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Article

Challenging Gender Hierarchies in Narratives of the Nation: Representations of Women in *Zintgraff and the Battle of Mankon* and *Hard Choice*

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Abstract

Ideas of nationalisms as masculine projects dominate literary texts by African male writers. The texts mirror the ways in which gender differentiation sanctions nationalist discourses and in turn how nationalist discourses reinforce gender hierarchies. This article draws on theoretical insights from the work of Anne McClintock and Elleke Boehmer to analyse two plays: *Zintgraff and the Battle of Mankon* by Bole Butake and Gilbert Doho and *Hard Choice* by Sunnie Ododo. The article argues that women are represented in these two plays as having an ambiguous relationship to nationalism. On the one hand, women are seen actively changing the face of politics in their societies, but on the other hand, the means by which they do so reduces them to stereotypes of their gender.

Keywords: ambiguity; gender hierarchy; nationalism; feminism; masculinity; narratives of the nation

Introduction

African literature is rich in narratives of nations coming into being, with ideals of national identity and unity emerging as the handwork of both women and men working in collaboration across multiple spaces—from the political to the socio-economic. In this literature, nationalist discourses are projected as the collective desire of a people, while the gender element is subtly subsumed under a barrage of ideals of nationhood—one people, one voice, one nation. Feminist scholars have however exposed the duplicity in constructions of the nation-state by highlighting the pervasiveness of gender hierarchies within these constructions. In her seminal work on gender and nationalism

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in the postcolonial era, Anne McClintock (1993, 61) notes that the institutionalisation of gender difference is the very foundation on which nationalisms operate:

> All nations depend on powerful constructions of gender. Despite nationalisms' ideological investment in the idea of popular *unity*, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*. No nation in the world gives women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state.

McClintock's statement helps us understand that despite professed ideals, women do not enjoy equal status of rights and access within the nation. We see this even in narratives of the nation where the construction of gender difference is the very *narratological base* on which male national power is produced, sustained and justified.

Ideas of nationalisms as masculine projects dominate literary texts by African male writers. The texts mirror the ways in which gender differentiation sanctions nationalist discourses and in turn how nationalist discourses reinforce gender hierarchies. In these texts, female figures only serve to enforce the gender hierarchies already pervasive in society: men rule and women submit; fathers decree and daughters execute; sons define boundaries and sisters maintain them. Female figures are often stereotypically represented as *mothers of the nation*—the bearers of the nation's iconographies, a stark contrast to the representation of men as *makers of the nation*.

In her work on gender and nationalism in postcolonial literature, Elleke Boehmer (2005) finds nationalisms problematic because of their perpetual exclusion of women from the performance of power, especially in the post-independence era. About this era, she states:

> Whether in literature, in law or in daily life, the national subject was in most cases implicitly or explicitly designated male. Despite the promises of independence, women were by and large left out of full national participation on an equal footing with men. Even where women fought for freedom alongside men, as in Algeria or Zimbabwe, national consciousness was authored and authorized by male leaders. (Boehmer 2005, 92)

For Boehmer, therefore, the political independence of formerly colonised African countries did not bring gender equality as women remained outside the borders of national power, irrespective of their contribution to the making of the emerging nation-state. In literature as in everyday life, women's identity formations were limited as they were hardly ever the players in the game of nation-building; they were restricted to spectatorship so that national consciousness continued to be authored by male leaders.

To date, African literature has been dominated by male writers whose representations of women in nationalist projects are skewed, biased and sexist: never free of gender hierarchisation. In many postcolonial texts authored by male African writers, such as the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the South African Zakes Mda, nationalisms are

envisioned as masculine enterprises where women play marginal roles. In his criticism of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, a particularly famous play about Kenya's struggle for liberation from British colonial rule, Evan Maina Mwangi (2009, 101) argues that the centralisation of women in both the text and performance of the play does not enforce an ideology of gender equality because masculinity remains the epicentre of nationalist power in the play: "While the playwrights suggest that there are no gender distinctions in the nationalist struggle, in the reality they present, it is women who should be like men—the play insists on masculinity throughout." About Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Meg Samuelson (2005, 72) has noted that in spite of its attempt at constructing female authorship, since Nongqawuse is centred as the author of the prophecies that are to shape the future of the Xhosa nation, women remain on the fringes of Xhosa national power: "women are cast as vessels for the messages of men. … Women speak loudest through their bodies. … In the novel, the 'heart of redness' beats within the breast, or womb, of a woman; the future and the pen are the preserve of men." These examples illustrate that men's writing marginalises women and projects masculinity as the normative order in nationalist projects.

Since male writers have continued to dominate literature that foregrounds nationalisms, representations of women in this literature have also continued to convey masculinist tendencies where male characters exercise political power while women remain marginal to power. Conscious of feminist criticisms of the exclusion of women from nationalist discourses, some male writers now attempt to represent women playing leading roles in the quest for national unity and freedom from neocolonial forms of oppression. This is especially a trend in contemporary drama influenced by the need to challenge colonialism through stage performances that stimulate audience reaction. We see this in the two plays selected for analysis in this article, namely, *Zintgraff and the Battle of Mankon* by Bole Butake and Gilbert Doho (2002) and *Hard Choice* by Sunnie Ododo (2011). These two plays seem to suggest that women's role in the nation is marked by agency. However, it is necessary to exercise caution and ask some fundamental questions: what kinds of agency do these playwrights assign to women in these plays? Do they counter the stereotypes of women prevalent in other narratives of the nation or do they simply mask these stereotypes? Our feminist reading of the two plays reveals that women are represented as agents of colonialism and patriarchy—both institutions of domination that are essentially masculine. Although *Zintgraff* is set in Cameroon and *Hard Choice* in Nigeria, both plays convey the ideology that the agency of women is ultimately not for their own self-emancipation but for the maintenance of a normative order of male power.

