Gender symbolism and the expression of post-colonial national and religious identities

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Abstract

This paper traces the symbolic importance of gender to the assertion of national and religious identities drawing on case study data with youth from Senegal, Pakistan, Nigeria and Lebanon. We start with a brief overview of the theoretical and methodological approach to the research. We then illustrate the gender assumptions within youth identity narratives and the ways these produce masculinist and patriarchal national imaginaries that instantiate a heteronormative hierarchy and gender polarity. Intersecting with this, we explore the ways that particular claims to Islam also legitimise and depend on the surveillance and regulation of women. We further show how gender remains a significant dimension of national othering and a site of explicit postcolonial resistance that strengthens and stabilises heteronormative gender hierarchies and associated inequalities. Nevertheless, youth's imaginaries are of a modernising religious nation, which are articulated in contra-distinction to the secular imaginaries of former colonising nations of the West. Provoked by this opposition, we show how religion is central in the production of nation states, colonial and post-colonial, and the ways that gender is inscribed in both. We point to the gender continuities of the post-colonial and former colonising states. Both sustain the continued surveillance and regulation of women and their bodies are used to inscribe power regimes and define difference. Finally we question the adequacy of liberal understandings of gender equality for disrupting the powerful gender symbolism embedded in youth's national and religious imaginaries as well as the material conditions that emanate from these.

Introduction

This paper explores how gender is imbricated in the national and religious identities articulated by youth across the case study nations. As with the other papers in this issue the analysis is informed by feminist, poststructural and postcolonial theorists and based on data from sex-segregated female and male focus group discussions (FGDs) with youth (See Paper 1 and Dunne, Durrani, Fincham and Crossouard, 2017 for more detail).

In the four postcolonial contexts of Senegal, Pakistan, Nigeria and Lebanon we observed the ways that youth asserted their national identities and articulated their sense of belonging to modernising nation states (see Paper 2 and 3 in this issue). Following Bhabha (2004) we noted the ways that elements of their everyday life were drawn into their identifications with their respective nations in ways that nationalised and naturalised them. However, in distinction from the secular framing of the nation claimed by former colonial nations, the youth in the four case studies highlighted the importance of religion to their identities and to their nations. In contrast to the modernising impetus to separate religion from the workings and sentiments of the nation state, many youth articulated an inextricable interweaving of their national and religious belongings. Even in the multi-religious states of Nigeria and Lebanon, youth imaginaries were of religious modernising nations. However, the sense of being drawn together with others under the umbrella of national identity was sliced through by gender. While gender tended to be pushed into the background, assumptions of a gender binary and a heteronormative hierarchical order were integral to youth discourses of national and religious identity. In this paper we trace the symbolic importance of gender to youth articulations of identity in their postcolonial nations and set this in the historical context of the formation of their nation-states.

We begin with a focus on national identities and a gender analysis of the icons that the youth named in the introductory phases of the FGDs (see Paper 1 in this issue for detailed discussion of our theoretical positioning). This is further developed in reference to the masculinist articulations of national identity in discussions amongst male youth. While often initially presented as if gender neutral, a strong universalistic masculine imaginary was articulated when national identities were addressed directly in the interviews. We move beyond gender and nation to excavate the ways that religion is integral to youth narratives of belonging and drawn on to legitimise the surveillance and

regulation of women. The patriarchal national imaginaries were interwoven and bolstered by articulations of religious belonging. Gender polarity was the foil with which the strength and certainty of national and religious identities were asserted. Indeed these were related proportionally such that increased regulation of women was equated to stronger adherence to Islam and commitment to the nation. The discursive entanglements of nation and religion worked to naturalise, neutralise and normalise hierarchical gender positions and relations within each of the different postcolonial national contexts. The re-iterations of females as subordinated, announced the symbolic and material importance of women to national and religious belongings. Indeed, women's bodies provided a surface on which different regimes of power/knowledge, in this case nation and religion, were inscribed and where difference was defined (Butler, 1990; Coly, 2015; Foucault, 1977).

