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UCSB Scholars Explore the Concept of Gender in Africa

For scholars in Africa, the concept of gender as a discursive term and an area of research within the field of African Studies is relatively new, according to two University of California professors and one at the University of Ghana. They have compiled a collection of essays that examine how the topic of gender has taken root in Africa and how it has impacted the daily lives of the people who live there.

In their volume titled "Africa After Gender?" (Indiana University Press, 2007) Stephan F. Miescher, an associate professor of history at UC Santa Barbara, Catherine M. Cole, a former associate professor of dramatic art and associate director of the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center at UCSB, and Takyiwaa Manuh, an associate professor and director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana at Legon, have brought together leading African scholars who discuss gender as an applied rather than theoretical tool. The contributors—historians, anthropologists, literary critics, and sociologists—explore themes such as the performance of sexuality, women's political mobilization, the work of gender-related non-governmental organizations, and the role of masculinity in a gendered world.

"Feminism as a word won't catch on in Africa," said Cole. "But everyone has a gender. Feminism often strikes men as something that excludes them, but gender is less threatening. It's seen as more equal opportunity."

The book also examines how differently African scholars perceive the concept of gender as compared to their colleagues in North America and Europe. According to Cole, while scholars who teach and conduct research in the United States and Europe take a more theoretical approach to gender issues in Africa, "those in Africa find the politics of gender very much at the forefront of their lives."

Among the other contributors to "Africa After Gender?" is Eileen Boris, professor of history and women's studies at UCSB, who wrote the essay titled "Gender After Africa!"

The purpose of the book is twofold, according to Miescher. First, it addresses the North/South relationship, which is the term the researchers use to describe the differences in the philosophy and experience that separate African scholars from those in the United States and Europe. It brings them together to work on a project that examines the scope of gender both as a topic in academe and as a way of life in Africa, he noted.

Secondly, the book takes an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach to the study of gender, one that has become possible in recent years due to the wide reach of the Internet.

"We wanted to assemble a volume that had voices from a range of locations," said Cole. "Considering the logistics of including so many contributors from the continent, it would have been impossible to accomplish without the Internet. The Internet is creating different avenues of knowledge circulation."

Added Miescher, "In general, the term 'interdisciplinary' has meant historians and anthropologists getting together and writing about something. In this case, it includes literary scholars, legal scholars, and performance and theater scholars. Our idea is to illuminate the importance gender has not just across academe but beyond it."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society.

All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.