

**Edited by Amandina Lihamba, Fulata L. Moyo,
  
M.M. Mulokozi, Naomi L. Shitemi,
  
and Saida Yahya-Othman**

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|  | **v rOMEN**  **WRITING**  **AFRICA**  **The Eastern Region** |

►:

**Women Writing Afri-da---**

**THE EASTERN REGION**

**The Women Writing Africa Project**

**A Project of The Feminist Press at the City University of New York
  
Funded by the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation**

**Women Writing Africa, a project of cultural reconstruction, aims to restore African women's voices to the public sphere. Through the publication of a series of regional anthologies, each collecting oral and written narratives as well as a variet-y of historical and literary texts, the project will make visible the oral and written lit­erary expression of African women. The definition of "writing" has been broad­ened to include songs, praise poems, and significant oral texts„as well as fiction, poetry, letters, journals, journalism, and historical and legal documents. The proj­ect has been undertaken with the expectation that the publication of these texts will allow for new readings of African women's history.**

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**Women Writing Africa**

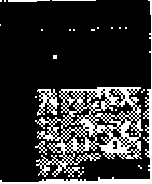
**THE EASTERN REGION**

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**A NOTE ON THE WOMEN WRITING AFRICA PROJECT**

**A NOTE ON THE WOMEN WRITING AFRICA PROJECT + XV**

**The first conversation about this project took place when Tuzyline Jita Allan spoke with Florence Howe at the 1990 meeting of ,the Modern Language Association. Allan was responding to the recent publication by The Feminist Press of the first volume of *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present,* edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. Referring to this landmark publication as a striking example of the untapped potential of international feminist scholar­ship, Allan pointed to the need for a similar intervention in Africa. Both Allan and Howe knew that a project for Africa like one that the Press had begun for India could testify to the literary.presence and historical activity of Africa nwomen. While Howe did not want to assume responsibility for such a project, she agreed to discuss it at a meeting of the Publications and Policies Commit­tee of The Feminist Press held in February 1991. All present understpod that so massive a project would need funding. Howe expected that the Africans inter­ested in such a volume would prepare a grant application, organize the work, and, when it was ready for publication, offer it to The Feminist Press.**

**Later that year, when Howe was delivering the volume of *Women Writing in Indiq* to the Ford Foundation to thank it for its small grant in support of that**

**project, Alison Bernstein said, "Africa has to be next." A small group­Abena P. A. Busia,, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Peter Hitchcock, Allan, and Howe met with Bernstein to discuss the possibility of and support for a plan­ning, meeting to follow the meeting of the African Literature Association (ALA) in Accra, Ghana, in April 1994.We are grateful to Johnnetta B. Cole, then president of Spelman College, who opened that meeting and testified to the need for such a project and to the commitment of The Feminist Press to publishing women's lost voices. Susie Tharu, who grew up in Uganda, Abena P. A. Busia, and Florence Howe also spoke with enthusiasm about the importance of such a project. They were joined by Margaret Busby and Bella Brodsky, who shared their experiences of editing individual volumes on women in Africa and around the world. In addition, some forty members of the ALA attended these two-day meetings, including Judith Miller, who has been an important member of the committtee for the West/Sahel region ever since..**

**Three primary considerations guided the preliminary discussions of the proj­ect. First, in spite of their overlapping agendas, Women Writing Africa could not be an exact replication of *Women Writing in India.* Africa's entrenched oral tradi­tions called for a different response to the discursive modes of expression on the continent. To this end, reconceiving the notion of "writing" marked a conceptual breakthrough in determining how to name o. project aimed at capturing African women's creative landscape. "Writing" in *Women Writing Africa* metonymically suggests a blend of verbal and written forms of expression embodying the experi­ence of African women in envisioning their lives in relation to their societies. The project's matrix of spoken and scripted words represents the creative interaction**

**between living women in the actual world and the flux of history: in short, African women "making" a world.**

**Women Writing Africa, therefore, became a project of cultural restoration that aims to restore African women's voices to the public sphere. We are publishing several volumes documenting the history of self-conscious expression by African women throughout the continent. This expression is both oral and written, ritual and quotidian, sacred and profane. We are as interested in dance songs and pri­vate letters as in legal depositions and public declamations. We hope to foster new readings of African history by shedding light on the dailiness of women's lives as well as their rich contributions to culture. In the end, seeing through women's eyes, we expect to locate the fault lines of memory and so change assumptions about the shaping of African knowledge, culture, and history.**

**A second consideration focused on the establishment of a framework for conducting research on the continent, and here two hard questions presented themselves: how to think of Africa regionally rather than nationally, and how to set up working groups in those regions and also in the United States. We orig­inally projected five volumes, but conditions in the countries of central Africa led to the decision to produce four representative, rather than all-inclusive, vol­umes—from Southern Africa, from West Africa and the Sahel, from Eastern Africa, and from North Africa.**

**Following the Ghanaian planning conference, Abena P. A. Busia joined Allan and Howe as co-directors of the project. Together we formed an Executive Com­mittee of U.S.-based Africanist scholars to serve as a resource and review board for the project's articulated goals, and an Advisory Committee of prominent scholars and writers in the field. Together we planned how to organize both regionally and nationally in the field: Allan would find the scholars in the Southern region; Busia would do the same in the West/Sahel region. For their help with this phase of the project, thanks are due to Debra Boyd and Joyce Hope Scott, who attended the Accra meeting and have continued to make contributions to the project. Then, with Africa-based colleagues, both Allan and Busia began the work of developing research teams in their assigned regions, first by locating national coordinators who would work as a team with their regional counterparts. Later, we proceeded in a somewhat similar manner in the East and the North.**

**The third consideration essential to realizing the project's promise was fund­ing. The three co-directors wrote the first grant proposal to the Ford Founda­tion, and within two years, another to the Rockefeller Foundation. At Ford, we wish to acknowledge specifically the instigating interest of Alison Bernstein and the support of our several program officers—Janice Petrovitch, Margaret Wilkerson, Geraldine Frater, and Irma McLauren. At Rockefeller, we wish to acknowledge the interest and support of Lynn Szwaja, our pro'gram officer.**

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**xvi + A NOTE ON THE WOMEN WRITING AFRICA PROJECT**

we wrote drafts for this Note. We want to thank especially Susan Garfield for her administrative support, and Gianna Celli, the director of the Bellagio Cen­ter, for her continued interest in our work. The time spent in Bellagio was invaluable for editors and consultants, all of whom live in different countries and would not ordinarily have had an opportunity to work together on their volumes for an extended period of from two to four weeks.

Without the commitment of the staff and Board of Directors of The Femi­nist Press, we could not have done this work. Florence Howe wants to acknowl­edge the whole staff during the years 1997 to 2000, when she was the pub­lisher/director of The Feminist Press, especially for their support during the weeks when she was holding meetings in Africa. In addition, she wants to acknowledge similar support during the years when she was again, publisher/director (2005) and then publisher (2006-2007).

In particular, and with respect to this volume, we want to acknowledge Cary Webb fOr her painstaking work seeking permissions; Jenny Kline for her detailed work on the bibliography; Jean Casella for her careful editorial work; and Hadassah Gold for her proofreading. In addition, we want to acknowledge assistant editor Anjoli Roy for her trafficking and detail work on the manu­script; and Cary Webb and Andrea Swalec for the Index. While Dayna Navaro designed the volume's cover and the series' interior, Lisa Force has creatively revised the design to suit the particular needs of this volume. We are grateful too for the work of publicist Franklin Dennis and the marketing strategies of Jeannette Petras, as well as Paul Pombo's careful attention to the myriad finan­cial details of this project. We appreciate the continuing faith in this project of the Board of Directors of The Feminist Press, our new executive director, Glo­ria Jacobs, and, finally, we wish to express our thanks to friends and colleagues in the African Studies Association and the African Literature Association for their continuing interest and support.

Tuzyline Jita Allan would like to thank the friends, acquaintances, and strangers throughout Southern and Eastern Africa who became part of a great wave of kindness and support during her travels. Malcolm Hacksley, Paulette Coetzee, and other members of the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown were at once generous and efficient. She sincerely thanks the following individuals for dispensing generously the famed African hospitality: Nobantu Ratsebotsa, Leloba Molema, Austin Bukenya, Susan Kiguli, Sheila Meinjies, Fulata Moyo, Saida Yahya-Othman, Naomi L. Shitemi, Sheila All Ryanga, Amandina Lihamba, Nalishebo N. Meebelo, and Jane Bennett, former director of the Gender Institute at Cape Town University. Allan also acknowledges the important contributions of Carol Sicherman, who traveled with her to East Africa in 1999 to set up the project and to help recruit scholars in the region, and Adam Ashforth, whose intimate knowledge of South Africa proved invaluable. She is also grateful for the expertise of Nobantu Rasebotsa, the former regional coordinator of the Southern volume, who traveled with her to Nairobi in January 2001, for another round of strategy sessions with the Eastern team. She thanks Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi,

A **NOTE ON THE WOMEN WRITING AFRICA PROJECT + XVII**

**Jane Marcus, and Rashida Ismaili for their intellectual and moral support, and she is especially grateful to Hawa Allan, who used the periods of her mother's absence to develop her own intellect and creativity. Allan and Busia wish to thank Irene Asseba D'Almeida, Carol Boyce Davies, Peter Hitchcock, Nancy Rose Hunt, Brenda Berrian, Ketu Katrak, Angelita Reyes, and Mete Shayne for their wisdom and sincere interest in the project. Both Allan and Howe would like to thank the Zimbabwe Women Writers and the organizers of the Zim­babwe Book Fair for their enthusiastic embrace of the project. And all three owe a debt of gratitude to Delia Friedman for her diligence and professionalism in handling travel plans for scores of women from all corners of the globe to attend our regional meetings through the years.**

xvtii **+ A NOTE ON THE WOMEN WRITING AFRICA PROJECT**

**Abena Busia wishes to acknowledge the support of the Department of Eng­lish at Rutgers University, especially chairpersons Barry Qualls, Cheryl A.Wall, and Richard Miller for flexible teaching schedules that allowed for extensive travel in Africa. In addition, she is grateful for the support of several Rutgers University graduate students, past and present: Carol Allen, Ronald Tyson, Kimberly Banks, Shalene Moodie, and Nia Tuckson, for assistance of various kinds through the years, including teaching and monitoring classes during her absences for editorial board meetings, some of which they also helped plan. Special thanks also go to Krista Johnson and Jessica Fredston-Herman for their particular and timely contributions, their planning and research assistance. Finally, a debt of gratitude is owed to Anita Ake, her personal assistant since 2003, for her exemplary equanimity in the face of chaos.**

**Florence Howe would like to thank Feminist Press Board members, Helene D. Goldfarb, Mariam K. Chamberlain, Judith Miller, and Shirley L. Mow for their extraordinary support of her work. She would also like to thank Marcia Wright, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, and Emilia Ilieva, for their special contri­butions to the Eastern volume.**

