

## Mothers of nationalism

The year 1955 was a turning point for women in Tanzania. John Hatch, the British representative of the Labour government, visited Dar es Salaam in June to meet with members of the fledging nationalist movement, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), and to encourage them to press for independence without violence. After witnessing a speech that the group's leader Julius Nyerere gave to a crowd of 25,000 people, Hatch posed a question to the officials he met: "I see there were a lot of people at Nyerere's meeting today ... but do you have a women's section ... I want to meet their leader."<sup>1</sup> They promised a meeting the following day. But, in the words of Bibi Titi Mohamed, who would become the women's leader:

The truth is, they didn't have a woman then! ... Everyone had locked their wives away [in the house]. Everyone refused. "Then what shall we do?" they asked themselves. Then Sheneda [one of the men] said, "I will go and collect Titi." ... her husband is my friend. I'll talk to him and she will come.<sup>2</sup>

The following day she was taken to the TANU office and introduced to John Hatch as "leader of the women's section." From then on, after TANU officials contacted her husband asking his written

<sup>1</sup> Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955–1965* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997), 57.

<sup>2</sup> Geiger, *TANU Women*, 57.

permission, Bibi Titi Mohamed became the head of the party's women's section. Adopting a pattern unique to Tanzania, she mobilized her followers through *ngoma*, women's dance groups, which united Swahili-speaking women from all over the country. As was common across the continent during the 1950s, in many of her speeches, she appealed to women as mothers, emphasizing the ability to give birth as the source of their power:

"I am telling you that we want independence. And we can't get independence if you don't want to join the party. We have given birth to all these men. Women are the power in this world. I am telling you that we have to join the party first." So they went and joined the party.<sup>3</sup>

Bibi Titi Mohamed was a young Muslim woman born in the coastal city of Dar es Salaam in 1926. In an interview with historian Susan Geiger, she explained that her father was a businessman and her mother a farmer and housewife. She learned to read the Quran as a child and attended Uhuru [Government] Girls School up to Standard Four; upon reaching puberty she was compelled to stay indoors to avoid seeing strangers without her parents' permission. She compared the experience to captivity: "You stay in as if it were a prison ... You can't even peep through the window. It is strictly forbidden."<sup>4</sup> She later recalled accepting this confinement because it was mandated by religion and custom.

When Bibi Titi turned fourteen, she was married to Mzee bin Haji, a forty-year-old mechanic for the Public Works Department whom she had never met. In those days, she explained, parents chose their children's spouses: "... if you were ever to bring a husband to them you would be looked upon as a spoiled child."<sup>5</sup> He divorced her after they had one child. She told Geiger that she then remarried Buku bin Athmani, the chief clerk at the Water Supply Department, whom she knew and loved, but who died a number of years after their marriage. She elaborated, "This marriage was not like my first ... We loved each other. But he died."<sup>6</sup> In other interviews, however, Bibi Titi spoke of three marriages, not including this second husband.

<sup>3</sup> Geiger, *TANU Women*, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Geiger, *TANU Women*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Geiger, *TANU Women*, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Geiger, *TANU Women*, 48.

Like most Swahili women, Bibi Titi was active in one of the city's numerous *ngoma*, popular dancing and musical groups, each with its own name and hierarchy of officials modeled on British titles: the "chief secretary" who did the organizing and planning, followed by the "kingi" and the "governor." The members of her group, Roho Ni Mgeni (Heart is a Stranger), not only performed at weddings and festivals, but cooperated in organizing burial ceremonies and taking part in the annual community event that celebrated the birthday of the Prophet Muhammed. Before her impromptu recruitment as the leader of TANU women, Bibi Titi had heard about the nationalist organization from her brother-in-law. The group was headed by Julius Nyerere, a young secondary school teacher with a teaching diploma from Makerere University in Uganda and an M.A. in history and economics from the University of Edinburgh. Typical of nationalist leaders at the time, he was a widely revered figure who became the embodiment of the country's aspirations for independence.

In the months that followed John Hatch's visit, Bibi Titi began speaking to leaders of *ngoma* groups and going from house to house to persuade women to join the freedom struggle. But women still were not expected to speak in public. Finally, male leaders persuaded Bibi Titi that she needed to address her supporters. She later described her shock and discomfort as she began her inaugural speech: "I stood up, as if God had caused me to rise. I didn't look at the people." But, she recollected, "I spoke well, and all the people listened attentively." She reported her words, which again emphasized motherhood as the source of women's power:

What authority is God giving us? He has given us authority! We shouldn't feel inferior because of our womanhood ... We have given birth ... Those whom you see with their coats and caps, they are from here [pointing to her stomach]! They didn't come to our backs and direct from their fathers. Yalaa! God has given us this power ... he knew that he did it so that you can bring children into the world. Without our cooperation, we won't achieve our country's freedom. So we must join. I say that it is necessary for us to join.<sup>7</sup>

Bibi Titi's success in using dance societies to mobilize relatively uneducated Muslim women challenges accepted ideas that nationalist

<sup>7</sup> Geiger, *TANU Women*, 61.

movements succeeded through the efforts of Western-educated young Christian men who rallied popular support through new political parties. More important than TANU, dance societies engaged women in “performing nationalism” by bringing together women from different ethnic groups in a common activity that was central to their daily lives.

