Gender and Identity in the Nigerian Media

Akin Iwilade

Department of International Relations,
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria
iwiladeakin@yahoo.com, +234 80 33549687

This paper examines the construction of gender identity and roles in the Media in Nigeria. It seeks to draw attention to the connection between cultural values and the gendered choices of the media. It interrogates the gender discourse in the context of power and disempowerment and situates this within the political economy of Nigeria and its place in the global system. By demonstrating the linkage between the nature of economic production and the problematic of disempowerment, the paper argues that gender identity is best understood for its utility as an agency of political action and mass mobilization. This utility, it contends, is however being appropriated by primary identities, in this case, ethnicity, to the extent that the gender discourse is subsumed within the contestations for power which is conducted primarily through loose ethnic coalitions in Nigeria. The media easily reflects this situation by making choices that demonstrate their immersion into the ethnic conflict and their conscious manipulation of gender identities in a way that highlights their ethnic character. This situation, the paper notes, has implications for transcultural communication. For Nigeria, the inability of the gender discourse to be couched in transcultural language reflects the salience of the National Question. It also highlights the challenge of democratizing Nigeria and of finding transcultural convergence in an era of globalization. In concluding, it questions the ability of the media in Nigeria to effectively promote gender identities that will be inclusive and at the same time recognize the organic evolutionary process of social cultures in Nigeria.

Introduction

At the core of this paper is an interrogation of the role of the media in the construction of gender identity and the latter's utility as an agency of mobilization, politics and hegemony in Nigeria. It seeks to understand how the media contributes to the public discourse on gender; a debate that is defined by a continuous interaction of cultural, religious and economic factors; and the implications of the media's gendered choices on the national question and democratization. It also attempts to interrogate the conflict between deeply held traditional perceptions of gender roles and the increasing pressure of western gender constructs. It situates this conflict within the political economy of Nigeria and its place in the global system. The media, the paper argues, has been at the forefront of reconstructing gender values in such a way that de-essentializes and in fact, often times, out rightly ignores the specificities of the Nigerian condition. This situation, it is argued, is at the core of increasing resistance of paternal forces to the growing assertiveness of women in Nigerian politics.

In demonstrating this, the analysis is placed within six interlinked sections, the first of which is this introduction. In the next section a theoretical template is set. Here, the dynamic nature of gender identity and the Nigerian media's role in that dynamism is placed within the context of the anti-essentialist perspective of social constructionism and hegemony theory. In

the section that follows, we address the challenge of transcultural communication in a globalizing era and the place of gender in this crisis. This is important to highlight how globalization places both constraints and opportunities on the nature and dynamics of interaction between and within cultures. This is particularly important for Nigeria because tensions exist on three key spaces of transcultural interaction. The first is between local cultures and the intrusive effect of the west. The second is between and among the competing local cultures on the broad national stage and the third is within the cultures. These three key spaces are interspersed with the class problematic. In the next section, we address the central question being confronted by the media in its reconstruction of gender identity in Nigeria. This is whether women should be visible on the Nigerian political scene or not. At the heart of this discourse is the question of power and hegemony. The debate is not really on the acceptability or otherwise of female assertiveness but on the implications of this for delicate power compromises and configurations. The section that follows goes on to confront the implications of all this for the national question and democratization in Nigeria. It looks at the potential for gendered constructs of identity to induce conflicts. It addresses its implication for cultural convergence and/or conflict between Nigerian societies and the West. The last section concludes. It underlines the critical nature of the media's role in reconstructing gender. It however questions the ability of the media to effectively promote gender identities that will be inclusive and at the same time recognize the organic evolutionary process of social cultures in Nigeria.

Media, Gender and Identity: A Theoretical Treatment

Identity studies has evolved full circle. It once referred to the assertion of the self in the midst of pressures from an over bearing public. By viewing individual identity as primary, it interrogated identity formation and construction from an angle that Cerulo (1997:385) referred to as 'micro-sociological perspectives focussed primarily on the individual'. This perspective demonstrated how the concept of 'me' emerged out of interpersonal interactions.

Changes in the nature of politics, particularly as it regards the utility of group consciousness as a platform and agency of mass mobilization and political action however induced a focus on collective rather than individual identity. Collective identity (as in the works of Marx; Class Consciousness, Tonnies; Gemeinschaft and Weber; Versetehen) has its roots in classical literature. This was approached as reflecting similarities or shared attributes around which group members coalesce. To Marx for instance, the privilege of capital or the misfortune of the lack of it represented natural platforms for solidarity and conflict. Such

essentialist view of identity precluded the possibility of group members consciously abandoning or perhaps more significantly, choosing, their class. Rather it sees perpetual conflict between the classes until the ultimate destruction of the dominant class. Because identity was seen as defined by 'natural' attributes, its fluidity was denied or ignored. Not even Marx's 'class suicide' effectively captures the fluidity of identity in the sense in which this important social phenomenon could lend itself to dynamism and manipulation.