The key argument here is that women are represented in these two plays as having an ambiguous relationship to nationalism. In other words, although they emerge as agents in the nationalist struggles presented in the plays, their agency is marked by ambiguity. On the one hand, women are seen actively changing the face of politics in their societies, but on the other hand, the means by which they do so reduces them to stereotypes of

their gender. In addition, change comes at great cost to women. In *Zintgraff*, the female character Kassa facilitates Bali alliance with the German explorer Eugen Zintgraff—a political alliance that results in the expansion of the Bali nation. However, by making Kassa use her body to lure the white man into Bali and to keep him entertained throughout his stay in Bali, the playwrights reduce Kassa to a stereotype of the beautiful African woman whose only source of power is her sexuality. In *Hard Choice*, Princess Azingae selflessly sacrifices her life in order to save the Emepiri kingdom and facilitate an Igbo-Yoruba alliance—a symbol of national unity. Nevertheless, the choice of self-sacrifice makes her the symbolic Mother Africa whose love for nation always necessitates her self-exclusion from the central politics of the nation. In both plays, therefore, the playwrights anchor their presumed feminist consciousness on an ambiguous agency of women that in the end fails to serve any feminist agenda as women remain marginal to power in the new nation.

One can argue that this ambiguity is deliberate: as writers conscious of the global call for gender equality, their plays must include "powerful" women to gain popular appeal for marketing purposes; but as men equally conscious of the normative order of male dominance in society, their works must respect the hierarchies in place—gender hierarchy in this case—so as not to lose popular appeal. Thus, ultimately, the portrayal of women in their plays inevitably reveals what Twalo (2009, 78) calls "the double standards implicit in nationalist literature," which we interpret here to mean the playwrights' inclination to make women a part of the nationalist projects in the texts but to keep them in their "proper place" within these projects. Any attempt to represent women differently would upset the gender hierarchy that is so crucial to the survival of male nationalisms.

Gender, Nationalism and the Family in *Zintgraff and the Battle of Mankon*

Zintgraff and the Battle of Mankon, jointly authored by anglophone playwright Bole Butake and francophone playwright Gilbert Doho, was originally written and performed in 1994 but only published in 2002. It brings into fictional explosion McClintock's claim that nations are not simply inventions of the mind "but are historical and institutional practices through which social difference is invented and performed" (McClintock 1993, 61). Social difference in *Zintgraff* is primarily gender difference, which is invented narratologically through the playwrights' deployment of a family feud, and is performed discursively on the bodies of women. The play is essentially history played out in dramatic form, with a gender twist that places woman at the heart of a nationalist enterprise but at the same time limits her role to that of a facilitator of colonial expansion and extended male political domination.

In *Zintgraff*, the reader/audience is transported back to the late 19th century when what is now known as the north-west region of Cameroon was still a vast spread of unconsolidated territory made up of autonomous kingdoms ruled by different kings,

known then and now as Fons. The play makes use of a narrator to inform the reader/audience about the exploratory mission of the German explorer, Dr Eugen Zintgraff, into the north-west region, which opened the way for German administrative control to be exerted over this region. Fundamentally, the play is a fictional rendition of the events surrounding Zintgraff's encounter with the people of Bali. It is a play about the making and unmaking of the Bali nation and of German Kamerun. The two playwrights' collaboration in producing this play is a projection of the possibility of national unity in Cameroon since an anglophone and a francophone—known to be enemies—have put aside their differences, presumably, to work on a project for the common good. This is the extent of the nationalist vision that surrounds the making of the play.

What is striking about the play is the way it rewrites history along gender lines, inventing gender hierarchy in forging a nationalist ideal of male political domination. Of the three historical sources consulted on Zintgraff's dealings with the Bali (Eyongetah and Brain 1974; DeLancey 1989; Ngoh 1987), none mentions an encounter between Zintgraff and a woman named Kassa. The love relationship between Zintgraff and Kassa in the play is therefore a fictional invention, one that nonetheless carries an aura of ambiguity. Superficially, it is a laudable dramatic improvisation as it illuminates the emotional side of male political figures whom history textbooks often project as super-human. However, it can also be argued that the writers' insertion of a female character into a historical context that was exclusively male provides a fitting space to replicate, justify and endorse in fiction the gender hierarchy pervasive in state politics.

How the Bali people came to settle in present-day Bali Nyonga following a migratory move from the Adamawa region is not explored in the play. Rather, the play focuses on the diplomacy of the Bali Fon, Galega I, who ruled Bali from the 1860s to 1901, and his political ambition to conquer all neighbouring kingdoms and to bring them under Bali dominion. It highlights the warlike nature of the various Grassfields communities and provides insight into the political tensions that marked relations between these independent kingdoms. From the perspective of the play, the disorder that is visited upon Bali is not the result of Zintgraff's arrival *per se*, for the Bali have always been a warring people seeking to exert their control over surrounding kingdoms. History confirms that although Zintgraff was a self-appointed agent of German colonial administration, his success in bringing Bali under German rule was facilitated by Galega's eager disposition towards an alliance with Germany that would ensure the defeat of the Bafut and Mankon kingdoms. In his analysis of the Galega-Zintgraff alliance, Richard Fardon (2006, 5) states the following, which makes sense in the light of events in *Zintgraff*:

> Zintgraff's expedition represented the vanguard of German colonial expansion into Northern Kamerun. Zintgraff and Galega were much taken with each other: Zintgraff decided that Bali Nyonga would make an ideal centre for German administration of the hinterland, and Galega astutely reckoned that the Germans might be useful to his own

> search for power and wealth. This interlacing of their ambitions marked the beginning of Bali's attempts to exert sub-imperial control on behalf of the Germans.

