James Tar Tsaaior

***In the Name of the Father… Masculinity, Gender Politics and National Identity Formation in Postcolonial Nigeria*.**

Abstract I: This paper negotiates masculinity, gender politics and national identity in Nigeria and foregrounds the sexist character and temperament of national symbols and emblems which inscribe gender and sexual practices within the patterns of socio-political and cultural life. The paper argues that Nigeria is a phallocentric society where traditional culture and modes of epistemology still dominate even with the advances of modernity and globalization. It locates the ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions within the Nigerian nation-state in multiple cultural imperatives which privilege masculinity over femininity deploying the Nigerian national anthem and pledge as analytic categories. As veritable markers of national identity, the paper contends that the anthem and pledge constitute a representational site for the contestation of gender politics and ideology and the inherent paradoxes this conflictual gender reality orchestrates. It concludes by interrogating the sexist and (en)gendered ideological formations internalized in the anthem and pledge, advocates a democratization of the gender space and the re-imagining of gender relations in national identity formation strategies in postcolonial Nigeria.

Abstract II: Questo articolo si focalizza sull'incontro tra mascolinità, politica di genere e identità nazionale in Nigeria, ne sottolinea il carattere sessista e la temperie di simboli nazionali ed emblemi che accomunano il genere e le pratiche sessuali al modello di vita socio-politica e culturale. L'articolo dimostra come la Nigeria sia una società fallocentrica in cui cultura e modalità epistemologiche

tradizionali ancora dominano anche se stanno avanzando modernità e globalizzazione. Si identificano ambiguità, ambivalenze e contraddizioni all'interno della nazione-stato Nigeria nei numerosi imperativi culturali che privilegiano la mascolinità sulla femminilità utilizzando l'inno nazionale nigeriano e le sue promesse come categorie analitiche. Si ritiene che, da veri e propri segni di identità nazionale, l'inno nazionale e le sue promesse costituiscano un luogo simbolico per la contestazione di politica di genere e ideologia, e l'intrinseco paradosso creato da questa conflittuale realtà di genere. L'articolo si conclude con la messa in discussione delle formazioni ideologiche sessiste dell'inno e delle sue promesse e auspica una democratizzazione di genere e nuove narrazioni nelle relazioni di genere nella formazione dell'identità nazionale nigeriana post-coloniale.

Introduction

Embedded in the Christian imagination is the dominant idea of the trinitarian nature of the Godhead. This episteme is particularly encoded in Catholic theology and doctrine where Catholics ritually sign themselves repeatedly during liturgical worship and other forms of ecclesial celebration. Invoking the Godhead through the formulaic words: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", Catholic Christians profess their doctrinaire faith in God the Father as the perfect creative essence, the Son as the quintessential redeemer and the Holy Spirit as the teacher of the Truth. But beyond this role in creation and the economy of human salvation, the Godhead is refracted as male and hence appropriated by the patriarchal tradition as the approximation of masculinity. This masculinization of the Godhead confers enormous social and sexual capital on the male and validates the claims and assumptions of ascendancy and superiority of masculinity over femininity. Indeed, male-defined, totalizing hermeneutics of sacred scripture has lent eloquent testimony

to these masculinized accounts even though radical feminist theology and interpretation reject this rhetoric of the masculine sexuality of the Godhead (Ferguson *et al* 1988: 255). However, this uneven, asymmetrical and exploitative gender relationship is internalized and concretized in socio-political and cultural institutions central to the nation-state and its corpus of discourses, not only in Nigeria but also in other patriarchal societies where the patrilineal order takes ascendancy over the matrilineal.

Within the canon of nationalist discourses fabricated by a dominant phallic order, the representation of women is executed in contradictory and ambiguous perspectives. Women are delineated as embodying central nationalist emblems and symbols. Indeed, they are constituted as mothers of their nations and hence synonymous with nationhood. However, the mother-nation dialectic pales into insignificance as women are erased from the central contours of national life and are marginalized in nationalist discursive existence. They are consigned to the peripheries as the actual operations of the national symbols interpellate them as subalterns (Boehmer 6; Kandiyoti 429). The notion of the nation becomes defined in terms of masculinity as the patrilineal principle takes precedence over the matrilineal in important socio-political, juridical and cultural processes. In this (en)gendered space, gender becomes firmly etched on the agenda of national identity formation strategies in many African societies especially in postcolonial Nigeria.

What is the Sexuality of (Y)Our Nation?

