

BEYOND WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT IN AFRICA

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BEYOND WOMEN'S  
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EXPLORING DISLOCATION AND AGENCY

Elinami Veraeli Swai

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my beloved mother,  
Mikali Mamboro, and precious father, Veraeli Zakaria,  
and my late baby sister, Joyce Aisaa.

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## FOREWORD

It is a great honor and privilege to be invited by Dr. Elinami Swai to write the foreword to this great book, which examines the role of women's knowledge systems in development in Africa using Tanzania as a case study. I would like to begin by congratulating Dr. Elinami Swai for converting her doctoral dissertation into a book because many dissertations do not make this transition. There are many eminent scholars on gender and women's studies in Africa more qualified than I, but I am happy that I was selected to write this foreword. Since the book discusses issues about women from East Africa (where I have conducted most of my research), I believe that I am qualified enough to introduce the reader to this book. The first chapter deals with "dislocation" in a discursive form, highlighting ways in which women have been dislocated as a consequence of many forces acting against them in rural Tanzania. The second chapter addresses the idea and movement of women's knowledge systems in Tanzania, dealing with ambivalences and silences that have attended these knowledge systems. The third chapter is perhaps the most fascinating because it uses *khangas* (women's clothes) as space and site where women's power and knowledge are articulated as text and subtext, coded and decoded. Equally fascinating is the fourth chapter, which examines the role of women's knowledge systems in Africa's development. Chapter 5 is titled "The Genesis of Women Disempowerment: The Case of Kilimanjaro," which is closely linked to the final chapter, which discusses the politics of women's empowerment. These are great themes that have not been addressed by previous studies. This book is, therefore, long overdue.

The appearance of this book is most timely as almost a decade has passed since Susan Geiger's *TANU Women*, which was published in 1997, on Tanzania, addressing the role of women in social movements. It is not only for this reason that the book must be welcomed by those interested in the role of women in development in Tanzania and Africa but also for its immediate value, which resides in the use of everyday examples, narratives, and new sources. Throughout the book, we are treated to interesting and exciting vignettes of women's

knowledge systems in Africa in ways that we have never seen or heard before. Dr. Swai uses anecdotes and fantastic life stories to lead us through complex discourses on how women have created and preserved knowledge in rural Tanzania. The stories she recounts from rural areas are a deep and exciting look into the minds of the women as well as their role in society.

The book provides a significant shift toward incorporating ordinary voices in understanding the lifestyles and livelihoods of women in rural Tanzania. A notable and insightful contribution to our understanding of women's lives, this book traces the unique narration, background, structures, and institutions within which women operate in rural Tanzania in the most remarkable manner. The book examines empowerment using completely new lenses—looking at power from the role it plays in societal relations rather than in dominating others. The main thrust of the book is on what may be termed the clash of knowledge systems—Western and African, and a subsystem that the author refers to as a women's knowledge system—and the resulting tensions.

Earlier books on women in Africa have tended to look at politics of exclusion and marginalization of women, but Dr. Swai's study suggests an alternative way of looking at knowledge and power. The fact that some people have not heard about other forms of knowledge does not mean that these forms do not exist. This book reflects not only on new topics and themes but also on new sources. Although the book uses a variety of sources that enrich the reader's understanding of women's knowledge systems in Tanzania, oral sources are deployed to great effect. Secondary sources provide a starting point for some of the sections of the book; oral interviews, participant observation, government reports, and life histories of rural women are utilized by the author to a large extent. Rural women have utilized traditional coping mechanisms and have taken advantage of modern entrepreneurial techniques. Swai faults government policies of privileging Western education and its attendant structures; they have done much to produce the evisceration of women's knowledge in Tanzania. Just as much as the role of the state has caused the marginalization of women's knowledge, the reader will likely conclude that the state has an absolutely critical, supportive role to play (e.g., in recent calls for recognition of indigenous knowledge in areas such as medicine and environmental conservation) if women's knowledge has to be profitable. This is not necessarily a contradictory assessment; rather, it suggests that politics and governance always are key variables in politics of knowledge.

The need for recognition of women's knowledge systems is a theme that runs throughout the book. Dr. Swai's book is an extraordinary

work that deploys women's knowledge systems such as beautiful stories, sayings, proverbs, metaphors, and slogans to great effect. She succeeds in drawing the attention of the readers to the ways in which women in rural Tanzania have created their own ways of creating power and how they have negotiated for their own position in society. Swai's book illustrates the innovative ways in which women in rural Tanzania have responded to economic difficulties and opportunities.

Dr. Swai deploys various theoretical frameworks. Among these that will be familiar to readers are the social historical theory, feminist theory, critical discourse analysis, and postmodern and postcolonial theories. Swai deploys postmodern devices in this book and refuses to close her eyes to forms of misrepresentation of women that have existed in the past. She remains perceptive and thoughtful, transporting our cognitive thoughts toward understanding and decoding women's knowledge in ways that have never been seen before. From the first page, readers are quickly and completely immersed in this book because of its simplicity and discursive superiority. As Dr. Swai's narrative continues throughout the book, she accurately conveys ways in which knowledge has been produced and used in rural areas in Tanzania. It requires great courage to fault and deconstruct Western education in Africa the way Swai does in this book. But rather than bashing colonial education and seeing it as a project in evisceration of women, Swai attempts to lead the readers into the states of mind of rural women and how their knowledge has remained resilient.

Any reader who seeks to understand more clearly the role of women's knowledge systems in Africa and their power, especially how they have influenced development, will be impressed with this book. There is no doubt that the book will be a useful addition to the historiography on feminism, gender, and women's studies in Africa. The interdisciplinary approach interwoven in the book and the research from which the book was produced, including the heavy use of oral and other primary sources, as well as secondary materials, adds to the adaptability of this book to all fields in the sciences, humanities, and social sciences. I would like to highly recommend the book to all students of the African continent and departments of African studies, ethnic and global studies, history, political science, education, anthropology, sociology, and gender and women's studies, and general readers.

—Professor Mary Nyangweso-Wangila, PhD, J. Woolard and  
Helen Peel Distinguished Professor in Religious Studies,  
East Carolina University

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scholar and not simply mimic ideas of other scholars. I was fascinated and thrilled by her enthusiasm for African feminisms, her knowledge of women's experiences in rural Africa, and her personal intellectual prowess, which really motivated me. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, who was willing to serve on my committee and always provided thoughtful feedback, guidance, and suggestions. Dr. Zeleza encouraged me to look harder and further into African feminist literature. His encouragement played a significant role in my getting hired for a tenure-track position at the University of Toledo. I need also to thank Lourdes Diaz Soto, my first advisor, for her encouragement.

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