



Title: *Pruning in the African Way: Locating the role played by African women (movements) in subverting cultural imperialism in Africa*

By Ibrahim Bahati

-Senior Research Fellow at HSRC.

If its African Revolutionaries, its MEN! 😞😞

- The decolonization history we know today, produces a gendered skewed version which “seems to solely be focused on male figureheads...such as Nelson Mandela, Thomas Sankara, Patrice Lumumba, and Kwame Nkrumah. This leaves African women leaders on the periphery, especially in social and political discourses” (Swift 2017). African women and their social movements have always been part of formulating social change in terms of constitutional legislations, passing laws on family and land rights, education rights, among others. They are not just contributors to African history, they are part of it. **Question is- why is there a continued silence (if not an absence) about women in the celebration of African history?**

Colonialism and altering of gender relations as part of social re-organization

In pre-colonial Africa, there was fluidity and complementary in gender roles and power relations in a household.

Colonialism would change the gender roles which were complementary into divided **spheres of private and public**.

As men were taken to work in industries, plantations, made to pay household tax, navigating the public sphere of income and politics. Cash crops and leadership would come to have a male reserve. **Ownership of household** items such as the radio, the banana plantation, the house keys, children (well behaved), car keys, are for the man.

Women were kept in private sphere for reproduction purposes, working for love, for free, raising children. Food crops and poverty became feminine. Women's work is largely informalized & not part of the GDP statistics

Education systems were teaching women **to be good housewives but who were also keen cultivators for men. Domesticity of women began here** (Musisi 1992)

African state as a patriarchal extension of a colonial state and continues to be treated as one.

- The colonial system (both a material and power construct), engineered a ‘gendered process’ in the construction of the state and class in Africa which clearly disempowered women in new ways. That is, women lost control of their own labor, property, power, bodily autonomy, sexuality, and reproduction activities became gendered as a female while men navigated paid labor and new public spheres of the economy and state.
- Women have been forced to develop different survival techniques (whether as individuals or as a social group or nations) to exist in a new system that was designed for them.

Women in Post Colonial African states

-
- Fredrick Cooper hints that, “the sub-Saharan Africa that became independent since 1957 was ...economically weak, but with the institutions and the international status of sovereignty. Yet that was not the Africa that most African leaders looked to in 1945” (2012: 40-41). Cooper emphasizes that newly formed nation states in Africa after 1945 **had inherited the failures of colonialism** (Cooper 2002) of which gender inequality relations such as the subjugation of women and other sexual minorities was part of that cycle..
- Esther Boserup’s (1970) work *Women’s Role in Economic Development* portrays that, national statistics of economic growth usually neglect, omit, or underreport on subsistence activities where majority of women’s work is situated. That is, “subsistence activities usually omitted in the statistics of production and income are largely women’s work” (1970: 163).



On Cultural Domination

- In terms of cultural domination, “colonialism sought to control the production of wealth, but in so doing it also controlled the production of culture.... Either by denying the existence of indigenous culture or by denigrating its value, **colonialism marginalized the cultures of the colonized**” (Gallagher 1994, 7 as cited in Ipadeola 394).
- *Women who often were left in the private sphere of raising children, food production and instilling morals in a household, became the keepers of the discarded traditional African culture compared to the men who existed in the capital relations the nation state*

Pruning in the African way? Afro-feminism

- Sylvia Tamale in *Decolonization and Afro-feminism* says:

“Although it shares some values with Western Feminism, Afro-Feminism distinctly seeks to create its own theories and discourses that are linked to the diversity of African realities. It works to reclaim the rich histories of Black women in challenging all forms of domination, in particular as they relate to patriarchy, race, class, sexuality and global feminism” (2020).

- Afro-feminism seeks to understand how African women are pushing the narratives of subverting not only (neo) colonial imperialism but as well how they are negotiating male domination and patriarchy in various African settings. It seeks to politicize gender and women’s issues as colonially inborn to create a hierarchized identities, in terms of religion, economics, politics, resource redistribution, education systems, sexuality, etc in today’s post colonial Africa.
- It advises us that “We can not move forward unless we know/recognize fully what was lost.” Also, we need to acknowledge several ways the female gender negotiates and exists along the male gender which diverges from Western contexts. Our gender relations do not exist out of the vacuum.
- **Women** exercise daily Afrocentric concepts of Ubuntu, Ujaama (community) and tackle daily issues of the marginalized (eg, credit schemes, market self help projects, community burial organizations, etc).

