

Spring 2001

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Recommended Citation

Amadiume, Ifi (2001) "African Women: Voicing Feminisms and Democratic Futures," *Macalester International*: Vol. 10, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol10/iss1/9>

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African Women: Voicing Feminisms and Democratic Futures

Ifi Amadiume

*T*he need to support the cause of feminism and social justice in Africa has never been stronger than it is under the present condition of chronic neocolonialism. News about modern Africa today should inspire rage and a desire for revolution, for the sheer enormity of perceived chaos—wars, ethnic violence, famine, poverty, abuse of women and girls, high infant mortality, epidemics of HIV infection, AIDS, corruption of politicians and governments!

Are these necessarily new maladies or the lingering effects of a long history of negative chain reactions from earlier external violations and exploitations? Africa has continued to suffer maldevelopment throughout the past millennium under Christian mission and Islamic imperialism, and the Arab trans-Saharan and European trans-Atlantic trade in humans. Imperialism was intensified during the European scramble for Africa in the late 19th century that culminated in colonial conquest and rule in the 20th century. Now, the continent is bearing the burden of neocolonialist exploitation by global multinationals and financial institutions. This is the context of African women's presence in international feminisms.

On the one hand, Africans are told to eliminate Western neocolonial hold on the economies, cultures, and governments of their various countries. Africans are told to do away with the arbitrary colonial maps that did not respect African language, ethnic, cultural group, or natural boundaries. Yet, at the same time, there are powerful international agencies, such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), insisting on regulating Africa's development.

There is also a continued Western economic involvement in the form of banking, investment capital, and military personnel and the supply of weapons of mass destruction. Who, then, is ruling these African nations that are supposed to be independent and sovereign? African states seem no longer able to function without one form of intervention or the other. I argue that, at the national level, the picture presented looks bleak. Not so, though, inside the communities, at the grassroots, where there are alternative systems and voices which give hope, but are marginalized. Our culture wars are also taking place in the communities. This is where women's voices are strong and enduring. What are women's conditions? What are women's concerns? Where are the voices for feminism and social justice?

I want to look at different areas in which African women are expressing views about women's conditions and rights, and feminist discourses about these rights. Because women are essential to the progress of their societies and Africa's future, it is important to understand the nature of discrimination and injustice against women in various countries of Africa. It is equally important that we acknowledge differences in women's conditions and concerns. I argue that African women can and do speak their conditions, needs, and rights, and have played an important role in the cause of social justice. African women's conditions and concerns got onto the agenda of national and international institutions and agencies due to real sacrifices and bravery of African women themselves acting as feminists, even if not quite identifying themselves as such. I am therefore saying that if we take a historical and comparative cultural perspective, there can be no monopoly on feminism! The first part of my presentation will focus on contesting feminisms and the second part on women, culture, and development. I shall conclude by examining the question of women and leadership.

II. Voicing Contesting Feminisms

General areas of concern about African women have multiplied since the 1960s to include political emancipation; education and training; economic empowerment; problems of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs); women's access to better jobs; women's easier access to credit for income generating businesses or purchase of land or property; women and health, which highlights women's need for access to health services, particularly reproductive and sexual health; environ-

ment and health; women and the state — the question of war, violations, repression, and state violence; women and politics — the question of leadership and political participation; women and rights and social justice — that is policy, legal reform, and concrete actions to empower women; and so on. You can never completely exhaust the demands for rights, not because women are greedy, but because women are as diverse as societies themselves and therefore women's conditions and needs are equally complex. We can see this from the diversity of backgrounds and cultures from which we speak.

From a comparative viewpoint, I beg to differ with the school of postcolonial discourse that insists that the colonized native woman cannot speak because the colonizer men and colonized men are "legitimizing each other" to produce a patriarchal biased text, and that we cannot know the mind of the local woman.¹ In my work, I find that native women speak a lot; and more important, they know their minds and the minds of women in a sisterhood based on women's solidarity. I want to therefore argue that, on the contrary, it is modern new generation women and girls as consumers of imported global cultures who do not speak. They mime and are afflicted by hybridity, which is a more Africanist postcolonialist criticism, following the political philosophy of Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral and the Afrocentric perspective of Cheikh Anta Diop, all of whom fought for a cultural liberation that is independent of imperialism.

I will illustrate some of the voices, issues, conflicts, and tensions in feminist discourse in Africa from different types of texts and perspectives that include anthropology, documentary film, and fiction. All the texts are about African women, but contain voices of diverse women, African and European. We can assume that these women are feminists and are concerned with feminist issues and the advancement of the conditions and rights of African women.