Tanzania was not alone in pressing for independence from colonial rule. In the standard account of African nationalist politics, during the late 1940s and 1950s, educated young men, some of whom had expanded their horizons as soldiers during the Second World War, became more assertive in challenging both their elders and European rulers in new ways. Their boycotts, demonstrations, grassroots campaigns, new political parties, and in some cases violence, eventually led most colonial rulers to negotiate an exit from imperial control and to hand over power to this new male elite.

As numerous historians have demonstrated, however, this male-oriented story of top-down decolonization is only partial, ignoring the campaigns of women across the continent whose protests against colonial policies also galvanized political organizing. It also omits the exceptional women who used their leadership skills and their ties to grassroots women’s groups to mobilize broad-based constituencies. At times these women leaders drew on their connections to existing women’s organizations (such as women’s dance societies) while in other cases they formed new politicized women’s groups that lent support to established nationalist parties. As auxiliaries to political parties, women were sometimes less concerned with gender equality than with the goals they shared with men – of putting an end to colonial domination. Even when acting in concert with men, however, women (again like Bibi Titi) often drew on their role as mothers as a basis of their political authority and empowerment and occasionally clashed with male nationalists who were unconcerned with gender equity.

The women who devoted their talents and energy to nationalist movements were able to mobilize new constituencies and sometimes to infuse women’s agendas into the narratives of nationalism – shaping and supporting, but also challenging and transforming male-led political groups. Many popular actions of the postwar years were sparked initially less by anticolonial sentiments than by resistance to particular colonial policies such as new taxes and land use regulations; over time, however, these grievances often meshed with those of nationalist

parties. Women targeted not only unwelcome policies, but also the chiefs responsible for implementing and enforcing them. Though different in many respects, most of these revolts (like those earlier in the century) were intense, spontaneous, and relatively short-lived, the responses of peasants or poor urban women to perceived threats to their livelihoods and to a disruption of customary relationships with local officials. In other cases, however, women generated political unrest that lasted up to independence.

### Grassroots actions

Protests in Tanzania and Cameroon typified these grassroots actions, although they ranged widely in their methods and the numbers of women involved. In 1945, 500 women in the Pare District of northern Tanzania marched to the district headquarters to support their husbands' opposition to new taxes that they believed would disrupt their family and agricultural life. The demonstrators battled with local police officers and issued the outrageous demand that the British district officer impregnate them all, since his policies undermined the position of their husbands. Significantly, although this campaign contributed to persuading British colonists to enact limited reforms of local government, women were excluded from the decision-making process.

More than a decade later, between 1958 and 1961 Kom women in Cameroon staged a much larger, more disruptive series of actions, also provoked by threats to their economic position. The Cameroonian protestors were angered by rumors that the British planned to sell their land to Igbos from Nigeria and by a new law that called for farming along the contours of the ridges in order to prevent soil erosion. They also resented the failure of chiefs to protect their crops from the cattle of neighboring Fulani herders. Relying on *anlu*, a traditional practice for protecting their interests, as many as 7,000 women organized a series of mass demonstrations that disrupted political life until the country's independence in 1961. During their dramatic actions, similar to those of Nigerian women three decades earlier, large groups of women issued shrill warning cries, dancing and singing, and taunting men who had offended them. Dressed in rags and leaves and dirty men's trousers, with sticks perched like rifles on their shoulders, they gathered at men's compounds, sometimes urinating and defecating to

drive people from their homes in order to shame men into meeting their demands.

Similar grievances against taxes and colonial policies also prompted urban women to engage in massive, often volatile expressions of discontent, sometimes independently and spontaneously, sometimes in conjunction with larger nationalist protests. In Lagos, organizing during and after the war drew on the Lagos Market Women's Association, active since the 1920s. Led by Alimotu Pelewura, an uneducated Muslim political activist, thousands of women traders banded together to protest the taxation of women and to oppose a price-control scheme implemented during the Second World War. As an explicitly anticolonial group, these women also joined a general strike called in 1945 that lasted for thirty-seven days and helped to launch militant mass movements calling for self-government in the near future. Similarly, in Sierra Leone, 10,000 women gathered in 1951 to protest the rising cost of food in Freetown. Led by Mabel Dove Danquah and Hannah Benka-Coker, they sought to regain their monopoly of the trade in palm oil and rice that had been appropriated by Lebanese traders and large foreign companies.

Other complaints galvanized women in South Africa and Burundi. In 1959, women in Durban, responding to restrictions on their involvement in domestic beer-brewing and to government support for competing municipal beer halls that threatened their independent livelihoods, invaded and burned beer halls. Beginning in the segregated township of Cato Manor, an estimated 2,000 women picketed, clashed with police, and set fire to municipal buildings. Also in the late 1950s, Muslim women in Bujumbura organized an effective revolt against a special tax on single women. Protestors, who refused to pay this exaction for several years, were incensed at the implication that all widowed, divorced, and polygynous women were *malaya* (prostitutes).

