The Representation of Women and Claims to Citizens' Rights in Africa: Beyond a Political Debate

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DRAFT for discussion

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A few questions by way of introduction

Representations of female identity are extremely important because they frame women's individual stories and their claims for social and cultural rights, for sexual and reproductive rights, for economic and political rights – those are the most common. Two questions arise: first, how to be a woman, claim rights and freedoms, and remain African in contemporary societies where the identity values forged by our long histories have undergone profound changes because of – most notably – colonisation, decolonisation and globalisation? Second, how to build one's identity freely, and assume it equally freely, when norms and rules are so entrenched in culture, religion and politics, and are primarily about societal control over individuals and groups in general, and over women in particular? It is a complex process which can weaken those women whose actions are questioned or condemned in the name of these "sacrosanct" norms.

Thus, women's struggles do not fall only within the socio-political debate on gender relations, a debate which would seem almost easy to engage in. African quests for more equality, social justice and effective citizens' rights are confronted with different representations which are "in competition" with one another: the much-criticised Western models inherited from colonisation and globalisation; the (re)asserted African civilisational and ideological values; the religious values that are (re)claimed as cultural resources and "identity alibis" (*alibis identitaires)*. African women are constantly challenged on what is considered as a Western approach in their outlook and aspirations. Whenever they oppose cultural injustices, their legitimacy is assessed by the degree of their Africanness. They are challenged on their religious identities, which are (almost) never to be questioned.

Now how can we elaborate a more relevant approach, or more relevant approach*es*, that are acceptable to us and can help us to understand the issues that affect us? The answer is far from simple. Academic research, like many forms of action-research or pure activism, is faced with a whirlwind of ideas about the way empirical data should be collected, read, sorted and analysed. Drawing conclusions is just as complex (Imam, Mama, Sow et al. 1997). I have experienced this whirlwind throughout my academic career and during my fieldwork. I have faced this complexity, especially about women's issues, with more or less happiness, anxiety or suffering depending on the circumstances, the time and place where I was speaking and working. I believe most of us have experienced this.

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I will attempt to briefly clarify my position as an African feminist, a position which is subject to various quandaries on the African continent. I am an African feminist, rooted in a continent which is deeply steeped in its cultures. And I do avail myself of the right to read and re-read the pages these cultures have produced, and to draw past and present stories from them. I want to be able to question their shifting values (because they are alive), to analyse their realities, transformations and contradictions. Should I not appraise their multifaceted contributions to universality, in relation to time and space, in order to imagine, if not dream, their future? Our cultures are not only memories of struggle against the colonial West, the dominating West. Our cultures are also our memories and life spaces, which we reinvent every day, at every moment, with every generation. Our cultures are the fruit of our actions and constructions, deconstructions and reconstructions, conquests and defeats, etc. We need to know them and revisit them, using the critical analytical tools that have been developed over time.

When asked for a title that encapsulates the essence of this talk, I suggested "The representation of women and claims to citizens' rights in Africa". As women, we are constantly represented according to cultural, religious and political ideologies (systems of ideas) which imagine us, fantasize us or criticise us, be it as individual or collective icons. It is up to us whether we succumb to these representations and assume them, claim them or challenge them. All those representations constitute as many stakes and challenges in claiming our rights as citizens. We shall now see how.

Identity: a social construct

What is identity? This is a question which is widely debated among academics, politicians and activists, in the religious and cultural spheres... as is the case today. Let me just highlight one or two ideas. In his book on *The Power of Identity* (1999), sociology professor Manuel Castells defines identity as the marking, by religion, culture or any other determinant, of any individual or community to allow them to live in society. For Castells, it is essentially a social construct which "is a source of meaning and experience". Identity, as he understands it, is

> *"the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning. For a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities. Yet, such plurality is a source of stress and contradictions in both self-representation and social action" (p. 6).*

The relationship between gender and identity is linked to the history of the interaction between biology and culture (Löwy and Rouch 2003), which I will not discuss at length here, except to say that biological sex merely allows individuals to perform so-called "natural" functions. Beyond the biological, being a woman implies gender-based assignations – assuming a female identity (as opposed to a male identity) within the family and in society. Through these assignations, human relations are based on a set of attitudes and behaviours which are represented, if not caricatured, as signs of weakness or strength on the basis of imagined criteria which are themselves ritualised into models and values. Again, we can gather ample evidence of this both in popular literature (sayings, stories, tales, proverbs, adages) and scholarly literature.

