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African Women's Movements in the Twentieth Century: A Hidden History

Iris Berger

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Abstract: This article begins by exploring the efforts of African women's movements from the 1990s onward to end violent civil conflicts and to insist on guarantees of gender equity in newly formed governments. It attempts to explain these recent successes first by examining the complex relationships between international women's movements and African women's groups from the Second World War onward, particularly from the era of the U.N. Decade for Women beginning in 1975. The article then turns to a broader problem: exploring the connections between contemporary women's activism and deeper currents in African history that link the precolonial period with the more recent past. By examining a variety of twentieth-century women's protests, it argues that cloaked in the language of political, economic, and environmental grievances, these movements also reflect a hidden history of women's influence as public healers, empowered not only to cure individuals, but also to mend broader relationships in the community.

Résumé: Cet article commence par explorer les efforts des mouvements des femmes africaines dans les années 1990 pour mettre fin à des conflits civils violents et pour

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exiger des garanties d'équité entre les sexes dans les gouvernements nouvellement formés. Il tente d'expliquer leurs succès récents en examinant les relations complexes entre les mouvements féminins internationaux et les groupes des femmes africaines depuis la seconde guerre mondiale, en particulier depuis 1975, date ayant marqué le début de la "Décennie des femmes," initiée par les Nations Unies. L'article se tourne ensuite vers un problème plus large: il explore les liens entre l'activisme des femmes contemporaines et les courants plus profonds de l'histoire africaine qui relient la période précoloniale avec un passé plus récent. En examinant plusieurs types de manifestations menées par des mouvements féminins au XX^{ème} siècle, cet article met en relief le fait qu'à travers le langage de leurs revendications politiques, économiques, et environnementales, ces mouvements laissent transparaître l'histoire cachée de l'influence des femmes dans leur rôles de guérisseuses publiques, ayant non seulement le pouvoir de guérir des individus, mais aussi de réparer des relations plus larges au sein de la communauté.

Key Words: Women; empowerment; protest movements; healing; international women's movements; Nigeria; South Africa; Kenya

Introduction

On July 2, 1991, leaders of the African National Congress gathered in the coastal city of Durban for their first conference in South Africa after the country's liberation fighters were released from prison. On the second day of this historic gathering, women delegates generated passionate debate by proposing that in the future women make up 30 percent of the ANC Executive Committee. At the time, only three of thirty-five members were women. Many considered the proposal audacious, and it was dropped in favor of a more general resolution on affirmative action. But Nelson Mandela was correct when he declared, "The ANC will never be the same" (quoted in Turok 1991:9). This "quota debate" represented the beginning of a new era in African women's politics and social movements. Within a decade, the push for democracy and growing international pressure to expand women's rights opened up a fresh landscape for women's empowerment across the continent.

Few countries experienced change as breathtaking as South Africa did. In April 1994, mile-long lines stretched outside polling stations as black and white voters waited, often for more than six or seven hours, to cast ballots in the country's first democratic election. The political activist Albertina Sisulu told her daughter-in-law, "The excitement was unbelievable—going to jail, being forced to leave my children—it was all worth it to live to see this day" (2003:621). As the wife of the ANC leader Walter Sisulu, who was imprisoned for twenty-six years, Albertina Sisulu had suffered constant police surveillance as well as several bouts of detention and solitary confinement, banning, and house arrest.

Amid the excitement over this remarkable transformation from apartheid to a nonracial democracy, commentators rarely noted that these elections

were an extraordinary step not only toward racial equality, but also toward gender equity. Only a few years earlier Albie Sachs, a prominent legal figure and antiapartheid activist, had called patriarchy one of few South African institutions accepted across racial lines. Until the 1980s black women were treated as legal minors and white women, once married, came under their husbands' protection. Regardless of race, a woman had no right to open a bank account, take out a mortgage, or sign any official documents in her own name; for many years, female teachers who married had to give up their jobs.

Transcending this history of legalized inequality, women, after the 1994 election, claimed 106 of the four hundred seats in the new National Assembly and South Africa jumped from 141st to seventh place worldwide in the national representation of women. This change reflected the efforts of a remarkable coalition of women's groups that formed alliances across racial and political lines to insure their inclusion in the negotiations that ended apartheid. Two years later the country adopted one of the most egalitarian and gender-sensitive constitutions in the world, a document that prohibits discrimination not only on the grounds of gender and race, but also on the basis of sexual orientation, motherhood, pregnancy, ethnicity, age, and disability.

