

Review Article

African Intersectionalities and the Decolonisation of African Women's and Gender Studies: A Review

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Abstract: The emergence of African Women's and Gender Studies (AWGS) represents a radical discursive rupture within the global academy, functioning not merely as a sub-discipline but as a "combative ontology" that challenges the very foundations of Western social science. The review article critically examined the relationship between intersectionality and decolonisation within African Women's and Gender Studies (AWGS). Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship from African feminist theory, Black feminism, postcolonial studies, history, sociology, and political economy, the article argues that African women scholars have long theorized intersecting systems of power—colonialism, gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and nation—well before the formal articulation of intersectionality in Euro-American feminist theory. Through a critical synthesis of foundational and contemporary literature, the review traces genealogies of African feminist thought, interrogates the travels and translations of intersectionality as theory, and assesses its methodological and political utility in African contexts. The article further situates intersectionality within broader decolonial struggles over knowledge production, curriculum, language, and institutional power. It concludes by proposing an Africa-centred, historically grounded, and politically accountable intersectional praxis as essential to the future of AWGS. As AWGS navigates the complexities of the 21st century, the adoption of an Africa-centered intersectional approach provides the necessary heuristic to dismantle the "imperialism of categories" while speaking with authority to global debates. By grounding theory in the material and spiritual lived realities of the continent, AWGS reinvisions itself as a field that is at once intellectually rigorous, politically engaged, and globally influential. The "decolonial turn" in intersectionality ensures that the study of gender in Africa remains a vital instrument for liberation, pushing the boundaries of what it means to produce knowledge that is both local in its commitment and universal in its impact.

Keywords: African feminism, intersectionality, decolonization, African women's studies, knowledge production

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of African Women's and Gender Studies (AWGS) represents a radical discursive rupture within the global academy, functioning not merely as a sub-discipline but as a "combative ontology" that challenges the very foundations of Western social science. The intellectual project is fundamentally an act of epistemic rebellion against what Claude Ake famously decried as "social science as imperialism"—a paradigm in which African realities were historically relegated to the periphery of the "colonial library" and interpreted through Eurocentric lenses that rendered African women as "analytically deficient" or "tradition-bound" subjects. Consequently, the decolonization of AWGS necessitates a sophisticated mapping of how power operates across multiple scales, demanding an analytical framework that can navigate the structural legacies of colonialism alongside

the contemporary exigencies of neoliberalism and local patriarchies. In the context, intersectionality—as both a heuristic and a political imperative—finds a unique, albeit contested, resonance within the African continent. While its formal nomenclature is inextricably linked to Kimberlé Crenshaw's legal critique of the erasure of Black women within U.S. jurisprudence, the underlying logic of "interlocking oppressions" has a much longer genealogy within African feminist thought. However, as intersectionality functions as a "traveling theory" its migration into the African academy risks a form of "epistemic hijacking" if it is disconnected from the material and historical specificities of the postcolony. The challenge for the doctoral study is to navigate the tension between intersectionality's global utility and the risk of "theoretical ownership" and "political dilution". The necessitates a move toward "Africa-centered intersectionality"—a praxis that recognizes the "matrix of domination" while simultaneously honoring indigenous frameworks like Motherism, Womanism, and Nego-feminism which have long prefigured intersectional logic by centering the triad of race, class, and coloniality. Ultimately, the review positions African intersectionalities not as derivative adaptations of a Northern concept, but as critical sites of theoretical innovation that seek to dismantle the "imperialism of categories". By synthesizing the contributions of scholars like Sylvia Tamale and Toyin Falola, we argue that a truly decolonized AWGS must go beyond mere inclusion. It must interrogate the very "bio-logic" of gender introduced by the colonial project and re-center the "epistemic freedom" found in African indigenous knowledge's. The following analysis thus addresses three critical inquiries: the recovery of intellectual genealogies that parallel intersectional thought; the discursive and empirical reworking of intersectionality within contemporary African scholarship; and the institutional pathways required to translate these intersectional insights into a transformative decolonial praxis for African universities.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS

