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Book Review: TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955- 1965

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TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955- 1965, 1997. Geiger, S. Portsmouth: NH: Heinemann; Map, Photographs, Swahili terms, Index. \$27.00 . xix. 240 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 978 0 4350 7421 0

Reviewed by Estella Musiiwa, PhD¹

Geiger's meta-narrative is on the role of Tanzanian women in the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) nationalist activities, and in the subsequent creation of a nation state in post-colonial Tanzania. From a postmodern feminist perspective she explores the relationship between feminist theory and political activism. Using "gender" as a category of analysis, she criticizes the exclusion of women's political experience that has characterized previous Tanzanian nationalist historiography. She is pre-occupied not so much with deconstructing the negative values inscribed on African women, as with relocating women as an active presence in transformations of the meanings of gender roles as these women redefined and reconfigured political gender identities in their own terms. Issues that inform her study include gender specific challenges as well as cultural aspects that influenced the emergence of TANU women's political consciousness. In short, she highlights the nexus between culture and women's political activism.

The book is divided into nine chapters orchestrated to flow one from another and creatively extrapolates meaning from Tanganyikan nationalism. In the introductory chapter Geiger takes a postmodern feminist standpoint. To make her case she identifies some weaknesses in the literature on nationalism in Tanzania. Geiger notes that one of the major weaknesses in Tanzanian nationalist history is the undue concentration scholars have paid to male elites, especially Julius Nyerere, the TANU leader, as the vanguard of Tanganyikan nationalism, often silencing the voices of TANU women. She is critical of the "lacks and absences" theory which enumerates several "absences" as contributory factors to the success of Tanganyikan nationalism. Geiger is also critical of the absence of African women's agency in western gender racial ideology that fosters the construction of women as "the Other of others". She argues that efforts to deconstruct images, ideologies and representations of African women fall short of the production of social narratives of women's nationalist consciousness and activities for they tend to overlook the relational connections among events making origins of women's politicizations. To correct the imbalances in Tanganyikan nationalist history and western feminism Geiger gives African women political voice. She prioritizes culture as a unifying "presence", and gives primacy to Swahili language, arguing for its significance as an epistemological basis for nationalism and nationalist consciousness. From a cultural perspective, Geiger effectively creates transcendent unity between pre- colonial, colonial and post- colonial demarcations in African historiography.

The second chapter deals with the colonial gender ideology, and examines the reinvention of African women in colonial Tanganyika. Geiger conflates state and patriarchal control over women and identifies differences in ways Tanzanian women and men experienced colonial domination. The colonial state defined urban areas a European and African male space, thereby creating rural areas as space for African women. When African women migrated to urban areas they experienced triple oppression on the basis of

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race, class and gender. The representation of urban areas as male spaces obscured many important aspects regarding urban African women. Beer brewing, cultural dances and prostitution characterized the life style for most of the poor women who migrated to urban areas. A notable feature of the chapter is the manner in which Geiger accords women long standing political consciousness expressed in traditional/cultural dances which gave them voice, agency and a sense of belonging. Thus, there were political and cultural motives that accounted for women's struggle for freedom as they defined politics in terms of colonial oppression and patriarchal dominance in their culture.

The third chapter is pre-occupied with the gendering of Tanzanian nationalism. When the Tanganyika National Union was formed under the leadership of Julius Nyerere, there were no women participants. The British, who had controlled Tanganyika as a colony asked TANU to include women in politics. Bibi Titi was the first African woman invited by men to participate in politics as a leader. She recruited and united other women in political activism, and became a central figure in politics. At her disposal was the cultural dance, which she used to mobilize women to participate in public politics. She also depended on Swahili to reach out to other women. Swahili became the lingua franca, which enabled women to understand each other and to unite them. The fact that Bibi Titi taught Nyerere how to speak Swahili in such a way that he would appeal to the ordinary people and win their political support speaks to ways in which culture mediated Tanzanian nationalism.

The interruption of the anonymity of women who created TANU takes place in the fourth chapter. Using eight life histories Geiger exposes women's subjective experiences of nationalism and describes their role as political leaders. She depends on collective memory to show how women's subjectivity reflected a nationalist political consciousness. Chapter five is preoccupied with Bibi Titi and other women in urban political activism. Bibi Titi is the thread that ties other women political activists together.

