

BOOK REVIEW

Womanhood and Girlhood in Twenty-First Century Middle Class Kenya: Disrupting Patri-centered Frameworks

Besi Brilliant Muhonja. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2018 (ISBN 978-1-4958-3433-8; ISBN 978-1-4985-3434-5)

Namulundah Florence

Brooklyn College, New York, NY, USA; Email: nflorence@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Feminist discourse has a tendency to focus on mainstream (read European/American) antipatriarchal experiences. Similarly, although the recent #MeToo movement galvanized feminist agendas worldwide, it has yet to gain traction in the third world. By contrast, Besi Brilliant Muhonja's *Womanhood and Girlhood in Twenty-First Century Middle Class Kenya* gives voice to often undocumented and less publicized grassroots countercultural traditions. The growing significance of a more comprehensive women's history makes this a timely book for various academic departments, including but not limited to philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science, women's studies and ethnic studies: African, African-American, Asian, Latin American, and so on.

Muhonja has long explored the world of gender and culture, illustrating the adage that the personal is political. Her depth of understanding builds on firsthand experience as much as cross-cultural exposure to offer a unique lens on the intersectionality of gender and class in patriarchal marginalization. In this book, Muhonja recognizes and underscores Kenya's middle-class *Ubabi* culture's historical agency and emerging collectivity; in so doing, she avoids the mainstream essentialism of feminist disempowerment and interventions. Turning sexism on its head, Muhonja's book depicts motherhood as a site of power and agency. Women bear children and find lineages outside patriarchal matrimony. They create alternative cultural practices—naming, child-rearing, cultural inculcation, courtship, marital unions/relations—and manage property. They establish ethnically pluralistic communities. In transforming these cultural practices, women are redefining gender relations in domestic and public spheres.

Mainstream narratives often sideline these cultural practices and their impact on self, partners, and communities. Muhonja utilizes ethnographic narratives, historical analysis, and participant observation to analyze and reveal how social class deconstructs and appropriates mainstream social hierarchies to create new social identities/roles. She focuses on two emerging identities, elective lone parenthood and single professional woman, to illustrate how Kenya's middle-class women set in motion a chain of cultural events that defies the image of circumscribed women's lives and exposes everyday choices that decenter patriarchy as well as the duality and linearity in social histories. Each of the chapters unfolds with an overview of mainstream narratives of a specific

stage—childhood, adolescence, bridehood, wifehood/adulthood—to then illustrate the social transformation of otherwise familiar cultural rituals. The *Ubabi* women's distancing from extended family units in indigenous communities causes further cultural rifts in language and lifestyles.

To Muhonja's credit, she disrupts a linear approach to cultural analysis in depicting a narrative of cross-cultural complexities and illustrates the fallacy of distinguishing what is from what was, or, what belongs to whom, in the messiness of Kenya's middle-class *Ubabi* culture. Muhonja's depiction of women's agency in twenty-first-century middle-class Kenya captures the impact of an intercultural global complexity on geographical cultural expressions. Urbanites, who comprise most of the 18% of Kenya's middle-class population, create "new villages embedded in their Christian and secular social publics" (15).

Ubabi culture crosses the country's ethnic, religious, racial, and regional differences, although it is skewed toward global cosmopolitanism. Muhonja roots the word *Ubabi* in the biblical Babylonian transition that preceded the promised land: drawing on the image of in-betweenness. Emerging from the ashes of Kenya's pre- and postcolonial history, *Ubabi* transcends the parameters of what women are and could do (ix) by highlighting women's achievements and possibilities over social limitations (58). A woman's individuation goes beyond spousal and child-rearing roles, and self-defined women further socialize female youth in alternative models of gender relations and selfhood decoupled from wifehood (69).

Muhonja's work cements a social reality that traditional structures glossed over and that few textbooks depicted as viable. She subverts a traditional narrative order and coherence centered in patriarchy. In interviews, women discuss their choices as obvious, not necessarily as radical. Their testimonials debunk an essentialist feminist agenda of identifying and negating patriarchal narratives, privilege, and status where identity and achievements are rooted in fathers, husbands, and children. Cultural disruptions are routine despite the masculine prominence in public spheres that, along with domestic labor, inadvertently and systematically subordinate and denigrate women's bodies (57). Muhonja highlights the significance of terminology in decrying a long-presumed neutrality of language in terms such as wifehood, womanhood, adulthood. When women's adulthood is synonymous with wifehood, single and childless women are an aberration. In challenging the authority and ideal of cultural niches, Muhonja's work offers a variable and open-ended cultural space that highlights women's agency and role as cultural arbiters.

Patriarchy denies the reality of women's choices from childhood, girlhood, and bridehood to an adulthood divorced from masculine normativity and the sexism on which it is predicated. This familial structure perpetuates norms of gender inequality since women define themselves by whom they belong to and serve. By contrast, *Ubabi* women have, without revolution, created spaces that redefine social structures. They are less self-conscious of desire for recognition and emotional satisfaction. Further, they construct "multilineal, duo-lineal, or bilinear" lineages and acquire property outside traditional "lineage founding and kingship among Kenyan communities" (11–14). Economically independent, women can retain their autonomy and chart social identities dislodged from parental and community demands and Church obligations that mitigate a gendered "imbalance of power" (62).