This leads to other questions: how can we study the processes of construction of identities and their categories? How can we dismantle the positioning mechanisms in the social hierarchies as they exist between individuals, classes, groups of all kinds, between men and women, between the elderly and the young? How can we document the multiple processes of domination/submission, their justifications, their institutionalisation in social, political, economic systems? These identity assignations (gender, age, class, language, religion, ethnicity, race, various roles and statuses…), all culturally and/or religiously endorsed, depending on their logic – one could say intersectionality – determine the standards and rules of representation that can be sources of discrimination, stigmatisation, prescription, injunctions, etc. While women and their movements have long lived and suffered the consequences of these assignations, one can now witness a multipolar intensification of challenges to, and rejections of, the sexual division of social status and roles almost everywhere in the world. Women's claims as citizens generally question these representations of female identity, which, beyond politics, pose clear social challenges. What kind of society do we want? Are we going to pursue models prescribed by the social codes in force which we try to negotiate and reimagine according to our aspirations?

Confronting the representations of identity

To claim something is to confront it. It is to refuse to abide by the norms, rules and decisions created and imposed by the cultural, political, moral or religious orders which vary according to our contexts. How can we achieve this?

Feminism is one way of challenging these orders, their representations of the social roles assigned to gender, and the resulting inequalities suffered by women. It allows us to analyse women's conditions and to deconstruct the mechanisms of inequality between sexes.

To be a feminist is to want to change these power relations, to promote equality in law, to encourage equal access to citizens' rights for everyone. Feminism (I should say *feminisms*) has theorised, to varying degrees, the centrality of the "oppression" of women. It sees sexism as the reason why women are oppressed, marginalised, made invisible, excluded even. Undeniably, feminist activists have taken a different approach to explaining the causes, forms and acts of sexism and the changes that have occurred in the course of history and used a different language (including gender) to understand and describe them. Gender concepts have helped us reflect about power relations between sexes. All these theorisations show that "the term feminism covers a diverse array of politics centered around the pursuit of more equitable gender relations; this is true of feminism in Africa" (Mama 2005). Amina Mama, a Nigerian sociologist whose team publishes *Feminist Africa,* a website hosted by the University of Cape Town, continues:

> *"Proper documentation and analysis of the various manifestations of feminism, and the ways these have changed over time in different African contexts, is hampered by the lack of access to resources and the limited opportunities for debate, networking, and scholarship grounded in continental contexts. As a result, the debate around African feminism and feminism in Africa remains highly contested and difficult to define".*

At this point I would like to introduce some African perspectives about the place of women in culture, even if these perspectives have brought as many divisions as contributions to the debate. They continue to fuel controversies, regardless of whether they relate to methodological, historical or political issues.

The perspectives of Western feminists on the "global" issue of women, with the emergence of *Women's Liberation Movements* (WLM) and various conceptualisations of Third World women such as *Women and Development* and *Gender and Development*, between 1970 and 2000, have been widely debated by activists from other parts of the world grouped together as "the South" (as opposed to "the North"). Though dominant, these perspectives were perceived as arrogant because they had an allegedly universalist approach to the priorities, demands and strategies of struggle of other women. As such, they attracted very strong criticism. In the USA, we have witnessed the reactions of *Black Feminism*, which deplored the fact that the question of race and the history of slavery were not taken into consideration in American feminist studies. As Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term "intersectionality", wrote:

> "*Because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both [sexism and racism]" (2005: 54).*

" [...] *was guided by two main objectives : the first is to create a space from which to theorize our experiences, presently marginalized in today's global context of unequal economic relations; and the second is to wrest ourselves from the mould of stereotypical assumptions in which this international economic order and its attendant culture of hierarchy have cast us" (2001).*

How to reflect on the place of women in African culture and history?