Thus, in Butake and Doho's play (2002), Zintgraff's arrival in Bali only serves to give the already existing war between Bali, on the one hand, and Bafut and Mankon, on the other, a new dimension. His presence catalyses the betrayal of Bali to the enemy camp by the prospective heir, Titanji. The tensions mount when Galega rejects Titanji's advice to ally with Bafut and Mankon and proceeds to welcome Zintgraff into his palace and to form an alliance with him. The character that facilitates this alliance is Kassa. This is where we get to see how nationalism wears a feminine face but carries a masculine body.

In the play, Kassa is Galega's daughter, and thus a princess. Conditioned by both her noble birth and her gender to be of service to those who wield political power over her society, Kassa submits to her father's wishes and accompanies her brother Titambo to Babessong. Her role in this mission is that of seducing the white man into buying the idea of extending his visit into Bali. Galega is very precise when he gives Titambo instructions about the mission:

> **Galega:** Let the noble princess Kassa keep your company.
> Make sure she is plentifully supplied with food.
> It is said that a beautiful woman will break a man
> No matter how strong-willed he may be. (8)

There is no ambivalence in these words. Kassa is the bait that will draw Zintgraff to Bali and to Galega's side in the war against Bafut and Mankon. Kassa is, therefore, taken along to Babessong to forestall any possible resistance Zintgraff might present to the Bali emissaries. As the play states, she is the "jewel that must entice even a man of white body" (10), a metaphor that captures her value as a princess but at the same time diminishes that value in associating it with vanity. Her being "plentifully supplied with food" ensures that her body maintains its suppleness and delectability, for it is the body that will entice Zintgraff into Bali territory. It is the body through which colonial power is tamed and exploited for Bali's national gain. Florence Stratton (1994) has noted how African men's writing tends to conflate opposing roles of women in a single metaphor. In the single metaphor of the jewel, then, Butake and Doho conflate the figure of woman as a hero and woman as a temptress since Kassa can only save Bali by exhibiting her feminine charms to the white man.

This point illustrates woman's entrapment within patriarchal nationalist discourses that do not see women's worth beyond the use of their bodies to service the nation. In the book *The Prostitute in Progressive Literature*, Khalid Kishtainy (1982, 74) notes that there was "institutionalized prostitution" in many pre-colonial African societies, for "in many communities there was a public whore allocated by the chieftains and publicly initiated into the profession." While it is hard to imagine this as a widespread practice, its existence in some communities certainly raises concerns about women's ambiguous

relationship with the nations they serve. Galega's entrusting Kassa the task of seducing the white man to come to Bali while putting Titambo at the head of the mission is a symbolic performance of patriarchy's initiation of women into public whoredom for the service of the nation. Within this context, female prostitution is an act of patriotism; it is instituted and controlled by patriarchy for its own benefit. When later in the play Kassa continues to associate closely with Zintgraff out of her own desire, her own brother Titanji calls her a whore. Her action is seen by patriarchy this time as an act of betrayal, a degradation of the nation that only woman can bring.

The mission to Babessong is successful as the royal entourage returns to Bali with Zintgraff and his four companions. The play does not shed light on what happens in Babessong, but it can be deduced that Zintgraff was indeed taken by Kassa's charms, for while in Bali he is shown making sexual advances at Kassa. As a stereotypical princess with profound beauty, Kassa fulfils her duty as a *sexual* ambassador of the royal house of Bali. In addition to a house of his own and food items of various kinds provided for him and his men, Zintgraff also gets to keep Kassa *unofficially* as his mistress. Thus, in Galega's plan to forge an alliance with Zintgraff in order to conquer Bafut and Mankon, he callously offers his daughter to Zintgraff as a "gift" in exchange for German support. It is evident here how the playwrights maintain gender hierarchy, for by representing women as objects to be sacrificed by men for political power the play endorses the ideology of women's inferiority to men.

It is quite significant that the very first meeting between Zintgraff and Galega takes place in Galega's palace with Kassa as the intermediary between the two men. It is through Kassa's hand that Galega presents to Zintgraff the traditional peace offering—kola nuts—and it is again through Kassa that Zintgraff responds with a peace offering of his own. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

> **Galega:** Kassa, my daughter, come.
> Take kola to Fonmbang,
> And tell him to sit down.
>
> (*Kassa takes the kola to Zintgraff and signals him to sit on the carved stool. Galega receives wine in his horn, pours a little on the ground, drinks and passes it to Kassa who takes it to Zintgraff and signals him to drink after which she takes the royal horn back to Galega*.)
>
> Fonmbang, you are welcome.
> Welcome to this land of the valorous.
> The eagle flies and flies and flies
> But must perch on the iroko for rest.
> Fonmbang, you and your people are perching
> On an iroko tree in full bloom.

> (*After brief consultation with Titambo, Zintgraff signals Kassa who takes presents—a rifle, bible, whisky, mirror and other curiosities—to Galega. The queens sing and dance.*) (Butake and Doho 2002, 20)

If the iroko tree in Galega's speech represents the strength of Bali as a warrior nation, then Kassa represents in more vivid terms the beauty of this nation—its rich landscape, productive land, and hospitable people, for she is a woman in full bloom. The stage directions describe mime scenes which are significant in demonstrating how male power is negotiated within this patriarchal space—with women as facilitators.