**And the entire project will be grateful forever for the exemplary translations into French of each of these volumes by Christiane Owusu-Sarpong. The French versions of these volumes are being published by Editions Karthala Press in Paris. Finally, a brief word about the final volume to come: The North­ern volume, focused on Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan, and Tunisia, will be published in mid-2008.**

**We are aware that Women Writing Africa represents the largest undertaking of our lives, a responsibility to set the reality of African women's lives in history and in the present before a world that is only just waking up to their impor­tance. It is our continuing hope that these volumes will give birth to hundreds of others.**

**Tuzyline Jita Allan**

**Abena P. A. Busia**

**Florence Howe**

**Series Editors and Project Co-Directors**

**PREFACE**

**PREFACE + XIX**

**This volume, the third in the Women Writing Africa series, contains a selection of works created by women in Eastern Africa during the last three hundred years. The earliest written piece dates from 1711, and the latest from 2003. Obviously women's creativity goes still further back in time, though much of the creativity before -1711 must have been oral, perhaps absorbed into later cre­ative productions, as usually happens with oral arts. The editors of this volume believe that the texts offered here represent fairly if not exhaustively both oral and written genres: songs, poetry, tales, anecdotes, speeches, letters, biogra­phies, and reminiscences.**

**The texts in the collection come from five countries, namely, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zambia. This designation of an Eastern Region is an ad hoc identification of the countries, determined by the editorial team, as a coop­erative community rather than a geopolitical entity. Granted that the five coun­' tries, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, are contiguous with one another, two of them having littoral eastern boundaries on the Indian Ocean, the five can claim neither a monopoly of being East African nor of being exclu­sively and unchallengeably "eastern."**

**While Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda are traditionally recognized as East Africa, Eastern Africa may, according to the context, include countries as far apart as Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mauritius, and Mozambique. At one stage in the development of the present volume, the editors seriously considered including writings from Mozambique, a good intention eventually abandoned for logistic reasons. On the other hand, any of the countries represented here may, on occasion, identify itself differently from the Eastern African entity. Thus, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia are members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), along with most of the countries in the recognizably southern geographical section of the continent-In our case, our self-definition was based mainly on our readiness and willingness to work together on the enterprise when it was introduced to us by Tuzyline ,vita Allan and Carol Sicherman in 1999.**

**Nevertheless, the grouping is not arbitrary. Indeed, one of the joys of work­ing together on the project was the discovery of the numerous similarities among our communities. All the five countries, for example, had shared the same, colonial experience of British rule, and had become independent in the early 1960s. British colonialism had bequeathed to us, perhaps inadvertently, the common transnational language, English, in which some of the texts in the volume were originally written, and into which texts from other languages were translated. Up north, in Kenya, Tanzania, and, to a certain extent, Uganda, we had another common language, Kiswahili, which was also a rich source of texts for our work, and served as a major tool of both socialization and discussion during our meetings.**

**But even in the multilingualism beneath the lingua franca, we discovered a reassuring element of manageability across the region. While it might be bewil­dering to find that our region claims a richness of over 300 languages, the proj­ect became clearer when we began to see these in clear family groups across the countries. The widest variety of languages appeared in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, where the groups ranged from the Sudanic through the Nilotic to the Cushitic and Bantu. The Bantu group is the most widespread in the region and covers all of Malawi and Zambia, and most of Tanzania, except for a few areas in the central and northern regions. It comprises such languages as Luluhya from Kenya; Chichewa from Malawi and Zambia; Chibemba also from Zam­bia; Luganda from Uganda; and of course, Kiswahili.**

**XX + PREFACE**

**What struck us even more deeply were the similarities and comparabilities of women's experiences as captured by the voices collected for the volume. Such similarities may be heard not only in the period after the imposition of colonial hegemony, but also long before the colonial period, probably because of the similar structures of the societies in our communities. Economically, for exam­ple, all our societies seemed td be divided into four main categories: the agricul­turalists, the pastoralists, the fishers, and, along the coast, the traders. The uttered word in all its forms dominated day-to-day interactions. In political and administrative organization, most societies observed strict hierarchies based either on hereditary dynasties or on age-group gradations.**

**Most relevant to Our project, nearly all the societies in the region were, and remain, manifestly patriarchailt is true that some communities, including sev­eral in Malawi, southern Tanzania, and along the east African coast, including some of the Waswahili (Mnyampala and Chiragdin), are nominally matrilineal. But even in such societies, the dominance of male ideologies, practices, and attitudes, inherently disadvantage women. Indeed, this ubiquitous dominance of male supremacy and women's determined struggle against it became the guiding prificiple in the choice of the texts in this collection.**

**The reader will note from the texts themselves, the accompanying headnotes, and several comments ift the Introduction, that almost every text in the collection contains an element of Eastern African women's fight for survival: the power to be, to do, and to grow in the face of a hostile environment created mainly by patriarchal impogitions. The search for empowerment may be expressed in differ­ent ways, such as woman-to-woman solidarity and advice, self-criticism, story­telling, questioning, petitions, protests, confrontation, or outright rebellion. But the underlying tssenceis4till strategizirig, mobilizing, and, eventually, liberating action. Many of the authors herein may not be self-proclaimed feminists: But their objective experiences as women battling with the realities of existence in prescribed and "proscribed" or prohibitive communities often engender their desire and determination to transform their lives and those of other women and ultimately of all humanity. The creation of the expressive texts, like the samples presented here, is itself part of that empowering action. For, indeed, silence has been one of the most powerful tools of subjugation of African women.**



**Women's emancipatory struggle can also be seen in a wider sociohistorical context. Women's creativity is informed, regulated, and nurtured by economic and sociohistorical factors. Communities exist and operate in specific social for­mations, be they peasant, pastoral, hunter-gatherer, or capitalist. Culture and the functions of production and reproduction tend to conform to such basic structures. Depending on their needs, communities tend to relegate certain tasks—economic, biological, artistic—either to men or women. The social institutions that have evolved over time, including the institution of marriage in its various forms, the extended family, and the rites of passage pertaining to the various stages of a person's life—i.e., birth, initiation, marriage, menopause, death—also tend to reinforce such arrangements.**

**PREFACE + XXI**

**Using the two criteria of women's emancipation and sociohistorical signifi­cance, the editors selected texts rich in fine aesthetic qualities. While the texts cut across a host of genres, linguistic and literary traditions, geographical areas, historical periods, and thematic concerns, the. editors admit that they often felt they were tightrope walking through the selection process. In the end, apart from ensuring a fair representation of the participating countries, which itself depended on the materials received from the field, the final selection of the pieces was as intuitive as it was interpretative.**

**As we attempt to describe briefly the procedure we followed in putting this volume together, we must remark that we are ourselves a little surprised that the work on this volume has lasted considerably more than the proverbial seven years! Indeed, by the time this volume reaches the reader it will have been a lit­tle more than ten years since we embarked on the project.**

**The process began in. 1996, with exploratory contacts between two of the directors of the project, Tuzyline Jita Allan and Florence Howe, and several scholars from Eastern African countries. The meeting held in Cape Town that year marked an important breakthrough for both the Southern-and Eastern Vol­umes. Tuzyline Jita Allan and Abena Busia discussed the projects goals and benchmarks with leading scholars in the field, including Amandina Lihamba, who was representing the Eastern region. In 1999, Tuzyline Jita Allan and Carol Sicherman led a full-scale effort to organize national committees in Kampala, Dar es Salaam, and Nairobi to begin the critical work of collecting texts.,To the meeting in Nairobi, Allan and Sicherman also invited scholars from Malawi and Zambia:- Froin this group of historical meetings grew the national working com­mittees, which undertook the bulk of the work**

**The various National Committees and volunteers comprised the following members:**

**Kenya: J.W. Arthur, Fran Etemese, Wangari Gibenye, Emilia Ilieva, Mar­jorie Oludhe Macgoye, Clara Momanyi, Barrack 0. Muluka, Murende Mutari, Milton Obote, Sheila All Ryanga, Naomi L. Shitemi, Fugich Wako, and Ali Wasi.**

**Malawi: L. Binauli, D. Chirwa, Vera Chirwa, H. Chunga, M. Gulule,**

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**Edrinnie Lora-Kayambazinthu, Bright Molande, Fulata L. Moyo, Hendrina Msosa, Anthony Nazonche, Desmond D. Phiri, and Boston Soko.**

**Tanzania: Fatma Alloo, Daudi Kweba, Amandina Lihamba, M.M. Mulokozi, Rehema J. Nchimbi, Martha Qorro, Edda Sanga, Kapepwa A. Tambila, and Saida Yahya-Othman.**

**Uganda: Syed A.H. Abidi, Robina Asiimwe, Jackee Batanda, Okot Benge,
  
Austin Bukenya, Florence Ebila, Charlotte Karungi, Jane •awalya,
  
Mildred Kiconco, Susan Kiguli, Abasi Kiyimba, Beatrice Lamwaka,**

**David Rubadiri Mbowa, Hilda Ntege Mukisa, Beverley Nambozo, Sarah Namulondo, Monica Arach de Nyeko, Ernest Okello Ogwang,**

**Celestino Orikiriza, Eunice N.N. Sendikadiwa, Sylvia Tamale, and Ayeta Anne Wangusa.**

**Zambia: Nalishebo N. Meebelo;Mbuyu Nalumango, Mondo Sifuniso, and Maseko E. Boston.**

**A characteristic feature of our national-working committees was that they included men. In consonance with our philosophy of gender empowerment, it was agreed from the start that our brothers who believed in and were commit­ted to feminist causes and to the enabling of African women's voices would be invited and encouraged to participate in the venture. Thus it was that several brothers, including Abasi Kiyimba, Austin Bukenya, and David Rubadiri Mbowa from Uganda, and. M.M. Mulokozi and Kapepwa Tambila from Tan­zania, were involved in the project from the development of the idea through the collection and selection of materials to the final editorial work. All of them not only appreciated the generous invitation of their sisters to join the project, but also hailed it as a uniquely enlightening learning experience and enhance­ment of their insight into African women's concerns.**

**The committees themselves were supervised by two coordinators in most countries. Naomi-h. Shitemi and Sheila Ali Ryanga oversaw the Kenyan com­mittee, Susan•Kiguli and Florence Ebila the Ugandan committee, while Saida Yahya-Othman and Amandina Lihamba took charge in Tanzania. Malawi was led by Fulata Moyo and Edrinnie Lora-Kayambazinthu, and Nalishebo N. Mebeelo chaired Zambia: The coordinators eventually worked also as the countries' chief representatives at various selection and editorial meetings, although other members of committees were frequently asked to contribute to these activities.**

**This was often a necessity. Even the idea of having two national coordina­tors, which we had taken fOr granted at the inception of the exercise, turned out to be a particularly prudent step, primarily because of the extremely taxing schedules of most of the participants in the** project. **The Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Malawian coordinators, for example, were all senior academics with heavy teaching and administrative commitments in their universities as well as a host**