As movements for independence from colonial rule ignited in the years after the Second World War, women leaders across the continent both responded to and helped to mobilize such grassroots constituencies, making resistance to foreign domination as much "women's work" as the work of the men usually credited with its spread. Among the most prominent of these women were Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in Nigeria, Frances Baard in South Africa, and Wambui Waiyaki Otieno in Kenya.

But other countries had equally robust women's involvement in nationalist organizations. In Sudan, for example, a high level of women's

participation was generated first through the local Communist Party and later through the larger nationalist movement. Although it began among urban educated women, the Women's League (and its successor, the Women's Movement), expanded to workers and peasants in the northern part of the country. In Cameroon, several different political parties worked specifically to mobilize women. But, most uniquely, women nationalists submitted an astonishing 1,000 of the 6,000 recorded petitions sent to the UN Trusteeship Council calling for independence, withdrawal of foreign troops, the reunification of the British and French territories, and lifting economic restrictions on local businesses. With an equal focus on women's rights, the Sierra Leone Women's Movement played a major role in nationalist politics, aiming specifically to improve women's status, protect the rights of market women, and insure women's representation in key government bodies. One of the group's leaders, Mabel Dov, became the first west African woman elected to the national legislature. She was followed by Constance Cummings-John, who a decade later became the mayor of the country's capital, Freetown. As independence neared in Uganda, the Ugandan Council of Women began to prepare women for leadership roles by running voter education and leadership training courses as well as promoting literacy and formal education for women. As in Sierra Leone, these efforts helped to promote women's political representation. By the time of independence in 1962, nine women (seven of them African) had served on the Legislative Council.

### **Nigeria: mobilizing market women**

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the Nigerian activist, differed from Bibi Titi in many ways. Well-educated, she was active in promoting girls' and women's education in the 1920s and 1930s. Her British education made Ransome-Kuti unusual for an African woman of her time. Using her exceptional organizational abilities, she and her husband, Rev. Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, ran a boarding school together. In the mid 1940s she was the key figure in transforming the Abeokuta Ladies' Club (ALC), a group of middle-class, Western-educated Christian women, to include poor market women for whom they set up literacy and tutoring classes. But, involving market women became a recipe for political action when the women decided to use the club

to rally against British colonial officials who were confiscating their rice without compensation, a continuation of policies intended to balance wartime food shortages and to provide for soldiers.

This move led to other complaints about officials seizing women's goods or paying less than the market value for them. Involvement with these popular protests launched Ransome-Kuti on a personal journey when she realized how removed educated women were from the lives of ordinary people. From this time on, in a symbolic effort to bridge this gap, she shed her Western clothing and began to dress only in Yoruba garb. Her new attire included a loose blouse and distinctive cloth wrapped elegantly around the head and body "to make women feel that I was one with them."<sup>8</sup>

As protests continued, the ALC expanded the scope of its actions to press for the establishment of health clinics, school playgrounds, improved sanitation, and safer water; the group also demanded an end to government control of trading and a pledge not to increase women's taxation. As its objectives widened and its membership swelled, the ALC grew more militant. Reflecting its avowedly pro-independence and activist goals, the group also adopted a new name – the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU). The new group was inclusive in its membership, attracting women of all educational levels as well as Christians, Muslims, and followers of Yoruba religions. Famed Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka later described these "wrapper wearers," distinguished by their traditional Yoruba dress from middle-class Christian women, as they filed into a meeting. He wrote: "Women of every occupation – the cloth dyers, weavers, basket makers and the usual petty traders of the markets – they arrived in ones, twos, in groups, they came from near and distant compounds, town sectors and far villages whose names I had never heard."<sup>9</sup>

The AWU was also larger and much more tightly organized than many other African women's groups at this time. With about 20,000 dues-paying members and another 100,000 active supporters, they were able to coordinate massive demonstrations. Ransome-Kuti was a vigorous and dynamic leader. According to her biographers, "Her high cheek bones and piercing gaze could be quite intimidating. She

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Emma Mba, *For Women and the Nation: Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson-Odim and Mba, *For Women and the Nation*, 72–73.



had a hearty laugh and a strong, clear voice that ... could be heard well even by a large crowd.”<sup>10</sup> The first target of the AWU attacks was a local one – the Alake (King) of Abeokuta, the official responsible for implementing the hated colonial policy of taxing women. In the course of the successful campaign against the Alake and the system of government that gave substantial power to “traditional” authorities recognized by the British (a campaign that, in 1949, forced the Alake out of power), Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti became a nationally and internationally recognized figure.

That same year (1949), relying on a strong, local base in Abeokuta, the AWU members formed a national organization, the Nigerian Women’s Union (NWU), to increase support for its long-term goals of enfranchising all women in the country and promoting their equality in the political process. As a feminist and socialist whose politics were well-formed prior to the nationalist era, Ransome-Kuti was less closely tied to a single political party or movement than leading women in some other parts of the continent. By 1953, branches of this nonpartisan group had expanded throughout the country, working together to achieve women’s franchise, direct popular elections, and proportional representation for women.