In contrast to Butake's other plays such as *And Palm Wine Will Flow* and *Lake God* (Butake 1999) where we see women attempting to reshape the political landscape of their society but doing so within their given space (the women's secret society), in this play woman is placed at the centre of the public space, performing a service on the same level as the male actors. The irony, however, is that her voice is muted, for she simply represents her gender without speaking for it. How this alliance will affect women in Bali is not considered by Galega and his royal court. Emmanuel Konde notes that in pre-colonial Cameroon, women's political participation in traditional society was often indirectly expressed, as women "had to play their roles behind the scenes, to be seen in public but not to be heard" (Konde 2005, 48). Interestingly, Butake and Doho make Kassa a part of the public deliberations in Bali, but only as a presence and not a contributor to the affairs being deliberated. Her marginalised position in public affairs is a reflection of the masculinised nature of nationalism. Contrary to engendering a feminist politics, the representation of Kassa in this play only serves to enforce gender hierarchy where men rule and women watch. The representation of women in this play is evidently ambiguous, for on the one hand women are seen as participating in public national life, but on the other hand they are *silenced*, which indicates a lack of recognition as equal players. Like Kassa who dances to the tune of her father, the queens in Galega's palace can only "sing and dance" (Butake and Doho 2002, 20) to mark their presence, while the negotiations going on remain a masculine affair.

However, Butake and Doho attempt to give Kassa some agency in the play. After the singing and dancing of the queens, Kassa speaks for the first time, addressing her father with the following words: "Father of the land here are some gifts Fonmbang bids me to give you" (20). The exchange of gifts establishes peace and collaboration between the Bali Fon and the European, and Kassa becomes the medium through which the alliance is concretised. She is an absented presence that nonetheless expedites the political machinations that will shape the history of her people in the years to come. By facilitating the alliance between Galega and Zintgraff, she inadvertently endorses the Bali ambition to conquer Bafut and Mankon and the German mission to establish administrative control in the interior of the north-west region. The gifts that she presents to Galega as coming from Zintgraff are quite significant in terms of their historical function as tools of colonisation in Africa. However, she is a mere passive participant in the colonial formations that are falling into place at this stage. Although she is made

a part of the power politics, she exists on the margins of it, as her role is confined to that of facilitator and not that of a stakeholder. Like the rest of the women who are mere entertainers—singers and dancers—in the royal house, Kassa is the unconsulted participant in a political game of intrigue and disorder. Despite being involved in negotiating the Galega-Zintgraff pact, she does not have the self-will to decide where her allegiance would be, whether with the Galega-Zintgraff-Titambo camp or with the Titanji-Gwalem-Formukong alliance.

Zintgraff magnifies gender difference in its narration of the Bali nation through the family metaphor. McClintock (1993, 63) asserts that in postcolonial literature "the family offers a 'natural' figure for sanctioning social *hierarchy* within a putative organic *unity* of interest." Put differently, this means that the family trope provides writers with what is perceived as a "natural" medium for legitimising social hierarchies such as man/woman, father/son, and adult/child in a context where there is presumably a *singular* goal to which a group of people aspire. Butake and Doho employ the family trope in *Zintgraff* using Galega's relationship with his daughter as a metaphor for African leaders' domination of their peoples. As shown earlier, Kassa is bound to the will of her father and has little choice in the matter of seducing the white man into entering Bali. The play even withholds her voice in the first scenes as she is only mentioned by various characters, but the audience does not get to see her or hear her speak. Thus, in spite of being projected as a central figure in the process of consolidating Bali dominion in the north-west region, she is, to borrow McClintock's words, "denied any direct relation to national agency" (McClintock 1993, 62). Paradoxically, her success in facilitating the formation of an alliance between Galega and Zintgraff, through which Germany eventually establishes colonial rule over the north-west region, makes her an agent of colonial domination.

The family trope in this play also provides the playwrights with a "natural" setting for "figuring historical time" (McClintock 1993, 63) in projecting the conflict between Galega's children as symbolic of the disunity that plagued pre-colonial Cameroon, where conflict opens up the way for colonial intrusion. This conflict is evident when Titanji finds Kassa in Zintgraff's house and accuses her of fooling around with the white man. Kassa, however, defends herself: "I have done nothing dishonourable to deserve such harsh words from you" (Butake and Doho 2002, 38). Because Kassa now goes to see Zintgraff for herself and not because she is commanded by the Fon, she becomes a condemned whore as Titanji insults her: "You foul stream in which everyone washes his dirt" (39). Recalling Stratton (1994), we identify again a single metaphor—of woman as a stream—through which the playwrights present two contradictory images of woman: the image of woman as a force of social regeneration and woman as a source of moral decay. The hero prostitute is now the degraded whore because she has overstepped the boundaries patriarchy set for her. When Kassa questions Titanji's sense of duty as a prince, he interprets the bluntness of her words as an attack on his masculinity and like a typical oppressive male he reacts with violence. He is about to hit Kassa with his fist when Zintgraff intervenes and hits him instead. Kassa then

becomes the archetypal beautiful woman who epitomises discord among men, and it is because of the resentment of her relationship with Zintgraff that Titanji intensifies his hatred for the white man and proceeds to execute his plans to betray Bali to Bafut. For this, he suffers a painful death. Once found out, he is taken to the "bad bush" and executed, and his body is left as food for the wild beasts of the forest. McClintock (1993, 64) asserts that the family image is "indispensable for legitimizing exclusion and hierarchy within non-familial (affiliative) social formations such as nationalism, liberal individualism and imperialism." Applying this theoretical view to *Zintgraff* suggests that the play uses the family trope as a means of legitimising the discourse of excluding women and certain categories of men from the project of nation-building. Since betrayal is associated with women, Titanji becomes feminine in betraying the Bali nation and therefore, like Kassa, he gets expunged from the nationalist project. The play thus constructs femininity as existing outside the borders of nationalism, while positing masculinity, as represented by Galega and Zintgraff, as constituting the driving power behind nationalist enterprises.