**of international obligations. The Ugandans were also academics and in estab­lished teaching positions. But the main demand on these two women was either to complete or to embark on their doctoral programs. In the end, the operation depended largely on an endless juggling of schedules and negotiating with colleagues to ensure that work on the project continued while our family, career, and professional demands were also met.**

**PREFACE +** XXIII

**Thus Susan Kiguli, working on her PhD in Leeds, England, had to leave the Ugandan coordination to Florence Ebila, who patiently waited for her to come home' before embarking on her own program at Madison, Wisconsin. Nal­ishebo N. Meebelo, too, set out on her doctoral research, in Australia, about halfway through the project. But the Malawian coordinating team faced the greatest operational challenge when Edrinnie Lora-Kayambazinthu, who had remained on the ground while Fulata L. Moyo was on a study program in South Africa, was involved in a tragic road accident that not only robbed her of a sister but also left her incapacitated for a very long time. Our entire editorial team wishes to. salute and acknowledge Edrinnie not only for her sisterly com­pany and her vigorous contribution to the project but also, and especially, for the heroic courage with which she faced her tribulations. An enduring inspira­tion to all of us, Edrinnie is an icon of the unbending bravery of Eastern African women.**

**Once the national committees had been set up, the task of collecting mate­rial for the project began. The search took the participants to all areas of the region, including remote villages and towns in the depths of the countryside; refugee and displaced persons' camps, like those in northern Uganda; personal, institutional, and governmental archives; and the libraries of several universi­ties. The collectors paid particular attention to oral texts, as reflecthd in the cor­pus presented in this collection. The collectors were impressed with both the richness and variety of texts available in the field and by the generosity of people willing to share them. To all our field and archival informants, including our many students, and in Tanzania, Shani A. Kitogo, Joshua Madumulla, and The Tanzania Writers Association (UWAVITA), we are deeply grateful.**

**Even as we proceeded with collecting, the national committees met periodi­cally to review and assess the variety and quality of texts collected. Provisional and preliminary .selections of publishable texts were made at these meetings, using the general guidelines suggested by the project directors for The Feminist Press, but also refining and adapting these to the specific evaluation of the texts in hand. Meantime, Florence Howe and Tuzyline Jita Allan advised and facili­tated a series of regional meetings at which the participants shared experiences and jointly assessed the texts collected from each country.**

**The first text selection meeting was held in Nairobi in May 2000; the second meeting, at the Sun 'n Sand Holiday Resort at Mangochi in Malawi in Sep­tember 2000. The third meeting took place at Entebbe, Uganda, in April 2001; and the final regional meeting was held in Dar es Salaam in April 2002. Tuzy­line Jita Allan and Florence Howe participated in the Nairobi, Entebbe, and**

**Dar es Salaam meetings. They brought with them their experience from the Southern and Western volumes, and generally guided the meetings to fruitful results. Allan was particularly helpful in elaborating the vision and goals of the whole project, guiding and grounding the discussions in an Afro-feminist the­oretical and ideological framework in line with the vision. The Malawi meet­ing, though not attended by the two directors, benefited from the attendance of the venerable Malawian human rights activist, Vera Chirwa.**

**XXIV + PREFACE**

**An indication of the deep interest that the texts in the collection might arouse was given in July 2002, in Kampala, Uganda, when four members from the national teams made presentations at the Women's World Congress.**

**Indeed, almost imperceptibly, we were making steady progress from merely looking at what had been collected to determining its suitability and to consid­ering the emerging patterns among all the texts,from the various countries and finally to determining the best candidates for inclusion in the volume and con­sidering the editorial work to be done on them. Thus, by the time we met in Dar es Salaam in April 2002, we were ready for the advice of a literary and lin­guistic expert, Ann Biersteker, from Yale University.**

**Regional meetings were followed by residential retreats at Bellagio in Italy, generously funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The first retreat took place from 12 August to 4 September 2003, the second from 1 to 14 June 2004. These meetings enabled the editors to complete the selection of the texts, edit the headnotes, and draft the Introduction. Tuzyline Jita Allan, Florence Howe, and Ann Biersteker were always available during these meetings, critiquing the writing and deliberations of the team, and assisting with translations.**

**Late in 2004, the editors held one final residential session, this time back home in Eastern Africa, to review all and to edit, harmonize, expand, and com­plete the headnotes and to work further on the Introduction. This meeting was arranged by Saida Yahya-Othman on the famed Zanzibar Island in late November 2004, thus incidentally ensuring that we had enjoyed a physical experience on the land of each cultural source of our texts, except Zambia. After Zanzibar, we turned the manuscript** over **to The Feminist Press for editing, design, and production, although it was understood that intensive consultations would continue both among ourselves and with the publishers.**

**The publishers did very well on this part. of the understanding, especially Florence Howe, despite the extra responsibilities placed on her by her recall to head the Press. The volume editors and their associates, however, did not find it easy to meet the deadlines. Returning to our usual work and study places had the usual effect of lessening our concentration on the work of the volume and some of the crucial parts of the material, like this Preface, took much longer than we had expected to put in final form. Only the patience and diligence of our publisher have ensured that this work will appear as scheduled. For this we are profoundly grateful.**

**This brings us to the debts of gratitude that we owe to a host of individuals and institutions that have contributed to the realization of this volume.**

**Production was a long, elaborate, complex, and expensive process which could never have succeeded without the devotion, cooperation, and generosity of whole communities of well-wishers who believed in its potential value. We are deeply grateful to all of them, and we regret that we cannot mention all of them by name. Let the ones we single out here be regarded as representatives of all those who contributed in one way or another. Though formally acknowledged at appropriate points in the text, the sisters who contributed the texts in the volume take pride of place. As the project's directors, Florence Howe, Abena P.A. Busia, and Tuzyline Jita Allan initiated the Women Writing Africa project, fundraised for it, and created the theoretical framework that brought it into full flowering. Over and above that, Florence Howe and Tuzyline Jita Allan showered us with truly sisterly love, taking valuable time of their schedules to be and to work with us at every important stage of the undertaking.**

**PREFACE + XXV**

**We cannot overstate the importance of The Feminist Press for its adminis­tration of this project as well as its editing, designing, and production of the volumes. We are grateful to the invaluable work of particular staff and consult­ants: Jean Casella for her editorial work on the manuscript; Hadassah Gold for proofreading; Anjoli Roy for trafficking work; Andrea Swalec for indexing; Cary Webb for permissions and indexing; Lisa Force for design, typesetting, and production; Franklin Dennis for publicity; and Jeannette Petras for market­ing. The cumulative force of talent and passion at The Feminist Press helped to sustain us throughout this project.**

**The sponsors and fenders of the project, the Ford Foundation and especially the Rockefeller Foundation, deserve our profound thanks. We reiterate our appreciation of the hospitality of the staff of the Rockefeller Study and Confer­ence Center in Bellagio, Italy, among whom we must mention Gianna Celli. Most important, our colleagues on the national committees did the initial work of identifying, collecting, translating, and annotating the huge bulk of texts from which the selections published here were made. Their research was often also the basis for headnotes to the selections. Finally, we acknowledge the inspi­ration we received from our sisters in the Southern and Western African and Sahel regions, whose volumes appeared before ours.**

**For us, working on these texts has been a tremendously moving and satisfy­ing learning experience. We gained not only insight into the challenges, strug­gles, trials, and triumphs of our sisters over the centuries but also a deep respect for their courage, resilience, and human pride. If the readers of this volume can share some of these with us, our labors will have been richly rewarded.**

**Austin Bukenya**

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**INTRODUCTION**

**In the written history of Eastern Africa, produced mostly by men, we read about a great many male leaders. We learn of the clan headmen who led their people into the areas they occupy today: for example, the warlords, headed by Zwangendaba, who led the Ngoni from South Africa to Malawi and Tanzania. We encounter the great male empire builders of the nineteenth century: the Mirambos and the Tippu Tips of Tanzania, the Mutesas of Uganda and the Kalonga of Malawi (Maravi). We are reminded** *of* **the heroic fighters who resis­ted colonialism: Abushiri, Mukwawa, Meli, and Kinjikitile in Tanzania; Mwanga and Kabarega in Uganda; Waiyaki wa Hinga and Mbaruk bin Rashid in Kenya; Maluma and John Chilembwe in Malawi.**

**In contrast, we rarely hear about the women resistance fighters who led the grassroots movements against the colonialists: Nehanda in Zimbabwe, Mekatilili wa Menza and Siotume in Kenya, and Muhumusa of the Nyabingi cult in Rwanda and Uganda. In fact, the movements led by such women were more successful and more abiding than the largely military and short-lived struggles waged by men. We know, for instance, that the Maji Maji uprising in Tanzania (1905-1907).against German rule would not have spread so quickly and with so much strength without the participation of women, who fed the men and cared for the children, the wounded, and the elderly while the men were working on German plantations or out fighting in the bush. Indeed, Mko­manire, a Ngoni woman who was influential in the Maji Maji war, was greatly feared by the Germans. Mobilizing the Ngoni people to participate in that war, she was instrumental in extending its duration to 1907, and she was hanged by the Germans along with the male Maji Maji leaders (Bates 1957: 11).**

**On the other hand, the oral traditions, the myths, and legends told by women themselves often place women where they belong: at the center of the historical** *and* **legendary origins of** *their* **civilizations, and at the heart** *of* **their peoples' struggles. It is impossible to conceive of Baganda origins without men­tioning Nambi, the mythical founding mother and partner of Kintu, the found­ing father. The Gikuyu of Kenya find their origins in Mumbi "Cre­ator" or "Molder"); from whom come the nine Gikuyu matrilineal clans (Kenyatta 1938). In the language of the Maasai people, the words for all the most important things in life are female.**

**This anthology attempts to correct distortions characteristic of Eastern African historiography and anthologizing. More than corrective, however, the anthology also celebrates women's achievements, voices, and concerns. Our focus is on women's work and thought, through which women may be seen not as passive or barely visible entities, but as articulate and talented producers of art and knowledge, and as heroic makers of history.**

**Not surprisingly, the project must be viewed as complexly heterogeneous, containing as it does a myriad of women's voices spanning historical time,**

**INTRODUCTION + I**

**geographical space, and a variety of literary genres, and drawn from 29 different languages, all from five countries. The heterogeneity of the anthology; in fact, contributes greatly to its wealth and its uniqueness. Chronologically, the texts tra­verse more than three centuries. Geographically, they have been harvested from an area covering nearly 9 percent of the continent, with a population of almost 114 million. The ideas, views, and creative techniques of eighteenth-century Swahili women are bound to be different from those of early-twentieth-century Malawi women or late-twentieth-century Ugandan women. The traditional Muslim advice offered by Mwana Kupona binti Msham (1858), urging her daughter to observe Islamic etiquette and not to associate with slaves, contrasts powerfully with the slave narratives of Bwanikwa (1895) and Mama Meli (1950s), as well as with the resolute feminism of Miria Matembe of Uganda (2002) and Wangari Maathai of Kenya (2004). Yet all these texts represent some aspect of the evolution of women's consciousness—we would argue, feminist consciousness—in Eastern Africa.**