Women in Ghana, West Africa, not only have a deep history of strong women in political struggles, they also have a long heritage of matriarchy in women's economic and cultural systems. More recently, however, not only women and girls in Ghana, but all women in Africa, share the story of a famous Ashanti woman called Yaa Asantewa, who led the fight against British colonialism in 1901, in the first year of the last century. What was the matriarchal heritage and women's system that empowered Yaa Asantewa? Like most West African women, Ashanti women have always been farmers, traders, and politically active citizens, controlling a network of market systems, including one

of the largest markets in Africa, Kumasi market. It has a daily trading population that ranges between 15,000 and 70,000.

In a more recent study, Gracia Clark described the women's organizational system used to run these markets. Where there is organization, there is a culture. Ashanti culture is said to be matrilineal, based on an ideological principle of common blood, *mogyaa*, which is transmitted by the mother via pregnancy and birth.² So central are women in the Ashanti notion of continuity that their proverb says, "*wo maame wuu aa, na w'abusua asa*" (when your mother dies, your lineage is finished).³ I have shown that similar matrifocal ideologies are true of many African communities.⁴ In Ashanti society, women can step into the role of lineage elder, *abusua panin*, which males usually occupy, but men cannot step into the role of female elder, *obaa panin*. Clark, like other writers on the Ashanti, explains this in terms of the genealogical primacy of women; the lineage dies if the mother dies.⁵ Can African feminism capitalize on this positive heritage for Africa's own development?

The Ashanti are not inflexible to change as there are cultural and modern organizational influences on patterns of market leadership; for example, the positions of female chief (*ohemma*) and male chief (*ohene*) and elder (*opanyin*) have origins in neighboring Akan culture. Ashanti women dominate the vegetable market through the *ohemma* structure of leadership, as for example, Yam Queen or Tomato Queen. All are subject to the leadership of the group senior council (*ahemmafo*). The market has adopted a similar system to town queens — *Asantehemma*, headed by the Queen Mother who nominates the Ashanti king. A good market leader has qualities such as maturity, patience, and fairness in dispute settlement; success and wealth; and she is an effective and gifted speaker.⁶

Although these powerful African women are experiencing changes under the modern state and the world system, they are holding their own by retaining and moderating their women's organizational systems and cultures. In my work, I have described in detail similar women's organizations and a matriarchal culture that have given women economic and political power in Igbo societies in Nigeria. This is one perspective on African feminism.

There is a different story of African women in a documentary, *Ashanti Market Women*, made by a white British woman, Mariam Margolyes, in 1982, which illustrates the kind of feminist savior mentality that has antagonized African feminists. The perspective of this film

assumes the backwardness and subordination of African women. It is wrong to state that men are polygamous among the Ashanti, that women are subordinate to them in all domestic matters, and that women are powerful only in the marketplace. Mariam Margolyes is using the perspective of a European patriarchal, patrilocal, monogamous nuclear family to understand Ashanti marriage and affinal relations. It is an ethnocentric reading of matrilineal households. How can she say that these women are economically strong, politically powerful, but subservient in the domestic scene? She is obviously misreading women who are in reality independent. No matter how powerful Ashanti women are, for Margolyes and Western feminism, they are not—because they are in polygamous marriages. Margolyes assumes that European culture has a monopoly to define marriage as sex-based and sex to mean romance. One woman's experience of a bad marriage becomes the typical! Her methodology is faulty because she learns about sexual regulations and social norms from the men and not the women. She uses men to state customs and even women's feelings.

In spite of the struggle by African women activists, scholars, and writers for feminism, geopolitical and class divides mean that we are faced with conflicts, contradictions, and fragmentation. Often, we have to confront situations in which white women and elite African women are pursuing their self-interest, while speaking for black, rural, lower class, and peasant African women. Several emotions and conflicts converge over issues involving individual freedoms, the collective freedoms and destiny of African communities, the tensions, the alienation, and the exiles suffered in the journey for feminism. Some of this fragmentation can be traced back to the conflicts between native cultures and the patriarchal conservative colonial cultures that were imposed on Africans through education, religion, law, and the state.

In elite African women's feminism, customary cultural institutions, especially marriage, are seen as backward and become a burden or a prison leading to a nervous condition.⁷ It would appear that a new freedom in transnational mobility, without the traditional kinship system, has perhaps become a fundamental sacrifice for feminism. Those who speak for African women have spatially or conceptually moved into more Westernized postcolonial patriarchal spaces and locations.