As President of the national organization as well as its Abeokuta branch, Ransome-Kuti expressed strong feminist ideas on women’s subordination. In a speech to the Federation of Nigerian Women’s Societies, she observed, “As women we still feel that we are inferior to men, we inherited this from our mothers whose spirits had been subdued with slavery and we have to join hands together to shake off this feeling so that the forthcoming Independence may be of reality to us.”<sup>11</sup> She also opposed customary marriage practices such as polygyny, which she saw as disrespectful to women, and objected to bridal gifts. In her eyes, these gifts reinforced male domination and discouraged women from leaving unhappy relationships. Taking up another issue that crossed party lines, Ransome-Kuti also led an unsuccessful campaign to extend the franchise to women in conservative, Muslim-dominated northern Nigeria.

Although Ransome-Kuti’s campaigns on gender issues appealed to women across the country, she also presided over the Women’s Wing of one of the regional parties – the National Council of Nigeria and

<sup>10</sup> Johnson-Odim and Mba, *For Women and the Nation*, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson-Odim and Mba, *For Women and the Nation*, 102.

the Cameroons. Thus, just as women's dance societies formed the basis for TANU women's groups, in western Nigeria a group centered on women traders became the core of a national organization whose goals and militancy widened along with its membership.

### **South Africa: fighting apartheid**

In South Africa, the most highly industrialized country on the continent, women's organizers during the 1940s and 1950s were closely tied to nationalist organizations such as the African National Congress that were fighting for democratic rights for the country's African majority. These groups especially attracted women living in segregated urban shantytowns, threatened by the white minority government's campaign to force them to carry identity documents known as passes. Of those with formal employment, many earned their living in low-paying jobs stitching clothing, weaving textiles, or preparing and canning food. Unlike Tanzania and Nigeria, South Africa had a minority population of permanent white settlers who monopolized political power. They entered the postwar period determined to reinforce racism and white domination rather than moving to end colonial rule. Under this new system, known as apartheid, African women and children living in the cities were designated as "superfluous appendages" of male workers, and at times terrorized with threats of deportation to squalid, underdeveloped rural communities. Frances Baard, who found a job in a canning factory during the war, eventually became an active trade union organizer who mobilized her constituency in the struggle against passes for women and an end to white domination.

Coming from a much more modest background than Ransome-Kuti, Baard, born in the diamond mining town of Kimberley, attended a Methodist primary school through Standard Six (eighth grade) and briefly attended a teacher's training school. After a short stint as a teacher, she took a job as a domestic worker, one of the few formal jobs open to women in South Africa. Once married, Baard, who lived in the segregated African township of New Brighton outside Port Elizabeth, found work in a food and canning factory – an industry that flourished during the war. Conditions in the factories at the time were harsh. Workers who peeled and canned the fruit had no plastic aprons or gloves and often worked sixteen-hour shifts.

When Ray Alexander, a white communist, organized a union at Beard's factory in 1948, Beard was elected Organizing Secretary for the African Food and Canning Workers' Union. From then on, she worked in the trade union office, learning organizing skills, giving speeches, listening to workers' complaints, negotiating with management, and confronting the difficulties of keeping seasonal workers involved in the union. In doing so she honed the political expertise that would equip her for a lifetime of political engagement. After new laws were enacted in 1950 that intensified urban racial segregation, Beard faced additional problems. Because the unions legally defined as "African" and "Coloured" shared an office and refused to separate, she was constantly harassed by the police.

In addition to her trade union activities, Beard was drawn to attend a meeting of the main nationalist organization, the African National Congress (ANC), after her shock at seeing people forced to sleep outside on a cold, rainy night for lack of accommodation, in a climate where winter temperatures could fall into the mid-forties. She soon became involved in the ANC Women's League as well, at first going from house to house to talk with women about their problems – lack of money, high rents, difficulty feeding their families, and men's harassment under the pass laws. According to these regulations, men were required to carry an identity document that gave them permission to work only in the city where they resided; they could be stopped, searched, and imprisoned or deported to rural areas at any time if their passes were not "in order." Beard also learned of the special hardships that widows faced – the threat of losing houses that could be registered only in men's names. When her husband died suddenly in 1952 and she assumed sole responsibility for raising their two young children, her reputation as an activist protected her from being forced out of their house.

Beard's leadership role in both union and women's struggles resulted, in part, from the close ties between the Food and Canning Workers' Union, its African affiliate, and the broader political movements against apartheid during the 1950s. These protests were organized by the African National Congress (ANC), whose leaders included Nelson Mandela. Thus, she was active in the Defiance Campaign, the first major nationwide program of civil disobedience aimed at challenging the apartheid regime. In support of the tightly organized groups that deliberately violated laws mandating segregated facilities and residential areas, crowds of exuberant supporters gathered in

mass meetings and demonstrations, carrying banners and chanting protest slogans. In her home area of Port Elizabeth, among the most militant communities in the country, thirty people marched through the European-only entrance to the railway station singing freedom songs. Accompanied by cheering friends and family, they chanted "Mayibuye Afrika!" ("Let Africa come back!"). Those defying the law in support of democratic reform voluntarily courted arrest and prison sentences (usually two to three months) rather than pay fines. In doing so they were following the tradition of nonviolent resistance pioneered by South Africa's Indian community a half century earlier under the leadership of Mohandas Gandhi.