The entanglements of religion and gender provided the space for explicit postcolonial resistance while strengthening and stabilising heteronormative gender hierarchies. Gender (in-)equality remained a significant dimension of national othering which highlighted the uniqueness of their post-colonial nations and their distinction from the secular former colonising nations of the West. This is of particular interest within our postcolonial contexts, especially when Oyěwùmí (1997) describes the invention of woman and the institution of gender categories as a colonial strategy of governmentality. Nevertheless, and perhaps perversely, gender and nation were taken up with strong affective attachments by female and male youth across the case study contexts who asserted their belongings to modernising religious nations.

This confluence of nation and religion and its use in expressing postcolonial resistance provoked us to explore the work of religion in the production of nation states, colonial and post-colonial, and the ways that gender is inscribed in these. Through this we point to the gender continuities of the post-colonial and former colonising states that both sustain the continued surveillance and regulation of women. Finally, we raise questions about the adequacy of liberal understandings of gender equality for disrupting the powerful gender symbolism embedded in youth's national and religious imaginaries as well as the material conditions that emanate from these.

The research

This multiple case study research was based on focus group discussions with youth in each of the four national contexts of Senegal, Pakistan, Nigeria and Lebanon. The approach to the research, its design, instruments and processes were all collaboratively developed and undertaken. The research

intention was to understand youth perspectives in the four Muslim majority nation states. Our efforts were to explore some of the more stereotyped assumptions about youth, in non-European postcolonial states. Our primary purpose was to provide a space for these often feared or demonised young people to speak about the ways they saw and understood themselves within local, national and global networks and social relations. This was supported by our own misgivings and critique of dominant liberal assumptions and theorisations of global development, modernisation, religion, identity and difference.

We selected four post-colonial contexts in three different geographical regions, West Africa, South Asia and the Middle-East. These were all Muslim majority countries with their own specific histories of colonialism and state formation. Importantly each of the UK-based researchers had familiarity with one of the national contexts which provided basic understandings of their respective history, politics and social dynamics. There were also pre-existing research relations with each context that enabled the construction of national research teams and access to youth.

The main research method was focus group discussions (FGDs) although each youth participant completed a short data information sheet that provided personal data and their own brief pen picture of themselves. We used this to provide background information on the participants. The majority of participants were in higher education with only 15% not in education. Their mean ages ranged between 19 and 24 years. In order to facilitate discussion we organised single sex and religion groups that were led by a local researchers who, with the exception of some FGDs in Lebanon, were also youth. In nearly all cases we matched the sex and religion of the local researcher with that of the FGD members. Participants were encouraged to engage in the language with which they felt most comfortable. The FGDs were recorded and transcribed by the national researchers who also contributed through their own post-FGD report to enable us to understand any nuances in the FGD itself as a social situation. In all cases ethical procedures were followed that included consent, permissions and the right to withdraw at any point.

The FGDs were guided by a protocol that focussed on youth views of their own nationality, religion, ethnicity and gender. In this paper we provide an analysis of data drawn from 276 youth in 58 FGDs across all four case study contexts. Here we consider how gender is instantiated in the identity narratives of youth in post-colonial national contexts. This relates primarily to questions of identity as illuminated through discussion of national icons, religious belongings and gender equality.

National icons

In an introductory question in all the FGDs youth were asked questions about national icons. Those cited by both female and male youth were overwhelmingly male. Perhaps predictably they were acclaimed for their part in the foundation of the postcolonial nations as political, religious and/or military leaders. There were however references to cultural icons, writers, poets or artists. In Senegal, for example, Leopold Senghor, the first president who was also a poet was popularly named as a national icon. He and others were praised for their leadership against colonialism. This was expressed in terms of:

the action of our great men who fought for a recognition of the African nationality, or I would say of our 'Africanité'.

Knowing that our leaders of that period were the great architects of independence in West Africa. We are proud of that … (Male Senegal)

In both Pakistan and Lebanon the male icons had both religious and national affiliations. Sunni Muslim males named in Pakistan included Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father of the nation; Imran Khan, cricketer and politician as well as poet and philosopher Allama Muhammad Iqbal. Among the Shi'a youth in Lebanon they referred to political/ para-military leaders like Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and men of Amal Movement including the founder Musa Sadr and leader Nabih Berri.