Margolyes lives and thinks from a patriarchal circumscribed space and thus fails to relate differently to Ashanti women — matriarchs whose natal homes are their homes for life; whose strong ties are with their mothers and children and who pass on their earned trading posi-

tions and titles to their daughters; market queens who control all important commodities like yams, plantains, and tomatoes. Yet these women are patient and compassionate. The Tomato Queen says, "We work hard for the sake of our children, to feed them and educate them. When I die my daughter will take my place." She thus restates Ashanti matriarchy. This reflects the postcolonial Ashanti of the 1970s and 80s where over 60 percent are Christian, but they still participate in traditional African ceremonies and rituals. The market queens have succeeded in carrying their powerful African traditions into postcolonial Africa. They speak through Ashanti values. But what of their daughters?

Margolyes had a chat with a few schoolgirls who do not like polygamy, do not want to serve a man, and think that men should do housework. Good for them, you would say! Yes, yes, yes! Here, then, is the contradiction. Their counterparts, the educated men, now resent women's domination of the economic life of the region through their control of the markets. Governments now attack the matriarchs and insist on these women paying tax. But on the other hand, these women that are so versed in politics have responded by hoarding goods to subvert government attempts to disempower them. What can the individualistic, professionally oriented daughters hoard to resist a government? While their grandmothers fought for female solidarity based on economic power, the daughters appear to be fighting wars of sex and romance! They are atomized and are hardly involved in Trade Union politics.

In traditional Nnobi Igbo society, women believe in the passing on of ideas, material wealth, and power from the Goddess Idemili to her daughters and to women.⁸ Similarly, Ashanti matriarchs are concerned about the future role and importance of girl children right from birth, and ritually resource them with material wealth, messages, and ideas for future success. From age three, girls start accompanying their mothers to market, so that preschool girls are still under the charge of the matriarchs. At school, they can still learn about their heroines, such as Yaa Asantewa, and still do housework, which is seen as helping their mothers. But the higher education they get, the more they turn away from traditional ways and, it would seem, begin to desire "whiteness."

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* tells the story of three generations of women: Nana, Esi's grandmother; Ena, Esi's mother; and Ogyaanowa, Esi's daughter. Ata Aidoo proposes in this novel that monogamy is not

such a bed of roses. She subverts the attack on polygamy by presenting a new type of protagonist. Esi Sekyi, a data analyst from the Department of Urban Statistics, is an educated professional woman who makes a rational choice of polygamy and a husband with whom she is emotionally and romantically involved. Ata Aidoo presents a generational difference in women in Ghana. Nana, Esi's grandmother, tells Esi not to marry for love, but to marry a man who loves her more than she loves him. Then there is Esi's mother with whom Esi cannot have the closeness and solidarity that her mother shares with her own mother. Esi thinks that because she was sent to a boarding school and had a Western education, she was messed up. Yet, Esi's daughter is going through the same educational institutions that African women writers, in a sort of upside down feminism, are increasingly faulting as isolating and alienating.

African women writers seem to be coming to the end of their enchantment with colonial and Christianity-enforced ideal notions of the emancipated woman as the educated, professional, and monogamous modern woman. As modern African women have come into these new powers, they have had to face the limitations imposed in these new European-derived cultures of the Western world where power is linked to traditional male roles and women in the home are seen as subservient. Colonial education and its postcolonial continuation socialize students into inferiority, hence, lots of these problems are those of the middle classes. The less Westernized African women are, it seems, the more self-assured. On the other hand, locked in a colonialist logic, the Western world and Western feminism continue to equate African traditional cultures with powerlessness. This is a problem even in countries that had fought an ideological liberation war.

Udju Azul Di Yonta (Portuguese for *The Blue Eyes of Yonta*), Flora Gomes' brilliant film, analyzes post-revolution corruption in one of Africa's most idealistic revolutions in the late 1960s and 70s, the revolution in Guinea-Bissau that was championed by Amilcar Cabral. These later revolutions placed the woman question on their agenda. What, then, became of the daughters following great sacrifices made by their mothers? In Gomes' film, Vicenté is remembered as a great soldier who fought the Portuguese colonizers. For Vicenté, the post-colonial weapon is now memory, therefore memory is important to him. This explains why lessons in political history were still being taught in class. But Vicenté is seen as a dreamer who cannot accept that things have changed. He fears modernity, represented in this film as a

vulture. The revolution had fought for good roads, electricity, and housing, all of which have not been available to old comrades who fought the war, but only to a corrupt new elite.

