

Defending Feminism in Africa

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Introduction

In this essay, I argue against the popular notion that feminism or feminists are ‘un-African’, and instead argue for why feminism has a necessary role to play on the African continent today. The claim or argument that ‘feminism is not African’ is certainly not new. It is a claim to which I have been explicitly or implicitly subjected by other Africans as I have come to consciousness as a feminist, while still assuming, naturally, that I can still identify as an African. One of the speakers at a recent talk I attended recounted how a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) described her understanding of feminism as a weed that has infiltrated Africa; the implication being that it is non-indigenous and that it threatens to choke or overrun ‘true’ African values. Clearly, the argument that feminism is not African is used to dismiss it and to equate its theoretical and political development in Africa with colonialism or imperialism. It says that those who declare themselves to be feminist in Africa are not really African or are suffering from mental colonisation, upholding views which do not belong on African soil and which have no worth for African cultures or peoples, women or men.

As I understand it, the argument that something or someone is or is not African, what I call the ‘discourse of African authenticity’ following Maria Baaz,¹ is based either on an essentialist or a socio-historical claim about Africa. It refers, in other words, either to an African essence or to African traditions and cultures, and thus to the various cultural practices that have historically prevailed on the continent. In this short piece, I want to problematise such claims as they relate to feminism in Africa, asking: What does it mean to say that something is or is not African? What counts as *evidence* of this African identity or authenticity? And finally, even if we accept the notion of some African authenticity, *what happens* if something is revealed to be inauthentic? Does this mean it can have no place or value here in Africa? After considering these questions, I will then offer my understanding of feminism, so that we can begin to consider the ways in which it can be beneficial to us in Africa to embrace feminist politics.

Anti-Essentialism

The notion that something is or is not ‘African’ is essentialist if it rests on the premise that there is an inherently unique place called Africa. It is essentialist if it implies some sort of intrinsic and therefore unchanging African nature or spirit which characterises or indeed defines all things African. The anti-essentialist critique of such notions is not new and so I will not dwell on it too long here; it has been clearly articulated by scholars such as Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) and Valentine Mudimbe (1988). They and other raise the following points: first, Africa is above all a geographical location or space, and even then it is contestable where its boundaries lie; second, the place we only happen to call Africa is very large and culturally diverse, made up of very different peoples, cultures and practices; third, the concept of a singular ‘African People’ or ‘African ‘Culture’ was first invented in the western imagination and through the colonial enterprise. As Appiah puts it, “a specifically African identity began as the product of a European gaze”²; fourth,

as Appiah has also argued, essentialist claims about an African spirit or identity must ultimately refer to the biological notion that all Africans have the same blood flowing in their veins which determines our spirit, culture and capabilities. This crude racialism has now been debunked by modern science.

In sum, an anti-essentialist position maintains that Africa and thus African-ness or Africanicity are historical and therefore contingent constructs. This means that we cannot meaningfully speak of an essential Africa or of essentially African or un-African things, in which case a consciousness and practice such as feminism cannot be dismissed as un-African in these terms. This anti-essentialist argument does not imply that there is no such thing as Africa. It does not deny the many shared historical, material and cultural conditions across Africa, which are in many ways unique to the continent and which in many ways shape our identities as African. It denies rather that these conditions are inherent, natural or fixed.

Culture, Tradition and History

The claim that feminism is ‘un-African’ may also refer to ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’. Indeed, I understand this as the most common meaning intended by the claim when it is popularly deployed, that is ‘feminism is not part of African culture’. The argument is that feminism has no cultural roots in Africa, and therefore no place here today. Yet the primary weakness with such an argument, which many have noted, is that it reifies our African cultures and traditions. I mean by this that the argument takes cultures and traditions as given, as they appear, and as absolute. This ignores the crucial fact that all cultures and traditions come from somewhere, that they are always the products of history, and thus always products of, and always subject to, change and contestation. The argument about culture overlooks the fact that the dominant shape or meaning of any given culture is inextricably linked to power and inequality within the society or cultural tradition in question.

I would argue that if most African cultures have traditionally or historically been patriarchal, and even if most remain so today, this is by no means proof that there have been *no* indigenous feminisms to match— feminism defined broadly for now as women’s resistance to patriarchy. If our societies are predominantly patriarchal, this is evidence only that patriarchy, and not resistance to it, has been hegemonic. This is not, in any case, proof that patriarchy is right or better. To really prove that feminism is not African culturally or traditionally speaking, detailed historical and anthropological evidence must be marshaled as proof that it has had no precedents or place in our diverse cultures. And to do so, we must look specifically *for* feminism and not just *at* patriarchy, all the more so as the two arguably tend to co-exist, if unevenly, in contestation and in different spaces. Clearly, such detailed research does not inform political or popular rhetoric in which the claim that feminism is un-African most typically surfaces. Instead ‘culture’ is simply invoked in such arguments, for which the proof is none other than the manifest form of the culture in question.