**These multicultural and multilingual texts are also distinguished by their modes of expression and delivery. From the coast, we have written texts dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and employing the literary resources and genres already well-established in Swahili culture by that time. Both Sultan Fatima (1711) and Mwana Kupona (1858) are working within a tradition that evolved partly from the oral tradition, but in time established itself as a written Islamic tradition. On the other hand, we also have many texts that are purely oral and have been passed on, probably for centuries, by word of mouth. Often, however, we find links among these apparently distinct forms. Twentieth-century writers, speakers, and singers, in the various African -lan­guages and in English, draw on both oral traditions and classical Swahili tradi­tions, even while they address more current issues. Thus, the power of speeches by Malawi's Chauwa Banda (1936) and Tanzania's Bibi Titi Mohamed (1965) derives from oral diction. Pelagia Aloyse Katunzi of Tanzania, though writing in the year 2000, employs Swahili poetics of the nineteenth century, as do such taarab singers as Siti binti Saad (1920s).**

**While different modes of expression and delivery dictate the nature and techniques of composition, most of the texts in this collection are united by their concern for the welfare of women. This feminist strand—sometimes appearing in a subtle, 'tactful., or subversive manner, sometimes more open, forceful, and unapologetically militant—unites the authors and texts in this vol­ume. The writers and speakers address most of the important issues relating to the condition of women in Eastern Africa and in the world generally. Promi­nent among these is the question of gender relations within the home and within the community, culture, and nation. The subject of Mwana Kupona binti Msham's "A Mother's Advice and Prayer" (1858) is essentially marital gender relations in a nineteenth-century 'Islamic society: how a woman can survive, have her way, and even control her husband, while appearing to be subservient to him. The same issues come up again almost seventy years later in Zeina binti**

**2 + INTRODUCTION**

II

Mwinyipembe Sekinyaga's "Civilized Motherhood" (1926), in which equality in marriage is more candidly demanded. Many years later, Monde Sifuniso's clever story "Beijing, Beijing" (1997) deals with domestic gender relations in a contemporary and explicitly feminist context.

**INTRODUCTION + 3**

Women are also concerned about how girl-children may be educated to it into—or resist—their societies, and to succeed in life. Many of the volume's folktales, such as "When Ogres Lived" (1936) as well as songs such as "Birds Will Mourn Her" (1956), are cautionary, intended to guide° girl-children to escape the dangers lurking in their way. At the same time, many personal testi­monies, such as "I Want School, Not Marriage" (2001), along with numerous political speeches and statements, attest to the importance women have placed on more formal education for girl-children.

Beyond the conventional "women's issues" of home and, family, many of the authors in this volume argue for the economic empowerment of women. They deplore, the exploitation of women by men in the homestead ("Fighting for a Widow's Rights," 1947) and in the workplace ("Elizabeth," 1966, and "A Bar-Maid's Life," 1980), as well as by colonial settlers ("Song of the Coffee Girls," 1922). They also offer success stories from women who became economically independent by organizing projects with and for other women ("A Courageous Woman," 2000).

The women in this volume address large social, national, and international issues, including religion, race and racism, national identity, slavery, colonialism and the anticolonial struggles, nation-building after independence, pan­Africanism; HIV/AIDS, the environment, and globalization. They view these issues through prisms of time and place, of culture and race, offering a rich array of perspectives. The traditional religious perspective found in Ester Nakate's "Nakayima and the Wonder Tree" (1995) and many of the oral texts stand in contrast to the Islamic perspective of Mwana Kupona and others, and also to the Christian devotion found in Martha Thabi's "My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?" (1890) and in the works of various missionaries and missionary converts. At times, the conflict between the various perspectives serves as the subject of a piece, as in "Letter Opposing Female Circumcision" (1931), which questions, from a Christian point of view, a well-established traditional custom among the Gikurl'of Kenya.

These conflicting and contradictory perspectives live side-by-side in the vol­ume, complementing and enriching one another, just as they do in the life of the region.

The Eastern African coast was, from ancient times, a melting pot for people of many cultures and races, who arrived on the coast from the Middle East, the Far East, Europe, and the African hinterland. Some of these peoples came as visitors, others as conquerors. The inevitable result was an intermingling of cul­tures; languages, and races, and also the emergence of a racial divide and often outright racism.

Some of the earliest texts in the volume, including "A Royal Childhood in

III

Zanzibar" (1886), view the enslavement of black Africans from the perspective of the Arab ruling class of the time, while Bwanikwa's "Ten Times a Slave" (1895) tells the other side of the story. The racial dynamics arising from modern European colonialism—which in Eastern Africa involved the British and Ger­mans are captured in many of the texts, including several by British mission­aries like Jane Elizabeth Chadwick and Eva Chadwick (1920, 1935) and settler women like Nellie Grant (1939-1963). African women, along with men, resis­ted colonialism in various ways. This resistance is captured in Hannah Tsuma's account of Mekatilili (2000), the coastal Kenyan woman who led the Giriama resistance against the British for several years. The anticolonial resistance waged in Tanzania, Uganda, and Malawi yielded no similar written texts, though we know that women did participate fully and heroically in those, struggles, as well.

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•Early resistance efforts would evolve into struggles for African identity and political rights, which in turn would merge into the main nationalist move­ments—the battles for independence. After independence, the major political theme was nation-building, and women such as Bibi Titi Mohamed (1965) and Babro Johannsen (1964, 1965) in Tanzania, Sarah Nyendohwa Ntiro (1999) in Uganda, and Rose Chibambo (1964) in Malawi made contributions—both in and outside of Parliament. The vision of these women moved toward pan-African liberation and unity. Thus Bibi Titi Mohamed was concerned not only about Tanzanian but also about South Africa, then under apartheid, and about Vietnam, then the site of a,U.S. war of imperialism.

In the last three decades, Eastern African women have written, spoken, and sung about the scourge of HIV/AIDS, which has devastated their families and communities; this volume includes speeches, stories, poems, and orature on the effects of the pandemic. Globalization and environmental destruction have also demanded attention from such concerned women thinkers and leaders as Wan­gari Maathai, who links environmental issues to struggles for good governance, democracy, social justice, and human rights, and insists that they disproportion­ately burden Africa's women.

This Introduction is ,organized into three roughly chronological sections. The first' section focuses on the pre-colonial period, and addresses issues of women's creativity, both oral and written, in the contexts of education, religion, and slavery. The second section considers the colonial 'period, from the time of early occupation and resistance, to the period of foreign consolidation in the thirties and forties, and then to the nationalist awakening that led to independ­ence. Included in this section are developments in the production of orature and written literature, including the rise of book publishing and the media. The final section treats the post-independence period, its dominant themes and pre­occupations: nation-building, cultural struggles and the search for identity, civil wars and other conflicts, parliamentary struggles, and pan-Africanism. The sec­tion ends by focusing on globalization, governance, and the environment, and the future of women in the twenty-first century

**4 + INTRODUCTION**

**THE PRECOLONIAL PERIOD**



***Women Teaching Women: The Power of the Living Word***

With the coming of independence in the 1960s, most African governments declared, as one of their main objectives, the elimination of "ignorance" from among their peoples. By this, they meant teaching their people to read and write, which in turn meant establishing schools of the Western type. Written literacy was in itself a highly worthy goal. By posing their objective in this way, however, the new African governments echoed their formei colonial rulers in dismissing the oral literacy that had long existed in Africa, and was practiced with particular richness, variety, and sophistication by the continent's women.

Through the centuries, beginning long before the advent of missionaries and colonialism, women in Eastern Africa created, adapted, and transmitted oral literature. In large part, this literature was a tool for learning, remember­ing, and passing on a large body of community wisdom. Such wisdom, passed down through generations, has helped women meet the challenges threatening their communities and resist onslaughts from outsiders. Even under that most invasive of all attacks, slavery, they held their ground and persevered until free­dom came. It has also helped them resist, subvert, or endure oppression within their communities, although at times the patriarchal social order forced theme to incorporate practices that maintained the subjughtion of other women (Chierii and Spencer 1993: 161; Phiri 2000a: 40). The fact that knowledge was passed on orally did not mean that it lacked depth or complexity. Within the clan or village, there were those who specialized in specific areas of what is now referred to as "indigenous knowledge." Knowledge about methods of farming, hunting, and preserving food; of producing cloth, leather, and iron tools; of preparing medicines, treating various diseases, and helping women through childbirth—all were transmitted through practice and observation, within an apprenticeship system (Shorter 1974: 78), and many were reflected in orature. Thus there emerged families within each clan that, through gener­ations, trained other family members in specific skills and crafts, so that the community never lacked artisans and craftspeople of various kinds. In precolo­nial times, most education in Eastern Africa was home- or work-based, and depended on the resources that the family could muster.' It related directly to the daily activities of the young people, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to deal with their environment. Women were not solely responsible for education; they were assisted, in a seamless process, by others in the com­munity—fathers, uncles, brothers, and elders. Each occupied a unique niche, preparing children for different facets of adulthood. Knowledge was imparted on a daily basis, as children confronted new situations. They learned both informally through observation and doing, but also formally through instruc­tion, ritual, and stories (Shorter 1974: 77). Nonetheless, the gender-based divisions of labor placed women as central especially to the education of female children.

**INTRODUCTION + *5***

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**In "When We Say" (2001) women's singing uses proverbs to teach children basic rules of proper and ethical behavior:**

**6 + INTRODUCTION**

**When we say**

**A person who heeds not**

**Goes with feces into her mother-in-law's hut, We mean**

**You need to hear others and they need to hear you.**

**When we say**

**Being near the anthill Made the fox turn brown, We mean**

**You reap what you sow.**

**These "socialization" processes—which like all such processes hold survival as their ultimate goal—have sometimes been romanticized. Nonetheless, it is a fact that there are still self-sustaining communities in Africa that have never seen a formal classroom, and yet their members have been "trained" to deal ade­quately with their environment (Shorter 1974: 75). Because much social inter­action took place within ethnic groups, education was naturally conducted in the language or dialect of the group. Bilingualism was common where different ethnic groups shared borders, and among certain groups such as women who were traders.**

**In this context, orality was of overwhelming importance, and those who became deeply versed in a language became composers of the community's songs, dirges, poems, and jokes. Even as they address practical matters, women's oral works are important social and cultural documents. Lessons in ethnic or family history were conducted through story- and myth-telling. From them, a young girl learned the traditions and taboos of her society; as a mother, she passed these on to her children; and as an elder, she continued to instruct younger women, and became a source for the history of her people. At the same time, these oral works express individual and collective feeling, finding much of their inspiration in the joys and sorrows of a woman's life. Through song, poetry, and dance, women express jubilation, desire, and tenderness, and give vent to anger and anguish through defiant satires and mournful laments.**

**The creative aspect ofwomen's orature is largely inseparable from its instruc­tional function, but no less rich for that fact. Women have created songs, say­ings, stories, and legends, which they have shared with other women and passed down to future generations. These oral works are also dynamic, changing sig­nificantly in form and content over time in an ongoing creative process.**

**arature is *performed* rather than simply *spoken,* the message contained in the music, the tone, the gestures, and the actions as well as in the words. Women sing lullabies while cuddling and soothing babies, and they sing work songs**

while pounding grain. Reducing such creations to paper obviously flattens them somewhat. Yet even as written text, women's orature reveals power, beauty, and intelligence as well as useful advice and information.

