Introduction

During the first decades of the twenty-first century, popular media portrayed Africa as a dangerous, disorderly continent that was particularly threatening for women. Reflecting such sentiments, Helene Cooper, a Liberian-born journalist for the *New York Times*, called Africa "the worst place there is to be a woman."[1] Writing of the city of Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cooper described "an old woman, in her 30s" walking up a hill away from town:

> She carried so many logs that her chest almost seemed to touch the ground, so stooped was her back. Still, she trudged on, up the hill toward her home. Her husband was walking just in front of her. He carried nothing. Nothing in his hand, nothing on his shoulder, nothing on his back. He kept looking back at her, telling her to hurry up.[2]

Yet Cooper's article communicated not despair, but hope for the women who, in her words, "somehow manage to carry that entire continent on their backs."[3] They were the women who in the Liberian election of 2005 ignored the threats from young men to resume war if their candidate were defeated and flocked to the polls to elect a Harvard-educated banker, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, as president. With this election, Johnson Sirleaf, imprisoned under

[1] Helene Cooper, "Waiting for Their Moment in the Worst Place on Earth to Be a Woman," *New York Times*, November 16, 2005.
[2] Cooper, "Waiting for Their Moment."
[3] Cooper, "Waiting for Their Moment."

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an earlier regime, became the first woman to be elected head of an African country. These events in another country led Cooper to conclude, "I want to go back to Bukavu to find that woman, and to tell her what happened in Liberia. I want to tell her this. Your time will come too."[4]

Despite the distressing conditions that Cooper depicted, the narrative of oppression oversimplifies the lives of African women by neglecting class, power, and regional and cultural differences among them. In both precolonial and current African societies, women's position was complex, depending on their age and marital status, the economic possibilities open to them, and whether they lived in matrilineal communities where kinship was determined through women or patrilineal societies where it was traced through men.

Cultures also differed in their understanding of female and male differences and similarities. Indeed, the study of African women's history reinforces this complex message, portraying some women as downtrodden and oppressed, yet many also in powerful positions: as queen mothers, wealthy merchants, spiritual leaders, participants in resistance and nationalist movements and revolutionary struggles, and as active modernized professionals in business, law, health care, teaching, arts, and literature. These women include the substantial numbers who hold seats in African parliaments, the three African women who have received the Nobel Peace Prize, and the large number of internationally recognized scholars and writers.

African women's history: historical and cultural contexts

These contrasting images of African women have historical roots in the continent's colonial past, a narrative of white domination that stretched in most places from the mid-nineteenth century into the 1960s and, in parts of southern Africa, from the mid-seventeenth century into the mid 1990s. Strong external influence predated direct European conquest, however. On the west coast, slavery and the slave trade, dating back to the 1490s, already had reshaped political and economic life, ravaging some communities while strengthening others.

[4] Cooper, "Waiting for Their Moment."

South Africa, colonized by Dutch settlers in the mid-seventeenth cen-
tury, became a British colony in the early 1800s. Across north Africa
and the southern borders of the Sahara and along the east African
coast, Western influence was superimposed on Muslim societies,
molded respectively by centuries of trade in gold and salt across the
desert and maritime commerce across the Indian Ocean. This early
period of foreign political, economic, and cultural contact trans-
formed African life in innumerable ways, spreading Islam gradually
through a combination of trade, warfare, and intermarriage between
Muslim men and local women.

External influence notwithstanding, in both the interior and along
the maritime and desert coasts indigenous political, economic, and
religious systems were complex and varied, ranging from centralized
kingdoms with strong rulers and clear patterns of social hierarchy to
smaller-scale communities based around extended families and clans.
Societies also differed economically, some depending more heavily on
farming, others on herding, and still others on local and long-distance
trade. Although most of Africa was rural, towns along the oceans
and the "coasts" of the desert fringe developed distinctive patterns
of indigenous urban culture, economics, and architecture. In most
societies, men were politically and economically dominant, and men
with sufficient wealth could marry more than one woman. Virtually
everywhere, however, women were granted greater freedom and
authority, both in their families and in public life, once they passed
their childbearing years.

Although European traders strongly influenced many coastal areas
of Africa beginning in the late fifteenth century, only in the nine-
teenth century did larger numbers of merchants, explorers, and mis-
sionaries begin to penetrate the interior in large numbers. In some
regions, especially on the west coast and in South Africa, the pres-
ence of these outsiders began to create complex changes among small
groups of Africans, encouraging them to convert to Christianity, send
their children to mission schools, and (in west Africa) to replace traf-
fic in people with the exchange of new commodities such as palm
oil and groundnuts. By the mid 1880s, a combination of political
and economic conflict within Europe and the tendency of explorers
and missionaries from Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and Italy
to become enmeshed in struggles within and among African states
and communities led to a "scramble for Africa" among the major
European powers.