While Vicenté dwells on the logic of the past, the young and beautiful girl Yonta, as daughter of s/heroes of the revolution, insists on choice. Yes, she says, the young also respect the past, but cannot live in it. Yonta spits out the bitter truth, "It's not my fault if your ideals are spoiled. I want to be free to choose—isn't that what you fought for?" Yet, what is this choice that young Yonta is claiming? European fashion, music, rich men, and the blue eyes in a poem from a secret lover! Can one argue a generational gap? A loss of ideals? Or a feminist argument that insists that Yonta has the right to any kind of choice and voice? Is this really freedom or loss of hope in postcolonial Africa due to uncontrolled forces of free market capitalism? Symbolically, time stops on Yonta's fat watch worn like a belt around her waist, at precisely the moment that her secret admirer, Zé, reveals himself and takes back his love letter. It turns out Zé was an unemployed young man who became Vicenté's driver. Class, then, seems even more significant to fashionable modernists insisting on their personal wants and desires.

A. History and Feminisms in Africa

These stories may seem separate in time and place, but they speak an interconnected, long history of women and feminisms in Africa. We now hear more the voices and see more the faces of elite women through whom Europe has reinscribed itself in Africa. Yet behind these new voices and faces, the legacies of precolonial, matriarchal Africa remain a strong contending force. In spite of the invisibility and voicelessness of African women's great achievements in world history, the geographical spread of these women leaders and their chronological historical developments tell a different story. The varied lives of these women remain crucial to our understanding of differences in the roles of women in precolonial Africa. Not surprisingly, a few such women have come to be known through negative representations of powerful nationalist women. For example, the most famous Queen of Hausaland, Queen Aminatu of Zazzau, who reigned in the sixteenth century, was demonized by the Arab invaders. So, too, was Queen Nzinga of Angola, who ruled in the seventeenth century, demonized by the Europeans.⁹

Queen Amina's rule followed a dynasty of seventeen queens. The myth that vilifies Queen Amina can, in fact, be interpreted as the myth of the origins of patriarchy in Hausaland. The political economy of her time can be contextualized in sixteenth-century regional trade and the trans-Saharan slave trade. The great African scholar Cheikh Anta Diop recorded that an Arab method of conquest of nations in Africa was by marrying local queens because succession and inheritance ran through the mother.¹⁰ It is not surprising that Queen Amina refused to marry. We have records of tales of her passion and lovers, real and imagined!

Similarly, the sociopolitical context of Queen Nzinga's rule is European Mission Christianity, slavery, and corruption of the morals of local rulers. Nzinga played a diplomatic role in negotiating a settlement with the conquering Portuguese, which committed her people as allies in the slave trade. Her conversion to Christianity was political as she used it to recover her people's lands from the Portuguese. The source of the legend of "Nzinga, the Cannibal Queen" was fostered by the Portuguese, her enemies! Nzinga ensured female succession to her rule. In sixteenth and seventeenth century Africa, these women did not call themselves feminists, but no doubt their lives were feminist. Were they living today, they would be perceived as such. These more controversial characters are important for our understanding of women's roles and contributions in precolonial African history.

The tendency is to trace feminism in Africa from modern elite women, but the great matriarchs provide a continuum to avoid dislocation. They were strong and determined African women who also fought patriarchal oppression. Their legacies were picked up by pioneer African feminists who equally have been combative and creative, as for example Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's critical and activist writing on gender and class issues,¹¹ and Filomina Chioma Steady on African feminism.¹² The matriarchs constructed a women's unity based on the strong solidarity of women bound by shared kinship, descent, economics, and women's culture. This is still the context of the lives of village women whose voices are drowned by elite women of the metropolis facing a new problem that their grandmothers did not have to deal with. It is the problem of seeing women as enemies, the problem of fragments.

While Stephanie Udang has been consistent in pointing out that the double oppression of women is colonialism and African men,¹³ Ogundipe-Leslie proposes that there are six mountains on an African woman: colonialism, traditional structures, backwardness, man, race,

and herself—that is, women against women.¹⁴ Today, women do not share easy sisterhoods due to the divides of race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. This came to the fore at the international level in the 1970s, which saw disagreements on issues of race, class, and gender. When sexuality got onto the feminist agenda, you would have thought that it would be a unifying force. But it created more divides because it detracted from the focus on economic empowerment of poor women of the South, and too much attention was paid to African women in matters of sex (that have not abated) as the spotlight focused on polygamy, female circumcision, and reproductive rights.