The veneration of heroic masculinities was juxtaposed with the absence of any significant references to female icons, either national or religious. This universalisation of male national icons pushed gender signification into the background. Nevertheless, explicit gender differences were emphasised in discussions of every day social life through which a heteronormative gender polarity was constantly recited. In each national context females were described as wives and mothers, caring, modest and pure, and they were located firmly within private sphere. Males on the other hand were breadwinners, defenders and protectors of the family and nation.

[the] 'ideal' Pakistani man is 'a man of action' (Female Pakistan)

[He] has a sense of responsibility for himself, for his family, for his country (Female Pakistan).

A woman's first and foremost duty to the nation is giving birth to the next generation, bringing them up as good Pakistanis and 'taking care of their moral, physical, emotional and other needs' (Male Pakistan)

The strong gender distinctions were expressed across the case studies as complementary aspects of the national imaginary. As such, the strength, bravery and masculinity of national heroes was

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contrasted and combined with the feminine associated with hospitality, caring and generosity as integral to the national character.

> *There is also that degree of hospitality people associate with the Senegalese. It's much more visible in the homes in women, because it's the women who serves the bowl for the guests … (Female Senegal)*

> *In Pakistan women are brought up in such a way that they are loving, caring, feel for others and responsible. (Female Pakistan)*

All the national myths incorporated a contrasting if not opposing gender positioning – a division within - that further instantiated a gender/sexual binary and male dominance as naturalized 'facticity' (Butler, 1990):

> *… you cannot compare a man and a woman because man is very strong and women are not strong. They are very weak. (Male Lebanon)*

> *… [a Nigerian man] does not compromise his position no matter what … the Nigerian woman is at the back seat. (Male Nigeria)*

Essentialised and naturalised heteronormativity fused gender and sexuality. This fusion was at the heart of a regulatory discourse that worked to degrade the feminine and revile alternative sexualities:

> *Any man that is not the bread winner of his family is considered a woman.*
>
> *(Female Nigeria)*

> *At a certain age, you are not married, for example you are considered - excuse me for the term I am going to use - as a pervert. (Male Senegal)*

While youth discussions project strong positive assertions of national identity in each of the postcolonial case study contexts, these were intimately entangled with gender. Mayer (2000) suggests that the experiences of colonialism, that include an infantilisation and feminisation of colonised men, have accentuated a masculinised nationalism in post-colonial contexts. Indeed as illustrated above, expressions of national belonging depend on and entrench gender polarities. It appears that national narratives only seem to be intelligible with a concomitant discourse of gender regulation (Mayer, 2000; Nagel, 1998; Pateman, 1988; Yuval-Davies and Anthias, 1989).

Gender and Islam

The subordinated position of women within narratives of nation also reverberated in youth discussions of religion. The significance of gender oppositions and male superiority flooded youth expressions of their religious identities:

Yes, Islamically, being a Muslim man … means a man is more complete than a lady... she'll be limited to follow some of her duties as a Muslim. (Male Nigeria)

… even our religion tells us that the woman must be under, must always be submissive to men and the woman must always be a woman in the household. Stay at home, take care of children, prepare the meal. (Male Senegal)

Shi'a men dominate their wives and daughters. He has power over the woman. (Male Lebanon)

Discussions of Muslim identities produced a litany of social regulations of females that related primarily to confining her to private space, modesty and dress:

In Islam the rightful place of a woman is within the four walls of her house. (Male Pakistan)

Shi'a women dress modestly. We wear hijab and loose clothes. She doesn't do things that attract attention to her such as laughing and talking in a loud voice in the presence of men. We must be discreet. Women have to abide by religious doctrines more than men. (Female Lebanon)

These were accentuated in examples of explicit and legitimated disciplining of women over their dress and the denigration of those females who did not comply with an idealised Muslim female imaginary:

I admire here in Senegal. I admire the Imams a lot. They spoke out recently, when a woman dressed indecently. They spoke out publicly to complain about her. (Male Senegal)

If a Muslim woman wears trouser in my place, they will see you as a prostitute (Female Nigeria)

They (Yoruba) will wear trouser, mini skirt, spaghetti shirt … and we don't normally allow our women to appear like that. They like exposing their body parts (Male Nigeria)

Although such commentaries were voiced by both females and males, the power to name, discipline and shame women in the name of Islam was taken up as a right by males especially. More than this it is regarded as a duty of Muslim males to engage in these forms of female surveillance and regulation. The failure of males to conform would be to cast doubt on both their Muslim and their masculine identities. In concert with this, those articulating the most intense regulation of women

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were regarded as more masculine and most significantly as having both stronger adherence to Islam and greater commitment to the unique cultural traditions of their nation.