Methodologically, that inquiry is situated within the tradition of critical narrative synthesis, a robust qualitative approach that facilitates the cross-pollination of interdisciplinary discourses across African studies, feminist theory, historical sociology, and political philosophy. The review intentionally eschews a purely descriptive summary of existing literature in favor of an analytical interrogation of the power dynamics inherent in knowledge production. The corpus subjected to analysis comprises a curated selection of foundational monographs, peer-reviewed interventions, and seminal theoretical texts that delineate the shifting boundaries of African feminist praxis and decolonial inquiry. In strict adherence to the principles of epistemic justice and the imperative to decenter Northern-centric paradigms, the review prioritizes the intellectual contributions of African women scholars and Africa-focused study clusters, recognizing these as the primary sites of theoretical authority. Departing from the rigid, often reductive empiricism of bibliometric mapping, which privileges quantitative frequency over qualitative resonance, that review privileges conceptual depth and historical contextualization. It seeks to uncover the "submerged" genealogies of African thought, recognizing that the decolonization of knowledge is as much about the recovery of the archive as it is about the refinement of theory. Structurally, the review proceeds through a thematic architecture, tracing the evolution of intersectionality from its "traveling" origins to its indigenized manifestations within diverse African geopolitical contexts. The organizational logic is not merely a stylistic choice but a methodological commitment to the reflexivity championed by Lewis and Medie and Kang. It posits that scholarship on the continent cannot be bifurcated from the material and political struggles from which it emerges; thus, the review treats the inseparability of academic inquiry and social transformation as its central analytical axis. By foregrounding the "politics of the personal" and the "politics of the location," the methodology ensures that the resulting synthesis remains tethered to the lived realities and revolutionary aspirations of African women across the diaspora and the continent.

3. GENEALOGIES OF AFRICAN FEMINIST AND GENDER THOUGHT

The emergence of African feminist and gender scholarship constitutes a profound ontological disruption, formulated as a direct counter-hegemonic response to both the "colonial library" and the teleological assumptions of Western feminist theory. These early intellectual interventions sought to dismantle the reductive, Eurocentric representations of African women as static subjects trapped in an ahistorical "tradition," devoid of agency and perpetually in need of external liberation. Instead, scholars emphasized a methodology of historical specificity, arguing that any rigorous analysis of African gender relations must be situated within the crucible of colonial political economy and the "matrix of domination" that defines the postcolonial condition. Filomina Chioma Steady's pioneering cross-cultural synthesis provided a foundational blueprint for what would later be understood as intersectional analysis, demonstrating that for the African woman, the variables of race, class, and colonial subjugation are not merely additive but are inextricably fused with gendered experiences. It was further substantiated by the archival recovery work of Nina Mba (1982), whose study of Nigerian women's political mobilization effectively shattered the colonial myth of the "domesticated" African woman. By documenting women's sophisticated participation in anti-colonial resistance and indigenous governance, Mba demonstrated that the marginalization of women in nationalist narratives was itself a byproduct of colonial historiography rather than a reflection of pre-colonial social reality. From the 1980s onward, the discursive landscape of AWGS underwent a radical diversification, moving beyond critique toward the construction of autonomous, Afrocentric paradigms. The articulation of Womanism and Africana Womanism by scholars such as Ogunyemi, Hudson-Weems, and Kolawole represented a deliberate epistemic break from the individualistic, rights-based focus of liberal Western feminism. These frameworks prioritized the collective survival of the community—inclusive of men and children—and centered race and culture as primary analytical categories. Similarly, Catherine Acholonu's theory of Motherism offered a radical alternative that repositioned nurturing, complementarity, and ecological stewardship not as domestic burdens, but as high-order Afrocentric values essential for social and environmental homeostasis. The most radical ontological challenge, however, came from anthropological and historical critiques that unsettled the very category of "gender" as a universal human constant. Ifi Amadiume's ethnographic study of the Nnobi Igbo revealed a socio-political structure characterized by gender flexibility—specifically the institutions of "male daughters" and "female husbands"—which permitted social roles to be detached from biological sex. The decolonial inquiry culminated in Oyeronke Oyewumi's seminal critique of the "invention of women," which argued that the very concept of "gender" was a colonial imposition used to reorganize non-gendered, seniority-based Yoruba social systems into rigid Western binaries. By demonstrating that the "woman" of Western discourse is a category born of a specific Eurocentric "bio-logic," these works provided the necessary epistemic groundwork for a decolonized intersectionality—one that does not take "gender" as a given, but interrogates it as a product of coloniality.