Tensions of the 1970s even led to African women and diasporic African women rejecting the term *feminism*, as they argued that feminism is a reference to white middle class women and not inclusive of other experiences of women and class. It has come to be seen as a dirty word with negative connotations because of its focus on differences with men only, and not about relations between women. Black women argued that “womanism,” after Alice Walker’s term, is more inclusive of people, with a focus on differences between women themselves. In my view, this was an easy cop out by women who write feminism but say that they are not feminists but womanists.

Even though there are historical and cultural reasons why African women differently negotiate their positions in feminism, their experiences are still complex, involving intersections of race, class, gender, nations, cultures, and ethnicities. African women’s experiences extend to the diaspora. As African women have gained voice through feminism, they have also educated the public about this complexity of identity through the explanation of roots and cultural heritage. African women and African diasporic women have critiqued negative historical and media images of women of African heritage. They have successfully turned a commoditized body misrepresentation into a celebration of African expressiveness of body and sexuality in spontaneity and loudness, speaking through Maya Angelou’s “I Rise from a Past Rooted in Pain.”¹⁵

African diasporic women continue to struggle against race, class, and sexual oppressions that silence black women—by defining themselves and educating others about who they are. They have been most effective when their voices are direct and not mediated through racist patriarchal theories that are originated by men. This is one of the reasons for the womanist separation from feminist discourse. Alice Walker saw the need to recover women’s knowledges by reclaiming

black geniuses not only for the present, but for future generations.¹⁶ Toni Morrison goes a step farther to argue through her classic novel *Beloved* that the past does not disappear when there has been a colossal injustice such as slavery. Suppressed knowledges do not feature simply as intellectual traditions, there is a vengeance and resistance dimension to the politics of the past.

As we can see, the past remains a force in the present, but postmodernist feminists would have us believe that all that is authentic is the present.

III: Women, Culture, and Development

In most international feminist discourse about Africa, traditional African cultures stand for backwardness, barbarity, and powerlessness, while Western culture is seen as liberation. Yet, the same patriarchal Western culture is what feminism is supposed to be opposing.

Amilcar Cabral correctly saw the most serious mistake of the colonial powers as the underestimation of the strength of the culture of the African peoples.¹⁷ National liberation is thus “an act of culture” since imperialism is cultural oppression. Sexism is the oppression of women, and patriarchy is equally cultural oppression. The positive strengths of precolonial African cultures and societies, that had potential for Africa’s balanced development, were ignored or rejected due to the forced imposition of new states by imperial colonialism. There is a disjunction between indigenous histories and new cultures, and this is marked by Western metropolis, urban cosmopolitan, and local rural divides. International designs, national identity, and national events become the subject history to the exclusion of rural cultures and women’s knowledge systems. Such a violation of rights and denial of meaningful participatory citizenship have resulted in a destabilizing national bias in development planning, and women are suffering the most.

The logic of fiscal intervention that was adopted in Africa in the 1980s again took on this national bias. This was opposed to the self-reliant, pro-rural perspective of the 1970s, which focused on agrarian and agro-industrial development — a development that was truly based on land resources and labor and not simply on the mining and selling of things like crude oil or diamonds. The story of this economic centralization and the domination of a mono-economy parallels the generational shift of power from market women to national women’s

organizations and more educated young women professionals. This shift of power was at the expense of rural women, the guardians of the matriarchal past (therefore, the very seat of African women's heritage).

Is it a contradiction that, as an elite feminist, I should be concerned about this growing shift of focus from community or grassroots-articulated issues to the dominating voice of elite women, whether national or international? I do not think that there is a contradiction. All I am saying is that since African women do speak loud and clear, we know their needs, and there are mobilizations and organizations around these needs, raising concerns about who is appropriating local voices and the implications of the shift from a grassroots, community-articulated focus to professional leadership imposed from above. I have argued that these new processes have led to the commoditization of women and development and its standardization through global women's conferences. Women's development as issues and goals has become repetitive in a fixed global language and discourse controlled by paid UN aid and financial agencies, gender advisors, consultants, and rights workers.¹⁸

A. African Women's Present Concerns

The diversity in African feminism means that women of different classes, religions, and political persuasions are making different demands and campaigning on different issues. However, the single most significant issue affecting African women is gender asymmetry due to externally derived economic development. The development plans of African states, because they are decided abroad, can only be seen as a continuation of the colonial policy of foreign intervention in state economic planning and budget allocation. An example is the role of the World Bank and the international development agencies. These institutions have had a negative effect on local communities and on gender relations. Sexist economic development strategies, public policies, and development projects have taken men as the central focus of development, enlisting female labor and production under male headship, and upsetting traditional systems of gender complementarity and cooperation. African women are concerned about the negative effects of this patriarchal path to development.