The common-place re-iterations of the disciplining and subordination of females expose and underscore their symbolic and material importance to national and religious belongings (Coly, 2015; Foucault, 1977). Gender was vital in the production and stabilisation of youth discourses of both national and religious identity.

Postcolonial distinctions

Narratives of national and religious identity within postcolonial states are neither singular, simply organic nor aberrant. The experience of colonialism has had a sustained influence on the emergence and assertion of a distinct postcolonial nation. As we have suggested in the previous sections and will discuss below, the production of a unique national identity, in this case through the interweaving of religion, has specific implications for gender. In his analysis of post-colonial India Chatterjee (1993) highlights ambivalent relations between postcolonial nations and their respective colonising nations of the West. He describes the ways that postcolonial states often mirror their former colonisers in the public sphere, attempting to replicate the structure and organisation of the state with respect to forms of governance, economic development and statecraft. However, they also strive for distinction in their national imaginaries, and do this in the cultural, spiritual and private sphere. Chatterjee argues that although what counts as 'local' culture has often been produced through the colonial encounter itself, claims to uniqueness in the cultural and spiritual realms are a 'defining characteristic' (1993, p. 6) of postcolonial nationalisms:

> *To me I am proud to be a Nigerian because Nigerians are very religious people, in terms of their faith, either Muslims or Christians, they are very religious.* (Male Nigeria)

Youths' emphasis on religious identities and practice offers cultural and spiritual distinctiveness from the former colonising nations whom they otherwise emulate and engage with as capitalist economies. Youth describe their modernising religious nations in ways that appear contradictory to western liberal theorisations that strive for a separation of religion and the state in ways that link modernisation with secularisation (Taylor, 2011) (see Paper 2 of this issue for an extended discussion). As such, the youth claims offer a challenge to Chatterjee's (1993) distinction between the formal workings of the state and the cultural/spiritual/religious elements of post-colonial national imaginaries. With youth shifting across these domains in their identity narratives, we probed them further about the possibilities of gender equality, which has implications that straddle the public and private aspects of the state and national life.

Gender equality?

International calls for gender equality that have been a persistent development focus, articulated in the both the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2000; 2015). In concert, most states around the globe, even if only in a perfunctory way, articulate and acknowledge a need to address gender inequalities to include women in multiple public and private social fields. This encompasses the formal state institutions of government, law, politics and economics as well as education, local social relations and domestic divisions of labour. Given the symbolic importance of gender to narratives of national and religious identity, we explored with youth the possibilities for gender inclusion and equality in their own national contexts. Youth responses asserted strong gender hierarchies that categorically resisted the formal tenets of state legislation:

> *Men participate in politics, not women. No woman achieved anything in politics because the man is the supreme ruler. Women are more emotional. They don't think logically. When women drive, they get confused and cause accidents. (Male Lebanon)*

The questions provoked authoritative masculinities and a defence of gender inequalities that referred to the distinctive cultural/religious domain as a counter to state law:

> *We have freedom but don't give it to women. … We give them freedom allowed by Islam and Pakhtun society. (Male Pakistan)*

> *… in Islam it is not accepted for a woman to become a leader … the law is saying that women should go out and participate in politics, this is against my religion (Male Nigeria)*

Notwithstanding women's and gender movements within each national context, the contemporary international policy agendas that have mandated gender equality reforms are seen as a Western invention. Significantly these agendas threaten, destabilise and challenge imaginaries of nation and religion articulated by youth above. As such they have provoked resistance and retrenchment in postcolonial states and a space for an insistence and re-assertion of unique post-colonial national and religious identities through gender:

> *Wade [Senegalese ex-president] wanted to push forward the issue of [gender] parity, as he had seen white people do. Really, above all, as a Muslim, one should base everything one does on one's faith, and there is a very specific place for women in religion, that is to say, the family home. (Male Senegal)*