4. INTERSECTIONALITY: ORIGINS, EXPANSION, AND CRITIQUES

The conceptual genesis of intersectionality marks a seismic shift in the heuristic architecture of social justice, emerging as a targeted critique of the "categorical invisibility" of Black women within the siloed legal frameworks of feminism and anti-racism. By exposing the structural failure of single-axis analyses to account for the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects, Crenshaw provided a gateway for subsequent scholars to theorize power not as a collection of discrete variables, but as a system of "mutually constitutive" axes of inequality. In the paradigm, race, class, and gender do not merely intersect like separate roads; they are co-produced within a "matrix of domination" that reconfigures the very nature of each category through its relationship to the others. However, the

rapid institutionalization of intersectionality has precipitated a profound discursive anxiety. As the concept ascended to the status of a feminist "buzzword", its radical political edge faced the threat of "conceptual stretching" and neoliberal depoliticization. Critics have pointed to a "thinning" of the theory, where it is often reduced to a descriptive checklist of identities rather than a rigorous analytical tool for dismantling structural power. It has led to contentious debates regarding "theoretical ownership" and "epistemic authority," with scholars like Jennifer Nash and Kathy Davis interrogating whether the mainstreaming of intersectionality has led to the erasure of its foundational Black feminist commitments. The migration of intersectionality into the global arena raises even more urgent questions for the Global South. When framed as a "traveling theory", intersectionality risks being abstracted from the specificities of Black American legal history and transposed onto African contexts in ways that ignore local colonial trajectories and state-formation processes. Within African Women's and Gender Studies (AWGS), the migration is particularly fraught; historical patterns of "epistemic domination" mean that theoretical imports—no matter how well-intentioned—can inadvertently function as a form of intellectual recolonization if they are not critically indigenized. The decolonial imperative in AWGS, therefore, is not to reject intersectionality, but to subject it to a rigorous "location-based" analysis that honors the continent's unique ontological and indigenous epistemological landscapes.

5. AFRICAN ENGAGEMENTS WITH INTERSECTIONALITY

Notwithstanding the legitimate anxieties regarding theoretical hegemony, African scholars have not remained passive recipients of Northern paradigms; rather, they have aggressively engaged in a project of theoretical re-territorialization, utilizing intersectionality as both a robust analytic and a transformative praxis. Significant discursive interventions, such as the special issues of *Agenda* (2017) and the *European Journal of Women's Studies* (2006), serve as critical indices of how intersectionality can be recalibrated to illuminate the hyper-local specificities of African women's lives while remaining anchored in global feminist dialogue. The engagement is characterized by a "contextualized intersectionality" that refuses to de-link identity from the macro-structural forces of history and political economy. A central pillar of the Africanized intersectional analysis is the foregrounding of coloniality as a persistent structural variable. Scholars like Agbaje (2021) and Adesina (2021) demonstrate that colonial rule was not a gender-neutral imposition; instead, it deployed gendered labor regimes and missionary ideologies to radically restructure indigenous social hierarchies. For instance, the imposition of colonial legal systems often codified patriarchal norms that were alien to pre-colonial structures, effectively marginalizing women from land ownership and political authority. The historical grounding is complemented by contemporary study that applies intersectional heuristics to the most pressing crises on the continent. In the realm of migration, Bouilly provides a nuanced account of Senegalese mothers resisting clandestine migration, illustrating how their agency is negotiated at the precarious intersection of gender, intergenerational kinship obligations, and economic marginalization. Similarly, in public health, the work of Mburu in Uganda reveals that HIV interventions are often stymied when they fail to account for the intersection of hegemonic masculinity and social stigma. Concrete Data Context: In Uganda, while national HIV prevalence stood at approximately 6.2% during the mid-2010s, intersectional study identified that men were significantly less likely to access testing and treatment—often due to the "double burden" of maintaining masculine status while navigating the stigma of being "weak" or "ill". Furthermore, the "secular" bias of Western intersectionality is being dismantled by scholars who center religion and race as co-constitutive of African subjectivity. Al Rasheed's analysis of Black Muslim performativity serves as a vital critique of Western feminist assumptions that often view religion as purely oppressive. By demonstrating how race and religion jointly configure identity and resistance, the scholarship underscores that a decolonized intersectionality must be spiritually and culturally

"literate." it is echoed in the work of Badejo, who argue that responses to human trafficking in Nigeria must move beyond generic "rescue" narratives to adopt a trauma-informed, intersectional lens that accounts for the specific socio-religious and economic vulnerabilities of victims.