More especially, in current agricultural policies, there has been a failure of development planners to recognize areas of women's work, their important economic contribution, and the high percentage of

women-headed households. Development, rather than generating and supporting self-help initiatives, became aid-dependent projects, thereby dealing a serious blow to African women's independent efforts toward gender equality and a better life for all.

African women have suffered most under the conditions of economic stagnation, cyclical debt crisis, and the crisis management mentality of Structural Adjustment Programs. All these put constraints on the normal economic and social activities of women as food providers and caregivers for their households, and as active participants in the development of their countries. In the areas of health, nutrition, education and training, economic opportunities, and participation in decision-making, the inequality between men and women has worsened due to these so-called corrective policy measures. Yet, several United Nations reports have recommended improvement in women's technical skill, education and training in science and technology, and supportive policy and legal measures. Education of girls remains an area of great concern.

Education for African women is a question of rights. There is a significant association between poverty, illiteracy, the low status of women, and "harmful" cultural practices, such as child marriage and genital rituals. Local opinions for solutions propose such things as the educational awareness of the entire community, with the active involvement of local professionals, local leaders, and women's groups, not just the sentimental concerns of "outsiders." Men also need to be educated about women's changing needs and concerns in their respective communities.

Local rural and poor peasant women are better served on their expressed concerns by locally designed projects and small group literacy classes. We also must adopt a holistic, multi-issue approach and recognize the economic and social dimensions to African women's economic, social, and health problems. African women of all classes suffer from stress and health hazards as they juggle time, money, work, family, and service to their communities. Like women everywhere, African women essentially need business capital, education and skills training, equal pay and benefits, childcare, healthcare, community care provision for dependents, and flexible work time for those in the public sector.

African women also suffer domestic and state violence. In their submission to the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995, human rights groups, such as Amnesty International, were correct to insist on the

universality and indivisibility of human rights, and that words must result in action in a real, practical sense. African women are the main victims of gross human rights violations and abuses. Recent years have seen devastating armed conflict in African countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and so on. Hundreds of villages have been destroyed, and many Africans are internally displaced or refugees in neighboring countries. Eighty percent of the world's 18 million refugee population (14.4 million) are from Africa; 75 percent of all refugees (13.5 million) are women and children; and 75 percent of all African refugees are women (10.8 million). Women and children have suffered rape, torture, murder, and genocide.

Civil rights are guarantors of peace, development, and social justice. We need to look inward and utilize traditionally tested methods of peacemaking under the leadership of the locally recognized authorities who will accept the involvement of women in mediation processes. The proof of good government is in the ability to facilitate broad consultations, promote civil participation, and enforce reforms of national laws and policing, judicial systems, and systems of criminal justice. The ultimate test is in seeing fewer and fewer human rights violations against women and other disadvantaged social groups.

Islamic women's organizations have raised issues concerning marriage and polygamy, generally demanding that the marriage age for girls be increased from 15 to 18 years. They have also campaigned against discriminatory criminal laws, divorce laws, nonpayment of alimony, child custody, passport restrictions for women, and honor killing, which allows men to kill females who bring "shame" to their families. Islamic feminists see this law as a cover-up for child, sister, and wife abuse within the family, often protecting the abuser, not the victim.

The demands by grassroots women themselves are usually quite practical because they are based on needs. They generally have asked for favorable government policies to enable women to secure better jobs. Women have demanded access to credit for income generation such as credit to start a business or to purchase a house or acquire land. Sometimes rural women have formed cooperatives or women's banks in order to rotate business or trade capital. African women resort to self-reliance and self-sufficiency, if left to these decisions.

The Beijing 1995 Fourth UN World Conference on Women, through its Plan of Action document, demanded that policymakers and gov-

ernments seriously address and take action on specific women's issues. The Platform for Action focused on a dozen main areas of concern, which include issues such as women in poverty, global economics, women's human rights, violence against women, political and economic participation, and access to health care and education. The less privileged women were concerned with the evils of SAPs, the unequal global economic order, and basic needs like the right to land, citizenship, clean water, food and shelter, education, and primary healthcare. These are all areas in which African women have suffered under Structural Adjustment Programs.

B. African Women under Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-instituted SAPs are breeding poverty and forcing maldevelopment on African women. Opponents to SAPs have demanded increased participation at the grassroots, and the engagement of poor women in meaningful policy dialogue about money and economic matters. They have recommended gender inclusive strategies that would involve women in project design and incorporate an accurate understanding of women and the poor, including gender and intra-household differences in production, consumption, access to resources, and responsibilities. Women should be recognized as agents of development, and the kinds of work that they provide, visible or hidden, should be taken into account in economic research, national accounts, and planning. All this is dependent on a good government—on a true democracy.