That society attributes marriage failure to individuals—women—rather than to the institution of marriage itself underscores Muhonja's thesis. Whereas global networks and companies have become preachers of American values, *Ubabi* culture draws from but does not replicate imperial marital rituals. Same-sex marriages and parenting,

delayed marriages, childless unions and adoptions, or use of reproductive technologies are global phenomena. The *Ubabi* performance of selfhood grants Kenyan women agency by borrowing “from local and global cultures to generate the public as well as domestic cultures of their families. . . . They, in effect, utilize familism to combat familism” (64).

Muhonja’s work depicts gender as pivotal to cultural transformation and in so doing creates a distinctive form of expression. She offers a different version of women’s reality whose depth and complexity can be overlooked in a mainstream feminism agenda. Drawing on several ethnic rituals, she underscores women’s arbitration of culture—its production, transmission, and administration of prevailing knowledge and practices. This is contrary to the underpinnings of patriarchy in mainstream stereotypes of subordinated women that traditional and historical structures sanction. Although often uncoordinated and undocumented, women are recreating familiar rituals that decenter patriarchy beginning with premarital gender relations to adulthood. Besides the mothering role, women redefine and orchestrate community rituals of naming, initiation, courtship, marriage, funeral rites, and (property) ownership rites. The choice and flexibility in emerging rituals favor women, who typically oversee these cultural expressions.

Childhood/Tweenage/Teenage

Kenyan names like Victoria Namaemba Lyambila reflect prevailing indigenous, colonial, and Christian structures and power relations. Muhonja acknowledges indigenous age-sets and initiation rituals among the Gikuyu, Taita, Wangi, and Dholuo ethnic groups. Adulthood typically involves an age-set-based transition from childhood dependence to autonomy, and from individual to a larger collective. By contrast, urbanites view these cultural anchors as backward and inhibitive (20). Fewer girls undergo indigenous initiation rites. Now, coming-of-age translates to a skewed independence of “exercising emotional, financial, and intellectual self-sufficiency” that can overlook parental/social obligations (28). These girls navigate a stage that offers limited frameworks or markers and rely mostly on role models within nuclear families. In secularized homes, religious rituals are also reduced to performances devoid of social responsibility or accountability.

Economically independent and urbanized women have the power to name persons, define processes, and create accompanying rituals. Some of the new names of children and women illustrate this decentering from traditional structures and cultural models (of patriarchal privilege and status) whereby naming rituals reflect a clan and parentage. Children’s names currently reflect ethnic and Christian traditions as much as trending celebrities. In adulthood, retaining names of natal affiliations or the use of Ms. rather than Mrs. enables women to “symbolically maintain an identity outside that of a wife who is always representing a marital unit” (63). Some women use natal names, but even this is individualized (some use nicknames) and not tied to parental lineage. This middle-class creation of alternative naming rituals symbolizes a cultural synthesis in socialization patterns, conception, and performance of developmental stages as well as the creation of social identities.

Bridehood

Lacking distinct rites of passage, girls rely on communities to orchestrate the transition to maturity. Muhonja reframes this performance of bridehood in *Ubabi* culture: “It is

precisely bridehood's flexibility, impermanence, and, sometimes, redundancy that makes it powerful as a site for mutinous womanhood that can radically redraft gendered societal scripts" (35). Middle-class brides dislodge and appropriate religious and modern cultural frameworks of ritualized home visits, elderly advisors, designated gifts, symbols, and stages of intimacy centered in patriarchal prescriptions (47). Few couples embrace traditional pre-, during, and post-wedding rituals even in Kenya's rural poor communities. Girls marry later or defer childbirth and childrearing roles, thus disrupting, in concept and practice, the centrality of fertility to a woman's identity. Several women already reside with a partner, which devalues the narrative of virginity, chastity, and honeymoons. As the ultimate arbiter, Kenya's Marriage Act of 2014 granted equal power to members of a couple.

Economic independence empowers girls to postpone spousal selection and commitment: "The bride publicly revises, with witnesses, the nature of marital contracts, interaction, and roles" (51). Redrafting gendered social scripts, Kenya's middle-class women orchestrate rituals, assisted by wedding committees of friends, for courtship, marital commitment and timing, accessories and performances all within established religious, indigenous, and legal structures. Mainstream media features wedding shows that audiences emulate, trying to surpass one another in exhibitionism at the expense of sanctity: "In this way, brides center themselves and how they want to be perceived, and accordingly encrypt the rituals with new intentions" (39).

Wifehood

Patriarchal structures equate nuclear family with household ownership, ennobling men as heads and property owners. Women and children are an appendage in this gendered relational unit. Celebrated as a "sacred and private institution," marriage contributes to the preservation of "sexist distributions of power and control that endure in modern-day institutions. . . . [Control] is ceded to husbands, extended family, and the larger community" (57). Historic structures limited women's independence and sought to control their bodies and identities (52). By contrast, Muhonja captures and celebrates female autonomy and the experience of self-actualization outside patriarchal roles. Her radical wifing model reclaims the place of women "as more than just a wife of someone and mother of another, as they subjectively control the functions and value of that body. . . . As the women reorganize their relationship to their bodies, structures, and roles, they conversely change landscapes of adulthood and recompose wifing as the actively strategic condition it was in many indigenous African communities" (72). The celebration of motherhood is not at the expense of selfhood. Middle-class women draw on their public and professional roles and performances to (re)position themselves in domestic spheres.