It should be noted that the idea of 'natural' attributes easily leads one to value judgements that contradict the very logic of essentialist identity construction. Because most social identities necessarily require a combination of both 'natural' features and a conscious choice to accept or reject its values, if not necessarily its implications, the role of value judgement cannot be wished away. It is in the realization of the weaknesses in the essentialist view of identity construction that the anti-essentialist perspective emerged.

This perspective has been particularly successful in its interrogation of gender identity which is at issue in this paper. The anti essentialist view of social constructionism challenges the primordial roots of gender and instead focuses on the dynamic character of gender attitude and the way it is continually being modified, constructed and renegotiated through linguistic exchange and social performance (See Cerulo, 1997). Also important to this perspective is the utility of gender identity not merely as a definition of self but as a platform for group agency and political action. A corollary is the interrogation of the tension between individual identity and the constraints of social structure (Giddens, 1991; Jenkins, 1986; Stryker, 1980).

Studies of gender identity that utilize social constructionist theory often interrogate agents of socialization and outline the specific roles played by each in its acquisition. For our purpose, we will focus on those that identify the media as central to the acquisition of this identity (see for instance Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger, 1995; Gaines, 1991; Sidel, 1991; Kaplan, 1983; Atkin, 1982). The central concern of these works is the way the media organizes, articulates and projects the affective, cognitive and behavioural data individuals use to form a gendered self. This demonstrates the fact that identities are neither immutable nor can they exist in abstraction. Identities are social constructions rooted in the character of economic relations and are constantly being re-invented, reconstructed and redefined to keep pace with the rapidity with which globalization modifies patterns of social relations. They are also important to the extent that they provide a reactive platform through which social formations can confront the implications of other competing identities. As was noted by Laakso and Olukoshi (1996:31), the construction of the identity of one group only makes

sense in relation to the way the identities of others are constructed and not in isolation. This suggests that in the case of gender, the value of feminist identity or gender equality is only obvious as a reaction to the dominant identity of the male and the patriarchal system constructed to consolidate and perpetuate it.

While this paper uses the anti-essentialism perspective of social constructionism as a framework to analyse the role of the media as an agency of gender identity construction in Nigeria, it focuses more on the area of the media's choice of certain gendered images and how these reflects the political economy of the region within which it operates. It places these within the context of contestations for power. Looking at the hegemonic discourse associated with the press, it utilizes insights from theories of hegemony particularly that of Antonio Gramsci (1971) who identified the capacity of the intellectuals of the ruling class to subjugate, by exercising a 'power of attraction', the intellectuals of disempowered social groups. This is achieved by creating a 'system of solidarity between all intellectuals with bonds of a psychological nature (vanity etc) and often of a cast character (techno-juridical, corporate, etc)'. The implication of this for our discourse is that the dominant culture in this era of globalization seems to be imposing its values on others. The increased relevance of agents of mass information, the media, in providing information about the preferences of this dominant culture places them within the space of 'intellectuals of other social groups' that have been 'subjugated' and now seek bonds of a 'psychological nature'. Going further, Gramsci (ibid: p, 186) notes that the 'normal exercise of hegemony is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally without force predominating excessively over consent'. The media has lapped up the prevailing western gender constructs, to the extent that the character of economic production of their 'catchment' area allows, but still has to balance this new 'modern' perspective with the old and as yet, still deeply entrenched perspectives. This process apparently requires a delicate combination of force and consent, enough to ensure legitimation both within the recipient society and the overarching international system of 'global best practices' or perhaps more appropriately, western practices. Gramsci's hegemony theory is complemented by those of Althusser, (1971), Cox, (1981) and Habermas, (1996).

The theories of anti-essentialist social constructionism and hegemony complement each other quite well in capturing the overall essence of our study. By explaining the connection between conscious manipulation of social institutions and hegemony, both theories provide an appropriate template with which one may look at the central thesis of this paper. That is that identities are fluid products of the character of economic relations and they

are important in the study of social formations principally to the extent that they are agents of social mobilization and political action. We can thus go on to examine gender in transcultural communication.

A Gendered view of Trans-cultural Communication in a globalizing age

One of the defining characteristics of this globalization era is its ability and indeed willingness to force the immersion of every part of life-both public and private- into the whirlpool of its contradictory forces. These forces continually modify, challenge and consolidate the evolution of social values and demonstrate a growing ability to construct historically specific and exclusive truths that fit into the prevailing fad. This is however perhaps not as important as the tendency of globalization to make all and any social phenomena a veritable agency of mass mobilization. The implication is a politicization of otherwise cultural issues and the emergence of new frontiers of conflict around the world.