6. DECOLONISING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN AWGS

Decolonization within the disciplinary boundaries of African Women's and Gender Studies (AWGS) necessitates a radical shift from mere "representational inclusion"—often a performative gesture within neoliberal academia—to a profound epistemic transformation. The project is deeply rooted in a long-standing critique of the imperialist underpinnings of the social sciences, where Africa has historically functioned as a laboratory for Western theory rather than a primary site of theory-building itself. For feminist scholars, the decolonial imperative is twofold: it must dismantle the "colonial library" while simultaneously exposing how current modes of gendered knowledge production continue to replicate racial and geopolitical hierarchies. A central tenet of the transformation is the strategic reclamation of African intellectual traditions, indigenous languages, and subaltern archives as primary theoretical fonts. As Wa Thiong'o famously argued, decolonizing the mind requires a linguistic and conceptual return to the local. In the context of AWGS, it is exemplified by the preservation and analysis of Mandinka 'Ajamī archives, which offer a gendered, indigenous historical record that, exists entirely outside Western colonial scripts. Institutional reform, therefore, cannot be limited to diversifying the "canon"; it requires what Mamdani and Falola describe as the restoration of epistemic agency, ensuring that the African university operates as a center of intellectual autonomy rather than a peripheral outpost for Northern academic trends. In that landscape, intersectionality functions as a vital decolonial heuristic only when it is stripped of its "traveling" abstractions and rigorously grounded in the material realities of the continent. Crawford emphasize that decolonizing the field requires a direct confrontation with authorship hierarchies, "study extractivism," and the politics of citation that chronically favor the Global North. An Africa-centered intersectionality, therefore, rejects universalized "abstract typologies of difference" in favor of a praxis that is dialectically linked to local histories and contemporary political struggles. It is an intersectionality that remains hyper-aware of how neoliberal globalism and post-independence state formation re-inscribe new forms of marginalization, necessitating a scholarship that is as politically committed as it is intellectually rigorous.

7. CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY, AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The transformation of African Women's and Gender Studies (AWGS) curricula serves as a critical frontline in the broader struggle for epistemic sovereignty. As Kisiang'ani and Idahosa contend, the decolonial project must transcend "additive models"—where African case studies are merely appended to Western theoretical frameworks—and instead pursue a fundamental epistemic reorientation. The reorientation involves a radical restructuring of the syllabi to center African women's historical narratives, indigenous feminist texts, and homegrown theoretical innovations as the primary lens through which global gender debates are interrogated. In that pedagogical shift, the "periphery" becomes the "center," and Western theory is provincialized, treated not as universal truth but as one of many localized knowledge systems. Pedagogically, the integration of African intersectional approaches necessitates a move toward a "classroom of resistance," where reflexivity and positionality are not merely academic exercises but essential tools for political awareness. By centering the lived experiences of African women across different socio-economic and religious strata, the pedagogy fosters a deeper understanding of how the "coloniality of power" persists in everyday life. Mama raises indispensable ethical questions regarding the politics of "studying Africa," challenging scholars to ensure that their academic labor is not extractive but is actively aligned with contemporary struggles for freedom and justice. Consequently, an intersectionality grounded in

African feminist praxis provides a bridge between abstract theory and material change. It supports a pedagogy that dissolves the artificial boundaries between the academy and the community, linking classroom inquiry to grassroots activism and policy advocacy. By prioritizing community engagement and the co-production of knowledge, a decolonized AWGS curriculum prepares study to navigate the complexities of the postcolony with an ethical commitment to social transformation, ensuring that gender studies remain a vital instrument for the liberation of African peoples.