Rebuttal

Muhonja's focus on middle-class Kenyan women highlights a situational advantage while overlooking its effect on the rest of society. The classic imitation and embrace of global capitalism among middle-class Kenyan women appear to sanction an imperialistic force on a local economy. It promotes consumerism; perpetuates the myth of novelty as progressive; and overlooks class exploitation by obscuring the battle of classes. Typically, economic status offers a rare opportunity for women to shape their destinies. Second, the inadvertent nod to capitalism undermines an otherwise enviable

patriarchal deconstruction, when a fetishized *Ubabi* culture draws youth and older women into its vortex: “capitalism and globalization have commoditized womanhood and girlhood within Kenya as it has done globally” (77). Third, social media is the amorphous and primary guide for social norms with little or no adult supervision. Further, rapid technological advances and social media undermine the status and maintenance of social norms, however desirable, in this case, matricentrism. Muhonja’s middle-class culture is hard to institutionalize in contrast to the process of cultural reproduction guaranteed by indigenous, imperial, and Christian structures with explicit knowledge, skills, and gender roles alongside age-mates.

The discussion of adolescence best problematizes the idea of agency. The erasure of initiation rituals for teenagers results in a cultural void that middle-class culture fills up with a seemingly rootless cosmopolitan ambivalence between identity and belonging. Parental ambivalence over boundaries without traditional structures further complicate the transition. Tech-savvy daughters act like siblings to mothers in charting the socialization process. Youth now acquire the cultural capital of places to which they have no geographical or biological connection, an interaction that symbolizes simultaneous cultural crossovers. For many, lingering ties to indigenous communities (19) appear an over-reach, given linguistic, economic, and regional rifts that complicate efforts at bonding across age. Meanwhile, the myth of endless childhood among middle-class youth is extended by social media, peers, and a lineup of caregivers—teachers, counselors, parents, and nannies—who delay the autonomy of girls seeking “identity and visibility” and erase distinctions between childhood and adulthood (21).

In sum, Muhonja destabilizes traditional ritual and language, while simultaneously articulating newer uses and views of otherwise ordinary normative behavior. Women have greater “influence over family networks and activities, as well as a significant part of family expenditure, reproducing patterns of many indigenous Kenyan communities in precolonial times” (70). That homes can run smoothly in the absence of husbands reconstitutes “wife and husband relationships and functions. . . . Wives enjoy the control of the home without the drudgery and burden that come with it in Europe and the United States” (68). Elective lone parenting, childlessness, widows, divorcees, and single professional women deviate from the heterosexual norm. Muhonja’s elective lone parenthood category, for instance, “obliterates the affiliations between motherhood and marriage, the collapsing of the identities of woman, wife, and mother, and the juxtaposition of female and male parenting identities” (5). In the absence of “biological-father,” women begin a matrilineal blood line. They elect who, when, and how to love the other. They have the means to make and sustain their autonomy. By dislodging paternity, these trends also deconstruct tenets of patriarchy. Kenyan middle-class women are reframing mainstream structures and the language of female identity from childhood to adulthood, with or without a male partner and children. Masculine normativity is also derailed by a legal system that recognizes and enforces gender equality.

In contrast to mainstream discourse on developing countries that focus on poverty, sexism, and neocolonialism, Muhonja offers a narrative that defies the subjugation of women’s bodies and the domestic sphere. Countering historical categories, Kenya’s middle-class women depict an agency rare even in more developed countries. It is a welcome reminder of the centrality of women in cultural discourse and social transformation. This book offers a more complex reading of postcolonial societies like Kenya. It also underscores and reminds girls and women that their history and agency are not

a patriarchal favor; there are and have always been self-determined women in history. It is a clarion call to explore pockets of resistance, whoever we are and wherever we are.

Namulundah Florence was born in Bungoma, Kenya and teaches at Brooklyn College (CUNY). A graduate of Fordham University, she explores the impact of sociocultural factors on self-image and cultural identity. Her works include *bell hooks' Engaged Pedagogy: A Transgressive Education for Critical Consciousness*; *From Our Mothers' Hearths: Bukusu Folktales and Proverbs*; *Multiculturalism 101: The Practical Guide Series*; *Immigrant Teachers, American Students: Cultural Differences, Cultural Disconnections*; *The Bukusu of Kenya: Folktales, Culture and Social Identities*; and "Bukusu (Kenya) Folktales: How Women Perpetuate Patriarchy" in *The International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Wangari Maathai: Visionary, Environmental Leader, Political Activist* as well as *Adapting to Cultural Pluralism in Urban Classrooms*, as well as *Wangari Maathai: Visionary, Environmental Leader, Political Activist*.