In keeping with her wide-ranging involvement in organizations challenging the apartheid state, Baard became a member of the National Executive Committee of SACTU (the South African Congress of Trade Unions), the new multiracial federation formed in 1955 in defiance of apartheid laws. During the late 1950s, SACTU campaigned aggressively to raise the minimum wage and organized a potato boycott that won some improvements in the brutal conditions of farm workers. She was also a founding member of the Federation of South African Women (now known as FEDSAW). Launched in 1954, this multiracial organization led women's struggles against the new requirement that African women as well as men carry passes. Alongside Baard, leaders included Lilian Ngoyi and Ray Alexander (both with strong trade union ties), and Helen Joseph, a British social worker and political activist, then working for the Garment Workers' Union. Emphasizing women's common bond as mothers, FEDSAW leaders castigated apartheid policies for separating migrant workers from their families. Lilian Ngoyi thundered in a speech, "My womb is shaken when they speak of Bantu education,"<sup>12</sup> the system of inferior schooling that was being imposed on African children.

As a leader of FEDSAW, Baard was in the forefront of the historic protest on August 9, 1956. Resisting official efforts at intimidation, 20,000 women assembled at the Union Building in Pretoria (the government's administrative center) to rally against the apartheid government's plans to extend the pass laws to women. They carried thousands of petitions to the Prime Minister, Johannes Strijdom.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (London: Longman, 1983), 151.

When he refused to see the women's representatives, they stacked the petitions outside his office door and marched back to the expansive plaza overlooking the city. The demonstrators, many with babies on their backs, stood silently for thirty minutes and then burst into the song that became emblematic of their movement: "Strijdom, you have tampered with the women, You have struck a rock."<sup>13</sup> Following on the success of the demonstration the Federation planned a massive campaign of civil disobedience in which women would refuse to take out passes, going to prison if necessary to make their point. Although the ANC leadership weighed in against this plan, women's unrest continued to spread. In both the cities and in rural areas, women rallied, sometimes violently, against both passes and schemes to "improve" rural economies (Figure 3).

Prior to the Pretoria demonstration, in 1955, as the South African government intensified its campaign against resistance movements, Baard and women's movement leaders Lilian Ngoyi, Ida Fiyo Mntwana, Bertha Mashaba, and Helen Joseph were among 156 people arrested in the famous Treason Trial, along with Mandela and other antiapartheid campaigners. Although all the defendants were acquitted in 1961, the lengthy ordeal drained the time and energy of the ANC and exhausted the group's resources. Nonetheless, it also strengthened the commitment and solidarity of the defendants. In the words of Helen Joseph, "We led a life within a life and became ever more firmly bound to our organizations and to our common struggle. The effort to turn us from our path had resulted only in a stronger determination to follow it, as almost the whole of the Congress leadership ... sat together, discussed together, planned together for the future."<sup>14</sup>

Once exonerated, Baard continued her trade union and women's organizing until she was rearrested and banned in 1963, at the height of the apartheid government's crackdown on the struggle for democratic rights. Although the Women's Federation was never formally outlawed, most of its leaders were detained, banned, or forced into exile. Under banning orders, individuals were restricted to a particular district, had to report regularly to the police, and were prevented

<sup>13</sup> Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (London: Onyx Press, 1982), 195.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Joseph, *Side by Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986), 63.



**FIGURE 3** Leaders of the Federation of South African Women delivering petitions to government officials at the Union Building in Pretoria on October 27, 1955. Carried by representatives from each of the officially designated racial groups, the petitions outlined women's grievances under apartheid, and particularly their opposition to the extension of the pass laws to African women. This march of 2,000 women was a prelude to the historic march of 20,000 women the following year on August 9, 1956. Pictured from left to right: Rahima Moosa, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, and Sophia Williams-De Bruyn. Source: Jurgen Schadenberg/Getty Images.

from associating with more than one person at a time. They could not be quoted in the press or in any other publication and were prohibited from taking part in political groups or unions. Such orders effectively silenced entire organizations.

Following her arrest, Baard spent a punishing year in solitary confinement, where she was allowed nothing to read and a light was kept on at all times, day and night. When finally taken to court she adamantly denied the lengthy list of charges against her, insisting, "I contravened all this? Rubbish!"<sup>15</sup> At this point, she was returned to prison for another five years. Recalling the ordeal, she was convinced that her interrogators were trying to kill her – but that her strong spirit enabled her to survive.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry, 1900–1980* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 257.

## Kenya: Mau Mau women

Kenyan nationalist leader, Wambui Waiyaki Otieno, was equally tough and resourceful. A rebel from childhood, she described her independent spirit from an early age: “As a Kikuyu and a Christian, I was brought up to be a part of both cultures, yet I rejected many of the restrictions imposed by each.”<sup>16</sup> Living in a colony where a tiny minority of British settlers clung to power, the nationalist movement faced colonial intransigence similar to that in South Africa. This unwillingness to yield power made Kenya one of the few European colonies in Africa, apart from French-ruled Algeria and French Cameroun, where sustained violence accompanied the decolonization process during the 1950s.

