

ADDRESS

Challenging Subjects: Gender and Power in African Contexts

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"What is certain is that 'normality' cannot be separated from the hierarchization of identities. The great hegemonic, rational, political-philosophical mechanisms are precisely what fabricate normality, with the consent of the group concerned" (Etienne Balibar 1998: 777)

There is no word for 'identity' in any of the African languages with which I can claim any degree of familiarity. Perhaps there is good reason for this. In English the word 'identity' implies a singular, individual subject with clear ego boundaries. In Africa, if I were to generalise, ask a person who he or she is and his and a name will quickly be followed by a qualifier, a communal term that will indicate ethnic or clan origins (See Omoregbe 1999:6). To this day, African bureaucracies use forms which require the applicant (for a passport, a driving license, to gain to access to public education, housing or health services) to specify 'tribe'.

The idea of identity is an interesting one to most Africans, largely because it has remained so vexed. We seem to be constantly seeking the integrity and unity that the notion implies, without succeeding in securing it, or coming to terms with it. We are being asked to think 'beyond identity', when for many of us, identity remains a quest, something in-the-making. I think that the reason that African thinkers – or indeed other postcolonial subjects – may balk at the prospect of working 'beyond identity' is clear. It relates to the contentious nature of the term in our upbringing, as a site of oppression and resistance. We recall distasteful colonial impositions that *told* us who we were: a race of kaffirs, natives, negroes and negresses.

Speaking for myself, I must say that I was not much aware of these things growing up in a postcolonial city inhabited by people from all over the world: Lebanese, Syrians and Egyptian business people and professionals, Indian doctors, Pakistani teachers, Englishmen, Scotsmen, and Irish nuns, Italian construction engineers, Japanese industrialists, Chinese oil workers, and a fair

representation of Nigeria's many ethnic groups, Muslims and Christians. There were differences, true, but I recall learning to eat with chopsticks, to make fresh pasta, and appreciate good coffee at an early age, alongside all the usual West African cultural details.

I seem to recall that I 'grew' a more specifiable 'identity' only when I was sent away to school in Europe by parents hoping to protect me from the horrors of the Biafran civil war, which after all, started in Kaduna in 1966. I developed an awareness of my difference, my Other-ness, when I was far away from home, family and the cosmopolitan community I had known. It was in an English boarding school that I was first compelled to claim and assert an identity, if only to correct the daily nonsense that I was subjected to by teachers who were often as parochial as my peers. Maybe the support system 'back home' had been unrealistically reassuring, but we had been raised to assume that we were 'citizens of the world' in a world that now turned out to be deeply divided. In England, these cosmopolitan wings were clipped down to more parochial size, insofar as I was now reduced to being a 'coloured girl' or a 'black', to be treated variously as though I was an orphan, a refugee or an immigrant. Furthermore assumed to have an 'identity problem'. It is possible that this formative experience gave rise to my longstanding interest in working on the subject of identity.

It was on my many visits and eventual return to Africa that I gradually realised the nature of the problem. Not only is there no all-encompassing concept for identity in much of Africa, but there is no substantive apparatus for the production of the kind of singularity that the term seemed to require. The petty bureaucratic insistence on tribal and racial markers, our new flags and anthems, and even the grand national stadiums and basilicas could not and still cannot be compared to the imperial administrative and ideological apparatus that lay behind the production of English culture, and its more encompassing political front, British identity. So how was British-ness produced?

Perhaps we should recall that these European psychotechnologies have been implicitly designed to serve the administrative, bureaucratic selection and social control needs of late capitalist welfare states (Donzelot 1980, Rose 1985). The focus on mental measurement, was motivated by the administrative need to find ways of distinguishing between those who were 'fit' from those who were 'unfit', initially for military purposes (Rose 1985). Later selection and testing was turned to civilian application, in differentiating 'the deserving' from 'the undeserving' poor, as a means of determining whether individuals would be entitled to work, welfare, education, health, residence permits, or not. Petty bureaucrats were thus providing with gatekeeping devices that were always heavily imbued with racism and sexism. In the colonies, the same tools were deployed in the selection of a suitably fit yet docile, exclusively male labour force, suited to the dangers of deep shaft mining and the like (Bulhan 1981). Given that the centuries-old technologies of the self⁴ and the nation have been developed in such close liaison with the twin projects of industrial capital-

ist development and imperial expansionism, can these concepts and tools be usefully turned around and deployed to assist in the oppositional project of decolonization, democratisation, and women's liberation?

