



Exchange Is Not Robbery: More Stories of an African Bar Girl

John M. Chernoff

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While living in West Africa in the 1970s, John Chernoff recorded the stories of "Hawa," a spirited and brilliant but uneducated woman whose insistence on being respected and treated fairly propelled her, ironically, into a life of marginality and luck as an "ashawo," or bar girl. Rejecting traditional marriage options and cut off from family support, she is like many women in Africa who come to depend on the help they receive from one another, from boyfriends, and from the men they meet in bars and nightclubs. Refusing to see herself as a victim, Hawa embraces the freedom her lifestyle permits and seeks the broadest experience available to her.

In *Exchange Is Not Robbery* and its predecessor, *Hustling Is Not Stealing*, a chronicle of exploitation is transformed by verbal art into an ebullient comedy. In *Hustling Is Not Stealing*, Hawa is a playful warrior struggling against circumstances in Ghana and Togo. In *Exchange Is Not Robbery*, Hawa returns to her native Burkina Faso, where she achieves greater control over her life but faces new difficulties. As a woman making sacrifices to live independently, Hawa sees her own situation become more complex as she confronts an atmosphere in Burkina Faso that is in some ways more challenging than the one she left behind, and the moral ambiguities of her life begin to intensify.

Combining elements of folklore and memoir, Hawa's stories portray the diverse social landscape of West Africa. Individually the anecdotes can be funny, shocking, or poignant; assembled together they offer a sweeping critical and satirical vision.

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