

Sheldon, Kathleen. 2017. *AFRICAN WOMEN: EARLY HISTORY TO THE 21ST CENTURY*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 330 pp.

In *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century*, independent scholar Kathleen Sheldon has written a history of the African continent, the world's second largest, with an emphasis on its women. Affiliated with the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, she argues that the history of African women is a vital and successful field of intellectual study, which has grown "from a small number of books and articles published in the 1960s and 1970s to the now thriving research that covers a huge range of places, times, and topics that has been achieved in the twenty-first century" (p. xi).

As she explains in a seven-page introduction, problems that she encountered in two distinct areas prompted her to think about writing the book: many textbooks on the history of Africa had neglected and marginalized the continent's women, who were "nearly absent in some books, and when they are included[,] it is often in very limited and passive roles" (p. xi).

This book was designed to accomplish two goals, which Sheldon explains thus:

My first objective was to write a comprehensive narrative of African women's history by bringing together information that is usually scattered and narrowly focused. My second aim was to show that fully understanding the history of the continent requires knowledge of women's contributions to their communities and their accomplishments in their families. (Pp. xi–xii)

Sheldon points out that knowing women's history will enhance our understanding of where the women of Africa stand on their continent. In many African societies, she says, women once had greater power, and they "still draw on older forms of exercising female collective power, often developing innovative approaches out of their historical experiences in order to deal with new situations" (p. xi).

The first six chapters, of nine, discuss the early history of Africa, which has left us few or no written records (chapter 1); histories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (chapter 2); religion in the nineteenth century, including analyses of local beliefs among the Igbo in West Africa and the Luba in Central Africa (chapter 3); the period of intense colonialization between 1850 and 1945, framing a discussion of subsequent changes in religious practices as European missions became established in Tanzania, the Congo, and southern Africa (chapter 4); resistance and protest in the first half of the twentieth century, especially as women reacted to losses and change (chapter 5); and the years of committed nationalism, which marked politics across the continent in the 1950s and 1960s (chapter 6). What the

final section does best is bring the history of women on the African continent into the twenty-first century.

Most certainly, *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century* “provides an up-to-date and comprehensive guide to major issues in African women history” (p. xvii). Furthermore, apart from useful notes at the end of each chapter, Sheldon provides a comprehensive bibliography (pp. 301–14) and a detailed subject index (pp. 315–30).

As a generous scholar, Sheldon boldly tells campus leaders what her book does best for their students and classrooms: “The book is organized along clear chronological lines, which should facilitate using it in a wide variety of classes. Either the entire text or selected chapters can be assigned in traditional African history courses, as well as in comparative women’s studies classrooms” (p. xvi).

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