Breaking the myth of the emancipation of women, often described as a "benefit" of European colonisation, was the first mission of all women involved in any reflection and action on these issues. Scholars of Africa had to identify and take into account the continent's own histories and values, and this was precisely the aim of the symposium on *The Civilisation of Women in the African Tradition*, which took place in Abidjan in 1975. Thinkers (both men and women) looked into African women's status and powers, whose origins could often be found in the matriarchal system. The debates on matriarchy as a universal system of social organisation are not new. For Johan Bachofen, the well-known Swiss theorist of matriarchy (1981), "the maternal right belongs to a more ancient civilization than the paternal right", but there was a universal shift from matriarchy to patriarchy. The historian of African civilisations Cheikh Anta Diop, however, takes the counterpoint to this theory, which implies the superiority of patriarchy, "synonymous with spiritual yearning towards the divine regions of the sky, with purity and moral chastity" (Diop 1982: 27), over matriarchy, characterised by a "passive dependence on earthly life, material things and bodily needs" (Diop 1982: 27). In fact, Diop argues that both systems exist in the world: "these two systems encountered one another and even disputed with each other different human societies, that in certain places they were super-imposed on each or even existed side by side" (1982: 25). The presence of

matriarchy as a basic social institution attests to the profound cultural unity of Africa. Diop goes on:

"Matriarchy is not an absolute and cynical triumph of woman over man; it is a harmonious dualism, an association accepted by both sexes the better to build sedentary society where each and every one could fully develop by following the activity best suited to his [and her] physiological nature. A matriarchal regime, far from being imposed on man, by circumstances independent of his will, is accepted and defended by him" (1982: 114).

Several theoretical approaches have been built on the importance of matriarchy and have highlighted the cultural specificities of African women in this context – see the works of Ifi Amadiume (1987, 1990, 1997), Oyèrónké Oyéwùmí (1997) or Kandji & Camara (2000), to name a just a few of the more renowned scholars. All the main ideas, or the seeds of these ideas, were already present in Cheikh Anta Diop's work.

Ifi Amadiume was one of the first scholars to argue that the colonial system subordinated women whose political power was inscribed in its organisations. She rejected the gender-based nature of political power relations. Speaking of *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Oyèrónké Oyéwùmí had little time for gender as a concept of power relations. For her, it is only in Western culture that the "woman", because of her relationship to her body, is constructed as a category, both in relation and in opposition to "man"... that other category. African cultures define hierarchies through social relations, not gender. There is no such thing as gendered cultural logic. One may also refer to seniority (senior–junior relations). But the most important factor is motherhood as another basis of women's power because it is the very foundation of their identity. For Kandji and Camara, the subordination of women is not universal. In Antiquity, matriarchal law made equality between sexes a fundamental value of Pharaonic societies. The woman is the source of life... hence her power. African concepts of the body emphasise only biological differences between sexes; they do not speak of inequality, superiority or inferiority.

Ahmeth Diouf, a Senegalese magistrate and linguist, Jimi Adesina, a Nigerian social scientist, and Lewis Gordon, an African American philosopher of Jamaican origin, all share the cult of matriarchy and remind us of its importance in understanding African social facts. Ahmeth Diouf, who has worked on African maternal rights, has highlighted their evolution and their sensitive remnants in contemporary Wolof culture. Adesina and Gordon are fascinated by issues surrounding the matriarchy of motherhood, an area of research characterised by profound epistemological changes with the appearance of new terms to describe women's sexuality and fertility (motherhood, mothering, matrifocality, matricentricity).

Adesina concludes:

"Finally, for African activists and scholars working for gender equity, the works of Amadiume and Oyéwùmí point to the basis for appropriating the "useful past" from a diversity of African pre-colonial histories.

As Amadiume (1997: 23) argued: As European feminists ... seek possible ways out of their historically oppressive patriarchal family structure ... inventing

single-parenthood and alternative affective relationships ... in the African case we do not need to invent anything. We already have a history and legacy of a women's culture – a matriarchy based on affective relationships – and this should be given a central place in analysis and social enquiry" (2010: 16).

Re-reading and re-visiting human cultures using critical analytical tools progressively developed over time

Social science studies on women have compelled scholars to take part in this broad movement of decolonisation, of re-reading and re-appropriation of sociology, culture and history by the African communities themselves. As African women, we needed to re-establish our own histories, our concealed – if not tribalised – cultural specificities. But can we not deconstruct them through new analyses when they become outdated and out of context?

How can women's claims be granted when they seem to offend the celebrated "traditions", as we usually call our cultures? The relations of seniority which, according to O. Oyéwùmí, dictate relations in African societies, are necessarily power relations, whatever the sex. To rule over a family requires hierarchical relations which, as B. Bakare Yusuf notes, are primarily gender relations (Don't Yorubas Do Gender ?).

