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Contested Spaces: Gender, Governance and Women's Political Engagement in Postcolonial Africa

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Introduction

In order to develop a deeper understanding of indigenous African women's participation in the socio-economic and political development of Africa, this chapter is informed by Fanon (1986:98) and Muiu and Martin's (2009:205) arguments that change must be preceded by a complete break with the past, leading to the creation of a new culture and nation, and it must aim to create a basis for the invention of a new humanity representing new beginnings (see also Cherki 2006:197-200). The chapter therefore starts with an analysis of the evolutionary history of the indigenous African society as a state marked by contested transitions of colonialism and post-colonialism. The second part looks at the role of women in the indigenous political systems, followed by the effects of colonialism on indigenous African women. The third part looks at indigenous women in contemporary African society, highlighting the challenges and opportunities.

The Creation and Evolution of the African State

The indigenous people of Africa can be described as those people of Africa whose way of life, attachments or claims to particular lands and social and political standing in relation to other more dominant groups has resulted in their substantial marginalization within modern African states. The notion of state as defined here is a multi-layered entity from grass root communities to the government level. In the same vein, Africa refers to the continent and its islands, but this does not imply that Africa is homogenous as issues of class, ethnicity, gender and race inform both the dynamics that shape African identities and political systems.

The socio-political history of Africa can be divided into three interrelated periods: the pre-colonial referred to here as the indigenous political systems followed by the colonial and postcolonial political systems. Of significance is the fact that elements of the three historic periods interact in dialectical ways. As Mueni Wa Muiu and Guy Martin (2009:206) point out in *Fundi Wa Afrika: Toward a New Paradigm of the African State*, Africa's predicament can be explained by the systematic destruction of African indigenous states, the dispossession, exploitation and marginalization of African people through excessive historical processes, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, imperialism, colonialism and globalization. Using a multi-disciplinary historical lens Muiu and Martin present the evolution of African political systems ranging from ancient Egypt, Kush and Axum to the present with a particular focus on the predicament of Africa's political systems and institutions due to the interference by colonialforces from Europe.

Gibson in his book titled *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* explores the partitioning of Africa in the late nineteenth century that resulted in the conversion of African territories into European colonies. For him, those who became new African rulers were not accountable to the indigenous people; instead they governed through despotic and non-democratic processes. To improve the ability of the Europeans to exploit African resources for the benefit of the metropolitan economies, the colonialists brought together through force many African ethnic cleavages, each with unique languages, cultures, traditions, political and economic systems, to form an administrative unit that could be controlled effectively by the colonial government. As a consequence, the laws and institutions brought by the Europeans and imposed on Africans were despotic, exploitative and not designed to serve the interests and needs of the indigenous peoples. Colonial institutional arrangements were designed to maximize colonial objectives in the colonies and severely restrict African participation in both political and economic markets (Gibson 1999; 2003:204).

In those colonies in which there were substantial populations of European settlers, the abrogation of the property rights of Africans was more severe. In many of the colonies, settlers controlled the colonial state structures, and had plenty of influence on the functioning of government. As a result, colonial institutions were designed to advance the interests of either the resident European population and/or the citizens of the metropolitan cities. Significant limits were placed on the mobility of Africans in order to improve the availability of labour resources for European economic and industrial activities. Colonialism, thus, resulted in the marginalization of indigenous Africans.

The Status of African Women in Indigenous Political Systems

Histories of women usually bring with them women's worldviews about their daily life activities as part of their culture and identity. With regard to women's political position, the indigenous African political systems represent a period of

extensive variation in the political systems of ethnic groups in Africa. Historically, women were conspicuous in high places. They were queen mothers, queen sisters, princesses, chiefs and holders of offices in towns and villages; occasionally warriors, and, in one well known case, that of Lovedu of Nigeria the supreme monarch (Sudarkasa 1986:73, 91). Furthermore, it was almost invariably the case that African women were conspicuous in the economic life of their societies, being involved in farming, trade or craft production. Indigenous African women played an important role in many African cultures, including ancient Egypt and Nubia. Nubian women were very powerful, sometimes ruling Nubia as queens in their own right. For example, by 750 BC, when Nubia controlled Egypt, Nubian kings had adopted the practice of appointing their daughters as 'God's Wives of Amun' to represent their dynastic interests in southern Egypt. These women lived in ancient Thebes, one of the combined kingdoms of Egypt and Nubia. God's wives also served as administrators of the huge economic domains that belonged to the god Amun (Sudarkasa 1986:92-96).