European governments staked out their competing claims to the
continent at the Berlin Conference in 1884–5. Gradually over the
following decades, often through military "pacification" campaigns,
these outsiders established control over their new dominions – leaving
virtually all of Africa under foreign rule. The exceptions were Ethiopia,
whose long-established kings mobilized their military power to stave
off occupation, and Liberia, founded by returning slaves from the
United States. America's informal influence allowed this west coast
country to escape formal colonization.

Twentieth-century transformations

By the early twentieth century, few areas of the continent escaped, even
if indirectly, the effects of the new colonial occupation and its after-
math. This book will explore how women experienced, perceived, and
influenced the transformations and cultural conflicts of their societies
and how they struggled, both individually and collectively, to reshape
their lives and communities. It will also examine the apparent paradox
in the conflicting images of African women – not only as singularly
oppressed and dominated by men, but also as strong, resourceful, and
willing to challenge governments and local traditions to protect them-
selves and their families. I will suggest that women's critical position
in society – producing, preparing, and selling food; giving birth to
new generations; feeding, educating, and caring for their families; and
sustaining traditions of healing and fertility – was precisely the reason
that male family members and successive male-dominated govern-
ments sought to undermine their economic and political influence
and to control their sexuality.

Understanding the tension between women's power and their
oppression, between their strength and their vulnerability, offers a new
lens for understanding the relationship between the state and society
in the twentieth century. Through the transformations of this period –
as the colonial state gave way to states controlled by African men, and
as the nationalist movements of the 1940s and 1950s yielded to anti-
colonial wars and to the democratization movements of the 1990s –
women continued to struggle – with increasing success over time – to
assert control over their lives and the lives of their families. Yet just as
some women were poised to regain or even to surpass the power and

authority they had lost during the colonial century, both local back-
lash and global economic forces threatened their achievements in new
ways, helping to sustain the conditions and contradictions that Helene
Cooper so poignantly described.

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Colonizing African families

In her moving novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nigerian writer Buchi
Emecheta portrays the dramatic changes in marriage, motherhood,
and family life in early twentieth-century Africa, emphasizing her
main character's struggles to survive in a confusing colonial city. Nnu
Ego is forced to leave her home village for an arranged second mar-
riage after an earlier union failed to produce children. Ironically, now
unhappily wed to Nnaife, her fertility blossoms. After the tragic death
of her four-week old son and her failed attempt to commit suicide, she
becomes pregnant again and pictures her new son as an adult, unlike
his father, a "perfect figure of a man."[1] When he grows up, she imagi-
nes, he will live next door to her in a rural compound bustling with
goats and hens, and relatives and friends, where she will tell stories of
her life in a crazy, demeaning town called Lagos.

The book goes on to explore the heartaches and challenges Nnu
Ego faces trying to survive and raise her children in a "white man's
world." As she struggles to feed her family by selling cigarettes,
matches, paraffin, and chopped wood at a stall in the market, her hus-
band Nnaife goes from job to job and squanders any extra money on
alcohol and lavish ceremonies. Adding to the family's woes, after his
brother's death, Nnaife takes the young widow Adaku as a second wife.
Despite the stress of sharing their cramped quarters with a co-wife,
Adaku's refusal to accept their husband's foibles provokes Nnu Ego to

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[1] Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (New York: George Braziller, 1979), 78.

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think more critically about her own life. When Adaku urges them to stop cooking for their husband until he provides sufficient housekeeping money, Nnaife responds violently, telling Nnu Ego that feeding the children is her responsibility. His response prompts her to reflect: "At home in Ibuza she would have had her own hut and would at least have been treated as befitting her position [as a senior wife], but here in Lagos, where she was faced with the harsh reality of making ends meet on a pittance, was it right for her husband to refer to her responsibility?"[2]

Nnu Ego's hardship intensifies when Nnaife is forcibly rounded up to fight for the British army during the Second World War, leaving Nnu Ego once again to ponder the circumstances of her life: "because she was the mother of three sons, she was supposed to be happy in her poverty … in her churning stomach, in her rags, in her cramped room."[3] When Nnaife finally returns, to great excitement, the costly celebrations continue for days. But in Nnu Ego's eyes, "There was one thing that did not change with Nnaife and that was his lack of judgement. Now that he had money, it had to be spent."[4] Again Nnu Ego consoles herself with the knowledge that when her sons grow up, they will support her and make her life more comfortable.

Nnaife's return also provokes additional challenges for Nnu Ego: her husband's new marriage to a sixteen-year-old girl, the arrival of a second set of twins – both girls – and then another girl, her ninth child, who dies at birth. Acknowledging men's disappointment at these female births, Nnu Ego wonders "who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world which women will always help to build."[5] Adaku, younger and more independent than Nnu Ego, is the only character in the novel to defy these expectations by educating her two daughters.

