the role of what would be termed a “chief” or a head “elder” in other African, rural societies. In order to maintain control over the members of his compound, both familial and non-kin, he had to ensure that their needs were met such that rebellion risk was low. Consequently, as the representative of the Compound in inter-rural trade and other economic-political organizations with foreign compounds, any failures in negotiations that led to tumult within his Compound could be traced solely back to him. This need to maintain power over both his peers in trade and in the Compound congealed to necessitate greater labor output as a means of accumulating more wealth. Thus, the rural structure facilitated a commodification of labor and of persons that predated chattel slavery and colonial capitalism.

⁷ Akyeampong. Pp 151.

⁸ In *Sexuality and Prostitution among the Akan of the Gold Coast c. 1650-1950*,” Akyeampong attributes this unrest among rural males to the creation of the terribly oppressive system of “public women.” These women were “coerced into what was definitely a social institution designed to alleviate sexual pressures among unmarried young men,” unwillingly (as most were slaves) partaking in a system of perpetual, institutionalized rape at the behest of compound rulers attempting to alleviate their male workforce for the purpose of greater production yields. Resultantly, these women are left to the whims of the State and controlled by fear tactics loosely based on religion (involving animal sacrifice) to morally justify the practice extra-marital and pre-marital relations with Public Women (153).

⁹ Parpart, Jane. “The Household and the Mine Shaft: Gender and Class Struggles on the Zambian Copperbelt, 1926-64”. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Oct., 1986). Pp 40. The initial policy of the corporation governing the aforementioned mining community offered a “sufficient supply of women” for their wholly male labor force because of their presumption that “a certain proportion of free women is healthy as a safeguard” to the economic drain caused by “legitimate wives” and their demands.

¹⁰ Parpart. Pp 39.

“privileged access to land” and transmitted this privilege and its advantages to the eldest son in their household as a matter of tradition.¹¹ Ergo, the sum of rural society for most Africans was the denial of access to land, economic independence, and social mobility.

In Lolli’s story, her life as a wife was understood to be defined by subservience to her husband and her ultimate happiness to be derived from his satisfaction; the “fate” of her and her children vacillated with respect to her ability to provide her husband with “respect, obedience, and submission.”¹² In her isolation from her agency, marriage transformed a woman from a human being to a pawn while reasserting the notion that “[the husband] is free. [The husband] does not belong to [the wife].”¹³ This condition is best described by the words of an Asante proverb: “*mmea se, wo ho ye fe’ a, ene ka.*”¹⁴ A woman could be cast out of her husband’s graces and, resultantly, from the safety provided by living in a controlled space to force her to wander, alone, in an attempt to find another space, whether with another man or with relatives, that would accept her.¹⁵ A daughter could be cast from her father’s Compound in the instance whence she, in an attempt to assert her self-determinacy, refuses to marry the man her father chooses from her; furthermore, the daughter would likely have “no resource but prostitution” in this case.¹⁶ Accordingly, many prostitutes were “outsiders with no kinship ties” where they practiced their profession in the era of colonial rule in Africa¹⁷; the alienation of the woman from rural society and the traditional expectation that marriage defines the African woman forced the women that rejected this assertion to be “outsiders” both spatially (frequently subjected to living in the outskirts of the town to practice their profession in relative privacy from prying eyes) and

¹¹ Eckert, Andreas. “Urbanization in Colonial and Post-Colonial West Africa”. *Themes in West Africa’s History*. Ohio University Press. Oxford Publishing. 2006. Pp 222. On page 219, Eckert recounts the present condition of younger sons and women who, notwithstanding changing cultural norms and practices, are still systematically denied access to land according to “age and gender lines.”

¹² Fall. Pp 27.

¹³ Fall. Pp 33.

¹⁴ Akyeampong. Pp 151. The proverb eloquently explains that no woman was “free,” socially or economically. Roughly translated, the proverb says, “when the women say (to you) ‘you are a handsome fellow,’ that means you are going into debt.”

¹⁵ Fall. Pp 30. Lolli categorizes the passage of a law which “forbade a man for saying to his wife one morning - for no reason at all, simply because he got up out of bed on the wrong side - ‘Pack your bags and get out!’ Even if the repudiated wife had no home to go to, she had to leave her husband’s house and go off to try to find a roof over her head with distant relatives, friends or acquaintances “as advancement for the female condition. In the text, it is alluded to the woman, in her attempt to find a new source of housing, is reduced to a beggar, implying that she would trade sex for housing and safety. Coincidentally, that is what many women in African rural society were reduced to regardless because of the striking similarities between marriage and prostitution as instances whence a male owns a female’s sexual autonomy.

