

Editorial: Feminism and Pan-Africanism

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This 20th issue of FA sets out to continue documenting and reflecting on feminist contributions to pan-Africanism, and the implications of pan-Africanism for feminism in Africa. Issue 19 indicated the variety of discourses and contributions of feminists in pan-Africanism. In this issue, our contributors explore just some of the ways in which neoliberalism and neo-colonialism have distorted and obscured feminist articulations of the pan-Africanism dream. While the previous issue clearly underlined the role and contribution of women in the pan-African intellectual and activist project (see Rhoda Reddock, Carole Boyce-Davis features in FA19), it became clear that post-colonial engagement on the continent comes out of a very different set of conditions. Today the continental mainstream pan-African agenda is dominated by powerful men who are mostly concerned about using conservative pan-African rhetoric to the service of their often anti-democratic purposes. The varied grassroots pan-African movements of the past have been reduced into a hegemonic pan-Africanism narrative that has become an institutionalised support for patriarchal values. Though the Organisation of African Unity transformed itself into the African Union in 2001, the institution remains dominated by the old boy's club of Presidents who utilise oppressive political cultures to remain in office beyond their constitutional terms, despite the mass resistance that we have witnessed this year in Burundi. Other leaders are engaged in conflicts that make a mockery of grassroots pan-African ideals dedicated to a liberated continent. The new hegemonic meanings of 'Africa' are being articulated by presidents from Mbeki to Mugabe who at times poetically expound on the renaissance of an African dream for freedom and at other times disfigure the transnational anti-imperialist thrust of pan-Africanism in order to entrench localised authoritarian rule, buttressing this

with nationalist, patriarchal, anti-feminist rhetoric that all too many of us remain gullible to.

Addis Ababa, the headquarters of the African Union, is home to something very different from the diasporan and early nationalist visions of the confederated state (advocated by Diop and Nkrumah), or the ancestral homeland that the Garveyites had hoped to return to, and no less different from the revolutionary society pursued by more radical, anti-capitalist movements in Guinea-Bissau, Algeria, and Southern Africa. Instead, we have a modern state-styled bureaucratic political structure. The architecture accompanying the African Union is grandiose, in keeping with the presidential culture that prevails. Perhaps in keeping with the economic malaise that has dogged African development, the building itself was fully paid for and constructed by the Chinese. It rises above the dusty impoverished streets of Addis, a cenotaph to the dreams of those who died for Africa's liberation. For the local inhabitants of Addis it is a nightmare of securitisation, with regular mass removals several times a year, whenever Africa's presidents are due to meet. With its walls adorned with portraits of male leaders, one could be forgiven for seeing the present-day incarnations of pan-Africanism as an elite men-only affair. Critics observe that, despite the efforts of the first woman Chairperson to create more civil society forums, by and large the OAU/AU still operates as if working class people never lived or died for freedom, never served the revolutionary pan-African cause of the liberation of all Africa's peoples from oppression, exploitation and marginalisation, both in their own nations, and in the world.

Beyond the AU, which, like the UN is constrained by its member states, African movements across the continent have their own visions, and interests for continental unity and solidarity. Even back in the era when the national liberation movements dominated, the transnational pan-African Women's Organisation (PAWO) advocated for women's liberation through a continental lens. PAWO worked alongside male-dominated nationalist movements, which women of that generation contributed to with numerous courageous actions, and often-times with their lives. This reality is a powerful fact of African history. Without the research and documentation work done by feminist activists and researchers this knowledge might well have been lost to us. Though the coverage of feminist struggles within academic circles has expanded due to a larger feminist presence in higher education and research,

challenges still remain. Pan-African discourses without class and gender analyses have limited, if any, relevance to women. It should be our goal to pursue political possibilities that would be opened up by revolutionary feminist pan-African discourses that work in the service and interests of African people across borders and language zones.