As time passes, Nnu Ego's first two sons leave for college and, to Nnu Ego's distress, Oshia, the eldest, accepts a scholarship to study in the United States rather than remaining at home to help the family. After one of the oldest twins refuses the marriage partner chosen by her father, preferring the son of a Yoruba butcher, Nnaife threatens

[2] Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood*, 137.
[3] Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood*, 167.
[4] Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood*, 182.
[5] Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood*, 187.

to kill the young man with a cutlass. The judge reduces his five-year prison sentence to three months with the stipulation that he return directly to Ibuza after his release.

Feeling old and defeated after her husband's sentencing, Nnu Ego leaves Lagos for Ibuza. But Nnaife's family rejects her as a "bad woman," forcing her to return to her home village, where her condition deteriorates quickly. What finally breaks her spirit, however, is not ill health, but "month after month" failing to hear from her eldest sons in North America. She dies quietly, "with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her." The narrator continues: "She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother."[6] When Nnu Ego's children learn of her sudden death, they all return to the village. Regretting that she had passed away before they were in a position to make her life easier, they organize "the noisiest and most costly" burial Ibuza had ever seen and have a shrine built in her name so that barren women might seek her assistance. In light of this sumptuous public display, everyone wondered why after her death she repeatedly failed to respond to their requests. "Nnu Ego had it all, yet still did not answer prayers for children."[7]
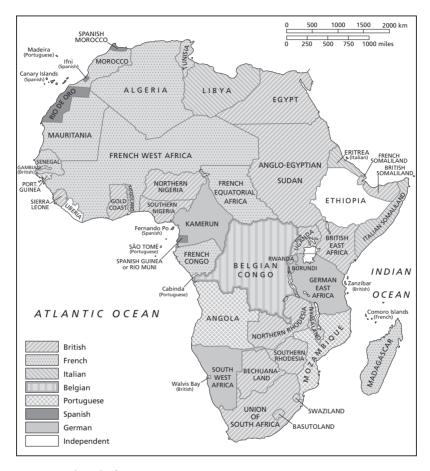
Colonial overview

The Joys of Motherhood was set in a single west African coastal city, yet the experiences of the book's characters reflected widespread trends after the British, French, German, Belgian, Portuguese, and Italian governments seized colonial territories across the African continent from the late 1800s through the first decade of the twentieth century. Sometimes through violent conquest, at others through more peaceful negotiation, these foreign rulers asserted their authority over African kings and chiefs and actively supported missionary efforts to convert Africans to Christianity. As part of their "civilizing mission," government officials and missionaries also founded schools to train a select group of African children, primarily boys, in European languages, history, and culture. Given the strong economic motives for conquest,

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[6] Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood*, 224.
[7] Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood*, 224.

MAP 2 Colonial Africa in 1914.
Source: From Robert O. Collins and James M. Burns, *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa Second Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

colonial powers also began to exploit the land and mineral resources in new ways.

Beneath the surface of one family's struggles to survive under these new and disorienting conditions, *The Joys of Motherhood* also conveys a more profound message: that these rapid social changes not only disrupted individual lives, but threatened the health, well-being, and continued viability of African societies. By transforming relationships between spouses, and between parents and children, colonialism endangered the very survival of African families. The book's last

line directly conveys this danger – in Nnu Ego's adamant refusal to respond to women's prayers for children.

In the early decades of colonial rule, still marked by both violent and covert protest and rebellion, colonial institutions were still in flux and the relationships between established local rulers and colonial officials remained contested. During this experimental social, economic, and political period, some girls and women began to exercise their rights in new ways. Challenging family control, many girls fled to mission stations to escape arranged marriages. In the absence of men, women also asserted a new autonomy in agriculture, experimenting with and adopting new crops.

By the 1920s, colonial powers and missionaries began to claim their hegemonic power more systematically. They reached more deeply into rural societies, codifying customary law and enhancing the power of the elders, who used these practices to control women and younger men. By recognizing or introducing new authority figures in rural areas (both new officials called "chiefs" and European appointees), colonial regimes ignored the power women had held in many societies, whether in their own right, as joint rulers with men, or through "dual sex" systems in which women and men each governed their respective activities. Whereas in some areas men's control over women had begun to loosen in the early twentieth century, the trend was now reversed, reflecting the shared beliefs of colonial rulers and older African men that women were inherently immoral and belonged under men's control.

In an effort to impose European values over cultures they saw as inferior and to control practices they judged "uncivilized," colonizers also began to intervene more aggressively in women's personal lives through efforts to transform and regulate coming-of-age ceremonies, marriage, and childbirth practices and to eliminate bridewealth gifts to the wife's family. In many areas, this "civilizing mission" coincided with efforts to staunch falling birth rates that disrupted the colonial labor supply. European rule also introduced more rigid ways of understanding the differences between women and men, undercutting the prior power of the exceptional women who were able to attain positions of wealth and authority generally associated with men.

"Here wives must work"

Unlike Western Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were fully engaged in the economic life of their