Since the late 1980s, there has been an explosion of conflicts all over the world. These conflicts are largely products of ethnic, racial and religious tensions that seem to suggest a growing social crisis in the international system (UNRISD: 1995). The 21st century has also witnessed many of such conflicts that threaten security and call to question the stability and very survival of the state in Africa (Nnoli: 2006). At the heart of this turmoil is the crisis of individual and group identity, which in the context of deepening social inequality/fragmentation, the weakened administrative and policy apparatuses of the state, the decline of the ideologies of communism and anti communism that dominated the cold war years, the rise of non state challenges to the state's monopoly of violence, and an accelerating process of globalization, has called into question some of the basic premises of the nation-state project (Laakso and Olukoshi: 1996, 7).

It would appear that globalization ought to promote transculturalism and initiate a regime of understanding. Indeed, many optimists of this era expect that globalization will 'end history'. They assume that the increasing homogenization of values, particularly neo-liberal capitalism, spells the end of old cultural frontiers of conflict as more societies come to accept the primacy of capital. This has however not been the case as the content and character of globalization has come to promote 'social fragmentation, disintegration and disaggregation' (Adejumobi: 2005, 19). Samuel Huntington's (1996) view of the tensions that resulted from the collapse of the cold war world order is that the identities that emerge

represent cultural forms and expressions that are to define the character of political relations in the 21st century.

Long before the post cold war century however, cultural disruption associated with changes in the backing of money have historically induced crisis of meaning, which according to Shapiro (1999:111), is a result of the 'way monetary discourses are implicated in various other domains of value, meaning, and identity'. Shapiro's point is that changes in the forms of exchange have historically challenged the notion of stability that the previous medium of exchange provided and introduced uncertainties that weakened both intra and transcultural communication. By expressing the contradictions between a persistent nostalgic feeling for the old; in the case of Gide's (see Goux: 1994, 20-21) World War 1 France, a pining for gold backed currency for instance; and a realistic acceptance of the rapid changes brought on by the new, changes in forms of exchange capture the tensions associated with transcultural communication in a time of rapid social dynamism. Africa's experience with the introduction of a cash economy by colonialism perhaps best illustrates the way disruptions to the dominant form of exchange expresses a more general anxiety about the way in which social life is appropriated by economic life. The impact of the new cash economy on the mobility of labour and the class structures of the society are examples of specific areas where changes in the form of exchange has altered social formations. This focus on form of exchange plugs into the larger perspective of the primacy of capital that was so brilliantly set out by Marx.

The very dynamism of globalization and the depth and scope of changes in the 21st century have forced a focus on the implications of identities for transcultural communication. This is because this new era has introduced a multiplicity of identities and has significantly deepened issue linkages to the point that even academics are finding it quite difficult to understand the connections, discourses and tensions currently associated with transcultural communication.

Globalization highlights disparities in broad cultural history while also bringing intra-societal differences into bolder relief. Attempts to cope with this multi layered tensions is what Jacques Derrida (1994) referred to as 'Hauntology'. Here, it is argued that in the process of coping with what they construe as a new world (dis) order, the discursive enactments of societies conjure away the aspects of inner disorder, like gender equality for instance, that highlight the fragility of the established identities. Diverse groups therefore struggle to maintain what Shapiro (1999: 114) called the fiction of their 'absolute separation from the various aspects of alterity on which the coherence and singularity of their identities are

founded'. In seeking separation from the 'other', identity formations inevitably repress dissent within and project a myth that ascribes a stable 'temporality and territoriality' to themselves (Ibid: 115).

This analysis is based on the assumption that there exists a primary or primary identities around which societies coalesce. These primary identities are straddled by 'lesser' identities that threaten the hold of the primary at the same time their aggregation defines the primary. In the Nigerian context, the primary identities are largely ethnic. It is the hold of the ethnic identities that is being threatened by class, youth, religious and of course gender identity. In an attempt to consolidate the hegemony of ethnic identities, all other identities are easily manipulated and their significance denied or accepted only to the extent that it strengthens the utility of the ethnic identity for providing access to the state and perpetuating dominant patterns of accumulation. As Ake (1996a: 26) put it, the political elite that inherited the authoritarian structures of the colonial state intensified ethnic differences and tensions because 'the only tool each faction (ethnic) had for giving itself a separate identity and for ideological mobilization of mass support was primordial loyalties such as ethnicity and religion. This highlights the value of identity as an agency for popular mobilization and political action. It is in this context that gender identity's place in transcultural communication can be understood.