The masculinist and patriarchal narratives of identity evidently preserve a cultural distinction which characterise anticolonial nationalisms in Africa and Asia (Chatterjee, 1993) and resistance to the

global imperatives (e.g. SDGs) that are heavily informed by the champions of modernity, the secular liberal democracies of the west. However, provoked by Fanon's observation that, '*colonialism ultimately determines the form and content of anticolonial resistance.' (*Fanon, 1967, pp. 46-47), we now explore the apparent contradictions in youth claims to belong to modernising *and* religious nations by tracing the ways religion has been expunged in characterisations of modern states. We then draw on these arguments to consider the implications for gender.

Secular modernity?

The separation of religion and state is a hallmark of the modern liberal democracies of former colonising nations (Taylor, 2011). Supported by science and western rationality, secularity has been emphasised during the 20th century, particularly from the end of World War I and in the post WWII era (Calhoun, 2011). These were periods in which new post-colonial nation-states were established in a wide range of Southern contexts. Interestingly, Badran (2009) uses a historical analysis to show shifts in the meaning of the term 'secular' over time, such that it was initially used to indicate pluralism, but has come to stand as opposite to religion. This implies its rejection and the exclusion of religion from the public sphere. Claims to secularity construct a separation of religion and reason that is superimposed on pathways of progress from traditional to modern nation states. However, contrary to the supposition that western democracies stand at the pinnacle of a universalised development trajectory, a position that been made possible because of their objectivity, science and reason, Kalberg (1997) points to the ways that Protestantism was integral to their emergence. In concert with Weber (1930), he links the rise of modern western democracies with both religion and capitalism. Asad (2003) has also extensively exposed the roots of modernity to show how religion has been integral to its claims to secularity. He argues that the 'myth of secularity' has been used to support the capitalism and colonialism of western states. While the universalisation of modernisation and capitalism has submerged the work of religion in the production of western democratic states, it is very far from being expunged.

Importantly too, colonial administrations specifically employed religion in shaping and defining new nation states. Post-colonial states as such have been founded on religion. This is evident within our case study nations with the formation of the confessional state of Lebanon after fall of the Ottoman Empire (Fisk, 2001; Hakim, 2013); the founding of the Islamic State of Pakistan through the bloody partition of India (Devji, 2011) and the construction of the Nigerian state from an amalgamation of Southern Christian and Northern Muslim territories under colonial rule and in the post-colonial nation state (Falola and Heaton, 2008; Nwabueze, 1982); Muslim leaders were also important in anti-colonial resistance and post-independence politics, even if Senegal emerged as a 'secular'

republic (Cruise O'Brien, 2003) Religion, in other words, has been central to post-colonial state formations. Given this inter-penetration of the religion and state, it now appears unsurprising that youth narratives of national identity tie these firmly together. Religion - even in contexts that claim to be 'secular' - remains an important "matrix of subject formation and mode of belonging" (Butler, 2011, p. 72) in ways that ring true for both colonising and colonised nations.

Gender and national identity

We now turn again to our focus on gender to observe that the importance of women to national identity has been forcefully articulated in reference to private, cultural and spiritual spheres. This was strongly affirmed in the way the youth used gender symbolism in the construction and performance of their own national identities. The emphasis on the cultural, religious and private was also evident in post-colonial youths' justifications for the exclusion of women in the public sphere of politics and formal governance processes of the state. However, the myth of the secularity of western liberal democracies suggests that we need to look more closely at the ways that gender was instantiated in the formal state structures established during colonial rule.