¹⁶ Akyeampong. Pp 156.

¹⁷ Akyeampong. Pp157.

socially (disdained as a result of traversing the “traditional social and spatial constraints imposed on women to facilitate accumulation.”¹⁸ The different forms of spatial illicitness of the female prostitute in urban society became a feature shared by many marginalized groups residing in the African city.

Space, as defined by Andreas Eckert in “Urbanization in Colonial and Post-Colonial West Africa,” is a reflection of “relations of power and social stratification” that dictates the trajectory of culture and routine in daily life by defining the persons within the spatial organization schema; likewise, it “is a central object of rule” that, in the colonial context, fostered “bifurcation nature” to reassert the hegemony of colonial control and limit “African individuals access to specific urban areas.”¹⁹ Although Colonialism was originally intended to reinforce separation between desirables and undesirables thorough restrictive zoning ordinances and slum clearance efforts as a procedure to assert control of labor and forcing ethnic removal of the primary occupants of the land for the purpose of benefitting the material interests held by the new European populace, racializing the spatial layout of the city,²⁰ the imposition of this spatial structure instigated a massive upheaval in urban power relations that offered women “more spaces within the emerging social order to assert their autonomy, to accumulate wealth on their own, and to define marriage and what they expected of it.”²¹ Ergo, the space where the prostitute in the urban city operated became an open defiance of the colonial state’s attempt to control women through marital structures²² of subservience by limiting their ability to accumulate capital through legitimate means.

Delineations between “licit” and “illicit” space resulted from a fear of female autonomy and of a socially mobile class of migrant male workers – realities that would severely challenge the basis of traditional manifestations of domination as represented in the Compound’s social organization. Whilst women were far from engaging in forms of labor that would truly free them from male and cultural

¹⁸ Akyeampong. Pp 160

¹⁹ Eckert. Pp 213.

²⁰ Cooper. Pp 32.

²¹ Akyeampong. Pp 156.

²² Parpart. Pp 39. The Urban African Courts were established, it is argued, for the primary rationale that marriage would occupy women by causing them to bear children and keeping them within the domestic sphere of labor production instead of entering other modes. Furthermore, these Courts dealt with matrimonial cases 70% of the time, with court assessors rulings emphasizing the moral need for marital stability and traditional norms for urban couples. Resultantly, institutions challenging the colonial authorities’ assumption that “African women in towns should be independents, not potentially troublesome independent women” shifted the focus on government officials to enforce limits on one of the primary means by which urban women asserted their independence: prostitution.

subjugation, the social and spatial dynamics of urban society provided women with a large male working class with few women, as a result of the sex imbalance in rural communities, to service their sexual needs because the colonial state failed to provide their male economy with means for “social reproduction in their labor force.”²³ Prostitution is a profession which requires no start-up capital. Resultantly, African women, denied access to the mass of “licit” occupations, could attain economic independence in the “illicit” sphere through prostitution. Urban prostitutes acted in the same capacity as Public Women; however, prostitution was less of a compelled choice and more of an option. Women could choose what type of prostitution to practice, where to practice it (as colonial authorities recognized the benefit that prostitutes had when acting in the capacity of temporary “wives” for the migrant male worker with respect to maintaining his exploitability with greater ease), and how to practice it. In Nairobi, for example, this produced three distinct forms of prostitution in the post-colonial society.²⁴

Prostitution and, more generally, types of sex work performed by women, is typically viewed by the mainstream Eurocentric dogma to be an “underclass” profession diametrically opposed to the Protestant ethics of temperance, religion, and restraint.. However, as an exploration of prostitution and sex work within the African urban sphere reveals, this Eurocentric conception of sex work as vice is misleading because it neglects to address the empowering effect that sex work can have for women in certain situations. Instead of sex work as degrading and deplorable, sex work within many African cities meant economic independence and agency of self for the women employed in the profession. It offered an escape from the formal, legal economy from which women were typically denied entry and carved a niche for single (and, to a lesser extent, married) women in the informal or illegal economy operating within the urban structure. Weighing the costs and benefits of rural marriage and urban prostitution, it is clear that urban prostitution was a lesser form of female dependence and offered far more for women with respect to social mobility.

²³ Akyeampong. Pp 157.

²⁴ White, Luise. “A Colonial State and an African Petty Bourgeoisie.” *Struggle for the City*. Pg 169-170. She describes three types of prostitutes that operated within the city: the streetwalker *watembezi*, the secret prostitute *Malaya*, and the foreign prostitute supporting the rural economy and patriarchal societal structures called the *Wazi-Wazi* form.