The gender debate in Nigeria is increasingly being constructed around the primal question of power. Because the competition for power in Nigeria is fought out on a political turf where ethnic identities have become key to social mobilization (See Ake, 1996a) the gender issue has inevitably become a component of the broader problematic of transcultural communication and the national question. The ethnic community in 21st century Africa and in the era of the modern media is an imagined community that can be easily manipulated to conjure up sacrifices geared at defending acquired privileges or challenging perceived marginalization. Gender is therefore placed within this problematic both to gain relevance in the power debate and of course to fit into the identities being acquired by the externally value oriented media.

The media who act as the new custodians of social values largely view gender in a way that reflects their positions as ethnic champions rather than modern social activists. This is in spite of the pretensions to westernization. Western constructs or sometimes Islamic ones are merely strategies and punch lines with which the media demonstrate the superiority of their social bases. Indeed Haruna (2005: 167) did much to demonstrate the ethnic leaning of the Nigerian media when he notes that the print media have behaved more like 'the attack

dogs of certain partisan interests than the watchdog of a country labouring hard to build democracy'. He makes no mistake in pointing out that those 'partisan interests' are ethnic when he states that the media is dominated by the 'Lagos-Ibadan axis'- a common way of referring to the southern media. In that article, Haruna looks at the reactions of the 'Lagos-Ibadan axis' in the media to a president with ethnic roots in western Nigeria, the core of the 'Lagos-Ibadan axis'. His conclusion was that the southern media was far too generous to Olusegun Obasanjo's government apparently because he was a southerner.

The fact that the media is immersed in the power struggle in such a way that points them out as ethnic champions rather than objective watchdogs shows that they are likely to regard gender issues as falling within the broad question of social mobilization. That is, gender is regarded first as an agency for political action rather than a human rights issue. The implication is therefore that gendered choices will be made in such a way that consolidates rather than threatens the dominance of the ruling elite. This explains why 'gender equality' easily promotes women whose claim to power is derived from their relationship with men. In the end, what 'gender equality' means is really a perverse sought of 'affirmative action' that increases the available spaces of power for the men (and by extension their ethnic groups), through their wives, daughters, girl friends and female loyalists, in a way that consolidates their dominance and further entrenches the marginalization of mainstream women.

This approach to the study of gender in Nigeria outlines the impact of cultural conflicts and contestations for power on women. As the competition for power deepens, gender, as well as most other social facts, becomes a mere weapon with which the ruling ethnic coalitions appropriate access to the state and ensure the consolidation of their power. In this kind of situation, it is near impossible for gender discourse to highlight the important issues that touch on the empowerment of ordinary people, rather, it focuses on the hegemonic goals of the elite and prescribes solutions to inequality that consolidate rather than reduce it. Gender is thus a tool in the hands of competing elites in transcultural competition.

Because women are often the disempowered in the relations between the sexes, it is inevitable that the gender discourse will focus on their marginality. A gendered view of transcultural communication will therefore necessarily focus on the impact of cultural conflict or cooperation on the status of women. The media is important to this problematic more so in an era of globalization where advances in technology have greatly increased the power, reach and vibrancy of the press and with it, its ability to construct social identities and aid their transformation into agents of social mobilization and political action. The media makes choices that reflect its social circumstances. These choices are at the heart of our

discourse in the next section as we engage the role of the Nigerian media in gender identity formation.

To be Visible or Hidden? The construction of gender identity in the Media in Nigeria

The gender discourse in Nigeria is underpinned, as earlier mentioned, by the questions of power, hegemony and access to the state. Paternalistic forces that resist social change in the direction of gender equality do so because of its implications for the delicate power configurations and coalitions that determine access to the patrimonial state. It is critical to understand the gender debate in Nigeria in the context of political economy rather than culture. Indeed, in southern Nigeria, it has been reported that respect for women, if not gender equality, was a critical foundation of the pre-colonial systems. Even the north, where a more conservative view of women holds sway, had elements within the traditional systems that indicated respect for women and the recognition of gendered voices in governance (Azuike: 2005; Ogwezzy: 2004; Stean: 1998; Olurode: 1990). The impact of the Islamist Jihad of Dan Fodio however forced women out of the public space, a condition that was fossilized in time by the colonial state. Gender insensitivity is therefore not necessarily a cultural fact in Nigeria. It is largely a conscious creation of a state system that valorizes force and authoritarian exercises of power.

The central question facing the media in its construction of gender identity in Nigeria is related to the dilemma of determining whether women should occupy visible spaces in the national discourse or whether they should remain hidden.