Returning to the matter of identity in Africa, here even the 'raw material' at hand in our strangely constructed and fragile nation-states vexes the question, nationally and individually. Nigeria illustrates the typical conundrum because like the vast majority of African nation-states it does not have a single language that everyone learns. Rather there are a plethora of tongues, and most citizens grow up speaking two, three or even four languages². If there is an homogenizing, unifying language at all, it is that thing called 'broken English', actually a Creole product of the creative grafting of so many of our tongues onto the standard issue English of Janet and John delivered through the colonial missions and schools. Never very concerned with correctly mimicking His Master's Voice, imparted through the royal cadences of the BBC World Service, Nigerians crafted a new use of English, one quite incomprehensible to those whose command is restricted to the Queen's version.

One might also invoke the example of Afrikanerdom, and the great lengths that it took the Boers and the *Broederbond* in their plan to coerce the all-white nation of their dreams out of the African land they had occupied. McClintock provides us with an astute analysis of this bizarrely contrived moment in history, and draws out the manner in which gender dynamics have been at least as central to nationalist projects as to racist ones (McClintock 1995).

In my own case, I could claim three continents in my global ancestry. If I limit myself to discussion of my African (Nigerian) aspect, I would still have to address the fact that this includes several local ethnicities and creeds, the result of at least one jihad, and various migrations across the Savannah lands, up and down the tributaries of the River Niger. English-ness, however, seems to be the simplest aspect of who I am, perhaps because identity is at best a gross simplification of self-hood, a denial and negation of the complexity and multiplicity at the roots of most African communities. Better still, everybody has quite clear ideas about who and what the English are, so that it flows easily as cultural currency, retaining a degree of value that appears to have survived the loss of its colonial possessions. The same may not be said for all the other selves I so casually lay claim to, for none of these travel quite so easily, and the difficulties of communication and mis-identification are profoundly exacerbated by the prevailing mystiques surrounding women of a different 'race' or nationality.

In short, the implication of history for our sense of who we are is complicated, and extends far beyond the scope of academic theorisations of identity, notably within twentieth century psychology³. By and large these have not been alert to considerations of power or politics, and could even be said to have obscured them.

Contemporary conceptualisations of 'identity politics' largely by political economists have also proved insubstantial, tautological even. 'Identity politics' is a term used to describe mobilisations around what now *appear* to be primordial notions of self-hood and community. These are in fact very new inventions, albeit inventions that seek to assert their own primordial character by making frequent reference to old books and holy scrolls, and to mythical, grandiose histories, in much the way so skilfully laid out for us by Benedict Anderson in his seminal discussion of nationalism, nearly twenty years ago (1983). Valentin Mudimbe (1989) is among those who have challenged the construction of 'Africa' by imperial Europe.⁴ The difference between the nationalisms of the past and the proliferating identities of today seems to lie in the fact that whereas the former assisted in the construction of the nation, the latter constantly threatens to fragment and implode it. Nonetheless, today's identities are just as historical and political, despite the scholarly insistence on substituting culturally deterministic arguments for previous biological arguments now no longer in vogue. Furthermore, in the post cold-war era, identity is the main site offering anything that *resembles* resistance to US-style globalisation. Thinking beyond identity therefore runs the risk of suggesting that identities – oppressive or liberatory – have no relevance to politics.

The generic response to manifestations of identity within Western institutions has been to put together some kind of training workshop in 'multiculturalism' or 'diversity management' to facilitate the necessary socio-cultural adjustment. But what should Africans be adjusting to in the era of globalisation? As young urban Africans rush to embrace the often violent and misogynistic North American ghetto cultures of rap, hip hop and Rambo-style machismo, their elders cannot but view this as a form of maladjustment! While swallowing the prescriptions of macroeconomic advisers, governments still express a concern for political and cultural integrity to be preserved somehow. The first reflexes of nationalist men still convey unitary (masculine) notions of patriotism, national unity and integrity, largely through restorationist appeals to implicitly masculine constructions of African culture⁵. The critics of this simplified response have correctly taken issue with the limitations of patriarchal nationalism, but without fully acknowledging that this is what they are doing, and developing the insights that a gender analysis would yield.⁶ Meanwhile the 'market forces' quietly deplete the sovereignty of the state and corporate cultures infuse the public and the civic spheres of organisation with the style and ethos of a well known 'global' fast food outfit, applying the same management systems, procedures and practices.