Acting quickly as a follow-up to their electoral victory, women activists grappled with a number of key issues. Anxious to establish a strong voice in government without marginalizing women's concerns, they rejected the common practice of creating a separate women's ministry, adopting instead a policy of "gender mainstreaming," which mandated that all government agencies diversify their personnel and establish gender-sensitive policies. Directly confronting the country's high level of social conservatism, women also pushed through a new law in 1996 affirming a women's right to reproductive choice, seeking to end the country's estimated three hundred thousand backstreet abortions each year. They also challenged rural traditional leaders who opposed extending the equality provision of the constitution to customary law and practices. The heated debate over these issues raised sensitive questions such as whether daughters and sons should have equal inheritance rights and whether co-wives in polygynous marriages, normally ranked by seniority, had to be considered as equals. When the new government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a means to encourage national healing, women activists insisted on separate hearings that would create a safe forum for testifying about the specific violations they had suffered.

South Africa was not the only country where women intervened effectively in a time of conflict. Even more dramatic was the situation in Liberia, where two bloody civil wars lasting more than a decade had left a quarter-million people dead and one-third of the population displaced. In the midst of this terror, Leymah Gbowee, a social worker who counseled people traumatized by war, decided that only mothers could bring down Charles Taylor's brutal dictatorship. She reports in her autobiography (Gbowee & Mithers 2011) that after having a dream in which Christian and Muslim

women together prayed for peace, she joined with other community leaders to mobilize women in local churches and mosques to wage an aggressive campaign to end the violence. Clad in white shirts and headscarves to symbolize peace, the women began daily sit-ins at the fish market in Monrovia holding banners that read “Women of Liberia want peace now.” As the bonds among them grew, they became bolder, finally deciding that only a sex strike would force men to join them in confronting the country’s warlords.

In June 2003, when peace talks between Taylor and rebel groups finally began, women peace activists camped outside the hotel in Accra where the delegates were meeting. Finally, impatient with the lack of progress, several hundred women marched into the building and informed the chief mediator, the Nigerian general Abdulsalami Abubakar, that they would hold the delegates hostage until the opposing sides reached a settlement. To demonstrate their resolve, they resorted to one of African women’s most powerful protest strategies: shaming the men by threatening to rip off their clothes if the negotiators tried to leave. Under these threats, the talks turned serious and a peace agreement was signed within weeks. These dramatic events were brilliantly captured in the 2008 film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*. In the words of the film’s producers, “As the rebel noose tightened around the capital city of Monrovia, thousands of women—. . . mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and daughters, both Christian and Muslim—formed a thin but unshakeable line between the opposing forces” (www.pbs.org/wnet/women-war-and-peace/fullepisodes). The grassroots actions of these women, armed only with their white shirts and their courage, forced Charles Taylor into exile and laid the groundwork for the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Africa’s first woman head of state. In 2011 both Sirleaf and Gbowee received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Elsewhere on the continent women’s movements generated equally significant political transformation. By the early 2000s a number of African countries had some of the highest rates of female parliamentary representation in the world, generally (as in South Africa) through the use of quotas; women also moved into leadership positions in political parties, legislatures, and NGOs and actively challenged discriminatory laws and constitutions. And African women’s groups assumed leadership roles in critical health issues, campaigning against female genital cutting and organizing programs to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.¹

Clearly, innumerable challenges persisted everywhere. Political gains did not affect all women equally, women legislators faced numerous obstacles, and inevitable setbacks and backlash followed in the wake of reform. But despite the fact that these legislative and political gains left many problems unresolved, I would argue that this wave of new and creative energy represented an important turning point for women’s empowerment and a significant change from earlier decades in the practices of women’s groups, which had rarely challenged men’s dominance in public or private life.

At the same time, however, women's successes in South Africa, Liberia, and other African countries from the late 1980s onward still raise many questions. Why did women activists grow more assertive in intervening in bitter, long-standing conflicts, insisting on their right to take part in shaping political reconstruction in postconflict societies? And why did they become more forceful in challenging entrenched political systems in which they had been marginalized? The increasing numbers of women educated through secondary school and university provide a partial explanation. But interpreting these developments also raises broader questions, particularly whether women's actions at the turn of the century represented a dramatic break from the past or whether they expressed deeper, long-standing patterns of women's public engagement rooted in connections between the precolonial and the colonial periods.