Similarly, Egyptian men and women were legally equals, the position of women in Egyptian society was unique in the sense that they enjoyed much the same legal and economic rights as men. Social position was based not on gender, but on social class. It is important to realize that in terms of attitudes towards sexual equality Egyptians viewed their universe as a complete duality of male and female. The legal rights enjoyed by Egyptian women extended to all spheres that defined life in society. Women could manage and dispose of private property, including land, portable goods, servants, livestock and money as well as financial instruments such as endowments and annuities. A woman could conclude any legal settlement and appear as a contracting partner in a marriage or divorce. She was also entitled to sue at law (Tydesley 1995:124). Tydesley, points out a number of cases where Egyptian women had the right to bring lawsuits against anyone in open court, and there was no gender-based bias against them. Reference is made in the inscription of Mestoa court record of a long and drawn out private land dispute. Significantly, the inscription shows four things: (1) women could manage property and they could inherit trusteeship of property; (2) women could institute litigation; (3) women were awarded legal decisions and had decisions reserved on appeal; and (4) women acted as witnesses before a court of law. It is highly significant that women in Egypt women could enjoy all these freedoms without the need of a male representative. This amount of freedom was at variance with that of Greek women who required a designated male, called *kourios,* either her father, husband or brother to stand for her in all legal contracts and proceedings (Tydesley 1995:125-126).

The role, contribution and influence women played in ancient Egyptian society extended well beyond their daily life as full citizens and the afterlife, as women were portrayed in a very public way alongside men at every level of society, from co-coordinating ritual events to undertaking manual work. Women's roles in daily

life were demonstrated by the respected ideal of marriage, fertility and motherhood, the vital industry of weaving, as honoured priests in temples, dancers, mourners and even *pharaohs*. Central to the culture for the ancient Egyptian women was the belief in matrilineal descent and equal inheritance. While kingship was essentially a male activity in Ancient Egypt, queens always had an important role to play. Royal women grew very powerful in the New Kingdom and had influence on the country. Women even ruled Egypt on several occasions throughout history, either jointly with their sons, husbands or in their own right, and were formidable, decisive and capable in that role (Tydesley 1995:134-137). Egyptian women also enjoyed a degree of social and economic independence as they could legally own property. They were also financially independent, showing that women and men received equal pay for undertaking the same job.

Terborg-Penn and Rushing (1996:123) reveal the matrilineal and matrifocal culture of the Akan-speaking people of Ghana showing the powerful role of the Queen Mother, the economic power of the market women and the political leverage it gave them. These examples dispel the notion that African women were silent drudges who were subjected to bearing children, to the practice of female circumcision, and to accepting their husbands' polygamous privileges unquestioningly. Furthermore, in Liberia while all the indigenous groups are patrilineal and have ideologies of male dominance, the sexual division of labour in indigenous agriculture afforded women a great deal of power and formal authority. Women's labour is extremely valuable, as seen in the institution of bride-wealth that accompanies marriage. Indigenous political structures also have a dual-sex organization that has parallel systems of offices for men and women. For example, among the northwestern peoples of Liberia, this takes the form of the dual organization of the Poro and Sande secret societies. In the south and east, female councils of elders use a series of checks and balances on official male power. At the national level, the last transitional leader before the 1997 election was the first female head of state in Africa, Ruth Sando Perry. The presidential candidate who came in second to Charles Taylor was also a woman (Terborg-Penn and Rushing 1996:121).