Tracing women's role in socioeconomic & political making of Africa

- African women were part of constitutional making processes in many African countries and formulating legislations that were aimed at creating a social welfare state that we find in various nations today. In the case of Tanzania for example, the “pressure from women’s groups in the 1990s led to a series of new legislation, including the Sexual Offenses Act, revisions of the Marriage Act, repeal of the law banning pregnant girls from school, and the changes in land laws” (Tripp et al. 2017: 127).
- The same can be said in South Africa where women were fundamental in pushing Labor Relations Act that aimed at protecting women from sexual harassment in workplace and giving maternity leave, among others (ibid)
- It was out of women’s organizations meet up in 2000 in Namibia that would later draft a document that would become essential for the UNSCR 135 to adopt a framework that women must be included in all peacemaking activities around the world

Nigeria



- Precolonial Igbo Nigeria, women managed their social affairs and were influential in societal governance.
- The Omi (queen) could stage a resistance against the Obi (King) and his men till women's issues were represented.
- Some of this was through not cooking for the men or withdraw from marital sex.
- Women of Lineage of the earth would punish men who misbehaved and abused women.
- In post colonial Nigeria, 1994, Lady Oyinkan Morenike Abayomi formed the Women's party in Lagos to advocate for Women's rights in Nigeria. This was critical in lobbying for more educational and economic opportunities for women (Swift 2017).
- Women scholars such as Chimamanda and Oyerone Oyewumi- leading Afro-feminist scholars who have called for the need to indigenize African stories and African women in global feminism

Other West African countries

- In countries such as Senegal, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, the role of preserving African religion and cultural subversion in the Diola community has survived due to the emergence of women prophets at the end of the 19th Century as British, French and Portuguese imposed various forms of colonial rule (Baum 2018).
- Women prophets emerged because existing male prophets had failed to maintain local resistance against colonialism in West Africa.
- They attracted large gatherings, claiming Emitai (prophet) had sent them to share their teachings in Diola communities.
- By 1986, when extreme droughts hit, women revived the Alinesitoue' rain ritual, Kasila and added additional teachings and ritual beliefs of their own.
- Unlike in Christianity and Islam that spread all over, here faith was practiced as exclusive to Diola communities in maintaining land rights, local trade and other social values.
- They became popular because women's spiritual power was still embraced in Diola communities. There were women fertility shrines (Ehugna) for land, livestock and policing bad male behaviors.

Women in peace-making process in West Africa

- “Secret women’s cults like the Takembeng in Cameroon and the female Sande initiation societies in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast have played a key role in helping presidents get elected, restoring peace during conflict, and swaying popular opinion. Liberian women peace activists would take kola nuts as peace offerings to militia during the civil war in trying to persuade them to lay down their arms.” (Tripp 2019: 5)

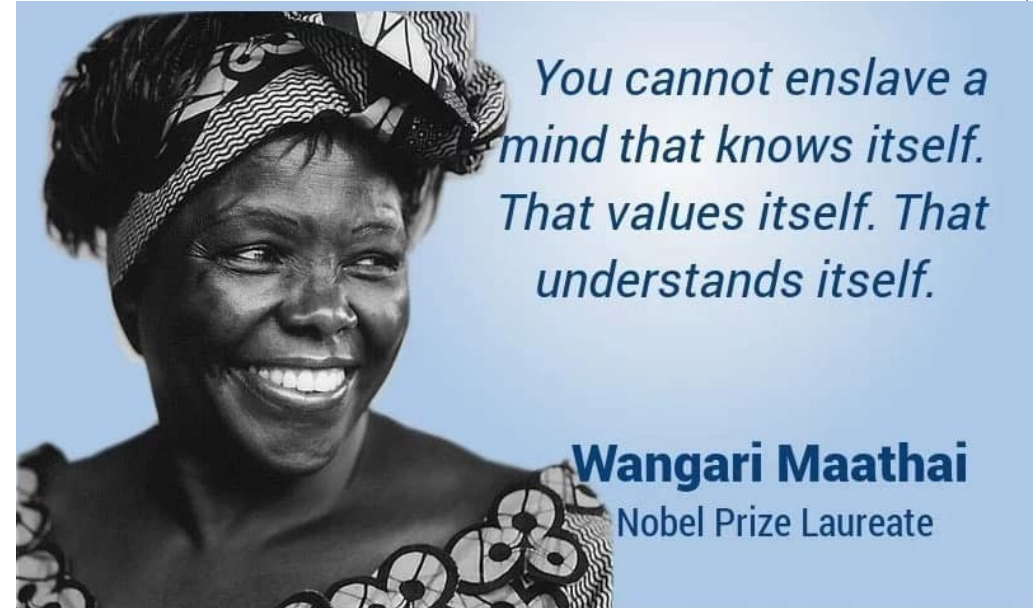


East African Countries: Tanzania.