Nairobi and Its Influence

Scholars generally agree that international women's movements—particularly in the wake of the U.N. Decade for Women conference in Nairobi in 1985—played an important role in infusing new ideas and energy into African women's groups. Inspired by women's activism in the early 1970s, the U.N. had organized the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 and designated the years 1976–85 as the U.N. Decade for Women. As a follow-up, the Fourth World Conference for Women was held in Beijing in 1995. The environmental activist Wangari Maathai, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, wrote about the inspiration she drew from these transnational groups. Looking back on her decision to launch a radically new women's environmental group in 1977, she wrote, “When I reflect on the years leading to the creation of the Green Belt Movement and the years of its emergence and growth, it also seems no coincidence that it was nurtured during the time the global women's movement was taking off, or that it flourished during the decade for women (1976–1985) the United Nations declared in Mexico City” (2007:125).

In different ways, women activists in South Africa and Liberia also drew inspiration from international sources. For South Africans, contacts with women from the rest of the continent during the 1980s helped to transform suspicions about feminism into the realization that without a concerted strategy for achieving women's equality, both within the liberation struggle and in a postapartheid state, majority rule could leave male dominance intact and gender issues on the sidelines. This realization especially galvanized younger women and female combatants in the military wing of the ANC to push for more gender-sensitive policies, first within the ANC, then in plans for a democratic transition, and later in the deliberations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Hassim 2006). In Liberia, the influence was more localized, centering on the training and mentoring that movement leaders received from the West Africa-based Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET).

More generally, from the mid-1980s onward, the influence of international women's movements in Africa grew as these groups become more representative of women from the global South. When the U.N. Decade for Women conference met in Nairobi in 1985, for example, the changes that had taken place since the 1980 conference in Copenhagen were impressive; at the 1985 meeting there was a massive increase in the number of delegates representing developing countries, Third World liberation movements, and black and immigrant women's groups from Western countries. The NGO Forum, the voice of grassroots delegates, included fourteen thousand women from 151 countries (including 3,000 from Kenya alone). Their increased numbers empowered these women to voice opinions on such critical issues as the relationship between national liberation movements and feminism and to challenge official Western delegations that sought to deny that apartheid and Palestinian rights were women's issues (Berger 2012).

The aftermath of the Nairobi meeting and the proliferation of international and regional women's conferences in the early 1990s leading up to the U.N.-sponsored Beijing conference in 1995 particularly helped to crystallize women's energy and shape new discourses on women's rights. Key to these changes were a move to understand women's rights as human rights, an effort to interpret women's issues through the broader lens of "gender"—thus focusing on the need to change men as well as women—and an increased openness to feminist ideas, often dismissed in the past as alien imports. The first matter—the move to conceptualize women's rights as human rights—was particularly critical in creating a new framework for combating the abuses that African women were experiencing in the context of civil wars and political unrest. As the feminist scholar and activist Charlotte Bunch wrote,

Significant numbers of the world's population are routinely subject to torture, starvation, terrorism, humiliation, and even murder simply because they are female. Crimes such as these against any group other than women would be recognized as a civil and political emergency as well as a gross violation of the victims' humanity. Yet, despite a clear record of demonstrable abuse, women's rights are not commonly classified as human rights. (1990:486)

Expanding this concept in gender-specific ways enabled women activists to link public and private violence against women as equally significant infringements of human rights.

Alongside the conceptual breakthrough in applying the discourse of human rights to crimes against women, many scholars and activists during the late 1980s and early 1990s also were beginning to interpret women's issues in innovative ways. Expanding the focus of women's studies, they advocated the need to understand "gender"—the relationships between women and men and ideas of "male" and "female"—across time and space.

The African scholars Ife Amadiume (1987) and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997) were pioneers in applying these ideas to Igbo and Yoruba communities, respectively. Their work on African conceptions of gender underpinned the rapid adaptation of the concept by African women's organizations, both political and academic, and gender equity became a critical organizing principle for political action and for new research and teaching programs at African universities. Influenced in part by these new approaches to women's rights, some groups and individuals began to identify themselves as feminists and to reinterpret feminism in African terms.

International Women's Movements: A History

From the Second World War onward, ideas and energy from international movements outside the continent also flowed to African women. Western-based social organizations (such as the newly formed International YWCA) expanded their geographical scope, the United Nations initiated new women's programs, and the left-wing Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) appealed to African women with an agenda that emphasized freedom and anticolonialism. But African activists themselves became increasingly central to generating ideas and energy in all of these transnational organizations, and any narrative of international women's movements that overlooks the significance of African groups and their leaders has major flaws. The WIDF, for example, developed its anticolonial agenda in part through contacts with African feminists such as the Nigerian women's leader Funmilayo Ransom-Kuti and the South African trade unionist and women's organizer Ray Alexander. Ransom-Kuti's trip to England in 1947 inspired the Federation's executive committee to set up a special commission to investigate the situation of women in Africa and Asia. The ensuing pamphlet, *That They May Live: African Women Arise* (1954), called for solidarity with women fighting against colonial rule.

