

**Review Of *Working With Gender: Wage Labor And Social Change In Southwestern Nigeria* by Lisa A. Lindsay, Heinemann, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 2003.**

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Lindsay has written an excellent book that offers empirical validity to prevailing theories that ideas about gender are malleable. Her book examines the varying ways in which gender is used to negotiate working conditions among employees and employers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in southwestern Nigeria. While not strictly about women's work, nor a descriptive historical account, Lindsay's book is an intellectually grounded study that uses a case study of government employed railway workers and their families in order to expose the intricate links between waged work, gender, and domestic work, demonstrating how gender, as a social construct, is fluid and changing. Thanks to the straightforward presentation of her argument, readers are convincingly shown that the book's title, *Working With Gender*, has a number of meanings derived from the realms of discourse, practice, and subjectivity.

The book consists of eight, extensively researched chapters in which Lindsay painstakingly prompts her readers to think about the complex ways in which gender can be understood. In the introductory chapter, Lindsay examines the links between gender and wage labor in colonial Africa. In the second chapter, titled "Wage Labor, Money, and Masculinity in Early Twentieth-Century Yorubaland", Lindsay looks to the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, where men were not the sole providers for their wives, children, and families. The reality of men's financial commitments to extended family members, as well as to the community, is illustrated in chapter 3, "Families, Jobs, and the State before 1945," These commitments received contradictory interpretations based upon the shifting responses and policies of colonial administrators.

The remaining chapters of *Working With Gender* follow a sequence that starts by establishing the connection between domesticity and difference during the 1945 General Strike (chapter 4). In two tellingly titled chapters—"The Rise of the 'Male Breadwinner' in Postwar Southwestern Nigeria" (chapter 5), and "The Fall of the 'Modern' Breadwinner?" (chapter 8)—readers learn about the rise and fall in significance of male wage earners to socioeconomic wellbeing. Sandwiched between these chapters, Lindsay discusses the differentiation of domesticity (chapter 6), and the reconfiguration of the connection between domesticity and difference as played out in the 1964 General Strike (chapter 7). When men's roles as breadwinners waxed due to exploitative working conditions they agitated for a family wage in accordance with conceptions of "progress," "enlightenment," and "modernization". The "modern" male breadwinner role waned by the early 1990s, the time when Lindsay was

gathering information for her dissertation (which is the basis of this book) from retired railway workers who were faced with economic hardships.

Lindsay's work cannot be faulted for lacking empirical rigor. In fact, the book benefits from her (acknowledged) acquaintance with people in the cities of Lagos and Ibadan, two main sites of her study. Loaded with a host of information obtained from primary and secondary sources, the book is eminently readable. I was very impressed by the range of materials that Lindsay synthesized to make her arguments. Lindsay's study is a good model for social scientists whose research utilizes various published materials, as she complements them with information gathered from interviews, detailed life histories, court archives, newspaper editorials, and even theatrical productions. Lindsay's ability to shed light on the study of class, gender, and ideological shifts in pre- and post-independence Africa is to be commended. The photographs and illustrations enrich the book immensely.

The book examines the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (an era of rapid social change), and covers varied topics, including trade union activism, social welfare, labor reform, family life, rural-to-urban migration, and urban planning. In all these spheres, Lindsay illustrates the often ambivalent or ambiguous rhetoric, and the realities of women's and men's roles. European colonizers seeking a stable urban work force debated the pros and cons of traditional Yoruba family norms and lifestyles. Male waged workers challenged British colonial discrimination during a six-week strike by couching their role as family breadwinners, even though married Yoruba women were also economic contributors and active partners in family upkeep. This "male breadwinner" ideal subsequently expanded during the post war decades, even as Nigerian government officials and women employed gender ideology for their own ends. These are a few of the ways different groups used and reused gender in the contexts of waged work and domestic work.

Two anecdotes from my mother, who grew up in Southwestern Nigeria, capture elements of labor differentiation, and the differentiation of domesticity that Lindsay describes. My mother recalled that a popular theatrical production, titled *Worse Than Crime*, decried the below subsistence wages paid to Nigerian workers under the colonial administration. She also recalled when the relatively high incomes of Nigerian senior service workers did not compare favorably with the salaries, benefits, and other family allowances enjoyed by European expatriates. However, the conditions of junior staff workers, including many who worked as "house boys", were far worse. This was the backdrop of the general strike of 1964 (the topic of chapter 7) when Nigerian labor unions requested the elimination of benefits and family allowances for top officials. This is an example of the twists and turns that makes Lindsay's gendered interpretation of wage labor and social change in Southwestern Nigeria compelling.

*Working With Gender* is a very important addition to the body of Gender Studies literature. Overall, the book lends itself readily to many academic disciplines, and I highly recommend it to scholars in African Studies as well as

to researchers, teachers, and students who want a deeper understanding of gender and social change. I especially like the fact that the book focuses on urban life—an aspect of African livelihoods that is still understudied. Wagadu readers will find *Working With Gender* appealing since the study is situated squarely at the intersection of imperialism, nationalism, feminism, and racism. Through its analysis of the complexities of wage work and social change, *Working With Gender* eschews simplistic and monolithic presentations of gender and work in studying past and contemporary African livelihoods. I hope the successive books in the Social History of Africa series, of which *Working With Gender* is a part, emulate this standard of analytic rigor, clarity, and social relevance.