To be sure, it should be noted that reference to the media in Nigeria is not meant to imply that there is a homogenous press that confronts social issues in largely the same way. The reality of the press in Nigeria is that they are far from immune from the primordial divisions that are products of the nature of the colonial state in Africa. There is a core division within the press that reflects the problematic of the national question in Nigeria. The northern and southern press have their jobs cut out for them. Even though a significant percentage of the print media are privately owned, they tend to mark out and defend turfs that are ethnic and regional. This division is also reflected in the way gender issues are confronted.

The tendency of the media in southern Nigeria, for instance, is to insist that women maintain relatively high levels of visibility while the northern media remains highly conservative. The dichotomy easily reflects differences in the character of economic production and the differences in colonial experiences. The relatively developed capitalism of southern Nigeria and the higher levels of western formal education make it much different

from the backward north. It can be argued that the political economy of the south provides increased opportunities for assertive women. This is both a consequence of and a push factor for a more liberal view of women. Indeed, the assertion of female independence or equality in northern Nigeria is more likely to induce a backlash that far overshadows the potentials available for feminine expression. It would appear therefore that there is little incentive for the northern media to construct gender in the liberal mould. This largely explains why gender equality and female sexuality have not become popular themes in media discourse in northern Nigeria. A cursory textual analysis of the print media in northern Nigeria will reveal that debate on gender equality is almost nonexistent. It would appear that the press easily mirrors the dominance of patriarchal forces and their tendency to exclude challenges to their power from public discourse.

Southern Nigeria is much different as the gender discourse has been quite intense. This is largely a reflection of the character of economic reproduction and the opportunities it provides for women. Because women can get and are in fact becoming increasingly privileged in competitive jobs like banking, the society seems more open to engaging patriarchal forces. The southern media promotes a largely western perspective of women. It therefore comes into conflict with the growing religious movement that seems to vacillate between the conservative and the liberal. This is unlike the northern media that tends to promote a largely Islamic perspective of women. It does this more by ignoring the discourse than by leading it.

The different ways in which gender issues are confronted by the southern and northern media establishments in Nigeria is a reflection of the regional disparities in economy and social history that have underlined the national question in the country. The North-South divide is not as much created as it is reflected by the different gendered identity systems promoted by the media. At the heart of the gender discourse is the question of power and hegemony. The gender debate in Nigeria is therefore a hegemonic discourse. It raises questions that threaten the dominance of class as well as ethnicity. In the first instance, the increased participation of women in national politics since 1999 must not be misconstrued as reflecting a national acceptance of public visibility of women. It is crucial to note that women who get to state office by virtue of their sponsorship by dominant class interests or as consorts of men, cannot be expected to confront the unique issues faced by common women. To the extent that their claim to power derives from their social navigation of the structures of power through relationships with men, their representation can only reinforce the very basis

of women's subordinate status. Their experiences are not representative of the disempowerment that the majority of poor women suffer.

This problematic addresses a critical dimension of the gendered identity choices being made by the Nigerian media. There is a tendency in the Nigerian media to focus disproportionately on the wives of political office holders. This creates an image of the successful woman that inevitably excludes the majority of women and, rather than highlight personal success, hard work and innovation, promotes traditional roles like motherhood, feminine grace, fashion and panache. This image interestingly generates respect in the north while it generates resentment in the south. This public reaction to the gendered choices of the media further highlights the regional differences in the political economy of Nigeria. The private sector driven south favours the competitive, educated, assertive but married woman while the public sector dependent north favours the homely, shy, submissive and hidden woman.

Political economy by no means provides the only explanation for the media's gendered choices and the society's reactions to it. Other factors like religion clearly play important roles too. The nature of economic production however does much to mould the impact of these other factors on the identity construction process. There is a large Muslim population in south western Nigeria for instance but their perceptions of the media driven gender roles and identity are not significantly different from that of Christians or traditionalists. Indeed, there is homogeneity of perception that is only tempered by the rural-urban dichotomy rather than religion. This demonstrates that religion interprets gender in such a way that adapts to the prevailing nature of economic production.

Why has gender become topical, in spite of the resistance? One reason gender has become a growth industry is the impact of neo-liberal reforms. The neo-liberal reforms that Nigeria embarked upon, particularly since 1999 and in the light of the Millennium Development Goals (Particularly Goal 3 that addresses gender equality issues) has done much to encourage the mainstreaming of gender in policy making. Gender equality has however suffered the same fate faced by democracy and most of the other prescriptions of the reform agenda. For democracy for instance, much has been written on how electoral and liberal democracy does not provide the type of mass representation and political participation that is required to truly democratize Nigeria (see Gana: 2005; Omelle: 2005; Adejumobi: 2000; Ake, 96b, 96c, 93). In the same way, gender equality has merely become a catchphrase through which the media demonstrates its supposed acquaintance with 'best global practices'

rather than a real commitment to addressing the crisis of disempowerment and authoritarianism that is at the heart of the gender discourse.

