THE AFRICAN WOMAN TODAY

"In most countries of Africa whole sectors of the economy, such as internal trade, agriculture, agro-business and health care are in the hands of women."

West Africa (September 9-15, 1991)

I t might not be fair to blame as well-intentioned an event as Bob Geldof’s Band Aid,1 which was staged to raise awareness of the plight of drought victims in Ethiopia, and even raise funds for them. But there is no doubt that since then the image of the African woman in the mind of the world has been set. She is breeding too many children she cannot take care of, and for whom she should not expect other people to pick up the tab. She is hungry, and so are her children. In fact, it has become a cliché of Western photojournalism that the African woman is old beyond her years; she is half-naked; her drooped and withered breasts are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around the faces of her children; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hand.

This is a sorry pass the daughters of the continent have come to—especially when we remember that they are descended from some of the bravest, most independent and innovative women this world has ever known. We speak of the Lady Tiy of Nubia (ca. 1415-1340 B.C.E.), the wife of Amenhotep III and the mother of Akhenaton and Tutankhamen, who is credited with, among other achievements, leading the women of her court to discover make-up and other beauty-enhancing processes. Her daughter-in-law was the incomparable Nefertiti, a black beauty whose complexion was nowhere near the alabaster she is now willfully painted with. Again from the pharonic era, we evoke Cleopatra, about whom “more nonsense has been written ... than about any African queen ... mainly because of many writers’ desire to paint her white. She was not a white woman. She was not a Greek ...” says John Henrik Clarke with the impatience of painstaking scholarship.2 According to C.W. King, of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Cleopatra, the last was “the most captivating, the most learned, and the most witty.” Among the many languages she spoke fluently were “Greek, Egyptian, Latin, Ethiopian, and Syrian.” Yet Shakespeare, heralding Western racism, could only dismiss Cleopatra as a “strumpet.”3

Collisions

Modern Africa came into collision with Europe with the journey of Vasco da Gama from Portugal southward to find Asia. He passed what became known to the West as the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1492, and the Cape of Good Hope in 1496. Since then Africa has never known peace. First there was the slave trade. Then the end of the slave trade was celebrated with the conquest and colonization of Africa in the mid-nineteenth century. From then on, various Western groups considered Africa their happiest hunting ground. The energies of the people, the wealth on and in the land, everything that could be taken was taken by European powers, with complete abandon. The people resisted—to the best of their abilities. But it could not have been an even match, since one side fought with spears or bows and arrows, while the other used guns.

Less known is that in response to Europe’s insistence on conquering the continent, Africa over five centuries produced countless women

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soldiers and military strategists, many of whom died in the struggles. A famous example was Nzingha (1582–1663), who tried to prevent the Portuguese from overrunning Angola. She died without achieving her objective, but only after showing them what she was made of. For their part, the Portuguese demonstrated that they had not come to Africa on a mission of chivalry. They fought Nzingha with uncompromising viciousness. When she suffered serious setbacks in 1645–1646, they captured her younger sister Fungi, beheaded her, and threw her body into the river.

In fact, in precolonial times, fighting women were part of most African armies, a well-known example being the all-female battalions of Dahomey (ancient Benin, early nineteenth century), who sought to protect their empire against invaders and internal treachery.

The Nzingha/Portuguese pattern was to be repeated in several areas of the continent over the next centuries. Queen after queen rose against the invaders. In the last years of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Yaa Asantewaa, an Ashanti (Ghana) queen, led an insurrection against the British. Although her armies were defeated, “it is safe to say that she helped to create part of the theoretical basis for the political emergence of modern Africa.”

True, all these women were reigning monarchs who found it relatively easy to organize armies against foreign occupation. But history is also replete with accounts of insurgencies organized by women from nonmonarchical traditions. One example is the women of Aka in Eastern Nigeria, who in the 1920s so successfully harassed the British that the colonial administration had to move its headquarters from Calabar to Lagos. Around the same time, in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Mbeya Nehanda (Nyakasikana) was accused of fomenting an insurgency against the British. In the end, the conquerors decided that the only way to get rid of this frail woman was to hang her. And they did.