For the World Bank and the IMF, democracy in Africa means financial budgeting and the free market. For African women, democracy means increased accountability, transparency, and openness to citizens. This is the solution to corruption, mismanagement, and non-representation in government. African women are in favor of debt cancellation and an end to SAPs. Women, children, and the African masses as a whole should not continue to suffer endlessly since they never benefited from the programs and investments that were financed by the supposed African debt. The diversion of Africa's wealth to service debt has meant the institutionalization of an unequal global economic order.

To curtail the imbalance of national and world economies, we must insist on the socialization of wealth by reappropriating government structural fiscal policies for equitable development in production and

redistribution. Development policy should not mean government budgeting and book balancing. The fiscal policies of waste due to white elephant development projects must be seen as distinct from national development policy. One must investigate and punish individual wrong-doers and criminals, not the whole nation. Fiscal neocolonialism is still determining new rescue policies of the West.

The world's richest nations, known as the G7 (consisting of the United States, Japan, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, and Italy), are signing on to the forgiveness-of-debt posture, with the United States, Britain, and France pledging to "forgive" 100 percent of debt. None of this has been actualized. In fact, the United States appears to have waited for Mozambique to suffer a catastrophic natural disaster in the recent floods, of which we were all a witness, to forgive 100 percent! This means that so-called forgiveness is translating as deduction for assistance money pledged! Rich countries, in other words Western colonizing countries, should stop mystifying exploitation under terms like helping, rescuing, enlightening, and saving the poor. They can certainly support African people, but they should stop coercing, stop forcing, and stop imposing unequal global relations and development.

With more recent courageous stands against global financial institutions and trade organizations, like the IMF and WTO, young people are again reconnecting with progressive movements of the past that were committed to fighting against the injustice of economic inequality and to demand social justice. These financial institutions have been accused of eroding workers' rights and increasing poverty through free trade. Students and youths have become conscious of the pattern of global inequality and have joined movements to protest against forced and inappropriate development (which creates and maintains unethical conditions of poverty and hunger) and force Western values on developing countries.

Young people and older progressives are being reawakened because it is not yet a brave new world of harmonious coexistence in the United States either. In a recently released 1999 report by the World Health Organization for its 191 members, the United States came in 24th for long and active life. The bottom 2 1/2 percent of the poor in the U.S. are Native Americans, rural blacks, and so-called inner-city populations. The U.S. poor still do not live a healthy life and their life expectancy is where Africa was in the 1950s. Africa accounted for the lowest 23 countries because of poverty-related diseases like AIDS and malaria; poor nutrition; and unsafe water. Not surprisingly,

war-destroyed Sierra Leone came last. Of the 56 million deaths in the world last year, 10.5 million were children under 5 years of age, 98 percent of whom were in the developing countries. Genocide against the poor and the children should be an urgent matter of concern to feminism, national and international.

According to the dictates of SAPs, African governments must remove agricultural subsidies, stop wage increases, devalue local currencies, and enforce a free market, all of which have resulted in higher food prices, poverty, disease, and hunger. To what benefit, then, is independence from former colonizing powers? The SAP's measures have so impoverished the social sector and destabilized the state and civil society in most African countries that there is currently a growing opinion that the national is purely conceptual and not real; it is simply something in the making. Everywhere, all you hear is transition or renaissance. Although this thinking opens up room to argue separations and the redrawing of national maps in countries in a stalemate, it is also a way of denying responsibility for the failure of the past forty years of self-rule in many African countries. Forty years of interactions and management of resources is not simply a question of an empty national space. Let us be courageous and speak truth to power by acknowledging that there are male politicians, all-male political parties, male intellectuals, and male writers who dominated this period. They have to take responsibility for policy failures, which have resulted in Africa's debasement. They did not share power with women. It is a failure of African men. The same men are still around, still talking and still monopolizing power.

C. African Women and Leadership

In spite of money spent on women's development by global donor agencies, and in spite of much rhetoric by women's groups, women are still quite absent from the top seats of African governments, a trend which is more contemporary than traditional. Whatever happened to the traditional concept of the constitutional women chiefs and queen mothers?

During the nationalist and liberation movements, African women were moving into government seats, encouraged by the pre-1988 Eastern European communist model. The Western liberal democratic model being forced on Africans through SAPs, for all we can tell, is strongly opposed to the presence of women in government. Yet,

women's rights are human rights and this requires joint decisions on all policy matters, and equality in power sharing.