The contradictions in the representation of the nation as a mother, on the one hand, and its masculinization, on the other, raises the spectre of a problematic questions: What is the sex of (y)our nation? Are nations masculine or feminine? Why does the sex of nations matter at all? What are the political and cultural imperatives at play in the naming of a nation? Is it possible to execute a non-sexist representation and identity of nationhood? Why will a nation drive itself into the controversy of dual identity with male and female identity markers? This

paradox encapsulated in the questions above has continuously haunted many African nations. This is particularly where phallic ideological and political imperatives compel the internalization and inscription of women into the nationalist struggle for liberation only to abandon, objectify and subject them to exclusionary practices when emancipation has been achieved.

In India, for instance, as in many parts of the so called "Third World", including Nigeria, women were "drafted" or "conscripted" into the resistance struggle as an inclusionary process of acknowledging their central role in the birthing of these nations. This was important as part of the nationalist ethos because "the struggle for women's emancipation was expediently connected to an anti-colonial, nationalist struggle. After independence was won, militant women found themselves, typically, back in 'normal', subordinate roles and came to recognize the dangers of conflating national liberation with women's liberation" (Katrak 395). The fraudulence and sexist politics which characterized nationalist struggles in many countries sufficiently demonstrated that women were objects of exploitation by their men who found them useful when the national liberation wars raged. However, as soon as the wars were won, nationhood became an exclusive preserve of men and became defined as a male heritage.

This exclusion of women from nationalist ideologies of liberation has found justification in the masculinist idea that men nurture societies or nations by shedding their blood, their sweat and their semen (Gilmore 230). These idealist tropes of nationhood in patriarchal societies like Nigeria have become focal in the very constitution of what authentically passes as the 'ideal' and becomes configured as the very soul of national existence. The men sacrifice their blood in nationalist warfare for the liberation and protection of the integrity of the nation's borders and sovereignty; their sweat for production which is also critical to national growth and their semen for reproduction which also assures the nation of its continuity.

This perspective undermines itself since women are also strategic to the accomplishment of these national roles men exclusively ascribe to themselves.

Women in Nigeria, for instance, form a substantial percentage of agricultural and economic production as farm hands and business entrepreneurs in many communities thus driving the local and national economy. The male semen on its own alone cannot reproduce as it takes the female egg for fertilization to happen. In this regard, it is only consistent with masculinist ideology to claim that men are more crucial to national survival as semen secretion is useless without the egg donation by women which is necessary for reproduction to take place. National survival through reproduction can be seen as a complementary role between the two sexes. It is, therefore, uncharitable for men to assume that they play a more important role in the reproductive process as agents of national sustenance. Women too can make such a valid claim.

Indeed, women in Nigeria and Africa play a very defining role in the construction of national structures which help to consolidate nations as they negotiate their way in the historical process. As Ali Mazrui (2000) argues, women constitute an indispensable socio-cultural category within national economies through their triple custodial role as the custodians of fire, water and the earth. These elements are necessary for national survival and development. Fire, for instance, is a symbol of science and technology. Water is a veritable source of life and the rite of purification; the earth represents the fertility of the womb, of plant and animal life, and it is also the store house of mineral resources which constitute the wealth of nations. And if women are custodians of all these, it follows that they are the custodians of the souls of their nations.

The Nigerian Anthem and Pledge

The sexuality of the Nigerian nation as a postcolonial state constitutes a contestable site in nationalist discourse as demonstrated in the ambiguities and contradictions in the national anthem and pledge. Nigeria won independence from colonial Britain in 1960 through what is largely described as on a platter of gold. This means that political autonomy for Nigeria was achieved without the spilling of blood as it happened in the protracted resistance of nations like

Angola, Algeria, Mozambique, Namibia, and South Africa where freedom has become synonymous with bloodshedding. The nationalist engagement against Britain in Nigeria was through intense negotiations and lobbies which were embodied in the series of constitutional conferences which eventually led to independence. That most of the nationalists in the vanguard of struggle were men can be explained partly in the fact that Nigeria is a patriarchal society where women have always been subordinated to men through time; and partly because colonial ideology and educational policies privileged men and discriminated against women such that the nascent elite was entirely composed of men.

It is against this backdrop that it is significant to observe that the national anthem of Nigeria emphasizes the founding role of men and deifies them in the canon of national formation and screens out women as if they never existed. This eloquent silence has a historical dimension which can be explained in the limited and limiting role apportioned to women at the time. It is also this unfairness of history that has created the gender problem in the anthem and the pledge. For embedded in these national identity markers is an ambivalent but intense gender politics which plays itself out and seeks to celebrate and idealize both masculinity and femininity simultaneously. The national anthem deifies and romanticizes masculinity. It etches men on the canvas of nationalism, praising their sense of patriotism and heroism with an atavistic fixity (Bhabha 1990: 3). The anthem is specifically addressed to men in a martial register:

> Arise, O compatriots,
> Nigeria's call obey,
> To serve our *fatherland*
> With love and strength and faith,
> The labour of our *heroes* past
> Shall never be in vain,

To serve with heart and might
One nation bound in freedom
Peace and unity (my italics).