By the mid-1950s and early 1960s, then, the combination of nationalist movements across the continent and U.N. efforts had generated a robust network of women's organizations that predated the new feminist movements of North America and Western Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Among the most significant groups in shaping these links were the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women, established in 1947; the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), formed in 1958; the Pan-African Women's Organization (PAWO), founded in 1962; the African Training and Research Center, which opened in 1970; and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), founded in 1976. Illustrating the transnational roots of these developments, Pumla Kisosonkole, a South African then living in Uganda (and, in 1956, the first woman on the Legislative Council), argued in a 1962 speech,

These days the cry of the "role of women" is being heard in Africa from East to West, and from North to South. What is the answer for East Africa? It is

this: times have changed and are changing very fast, and the woman must change with them in order that she does not become the “forgotten factor” . . . and [she] will be ready and willing to play the fullest part in shaping the destinies of her country. (Quoted in Snyder & Tadesse 1995:28–29)²

ECA initiatives during the 1960s were particularly critical in laying the groundwork for the programs of the U.N. Decade for Women in the 1970s, in part by prompting researchers to document the vital economic roles of African women. They discovered, for example, that women in Lesotho performed 90 percent of the road building under the food-for-work program, that Tanzanian women worked twenty-six hundred hours a year as compared with eighteen hundred for men, and that in the late 1950s and early 1960s women represented 83 percent of the sellers in urban markets in Lagos and 85 percent in Accra (Snyder & Tadesse 1995:31).³ Margaret Snyder, the first director of UNIFEM, credits the independence of fifty-four former colonies, many of them in Africa, with the ECA’s new focus on poverty and “development” and with UNIFEM’s founding (Snyder 2006). But local women’s groups also took the lead in formulating new ideas and programs and in establishing influential women’s networks such as AAWORD, the Association of African Women for Research and Development. Since 1977 this group has been in the forefront of sponsoring Africa-centered community-based research that focuses on gender equity, human rights, and sustainable development.

In more than a century of women’s growing contacts across national boundaries, the perceived bonds among women also changed. The earliest Western women’s movements depicted African women as subjects in need of rescue and uplift, not as partners in the antislavery and suffrage movements. The situation changed after the Second World War when many groups, including the WIDF, emphasized women’s common bond as mothers, the primary identity that inspired them to unite in the interests of promoting peace and freedom. From the 1960s through the early 1980s the discourse of development introduced a new divide between the “developed” Western nations and the African groups that were the recipients of “women in development” programs. The focus of these projects exclusively on the global South implied that only Western women enjoyed full equality. From the mid-1980s onward, however, transnational women’s organizations once again began to rally their political energies around common issues that remained as intransigent in the so-called “developed” world as elsewhere. International organizations now sought to unite women not around their shared experiences of motherhood, but rather around their shared inequality and oppression. By emphasizing such issues as violence against women (both public and private), political inequality, poverty, human rights, and reproductive rights, these global movements inspired a new political environment in which women from the global South, including Africa, became equal, and sometimes dominant, voices in shaping the agenda of transnational women’s movements.

Politics and Public Healing

This narrative, tracing transnational women's organizing back to the Second World War, emphasizes the innovative aspects of African women's movements from the late 1980s onward. But despite the importance of these developments, I would suggest that recent women's movements also bear the imprint of much older traditions of "public healing"—as Steven Feierman (1999) has termed the actions of therapeutic specialists, often women, who used their powers to insure individual health and well-being and to mend relations between individuals and their communities.⁴ In both South Africa and Liberia, societies torn apart by deep divisions, women activists were seeking not only to improve their own position in society, but also to heal the wounds of violent conflict and bring peace and stability to their troubled nations. Feierman's discussion of the worship of Nyabingi spirits in the Uganda–Rwanda border area underscores this critical point when he observes that in many Bantu languages the words for "healer" apply equally to "those who worked to make individual bodies whole" and to "those who treated the body politic" (1999:187).