Struggles for Independence

After the Second World War, many women stayed in the forefront of the agitation for independence. Some, like General Muthoni (of the Mau Mau Rebellion) became guerrilla leaders whom the enemy feared even more than their male counterparts. Others, like Mrs. Ransome-Kuti of Western Nigeria, were mainly nationalists of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois backgrounds. But then, so were the majority of the men who were their companions in such struggles.

Today, we know that the story of South Africa’s fight against the institutionalized horrors of conquest would be different if women had not been prepared to get actively involved. And they paid the price. They were killed, maimed, incarcerated, and exiled. For instance, Sibongile Mkhabela was a student leader at the time of the Soweto riots. The only woman charged in the June 7th (1978) trials, she was jailed for three years and then banned after serving the sentence. Countless others like Winnie Mandela, Albertina Sisulu, and Zodwa Sobukwe survived the hounding of their men, only later to show an awesome readiness to assume leadership with all the sacrifices such decisions entail.

Given such a heroic tradition, it is no wonder that some of us regard the docile mendicant African woman of today as a media creation. But if she does exist, she is a result of the traumas of the last five hundred years’ encounter with the West, the last one hundred years of colonial repression, the current neocolonial disillusionment, and of a natural environment that is now behaving like an implacable enemy.

In 1992, the African woman must cope with a “structural adjustment program” imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank that is removing subsidies from her children’s education, from health care, from food. Transportation and from vital areas of her life have either broken down or never existed.

In 1992, there is a drought and the world is phenomenally hot. And the African woman has already given up on the season’s crops. She is now wondering whether there will be enough water to last her and her children through this year for drinking, for cooking nonexistent food, and to keep the body minimally clean.

In 1992, the African woman is baffled by the news of a “plague that has come to end all...
human hopes." And she is afraid that she and her children might not survive this disease whose origins no one seems to know, and for which there is yet no cure.

Africa is the second largest continent, covering an area of over thirty million square kilometers. In spite of centuries of exploitation by its conquerors, it is still, potentially, the richest piece of earth in the world, with 60 percent of all known exploitable natural resources. And in spite of the vicious campaign about an African population explosion, Africa is not the most populous place on this earth. China is. In fact, given its size, and its current population of around five hundred million, the continent is underpopulated.

Burdens and Riddles

Three major factors have influenced the position of the African woman today. These were indigenous African societal patterns; the conquest of the continent by Europe; and the apparent lack of vision, or courage, in the leadership of the post-colonial period. "Leadership" in this context does not refer to the political leadership exclusively. We speak of the entire spectrum of the intellectual, professional, and commercial elites in positions to make vital decisions on behalf of the entire community.

From ancient times, the majority of societies around the world were either matrilineal or patrilineal. It is now clear that most African societies were matrilineages lasting millennia, from the prepharonic period all the way down to a micronation like the Akans of Ghana. What changed the pattern in some areas were, first, Islam and, later, Christianity, since both religions were obviously patriarchal in orientation. The African societies that retained vestiges of their matrilineages were also the ones that met both Islam and Christianity with the greatest resistance. These areas—for instance, coastal West Africa—are also where one finds some of the least oppressed women.

Today, it is not at all easy to imagine the coastal West African woman bearing with any equanimity even the thought of the heavy black veil, the burden of purdah, circumcision, infibulation, and so forth. But even for the West African Moslem woman, the veil is no more than a couple of meters of an often pretty gossamer fabric. This she normally and willingly drapes over the back of her head and her shoulders. Indeed, the effect of this type of veil is to make its wearers look more attractive and decidedly unhidden. In this, West African women seemed to have more in common with Islamic women in faraway places like the Indian peninsula and the rest of Asia than with their "sisters" to their immediate north.

