

CHAPTER 12

Gendering the African National project in the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction

Contrary to earlier assertions by some scholars of nationalism that in the age of globalisation, nationalism was waning, the twenty-first century has in fact witnessed vigorous re-assertions of nationalism and the relevance of gender analyses of nationalist projects. This chapter takes as its point of departure the implications of nationalism in the power balance between men and women and that nationalisms are sites of gender struggles. Given the perceived increasing agency of women in the global age, the chapter pursues the question of the gender of national agency in the twenty-first century and whether the symbolic relation of genders to the nation will remain located at the cusp of the patriarchal nature of nationalism and the historical construction of gender differences.

The chapter problematises the nature of the contested systems of cultural representations that sustain, legitimise or delegitimise men's and, especially women's access to state power and national resources. Following the gaining of theoretical currency of gender performativity in feminist philosophy, this chapter also examines the ways in which men and women perform gendered roles and negotiate their places in the national imaginary. Performativity provides a framework for apprehending the cultural and political power of women in Nationalist projects. Since all nationalisms are inventions, it is also the scope of this chapter to interrogate in turn the invention of feminine iconography and its deployment in nationalist politics. The chapter also raises questions regarding the increasing economic gap between classes of women, a legacy of globalisation and how class politics and gender politics intersect in nationalism. This ultimately ironises gender and nationalism.

Lumumba-Kasongo defines the national project as constituting the dialectical relations between the way colonisation came about and the various mechanisms and processes deployed in decolonisation came about and the various mechanisms and processes deployed in decolonisation efforts. The national project is a reflection of the national reality which was relatively popular in the 1960s, disappearing in the 1970s and 1980s and receiving fresh momentum in the twenty-first century. Ndlovu-Gatsheni views the African national project as encapsulating the totality of African people's desires to complete the decolonisation process, build post-colonial nations, reconstruct post-colonial states, promote economic development, entrench popular democracy, defend sovereignty and eventually build regional integration and pan-African unity. It is through the national project that various political regimes attempt to Africanise capitalism, socialism or to project African socialism or politics of authenticity. Stronger national projects then become prerequisites for producing stronger nations.

Though the national project has been interpreted with inconsistencies and contradictions through various ideologies and regimes in Africa, the concept of the national project implies

that, in a country, there exists a law of nation, a national political culture, a national language, a national government and loyal citizens so as to provide common values and standards. Lumumba-Kasango adds that the national project can be perceived as a state policy to address the extent to which gender issues have been implicated in the African national project over the years.

Scholars of nationalism have highlighted the invented nature of nationalism which is the ideology undergirding all national projects and the nature of nationalism has been eloquently articulated. However, McClintock submits that 'if the invented nature of nationalism has found wide theoretical currency, explorations of the gendering of the national imaginary have been conspicuously paltry. Banerjee asserts that "usually, nationalism is gendered in that it draws on socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity to shape female and male participation in nation building, as well as the manner in which the nation is embodied in the imagination of self-professed nationalists. Since the national project should not be viewed as a static and monolithic concept but rather as a dynamic concept that has been changing to respond to the imperatives of time and space, it is important to analyse issues of gender in national projects and to examine how gender differences impact on access to power and relations to the nation in twenty-first century.

The implicatedness of women in the nation building process in various ways calls for an analysis of their place in the national project. It is imperative that the way in which power relations in the nation are handled between the genders and how national resources are accessed, be articulated. While women and femininity constitute the specific subjects can also become critical sites for the symbolisation of nationality and 'belonging' and 'men [can] become symbolic national icons; through their suffering masculinities, they index the violence of both colonialism and elite nationalism.' In this chapter we problematise the contested nature of cultural representations that impact on how men and women access power and state resources.