- Coastal Women of Tanganyika and Charismatic women like Bibi Titi are the unsung heroes.
- Bibi Titi toured the country with Julius Nyerere, the founder of Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) to rally support for the party and would later serve as head of “Umoja na Wanawake” (UWT), the Women’s Union in 1961 (Tripp 2019) when Tanzania gained independence.

Kenya

- In Kenya, works of Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai who formed the Greenbelt Movement in 1977 is one of the reasons to prove women are at the core of achieving inclusive environmental justice and climate action in whole of Kenya and East Africa.
- Wangari involved ten thousands of women from various Kenyan districts in planting trees as a way to combat environmental degradation (Tripp 2019).



Uganda

- Women were fighters in the Bush war of 1980-86 that led to Museveni to take power in 1986. They were informants, enlisted their husbands to join the movement and others were seeking revenge from previous governments (Capt. Olivier Zizinga).
- In 1986, Uganda was one of the first countries to adopt legislative quotas in 1989 although its deteriorated today.
- Women like Miria Matembe and Mary Maitumum were engaged in drafting the 1995 Uganda constitution.
- The Women Parliamentary Association created alliances with civil and grassroot women's movement to promote political participation through leadership skills training.
- The Uganda Association of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Uganda) is known to champion women's property rights through free legal aid and services.
- Aids Support Organization (TASO) was formed by Noerine Kaleeba in 1997.



South Africa

The case of Black women's role in the decolonization of South Africa came in various forms. For example, Miriam Makeba's song Malaika (my Angel, 1969), she chooses immortalize Swahili language (besides her own) to reclaim what unites us all love as choice and healing despite South Africa being under apartheid and African countries were still decolonization struggles. No wonder she was called Mama Africa.

South Africa continued:

- Other key figures like Winnie Madikizela Mandela are very known in anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa with other ANC Women's League such as Lilian Ngoyi and Albertina Sisulu. For instance, they were key in organizing against protest laws against 1958 pass laws, etc
- Winnie was charged with treason, faced house arrest, employment ban, arrest in violation of Terrorism act and while in prison in 1969, she spent 200 days without any human contact except her interrogators (Major Theunis Jacobus Swanepoel- a notorious torturer). She was kept awake for 5 days and 5 nights in trying to break her give info about ANC and her husband. When she refused to break, Swanepoel began torturing other ANC prisoners in front to make it clear that her silence was leading to her people's death.
- She was also one of the most surveilled women in Aparthied South Africa, planted with spies all around her.



Way forward?

- African women role in cultural subversion need to be analysed from their creative ways of social mobilization from the local to the national and regional levels.
- However, their forms of social mobilizations (such as women's movement) need to be examined from different contexts of which their needs, goals and visions were/are in a given time.
- Additionally, although many of their goals (such as women economic empowerment) might seem to be of sameness, the processes which many have taken to achieve their agendas are very different.
- Therefore, we always need to bring an intersectional approach (class, location, education, etc) and how that impacts on their agency given the geographical socio-political contexts they find themselves in at a given time and place.

Conclusion?

- Analyse how African states might use gender as form of gatekeeping to ensure a form of survival politics that others women. African states resort to fear and direct violence instead of moral/ethical, material & intellectual leadership, eg, educated women are seen as worrisome (Fetton 1990).
- We need to bring back women at the center of discussion as restorers and architects of African culture and indigenous knowledge systems in agriculture, family heritage, African cultures, leadership, among others.
- Pruning from the African way is both a form of protest and reclamation of our various African identities of what makes us unique, different or similar at any given contexts. Through songs of music, hair styles, food, the vernacular-(local languages), fashion and design, architecture, spirituality, etc, it reminds us who we are and how far we have come. However, *We can never claim that we know who we are unless we do history right by trying to address the role of African women in every polities of African societies. This paper is proof that African women have been bystanders as African history gets written, they have always been active agents and situated knowers of knowledge of our original yet troubled histories, one we must relearn to reclaim our truest selves.*