It may well be true, as I have suggested, that existing theories of identity do not have much explanatory power in African contexts. But does this inadequacy mean we can just make a note, perhaps adopt the North American rhetoric and procedures of 'diversity management' to deal with some of the

consequences of identity in our organisational social and cultural life, and move on?

The English word identity is closely linked to others – the notions of integrity and security. I would like to suggest that much of what we are grouping under the dubious rubric of ‘identity politics’ is actually about popular struggles for material redistribution and justice, and related desires for existential integrity and security. Put simply, poverty is probably the worst threat to integrity and security worldwide. *It is a threat that cannot be adequately addressed through the cultural lip-service strategy of recognition and celebration, because poverty, and its offspring, insecurity and loss of integrity, are all matters of global and local political economy, matters that demand redistribution and justice.*

The present moment is one in which the integrity and security of today’s prime target Others have never been more profoundly threatened. As non-Americans we all find ourselves being subjected to a high technology financial, political and informational onslaught emanating from the epicentre of global power, and backed up by the military muscle currently flexing across our TV screens.

Recent events only underline the precariousness of our situation, and suggest that we do need to take matters of identity very seriously, not just as some kind of psychological artefact or cultural consumable, but as a matter of profound political, economic and military strategy, and counter-strategy. Identity is all about power and resistance, subjection and citizenship, action and reaction. I would suggest that *rather than simply passing over identity in order to rethink power, we need to profoundly rethink identity if we are to begin to comprehend the meaning of power.*

This is one sense in which ‘identity’ is a challenging subject: it challenges us to rethink power, and all the banal and brutal simplifications and subjections that have accompanied the exercise of power by the ruling regime. That some of these simplifications, and their financial accompaniments, have given rise to forces that now exhibit degrees of agency and strategy that threaten the global order can only add to our sense of urgency.

Postcolonial thinkers challenge the hegemony of the colonial regime, and the coercive manner in which it has produced us as subject peoples, reduced, simplified and embedded us in dubiously defined nativist notions of custom and creed, notions so thoroughly imbued with insecurity and mistrust, that they manifest in spasms of internecine enmity and hatred. That these enmities are often more imagined than real can be seen in the record of history. One might even go so far as to suggest that they have been discursively *orchestrated*, first by colonial regimes, then by subjective conservatism of postcolonial rulers, and later compounded by the duplicity of global economic institutions that deny their own agency attributing responsibility to an abstraction – to ‘market forces’. How can an abstraction have systematically eroded the promises of

decolonisation, denied the aspirations of generations of young Africas, and depleted the collective desire for democratisation and development? It is a dangerous abstraction indeed that leaves people outside the imperial heartlands impoverished enough to clutch at tribal straws and drown their sorrows in the elixir of fatalism, many now shunning secularism because of its apparent association with the dubiously-regarded fat cat West.

With such an efflorescence of identities and what *appear* to be identity-based conflicts, it is worth reminding ourselves that the substantial part of African history lies outside the established instances of war and slavery, displaying a diverse tapestry that includes centuries of peaceful co-existence, migrations and movements across the continent and round the world, long before the barriers came up, and, ironically, the word 'globalisation' was suddenly on everybody's lips. The proof of this generally hospitable relation to one another can be seen in the fact that while the affluent nations of Europe, America and Australia make a great deal of noise about refugees and fear being swamped, the vast majority of refugees have never left the continent. Rather, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children have been absorbed by impoverished African communities, accepted as guests and been given land to farm for their own use.⁷

Once born, any given identity spans the distance between subjectivity and politics, between micropolitical and macropolitical. It is no accident that this is an idea that has been well developed within revolutionary feminist thought, dedicated as it is to transforming women's lives. The politicisation of personal experience has been a key strategy of women's movements all over the world. As a result of the accumulated experience generated by the democratic praxis of women's movements, feminist theory has developed a sophisticated understanding of power that can usefully be brought to bear on considerations of identity, an understanding that highlights the workings of power from the bedroom to the boardroom.