Implications of Gender Identity for the National Question and Democratization in Nigeria

The Gender discourse takes shape in the context of resistance to the domination of minority social groups in Nigeria. Even though the minority question is inevitably primarily an ethnic struggle, political economy, particularly oil, is salient to the contextualization and intensity of the minority issue (Soremekun and Obi: 1993; Obi: 2002). This is more so because the bulk of Nigeria's oil wealth is derived from regions inhabited by minority groups.

The period of adjustment and the authoritarianism it spawned (Gibbon, Bangura and Ofstad: 1992) greatly reduced resources available to fund the patronage systems of the state and deepened competition for a shrinking revenue base. Challenges to dominant social structures took the shape of calls for democratization and pressures from autonomous social forces for a sought of remodelling and re-definition of the basis of national cohesion. In the midst of this milieu, the cold war world order; with its defined contours and clear boundaries; collapsed, giving way to the emergence of monoculturalist forces that increasingly force a liberalization of the political space and intensify its modelling around capitalist values. The widening political space easily combined with neo-liberal economic reforms and the pressures from a global media apparatus and provided opportunities for erstwhile marginalized social groups to highlight their disempowerment and challenge the system that perpetuates it.

It is in the context of these changes that the gender question came to be couched not in the language of right or morality, but rather in the language of power, hegemony and empowerment. Rather than ignoring the 'political-economic dimensions of gender oppression and presuppose an immanent and superior female morality and nurturing capability that is held up as an alternative to the destructive militarism and environmental ruin caused by aggressive, patriarchal men' (Edelman: 2001, 300), the tenor of the gender struggle within society in Nigeria, as more accurately defined by feminist scholarship, captures the disempowerment and hegemonic dimension of gender relations. Unlike the media that portrays a rather shallow vision of the gender problematic, feminist scholarship tends to more deeply understand the linkages between gender and disempowerment.

Gender is unique in that it bears a minority only in the sense of access to power. There is a rough balance, in numbers, between both sexes, so one might not speak of a minority for

a disempowered sex (almost always women) in the sense in which one describes the oil producing Niger Delta communities as minorities for instance.

The atmosphere of protest and the neo-liberal agenda have done much to provide inspiration and fillip to the gender discourse in Nigeria. It is critical for the understanding of the roots of the gender debate to examine it in the context of disempowerment. This is what links gender to a national question that is also rooted in discourse on disempowerment and equality. Before addressing the implications of gender identity for the national question and democratization in Nigeria however, it is crucial to examine its nature and trajectory. One should interrogate the factors that have combined to make the national question so problematic in Nigeria, what linkages it has to the democratic challenge and to determine the place of gender in the crisis.

JF Ade Ajayi (1992: 14) provided an insightful description of the national question when he notes that 'it is a perennial debate about how to order the relations between different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groupings'. This description is however incomplete if it is not placed within the context of external influence and the:

> character and structure of Nigeria's political economy and how these shape the structures of political and economic inequality which benefit the external factors and the dominant groups and are antithetical to an equitable resolution of the National Question (Soremekun and Obi: 1993, 213).

The National Question emerged in Nigeria in the 20th century as a result of the forcible bringing together by Britain of disparate nationalities at various stages of social organization and state formation and the forcible imposition of colonial capitalism on the territory through the instrumentality of the colonial state (Soremekun and Obi:1993, 215). Colonialism arrested the development of the pre-colonial modes of production and created the conditions in which the diverse groups that made up colonial Nigeria had no choice but to mobilize through communal or national groups, or better still as Ekeh (1975) describes them; primordial publics, whose identity systems were of necessity exclusive in nature. The severe competition for shrinking national resources, particularly oil revenue, and the fact that state revenue is largely derived from minority areas have intensified the problematic nature of the national question in Nigeria. The National Question easily lends itself to the contest for power and the just and equitable distribution of state revenue between these nationalities.

Democratization is also inextricably linked to the national question in Nigeria. Many distinguished scholars have called for a rethinking of the assumption that ethnicity is bad in itself (see Nnoli: 78, 2000, 2006; Ake: 93, 96a, 96b, 96c; Olukoshi and Laakso: 1996;

Soremekun and Obi: 1993). Rather, they argue that, given the specific nature of Africa's social formations, ethnicity could form the basis upon which genuine representation could be found and mass participation guaranteed. Indeed Soremekun and Obi (1993:214) see in the genuine democratization of Nigeria the ultimate resolution of the national question.