**INTRODUCTION + 7**

A great deal of women's orature, including several of the pieces collected in this book, concerned initiation—in Kiswahili, *unyago.* Initiations provided an opportunity for children to learn about the tasks and challenges they would face in the future, when they became responsible for their communities, and ensured culture's passage from one generation to another. The educational rituals that made up the initiation depended entirely on oral, visual, and theatrical modes.

The initiation ceremony is generally a major event for a young girl, involving seclusion, instruction, singing, dancing, and pampering. For instance, the Taveta in Kenya undertake an elaborate process of beautifying the girl initiate, bedecking her in ornate bead jewelry and a decorated goatskin wrapper. The Maasai initiate in Tanzania and Kenya is secluded and regaled with meat and other rich foods (Makumbusho ya Taifa 1998: 62). Among the Chagga of Tan­za.nia, parents go to great lengths to ensure that their daughter has all the nec­essary ornaments and decorations. She is also fed with the choicest food for up to six months following the initiation. The ceremony is preceded by all day dancing of the *kipora.*

This momentous event for a girl often includes not only pampering but also great physical pain, when it culminates in circumcision. Among the Chagga, for example, circumcision is carried out in the open, with the girl's betrothed, prospective in-laws, and other relatives in attendance (Marealle 2002: 23). Among the Chewa in Malawi, the initiation includes ritual sexual intercourse (Phiri 2000a: 35). Now a subject of mounting protest all over Eastern Africa from government authorities and women activists, female circumcision is still fiercely defended by some women elders and men. Activists' efforts have led some traditional circumcisers to declare that they will no longer perform the rites, but the practice continues clandestinely.

In those communities where it is practiced, circumcision has regrettably endowed initiation with a stigmatic stamp that threatens to obliterate any edu­cational value it may have. Initiation rituals were primarily intended to instill in the initiates a sense of their responsibilities and loyalties as full members of the community, and to give them a greater consciousness about their identity (Ben­dera 1996: 16; Shorter 1974: 77).2 Women had to be prepared for the chal­lenges that were certain to face them in their future, both painful and pleasura­ble, and one of these was giving pleasure to their future husbands. Hence, female genital mutilation (FGM), if included as essential to the initiation of young girls, may be viewed as a lesson in submission to male will (Bendera 1996: 18; Phiri 2000a: 40). (Even here, however, women may resist the subjuga­tion, for instance, by abstaining from the marital bed [Moyo 2005],3 or return­ing home to parents.)

Some have argued that, in the absence of sex education in most school cur­ricula in the region, initiation practices fill a dearth that has become especially

**dangerous as HIV/AIDS stalks the continent. The challenge at present is how to integrate the positive aspects of initiation ceremonies into modern training, and to separate the ritual of circumcision from the social and economic educa­tion that provides cultural continuity and arms the initiate with some vital sur­vival skills. A primary function of initiation rituals has been to prepare the girl for "service" to her husband. The communal song from the Iraqw of Tanzania, "Gidmay: Farewell to a Bride" (1950s), outlines the kinds of wisdom and stam­ina required of a woman if she is to survive and sustain herself in marriage. The bride is made aware of male dominance and the possible physical and psycho­logical assaults, literal and symbolic, that are likely to come her way:**

**S + INTRODUCTION**

**. . . you will face those sticks long stored on the roof,**

**The sticks full of dust; you'll think they are for herding calves, But alas! They are for teaching you a lesson!**

**At the same time, however, "Gidmay" satirizes the patriarchal marriage system with a series of insults leveled against the groom.**

**Why did you accept him, this one with heels as rough as roof tiles? This one with rough heels, like those of salt lake warthogs.**

**He is inclined to live on stale local beer, To live on stale beer made from scum.**

**Women's orature from Eastern Africa includes a wealth of songs meant to protest against and sanction wayward men who are not responsible husbands. In "Songs Complaining about Husbands and Lovers" (1996-2001), women from various ethnic groups sing to shame men who are impotent and yet pre­sume they can still woo a woman; men who are greedy and gobble up all the food in the house; and men who,migrate and forget those they leave behind. In one song from the Rumphi District of Malawi, women chastise a man who has gone to work in South Africa and forgotten his wife and mother at home.**

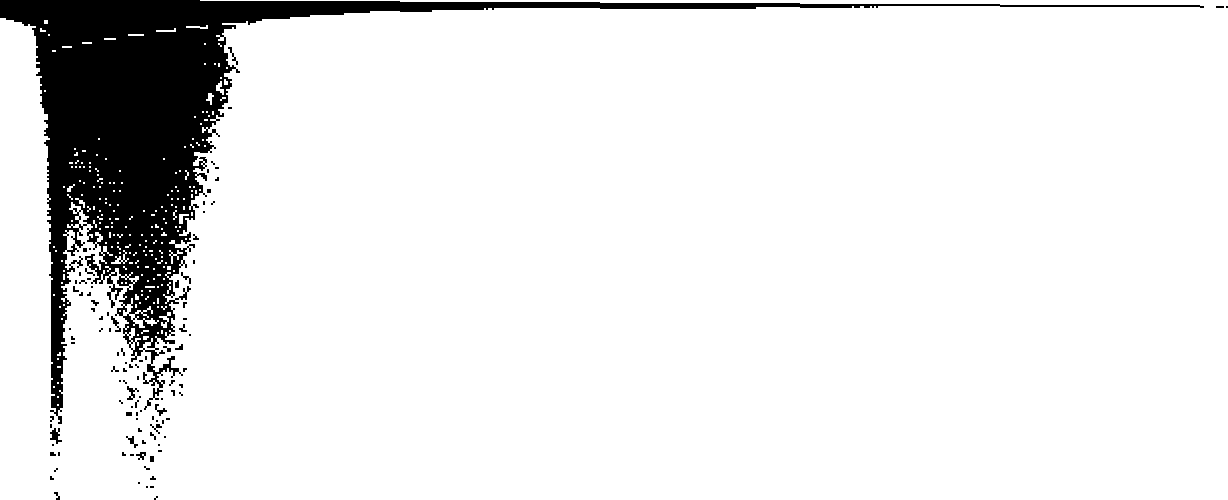
**You who go. to Johannesburg, Please please tell him,**

**I am naked and so is his mother.**

**The Borana women of northern Kenya, who generally occupy a subservient position in their society, have license to sing about male failings during tradi­tional naming ceremonies, as they do in "Alison Is an Insult" (2001).**

**The market is tomorrow; he sells his cattle;**

**He receives the money; he asks for the beer hall. One liter of alcohol is one sip for you.**

**The price of one bull is one day's expense for you.**

A

**In the first of the *"Vimbuza* Songs" from northern Malawi (1997), women go so far as to rejoice that a promiscuous man has earned his just desserts by being infected with syphilis and rendered sterile by the disease.**

**Songs protesting or satirizing women's predicament in an unequal society concern not only men and marriage, but a broad range of subjects. Even lullaby texts can contain defiant messages, as in this Kiswahili lullaby from Tanzania (2002):**

**When my mother brought me into the world, she called me** *Kukuwa.* **All the Prophet's people recognize me as such.**

**He who is not my creator cannot uricreate me**

**Another lullaby from the same group transmits its subversive message through metaphor.**

**A snake lies on the path, let's crush its head**

**To let by hewers of wood, and fetchers of water.**

**And in another, the singer adopts the point of view of the baby, who, as a grown woman, would rather share her secrets and her valued possessions with her mother than with her husband.**

**That canoe approaching, no doubt has something for me. It has beads for me to string, the size of my neck.**

**I will not string them, not give them to my mate.**

**I will give them to my mother, who shares my secrets.**

**Many ,oral works describe—and accompany—work performed by women. One early-twentieth-century text by a settler woman, E. May Crawford's "Face to Face with Wangu wa Maker?' (1913), describes in detail some of the activi­ties of Gikuyu women and girls in a typical day, and the process through which they learn to do** such **work. She notes that at a very young age, girls learned to look after their siblings, collect firewood, and fetch water from the river. To these burdens would later be added many others, including day-long digging and weeding, cooking, basket-weaving, and the ubiquitous pounding of grain—an activity that inspired an especially large number of songs. This volume's col­lection of "Pounding Songs" (2001) captures the rhythm of this communal work. Once again, they also include expressions of social protest—in this case referring to the unequal distribution of labor between the sexes. One of the songs, for example, mocks the man who does nothing but consume what is pro­duced by others.**

**INTRODUCTION + 9**

I am pounding for Mr. John.

14

14

**10 INTRODUCTION**

He is lying there in idleness, Mr. John, With his big stomach, Mr. John,

Like a toad, Mr. John.

Look at the chunks he takes off, Mr. John. Look at the way he swallows, Mr. John.

Women's work has long included caring for the health of others within the community. Ways of healing were passed on through the family structure, and women became "specialists" in midwifery, in bone setting, and in treating other maladies. In "Hush, My Child, Hush" (1983), there are numerous references to the traditional herbs, beverages, and cleansing practices that eased the tribula­tions of a difficult pregnancy. Although written in the 1980s, the poem pays tribute, in form and content, to women's traditional knowledge.

These customs of old Were full of wisdom,

Replete with value.

Give them deep thought.

Taken together, in the orature and other traditional texts in this volume women present the collective wisdom of their societies to other women. While advising them to conform in ways necessary to their survival, many of the texts also offer examples of women's resistance, through explicit protest, through subversion and satire, or simply through a sense of solidarity with other women. It was very rare for women to overturn the social order entirely. But in one text, a retelling of the Gikuyu folktale "The Story of Wacu" (2004), a young woman who "lived the life of a humiliated wife" bteaks the taboo of women not eating meat in public, after she receives a providential gift of sausage dropped by an eagle. "This reminds us," the tale declares, "that our God loves even those who are held in contempt by others.'

Patti Duncan wisely comments that women's oral creativity above all reflects "creative responses to oppressive situations" (2004: 160). What is especially inspiring is the fact that women often respond in ways that are vital, joyful, and uplifting.

***The Sacredness of Mother Earth: African Traditional Religion***

From time immemorial, African women were perceived in terms of their pro­creative power, often described using the metaphor of garden or soil.' In African Traditional Religion,6 women were perceived as both unofficial care­takers of the land, the iconic symbol of African existence, and as guardians of the spirits.