The Effects of Colonial Policies on Indigenous African Women

Colonialism changed the *status quo* of the indigenous political systems. The process was arrogant because it was based on the belief that the dominating group is culturally and racially superior. Colonialism was totalitarian as it ruled every aspect of women's lives, from the economic to the political and social. Colonialists tightened control over indigenous people, in particular women, who were subjected to all forms of violence and corruption as cruelty informed all aspects of colonial rule (Harris 1987:23). Taking women and children hostage was a common practice to force men to provide labour or to pay taxes in kind. In

colonial Kenya, for example, colonial power used capital punishment as women were raped repeatedly by both African and British guards (Elkins 2005:256). The Maasai, a pastoral people in eastern Africa, are also a prime example of this shifting social organization, specifically the gendered identities and relationship between men and women. Though the Maasai society is complex, and gender is thus a necessarily shifting definition, it is clear that through specific colonial policies the rights, status and independence of Maasai women were undermined, overpowered or erased during the period of colonial rule. Through a variety of legal, economic, agricultural, religious and medical policies Maasai women were devalued and subjugated, removed of their previously equal and valued position in society (Dimandja 2004:3-4).

In his work on gender inequality titled *Many Faces of Gender Inequality*, Amartya Sen looks at the problems of discrimination against women in the development process, and on survivorship differentials between men and women under conditions of social discrimination against women. According to Sen:

> It is a known fact that the world in which we live in is characterized by deeply unequal sharing of the burden of adversaries between men and women. Gender inequality exists in most parts of the world from Japan to Morocco, from Uzbekinstan to the United States (Sen 1994:13).

With Sen's assertion, the assumption is that gender inequality is an inherent nature of all human societies. The perception, if clearly understood, is that there has always been the nature of inequality between men and women in our world, right from the inception of human society. Thus, if inequality characterizes gender rights from the consciousness of human existence, it implies that the claim of women's complementary position to men's roles in the uplifting of the family and societal development is not tenable. Records of history have shown, however, that there existed little or no significant gender inequality in traditional African society; rather, women's roles were complimentary to those of men. In indigenous Nigeria, for example, women had roles they played in economics, commerce and the politics of society. Many of them excelled and distinguished themselves in various endeavours, such as Queen Amina of Zaria and Madam Timbu of Abeokuta among others. But Africa's contact with European colonialism became the concatenation to gender inequality in Africa. Boserup (1970:87) captures the result of this contact succinctly:

> Today, the complimentary roles of women to men no longer exist in Africa, but Africa's women subordination to men and gender inequality continues in various forms.

In a similar vein, St Clair explains that upon contact with Europeans, indigenous people in Africa were confronted and started interacting with a society that had markedly different moral and value systems from their own. The colonial perspective of gender roles was fundamentally that women were subordinate to

men and that their roles were less important because they were confirmed within the family unit. It was them that had the decision making power, the wisdom and the knowledge to build their communities (St Clair 1994:19).

One of the consequences of the advent of colonialism is the erosion of gender equality that characterized traditional African society. Both men and women had different roles they played in families and society at large. But the case became different since the contact of Africa with colonialism. Hunter (1973:93) narrates this ordeal:

> But since the era of colonialism, women have been placed on the lower rungs of the proverbial ladder by the dominant forces of capitalism, and now globalization, which emphasizes this need for power, superiority and compartmentalization of roles and responsibilities with different values attached to them.

Going by Hunter's assertion, the face of the African society on gender equality changed owing to the influence of colonialism. Women began to suffer oppression from men as the shackles imposed by law, custom, religion and attitudes forced women to play the second fiddle. Women remained relegated to the last rung of the social and political ladder and were not given the opportunity to exercise power. Dennis (1974:88) aptly captures the situation:

> The religions of many Nigerian societies recognized the social importance of women by emphasizing the place of female gods of fertility and social peace, but women were also associated with witchcraft which appeared to symbolize the potential social danger of women exercising power uncontrolled by men.

What this indicates is that colonial influence restricted women's participation in Africa's social, economic and political affairs. Women thus had relatively or little opportunity to become involved in whatever they desired.

The colonial state was generally based on centralized authority. Strong governments were encouraged so as to attract and protect foreign investment. The African state that developed during colonialism reflected neither Western values nor African ones. Indigenous Africans were oppressed under the guise of law and order. At the same time the Africans did not develop any affinity with the new institutions since these were used to oppress them. Their own indigenous institutions were dismissed as useless and backward (Muiu & Martin 2009:210).