Significantly, in its representation of women, *Zintgraff* limits their role to that of the symbolic, thus making them identity bearers *for* the nation but not of *it*. Boehmer (2005, 91) argues that in the nationalist scenario, the roles of males "are specific, either horizontally positioned, or in some way contiguous with one another." She adds that the female, in contrast, appears mainly in a metaphoric or symbolic role, which "excludes her from the sphere of public national life" (Boehmer 2005, 91). This limitation of the female to a metaphoric, symbolic role not only erases her subjectivity but also legitimates her *passivity* within nationalist projects. In other words, the female exists only to illuminate the *activism* of the male in creating and sustaining a public national life, however bizarre. This is evident in Butake and Doho's play in the relationship between Kassa and Zintgraff. Consider the following conversation between the two just before Titanji makes an appearance in Zintgraff's house:

> (*Zintgraff looks up and smiles when he sees Kassa approaching*)
>
> **Zintgraff:** At last there is some sunshine coming into my life. Kassa, my African Queen, so you have come? I have waited and waited and waited. You did not get my message? My friend, Titambo, did not tell you how I longed for you? Oh, how my sad heart warms at the sight of you!
>
> **Kassa:** I no come. Foolish me come.
>
> **Zintgraff:** Come on, Kassy, your coming is not foolish; it is the call of the heart.
>
> **Kassa:** Heart foolish. Titanji see me you, Titanji beat me.
>
> **Zintgraff:** If Titanji touches just one hair of your lovely head I will blow off his head with my gun. Come, Tropical Star, let's go into the house. Come. (Butake and Doho 2002, 35–36)

This conversation between Zintgraff and Kassa illustrates Butake and Doho's representation of the female in a symbolic role. Zintgraff refers to Kassa as his "African Queen" (35) and "Tropical Star" (36) and later "Morning Glory" (37), expressions indicating an exoticisation of nature. They suggest Kassa's possession of natural beauty, her adornment in purity, and her innocence. These virtues, from a feminist point of view, conflate to project her as Mother Africa in the figure of a virgin—pure, undefiled, unadulterated. Stratton (1994, 41) argues that in the Mother Africa trope a man pays tribute to a woman's body "which is frequently associated with the African landscape that is his to explore and discover." Here we see a white man paying tribute to a young black woman, calling her flattering affectionate names and wooing her with expressions such as "I need you" (Butake and Doho 2002, 37) and "I want you" (38). Kassa thus symbolises Bali, and by extension pre-colonial Cameroon, as unchartered territory. She is the virgin territory to be explored, penetrated, conquered, owned and exploited for its natural resources by the colonialist. She is Mother Africa with an imposed identity of a virtuous woman, bearing the promise of being a nurturing caregiver. Such a symbolic representation of woman places her permanently in a subordinate position vis-à-vis man, one in which she is devoid of power or control over her fate. Ultimately, the reduction of female characters to symbols in narratives of the nation enforces a gendered discourse in which women's place in nationalist projects remains one of *passive* citizenship where men *act* and women are *acted upon*.

After the encounter between Kassa, Zintgraff and Titanji, Kassa disappears from the play. Bali declares war on Bafut and Mankon, but despite its use of modern ammunition supplied by Zintgraff it suffers defeat since Titanji had advised the Bafut and Mankon soldiers on how to resist the Bali war machinery. The narrator informs the reader/audience that Zintgraff returns to Germany a depressed man but returns two years later and enlists Bali help in establishing German administration across the north-west region. Throughout this final part of the play, only male characters are seen on stage, projecting war as a masculine undertaking. The playwrights finally reveal nationalism as a structured system of power in which men rule while using women as their ladder to ascend to power.

Gender and Nationalism in *Hard Choice*

Nigeria is a multicultural nation with three major ethnic groups: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. Each ethnic group has boasted prominent women who have at one time or the other worked towards achieving national unity in Nigeria. As a recent example, in 2014 Dr Ameyo Adadevoh, a female medical doctor born in Lagos, insisted on not allowing an Ebola patient, Patrick Sawyer, to travel freely in Nigeria. Sawyer, a Liberian, wanted to attend a business conference in Calabar, Nigeria, and would have likely infected a lot of Nigerians. Dr Adadevoh's act of nationalism saved Nigeria from a pandemic (Denkey 2015). *Hard Choice* was written three years before Adadevoh's heroic act in 2014. A striking similarity is the way both the character Azingae in *Hard Choice* and Dr

Adadevoh willingly sacrifice their lives to save their community and nation from impending calamity.

Female sacrifice is a dominant trope in male-authored African literature, where it is posited as a form of women's agency. However, the trope is problematic in its ambiguity. The ambiguity is that while the trope elevates women to the level of national heroes, it also removes them from the national political arena as they lose their lives. In the end, men remain on the national stage to wield power. This is what happens in Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*.

In *Hard Choice*, Ododo presents two fictional communities from different geographical regions in Nigeria, the Igbo community of Emepiri and the Igedu community of Yorubaland, who intend to unite as a result of marital communion between a princess and prince from both areas. In the play, marriages are meant to promote unity and friendship as in the case of the traditional marriage between the families of Eze Okiakoh of Emepiri kingdom and King Iginla of Igedu land. The play commences with pomp and pageantry at the traditional marriage ceremony between Azingae, the Princess of Emepiri, and Oki, the Prince of Igedu. However, the ceremony is interrupted by three masked men orchestrated by Chief Ubanga, a traditional chief in Emepiri, who is also the second in command to Eze Okiakoh. The masked men abscond with King Iginla's crown, and the abduction of the crown causes a tense atmosphere in Emepiri kingdom as both communities, which are supposed to be celebrating a wedding, divert attention to locating the royal object. In their refuge in Emepiri, the Yoruba monarch and his chief warlord, Bashorun, plan to wage war on Emepiri if the Emepiri rulership fails to retrieve the crown.