The Gikuyu of Kenya provide a representative explanation for such

conceptions: "The Gikuyu consider the earth as the 'mother' of the tribe, for the reason that the mother bears her burden for . . . nine moons while the child is in her womb, and then a . . . time of suckling" (Kenyatta. 1938: 13). The soil then takes over, feeding this child for a lifetime, and after death the soil continues nursing the Living Dead for eternity. Most African ethnic groups still bury the umbilical cord in the soil after it falls from a newborn's navel. This practice has deep religious connotations for them. It connects them not only with the land as a nurturing mother, but to their ancestors who are nurtured by the same soil (Mpassou 1998). Among the Bahaya in Tanzania, the link between woman and land was captured by the Goddess Nyakalembe, who detiermined when' and how the tilling of the land shouldtake place (Mulokozi 2002: 570).

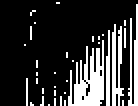
**INTRODUCTION + 11**

Women's relationship with the land was linked also to the perception that women were custodians of the well-being of the community. They were respon­sible for both "reproduction and production, ensuring that there was adequate food for the family and extra for the various functions on which the status of the homestead depended" (Kenyatta 1938: 37-38). Men assisted in clearing land, but left women to plant; weed, harvest, and oversee the disposal of all food crops. "To cope, women evolved the *ngwato* system under which members' farms were worked in rotation. An *ngwato* was comprised of women married to men of the same lineage" (cf. Kenyatta 1938: -35). The *ngwato* would also serve as a safe space in which women might share their stories of powerlessness as land custodians, not owners. Ironically, women could not own the land, in spite of the fact that they were its main caretakers. Nevertheless, whatever the patri­archal realities, the religio-cultural connection of land with motherhood alludes to the inherent power of women in this'.region.

Ontologically, women have been regarded as more important in African Tradi­tional Religion than in Islam or Christianity. In many African societies, women are viewed as the source of life and the spirits of love and fertility. Childlessness, in this scheme of things, is a disgrace. In some cultures, women have served as high priests and mediums, on a par with men. They have likewise been deeply involved,in healing rituals, and they were usually the best traditional doctors and midwives.

Among the Bahaya of Tanzania, for example, the goddess Muhaya deter­mines matters of love and marriage, while the Gikuyu consider Mumbi the mother of their people. In the Maasai oral tradition, the founder of the Maasai nation was a woman called Maa-Sinta, who was married to Leeyo. God ordered Maa-Sinta to bear children and fill the world with Maa people. In response to God's bidding, Maa-Sinta bore seven boys, who became the founders of the seven Maasai clans. Not surprisingly, the Maasai believe that women are closer to God than men; hence they have usually been in charge of important religious prayers and rituals (Makumbusho n.d.: 122). In the Maa language, all words for things of fundamental importance to Maasai existence are feminine in gender. These include such concepts as *e-nkai* (God), *enkop*

**(earth), *e-nkare* (water), *e-nkiteng* (cow/bull), *e'nkerai* (child), and *e'ndaa* (food) (Makumbusho n.d.: 32).**



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**Unfortunately, however, this ostensibly high status was often marred by other considerations and practices that disadvantaged women. Maleness remained the gauge of status even in traditional priesthoods, so that in some cases a woman priest or medium was, in ordinary life, symbolically regarded as a man, and was usually addressed as such. Paradoxically, both male and female priests in the Great Lakes region (Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and portions of Congo-Kinshasa, Kenya, and Tanzania) were also, during rituals or seances, symbolically considered to be women in relation to the spirits they represented. Thus, when carrying out religious rituals they were not allowed to wear male attire.**

**Despite the religio-cultural belief in the continuity of life after death, disease and death were not usually considered natural. The general view was that one dies because of some evil *eye* or witchcraft unleashed by one's enemies. Hence, during an extended illness or misfortune, or after a death, the witch had to be sought and punished. This belief, which still persists, has caused much suffering to innocent people, particularly old women, who were often the butt of such accusations.**

**Death, dying, and the accompanying burial and funeral rites were usually gendered. While both men and women became spirits after death, male spirits were usually viewed as more powerful and permanent than female spirits, at least in patrilineal** societies, **where men were the ancestors of the clan or line­age, and thus receive offerings from-their offspring. In many societies, women's funerals were shorter and less elaborate than men's,. reflecting the difference in status (Marealle 2002: 63-66). Only in special cases did female spirits acquire a similar status, thereby turning into deities, as in the case of the legendary Makewana ("mother of the children") of the Chewa in central Malawi and of Nakayima,'the Baganda priestess immortalized. in "Nakayima and the Wonder Tree" (1995).**

**Ultimately, women's status under African Traditional Religion depended on fertility. Even in death and in conceptions of the afterlife, a woman without children had no status; in some societies, such women were not buried in the common graveyard. Moreover, various communities carried out burial rituals to ensure that barren women's spirits would vanish completely from their commu­nities because they would have left behind no descendants to sustain their names. In "Birds Will Mourn Her" (1956) the Sukuma women of Tanzania lament the loneliness of a childless woman who, when she dies, will have no child to grieve for her. For her, there will be no immortality.**

**Other manifestations of the culture, such as art and literature, were also influenced by beliefs and practices. For instance, sculptures and masks served as religious and ritual items (cf. Mulokozi 2001; Ott 2000). Religious beliefs and myths inspired numerous songs, stories, and epics, depicting the. worlds of humans and spirits, and the concerns of humans in this life and the next one. In**

**12 + INTRODUCTION**

many of these, female symbolism and images predominate—for instance, in the Mwanahiti sculptures made by the Wazaiamo and other related peoples ein Tanzania. The Mwanahiti sculptures served as ritual objects during women's initiations, and as symbolic spirits at women's grave sites (Jahns 1994). Objects of material culture, such as housing, dress, food, and tools, also had a religious and ideological dimension. In many cases these objects symbolized women's procreative power. Traditional homes, for example, were most Often round in shape, mimicking the shape of women's breasts and pregnant bellies and thus serving as symbols of fertility. These and many other expressions in traditiorial life point to that all-pervading connection between women as procreators and the land as life-giver and sustainer.

**INTRODUCTION + 13**

The nonindigenous religions that began filtering into Eastern Africa around 800 C.E. were already becoming well-entrenched in some parts by the 1850s, thanks to the tolerant attitude of African traditional religions on the one hand and the might of the sword on the other. In addition to suppressing. existing religious beliefs, these religions also introduced new practices and taboos. Nev­ertheless, in spite of the spread of Islam and Christianity, indigenous African beliefs, taboos, and customs still persist, though often stripped of their tradi­tional religious meaning.

African traditional religions were organically intertwined with the origins, culture, and social structures and aspirations of the entire society. Religion was so central to the being of the African people that it even influenced their basic worldview. For Eastern African women religion was not Marx's opium of the people; it was the source of supernatural empowerment, which exalted them beyond their presumed powerlessness within patriarchal structures toward posi­tions of "divine" and even social authority. It situated women in a place that was beyond the reproach of worldly authority, where they might seek to alter the otherwise unalterable, and seek more just and inclusive communities (Moyo 2004). Since these communities comprised African peoples whose religious beliefs permeated all realms of life (Mbiti 1979), whatever these women denounced or upheld was taken as divine commandment—the voice of the spirit, speaking through the body of women (Berger 1976). To resist them, therefore, would be to resist the will of God.

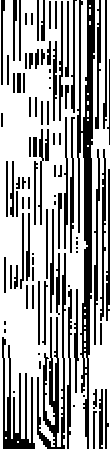
In the *Vimbuza* Protest Songs" (1997), for example, spirit-possessed Turn­buka women from Northern Malawi were (and still are) empowered to denounce their experiences of oppression within the patrilineal family system. *Vimbuza* spirit possession cults are said to date from the time of the migration of the Ngoni to Malawi, in the 1840s. Through spirit possession, women could express their innermost thoughts against male misbehavior without fear of reprisals. One recent *Vimbuza* protest song, "Mr. Nyirongo I," illustrates how women have used this medium. This song publicly chastises a husband who has contracted and transmitted syphilis from his extramarital sexual adventures. Such a denunciation of unfaithfulness among husbands would not be accepted m normal circumstances. The double-standard that allows men to stray while

**demanding unwavering obedience from women would also expect women to be more understanding and more forgiving of men's intransigencies. Furthermore, the sterility that, according to the song, resulted from untreated syphilis would be a terrible blow to an African man. Masculinity is conceived mainly in terms of sexual virility, without which a man would be viewed as being "as good as a woman." Men's sexual potency is so central to their identity that a public decla­ration of its absence deprives a man of the very basis of his patriarchal powers. Women could speak out in such an "outrageous" manner only because of the "divine authority" they wielded when possessed by the spirits of the *vimbuza.***

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***Ten Times a Slave: Women and Slavery in Eastern Africa***

**This volume's texts on slavery clearly indicate that African slavery, whether tra­ditional CIP commercial, was neither humane nor identical everywhere. Its form and practice differed from place to place. For instance, there are indications that the enslavement was sometimes a temporary state, and sometimes hard to define. Slaves could sometimes own slaves in their own right. In Swahili and many other Eastern African societies, a woman slave who married her master or married into his family often became a free woman upon producing a child, and the children born of slave women *(vizalia* in Kiswahili) automatically became free persons. Emily Ruete's "A Royal Childhood in Zanzibar" (1886), for example, describes many children of the sultan born to slave mothers. Fur­thermore, slavery was not confined to a particular social category of women, but affected all classes. Even a royal or ruling-class woman could overnight be turned into a slave. Mama Meli, who relates her story in "From Slavery to Free­dom" (1950s), belonged originally to a chief's family, but was captured in a raid and enslaved while still a child.**

**Prior to the nineteenth-century slave trade, and in the absence of economic demands for intensive, plantation-type slave labor,-most slaves in many Eastern African societies were women. Men, who were generally unskilled in household labors, could in fact pose a real danger to the masters. Thus male slaves were rare and temporary. Male war captives were soon either redeemed, after paying a ransom, or killed. In.some languages, such as Luhaya in northwestern Tanza­nia, the word for slave *(omuzana)* refers only to women. That a low premium was often placed on women is evident from the way Bwanikwa was taken into slavery. She was surrendered by her father as payment for a fine. Had she been a.boy, she would probably not have been so treated.**

**In traditional slavery—until about 1800, and in some places even later—one became a slave through birth, capture in war or raids, indebtedness, kidnapping, purchase, destitution, or through a legal or royal decision. Whatever the mode of enslavement, in most cases the end result, for women slaves, was the same: domestic slavery.**

**Two nineteenth-century texts, by Mwana Kupona and Emily Ruete (the name assumed by Princess Salina Said of Zanzibar after she married a German**

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merchant), portray domestic slavery among the Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania. Mwana Kupona, writing a lengthy poem to her daughter in 1858, is very con­scious of the divide between her family and the slaves. She advises her daughter not to associate too closely with slaves, lest they lead her astray. Emily Ruete, writing in 1886 about her childhood in Zanzibar's royal family several decades earlier, describes the relations between African slave women and their young Arab masters in the Zanzibar palace, and criticizes the enslaved nursemaids' "bad habit" of recounting what Ruete calls "dreadful and absurd stories"— obviously, African folktales—to their young charges. Yet the line between slaves and free persons appears to have been very slim. Ruete herself, with the sultan of Zanzibar as her father and a Circassian slave woman as her mother, would have been a slave had she been born in the American South at the time. That she was a. free princess was due to the fact that Eastern African domestic slav­ery allowed certain shifts in status for slaves and their children through mar­riage to free men. The text also offers us a glimpse of the mixed origins of the slave population, especially among the women. While Ruete's own mother was a Circassian (from the northern Caucusus); the other slave women in the palace included Ethiopians, Europeans, Asians, and local Africans.

