

## Culture



# ***Women Wielding The Hoe. Lessons from Rural Africa for Feminist Theory and Development Practice***, par Deborah Fahy BRYCESON (ed.), Oxford/Washington, D.C. : Berg Publishers, 1995: 282 pages

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[See table of contents](#)

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❖ *Women Wielding The Hoe. Lessons from Rural Africa for Feminist Theory and Development Practice*, par Deborah Fahy BRYCESON (ed.), Oxford/Washington, D.C.: Berg Publishers, 1995: 282 pages.

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This book is a welcome contribution providing a realistic and more appropriate portrayal of the African context, particularly African women. The area is large, rural Sub-Saharan Africa, and the topics and views are varied. Yet in six sections amassing fourteen chapters, twelve social scientists with considerable field proficiency emphasize the importance of empirical research when assessments of development theory and feminist practice are employed. Together the chapters do a good job of revealing the complexities surrounding these assessments. Thus the volume is certainly worth a read, not only by policy makers but also by the academic community, including graduate and undergraduate students. *Women Wielding The Hoe* is metaphor for women running the world, with significant and sophisticated treatment given to women as providers, men, often as dependents. The strength of the book lies in the detailed accounts of empirical actuality, most written with optimism rather than pessimism, recognising that although African women face oppressive circumstances, they are not oppressed. Indeed the detailed recognition of women's important contribution in this volume shows they are significantly worthy of support as powerful producers, not to be simplistically treated as welfare candidates evoking western world sympathy.

The theme in the Introduction, Section I, is production via hoe agriculture and the emphasis is on the pre-historical, historical and current practices surrounding the adaptation. Bryceson introduces us to and centres us in the midst of the "mystique" surrounding African women (not mysterious to themselves obviously but to "western feminists and development practitioners" p. 4) by providing details that allow the conclusion that the gender division of labour in hoe agriculture has not been monolithic, yet women provide the "bedrock role" for hoe production. The remaining sections give us the accounts of women's place in production, reproduction and consumption configurations via an examination of women's work and their social organizations, insider and outsider development practices and most importantly a section

on efforts to compile women's perspectives through participatory research and women's voices.

Guyer's detailed empirical presentation of a Yoruba "restudy" in Section II, emphasises changing theoretical points of view that assist with the question "[o]ne is asking - in this case of the gender division of labour - where did it come from and where does it seem to be going?" (p. 33). She suggests that we utilise the theoretical models that provide us with "distant" (macro) views but avoid applying them with an *a priori* intensity that is not based in empirical research. Ekejuiba adds to this Section, by applying a hearthhold/household distinction as a unit of analysis that better describes the realities of Nigerian (and by extension African) daily life. It is her position that an *a priori* definition of household and women's position in it as passive or as secondary producers allows for women's lack of voice in development projects and development literature. Drawing on her own growing-up experience she points out that although the household has common resources, a hearthhold occupies and controls its own space. The women hearthhold heads are not simply appendages to the household but "active, often independent actors...maximiz[ing] their livelihood options and the positive impact of their efforts on their dependents" (p. 60). O'Laughlin and Peters continue with examinations of African social organization by contemplating the "myth of the African family" and the "uses and abuses of the concept of female-headed households" in development policies. O'Laughlin rightly critiques the model of "the weak conjugal bond" portrayed in African societies as overly simplistic. She argues that "...enduring conjugal relations of both cooperation and conflict between husbands and wives are common in rural Africa" (p. 87). As she points out, we should recognise that conjugal relations sort out people's positions within family and class structures and people's engagements with rural and urban labour markets. Peters reviews the analytical history of 'female-headed households' in order to provide new concepts and methods of analysis. A major importance of this review is in pointing out the analytic convolutions, but also in the held assumptions that female-headed households are "vulnerable", that they are consistent over time, and they develop because of men's choices. As Peters says, the current situation in African and other contexts (for example she notes the English-speaking Caribbean) shows that many young women (and I would add widows and divorced women) are consciously refusing marriage - "... for a variety of reasons that critically include gender relations" (p. 103). She suggests multiple approaches of data collection, including interviews

with adult men and women in examining 'intra-household' relations and in 'supra-household' relations utilising intensive, longitudinal ethnographic analysis.

Bantje, Caplan, Dupré and Obbo in Section III examine issues of motherhood as these are evidenced in fertility, sexuality and agrarian labour. Bantje promotes systems analysis in his chapter on studies of maternal health and nutrition in mainly Tanzania to overcome earlier research misconceptions. His examination of the relationship between women's workloads and the birth of healthy babies points out "... a wide range of individual outcomes in response to apparently similar conditions" (p.127). The results of this research (and the research of others) point out that caution needs to be exercised in making "easy generalizations" related to debilitating effects of heavy work and inadequate nutrition. Particularly he notes that Western norms do not provide the base line for conclusions. He calls for a "large amount of data", investigating demographic, physiological and socio-cultural dimensions in order to be able to make informed statements about certain categories of women and infants being more at risk than others. Caplan gives us her usual insight in the exceptional analysis of Children [as] Our Wealth. The detail is provided through voices, Caplan's as well as those who are informing the research and allows us to see the importance of children as kin and community riches. Too many ethnocentric views on 'African women having too many children' have been provided, both by the academic and development communities and the general public. Here we see that women intelligently assess fertility situations, that men influence women's fertility decisions, that women frequently are ambivalent about having children recognising the associated costs, and finally that women get assistance and experience joy from having children.