There is a certain holism in all this, yet our theorisations of identity remain Balkanised within the artificial boundaries of academic disciplines. Identities exist *across* the separated-out terrains of politics, economics, sociology, anthropology and psychology. All identities have histories, as Freud pointed out quite some time ago, and they all involve questions of power, integrity and security, questions that have emotional as well as political currency (Freud 1976, 1977, Mitchell 1974). Somehow we still seem unable to get an analytical handle on the complicated relation between the production of individual identities and the production of communal identities. It is here that the inadequacies of theorisations of identity can be located. What does an understanding of gender theory contribute to this?

All identities are gendered, perhaps dangerously so.⁸ Again we can thank Sigmund Freud for placing gender at the centre of theorisations of identity (Freud 1977). Within postcolonial feminist circles there has been an intellectually fertile debate on nationalism and its discontents, as revealed through gender analysis (e.g. McClintock 1995, Yuval Davis and Anthias 1989, Lazreg 1994, Badran 1994). How is it then that some postcolonial theorists choose to ignore the relevance of gender to our understanding of national identity and nationalism (Bhabha 1986, 1990; Mamdani 1996, 2000). Equally problematic are those who would deny that gender has any relevance to matters authentically African by inventing an imaginary precolonial community in which gender did not exist (Oyewunmi 1999). Yet there is ample evidence to suggest that gender, in all its diverse manifestations, has long been one of the central organising principles of African societies, past and present. Working with this insight adds much to our analysis, as the burgeoning literature on gender and postcolonial states adequately demonstrates.

The manner in which identity and power are configured by gender in postcolonial African states today is mediated by complicated gender politics. We all know that women are more pervasively governed by the dictates of custom and community, and correspondingly less able to realise the rights afforded to citizens-in-general through the trope of civil law. This is why one of the strategies of feminist jurisprudence in African contexts involves enabling a more gender equitable access to civil law, generally understood to be a better vehicle for the protection of women's rights, and the realisation of their citizenship. This is most obviously so where customary laws still afford women only minor status, and customary practices can be said to violate the physical and emotional integrity of women.⁹ What this means is that if the state is indeed bifurcated along the tropes of civil and customary legal systems (Mamdani 1995), the implementation of both are also deeply gendered, and unevenly so, with consequences that seem to me to be well worth exploring further.

The last two decades or so have seen the feminist movement becoming increasingly internationalised, with feminist struggles being pursued through international as well as local organisations and networks. The uptake of demands originating in women's movements by the international development industry is now an important variable in this process of internationalisation. But what were the conditions that gave rise to it? During the 1980s, the deleterious impact of structural adjustment packages on all but the duplicitous elite living in the capitalist periphery exacerbated the feminisation of poverty to such an extent that the gendered nature of global economic strategies and their consequences could no longer be denied.¹⁰ Once the international agencies trumpeted their interest in women, the African governments of the 1980s were quick to see the potential benefits of adopting a posture that involved too, albeit on largely instrumental grounds (Mama 2000a). How else do we explain the rather contradictory establishment of national machinery for women all over Africa,

at a time when macro-economic imperatives require the state to reduce its sphere of operation, not expand it! I am suggesting that these national structures and gender policies are not adequately provided for in national budgets, because they have been established on the assumption that they will attract donor funds. Elsewhere I have explored the contradictions and challenges of postcolonial African gender politics in more detail, using the example of Nigeria's military regimes (Mama 1995, 1999, 2000).

It is important to note that there were also local political pressures that led African governments to engage with gender in one way or another. For less-than-democratic regimes, women have provided a foil for tyranny. Mobutu is well known for his corruption, brutality and sexual profligacy. As if to divert attention from these he embarked on a highly publicised 'mass promotion' of women during the crisis of the 1980s, not as equal citizens in his dictatorship, but in the circumscribed roles of wives and mothers. By reinscribing Zairois women in this way, he not only reaffirmed a particular form of masculine control over women, but also extended the reach of his dictatorship, both temporally and territorially. Re-asserting the subjugation of women appealed to the ordinary men who might well have felt emasculated by their own experience of Mobutu-style patriarchy, and indeed to the many women who felt flattered by this sudden attention.