Paul Landau makes a similar argument about healing in discussing nineteenth-century Botswana. He observes that in the Ngwato kingdom, *dingaka* (priest healers) were concerned with restoring a sense of balance and power in their "patients," both within the human community and in the relationships between people and their ancestors. Elaborating on this idea, he explains that *dingaka* included in their practices "both the patient and the social relationships around her" and that a common feature of all healing practices was "an abiding concern with the *patient's community*" (1995:115; italics in the original). Illness was understood as reflecting "a person's situation in her environment as a whole," not simply as the interplay of elements in her body (1995:124).

In the course of the nineteenth century, however, ideas of public healing came under assault from European doctors and missionaries who separated their own medical practice from that of local specialists and insisted that therapy be directed only at the physical body, isolated from the interpersonal relationships that can determine health and wellness. But in the early years of colonial conquest priestesses and spirit mediums still shared precolonial ideas of public healing. Prompted in part by the devastating human and bovine death toll from smallpox and rinderpest during the 1890s, they sought to protect their communities from further destruction and devastation, and in many areas also took the lead in mobilizing anti-European sentiment. Among the most prominent of these women were Nyabingi priestesses and, in Zimbabwe, mediums of the spirit Nehanda.

But as colonial rule was implemented in East Africa and elsewhere, strong, yet ambiguous, laws against local religions, along with selective prosecution, forced their ceremonies underground. These measures insured that healing would become a private matter, disconnected from the wider political community. As long-standing therapeutic practices were either

outlawed or lost favor, many women with spiritual powers channeled their energies into founding or becoming active followers of new Christian groups such as the Harrist movement in West Africa and the Roho movement in western Kenya. Drawing on their experience in healing illness and infertility, these women played central roles in proselytizing and spreading the new faiths and in integrating possession and speaking in tongues into Christian practice. For example, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, following the devastating influenza epidemic of 1918, Nontetha Nkwenkwe founded one of the numerous revival movements that sprang up as survivors sought to make sense of the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in the region (see Edgar & Sapire 1999). After a series of dreams revealed her special mission to preach the Bible to uneducated people and to reform her society in the wake of this divine punishment, Nontetha, a widow with ten children, no formal education, and a local reputation as an herbalist and a seer, drew on both Xhosa and Christian ideas to begin preaching a message of renewal for the entire society. Unable to read, she looked down at the palm of her right hand as she preached her two- to three-hour-long services, as if her messages were inscribed there. Her preaching urged Africans to unify and to follow the Bible faithfully.

The alarm these movements provoked among colonial authorities contributed to undermining the power of women therapeutic and spiritual leaders. As Nontetha Nkwenkwe's followers grew more numerous, she began to attack mission churches, evoking fears among whites that recalled the area's nineteenth-century history of catastrophic prophetic movements. Late in 1922, in the wake of the Bulhoek massacre in which police slaughtered nearly two hundred members of an independent church group one hundred miles north of Nontetha's area, she was arrested and confined to the Fort Beaufort Mental Hospital. Later, to distance her from the devoted disciples who visited her regularly, she was sent to Pretoria (Weskoppies) Mental Hospital, where she remained until her death from cancer in 1935.

Nevertheless, even in the context of attacks against the explicitly religious groups that mushroomed during the twentieth century, women continued to carry on traditions of public healing in a variety of forms. Beneath the surface of movements focused on economic and political injustices, protesters often expressed deeply held ideas about women as the source of life and the sense that threats to women and to motherhood endangered the continuity of the community. By insisting that authorities recognize their grievances, these women sought to mend the social and political communities endangered by colonial rule.

The Women's War of 1929: Healing Communities

On November 23, 1929, in eastern Nigeria, a senior Igbo woman named Mwanyeruwa, busy extracting palm oil in her village, was approached by an employee of the village warrant chief, Mark Emeruwa, a Christian and former schoolmaster. Prepared by rumors that the colonial administration

planned to count women as a prelude to taxing them, Mwanyeruwa (as quoted in Matera, Bastien, & Kent 2012:137) snapped at him: "Last year my son's wife who was pregnant died. I am still mourning the death of that woman. Was your mother counted?"

This retort, blaming the census for the loss of two lives, expressed widespread fears that counting and taxing women were not only a new and unwelcome colonial economic intrusion, but also one that would hamper women's fertility and reproductive capacity. The altercation that followed the interchange ignited a "war" carried on by tens of thousands of women that engulfed both Igbo-speaking and neighboring communities. Angered at their treatment by corrupt warrant chiefs, women attacked and burned courts and other symbols of colonial rule while chanting, dancing, and singing songs that ridiculed the hated officials.