Like Ransome-Kuti, Otieno was born into an observant Christian family. Her father was the first African chief inspector of police in Kenya during the 1930s. Raised in a rural area, she was expected, as most girls were, to cultivate her own crops, to herd sheep and goats, to milk cows, and to carry water from a nearby stream while attending school. Living in a community where strong divisions remained between Christian converts and traditionalists – a legacy of the battles over female circumcision during the 1930s – Otieno was constantly teased by her classmates for being uncircumcised. In her life history, she quotes the lyrics of a song that proclaimed the uncircumcised girl as evil and cursed by the ancestors. During the periods when other families celebrated the life stages of their daughters, the children in her family were locked indoors to protect them from these “heathen” songs and dances. A strong student, she completed secondary school and, after several years as a political activist, went on to Tengera College in Arusha, Tanzania where she received a diploma in community development, political science, and leadership.

Despite her Christian upbringing, Otieno chafed at school over the European version of Kenya’s history and the school’s insistence that she adopt a British name. When the British government declared a State of Emergency in October, 1952 to quell a simmering rebellion against colonial rule, she was a sixteen-year-old school girl who felt: “All the contradictions of my Christian upbringing and the cultural bias I experienced in school led me, inevitably, toward the

<sup>16</sup> Wambui Waiyaki Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter: A Life History*, ed. Cora Ann Presley (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 25.



rebellion.”<sup>17</sup> Too young to join her sister and brothers who were studying abroad because of the Emergency, Otieno became more and more drawn into “freedom fighting activities,” which she perceived as “getting rid of colonialists and their black collaborators.”<sup>18</sup> Her commitment involved taking a successive series of oaths that expressed her loyalty to the secret underground segment of the freedom movement. Known as Mau Mau, these combatants were retreating into nearby forests and arming themselves.

By late 1954, so involved in the movement that she could no longer pretend to be leading an ordinary life, Otieno ran away to Nairobi and became a full-time Mau Mau fighter. She enrolled house servants into the freedom struggle, smuggled firearms and information to the forest fighters, and acted as a scout in areas targeted for attack. She observed: “A typical scout was a young, smartly dressed woman ... her working tools included paraphernalia such as wigs, various uniforms, *buibui* (the caftan-like dress and head cover worn by Muslim women), and make-up.”<sup>19</sup> This was an essential job for women in the movement, who had to report on the precise details of each location, including the number of attackers required, the best weapons to use, and where to flee in case of trouble and to regroup. Stressing the danger of these activities, she emphasized, “Scouts lived from day to day, as one wrong move could mean death.”<sup>20</sup> Almost as an aside, she noted the difficulties of raising the three children she had before 1960, with assistance and funding from her fiancé, a nanny, and her mother.

In addition to her underground activities, Otieno became involved in the Nairobi People’s Convention Party (NPCP), which worked closely with Mau Mau by fighting against racial segregation and campaigning for the release of detained leaders, especially the leading nationalist figure, Jomo Kenyatta. She worked with the group’s Women’s Wing that, like the Federation of South African Women, was dedicated to the broader struggle for freedom. Unlike women activists in South Africa, their demands did not specifically include equality for women. They did, however, organize massive demonstrations, sometimes involving as many as 200,000 to 300,000 people from all ethnic groups, demanding land, freedom, and Kenyatta’s release.

<sup>17</sup> Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter*, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter*, 43.



Like the Defiance Campaign in South Africa, members of the NPCP also held what Otieno described as “sit-ins” to desegregate European-only hotels, restaurants, and toilets in Nairobi. She was served with a restriction order for her activities, which limited her movement and obligated her to report daily to the district officer between 8 A.M. and 10 A.M. each day. Under repeated questioning, she refused to disclose information about the struggle. She was also detained in the coastal town of Lamu, where she was raped several times by an officer who was interrogating her. Reporting his words after these multiple assaults, she said, “He then told me that he had given me a baby girl. He ... said that impregnating me was a decision of the British government. They hoped that Mau Mau would either kill me or hate me for having a white man’s child.”<sup>21</sup> When the State of Emergency was ended in late 1959, the NPCP was folded into the new political party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and Otieno became head of its Women’s Wing.

Armed struggle and its consequences also opened up space for challenges to accepted ideas about men’s and women’s social roles. For those who took up arms against the colonial government as forest fighters, relations between women and men became critical to how they organized daily life in an isolated environment. Steeped in Western Christian ideologies of family life, the more literate group, who called themselves the Kenya Parliament, enforced monogamous marriage and a traditional gender division of labor, under which women cooked and gathered firewood regardless of their rank. Less educated and less hierarchical, the Kenya Riigi men and women fought side by side, spurning marriage along with a customary division of labor. Their debates about military strategy – particularly about whether African women and children who opposed Mau Mau should be killed – also challenged them to hone their ideas about the differences between women and men, particularly in relation to women’s maternal roles. For fighters who were captured and detained in sex-segregated prison camps, some men were forced into doing “women’s work” such as cooking, while some women were pressed into building roads and quarrying rocks.

