

*Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon*, by Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019.

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Patriarchal accounts of history have justified the erasure of women's contributions with claims that women have, for the most part, "played subordinate roles." It would seem, from such claims, that only overt efforts are worth recording; yet scholars (Nnaemeka, 2004; Nkealah 2016) have argued that women, particularly African women, have historically resisted and rejected dominant oppressions more covertly, by employing negotiative strategies in confronting limitations to their freedoms and powers.

Cognisance of this demands that the tracing and evidencing of African women's efforts – be they efforts countering patriarchy (feminism) or for national liberation and nation-building (nationalism) – ought to be done in a more sentient and encompassing manner. Otherwise, what is recorded in history will remain scanty and biased, continuing to exclude African women whose nationalist and feminist resistance have unfolded in less conspicuous ways. When our foremothers challenged patriarchy, for instance, they often did it in ways that left patriarchy believing it was its own idea.

The significance of the inconspicuous effort and underappreciated contributions of women, specifically Anglophone Cameroonian women, to the nationalist struggle and development of national identity, is what Jacqueline Mougoué highlights in her book *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* (2019).

Historical accounts of the role that women played in the Anglophone Cameroon nationalist struggle are rare. Mougoué's work (2019) is even more unique as she goes beyond the typical profiling of a selection of individual

nationalist figures, like Anna Atang Foncha, Gwendolyn Burnley, and Josepha Mua, to demonstrate how Anglophone women generally embodied nationalism in the ideas they promoted and internalised about gender and womanhood. With each of its nine chapters, Mougoué's *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* argues that the engendering of Anglophone women was, and arguably still is, intrinsic to the developing, distinguishing, and sustaining of Anglophone nationalist identity in and out of the public sphere, for better or worse.

Each chapter of the book develops the central argument mentioned above, from a different angle. This ranges from outlining the socio-cultural and political landscape and development of gendered identity therein, to focusing on specific features of such engendering by Anglophone women and demonstrating how these related to the Anglophone nationalist struggle and separatist politics at play nationwide. Although the chapters are not sequentially dependent on each other, some build-up can be observed. The introduction and chapter one offer readers a historical background and sufficient contextualisation to enable an appreciation of both exceptional cases of formal political participation by women like Gwendolyn Burnley at that time, and the relatively informal political participation that Anglophone women generally carried out through everyday activities.

Chapters two to seven each deal with a dimension of Anglophone womanhood, from women's organising (notably through Christian women's organisations) to culinary practice and fashion trends. Using historical data on gendered being and doing during that time frame, the author illustrates the social construction of the "ideal Anglophone woman" as one who is adept at preparing traditional meals although presented in a modern way; one whose aesthetic is native, yet suitably urban; one who depicts 'godliness', 'motherliness' and 'humility', and finally one who exudes 'respectability' by being decently dressed (as per the male gaze) and exercising 'emotional restraint' (despite any affront) for proper comportment in public.

Mougoué's examination of the framing of ideal Anglophone womanhood during that time points to how ethnolinguistic divides were sustained and/or aggravated in Cameroon through Anglophone women's aspirations for ideal

womanhood. The book's concluding chapter indicates the divisive consequences of that to date but fails to emphasise the significance of the book's argument and its contributions for understanding contemporary issues of Anglophone Cameroon identity and the ongoing separatist conflict in the country.

Cameroonian history (as many others) is considerably bereft of the contribution women have made; as such, this work is significant by default for its contribution to abating the lacuna in historical scholarship. What I find most noteworthy is the uniquely African feminist perspective that this historical account offers, as evidenced in its two key takeaways.

