During a turbulent colonial and postcolonial century, African women struggled to control their own marital, sexual, and economic lives and to gain a significant voice in local and national politics. This book introduces many remarkable women, who organized religious and political movements, fought in anticolonial wars, ran away to escape arranged marriages, and during the 1990s began successful campaigns for gender parity in national legislatures. The book also explores 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 themselves and their families. 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.

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New Approaches to African History

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New Approaches to African History is designed to introduce students to current findings and new ideas in African history. Although each book treats a particular case and is able to stand alone, the format allows the studies to be used as modules in general courses on African history and world history. The cases represent a wide range of topics. Each volume summarizes the state of knowledge on a particular subject for a student who is new to the field. However, the aim is not simply to present views of the literature; it is also to introduce debates on historiographical or substantive issues and may argue for a particular point of view. The aim of the series is to stimulate debate and to challenge students and general readers. The series is not committed to any particular school of thought.

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In memory of my parents
Esther Skolnik Brown
and
Norman L. Brown
and
To my students at Machakos Girls High School
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This book has its origins in the classrooms of the Machakos Girls High School in Kenya, where I taught history and English in the mid 1960s. Just out of college and scarcely older than some of the students in my classes, I began meeting periodically with a group of girls to talk about their personal lives and plans for the future. Perhaps prompted by the pregnancy of one student, who was allowed to remain in school, but had to live apart from her classmates in the small house designed for domestic science instruction, our discussions turned to marriage, sexuality, and childbearing. Over the years, all I recalled from these gatherings was the insistence of many students that they were eager to have children, but were skeptical about being married. I am deeply grateful to one of them, Maryam Murbe Solola, for her persistence in tracing me nearly four decades later. Our emotional meeting rekindled memories of the school and of a formative period in my own life.

My relationships with these lively and engaging young women contributed to my interest in African women’s history. Although I was assigned to teach African history, the syllabus for the national examination at the time focused primarily on the activities of Europeans on the continent; women were never mentioned. As in the United States and Europe, research on the history of women in Africa developed only during the late 1960s as feminist scholars and activists began intensive efforts to “restore women to history.” Over time, the field expanded from a concentration on economics and politics to include...
marriage, childbirth, sexualities, and the relationships between women and men, issues that this book will explore.

Rather than a chronological narrative that looks at African women’s history region by region, I use case studies to analyze the interactions between personal and public life across the twentieth century, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa. North African countries shared the political challenges of European colonization, nationalist resistance, and the difficulties of creating a new postcolonial legal and political order. But by the early twentieth century higher levels of industrialization and commercialized agriculture, the erosion of small-scale peasant economies, and a shared history and culture made the lives of north African women different in significant respects from those of their neighbors to the south.

In addition to my students in Kenya, many other people have contributed more directly to this book. First, I am grateful to Martin Klein, editor of the series *New Approaches to African History*, for asking me to write a book on women and for his prompt and perceptive response to the completed manuscript. I also appreciate the suggestions of Sandra Greene and Margaret Jean Hay, who read the initial proposal. The invitation from Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin to write one of the scholarly essays for their online documentation project, *Women and Social Movements, International*, contributed to the sections on African women’s participation in transnational women’s movements. I also want to thank the editors of the *African Studies Review* for inviting me to deliver the ASR Distinguished Lecture at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association in 2013. Preparing for the talk gave me new insights into several of the book’s main themes, as did comments from Teresa Barnes, Amina Mama, Ali Tripp, and other members of the audience. Peter Gelfan’s astute questions and suggestions on an earlier draft greatly improved the final manuscript. The Department of History and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University at Albany contributed to funding for the photographs. Thanks also to Eloise Brière and Tricia Redeker Hepner for answering my queries about particular images and to Judith Tucker, who replied to my questions about women in north Africa. This book would not have been possible without the remarkable scholarship and literature on and by African women that has provided the basis for new insights into how women’s lives changed during the course of an unsettled century.
Finally, Ron Berger’s contributions to the book are immeasurable. As both a historian and a creative writer, he has read and critiqued numerous drafts of the manuscript, asked probing questions, and offered inspired suggestions for revisions. Most important, he never wavered in his encouragement and love.
MAP 1 African countries and cities, c. 2000.
Source: Adapted from Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).