In response to the crisis, Eze and his council of chiefs summon the Dibia, the chief priest of Emepiri, who reveals that the missing crown has been used to placate an angry god in the Oguguru shrine. The Dibia proposes that in order to get the missing crown, a vow needs to be fulfilled. It is further revealed that the vow involves Princess Azingae's blood. Princess Azingae's mother, Queen Amaka, had promised the god Oguguru that she will return Azingae to the Oguguru shrine on the day of her wedding in exchange for the privilege of her husband sitting on the Emepiri throne as king. The god granted Amaka's wishes. Now a queen, Amaka decides to abrogate the god's request by substituting the Igedu crown for Azingae. In her confession, Amaka divulges dedicating the princess's life in the belief that she was going to give birth to other children, which unfortunately did not happen.

The final part of the play centres on Princess Azingae, who is the only child of Eze Okiakoh, and her willing submission to become the sacrifice to appease Oguguru whose anger at being deceived by Queen Amaka spells doom not only for the Emepiri kingdom but also for Igedu, since King Iginla will die without his crown. The queen strongly disagrees with the sacrifice of her only child for the redemption of the two communities, but the princess willingly offers to sacrifice herself. The ritual is eventually conducted,

and Princess Azingae retrieves the crown and gives her royal beads to Oki as a sign of regal continuity. The royal beads allow Oki, a Yoruba prince, to marry any woman from Emepiri and produce an heir apparent to the Eze's throne, and also to become the Eze of Emepiri. Oguguru accepts the sacrifice as the princess dies and Prince Oki is able to continue the regal duty of both kingdoms after the Dibia endorses Princess Azingae's decision to entrust Oki with royal responsibility. Through the play's ending, Ododo presents a vision of a united Nigeria, where ethnic differences are buried and a single agenda for national development flourishes.

A striking part of *Hard Choice* is how Ododo experiments with women, particularly Azingae, as a tool for nation-building. Women's role in nation-building has been subjected to masculine memory and interests. McClintock (1993, 62) remarks that "nationalisms have typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope." In other words, the desire for nationalist pursuits comes out of men's experience of humiliation and a quest to regain masculine dignity. This is precisely the reason for the marriage between Azingae and Oki in *Hard Choice*. It is as a result of an agreement between Eze Okiakoh and King Iginla, after the latter came to the rescue of Emepiri soldiers at a war, that Azingae has to marry Oki. Eze Okiakoh betrothed his newborn child to King Iginla for saving Emepiri from the Tanaka warriors. The conversation between the guards protecting King Iginla's hideout after his crown is stolen is informative in this regard:

> *It is King Iginla's hideout. Thick night; rain threatens. Two guards are keeping vigil…*
>
> […]
>
> **GUARD I:** Recall two decades ago when Emepiri kingdom was about to be annexed by Tanaka warriors, it was our army that came to their rescue on the invitation of the Eze.
>
> **GUARD II:** You are correct; it was on the day that the Tanaka warriors were finally booted out of Emepiri land that Princess Azingae was born. The Eze was so overwhelmed with joy that without prompting, he betrothed her to the Prince of Igedu. Unfortunately, the Eze never had another child thereafter. That happy declaration is our nightmare today. (Ododo 2011, 31–32)

From the above, it is evident that Azingae was offered to Igedu as a token of appreciation for their support in wartime, making her a sacrifice on the altar of a war alliance. The agreement between Eze Okiakoh and King Iginla is a masculinist transaction for which women's opinion is not sought, but women are the currency for the exchange. The Eze's declaration is made without consulting Queen Amaka, Azingae's mother. If the Eze had consulted Amaka before making the decision, he may have learned that Azingae will belong to the Oguguru shrine when she comes of marriageable age. However, this failure to consult with women is symptomatic of the masculine nature of political negotiations where women's voices are muted.

As in *Zintgraff* where Kassa is nothing but an absented presence in the negotiations between Galega and Zintgraff, Amaka and Azingae are invisibilised and silenced in *Hard Choice* so that the marriage between Azingae and Oki—a symbol of national reconciliation in Nigeria—becomes a masculine project. In a sense, Azingae's sacrifice of her life at the Oguguru shrine is only a legitimation of masculine leadership since Eze Okiakoh and King Iginla had already sacrificed her life to the Igedu kingdom through an arranged marriage with Oki. Azingae effectively becomes a double sacrifice for the sake of national unity. She is caught in the web of a patriarchal vision of nationalism that is hard to change, and yet her willingness to become the sacrificial lamb in Emepiri land is constructed as a heroic act—as if she has a choice. If women's heroism depends on sacrifice, then men's heroism certainly depends on the exploitation of women for their own gain. McClintock (1993, 62) avers that "the definition of nationhood rests on the male recognition of identity, [and] such recognition aligns itself inevitably with the notion of transmission of male power and property which must align itself, spiritually as well as physically or carnally, with the patrimony to be protected from all degradation." This transmission of male power is embodied in the possibility of Oki, a Yoruba prince, becoming an Eze of Emepiri and producing an heir to the throne. Since Queen Amaka could not produce an heir and Azingae is not considered an heir, the play subtly transfers that responsibility to Oki, creating a "masculinized hope" (McClintock 1993, 62) for the nation. Effectively, the play suggests that women can be agents of nationalism, but not beneficiaries of it.