The first takeaway is the benefit of employing African feminist theorising in investigations of African women's agency. Where mainstream feminist historians do present accounts of women's efforts in nation-building and political resistance, they – like patriarchal accounts – also indicate that only overt efforts are worth recording. As a result, a handful of prominent events (like the Igbo women's war, the Anlu revolt, resistances led by Yaa Asantewa and Queen Nzinga) where women have joined men to confront oppressive regimes or led resistance under colonial rule are repeatedly used as examples of African women's agency. Contrary to this, Mougoué's (2019) African feminist conceptualisation of "embodied nationalism" establishes African women's agency as more common than records suggest, illustrating how Anglophone women wielded politically significant agency through seemingly mundane gendered beings and doings of that time.

As Nnaemeka (2004) asserts that African feminisms (specifically nego-feminism) evokes dynamism in contesting [gendered] injustices and achieving women's goals, so too Mougoué presents embodied nationalism as a subtle manner of approach by which Anglophone women took part in shaping the nation without passing decrees or using formal nationalist instruments like political parties. In this way, the author rejects the limited historical accounting of nation-building and nationalist resistance as identified by articles like flags, militant activity, and political party membership – accounting which has either dismissed women's contributions altogether or considered only a handful of them as worth recording. In turn, Mougoué's (2019) African feminist accounting affirms that women's social construction of gendered identity through articles of

everyday life, like food eaten and fabric worn, is just as effective in ultimately defining the nation as the articles of the constitution drafted by pen.

Yet another key takeaway, which I feel Mougoué (2019) ought to have developed better and emphasised more, is the subtle argument made about the unforeseen lasting and divisive consequences of the social construction of gender – particularly, ideal womanhood in Anglophone Cameroon. Mougoué’s (2019) examination indicates that, with the construction and promotion of “ideal Anglophone womanhood” as, among other things, more diligent and culturally appropriate than, and morally superior to Francophone womanhood, Anglophone women – akin to the Europeans who carved African territories with borderlines – played an indelible role in the delineation of who and what was Anglophone Cameroonian. In other words, they defined the borders of nationalist identity through what they challenged at church group meetings, promoted at beauty pageants, affirmed in gossip columns, and more. As the characteristics of “ideal Anglophone womanhood” were often extrapolated to distinguish Anglophone national identity in general and used as grounds for separatist politics, the construction of gender proved instrumental for separatist politics. In this way, the unrealistic expectations placed on women with the construction of ideal Anglophone womanhood has not only affected Anglophone women, but the nation as a whole. This it does by persistently foiling possibilities of social cohesion for unified movements for change in Cameroon, as bias and stereotypes continue both between and within gendered groups.

Although she identified it as a key takeaway, I opine that Mougoué (2019) could have done more to emphasise the relationship between, and consequences of, the patriarchal construction of Anglophone womanhood in that time and the state of Cameroon today. It is worth recognising that, decades later, the seeds of separatist politics sown in the construction of Anglophone identity have fomented what is observed in hate speech across ethnolinguistic divides and justifications of the secessionist movement for Ambazonia.

Likewise, Mougoué (2019) seemingly declines to compare the ultimate effectiveness and efficiency of embodied nationalism as she outlines it against more overt exercising of agency. Granted, the book’s submission of Anglophone

women's participation in nation-building through everyday gendered being and doing is worth appreciating on its own. However, in the light of contemporary criticisms of African feminisms' negotiative strategies as compromises with oppressive systems, the author ought to further clarify whether and why the less conspicuous political participation she reports the majority of Anglophone women to be partaking in at that time should be valued as much as the events of prominent resistance that have thus far made it to historical records.

Ultimately, *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* makes a strong case for the application of African feminist perspective to historical scholarship. By demonstrating how women, and the construction of womanhood, made a considerable impact on the development of Anglophone national identity and politics, Mougoué (2019) proves that employing an African feminist lens to analysis enables the uncovering and better appreciation of furtive displays of women's agency in the African context. As Mahmood (2005, cited in Switzer 2018: 5) notes:

If the ability to effect change in the world and oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes as 'change' and the means by which it is affected), then the meaning and sense of agency [like political participation] cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through analysis of the particular concepts that enable modes of being... in this sense, agentival capacity is entailed by not only those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.

## References

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