We start with a review of the separation of the technocratic aspects of the state (governance and economics) from the cultural and spiritual of national imaginaries (Chatterjee, 1993). This separation while useful analytically, is itself resonant with gendered associations (Mouffe, 1992; Nagel, 1998; Pateman, 1988). The masculinist public sphere of government and economics is set against the feminine private sphere of culture and the spiritual. This gender positioning is asserted and re-circulated through the discursive naturalisation of a heteronormative gender binary within the above youth expressions of national and religious identities. Indeed, the symbolic importance of women to the cultural and spiritual elements of postcolonial national identity that support their claims to uniqueness, heightens the need for their regulation. The surveillance of women from within the postcolonial nation is further compounded by the work of multiple externally-driven development policies and agencies that attempt to measure and address the subordination of women (Spivak, 1988). Interventions for the empowerment of women tend to focus on local and indigenous culture or 'adverse cultural practices' (Colclough et al., 2003) as producing the systemic subordination of women in community, religious and educational institutions. Indeed, the position of women remains a key rationale for international intervention. Echoing Fanon, Coly (2015, p. 20) suggests:

> *The female body being a prime colonial discursive site where Africa's backwardness and need of foreign leadership was constructed will inevitably be a prime postcolonial discursive site where African nations contest such colonial constructions and assert their modernity.*

The identity narratives of the post-colonial youth presented above, including their resistance to gender equality, certainly demonstrate this pattern. Further, however, several southern feminist scholars have historicised what has been constructed as 'indigenous' cultural forms to point to the ways that colonisers introduced a patriarchal gender system within the state. Moreover, gender was integral to the systems of the state established in colonial times and later sustained in postcolonial countries. Histories of gender exclusion are borne into different geographies through the very construction of colonial and postcolonial administrations. Rather than emergent from local 'peculiarities' within former colonies, gender inequalities have been seeded in post-colonial nation states as part of the processes of colonialism. In this more complex analysis we can see that gender intersects with the capitalism and racism of colonialism (Boserup, 1970; Gimenez, 2005; Kabeer, 1994; Lugones, 2007; Moeller, 2018; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Rai, 2011). Indeed, this is to the point that 'heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification are impossible to understand apart from each other' (Lugones, 2007, p. 187).

Efforts to isolate gender inequalities as a simple separate binary underestimate the ways it is knitted into social life and perhaps more significantly within the capitalist economic systems into which post-colonial nations have been berthed. Gender inequalities were integral to the systems of economics and governance that were instituted by former colonising nations of the west and these are sustained within post-colonial states, in the very efforts to define themselves as such (Coly, 2015; Fanon, 1967). Evidently, female subordination does not only emerge in post-colonial efforts for cultural or religious distinction. It is also compounded by their emulation of the systems of governance and economics of the former colonising nation(s).

Questions of gender equality become extremely complex in consequence, and certainly not reducible to deficit in postcolonial or developing nations. Women are of vital symbolic importance to sustained patriarchy which operates in multiple configurations in different local contexts of both former colonising and post-colonial states. The positioning of gender at the intersection of the private and the public as well as between the postcolonial impetus to emulate former colonial states or assert distinction from them presents a convoluted discursive space. It appears that the pathway to gender equality needs to interrupt the heteronormative hierarchies and binaries that inhabit the language through which state and national belonging are performed. This is rarely reached by universalised intervention formulae for the empowerment of women, especially those that focus only on women.

Conclusions

In this paper we set out to explore the symbolic importance of gender to youth identity narratives. Their expressions of national and religious belonging were intermeshed and replete with heteronormative gender binaries. Women were associated with the cultural and private aspects of postcolonial national identities which intersected with religion justified their surveillance and regulation. The youth insistence on religion as integral to their national belonging placed their nations at odds with the tenets of 'secular' modernity of the liberal democracies of their former colonising nations. The ambivalent relations with western states drew us to a historic exploration of the formation of the postcolonial states. Through this we exposed the influence of religion in the production of secular capitalist democracies of the west and the ways religion was explicitly operationalised in the delineation and administration of our case study countries in colonial and postcolonial periods. Following many Southern feminists, we point to the subordinated gender positioning in capitalist economies which were the basis of colonialism (Boserup, 1970; Gimenez, 2005; Kabeer, 1994; Lugones, 2007; Moeller, 2018; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Rai, 2011). As such we highlighted the ways that patriarchal gender binaries were integral not only to the cultural and spiritual imaginaries of the nation but also to the formal institutions of the state in both colonising and colonised countries. Women are of symbolic importance to sustaining powerful gender binaries that support the propriety, dominance and authority of masculinity across all social spheres. In this context liberal interventions for gender equality appear inadequate to address the gender subordination and exclusions that are deeply anchored and intricately instantiated in the public and private life of nations.

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