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Another account of traditional semi-slavery is provided by Genda, a member of the semi-pastoral Iraqw people of Tanzania. While her text, "An Unusual Girlhood," dates from 1964, the autobiographical story she narrates took place many decades earlier, in the late 1880s. Kidnapped and sold while still a small child, Genda was later married off by her master into a family where she was treated every more harshly. Hers was a life of toil without respite, as she handled unaided all the domestic chores in the homestead, including milling the grain, cooking, cleaning, and tending to the livestock. Her working day began very early in the morning and ended very late at night. Eventually, she managed to run away and return to her people.

In "Ten Times a Slave" an autobiographical account first recorded by mis­sionaries in 1895, the young Bwanikwa is given away by her father and later her master, probably in the 1870s, as payment for customary debts. Thereafter she was sold and resold by her successive masters in exchange for Western items, including gunpowder and pieces of cloth, until she was finally bought by and married to the servant of a European traveler. Bwanikwa's treatment was an abuse of the traditional system of domestic slavery, and indeed represented a transition from traditional modes of enslavement to the commercial enslave­ment of Africans by Arabs and Westerners in the nineteenth century. The fact that fathers would give away their female (not male) children as slaves to pay for debts is evidence of the thin line that existed, for women, between freedom and slavery.

In "From Slavery to Freedom," recorded in the 1950s but set in the late nine­teenth century, Mama Meli tells a story similar to Bwanikwa's. Captured in a war raid while still a small girl, she became a slave in the household of one of the conquering warriors, and was later sold or married to a succession of

**Swahili slave traders. In Mama Meli's case, marriage to free men did not bring her emancipation, because her husbands were not averse to selling her to the highest bidder. She was finally rescued by Europeans and married to a Christ­ian convert, probably in the year 1900.**

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**In royal courts in centralized states such as Buganda, and along the Arab-dominated coast, domestic slavery existed side by side with institutional and plantation slavery. The former sometimes took the form of harem slavery, in which a king's or nobleman's concubines were kept in seclusion and virtual imprisonment for life. In Zanzibar such women, known as *masuria* if they were not proper wives according to Islamic law, lived under the watchful eye of stern eunuchs. Sultan Barghash of Zanzibar (1870-1888) had one wife and ninety-nine *masuria* at his Maruhubi palace. In Buganda, there was no limit to the number of wives and concubines a nobleman could have. *Kabaka* (King) Suuna (1832-1856) is reported to have had 148 wives and more than twenty thousand concubines and slave women (Nsobya 2000: 222). Both Mwana Kupona and Emily Ruete offer glimpses of domestic and harem slavery in coastal ruling houses.**

**A more entrenched form of institutional slavery affecting women had to do with religious beliefs and rituals. In some societies, certain individuals were dedicated to certain spirits, gods, or shrines for life. In Buganda, each shrine of a dead *kabaka* had several "wives" ministering to it for life. These were drawn from the clans of the former *kabaka's* wives. Such women—who exist to this day at many shrines•were not and are still not allowed to marry and have chil­dren.' This system was duplicated in most of the kingdoms in the Great Lakes region. There, too, women, including priestesses, were sometimes dedicated to certain spirit shrines for life; they had to remain virgins. The high social status seemingly enjoyed by such women cannot mask their bondage, though, for ide­ological reasons, such arrangements were not usually labeled as slavery. This kind of bondage is mirrored in the celibate, sometimes cloistered Christian reli­gious orders introduced.in the colonies by the mi§sionaries.**

**The nineteenth-century empire builders (Milambo, Tippu Tip, and even the *kabakas* of Buganda) intensified the institutionalization of slavery in the soci­eties affected by their campaigns and rule. Thus the Ngoni, who moved from South Africa during the Mfecane and arrived in this region in the 1840s, are said to have reduced to slaves. some of the conquered peoples in their path as they moved northward. Such slaves were expected to do all the farm work and hard labor while the•Ngoni men engaged in warfare. Women slaves among the Ngoni were also buried alive with the kings' bodies when the latter died. A sim­ilar practice was observed in some of the Great Lakes= kingdoms, such as Karagwe (Katoke 1975).**

**Between the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, commercial slavery in Eastern Africa acquired great importance and a more sinister charac­ter, fueled by a greater demand for slaves to work in the French-ruled islands of the Indian Ocean or in the United States, to which they were transported via**

the Cape to the south and the (then Belgian) Congo to the west. The inland areas around Lakes Nyasa and Tanganyika, the homelands of Bwanikwa and Mama Meli, and beyond into the Congo, became the ;major source of slaves, with bands of Swahili, Arabs, Yaos, Nyamwezi, and local warlords marauding the area looking for souls to enslave and sell, usually in exchange for Indian cloth and beads, guns and gunpowder (cf. Tippu Tip 1974; Sheriff 44). The inland trading depots of Tabora and Ujiji in Tanzania, Nkhotahota, and K2ronga in Malawi, and Kazembe in Zambia, thrived on the slave trade. The ports of Bagamoyo, Zanzibar, Kilwa, Mombasa, and Dar es Salaam became export points for slaves destined for the Indian Ocean islands, the Cape Verde islands off the West African coast, the Arabian peninsula; Asia, and the Amer­icas. Indeed the name "Bagamoyo" which derives from the Kiswahili *bwaga mop,* meaning 'flay down the heart," alludes to the town's role as the main embarkation point for slaves from the hinterland: here, in total despair, they embarked on boats for unknown lands, never to return.

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The texts: by Bwanikwa (1895) and Mama Meli (1950s) point toward the increasing commercialization of slavery in the nineteenth century. Bwanikwa's story, for example, illustrates the deadly interface between. traditional slavery and commercial slavery. Originally enslaved for customary reasons, Bwanikwa is ultimately sold to coastal slave traders, and would conceivably have been transported to the coast had it not been for European intervention. A compar­ison between. these texts and the nineteenth-century slave narratives of African Americans reveals some interesting parallels. African slave narratives usually begin with the subject's enslavement, through capture or purchase, proceed to describe hardships in captivity, followed by repeated attempts to escape, and culminate in escape or liberation through the assistance of white abolitionists or missionaries. The final escape is often followed by conversion to Christianity (cf. Equiano 1789 and Mbotela 1934). In some of the African American narra­tives, the tales begin with ardescription of the narrator's suffering and hardships under slavery, followed by repeated attempts at escape, and finally the escape, also often assisted by white abolitionists or Quakers.' These similarities may be explained partially by the fact that the narratives included in this volume were recorded in mission stations and come from women who had converted to Christianity and settled at the missions. Stories of the slave women who were not linked to European missions are far less likely to have been written down, and are yet to be discovered.

The perspective of the slaves themselves toward slavery, and hence their strategies for resistance and emancipation, were bound by the surrounding cir­cumstances. While slavery was abhorred by most of the enslaved, as evidenced by the many attempts to escape made by Genda, Bwanikwa, and Mama Meli, sometimes slaves were afraid to be freed, unsure about what lay "in freedom." This was not so much a result of their having been brainwashed or psychologi­cally traumatized as of practical considerations about their personal security and survival (Wright 1993). These same fears may have influenced their deci-

sions to remain attached to European mission stations once they had been emancipated, as did Mama Meli and Bwanikwa, and as did the Freretown freed slaves at Kisauni in Mombasa, Kenya (Mbotela 1934).

In domestic slavery, slave women had no opportunity to organize in groups that might have created effective resistance. Resistance in these cases was often subdued, in individual acts such as malingering at work or repudiation of sexual advances, and, once again, occurred mainly in songs and other forms of expres­sion, including the autobiographical storytelling found in this volume's texts. At best, the slaves could resist with their feet—by running away.

Colonialism for the most part ended traditional slavery; and the abolition of slavery, in Europe and its colonies and then in the United States, effectively closed the slave trade. At the same time, colonialism ushered in new forms of enslavement, conforming to the new economic demands of the colonizers. For women, these new forms of slavery, many still prevalent today, included serving as cheap labor in homes, plantations, and factories, along with prostitution and sex trafficking.

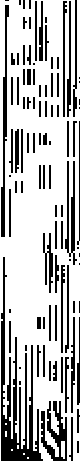
***Islam: Conversion and Conversation***

The earliest invaders of Eastern Africa, well before Christian missionaries and European colonizers, were Arab traders. The arrival of the Arabs preceded the migration to Eastern Africa of the Ngoni (Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia), Nyanja/Chewa (Malawi and Zambia), Tumbuka. (Malawi and Zambia), Acoli (Uganda), and other ethnic groups from other parts of the continent. Apart from mercantile goods such as guns and cloth, the Arabs brought with them a plethora of new cultural practices. They also brought one of the world's great religions, Islam.

Since religion has always been central to the lives of Africans—and espe­cially African women—Africans found themselves in what Jean and John Comaroff (1991) call the processes of conversion and conversation, during dif­ferent periods, with Muslim (Arab) traders, conquerors, and Christian (Euro­pean) missionaries and colonizers.

In its early centuries, the history of Islam in Africa was dynamic and turbu­lent, with various dynasties and reform movements clashing with and succeed­ing one another. Gaining power depended on securing trade routes into gold-producing areas in sub-Saharan Africa. Islamic rulers expanded north and west as well as south, dominating the Mediterranean world in the last quarter of the eleventh century, and placing much of the Maghreb under Ottoman rule between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. By the 1880s, Islam had taken root on one-third of the continent

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The Milslim! traders' acceptance of polygamy and certain other religio­cultural practices that prevailed in most Eastern African communities might have contributed to the positive response Islam received in this period, despite the fact that many of these traders were involved in the slave trade. Unlike the Christian missionaries of a later period, who, according to Etherington, wanted

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the Africans' souls, the Arabs had other interests (quoted in Camaroff 1991: 6). De Vere Allen suggests that, although the Arabs began visiting the Eastern African coast as early as the eighth century, proselytizing was not one of their priorities then (1993: 179). It is more likely that the earliest conversions were carried out by the Shirazis from Persia, and these would have been widespread by the twelfth century (De Vere Allen 1993: 183). Thus, Muslim women in the coastal communities would have begun to achieve written literacy at that time, using the Arabic script. (With the advent of Western colonialism, literacy in the Arabic script would be dismissed, and not included in calculating literacy rates.)