What seems to separate the woman "south of the Sahara" from the Arab-Islamic woman of the north is not so much the latter's "closeness to Europe" and "civilization," as the former's relative freedom to create herself, economic and political dynamics permitting.

But then, according to Nawal El Saadawi, "There are many misconceptions [in the West] about the identity, character and diversity of Arab women." This Egyptian writer asserts that although the North African-Islamic-Arab woman is veiled and circumcised, to know nothing more than that about her "Borders on racism." Maybe African women share more commonalities than we are aware of.

In any case, some tenets presumed to be "Islamic" may not sound so strange to women in Southern Africa who have had nothing to do with Islam. For instance, in precolonial Zimbabwe as well as in colonial Rhodesia, the woman was regarded as a permanent minor, first her father's ward, then her husband's. If she outlived her husband, then as a widow she became the ward of some male in either her husband's home or her own home. Sometimes a woman became a ward of her own son(!) This meant that she could never own property or be granted a bank loan. The situation was so bad that a conscientious and sensitive ZANU (PF) government (in Zimbabwe) attempted a corrective measure by passing the Legal Age of Majority Act in 1982. This law stipulated that at age eighteen a young woman became an adult, with all the attendant rights and privileges.

To a certain extent, African women are some sort of riddle. This is because, whether formally educated or not, "traditional" or "modern," they do not fit the accepted notion of them as mute beasts of burden. And they are
definitely not as free and equal as African men
(especially some formally educated ones)
would have us believe. In fact, they fall
somewhere between those two concepts.

To some West African men, the way West
African women struggle to be independent "is
really quite bad." They think that "these
women are all over the place." Wherever men
meet, you can be sure to hear jokes and stories
about women, all of which are supposed to
show how "terrible" we are. One solid piece of
"advice" any growing boy is likely to pick up
along the coast of West Africa is: "Fear
women." And if there really is a Fon (Gabon)
proverb that translates as "Woman is the root
of all evil, only our souls can save us [from
her]," then women have been in trouble for a
long time in Africa!

The colonial period did not help women
either. It is true that some of the "civilizing"
missions did not want their policies to run
counter to any patterns in the "natives" that
were tolerant of women’s development. So
they gave a few girls some opportunities for
formal education. Some of the girls’ secondary
schools in the area go as far back as 1837. But
the missions came with their own ideas on how
females should be educated to be "proper
women." While the boys in colonial elite
schools were being prepared to go to England
to become professionals (mostly lawyers), girls
in the equivalent schools were being taught
needlework and needlepoint, crochet, and
baking. This was to make sure that they
became wonderful wives and great mothers.
And many turned out exactly as programmed.
Even they were only a few women from either
traditionally royal or nouveaux riches families.
For the great majority of West African women,
colonialism meant unmitigated suffering.

A few women managed to squeeze some
advantages out of the neocolonial era, and
excelled in areas where women would not
normally be expected to. The emphasis is on
"few," because educational policies in Africa
have never been democratic. Today, the
pyramid is a symbol of what is happening to
young women in the education systems of West
Africa: a massive base and a needle-thin top.
At the primary levels, girls and boys get equal
opportunities to enter the system, or almost.

But by the time a given age group gets to the
universities, the ratio of girls to boys is as low
as one to ten or worse. Apart from impossibly
poor environments, this is a result of a number
of negative forces in young women’s lives,
such as becoming pregnant and getting ex­
peled from school, while the offending
male—whose identity no one cares to
know—is left free, or receiving discouraging
career counsel from sexist teachers and school
authorities as well as schoolmates and well-
meaning but reactionary relatives.

