

## The Many Faces of African Women's Agency and Power

BY LAUREN PARNELL MARINO

Nwando Achebe and Claire Robertson, eds., *Holding the World Together: African Women in Changing Perspective*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2019. (Women in Africa and the Diaspora.) 352 pp. bibl. index. \$36.95, ISBN 978-0299321109.

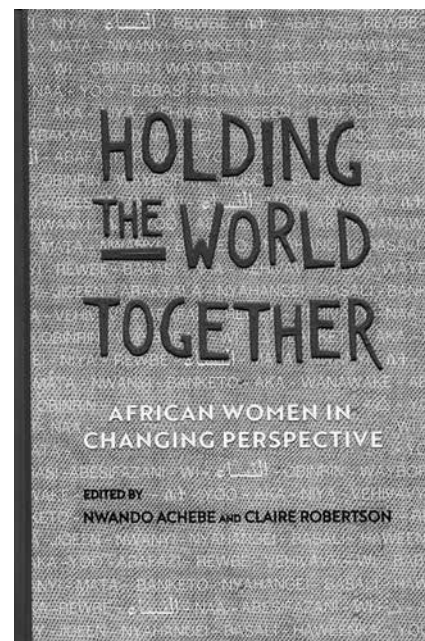
*Holding the World Together* sets out to enrich and complicate what, for many, is a fairly one-dimensional image of African women. With an emphasis on African women's agency, this edited volume delivers on its promise to give readers a thorough and thoughtful exploration of women and power in Africa.

Editors Nwando Achebe and Claire Robertson have curated a wide-ranging set of essays from seasoned scholars on gender and Africa.<sup>1</sup> The result is a readable, engaging book that will be a wonderful resource in libraries and classrooms, including for those new to the study of gender in Africa.

The book is organized into a number of broad topics and includes chapters on subjects as diverse as women and religious fundamentalisms, women and urban spaces, and women's health. The contributing authors were charged with exploring their subject across the large geographic area of the African continent, a seemingly overwhelming task given the diverse histories and contexts present there. Yet they rise to the occasion, providing narratives that highlight shared histories while not oversimplifying or erasing important differences. In fact, many of the authors use an explicitly intersectional lens to understand the experiences of different African women in each subject area, emphasizing how various layered identities create specific types of oppression or privilege for women to navigate.

The first of the book's three themes — the historic existence and persistence of African women's agency — illustrates the volume's central purpose. Some of the chapters are exemplary in addressing women's agency. Kathleen Sheldon's contribution, for instance, on women's resistance to colonialism and contributions to nationalism, is full of important and often ignored history that demonstrates how women as individuals and in the collective used their power. Nwando Achebe examines the ways women use power derived from religious institutions, and Gracia Clark looks at women's power within changing economic structures. Throughout the collection, African women are shown to be strategic, creative, and influential.

A second theme of the book is the importance of historical knowledge for understanding contemporary contexts. Since about half of the book's contributors are historians, this message comes across without much exposition. Teresa Barnes's chapter on urbanization connects current trends with processes that have been going on for more than a century. Rachel Jean-Baptiste and Emily Burrill relate current marriage systems to historic practices of kinship, reproduction, and emotional attachment. In these chapters and others like them, readers are shown the relevance of history for the analysis of contemporary issues.



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The third and final theme of the book is the challenge of colonialism and neo-colonialism for African women. Although this is hardly a new area of exploration for scholars, this book tackles the topic in some new and interesting ways. Karen Flint, for example, discusses how colonial changes to agricultural systems affected women's nutrition. Cajetan Iheka demonstrates the impact colonialism had on women's depictions in African films, and Elizabeth M. Perego considers how African women novelists address neocolonialism in their work. In every essay in this volume, the enduring impact of colonialism is interrogated, often in unexpected ways.

As I read, I felt the chapters building on each other, providing ample evidence and arguments aligned with the book's three themes. I also appreciated how well each chapter stood on its own. It was easy to imagine how individual chapters could be used in classroom settings, giving students a synopsis of the various

gender implications of different topics. Josephine Beoku-Betts's piece on gendered education gaps stands out as a particularly good example of this.

In the introduction to the volume, the editors say they want to address "changing notions of gender identity" (p. 8), a topic often ignored in scholarship on African women. This is the one area in which I felt the book fell a little short. While some essays did think outside the binary (including, not surprisingly, the chapter on sexuality by Signe Arnfred), most relied on relatively stable notions of gender. We continue to have work to do on this topic in the field of gender studies in Africa.

This book is an expansive and well-organized contribution to the existing literature. It gives the reader an appreciation for the many ways African women have wielded power in different parts of their lives and promotes a more accurate depiction of African women in all their diversity and strength.

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### Note

1. In the interest of transparency I note here that my advisor, Aili Tripp, is one of the contributors to this volume. Her essay, however, is not among those I have considered in this review.

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