Nevertheless, despite the influence of colonialism in perpetuating oppression against women in Africa, some African women who were enlightened and powerful were able to organize and had a formidable resistance movement against colonial rulers. There were, for example, women like Dona Beatrice, who led a rebellion against the pre-Portuguese Congo leadership, Queen Amina of Zaria who was a prominent warrior, and the women of Eastern Nigeria who led the Aba revolt against British colonialists for inhuman taxation in the 1920s (Saje & Abubakar 1997:22).

The Construction of the Postcolonial State in Africa

The process of decolonization and independence offered Africans the first opportunity to establish appropriate laws and institutions for their societies. Basically, the state inherited from the colonial was supposed to be reconstructed to provide (1) more appropriate governance structures for the Africans and (2) economic systems that enhanced sustainable development in the post-independence period (Gibson 2003:14). Unfortunately, this was not undertaken because the decolonization process was reluctant and opportunistic and did not adequately address important issues associated with the effective participation of Africans in the post-independence political economy. The Europeans failed to adequately transform the critical domains such as the economy, bureaucracy, educational system and health and make them more appropriate for post-independence development. Instead, the colonialists engaged in wanton destruction of valuable economic infrastructures leaving behind economies that were not viable, and thus could not support the people. At independence, Africans inherited government and economic systems that were alien, designed for the exploitation of indigenous populations and not for the advancement of their development (Muiu 2008:206-216).

According to Muiu (2008:197) formal independence was given by the colonial powers, but it was devoid of content and had very strong strings attached. At independence, it was expected that the indigenous elites who had captured the evacuated structures of colonial hegemony would engage the people in proper constitution-making to reconstruct the neo-colonial state and establish governance and economic structures more friendly to African participation in development. As Muiu argues, Africa's post-independence leaders made no efforts to undertake proper reconstruction of the state. Instead, many of them engaged in opportunistic reform processes that increased their ability to monopolize both political and economic systems.

Analysis shows that at independence, Africans had to decide on two critical issues: (1) the choice of a political system; and (2) a development model. Arguing that the market-centred resource allocation systems inherited from the colonial state were not appropriate for African societies, many of the continent's leaders chose statism which emphasized (1) state regulation of economic activities; (2) state ownership of productive resources; (3) minimization of the functions of the market; and (4) the redistribution of income, supposedly in favour of the deprived poor and marginalized groups and communities. It was generally believed that statism would provide the state with more effective strategies to deal with mass poverty and deprivation. Furthermore, exploitative multinational corporations underpriced commodities as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund's conditionalities and permanent foreign economic bases replaced old forms of colonialism making genuine independence difficult (Muiu & Martin 2009).

Instead of removing African countries from the colonial yoke, independence tied them even closer to the colonial powers. It also silenced both men and women by giving them a sense of false hope. Now that they had their *Uhuru* (independence) all they had to do was to work hard and all other fruits would follow. In Kwame Nkrumah's words, 'seek ye first the political kingdom and everything shall be added unto it' (Harris 1987:28). When these benefits failed to materialize, the people blamed fate, themselves or their leaders. The African political bureaucratic elite, much like its colonial predecessor, maintained centralized states in which power remained vested in the executive, without a tradition of multi-party opposition. Such a state was undemocratic in the sense that it forced citizens, already treated as subjects, to submit to its powers by obeying its rules. Instead of uniting the diverse ethnic and social groups in nation building, the post-colonial state relied on the nationalist rhetoric to protect itself from the majority of the people. Political power became personalized, blurring the divide between rulers and states, and between the public and private spheres. Various foreign agencies controlled the economy while African leaders opted for political power. The African rulers became corrupt and the state's legitimacy was under threat as it faced an economic crisis. While the colonial state was a brutal and violent state, the post-colonial state was equally brutal and violent, but in more subtle and manipulative ways.