Hard Choice is notorious for its explosion of gender difference in the envisioning of national unity in Nigeria. While the play calls for national unity, it does not advocate gender equality. Note the conversation between King Iginla and Oki during the search for the king's abducted crown:

> **KING IGINLA:** Yes, stand up and act. This is a moment of crisis, only women run their mouths and weep up emotions instead of their limbs and energy. Or was I wrong in supporting your wedding to the princess of Emepiri Kingdom?
>
> **OKI:** No, your highness.
>
> **KING IGINLA:** Then rise and recover my crown and your bride. Only that singular manly valour would qualify you to rule over two most important kingdoms in this region. If I die without my crown you will never qualify to rule over Igedu kingdom; with the princess as your wife, you shall become the crown prince of Emepiri Kingdom. (Ododo 2011, 21)

In this conversation, King Iginla positions men and women as binary opposites: in a time of crisis, men take action; they do not sit around talking and weeping like women. Such gender differentiation associates nationalism with masculinity while degrading femininity. Oki has to display "manly valour" to prove that he is capable of ruling over the Igedu and Emepiri kingdoms. King Iginla does not even mention Azingae's name in the above conversation. He believes Oki's involvement alone will bring an end to the

commotion and retrieve the Igedu crown. From King Iginla's words, the "crown" is a symbol of power and "the princess" is a mere object to be used to attain that power. When the king tells Oki to "rise and recover my crown and your bride" (21), he reduces Azingae to an object that can be recovered, like a crown. Oki, being a prince, must fight to reclaim that which is legitimately his, whereas Azingae, being a princess, must sit and wait to be claimed. Oki is the national hero and Azingae the national booty. Azingae assumes a symbolic role as mother of the nation, for it is through her self-sacrifice that national unity is attained. In Boehmer's words, "she is the strength or virtue of the nation incarnate, its fecund first matriarch" (Boehmer 2005, 91). Where Butake and Doho use the prostitute metaphor to construct a nation in decline, Ododo uses the virgin-mother figure to portray a nation in progress. Stratton (1994) identifies the binary of virgin/whore as a dominant trope in the representation of women in African male-authored nationalist literature. She notes: "the trope elaborates a gendered theory of nationhood and of writing, one that excludes women from the creative production of the national polity or identity and of literary texts" (Stratton 1994, 51). Thus, in hyping gender difference in *Hard Choice*, Ododo suggests that nationalism thrives not on the elimination of gender inequality, but on the institutionalisation of a gender hierarchy.

Ododo's portrayal of Azingae's role in uniting the Igedu and Emepiri kingdoms starts off on a very patriarchal note when he presents women as weak and incapacitated. Azingae is portrayed as a love-struck woman who is blinded by her love for Oki and is willing to risk her freedom and security to make sure Oki and his Igedu entourage are safe. After the disruption of her wedding ceremony, she tries several times to leave the palace in order to assist Oki in searching for the missing crown, but is prevented by her mother, Queen Amaka. Ododo here presents love as Azingae's weakness; she is the stereotypical woman in love who is too emotional about her lover. This is evident in Azingae's conversation with the palace maids:

> **PRINCESS:** (*Yells, and all are startled*.) What's going on?
>
> **ADA:** Calm down, my princess.
>
> **PRINCESS**: Calm down? I had a disrupted wedding ceremony, passed out for two days, and no caresses from Oki, my love, and soothing words from the queen, my mother. I sent Chinelo, my chief maid, to get information and she dissolves into thin air; you then ask me to calm down? (*She yells again, ADA holds her down tenderly*.) Tell me, Ada, is the prince alright? (Ododo 2011, 24)

Azingae is concerned about not receiving "caresses from Oki" and thus is eager to know about the well-being of the Igedu prince. She is being emotional and hysterical over the current situation. This is the kind of reaction that King Iginla warns Oki against, as was shown earlier. Juxtaposing Oki and Azingae, the play construes femininity and masculinity as binary opposites where femininity represents weakness, disorder and emotional disintegration, whereas masculinity represents rationality, order and a stoic response to a crisis. Thus, Oki emerges in the play as a national hero because he shuns

everything feminine, while Azingae is expunged from the national scene because she embodies all that nationalism rejects.

There is, however, another side to Azingae that must be explored. She believes that if Oki is killed while pursuing the masked men, Igedu and Emepiri may resort to war. She wants to join Oki in the search for the crown, but is barricaded by the palace maids. This relates to what McClintock (1993, 72) refers to as "gender containment." Queen Amaka's intention is to keep Azingae "safe" from any impending threat from the Igedu community. Although Azingae shows willingness to assist in searching for the missing royal object, her role is contained by her mother and guards who believe that a woman should not be involved in matters of state. Effectively, the ambiguity in Azingae's portrayal counters any claim to women's agency that the playwright may have nursed. On the one hand, she is depicted as one of those "women who run their mouths and weep up emotions instead of their limbs and energy" (Ododo 2011, 21), but on the other hand, she is actively stopped from using her limbs and energy to help resolve the crisis Emepiri faces. The play then suggests that male nationalisms create boundaries within which women can operate.

The ambiguity around Azingae's portrayal persists throughout the rest of the play. Antithetical to Queen Amaka, who confesses to being part of the snatching of King Iginla's crown, and also confirms her collaboration with Chief Ubanga to abduct the crown as a substitute for her pledge to Oguguru, Azingae decides to act courageously by accepting to die for both communities. She states: "I'm resolved to face the worst. If offering me as a sacrifice to Oguguru would avert the imminent war and save the lives of millions, then I am ready to be sacrificed" (42). Azingae's resolve projects her as a woman who has achieved what Boehmer (2005, 92) calls "national selfhood"—she embodies the national essence of ethnic unity. When questioned by Chinelo why she has decided to "give [her] life for the crown" (Ododo 2011, 43), Azingae's response indicates that she is courageous and selfless. She states: "the gods decided, and I accepted" (43).