As earlier noted, the demands for inclusion in the political process which took on violent ethnic dimensions in the 1990s had as its corollary, corresponding demands for the inclusion of other social groups. It was in the context of these resistance of a political structure that seemed to entrench disempowerment and marginalization that the gender discourse took root. Other social groups like youth, students, consumers, and labour also intensified their demands for social inclusion so much so that the tapestry of identities in Nigeria became truly rainbow-like. But it was a single tapestry nonetheless. It was held together by common bonds of disempowerment, economic crisis and increasing competition for shrinking resources. The period of adjustment did much to intensify these struggles and by the time the liberalization of the post cold war era nominally freed social forces from overt institutionalized repression by the state, multiple identities emerged as vanguards of a confused network of values.

The media, giving its lack of autonomy and consequent immersion in the identity struggles of society, became a platform through which these identities were articulated, sieved, adapted, transformed and manipulated by the competing social formations. In this way, the media's divisions and the inevitable divergence in the gendered choices it makes constantly highlight the divisive contours of the national question in Nigeria.

The view of women strikes at the heart of society. This is because women are largely responsible for passing on cultural identities to children. They are also perhaps the symbol of social continuity and survival. Ironically, the same cultural roles that predispose women to seeking cultural accommodation may ignite virulent nationalism. It is common to see the protection of women feature prominently in gender discourse. For those who think they should be largely visible and those who expect them not to be, protecting 'weak, fragile and disempowered' women lies at the core of their justification.

Gender threatens primary identity as it pitches all women against all men irrespective of ethnic, class or religious affiliation. These forces are fighting back and the media plays a

confused role by promoting the new neo-liberal gender identity at the same time it champions the cause of ethnic solidarity, class tensions and democratization. The media has plugged, to varying degrees, into the gender agenda but still have to fulfil ethnic and class roles that give little room for the gender discourse to emerge with its own distinct dynamic. This confusion of the role to be played by the media reflects in the contradictory gendered choices it makes and the further undermining of national cohesion.

The implications for democratization are deep. It is important to bring a social group so large and potentially all encompassing into the mainstream of politics. It is however misleading to assume that gender discrimination can shunt other potent discriminations out of public focus. Disempowerment linked to class, religion and ethnicity are far more potent and are likely to remain so. How Nigeria's autonomous social forces navigate this dilemma will play a decisive role in its democratization.

Conclusion: The Media's Janus Dilemma: The Past or the Present?

The media's dilemma is similar to that of Janus. Should it look to the past, where the pre-industrial Nigerian society so apparently relates much better to, or should it look at the present pressures of globalization that insist on a homogenization, couched as transculturalism, that requires imposing alien values on a reluctant society?

The media's role is a confused one. At the same time it attempts to plug into the neo-liberal agenda by promoting, to varying degrees, the western vision of gender equality, it inevitably retains its tendency to promote ethnic or regional views that call to question the ongoing nation-state agenda and prevent the kind of convergence required for transcultural solidarity and cooperation. By assuming that these divisions are in and of themselves inimical to democratization, while at the same time promoting these very same discredited divisions, the Nigerian media, like the rest of civil society, loses sight of the potentials of diversity providing the basis for re-negotiating the very root of national survival and with it, the possibility of finally answering the national question in Nigeria.

The media in Nigeria is a yet untapped potential for promoting transcultural communication. This is not unconnected to its links to vested class interests who continually manipulate ethnic and cultural identities to consolidate their power in the post adjustment era. Even publicly owned media are tools in the hands of the political elite to promote their interests and to mark out ethnic hegemonic turfs.

How the media handles its Janus dilemma is largely dependent on changes in the distributive and extractive character of the Nigerian state. As critical as it is to the

construction of gender identity in Nigeria and the utility of that identity for the nation-state project, it appears the ball is effectively out of the media's court. It rests instead in the hands of forces of resistance that can rise above exclusionary identities and find solidarity in mutual disempowerment and marginalization.

References

Ade-Ajayi J. (1992), *The National Question in Historical Perspective*, Text of the Fifth Guardian Newspapers Lecture delivered at the NIIA, Lagos, 4th November 1992; published in Lagos, November 5, 1992, p.14

Adejumobi S. (2000), Elections in Africa: A Fading Shadow of Democracy?, *International Political Science Review,* Vol. 21, No. 1, pp 685-90

Adejumobi S. (2005), 'Identity, Citizenship and Conflict: The African Experience', In: Fawole W. and C. Ukeje (eds.), *The Crisis of the State and Regionalism in West Africa: Identity, Citizenship and Conflict,* Dakar: CODESRIA, pp19-43

Ake C. (1993). 'The Unique Case of African Democracy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 69 No.2: 239-244.