The need to seek and enjoy more rights has been well understood by women of all backgrounds and has led to many successful campaigns and projects which have resulted in an increasing number of competitive female entrepreneurs. These rights include, among others: the right to access land and other natural resources; the right to obtain credit without the guarantee of land, which is controlled by men at the community and state levels; the right to political participation and to achieve greater gender parity in political institutions (in municipal councils, for example), the promotion of compulsory education for girls and their access to more and more qualified jobs; the strengthening of women's economic activities.

In 2017 women made up 42 per cent of Senegal's parliament. This was achieved thanks to the struggles of the Senegalese Women's Council, which brought together women from civil society and political parties and owing to the support of crowds of women who took to the streets whenever necessary. Many have doubted the competence of women in this realm, but never questioned the competence of the 100-per-cent male Parliament in the first decades after independence. And if today some complain about the mediocrity of our parliament, isn't this mediocrity the result of manoeuvres by the fighting political classes, and of governance challenges?

Reforming the family code has been a long struggle in all countries. In Senegal Leopold Sedar Senghor, the first president of the Republic, managed to impose a unique family code for all Senegalese citizens. He gave the judge alone the right to rule on divorce between spouses. That was a beautiful feminist victory for women, even if, unfortunately, culture still leads to discriminations. There have been many other beautiful feminist achievements: the minimum age of marriage has been redefined; women are now able to make decisions about contraception without the approval of their husband, the marabout or the priest.

It is true that one cannot be a feminist in Africa without first identifying the African sources of sexism – the weight of patriarchy, the intersection of gender

inequalities and age, class, ethnicity, caste, race, religion, sexuality, etc. Recognizing and accepting that "the body is political" is an old feminist claim that has taken into account the needs of women as reproductive and sexual rights: control of their sexuality and fertility; advanced advocacy for the right to abortion; prevention of child marriages and forced marriages; guaranteeing the physical integrity of the body (abolition of female genital mutilation [FGM]); fight against sexual violence; criminalisation of rape in families or in conflict, etc. "A child, if I want, when I want, with whom I want…" is shocking language that women's control of their own fertility should nonetheless permit! Maternity, whether sublimated or imposed, has ideological, cultural and religious meanings which we must analyse more subtly and more critically.

But while it has been difficult to recognise the weight of external patriarchy (that of colonisation and globalisation), the move to endogenous patriarchy, which is regularly endorsed by culture and religion, has been more difficult. All of us – men and women, researchers and others – have put forward the "original" matriarchy to glorify our positions. Matriarchy is at the root of African societies, writes Cheikh Anta Diop. The woman's body is the origin of creation, which explains the power and the presence of women in matriarchal societies. We have made it our matrix of thought, even if there are hurdles along the way. If patriarchy is a proven political system that raises men to power, does matriarchy follow the same structuring patterns in history? Is it not rather a political system based on the uterine transmission of power and assets? This constitutes a huge problem because women are struggling to deconstruct patriarchy and its conjunction with other religious, colonial patriarchies. Deconstructing African patriarchal institutions strengthened by culture and religion, and endorsed by politics or religion, has been and remains a challenge, as we are grappling with deep-seated identity issues which women find difficult to question for fear of losing their identity. We could have redefined polygamy, the dowry, the wearing of the Muslim veil, handshaking, etc.

There is one last point that I would like to highlight: it is the rise of religious and cultural fundamentalisms (Sow 2018). Some call them radicalism. I call them fundamentalisms and I can witness their effects in the public space (streets, media, academic and associative spaces), in political life (because it is a threat to secularism and results in the blurring of powers – executive, legislative and judicial, there are no others, contrary to what some would have us believe and even want to impose on us). To put secularism in danger is to go back on so many of the women's rights which were conquered thanks to the many conventions and protocols we have elaborated, not thanks to holy books or some interpretation of customs.

What conclusion?

Women studies have evolved considerably with new theoretical developments. The sociology of the family has also renewed the study of its dynamics, its changing types of arrangement, of discussion, of negotiation, of conflictual relations between individuals. African cultures are now experiencing changing dynamics that need to be taken into account and analysed with appropriate critical tools. Should we not revisit the African storytellers' and poets' feminine and maternal icon of *Mama Africa, L'Afrique Mère*, brandished by many of our male interlocutors in response to our discourses. They always highlight the "power" of their mothers during our exchanges on the relations between men and women in society.

How can we better understand the place of women in our societies, from the political hierarchy to grassroots communities, when it comes to their access to land, resources, political power? What is their influence in the face of the many ancient and contemporary forms of a very real and persistent patriarchal power? The debate is far from over.

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