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Although the existence of powerful Muslim women in medieval times is well documented (Dunbar 2000: 409; Pouwels 1987: 28), the presence of a text from one of those, women is a rarity. In the 1711 text we have called "Peace and Secu­rity," Sultan Fatima binti Muhammad Mkubwa, the ruler of the city-state of Kilwa Island, writes to invite all peace-loving people (except Europeans) to come to Kilwa, "where God's peace prevails." **It** is not clear why Sultan Fatima dictates the whether because of her high status or because she is illiterate. What is clear is her power, along with her desire to bring her people home. In the letter, Sultan Fatima expresses her authority not only as a .ruler of her people but alsc; as a ruler of equal stature to the male ruler to whom she writes. She speaks of a peaceful sultanate unified with other sultanates under a Muslim reli­gious leader. But she cautions against the potential danger of dealing with the Portugese. She extends her invitation to all except the Portugese, whom she saw as enemies of both her state and her religion.

Another of the earliest texts in the volume, also written in Arabic script by a Muslim woman, addresses women directly. Ins"A Mother's Advice and Prayer" (1858), Mwana. Kupona binti Msham offers her daughter instruction on how a Muslim woman should behave in matters of the household and marriage. When MWana Kupona asks her daughter to listen to her with "pen and ink," we understand that the daughter is literate. Islamic education for bays and girls probably began before the tenth century.

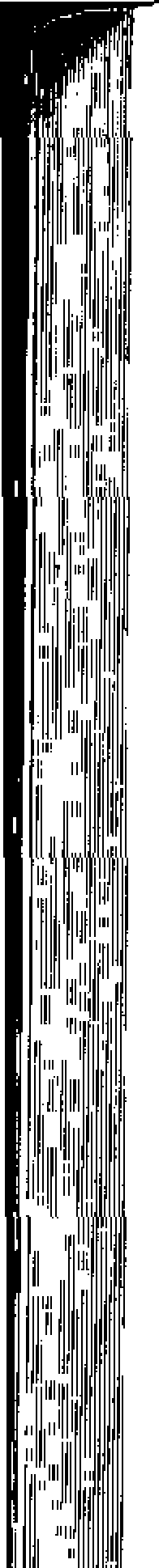
In her poem, her last will and testament to her daughter, Mwana Kupona finds strength and solace in her faith in God. She wants to offer her daughter detailed, practical advice, and at the same time she wants the girl to remain true to the dictates of Islam.

If you remember my advice, My child, you will never suffer. You will walk across this world

And, later, you will enter paradise.

Mwana Kupona instructs her daughter to be subservient, but at the same time aware of the power she does have. A husband is to be elevated to the high­est possible level, not only by the things his wife does for him, but by the way she cares for herself—maintaining her absolute cleanliness, bedecking herself

**with jewelry and henna, perfuming her body, and generally cultivating her sen­suality for the pleasure of the man. Mwana Kupona also presents social rela­tions as a reflection of a woman's respect and dignity. In giving advice to her daughter, she draws closely on Islamic teachings regarding how a woman should behave in a marital relationship. These teachings would have been imparted partly in the *madrassa,* the Qur'anic school, and partly within the household. It is interesting to note contrasts between Mwana Kupona, writing within the Islamic reality where she had always lived, and Emily Ruete, writing of her royal childhood in Zanzibar from the perspective of a convert to Chris­tianity and to Western ways. Ruete describes dispassionately the rote learning practiced in the madrassa, designed to teach children to recite the Qur'an in prayer, though not necessarily to understand it. But children also learned to read and write Arabic script, which, Mwana. Kupona, for one, used to remark­able effect.' While Mwana Kupona urges her daughter to heed the Muslim directive to make no distinction between religion and daily life, between the secular and the spiritual, Emily Ruete clearly rebels against what she has been taught, rejecting both her religious and social obligations and choosing to marry a foreigner and a Christian man.**



**Even limited education may have helped some Muslim women find a voice with which to express their own points of view, and to protest practices that were unjust. As early as 1926, a Muslim woman, Zeina binti Mwinyipembe Sekinyaga, penned such a protest, in the very public form of a letter to a Kiswahili newspaper in Tanzania. In "Civilized Motherhood," she outspokenly argues for gender equity and advocates the elimination of certain cultural prac­tices, such as bride price and polygamy. Whether monogamous or polygamous, the Islamic concept of marriage strongly opposes divorce, yet Zeina binti Mwinyipembe Sekinyaga goes so far as to allude to the possibility of divorce on grounds of the gender inequalities that she raises. If she was a Muslim, as her name would suggest, then her courage in presenting these arguments chal­lenges the generally held views regarding the position of women in African Islamic societies.**

**While the Swahili on the Eastern African coast had their differences with the Arab rulers, Qur'anic education itself, at least on the coast, did not meet with the kind of opposition that greeted Christianity and Western education in the interior." Several reasons may be posited for this contrast. First, Islamic education was offered only to those who were already converts to the religion. Secondly, the instruction provided was purely religious, without many incur­sions into worldly matters (although for devout Muslims the line between the two is hardly distinct). Finally, once they were outside the madrassa, African students could continue their usual religious practices without much sanction.**

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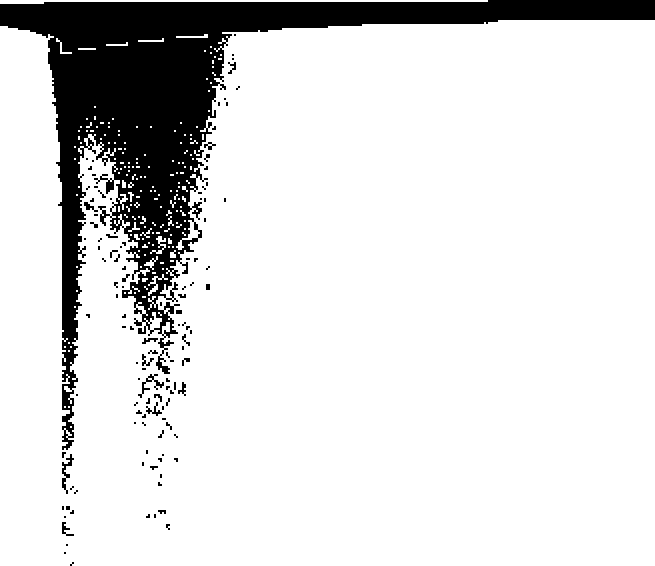
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**For women, "conversion" to Islam or to Christianity sometimes provided a measure of empowerment through education, as well as an escape from some aspects of traditional African patriarchal oppression, expressed, for example, in forced child-marriages, bride price, and FGM. The fact that they offered an**

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**alternative to such practices may have aided both Islam and Christianity in expanding their influence. In the process of this "liberation," however, women may have acquired different forms of oppression.**

**THE COLONIAL PERIOD**

***Colonialism: The Beginnings***

**The history of African women is in part a history of migration. African women have traversed many mountains, valleys, deserts, and rivers, sometimes with their men, sometimes alone, more in suffering than in pleasure. While most of the movements would have been within the continent, some, as during the time of slavery, hurled women into places and cultures that were alien and hostile." The history of Africa is also a history of migration to the continent from other lands. Thus African women encountered men and women who had come from the Middle East and then, more sweepingly, from Europe, bringing tremen­dous changes to African communities, identities, social relations, and develop­ment. Colonialism, like the international slave trade, was ideologically premised on the myth of European supremacy. The alleged cultural inferiority and irra­tionality of the Africans signaled their need to be "civilized" by their colonizers.**

**In the 1880s, the prevalent European view was that local societies were at worst less than human and at best devoid of knowledge, cultural institutions, and history. These ideas provided the moral justification for economic exploita­tion and cultural oppression, for plunder as well as race-based subjugation. The "civilizing" mission also propelled European missionary and settler women to work in the region as evangelists, educators, and health workers, as well as eco­nomic opportunists and partners of administrators. These migrations into Africa thus defined not only the relationships between indigenous women and migrant men but also between indigenous and migrant women. Under colo­nialism, the relationships between European migrant women who settled in Africa and African women were defined in terms of rulers and the ruled, colo­nizers and the colonized. African women's responses to colonialism ranged from accommodation to resistance, from adaptation to war.**

**Up to the early 1880s, European incursion into east Africa had been gradual, with attempts at economic penetration and the establishment of monopolies through trade, as well as the founding of missionary posts by various Christian sects. The Portuguese had followed the Arabs, Persians, and Chinese, who had been in contact with the peoples of east Africa before the advent of Christian­ity. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Portuguese competed with the French and the indigenous Yao (the latter acting as brokers) for the East African trade in ivory and slaves (Curtin et al. 1978). The conquest of Africa, which had begun in earnest with the rapid annexation of African lands by competing European nations, culminated in the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. In Eastern Africa, the British and the Germans managed to divide the territory between themselves.**

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***"Praised Be Jesus Christ": Christianity and Women***

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**For women in Eastern Africa, Christianity was an agent of great change. Chris­tianity first came to parts of the coast in the fifteenth century, although in the interior, most people continued to practice African traditional religions undis­turbed until the middle of the nineteenth century. At that time, Christian mis­sions to Africa increased, driven by both the antislavery crusade and the Euro­pean drive to colonize Africa."**

**In the coastal areas of Kenya and Tanzania, as well as some pockets of the hinterland, Christianity met its greatest challenge not only from African reli­gions but also from Islam, to which some Africans had already converted. We know through Sultan Fatima's letter that by 1711, Islam was the predominant foreign religion not only in her own realm but also in most of the coastal areas of Eastern Africa and along some inland trade routes. Christianity had also grown in these areas with the gradual European incursion, but some local rulers and their subjects preferred Islam over Christianity: At the end of the nine­teenth century, however, Christianity became the religion of colonialism, and provided a strong challenge to both Islam and African Traditional Religion. Commenting on how women in northwestern Tanzania embraced Christianity, Spear has noted:**

**Women were attracted to the mission from an early stage as it provided protection *(busirika)* to royal "slaves," girls escaping unwanted or unhappy marriages and women fleeing widowhood. Many subsequently entered an unofficial sisterhood *(Bashomesa)* whose members took annual vows and served as teachers, nurses, evangelists in the community. (1999:18)**

**For the women who embraced Christianity; the religion provided both a sense of new identity and an alienation from the old. Many women converts became fervent adherents of Christianity, profoundly taken with its symbols and images. Perhaps the greatest symbol of Christianity; the cross, spoke to women who knew about suffering and about making sacrifices for others. Martha Thabi, in a hymn written in Malawi in 1890, quotes the words Jesus is supposed to have said as he was dying on the cross, " My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?" These words indicate a recognition of one's dependence on God as one calls for His help in times of need, thus turning humility into strength.**

**Christianity destabilized the status quo, sometimes undermining the 'tradi­tional patriarchal powers of African men while bringing new,opportunities to some female converts. From the Christian missions came the teaching of a lov­ing God who brought hope for disadvantaged women reeling under slavery; early and arranged marriages, and other farms of oppression. The establish­ment of mission centers provided refuge for some disadvantaged girls and women. In "Praised Be Jesus Christ" (1963), a girl writes to her father from a Roman Catholic mission, refusing an arranged marriage. Usually, elders from two families negotiated marriage terms and even fixed a wedding date without**