In Zimbabwe, the Mugabe government has played a contradictory game of gender politics. Here the initial commendation of women's role in the liberation war and the support for women's legal and civil rights soon gave way to a series of retractions. If the early 1980s saw the mass detention and abuse of hundreds of women by the police in 'Operation Clean Up', the 1990s were characterised by the refusal of the law courts to uphold women's rights to inherit property and own land under civil law. Discriminatory judgements are invariably based on male judges' assertions that such rights are not 'customary' (ZWRCN forthcoming, Nkiwane 2000).

A feminist analysis of postcolonial states links the violent and destructive manifestations of modern statecraft with the persistence of patriarchy, in all its perversity. It approaches authoritarianism in a manner that draws on the insights of feminist studies, building on work that begins to explore the complex resonances and dissonances that occur between subjectivities and politics, between the individual and the collective. It offers a powerful rethinking of national identity, and opens up possibilities for imagining radically different communities. At a more concrete level, I suggest that the accumulated experience of participatory democratic organising within women's movements provides ample evidence that there are other, more inclusive ways to govern and be governed than those assumed by contemporary liberal democratic systems.

The examples I have given so far illustrate the instrumental uptake of international gender discourses by authoritarian regimes currying favour with the international community, while at the same time consolidating their hold on power by placating those they govern with affirmation of conventional gender identities. Other examples might address the manner in which these dynamics play out down the line, and use a similar analytical strategy to explore the various complicated manifestations of gender politics in all the organisational forms that comprise postcolonial society: corporate, governmental, non-governmental, and community-based. For example, in the new South Africa it is worth investigating how financial liberalisation and the adoption of corporate managerial procedures has affected the implementation of national and institutional policy commitments to transformation and gender equality. How has the macro-economic policy affected the availability of resources and capacities for the realisation of democratic promises?

Finally, allow me to suggest that within women's movements, perhaps because of their widespread adherence to participatory democratic organisational practices, we can discern the emergence of new and more challenging identities. Here we find women-people intent on creating autonomous spaces in which to work at elaborating and developing their own individual and collective agency, women who dare to differ and sabotage the patriarchal precedents of received 'identity politics' being reproduced by the old regime.

At the present time, if we choose to look beyond the sinister machinations of the late capitalism and listen beyond the battle cries of powerful men, we will hear the quietly persistent challenge articulated by women. We can take heart in the fact that there are communities all over the world resisting fundamentalism, militarism and war-mongering, grouping and regrouping and innovating political, economic and cultural strategies in the interstices of power. The intellectual challenge of identity lies in the exercise of adding gender to the arsenal of analytical tools required to rethink identity, so that we can deepen our understanding of power, and increase our strategic capacity to engage with and challenge its destructive capacity. Being an optimist, I assume that we still have the chance to do so.

Notes

1. Derived from Foucault, and subsequent applications of his work in France and Britain (Donzelot 1979, Rose 1985, 1989, Hollway et al 1984).
2. One estimate states that there are 'at least 250 language groups' in Nigeria (Appiah & Gates 1999).
3. The 21st century is seeing a more critical movement within psychology gain promising ground in its theorisation of 'subjectivity' as historically-constituted, multiple and above all, dynamic. This paradigm shift dates back to the early 1980's (Hollway et al 'Changing the Subject', 1984).

4. Even earlier, Edward Said challenged the hegemonic construction of the Orient by the Western cultural and political apparatuses (Said 1978).
5. These have included Negritude, Pan Africanism, *Africanité*, *Auhenticité*, Black Consciousness and the African Renaissance.
6. McClintock (1995) discusses this occlusion in the work of Fanon and Bhabha, but a similar point could be made regarding the work of Appiah (1995), and others.
7. This is not to deny the manifestations of xenophobia, but rather to note that this is not by any means the usual response to the problems of neighbours. Where it does exist, the postcolonial state is often duplicitous, and the people in question have been stigmatised and incarcerated in camps as a precondition for the delivery of 'aid'.
8. A reference to McClintock's opening statement 'All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous'. (1995: 352)
9. The network Women and Law in Southern Africa has been engaged in such work since 1988.
10. However the manner in which gender has been addressed, largely through an affirmative women-in-development paradigm leaves much to be desired. The marked persistence of gender inequality and injustice indicates a high degree of what the industry refers to as 'project failure'.

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