Oki, however, finds Azingae's actions strange, because he has been made to believe that only men can exhibit nationalist traits. He tries to convince Azingae to drop the idea of being the community's hero and elope with him. In her response, Azingae stresses her determination to save the people:

> **PRINCESS:** It's too late Prince Oki. Can we really escape from our shadows? No. The life of our father, the king of Igedu kingdom, and that of the entire people of Emepiri kingdom are enmeshed in this atmosphere. It would only take a life, to save them and you want me to walk away?
>
> **PRINCE OKI:** What then happens to me?
>
> **PRINCESS:** Please don't be selfish. In due season, the sun and the moon shall fuse together for celestial edification. My love, my heart yearns for a new world devoid of

> acrimony and rancour amongst kingdoms. As I paint that world with my blood, you stay to animate it for all to enjoy. … Kiss my feet and bid me farewell. (Ododo 2011, 46–47)

Here, Azingae makes use of the personal pronoun "our" twice, to show that she speaks with royal authority. There is a change in her representation from being a besotted, emotion-driven and powerless young woman to a strong-willed and selfless woman. Azingae's vison of "a new world devoid of acrimony and rancour amongst kingdoms" reveals a woman who shows concern about peace in the community when men are busy threatening to cause war to protect their territories and authority. Therefore, Azingae is constructed not as passive but as an active contributor to the quest for national unity. Contemporary Nigerian literature fosters a vision of "national integration, cohesion, reconciliation and nation-building" (Owhorodu 2018, 11). Thus, Azingae's determination to forestall war between the Yoruba and the Igbo peoples symbolises a quest for national reconciliation in Nigeria. She can be seen as a descendant of a generation of women who have been "active transmitters and producers of the national culture" (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 7).

The ambiguity, however, is that while making Azingae a selfless woman who offers a valid reason for Igedu and Emepiri to seek peace instead of war, Ododo also depicts her as a naïve princess who has a very romanticised vision of the nation. Christopher Odhiambo (2009, 162) explains a romanticised vision as one in which "the vision of the imagined nation tends towards the transfiguration of the ordinary reality to the lineaments of an earthly paradise." Thus, Azingae envisions a new world with paradisaical conditions, where "the sun and the moon shall fuse together for celestial edification" and where there will be no "acrimony" and "rancour." Her use of such flowery and largely meaningless expressions accentuates her naïveté. She truly believes in an Igedu-Emepiri alliance that will work for the benefit of both communities when Igedu is only concerned about dominating and ruling Emepiri, as is evident in King Iginla's conversation with Oki discussed earlier. She believes that Oki will be a good king "to animate [the new world] for all to enjoy," thus fulfilling her dream, meanwhile Oki will be married to another woman whose wishes will be more pressing to him. The play, then, seems to justify her elimination through sacrifice, because with such naïveté she would not survive anyway once she comes to understand that the envisaged new world is nothing close to a paradise.

Regardless of constructing Azingae as a hero in the play, her actions are still subjected to male approval. She must wait until the Dibia, a male priest, approves what she intends to do. This is evident in the final act of the play:

> **PRINCESS:** … (*She turns to look at the two kings and smiles with a sense of victory*.) They chose wisely to unite us so that a new world may sprout but the gods are wiser. In death life is found and in life our dreams are secured. (*She wobbles and PRINCE OKI tries to support her but she stops him*) … My strength is failing me … Oki those beads are the shining spectres of the new world and you are its custodian, which now makes

> you a crown prince of Emepiri kingdom … (*Everyone is surprised; she looks at the* DIBIA *for confirmation.*)
>
> **DIBIA:** Yes, she is right. It is one aspect of our customs that has remained a guided [sic] secret because of fear of abuse. Apart from marital ties, any male that an only-child-princess gives her royal coral beads automatically becomes the crown prince of Emepiri Kingdom. However, if he is not an indigene, he must marry from Emepiri Kingdom or forfeit the right. This way, Emepiri blood is still accounted for in the heir apparent. (*Different shades of reactions from the crowd*.) (Ododo 2011, 51)

In this final scene, Azingae gives her royal beads to Oki, a Yoruba prince, to solemnise the alliance between the Yoruba and Igbo communities. As much as the play hinges on portraying women as active participants in the national struggle, Azingae still has to wait until a male character approves her actions. Although everyone present at the Oguguru shrine is shocked at Azingae's actions, the Dibia approves of it, possibly because through it Emepiri will get a king and not have to be ruled by a queen. McClintock (1993, 74) notes that in colonial South Africa, "women's volunteer work was approved in so far as it served the interests of the (male) 'nation', and women's political identity was figured as merely supportive and auxiliary." Applying this to Ododo's play, we argue that Azingae's sacrifice and passing of her royal authority to Oki are both approved by the Dibia because they serve the interest of the masculinised nation, by creating a new order in which rulership will be an all-male affair since powerful women like Azingae and Queen Amaka will no longer be in the picture. By their actions, both Queen Amaka and Azingae become facilitators of a nationalist dream that is founded on patriarchal principles. Oki finally achieves his dream of becoming the "crown prince of Emepiri kingdom" (Ododo 2011, 51) through the transfer of the royal beads. The continuation of Eze Okiakoh's royal lineage now lies in his hands. In symbolic terms, the future of Nigeria is a future determined by male leaders, while mothers lose children and daughters lose their lives to sustain a patriarchal order.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to emphasise the need to challenge African male-authored literature, which continues to intensify rather than dismantle gender hierarchy, and to question the very ethics underpinning this practice in narratives of the nation. Besides robbing women of subjectivity, the practice inscribes femininity as *inherently* opposed to nationalist pursuits. Boehmer (2005, 92) states, "for where, in nationalist rhetoric as in the official discourse of the state, masculine identity is normative, and where the female is often chiefly addressed as an idealised *carrier* of nationalist sons, woman as such lacks a valued or marked position." This means that writing women in idealised terms while male power remains the norm, as the playwrights of *Zintgraff* and *Hard Choice* have done, effectively alienates them from nationalism's goals while at the same time seeming to make them executors of those goals. Such ambiguity in the representation of women tends to conceal deep-seated anti-feminist sentiments in literature. It is the task of feminist scholars to probe Manichean representations of

gender and nationalism in literary texts because, as McClintock (1993, 77) states, "if nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations and male privilege." There is a scholarly need then to redefine nationalism using *principally* a feminist vocabulary that dispenses with ambiguity.

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