The ensuing Women's War was characteristic of protests during the interwar period, when women's religious and political groups began to separate more clearly from each other. But even in the more explicitly political mobilizations, beneath the surface of political and economic grievances, women drew on customary idioms of public healing to respond to colonial conditions that appeared to threaten not only their fertility, but the very life of their communities, including the ancestors and the spirits.

Although threats of taxation sparked the protests, the "war" reflected far deeper discontent with the many ways that colonial rule had weakened women's position by disrupting a decentralized political system in which women and men had shared political power and undermining the importance of women's trading activities. More profoundly, however, the idea of counting and taxing women evoked deeper anxieties about the threat of colonialism to the people of southeastern Nigeria, fears rooted in beliefs about the close links between women's material interests and their cosmological position as mothers of the land. When Mwanyeruwa lashed out at the census taker, she was expressing the widely shared opinion that counting human beings endangered women's fertility, and by extension, the fertility of the land. Thus counting women represented a general threat to human survival, part of a colonial male conspiracy to kill women and destroy their ability to reproduce life—the ultimate abomination in Igbo cosmology. The behavior of warrant chiefs and "native administrators"—who routinely took wives without paying bridewealth or misappropriated the returned bridewealth in divorce cases, was equally menacing to the institution of marriage and thus to the continuity of life. Furthermore, growing male control of market spaces undermined not only women's economic position, but also their general wealth, well-being, and reproductive capacities.

From this perspective, these women warriors were engaged in a ceremonial public healing, seeking to right the cosmological balance that threatened not just the position of women, but also the continuity of land, human life, and the world of the ancestors and the spirits (see Matera 2012). One powerful voice in the testimony to the Commission

of Inquiry established to investigate the disturbances was that of Nwato of Okpuala, who portrayed the women as seeking to heal the land and its people, to mend the relations among different groups, and to restore peace.

Our grievances are that the land is changed—we are all dying. . . . We sang so that you might ask us what our grievances were. . . . It is a long time since the Chiefs and the people who know book . . . have been oppressing us. We said that we thought that white men came to bring peace to the land. We were annoyed because men are born by women and they marry women. . . . We meet you here so that we might settle matters. We are telling you that we have been oppressed. If this oppression continues, how are we to praise you? (Quoted in Bastien 2002:268)

The last sentence of this moving testimony reveals the speaker's deepest feeling about the protests. The women's aim was not simply to air their grievances, but also to heal and bring peace to a battered society, restoring it so that those in power would once again earn people's trust and that women, the source of life, would be respected.

Nationalism, Independence, and Political Motherhood

By the end of the Second World War, as independent churches became more established and leadership roles required higher levels of education, men were more likely than women to assume positions as heads of churches. Women's importance in prayer and healing persisted, but in a more restricted form, concerned more with curing individuals, especially women and children, than with healing either epidemics or wider social ills. Furthermore, as Western biomedicine spread and became the accepted scientific way of treating illness, the belief in earlier healing regimes eroded, relegating them to either a supplementary or secondary position. At the same time, the education of increasing numbers of young women as nurses and midwives gave educated women alternative ways to pursue a therapeutic vocation.

As a result of these changes, the notion of "healing" narrowed further to a specific concern with physical ailments rather than also encompassing the idea of mending social relations. Yet by accepting these more limited ideas of therapy, and by analyzing women's movements solely as expressions of political and economic grievances or in relation to nationalism, we may have overlooked the persistence of women's efforts not only to address specific injustices, but also to "heal" the broader society.

Following independence, the division between religious and political organizations persisted. As the number of independent churches soared, men continued to head most religious groups, while women expressed their religious convictions through singing, prayer, trance states, and healing. With the advent of one-party states across the continent, the women's

sections of political parties that had helped to galvanize their supporters for independence from colonial rule were mobilized in support of agendas developed by male party leaders. Sometimes these plans focused on development activities that engaged rural women in achieving economic self-sufficiency, but on occasion these rulers also took aim at young urban women, accusing them of undermining cultural Africanization and authenticity by daring to wear miniskirts or makeup. Only gradually, during the 1980s, did groups, such as Women in Nigeria, begin to criticize party agendas that ignored women's interests and to form independent organizations that challenged the basis of male domination in politics and society more broadly.

But despite the apparent divide between political and religious movements, I would argue that in the nationalist and national liberation movements from the 1950s onward, women continued to express ideas fundamental to public healing by emphasizing motherhood and the ability to produce life as key sources of their empowerment. Nowhere was this point conveyed more powerfully than in the iconic image of armed struggle across the continent—a woman holding a baby in one arm and a machine gun in the other.