Dupré uses data from four Congo societies to point out that the informal and female agricultural wage sectors are not counted by wage labour statistics. They are seen as local phenomena. These data show the informal structure includes women as healers, particularly in their role as fertility experts. Dupré notes that we treat health care, fertility and agriculture work as discrete categories for development assistance, not recognising they are "interlocked and socially embedded in people's lives" (p.162). She asks if the issue (for research) is really African women's domination by men, recognising that centring on this issue neglects areas of relative importance. For example if African women "get free" how will their situations improve? "Many African women are already helplessly 'free'.

They have become the only economic agent in what is still called a 'family' in statistical tabulations. The husband's economic contribution is missing, yet women's work goes unnoticed by national statistics" (p. 162).

Obbo provides the detail of how women at risk from structural adjustment politics now find they are further compromised by the AIDS epidemic. She makes the viable connection between AIDS and gender issues as they are evidenced in equity concerns. Obbo concludes;

Both the sexual demands and the role expectations placed on women have imposed a high disease risk and an onerous burden on them as caretakers, nursing the sick and fostering orphaned children. Their cherished life-giving role as mothers has taken on a new dimension, that of life prolonging. They have no time for idle discussion about the gender division of labour, social rights or economic opportunities... (p.177).

Along with Obbo, we recognise their dedication and exhaustion.

In Section IV, Davison challenges the development agencies' assumptions that women must work together in order to develop. Although Africanists (mostly those working from a gender perspective) recognise the long history of women's groups, women's cooperative endeavour has become a "hidden assumption" in many development plans. Davison is providing information from a Malawian case study that shows social contexts influence work generally and development projects specifically. For example, matriliney makes a difference in how women farm and engage in collective activities. Bryceson concludes this Section with a critical article on Western donor efforts to raise women's status. She recommends a focus on homestead economics, that is research attention to homestead work, including an appropriate assessment of women's actual activity encompassing work in a domestic unit, on family agricultural holdings (and I would add wage labour if available). "Homestead economics, as a field of study, would entail the dissection of the *detailed mechanics* of women's work, questioning what, when, where, how, and why women's tasks are performed" (p. 211). Using women's own perspectives, a case study approach is advocated allowing labour constraints to be emphasized rather than income generation. Bryceson specifies that teen-aged girls be singled out for preference in development projects, arguing that "changes in young women's attitudes and skills could have a far-reaching effect" (p.218).

The Skjønsberg and Vuorela chapters provide the detail for Section V, Efforts to Record Female Perspectives. Through diaries and story-telling women's, indeed people's, lives are portrayed. Skjønsberg tells how participatory research is not an alternative to existing social scientific research but a supplement. Participatory research widens our perspective, people informing people gives us a more accurate view of the diversity of social life. As she says, the "silent majorities" (like women who face more powerful groups) are given voice. Vuorela gives space for this voice in the engaging stories told by and about women in Msoga Village, Tanzania.

In the final Section Bryceson returns again to ask if we should bury the hoe as we note the transformations of agriculture in African life. What is to be acknowledged is that women wielding the hoe has not been displaced in the 'modernising' process. It endures, as a mainstay, perhaps as a last resort, but, "...given the individualized nature of hoeing as a physical activity, the hoe has, over time, offered women a means of supporting themselves and their dependents with or without male involvement" (p.269).

This volume contributes to the small but growing academic literature recognising African women's intelligence as well as their hard work as this is delineated in empirical data using participatory methods that include women's voices.

❖ *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, by Harjot OBEROI, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 494 pages.

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The changes of the nineteenth century ushered in by European science and military technology were remaking the world in fact as well as in the mind. In fact Britain had established preeminence on the Indian subcontinent. In mind it changed the way the colonized peoples would perceive themselves as well as the world around them. It is in this context that Harjot Oberoi writes about the tension between diversity of religious practice and the representation of a modern homogeneous Sikh identity in India. His central argument is that categories such as Muslim, Sikh and Hindu were simply irrelevant to the religious life of the newly colonized peoples of the subcontinent. Religious life of the people in the pre-colonial period, he maintains, is best characterized as a continuum of overlap-

ping communal identities. Indeed categorizations such as Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism and Sikhism took place in the nineteenth century. Oberoi asserts that the tidy category "Sikh" is a cultural construct resulting from a mixture of factors such as the impact of modernity, British colonization, the effective use of communications technology, and the desire of certain elite groups to purge their community of religious plurality.

Oberoi's description of the Sikh effort in the construction of a religious identity shares resonances with the struggles of other colonized communities worldwide to undertake reform of religious values and practices in the search for a relevant self-representation. Subjugation creates a deep anxiety among the colonized elites caused by strong feelings of religious and moral superiority juxtaposed against the fact of being a conquered people. Invariably this leads to critical self-examination through questioning of what went wrong and movement towards reform and a new self-representation. Indeed, amongst the Sikh, the process of self-examination and response to modernity began among the educated elite. In this sense *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* speaks to anyone who perceives that debilitating anxiety and is interested in the response of colonized peoples to the challenges of modernity.

Oberoi's argument echoes David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* in which he maintains that mankind oscillates between polytheism and monotheism, like a pendulum swinging from a pluralistic, ritual-oriented, oral tradition to a puritanical, scripturalistic, codified religious practice. Oberoi meticulously traces the movement of a plural Sikh framework, consisting of heterogeneous religious beliefs and practices, to the dominance of the Tat Khalsa "episteme" subordinating all other Sikh traditions. Attempts to force a people into separate and distinct breeds invariably leads to misrepresentations. The complicity of the British in the construction of the identity of the "marshal race" reveals the web of political motives necessary to produce categories such as the "Sikh".

It is noteworthy that Ernest Gellner in his *Muslim Society* argues that under modern conditions Hume's oscillating pendulum becomes unhinged and moves overwhelmingly towards a more protestant and less pluralistic version of religion. The mediating function of local saints is eroded by the colonial and post-colonial state. Atomised masses identify less with saints and more with a common national factor.