I hesitate to use the term feminism in reference to our cultural heritages in Africa for reasons which point me to a further weakness with the argument that feminism is

culturally or traditionally un-African. Feminism is a relatively modern term, coined in the late 19th century in Europe. It is therefore anachronistic to speak of it other than in our relatively recent history in Africa, as elsewhere. Also, when feminism or feminists are dismissed by critics in Africa, I believe it is often with reference to specific stereotypes of feminists, namely of women in Europe or North America burning their bras, or of angry women who are man-haters. Such images are unlikely to be found, obviously, if one sets out to look for them in traditional practices in Africa—though there are in fact traditions of women tearing off their clothes as a sign of protest, amongst women in Eastern Nigeria for instance.

I think then that it is futile to argue over whether our ancestors were ‘feminist’ or not, if feminism is narrowly defined in terms of what a few women in other parts of the world did at a certain moment in their own history. It is obscuring the point to argue over whether our ancestors were feminist or not in the precise manner of contemporary African feminists. Obviously they were not. They could not have been, quite simply because they lived under very different cultural, material, political and ideological conditions, and because they had different means at their disposal and different ends in mind. Frankly, there is no reason why we should expect otherwise.

To explore the historical roots of contemporary feminist praxis in Africa, it is more appropriate to ask not if the exact same practices existed in the past, but if, how and why African women historically resisted the conditions that oppressed them as women. If we ask this more nuanced question, it seems clear that women—some, if not all—*must* have resisted oppressive, patriarchal institutions and customs as and when necessary. Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, in an article on feminism in Africa, clearly states the logic of my argument, and extends it even further. She argues that because Africa has some of the oldest civilisations in the world, it has the oldest patriarchies, and therefore the oldest traditions of resistance to patriarchy. To believe otherwise is, she states, to falsely imply “that for centuries African women have crossed their arms and accepted being battered and depersonalised by patriarchy.”³ This is the direct implication of the argument that feminism is un-African because it is not part of our culture. It implies, as Amina Mama vividly describes it, that “the ‘real’ African woman...is content with her subordinate position as wife, mother and beast of burden. She is passive in the face of abuse, tolerant of all forms of infidelity; her only real ambition is to retain respectability by labouring for the maintenance of a stable marriage and family and seeing to the satisfaction of her husband's desires.”⁴

I consider such an image of the ‘authentic’ African woman to be not only irrational (contrary to reason), but also counter-intuitive (contrary to my insight as a woman), and insulting. Scholarly evidence and even popular wisdom, I would conjecture, exist to support my position. Existing studies have tended to focus on and even mythologise ‘great women’ in pre-colonial Africa—queens, warriors, traders and the like.⁵ It could be argued that such women were remembered or noteworthy because they were exceptions to the general rule of women as subordinates. However, Desirée Lewis points out the difficulty in sourcing detailed empirical evidence on these and other women.⁶ Other scholars have gone further to argue that colonialism either introduced gender inequalities

into Africa in the first place⁷ or exacerbated them.⁸ In this case, a return to pre-colonial traditions would actually imply a return to a more equitable state of gender relations than presently prevails, in keeping with current feminist ideals.

Scholars studying the colonial period in Africa have traced the presence of what we could call an indigenous feminist consciousness in various women's movements across the continent. They have also argued that women's feminist consciousness grew out of their resistance to colonialism and their participation in nationalist struggles, and that women often used pre-colonial forms and strategies of organising.⁹ Nina Mba's pathbreaking book of 1982, *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, traces the activism and political engagement of women in Nigeria well before the modern wave of feminism in the West. Speaking of the 1929 women's uprising in Eastern Nigeria, she states that: "the women's war was very much a feminist movement in the sense that the women were very conscious of the special role of women, the importance of women to society and the assertion of their rights as women vis-à-vis the men."¹⁰

Also, as Amina Mama notes, as early as the 1920s a relatively radical group of women in Egypt were meeting, acting and naming themselves as feminist.¹¹ Still in Egypt, Margot Bardran argues that feminism did not come from the West as is frequently charged, but arose, rather, out of women's "dissatisfaction with their own lives.. [and was] motivated and directed by women's own social, psychological, economic and political needs."¹² She goes on to name a number of Egyptian women who displayed a feminist consciousness as early as the mid-19th century, the most famous of whom was Huda Sha'rawi. Other examples of individual African women who espoused feminist values, explicitly or implicitly include: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in 1940s Nigeria, Margaret Ekpo also of Nigeria, Constance Cummings-John in Sierra Leone, and so on.