Otieno’s harsh treatment was part of a history of brutal suppression of the uprising by British forces and their African allies in the Home Guards. By the time the State of Emergency was lifted in 1960,

<sup>21</sup> Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter*, 83.

between 80,000 and 100,000 Kikuyu had been imprisoned in concentration camps, more than a million civilians had been forcibly moved to “protected villages” to separate them from the forest fighters, and about 11,500 suspected Mau Mau were killed, 1,000 of them hanged. For the women left behind, life was very difficult. Muthoni Likimani, a Kenyan writer whose fictionalized account was based on extensive interviews with women, explained:

The British gave an order to demolish the homes and to build huts in one camp so that they could guard the Kenyans every movement. The women in the camps were being beaten up, raped, harassed, and overworked at the forced communal labour. Yet, they made sure that all the gardens were weeded and growing food ... One really remarkable thing that Mau Mau women did was to continue to educate their children. Women would collect money and do all they could to smuggle the brightest children out of Kenya to study overseas. They would smuggle them through Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt. The women did so with the hope that their children would come home to be the future leaders of their government. And sure enough, they did.<sup>22</sup>

According to Otieno’s life history, which she related to historian Cora Ann Presley, many women took part in the oath-taking ceremonies that created bonds to the Mau Mau freedom fighters. Smaller numbers joined the armed guerrilla forces in the forests surrounding the Kikuyu reserves – the areas of land allocated to African communities under British rule. But women sympathizers were critical to maintaining the supply lines that funneled food, information, medicine, and weapons from the towns and reserves into the forests. These tasks were vital to sustaining the guerrilla movement.

### Guinea: challenging men to “wear the pants”

In French West Africa, the dominant nationalist party, the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA) [African Democratic Rally] had separate branches in each of the eight countries that comprised the Federation of French West Africa. Although women were not involved in the

<sup>22</sup> Muthoni Likimani, speaking with Teresa E. Turner and Teena Jo Neal, New York, May 22, 1993, in Teresa Turner, Foreword, *Mau Mau Women*, [www.uoguelph.ca/~terisatu/MauMau](http://www.uoguelph.ca/~terisatu/MauMau).

party's founding in 1946, in Guinea they played a crucial role in sustaining a seventy-day general strike in 1953. This action led the male RDA leaders to enlist them in the nationalist movement and encourage them to use their own networks and organizations to mobilize new members.

Like their counterparts in Tanzania, most of the grassroots women activists in Guinea were Muslim, earning their livelihoods as market traders, cloth dyers, and seamstresses. Political organizing was taxing, often requiring women to act in ways that violated accepted behavior by speaking in public and leaving their families to travel unescorted in the countryside. Yet they became engaged in the struggle for independence because colonial policies interfered with their ability to sustain their families. Unlike many African political parties of the period, the RDA in Guinea encouraged women's involvement, putting forth practical demands that might improve women's lives in tangible ways. These ideas included adding rations of rice to workers' wages, encouraging the use of charcoal for cooking fires to reduce the burden of collecting firewood, and advocating for the construction of public water taps in the capital city of Conakry. The party also called for paid maternity leave, increased educational opportunities for girls as well as boys, and expanded medical facilities, including maternity clinics.

As in Tanzania (and unlike Nigeria) women's initial involvement came from the party leaders; but they soon mobilized themselves independently to support both their own grassroots interests and the nationalist project. Unlike Tanzania, however, Guinean women's associations in the 1940s tended to be ethnically exclusive, although their ethos of mutual support helped them to transcend these boundaries.

With long-established social and cultural networks as the basis of their mobilization, women activists in Guinea also were able to promote their organizational efforts by circulating information quickly at markets and public water taps. Just as Kenyan women became valuable couriers for the Mau Mau insurgents (as did women in Algeria), Guinean women used their networks to sell RDA membership cards, which they hid in their headscarves and under their armpits, covered with long, flowing clothing. They also sold party newspapers, distributed tracts, posted announcements of meetings, and gathered intelligence as they went about their daily lives. In addition, a few women formed violent "shock troops" in the large cities that fought against opposition members.

Since few women were literate, songs became an essential tool for mobilizing them and others who were unable to read party material or newspapers. After the colonial authorities rigged the elections in 1954, women sang at the markets that the other party had stolen the votes; by the time the results were announced, everyone knew the election had been manipulated. Like the Igbo women in 1929, their songs were often sexually suggestive, mocking and shaming the opposition and ridiculing men who refused to join the RDA. Women composed these songs spontaneously and then sang them in the market in teams. Men who refused to join them were considered to be "behaving like women."<sup>23</sup> Women also taunted such men by comparing them unfavorably to nationalist leader Sékou Touré, challenging them to wear their pants. After the falsified elections, women paraded across the capital city of Conakry chanting the praises of Touré and singing songs that characterized his rival as a "dog" and uncircumcised, the worst insult to an adult man. Unlike Ransome-Kuti in Nigeria, these women firmly believed that men should "wear the pants," with women showing courage and initiative only if men refused to do so.

As in most nationalist movements, women's active participation could lead to domestic tension and open clashes. While some husbands supported their wives' political activities, others strongly opposed this challenge to their control over their wives. These disputes led to increases in wife-beating and divorce; men taking additional, more subservient, wives; and misrepresentations of the RDA as a refuge for prostitutes, divorced women, and loose women. But these accusations did not deter most women, some of whom threatened to refuse to have sexual relationships with husbands who would not join the party.