Chapters six and seven focus on the political performance of TANU women. TANU was trans-ethnic, and women were involved largely in selling cards, singing and attending political rallies. Geiger raises important questions about the implications of women's cultural contributions to Tanzanian nationalism and the fact that nationalism in Tanzania did not manifest itself "as a reactionary impulse or calculated product of elite control or "the state". (p.13) Although she does not overlook male initiative in recruiting women to join TANU, Geiger gives women political agency and she is conscious of the gender aspects and cultural conditions that informed their agency in the process of constructing, embodying and performing Tanzanian nationalism.

Chapters eight and nine are devoted to the post-independence period and shows how women were relegated to the subordinate and private position in politics. Bibi Titi actually lost her position as a political leader. The result was that women were left to create women's departments which had very little if anything to do with public politics. Geiger disaggregates the women and identifies class differences among women themselves as the educated women took over leadership roles in the newly created women's departments. Ordinary women who played an active role in the building of TANU were left out of formal political activities in post- colonial Tanzania. After fighting the first nationalist war, Tanzanian women still had to fight the 'women's war' against their fellow African men.

Geiger's outstanding historiographical contribution is the gendering of political iconography. By juxtaposing Bibi Titi, a female political icon and Nyerere, a male political icon, she carefully navigates the changing gender roles and gender identities and illustrates how political iconography is constructed, contested and reconfigured over time. She identifies ways in which Tanzanian women have been constructed into political icons and have contributed to the construction of the gender-neutral category, "political actors". She challenges the notion of pervasive boundaries that has informed prior male dominated nationalist historiography by giving details of women's role as political activists in building TANU and the post-colonial nation-state in Tanzania.

Geiger's poignant epistemological contribution is her reliance on subjective life histories. She accords primacy to situated knowledges and shows how the oppression of women and their subsequent resistance of colonialism as TANU women must be told in a way that contextualizes the construction of political identities. She rejects the bifurcation of nationalist consciousness and the way in which construction of reality by social scientists heads to "meta" or "master narratives" that claim privileged status as discourse and overlook the voices and knowledge claims of more marginalized and oppressed women. The feminist standpoint theory she adopts begins from the premise that knowledge is and should be situated in people's diverse social locations. As such all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced. She is critical of scholars who have taken seriously the responsibility of publishing not only what they know, but the process of constructing that knowledge. Her argument is that the privilege and power are always contextual and relative and she identifies multiple kinds of power, which are exercised and exchanged in a research relationship.

A peculiar methodological strength of Geiger's meta-narrative is her successful turn away from colonial representations of African women. She carefully treads in the face of representation, tracing the inevitable, yet always invisible connection between production of knowledge and power relations. She argues that representations should be seen in ways African women conceptualize temporal and spatial space as well as their social relations. These women talk of themselves as "political actors" and not as "women". Geiger challenges the image of a normative subservient woman and decenters the myth of an all powerful African man, and goes beyond the simple reduction of gender relations to male control and female subordination. Not only is state formation shaped by both the colonizer and the colonized, but it is also gendered. Thus, she highlights the symbiotic relationship between African women and men as they struggle against colonialism. She deconstructs the Eurocentric representation of women and calls upon scholars' attention to the whole question of ways in which African women want to be identified and represented as political actors.

Though it marks an important stage in African nationalist historiography, Geiger's narrative tends to homogenize Tanzanian women as "Muslim" and "TANU". It is important to note that she does not question the implications of hegemonic epistemologies such as, 'postmodern' and 'western'. Geiger's use of terms such as "politics", "nationalism", "nation" and "nation state" tend to perpetuate the Eurocentric approach to African history. Another flaw is that she identifies culture as a unifying historical process yet she continues to use terms such as "colonial" and "post-colonial". While Geiger is strong on women and culture as the unifying presences in Tanzanian nationalism, she is silent on the gendered nature of the nationalist voice. Bringing in

women as a 'presence' in Tanzanian nationalist politics begs the thought-provoking question, "What's so feminist about TANU women's nationalist voice?" Notwithstanding, the book is ideal for teaching graduate courses on feminist theory and political activism for it shows how gender and culture mediate nationalist history. It also interrogates the representation of African women in western feminist epistemology and encourages scholarship not only to rethink objectivity in metanarratives, but to value subjectivity in the writing of African nationalist history.