An emphasis on motherhood was also critical to the women's antipass movement in South Africa during the 1950s. Living under a political system in which women were divided in all their daily activities by the ostensibly racial categories of African, white, Coloured, and Asian, they needed to find the rationale to form a united front to protest the extension of passes to African women. Living in a ghettoized society where people of different racial classifications attended separate churches and mosques, sent their children to different schools, and rode on segregated public transport, women were able to find common ground as mothers. And in South Africa, as in other nationalist struggles of the period, the images of women as mothers and procreators inspired powerful rhetoric. In one fiery speech Lillian Ngoyi, a leader of women's struggles against the pass laws, denounced the apartheid government's plans to mandate an inferior system of education for black children. Implying that the new law threatened her very existence as a mother and giver of life, she thundered, "My womb is shaken when they speak of Bantu education" (quoted in Lodge 1983:151).⁵ The bond of motherhood also inspired connections between South African and international women's activists. In 1955 Ngoyi and Dora Tamana defied apartheid travel restrictions to attend the WIDF-sponsored World Congress of Mothers in Lausanne, Switzerland (see Grant 2010).

Women nationalists in Tanzania appealed to motherhood in a different way, by making a connection between women's power to give birth and the power they would have if they joined the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), the nationalist political party. In her first address to a mass audience, Bibi Titi Mohamed exhorted women to feel self-confident.

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. (Quoted in Geiger 1997:61)

In another speech, she recalled telling a different audience “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.” And she concluded, “So they went and joined the party” (quoted in Geiger 1997:58).

Thus both Ngoyi and Bibi Titi expressed the widespread sentiment that women's most basic power derived from their ability to give birth, to bring life into the world, and that destructive social changes threatened the entire society by disrupting their procreative powers.

The Green Belt Movement: Healing the Land

Women's power was linked not only to their position as mothers, but also to the fertility of the land, an idea expressed most forcefully by Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner. In a 2009 interview with the journalist Johann Hari, she described sitting for hours beside one particular fig tree, which her mother told her must be revered and never harmed. “That tree inspired awe,’ Maathai recalled. . . . ‘It was the place of God.’” Returning to this venerated spot many years later she was shocked to discover that “God had been relocated to a little stone building called a church. The tree . . . had been cut down. I mourned for that tree . . . , I knew the trees had to live . . . so we can live.” Maathai also remembered the flowing crystal-clear stream near her childhood home where hundreds of wild fig trees dotted the landscape, their massive canopies sustaining a rich variety of plant and animal life. In local cosmology these trees, considered the birthplace of the founding ancestors Gikuyu and Mumbi, were a site of prayer for rain, fertility, and abundance. The transformation of this vibrant terrain into eroded fields of coffee and tea inspired her to found the Green Belt Movement, the pioneering group that has motivated thousands of women across Kenya and around the world to heal the land by planting and nurturing millions of trees.

The Greenbelt Movement grew directly from Maathai's experience as a biologist specializing in veterinary medicine at the University of Nairobi. As the first East African woman to earn a Ph.D., she was a leader in many local and international organizations, including the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) and the local branch of the Environment Liaison Centre, a prestigious international NGO. While visiting rural areas for her research she observed with alarm the devastation caused by deforestation. By the early 1970s landslides were becoming more frequent and clean drinking

water more scarce. With deforestation causing a shortage of firewood for cooking, women were turning to processed foods with little nutritional value to feed their families.

While preparing for the 1975 U.N. Conference on Women in Mexico City and wondering how these problems might be solved, Maathai reported having a sudden insight—comparable perhaps to the inspirational dreams of religious prophets. “Why not plant trees?” she thought. They would supply wood for cooking and fencing and fodder for cattle and goats. They would also protect the watershed, bind the soil, and provide shade and food. And most important, “They would . . . regenerate the vitality of the earth” (2007:125). After numerous experiments and false starts, the Green Belt Movement expanded rapidly. By the mid-1980s nearly two thousand grassroots women’s groups were managing nurseries and planting and tending trees, and schools and students were running more than one thousand green belts. Two decades later over six thousand community-based networks had planted more than thirty million trees in Kenya alone.