High-Powered Tokens

Given the chance, a number of young women
show their independence and courage in
choosing careers, and in most cases do
brilliantly, but women in high-powered posi­
tions are still hostages to tokenism. Certainly as
"tokens" many of them have attained the top of
their professions. Some even got there as early
as other women from some of the most
technologically advanced regions of the world.
So that for a long time some countries in Africa
have produced women doctors, lawyers,
judges, university lecturers, and professors.
There have been women in "rarified" profes­
sional areas such as imaginative writing,
publishing, geology, architecture, engineering,
transportation ownership and management, and
music conducting. When we talk of African
women today, we speak of over two hundred
million people, some of whom are commercial
and air-force pilots, engineers (electrical and
mechanic), primary and secondary school
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However, there is one group of women
almost peculiar to West Africa. These women
are in trade and commerce. Mostly, such
women are referred to as "market women" or
"market mammies" by non-West Africans. But
of course, not all of them actually work from
the markets, although the great majority do.
Their activities range from gem dealing and
high finance to "petty" trading. Therefore,
their workplaces also range from highly sophis-
ticated modern office complexes to the pavements of the cities where their kiosks stand.

For these women, the market is both a business arena and a home away from home. From early morning when they occupy their stalls they conduct their commercial business and their business as homemakers, including the day’s cooking for husband and children. Indeed, many people who grew up in urban places (for example, in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, and Benin) could confirm that much of the time they went after school straight to the market to be with their mothers. The market was where they ate lunch and supper, did their homework, and had their baths from buckets and bowls. Such people recall, often with a great deal of nostalgia, that during the weekday, home was the market: a house was only for sleeping in. Meanwhile, these women make money to feed, clothe, and educate their children, and sometimes support their men.

For most West African women, work is a responsibility and an obligation. This idea is drummed into us from infancy. We could never have fought for the “right to work”—a major concern of early Western feminists. In West Africa, virtually no family tolerates a woman who doesn’t work. So that today, there may not be too many homes in the region, including traditionally Islamic areas, where girls are encouraged to think they needn’t have ambitions because one day they’ll grow up to marry and be looked after by men.

Yet, Africa’s women farmers may get the rawest deal of all. Although it may now be fashionable to admit that women have been the backbone of the continent’s agriculture, that is a very recent trend. Earlier on, their existence was not even acknowledged. Governments never mentioned women in agricultural policies. So the burden of constant poverty, of working on the farm from sunup to sundown and then coming home to take on dozens of other roles, was added to the deprivation of being invisible to policy-makers.

Debating Feminism

Currently, the debate about African women and feminism is hot. It is common to hear feminism dismissed as a foreign ideology, imported into Africa “with . . . crusading zeal” (A.N. Mensah, 1990) to ruin good African women. It is also easy, and a trap we all fall into every now and then, to feign a lack of interest in this discourse, or to airily maintain that “we don’t need feminism” because we had strong women for antecedents. Many of us have declared at one time or another that “African women were feminists long before feminism.” Certainly from the male camp, the cacophony is that African women do not need “feminism.” Even though in many modern African states grown-up women are expected to crawl on their knees to offer food and other services to their husbands, their in-laws, and others in authority generally, most men still maintain that in their country, “women are not oppressed. There are roles which women and men have to play”—including crawling, obviously. The latest and most interesting front in the discourse was opened by Alice Walker, when she proposed that we substitute the term “womanist” to describe the global African woman’s particular concerns.

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist—especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives, and the burden of our own development. Because it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element in our feminism.

On the whole, African traditional societies seemed to have been at odds with themselves as to exactly what to do with women. For although some of them appeared to doubt gender and biology as bases for judging women, in the end, they all used gender and biology to judge women’s capabilities. Otherwise, how was it that men ruled by proxy for women from those nationalities, like the Akan of Ghana, among whom inheritance and succession, and therefore power, were vested in the matrilineage and not the patrilineage? Some of us are convinced of something else: that much of the putting down of women that educated African men indulge in and claim is
"African culture" is a warmed-up leftover from colonization. European colonizing men (especially Victorians) brought with them a burden of confusion: first about their own women, and then about other women. All of which was further muddled up by the colonizers' fantasies about the sexual prowess of both African men and women.