8. TENSIONS, LIMITS, AND ONGOING DEBATES

The promise of intersectionality within the African academy is significantly tempered by a series of rigorous, ongoing contestations that interrogate the ethics of its adoption. A primary critique, articulated by scholars such as Apusigah and Mekgwe, posits that intersectionality often functions as a form of "theoretical repackaging." They argue that the framework frequently receives global acclaim for insights—such as the simultaneity of race, class, and gendered oppression—that African feminists had already sophisticatedly articulated for decades under indigenous banners, yet without receiving the commensurate epistemic credit. The lack of acknowledgment points to a persistent "erasure of the local" where Northern-branded concepts are prioritized over established African intellectual genealogies. Beyond the politics of origin, there are significant methodological and discursive tensions. Verloo cautions against the risk of "analytical overreach" and methodological vagueness, suggesting that if intersectionality is used to explain everything, it may end up explaining very little with structural precision. Within African studies, the tension is exacerbated by the friction between the universalizing impulses of global feminist frameworks and the steadfast insistence on historical and cultural specificity by African scholars. The fundamental decolonial challenge here is whether a theory rooted in Western liberal legalism can ever fully account for social systems organized around seniority, communalism, or spiritualities that do not neatly fit into Northern "categories of difference." These debates are far from purely academic; they are deeply entangled in the material politics of the global knowledge economy. As noted by scholars of the "postcolony," these theoretical preferences directly influence: **Funding Priorities:** International donors and NGOs often favor projects that use "buzzword" frameworks like intersectionality over those using indigenous terminologies. **Publication Politics:** High-impact global journals may privilege submissions that utilize "traveling theories" (e.g., intersectionality, post-structuralism) as they are deemed more "legible" to a Northern audience. **Institutional Recognition:** The prestige of African scholars is often tied to their ability to negotiate these global frameworks, sometimes at the expense of local relevance. Ultimately, the contestation over intersectionality in African contexts is a microcosm of the larger struggle for epistemic justice. It underscores the need for a scholarship that is not only theoretically rigorous but also ethically grounded—one that uses intersectionality not as a borrowed mask, but as a site for radical, Africa-centered innovation.

9. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR AFRICAN INTERSECTIONAL AND DECOLONIAL SCHOLARSHIP

The future of African Women's and Gender Studies (AWGS) is predicated upon a rigorous commitment to deepening Africa-centered, intersectional, and decolonial methodologies. The evolution requires the cultivation of transnational feminist solidarities that are rooted in radical critique rather than neoliberal homogenisation. As Mohanty asserts, such alliances must be built on "solidarity" rather than "sameness," ensuring that global collaborations do not inadvertently erase the historical and material differences of the African experience. At the heart of that future is the necessity of supporting African-led study agendas and institutionalizing robust mentorship for emerging scholars to ensure the sustainability of the decolonial project. In the coming decade, African intersectionalities must move beyond foundational critiques to engage with the complex, overlapping crises of the 21st century. It includes parsing the gendered impacts of neoliberal globalism, the

"digital turn" in surveillance and activism, and the disproportionate effects of climate change on African agrarian communities. Furthermore, the intensifying dynamics of global migration—driven by both economic precarity and political conflict—demand an intersectional lens that can account for the shifting subjectivities of the African diaspora. By grounding theoretical production in the "combative ontology" of lived realities and ongoing political struggles, AWGS can maintain its position as a vanguard of global feminist thought. The field's primary mission remains the resistance of epistemic marginalization by asserting that African experiences are not merely "case studies" for Northern theory, but are the very ground upon which more universal, inclusive, and liberating theories of human existence must be built.

10. CONCLUSION

The review has demonstrated that intersectionality and decolonization are not merely adjacent concepts but are fundamentally intertwined within the intellectual architecture of African Women's and Gender Studies. Far from being a recent import, African feminist scholarship has long articulated multidimensional analyses—grounded in the crucible of colonial histories, indigenous social complexities, and the nuances of postcolonial political economy—that prefigure contemporary intersectional logic. The decolonization of the field, therefore, is not an act of total rejection, but one of radical reclamation: recognizing these deep genealogies, dismantling persistent epistemic hierarchies, and committing to a transformative praxis that honors African agency. As AWGS navigates the complexities of the 21st century, the adoption of an Africa-centered intersectional approach provides the necessary heuristic to dismantle the "imperialism of categories" while speaking with authority to global debates. By grounding theory in the material and spiritual lived realities of the continent, AWGS reinvisions itself as a field that is at once intellectually rigorous, politically engaged, and globally influential. The "decolonial turn" in intersectionality ensures that the study of gender in Africa remains a vital instrument for liberation, pushing the boundaries of what it means to produce knowledge that is both local in its commitment and universal in its impact.

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