As the movement grew, so did Maathai’s awareness of the connections among environmental degradation, political empowerment, and healing. “We had to understand,” she wrote (2007:173), “why there was malnutrition, scarcity of clean water, topsoil loss, and erratic rains; why people could not pay school fees; and why the infrastructure was falling apart. Why were we robbing ourselves of a future?” As she came to see the Green Belt Movement as a vehicle for planting ideas as well as trees, Maathai and her followers began to realize that the land could not be healed without challenging the country’s corrupt, repressive government.

By the late 1980s, equipped with new global contacts from the U.N. Decade for Women conference in Nairobi and increased international visibility and funding, the Green Belt Movement joined the growing push for democracy in Kenya. From this point onward, bitter clashes with the government set the movement on a new and more confrontational path that included halting plans of President Daniel Arap Moi to build a sixty-story skyscraper in Uhuru Park, the only substantial green space remaining in the center of Nairobi, and thwarting a project to distribute more than twenty-five hundred acres of public land outside Nairobi to private developers. During the Uhuru Park controversy Members of Parliament launched a campaign of public vilification against Maathai and the Green Belt Movement, depicting her as a “frustrated divorcee” and a “madwoman.” Moi proclaimed, “According to African traditions, women should respect their men! She has crossed the line!” (quoted in Hari 2009).

Another heated clash occurred in 1992 when a group of mothers who feared that their imprisoned sons were being tortured appealed to Maathai for assistance in securing their release. Using tactics that presaged those of Liberian women, the group camped in Uhuru Park, went on a hunger strike, and braved violent attacks. On the fifth day of the protest, when police began firing tear gas and charging the demonstrators, some of the women linked arms to avoid being dragged away. Others stripped naked,

exposing their bodies in a powerful form of curse that, in the view of one reporter (Tibbets1994), drew attention to women's life-generating potential. From then on, with Freedom Corner cordoned off, the mothers continued an eleven-month vigil and hunger strike at the nearby All Saints Cathedral until all but one of the fifty-two men were suddenly released. "In the months that followed," Maathai wrote (2007:226), "I sensed the bond we had formed with one another as mothers, and recognized the appreciation they had for what we had done for their sons."

These militant confrontations notwithstanding, Maathai continued to interpret the tactics of the Green Belt Movement in relation to peace and healing. She reflected, "When we were confronted with a tense situation, we would sing about the need to protect the forest, and dance. This was a way to disarm the armed men in front of us—and it worked. . . . What they didn't know is that the singing and dancing made us feel strong" (2007:272). After Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, she reflected in her memoir that the committee had understood the metaphor of a traditional African stool, the three legs representing the pillars of just and stable societies—respect for rights, sustainable and equitable management of resources, and the cultivation of peace. Put another way—perhaps the Nobel committee recognized the long-standing African tradition of public healing, which entailed curing not simply individual bodies, but also the family, the land, and the wider community.

Conclusion

Many historians accept the notion that "public healing" went underground for much of the twentieth century, mutating into the thriving practices of healers treating individual illness and the dominance of women therapeutic specialists in African independent churches. But perhaps in accepting this narrowed definition of healing—and along with it, the split between religion and politics—historians have overlooked a critical aspect of women's movements throughout the twentieth century. And, if that is the case, perhaps we can understand the upsurge of women's organizing from the late 1980s as reflecting not only a creative convergence between international and local women's movements, and a concern to empower women in new ways, but also as a contemporary expression of much older and deeper patterns of public therapy. From this perspective the groups and individuals across the continent pushing for peace and reconciliation, women's empowerment, and environmental restoration in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were also animated by a deeper vision of change—seeking to mend local and national moral communities battered by the events of a turbulent century and, most immediately, to restore peace and equilibrium to societies devastated by brutal civil conflicts, damaging structural adjustment programs, and the scourge of HIV/AIDS. This longer view of recent women's movements suggests that cloaked in the language of political, economic, and environmental grievances, colonial and postcolonial women's

protests have also reflected a hidden history of public healing able to inspire broad movements committed to social change, particularly in moments of crisis.

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Notes

1. Some of the sources that discuss these changes include Tamale (1999); Fick, Meintjes, and Simon (2002); Geisler (2004); Britton (2005); Bauer and Britton (2006); Hassim (2006), and Tripp et al. (2009).
2. Snyder and Tadesse (1995) were quoting from a speech of Bibi Titi Mohamed that was printed in a 1962 Report of the Kenya Women's Seminar.
3. The figures come from Economic Commission for Africa (1972).
4. For additional discussion of public healing, see Schoenbrun (2006) and Kodesh (2010). Berger (1994) explores fertility as a source of power in precolonial East Africa.
5. The quotation comes from *Bantu World*, October 8, 1995.