There are strategies that can be adopted to increase women's presence in government; for example, instituting equal education, nominating women candidates, and encouraging women's registration to vote. There is also the growing demand for accountability to the women below and collective or rotating leadership at the top. African women are good partners in decision-making, if invited to participate in government. The South African government stands out as the African democratization process most concerned to effect a strong and open consultative state that is seriously taking action for gender equality. As articulated by Nigerian women, African women are saying that they are ready to be invited to participate in a shared presidency of their countries.¹⁹

IV. Conclusion: African Matriarchy and Democratic Futures

To present African women simply as destitutes in need of charity from the West is to do injustice to women with a rich history of matriarchy, women's authentic leadership skills, women's economic enterprise, and women's strategies of resistance to oppression. It was this rich legacy that enabled African women to make historic contributions to anticolonial resistance movements in countries where they had to resist European expansionist settler colonialism and pass laws, such as in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Kenya. In these countries, racism and land appropriation were central to colonialist policy and its ideology of exploitation. Colonialist policies when applied elsewhere in Africa, for example Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea, and Cape Verde, also met with resistance from African women. It was precisely African women's grounding in economic production, particularly in agriculture, trade, marketing, management, women's organizations, and a matriarchal culture that made it possible for them to resist and survive the corrosive onslaughts of imperialism. Examples of African women in anticolonial resistance movements include the Gikuyu women of Kenya during the Harry Thuku Disturbances in 1922 and again in the Mau Mau anticolonial war in the mid-1950s; Igbo women of Nigeria during the Women's War of 1929; Kom women of Cameroon during the Anlu Uprising in 1958 – 59; and women in South Africa throughout the antiapartheid struggle. Women resisted colonial imperialism in various forms that involved demon-

strations, riots, and war. Women also fought in the liberation movements in combat as guerrillas, as health workers, as teachers, and as political workers.

It is against this background that one must assess contemporary gender transformations and women's progress in Africa. Colonialism introduced a new economy, imposed new government systems, a new educational system, church and state laws, changes in marriage practices and gender relations, and a patriarchal property inheritance law. All of these factors are responsible for a new, rigid Eurocentric gender ideology of power, demarcating public space and power as male to the exclusion of women. Male dominance was in effect written into law, resulting in new experiences of subordination and oppression of women. Unfortunately, these backward and oppressive patriarchal gender attitudes were carried over into many of the nationalist and liberation movements, so that at the end of struggle, progressive gender equality promises were broken. African women found themselves more backward in terms of political representation and legal rights than they were in many precolonial sociopolitical systems.

Thanks to these precolonial women's spaces and rights, African matriarchs like Ashanti Yaa Asantewa, or Nana in Ata Aidoo's *Changes*, present a narrative that speak their lives of traditional women's organizations, women's cultures, and women's powers. Mariam Margolyes' Eurocentric text of the subordination of African matriarchs speaks to another feminism. In this perspective, which is dominated by sex, romance, and adultery, polygamy is a crime. More seriously, in this text, African women's struggles are not contextualized in their own diverse social histories, looking at where they are coming from, what struggles they have made, and what resources they have carried forward to face and overcome new challenges. Instead, African women are objectified in the neocolonialist desires and expectations of what African women ought to be doing and where African women should be heading. This is a perspective that is reproduced by professionally oriented elite African women in supposedly speaking for African women to the international feminist community.

Even though there is no single African feminism, womanism or feminism in Africa is still a commitment to struggle and social justice. A decolonized, independent, African-centered feminism has no choice but to fight on the progressive front for culture, national liberation, and social justice. ●

Notes

1. Gayatri Spivak 1994, 1999.
2. Gracia Clark 1994, p. 97.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
4. Ifi Amadiume 1987, 1997.
5. Clark 1994, pp. 98–99.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 274–275.
7. See, for example, essays in Obioma Nnaemeka, ed. 1997, 1998; Christine Oponng, ed. 1983; Claudine Dinan 1977; and the novels of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, and Ama Ata Aidoo.
8. Amadiume 1987.
9. David Sweetman 1984.
10. Cheikh Anta Diop 1989.
11. Molora Ogundipe-Leslie 1994.
12. Filomina Chioma Steady 1987.
13. Stephanie Udang 1979; 1989.
14. Ogundipe-Leslie.
15. Ngozi Onwurah 1993.
16. Alice Walker 1983, p. 92.
17. Amilcar Cabral 1973.
18. Amadiume 2000.
19. *Ibid.*

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