Again, the relative paucity of these examples of politically active African women who organised as and for women may be taken as proof that they were the exception rather than the rule. I would argue, rather, that these few examples of early women's consciousness and organising in Africa stand as evidence of the work that remains to be done to more fully unearth the histories or precursors of what we now call feminism on this continent. The fact is that the histories of Africa which we most commonly know are the histories of and by men; our historical records are not complete until the voices of ordinary women (and other marginalised groups) are included.

Shifting the discursive terrain

I have now attempted to highlight some of the errors I see in the popular claim, often too easily made, that feminism is not African essentially, culturally or historically speaking. But despite my efforts thus far, I must confess a certain impatience with the very terms of the discourse, with the apparent need to defend feminism in Africa in terms of its authenticity. Therefore I want to shift the discussion to consider what happens or what it means if feminism is *not* actually African in any sense? I want to ask: Why would we need to resort to essentialist, cultural or historical claims or counter-claims to justify feminist politics in Africa in the first place? Is it not possible that as Africans, women and

men, we could *choose* to define ourselves as feminist, having made the critical assessment that feminism is in fact relevant and valuable for us, whatever its origins?

Such questions relate to the politics of labeling something or someone as African or un-African. As seen, within the discourse of African authenticity, the label 'African' signifies that which is legitimate in and for Africa, whereas 'un-African' signifies the illegitimate. This functions to not only distinguish Africa from the Western world, but to also validate Africa in opposition to the latter. The ostensible purpose of the discourse is to set Africa apart from her former colonial masters and to reclaim the value of our indigenous, African cultures. The discourse of African authenticity functions to reject the racism and ethnocentrism with which Africa and the African are still often are judged by others.

Let me state categorically that I take it to be necessary to promote and celebrate our continent and our customs in a world that would otherwise devalue all things African. I believe that it is necessary for us to construct a pan-African identity, and to build a shared African sensibility and unity. It is important that that we reassert the worth of our many cultures, and that we protect and retain those cultural elements that are most sacred to us. Yet it seems to me imperative that if we Africans embark upon such work, we do so in intelligent and critical ways and for ends which are not merely reactionary to the West and ultimately retrogressive. As Ayesha Imam puts it: "in revolting against western ethnocentric false universalisations, we should be careful not to enshrine equally false essentialisations of Africanicity, which disenfranchise us from examining certain aspects of oppressive relations."¹³ However, this is precisely what the discourse of African authenticity and tradition currently does. The fact is that it functions to promote conservative and oppressive political agendas: for instance in Zimbabwe and Nigeria to condemn homosexuality and to deny homosexuals their human and civil rights;¹⁴ to support practices such as genital mutilation, polygamy, domestic abuse and virginity-testing from which women suffer, and so on.

Imam's point is that we should not uncritically celebrate and cling to some notion of 'African Tradition' just because our various traditions face constant assault and denigration by outsiders. Not only must we deconstruct facile and oppressive rhetoric of African 'culture' and 'tradition' as and when it appears, but we must allow and even desire the possibility that our cultures change, as necessary, and in order to retain their vitality. This does not mean that we adopt seemingly new or external practices wholesale, without any reflection. It does mean, however, that we do not dismiss them for these reasons only, but rather critically engage with them on their own merits (and demerits). There is, in other words, a need to move *beyond* the discourse of African authenticity and inauthenticity, to radically shift the terms of the debate. What should be of concern to us as Africans is less the *origins* of a theory or practice, but its potential relevance and benefit to us.

Feminism in Africa: What benefit?

In this spirit, I want to conclude this piece by offering a tentative understanding of feminism and by suggesting some of the potential contributions it can make in Africa.

First I want to draw a distinction between feminism in the singular, which I define broadly as the political consciousness, commitment and praxis to redress women's structural disadvantage in patriarchal societies, and feminisms, understood as the various doctrines and means to this end. I want to consider a specific form of feminism here, relevant to the African condition, what I call 'radical African feminism'.

As I imagine it, this feminism is one which pursues truly substantive equality between men and women in Africa where gender inequality presently reigns. If so, this feminism is not just *for* women. Its purpose is not to replace men with women, nor even to merely include more women in men's worlds. Its purpose, rather, is to transform the very structures of our societies which produce and perpetuate gender inequalities in the first place. Feminists may seek to enact this transformation primarily by focusing on women's situations and by advocating on their behalf but this does not mean it is only *about* women or, indeed, only about women and men. Rather, it is concerned with radically reimagining and reshaping *all* power relations, in which case it concerns human relations in general. It advocates mutuality and respect in the place of hierarchy, abuse, oppression and exploitation. It strives for peace, justice and freedoms. It is for these reasons opposed to neo-liberalism and corruption, imperialism and racism, war and violence.