Claude Ake (1996:132) argues that the post-colonial African state is an instrument of political domination and economic exploitation of the people in the hands of the African elite, rather than an agent of democracy and development. According to Ake (1996:132, 139), a suitable democracy for Africa should have a people with some real decision-making power; a social democracy that emphasizes concrete political and economic rights; a democracy that puts as much emphasis on collective rights as it does on individual rights; a democracy that recognizes women and children's rights; and a democracy of incorporation which is as inclusive as possible. The development strategy derived from such a people-driven democratization process would be based on a popular development strategy of self-reliance, employment, confidence and self-realization rather than alienation (Ake 1996:140-42).

Building on the various works of other African scholars like Ake (1996), Muiu and Martin (2009) propose a new paradigm of the African state. This new paradigm which is called *Fundi wa Afrika*, meaning 'the builder' or 'tailor', uses a long historical perspective to present an exhaustive panoramic view of the issues at stake in Africa's economic, political and development so that Africans can get out of their predicament. Muiu and Martin analyse the creation and evolution of the African state from indigenous to colonial and post-colonial, showing how internal and external actors in Africa shaped the state and its leadership. They then prescribe what the ideal state and its leadership as determined by the Africans themselves should be (Muiu & Martin 2009:194, 212).

Like Fanon and Nyerere, Muiu and Martin urge Africans to be autonomous and self-reliant. In particular they call on Africans to get rid of their dependency syndrome, to cease to be supplicants in international economic forums and institutions; to take control of the resources within their borders for the sole benefit of every African; and to focus production on domestic needs rather than on export markets (Muiu & Martin 2009:195, 198, 214). Like Fanon, Muiu and Martin (2009:201-202) see African youth and women as key agents of the political change and socio-economic transformation in Africa. Finally, Muiu and Martin argue that a new stable and modern African state based on the five political pillars of the Federation of African states (FAS) should be built on the functional remnants of indigenous African political systems and institutions and should be based on African values, traditions and culture (Muiu & Martin 2009:206-216).

Gender and the Good Governance Debate

The good governance debate, understood as the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority to manage a nation's affairs, became visible in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War and with the failure of the structural adjustment plans (SAP) imposed on the countries of the South (World Bank 1992). The financial institutions and the international donors introduced Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) as a basic requirement for the achievement of economic, social and political changes considered necessary for development. *The Report of the World Summit Declaration on Social Development* (1995) in Copenhagen also recognized that democracy, transparency and accountability in the governance of all sectors of society are indispensable foundations for the realization of social and people-centred sustainable development. From this perspective, good governance and sustainable human development have become indivisible. Likewise, the Copenhagen Declaration recognized women's full participation guided by the principles of equality and equity as a priority and a fundamental element of economic and socio-political development. The Summit also emphasized a people-centred development approach aimed at eradicating poverty. Thus, with the thrust of the Fourth World Conference in Beijing (1995), gender inequality has become a central concern in good governance and sustainable human development discourses. However, it should be noted that women have not been able to fully reduce the generalization and to leave room for the concessions that states have made in response to women's needs. Each disappointing encounter with state machineries in the postcolonial era is evidence of more basic underlying problems that existed in the past. For example, from the time of political independence, women have received mixed messages from state institutions and bureaucracies. On the one hand, laws, policies and constitutions on women's rights and empowerment have been developed to guarantee women their rights and ensure equality with men in most African countries including Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, when women appeal to

these provisions, they are often accused of being anti-African, Westernized or elitist. When corruption, state patronage or local patriarchal practices are used by those in power to appease various constituents in the quest to seize or retain power, women's focus on their rights as citizens is seen as disruptive.

Analysis of good governance as a normative concept shows that it is shrouded in different but contested meanings as it is conditioned by actors with different interests, positions, mandates and priorities. Current definitions of good governance framed by their different approaches recognize the functional role of the different actors in the public and private sectors and how they interact at all levels including the local, national and international spheres (Jayal 2003:46; UNDP 2000). Similarly, a gender perspective on governance entails all of these aspects in order to make visible the multiple forms in which unequal power relations are expressed in each with a view to encouraging transformative interventions. Central to gender-responsive governance are democratic ways of power relations such as equity, equality, empowerment, human and women's rights. Democratizing state structures and strengthening citizen participation are considered to be fundamental to the promotion of gender-responsive governance systems. This gendered perspective implies redefining the governance concept so as to make it gender sensitive and ensuring that it includes the private and domestic spheres of life.