In this issue, disparate continental relationships to pan-Africanism are explored through considerations of neoliberal economics and their negative impact on the possibilities for a feminist pan-Africanism (Lyn Ossome), examples of transnational efforts to bring about changes in political leadership and peace-building (Cheryl Hendricks), and the creative work of feminist pan-Africanist writer, Ama Ata Aidoo (Delia Kumavi). We regret that our efforts to secure contributions from French-speaking feminists were not successful.¹

Ahikire, Musiimenta and Mwiine's article 'Making a Difference' shares the findings of research commissioned by ISIS-WICCE to investigate the challenges of moving beyond mere inclusion of women in political institutions. The Ugandan case study was carried out as part of a pan-African action, research and institution-building project currently being orchestrated by ISIS-WICCE, itself a transnational organisation that has worked across the continent's war zones for decades, and which sees the need to work towards a new political culture (FA 10 carried an interview with Ruth Ochieng, Executive Director, ISIS-WICCE). Africa remains marginalised and hampered by destructive conflicts that continue to be misrepresented and poorly understood. Luam Kidane provides an acerbic review of Goran Hugo Olsson's much-acclaimed-in-the-West documentary, taking issue with the persistent distortions, of both African realities, as well as the work of revolutionaries like Frantz Fanon. Also on the cultural front, Delia Kumavie's feature discusses key aspects of Ama Ata's work as a pan-African feminist writer, while Helen Yitah reviews Yaba Badoe's latest documentary 'The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo' (2014). Three years in the making, due to the travails of procuring funding for African film-makers, the film owes its completion to the community of supporters who responded to with a crowd-sourcing initiative, raising almost 50% of the funding. This, in conjunction with the support of the African Women's Development Fund, enabled the completion of this project.²

One thing that is clear is that throughout the history of women's cultural production and organising, women's ideas and movements express principles of continental unity and solidarity across colonial borders. The challenges of

continental organising have always been significant, particularly in relation to external actors. So for example, when it comes to resources, donors still prefer to channel resources along colonial borders. It seems that for all the 'grassroots' rhetoric, such agencies remain curiously reluctant to accept that colonially inscribed borders do not define African people – least of all the vast majority of who have no passports. African civilisations were not constrained by the borders of colonial, now post-colonial, states, nor was the radical pan-Africanism evident in those liberation movements that challenged subjection to the global expansion that was required to sustain Western capitalism, as Walter Rodney and many others have demonstrated. Unfortunately, even Africa's more revolutionary movements were to lapse into patriarchal state-centred politics and economic policies that ensured that national liberation did not mean liberation for women, or victory for pan-Africanist visions of a liberated Africa. Pan-African feminist movements have emerged since flag independence, as women have risen to the challenge of engaging in a whole new struggle, not merely to secure better political representation, but further – to challenge multi-faceted cultural and material oppressions based on gender and sexuality.

The long-term commitment of feminists in Africa to transnational organising predates the recent iterations of 'transnational feminism' in Western discourses, and has been further underlined during the last decade. The African Feminist Forum has mounted a series of remarkable continent-wide convenings that invoke pan-African traditions to promote solidarities and shared agendas (see Jessica Horn's review in FA 11). AAWORD/AFARD has been revitalised with a new generation taking up the leadership. FEMNET, ISIS-WICCE, ABANTU for Development and AAWORD/AFARD are among transnational African networks that continue to actively pressurise continental governance forward on questions of gender equality, carrying out training, policy advocacy, documentation, publication and other activities.

The persistence of material and cultural gender-oppression and injustice has generated post-colonial movements of women across the political spectrum. Liberal and neoliberal women seek representation through entry into the existing structures of power and leadership. Others apply critical analysis to demystify the patriarchal structures and cultures which have often failed women. On the basis of systemic analysis, radical feminists pursue transformative gender politics, often by organising autonomously and beyond

state structures to challenge war, poverty, lack of basic rights and injustices.

In sum, feminists in Africa share a regional experience of the incompleteness of the struggle for African liberation. We see the inter-connections between multiple oppressions, and are set to continue pursuing freedom in the firm belief that a just and humane order – another world – is possible. The struggle continues.

Endnotes

1. French, as colonial a language as English is only one challenge. What of the many indigenous languages omitted by scholars and writers, which only Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has been able to accomplish? The fact is that multilingualism requires another level of resources, and the means to address differences that are not merely linguistic, but also of philosophical and intellectual traditions. It requires the voluntary labour of our French-speaking sisters, our Arabic and our Portuguese sisters. We reiterate our open invitation, and call for the mobilisation this will take to implement.
2. Full disclosure: Amina worked with Yaba Badoe on this film, making it the second of two collaborative film projects, the first of which was 'The Witches of Gambaga', discussed and reviewed in FA 16 (www.witchesofgambaga.com)