Besides the fact that the anthem possesses a belligerent spirit for which it has been interrogated as a protrusion of martial culture associated with men, it also gives value to a masculinist principle through its invocation of the male principle. Nigeria is, for instance, masculinised as "our fatherland". The nationalist fighters are characterized as "our heroes" effectively screening out the heroines of the nationalist struggle. If anything, women are only generically included as mere accessories or appendages to men. This validates the earlier claim by phallic ideology that men are the ones who fight to protect the territorial integrity of nations as if women do not form part of the armed forces of the nation and are not deployed for combat missions. "Fa(r)therland" contrasts radically with "(m)otherland" which is the metaphor for nationhood when it privileges masculinity to constitute nationhood in terms of femininity. The heroes of the nation are those men who in 1960 won national independence from colonial Britain after the nationalist ferment. These include Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president; Tafawa Balewa, the first prime minister, and the other nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo: an all male cast. Interestingly enough, all of these men were from the majority ethnic extractions raising questions about the marginality of ethnic minorities in the configuration of the Nigerian nation right from its invention as an imagined community of heterogeneous peoples.

These are the heroes that deserve celebration for without them Nigeria would have remained shackled to the yoke of British colonialism and imperialism. Women like Margaret Ekpo, Funmilayo Kuti and the Aba women who were also in the vanguard of the anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle are excluded from the canon of nationalist names. Their contributions as women did not matter because it is the blood, sweat and semen of men that can validly win

national freedom and populate it with citizens. This exclusive masculinist self-presencing of the Nigerian anthem ends on a fraudulent note as women are subordinated to men and effectively erased from the nationalist hall of fame. What this national narrative as encoded in the anthem means effectively is that women have always suffered stereotypification in the hands of men. Colonialism which also represented a male ideology was discriminatory against women by denying them education and a voice and hence access to public space, consigning them to silence and privacy. Independence which also conferred enormous political capital on men was also unjustly used by men as an oppressive and exploitative weapon against women.

But beyond the engendered question, the issue of minority rights and subaltern categories remained largely unaddressed at the onset of Nigerian nationhood. Minority agitations were part of the causes that precipitated the first military intervention in democratic politics in 1966 when the first coup d'etat occurred. It is, therefore, little wonder then that these issues have returned to haunt the nation as the minority groups are now in the process of liberating themselves from a more dangerous hegemonic threat, namely internal colonialism by the dominant ethnic nationalities: the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba. The minority question has become pronounced in contemporary Nigerian politics because it is the minorities that produce the wealth of the nation which is used by the majorities to develop their areas. The armed agitations in the Niger Delta today as a reaction against the Nigerian government and international monopoly capital represented by the multinational oil corporations like Shell and Chevron whose degradation of the environment through oil drilling, spillage, gas flaring and the despoliation of farmlands is the centre of the struggle. The reality is that in such circumstances of armed conflict as is currently the case in Nigeria's Niger Delta, it is still women that suffer the indignities and privations.

The ambiguity of the nation's sexuality and the ambivalence in national identity formation in postcolonial Nigeria persists as the national pledge resonates an alternative vision and temperament which privileges femininity. Thus, while the

national anthem is male-centred, the pledge is female-centred. It valorizes a feminine principle and inscribes women into the fabric of national arrival and becoming through the appropriation of the pronominal "her", a specific feminine reflexivity which constructs women as the mothers of the nation thus equating nationhood with womanhood. The pledge announces exultantly:

> I pledge
> To Nigeria, my country,
> To be faithful, loyal and honest,
> To serve Nigeria with all my strength
> To defend *her* unity
> And uphold *her* honour and glory
> So help me God (italics mine).

The pledge is much less martial than the anthem perhaps emphasizing the supposed feminine virtues of grace, temperance, faithfulness, loyalty and submission especially in the restricted spheres of domesticity and the privacy of matrimonial or conjugal relations in familial spaces. Increasingly though, women groups have started to resist this hegemonic socializing as a patriarchal strategy to subordinate them and cast them in subsidiary roles. Woman is represented in the pledge as the veritable embodiment of nationhood, bearing and nurturing patriotic and loyal citizens. The pledge also is particular about service which is the admirable quality patronizingly associated with women both in the domestic and public domains. The repeated referentiality to Nigeria as *her* is symbolically significant as it suggests the femininization of the nation and the apparent construction of a space for women in mainstream Nigerian national structures.