The potential of such feminist politics in Africa is clear, given the degree to which inequality and injustice characterise our contemporary societies. In Africa, feminist politics cannot be separated from the problems of poverty, disease, under-education, militarism, violence and conflict. These must necessarily be the concerns of radical feminists committed to Africa, for they overdetermine the lives and conditions of most women on this continent, indeed men too. Radical African feminism also cannot ignore the linkages between the local, the national and the global such as the unfair terms in which Africa is locked into the global capitalist order, which exacerbate poverty and underdevelopment on the continent. Radical feminists are therefore committed to resist this order, and to critique and fashion alternatives to development paradigms handed down to us from the West, those especially that co-opt the language of 'gender' for conservative, patriarchal ends. Thus in Africa and indeed other post-colonial contexts, a committed feminism is inextricably linked with anti-imperialist, anti-elitist and anti-racist politics.¹⁵ Amina Mama states that "it presents a praxis that directly opposes the hegemonic interests of multinational corporations, international financial and development agencies and nation-states."¹⁶

The feminism I imagine here is African insofar as it is fully grounded in and informed by our various local realities, and insofar as it is committed to their amelioration. It is in this sense that we can speak meaningfully of an African feminism—African because in, of and for our continent and its peoples. It is radical as it seeks to transform society in its totality, for the betterment of all, not just women or even a certain type or group of women. The sketch I have given here is optimistic but not, I believe, unduly so. If feminists are truly committed to equality, democracy and social justice, then they must be self-reflexive, open to a constant re-envisioning and re-imagining of their assumptions, means and ends. If first inspired and informed by a deep concern with women's oppression, they therefore do not seek to reproduce any other forms oppression between other social groups.¹⁷

I offer this vision of a feminism for Africa only tentatively here because it clearly needs to be further developed and concretised; the practicalities of how such a feminist praxis can be made real and effective, to bridge the gap between theory and practice, is a work in progress, in which many contemporary African feminists are engaged. I would argue that they need the support and constructive input from others Africans. In a sense this has been my ultimate purpose in this essay: to offer a characterisation of feminism up for consideration, and to propose that we begin to discuss and debate feminism on its own merits and on its own terms, rather than continue to focus on where it came from. Let us no longer seek to legitimate or delegitimize feminism in Africa in terms of its origins. Instead, a more worthwhile and productive focus for our energies would be a critical discussion on what feminism is, can and should be for us, women and men, in Africa today.

¹ Maria Eriksson Baaz. 'Introduction: African Identity and the Postcolonial.' In *Same and Other: Negotiating African Identity in Cultural Production*. Ed. M.E. Baaz and M. Palmberg. (Nordiska Afrikainsitutet, 2001), p. 8.

² Anthony Kwame Appiah. *In my Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 71.

³ Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi. 'Creating and Sustaining Feminist Space in Africa: Local and Global Challenges in the 21st Century' in *Feminist Politics, Activism and Vision: Local and Global Challenges*. Ed. L. Ricciutelli, A. Miles and M. McFadden. (London/New York: Zed Books, 2005), p. 88.

⁴ Mama, Amina. 'Women' Studies and Studies of Women in Africa during the 1990s.' 1995. Available at <<http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/index.html>> , Cited September 2006.

⁵ For example Desirée Lewis 'African Feminist Studies: 1980-2002: A Review Essay for the African Gender Institute's 'Strengthening Gender and Women's Studies for Africa's Social Transformation' Project.' 2002. Available at <<http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/index.html>> Cited September 2006.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For example Ronke Oyewunmi. *The Invention of Woman: Making African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. (Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press), 1997.

⁸ For example, Nina Mba. *Nigerian Women Mobilized*. (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California Berkeley), 1982.

⁹ For example Desirée Lewis, op. cit.; Nina Mba, op. cit. etc

¹⁰ Mba, op. cit., p. 91

¹¹ Mama, op. cit., p 3.

¹² Margot Badran. *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and Making of Modern Egypt*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹³ Ayesha Imam. 'Engendering African Social Sciences: An Introductory Essay' in *Engendering African Social Sciences*. Eds. A. Imam, A.Mama and F. Sow. (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), p. 17.

¹⁴ For instance, Marc Epprecht. 'The 'Unsayings' of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe; Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity.' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24.4 1998; Jessica Horn. 'Re-Righting the Sexual Body. *Feminist Africa* 6. 2006.

¹⁵ Sylvia Tamale. 'Alternative Leadership in Africa: Some Critical Feminist Reflections.' *Feminist Politics, Activism and Vision: Local and Global Challenges*. Ed. L. Ricciutelli, A. Miles and M. McFadden. (London/New York: Zed Books, 2005)

¹⁶ Amina, Mama. 'Editorial.' *Feminist Africa* 1. 2002, p. 1.

¹⁷ Shamillah Wilson. 'Feminist leadership for feminist futures...' In *Defending our Dreams: Global Feminist Voices for a New Generation*. Eds. Wilson, S., Sengupta, A. and Evans, K. (London/New York: Zed Books), 2005.