Yet, as historian Elizabeth Schmidt concludes, women took on traditionally male roles during the independence struggle because of unusual circumstances that thwarted their ability to fulfill their obligations to their families. In the end, however, they sought to recreate a society that allowed them to resume their accepted positions as mothers, traders, and caretakers, not to challenge social practices that accepted women's inferiority and inequality.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Schmidt, "‘Emancipate Your Husbands!’ Women and Nationalism in Guinea, 1953–1958," in *Women in Colonial African Histories*, eds Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 288.

## Cameroon: petitioning for freedom

In Cameroon, like Tanzania a former German colony ruled as a United Nations mandate, the main nationalist group, the UPC, Union des populations du Cameroun (Union of the Peoples of Cameroon) was a leftist party with a revolutionary ideology. Inclusive in its membership, the UPC spanned class, ethnic, and regional boundaries and embraced women as equal partners in the struggle for independence. It also sought to merge the British- and French-ruled parts of the country. With ties to international anti-imperialist organizations, Cameroonian women followed the path of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and came under the influence of WIDF, the Women's International Democratic Federation. In 1951, after accepting an invitation to travel to Vienna to take part in planning a conference on the rights of children, women founded their own organization, the Union démocratique des femmes camerounaises (Democratic Union of Cameroonian Women, the UDEFEC). They also joined with the UPC to launch the Écoles des Cadres, a school to train a new generation of administrators and civil servants.

In the course of the independence struggle, which turned violent in 1955, women leaders remained on an equal footing with men, aggressively voicing their concerns internationally through the thousands of petitions they sent to the United Nations Trusteeship Council. Many of their grievances concerned the ways that colonial policies had restricted women's economic independence and, by encouraging male migration, disrupted fertility patterns. Rural women, seeking to restore control over the fertility of the land, sought the right to grow coffee and to be given agricultural machinery. In the Grassfields region, where women were the primary farmers, they relied on established village associations known as *fombuen* or *anlu* to take more militant action. By digging up roads and planting them with crops women activists could block French troops and military vehicles, while also by-passing traditional constraints on where to plant their fields.

As the movement expanded in the countryside and larger numbers of men disappeared (whether exiled, in hiding, or in prison), fears about women's fertility transformed into more general alarm about Western biomedicine and rumors of campaigns to defeat nationalism by harming babies and expectant mothers. Although earlier in the struggle women's leaders had pressed for the expansion of prenatal care and birthing clinics, they now began to refuse treatment

at European medical facilities, to distrust injections, and to perceive doctors as sources of infection. As violence escalated in French-ruled parts of the country and stories of rape and torture of women escalated, so did heightened fears about a colonial project to exterminate nationalist supporters. Gradually, UDEFEC members came to see both European administrations and missions as sources of ill health, infertility, and death. In this view, independence would restore abundance and well-being to society.

In Cameroon, as elsewhere, women identified as mothers and wives in ways that empowered them to play a full role in ending colonial rule. More than in many other nationalist struggles, however, they were both active and independent in relating to their male counterparts. This difference resulted, in part, from the revolutionary ideology of the UPC that envisaged dramatic social and political change as a result of independence. In the course of the struggle women also politicized issues of agricultural and reproductive fertility and began to reclaim motherhood and birthing practices as acts of resistance to colonial rule. In the opinion of historian Meredith Terretta, for the neocolonial government that took office in 1960, excluding women from government was integral to staunching the radical social and economic change that the UPC and the UDEFEC had envisaged.

## Conclusion

The involvement of some educated women in nationalist struggles followed the standard narrative of independence movements – that elite Africans facing the strictures of colonial society and government (such as Ransome-Kuti or Waiyaki Otieno) rebelled in order to create political systems in which they could move into privileged positions in place of Europeans. But taking women into account expands and counters this top-down view of decolonization to include peasant women, traders, domestic and factory workers, and members of dance societies and village associations. Their mobilization and leadership challenges narrow male-oriented narratives of African nationalism in the 1940 and 1950s as a call for self-government by a small elite class. Rather, the movements that engaged women were popular protests, often risky, that supported nationalist struggles to express women's hopes of a better life for themselves and their families. Though women's equality was rarely the primary concern of women activists, in

Nigeria, the conservatism of northern politicians prompted a call for women's suffrage and one of the country's most prominent nationalist leaders, Ransome-Kuti, identified herself as a feminist. Cameroonian nationalists embraced a revolutionary ideology that treated women as equals. In South Africa, a broad-based multiracial women's organization issued a wide-ranging Women's Charter calling for gender equality, although since all blacks were disenfranchised, African women were most concerned with ending apartheid pass laws that were destroying family life.

By the mid 1960s, the nationalist phase of Africa's history had concluded for most of the continent and a majority of countries began a new period of self-government, with more or less interference by former colonial powers. Yet just as some European historians have posed the question "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" historians of Africa may justifiably ask whether and how "independence" applied to African women. To what extent did women attain greater power over their own lives in these newly independent countries; how did norms and expectations change to reflect women's contributions to the struggles for independence; and how did the pervasive ideologies of motherhood and domesticity affect their political participation in a new era? Adding another dimension to women's politics, the events of this period included not only newly installed African governments, but also continuing struggles for liberation in white settler societies and Portuguese colonies and the emergence of a strong transnational women's movement.