In the meantime, no one wants to hear African women discuss their problems. In Harare, a journalist recently wrote an incredible outburst that began with "Women, women, women, will they ever stop moaning?" He then went on to ask "whether [our] women will ever stop weeping to find solutions to their problems so they won't weep again?" He ended by declaring grandly that "it serves no purpose trying to convince each other that women are oppressed. There are better issues to focus on." (Emphasis mine.) A full comment on this piece could make a sizable book.

A way to appreciate some of the contradictions in the position of African women today is to adopt a bifocal mode of looking at them. One view would he from inside their own environments. This would reveal that in relation to their men, they were just as badly off as women everywhere. But viewed from outside, internationally, the picture changes somewhat. "For years, some of us have been struggling to get the world to look at the African woman properly. Hoping that with some honesty it would be seen that in actual fact, vis-à-vis the rest of the world, the position of the African woman has not only not been that bad, but in some of the societies . . . she had been far better off than others." And this should include the self-congratulatory West.

This much is evident about the majority of African women today, from the Cape of Good Hope to Cairo. They live in the rural areas of the continent and its urban shanties. They have had only the most minimal education or none at all. They are married, monogamously or polygamously. They have had between two and six children. They are involved in peasant farming and petty trading. Their lives are ruled locally by men who speak in languages they do not understand and from abroad by alien men who speak languages they could not possibly understand.
All this should be enough to make the African woman want to fold her arms, keel over, and just die. But she is doing anything but that. She is still pushing. The African woman today is a real heiress of her past. We need to intensify our struggle. For instance, instead of letting ourselves be "lulled into a false sense of security through tokenism and processes of 'de-feminization' which in most cases is a prerequisite for performing certain functions," we need to be able to challenge "gender and class oppression, imperialism and exploitation" and seek "access to policy-making positions, legal reforms, equal rights in education, employment and credit facilities." 11

Notes
1. Also sometimes referred to as Live Aid, it was organized by Geldof in 1985. It galvanized the world. Among the honours Geldof received was an honorary knighthood bestowed by the Queen of England, and the 1986-87 Third World Prize. The Western media fell over itself paying him the well-deserved homage, calling him "Santa Bob," "Sir Bob," and "St. Bob."


3. In Act One of Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare was unbelievably crude about Cleopatra. But then the Bard’s racism is a great source of acute embarrassment. See The Tempest, The Merchant of Venice, and Titus Andronicus.

4. "And this jolly West.

5. The story is so heartbreakingly so aspect of it bears telling. The Herald (Harare, Feb. 20, 1992) reports the most terrifying example of this to have come to the continent’s notice in recent times. In an incident between boys and girls in a co-educational secondary school in Kenya that left 19 female students dead, and during which, according to doctors, “71 girls were raped,” “only two schoolboys were charged with the offence!” (Emphasis added.) Some of us keep talking about the problem, albeit to deaf ears. For example, “Profile: Remembering Tomorrow – A Conversation with Ama Ata Aidoo,” by Sarah Molebe, Africa World Review (October 1990–March 1992), London, African Woman (Autumn 1991), London.

6. One stock advice to a young schoolgirl who plans on having higher education is that she should be careful. Otherwise she would never find a husband. The harm done is...are women.”

7. According to Anthony Yedeowi of West Africa Rice Development Association, “over 80 percent of the small holder rice farmers of West Africa are women.”

8. Of course, this shows why it is dangerous to assume that because a society is matrilineal, it is also a matriarchy. Certainly, the Akans are one very good example of a people with a matrilineal base and an obvious patriarchal superstructure. (Freudian symbols unintended.)


11. Page 176, West Africa (3–9 February, 1992). Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi was reacting to a letter from K. Asare in a previous issue of the weekly. From my rather brief experience as cabinet minister (Education in Ghana, January 1982–June 1983), I fully endorse the view that in order to function as tokens women defeminize. Or we fall into the trap of being overly feminine. But then either way, we are rendered ineffective. Because on one hand we alienate the public (?) and on the other, our male colleagues refuse to take us seriously.