But the pledge ends with the familiar image of the masculinized Godhead in the hapless and solicitous words, "So help me God" further problematising the gender politics encoded in the national anthem also in the pledge. With this, it is

clear in an ideological sense that masculinity still serves as the true custodian of national institutions and symbols of nationhood, occasionally yielding a limited space to women when it serves its imperial, hegemonic interests. The idea embodied in the pledge is the helplessness of the woman without the dominant presence of the man to ensure national stability and sustenance.

Thus, the Nigerian national anthem and pledge ambiguously orchestrate gender politics which is indelibly invested in their matrices raising fundamental questions about the sexuality of Nigeria as a nation. Related to this is the subtle process of including women in national emblems and symbols with the ultimate political strategy of excluding them in a postcolonial Nigeria. This exclusion through inclusion is what has galvanized the feminist ideology to contest the transcendental and absolutist power of masculinity and the imperial knowledge systems that legitimate its hegemony and domination of women. Women have, therefore, sought to emerge from the archipelagoes of silence and torn the veil of invisibility by contesting silence and invisibility in diverse publics. They also undermine the masculinist nationalist discourse which constructs them in terms of subalternity. As according to Spivak (1995), "the subaltern cannot speak" as a woman, since language has been appropriated from her by a dominant phallic order, Nigerian women through their transgressive actions and interrogatory artistic practices have continued to undermine phallic assumptions especially as inscribed in the anthem and the pledge, among other national symbols. The sexualization of the nation and the nationalization of sexuality as embodied in the Nigerian anthem and pledge have amply demonstrated that gender politics is a necessary aspect of national identity formation.

These national symbols as veritable markers of Nigerian nationhood have yielded themselves to gender discourses which have fore-grounded the ambivalences inherent in the fabrication of nationhood in Africa as in other parts of the world. This has raised significant questions about the very character and identity of nations as aggregations of peoples and cultures in an imaginary

territorial space and as a community. In this regard, gender transcends an individuated treatment as it is always thought to be among human beings as a culturally determined category. Gender also defines nationhood, sometimes in contradictory ways as in the case of Nigeria where the national symbols of the anthem and pledge espouse the causes of masculinity and femininity. Beyond underscoring the relevance of gender to national discourse, this contradictory manifestation of gender politics in the national anthem and pledge of Nigeria illustrates the abiding presence of gender as an analytic category in discourses that affect not only individuals in private and public spaces but also nations as imagined communities and societies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Bhabha, Homi. 1990. Introduction: Narrating the Nation. In Homi Bhabha (ed) *Nation and Narration.1-7.* London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

Boehmer, Elleke.1991. 'Stories of Women and Mothers: Gender and Nationalism in the Early Fiction of Flora Nwapa'. In S. Nasta ed. *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing From Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia:* 2-23. London: Women's Press.

Ferguson, Sinclair (eds). 1990. *New Dictionary of Theology.* Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.

Gilmore, D. 1990. *Manhood on the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gunner, Liz. 1999. Remaking the Warrior? The Role of Orality in the Liberation Struggle in Pos-Apartheid South Africa. In Duncan Brown (ed). *Oral Literature and Performance in South Africa.* Oxford: James Currey.

Kandiyoti, D. 1999. Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 20, 3: 429-443.

Katrak, K.H. 1992. Indian Nationalism, Ghandian "Satyagraha", and Representations of Female Sexuality. In A. Parker *et al (*eds). *Nationalisms and Sexualities.* London: Routledge.

Mazrui, Ali. 2000. *The African Renaissance: A Triple Legacy of Skills, Values and Gender.* Lagos: CBAAC.

Spivak, Gayatri. 1995. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Bill Ashcroft *et al* (eds) *The Postcolonial Studies Reader: 24-28.* London and New York: Routledge.

James Tar Tsaaior holds a PhD in English from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He has taught in universities in Lagos and Ibadan, Nigeria. His research interests include African and Afro-Diasporic Literatures, Folklore, Gender and Cultural Studies as well as Literary Theory and Criticism. Is emerging area of interest now is Media and Film Studies. He has published in these areas in local and international journals. Dr. Tsaaior is a poet and his collection, *Moments and Monuments* (Free Enterprise, Lagos, 2005) has received critical acclaim and a second volume, *Hearth of the Heart* is due soon. Beginning October, 2011, he will be a Fellow of the African Studies Centre, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom where he will be involved in research on myth and modernity in African literature.