Ake C. (1996a). 'The Political Question', In: Oyediran O. (ed.), *Governance and Development in Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Professor Billy J. Dudley*, Ibadan: Oyediran Consult

Ake C. (1996b). 'Is Africa Democratizing?' *CASS Monograph* No. 5, Lagos: Malthouse

Ake C. (1996c). *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Washington DC: The Brookings Institution

Althusser L. (1971), Ideology and Ideology State Apparatuses, In: Louis Althusser (ed.), *Lenin and Philosophy*, translated by B. Brewster, London: New Left Books

Atkin C. (1982), 'Changing Male and Female Roles', In: M. Schwartz (ed.), *TV and Teens: Experts Look at the Issues*, Reading: Addison-Wesley, pp 66-70

Azuike M. (2005), 'Women and Governance: Four Years of Democracy', In: Gana A. and Y. Omelle (eds.), *Democratic Rebirth in Nigeria (1999-2003),* New Jersey: Africanus, pp 133-47

Cerulo K. (1997), Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 23, pp 385-409

Cox R. (1981), Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory, *Millennium*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 135-51

Derrida J. (1994), *Spectres of Marx*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge

Edelman M. (2001), Social Movements: Changing Paradigms and Forms of Politics, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 30, pp. 285-317

Eilberg-Schwartz H. and Doniger W. (1995), *Off With Her Head!: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Ekeh Peter (1975), Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17(1), pp. 91-112

Gaines D. (1991), *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids*, New York: Pantheon

Gana A. (2005), 'Conclusion: The Democracy-Development Nexus', In: Gana A. and Y. Omelle (eds.), *Democratic Rebirth in Nigeria (1999-2003),* New Jersey: Africanus, pp 257-89

Gibbon Peter, Yusuf Bangura and Arve Ofstad (1992) (eds.), *Authoritarianism, Democracy and adjustment: The Politics of Economic Reform in Africa*, Uppsala: Nordic African Institute

Giddens A. (1991), *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the late modern age*, Cambridge: Polity

Goux J. (1994), *The Coiners of Language*, translated by Jennifer Curtiss Gage, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press

Gramsci A. (1971), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by O. Hoare and G. Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart

Habermas J. (1996), *The Social Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by William Rehg, Cambridge MA: Cambridge

Haruna M. (2005), 'A Tame Pres for the Fourth Republic', In: Gana A. and Y. Omelle (eds.), *Democratic Rebirth in Nigeria (1999-2003),* New Jersey: Africanus , pp 163-170

Huntington S. (1996), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the New World Order*, New York: Touchstone

Jenkins R. (1986), *Social Identity*, London: Routledge

Kaplan E.A (1983), 'Is the Gaze Male?' In: A. Snitow, C. Stansell and S. Thompson (eds.), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, New York: Monthly Review, pp 309-27

Laakso L. And Olukoshi A. (1996), 'The Crisis of the Post-Colonial Nation-State Project in Africa', In: Olukoshi A. and L. Laakso (eds.), *Challenges to The Nation-State in Africa,* Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, pp-7-39

Nnoli O. (2000). 'Globalization and Democracy in Africa' In: D. Nabudere (ed.) *Globalization and the Post Colonial African State,* Harare: African Association of Political Science, pp173-189

Nnoli O. (2006), *National Security in Africa: A Radical New Perspective*, Enugu: PACREP

Obi C. (2002), 'Oil and the Minority Question', In: Momoh A. and S. Adejumobi (eds.), *The National Question in Nigeria: Comparative Perspectives*, Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, pp 97-118

Ogwezzy A. (2004), 'The Press, Gender and Politics: Nigerian Perspective', In: Akinboye S. (ed.), *Paradox of Gender Equality in Nigerian Politics: Essays in Honour of Dr. (Mrs.) Veronica Adeleke*, Lagos: Concept

Omelle Y. (2005), 'Democracy: Is it a Means to or an end in itself?', In: Gana A. and Y. Omelle (eds.), *Democratic Rebirth in Nigeria (1999-2003),* New Jersey: Africanus , pp 1-15

Shapiro M. (1999), Globalization and the Politics of Discourse, *Social Text*, No. 60, pp111-29

Sidel R. (1991), *On Her Own: Growing Up in the Shadow of the American Dream*, New York: Viking

Soremekun K. And Obi C. (1993), 'Oil and the National Question', Proceedings of the Nigeria Economic Society (NES) Annual Conference, pp 209-31

Steans J. (1998), 'States, Nationalisms and Gendered Identities, In: Steans J. (ed.), *Gender and International Relations: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press

Stryker S. (1980), *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version*, Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin Cummings

UNRISD (1995), *States of Disarray: The Social Effects of Globalization*, Geneva: UNRISD