Gender and Indigenous African Democracies

Ancient Greece is widely regarded as the birthplace of Western democracy and political thought and the word democracy was coined from the Greek words *demos* (the people) and *kratia* (to rule), or ruling by the people for the people as opposed to rule by one of a few. Athenian democracy, however, did not extend equality to all persons and therefore allowed direct participation only by male citizens, a small political elite, to the exclusion of the majority of the populace consisting of women, slaves and foreign residents. Thus, direct participation in government by the privileged few constituted the thrust of Athenian democracy. The ancient Romans took a practical approach to the principle of democracy whereby social conditions that existed within their community determined the political institutions the Romans adopted in response to the problems as they arose (Spielvogel 1999:87).

In indigenous Africa, variants of the concepts of participatory or representative democracy evolved independent of the Athenian tradition and survived until the European invasion of Africa in the nineteenth century. In contemporary times, however, there is no acceptable scientific definition of liberal democracy although the main features are free competition among political parties, periodic elections and respect for the fundamental freedom of thought, expression and assembly (Makinda 1996:562). However, critics argue that reducing the concept of democracy to elections, multiparty system, and universal suffrage limits it to the western concept of political party formation along class and interest lines, a situation

which was absent in indigenous Africa until the colonial intrusion. Thus, contemporary Western insistence on multi-party politics does not consider indigenous cultural values and consequently multi-party politics degenerates into ethnic or communal conflicts (Makinda 1996:557). Makinda proposes that democracy should be conceived 'as a way of government firmly rooted in the belief that people in any society should be free to determine their political, economic, social and cultural systems. But the form it takes may vary from particular circumstances of any society'. Similarly David Miller points out that a broader concept of democracy should include a 'cultural dimension in which democracy represents a philosophy of people's lived experiences'. For him, African societies were socially and politically structured so that everybody participated according to their ability, age and status. African democracy transcended the realm of politics as it was embedded and constituted an integral part of the people's culture, which allowed everyone to experience a sense of belonging. It was a practical democracy as opposed to theoretical democracy, which required people to be more sensitive and responsible for each other's wellbeing.

David Held (1987:5) has delineated three basic variants of democracy, namely participatory democracy, liberal or representative democracy, and one-party democracy. While participatory democracy was used by ancient Athens, it involved all citizens in decision making about specific affairs; representative democracy involved elected officials who undertook to represent the interests of citizens within specific territories, and one-party democracy shunned multi-party competition. Critics argue that liberal democracy and its capitalist economy inevitably produces systematic inequalities and massive restrictions on real fundamental freedoms (ibid:12).

The understanding and practice of indigenous democracy can be premised on the maxim that 'three heads are better than one'. Implicit in this adage are notions of democratic values and tradition predicated on people's participation. Evidence shows that indigenous Africans experimented with various forms of monarchical and decentralized systems as many African indigenous governments were open and inclusive (Osuwu 1997:135). The structure of an indigenous African state implied that kings and chiefs ruled by consent and that the subjects were fully aware of the duties and could exert pressure to make the chief discharge his or her duties. Similarly, Ayittey (1998:91) observed that in a traditional political arrangement, no one was locked out of the decision-making process. One did not have to belong to one political party or family to participate in the process. Advocating a return to that kind of governance system, Ayittey (1998:91) noted that King Alfonso of the Kingdom of Kongo had Portuguese advisors and had allowed them to become members of the kingdom's electoral college that represented the interests of the Portuguese segment of the resident population.

The indigenous political system of the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria presents one of the most elaborate examples of participatory democracy in indigenous

Africa. Apart from a few centralized polities such as Nri, Onitsha, Oguta and Osomari that were monarchical systems, the Igbo operated a decentralized political organization (Nwabara 1979:22; Uchendu 2000:41-42). Uchendu isolated two layers of political structures among the Igbo: the village and the village group. The villages varied in size and population and the government at the village level was an exercise in direct democracy. Uchendu (2000:275-84) presents a detailed account of how Igbo village democracy operated. During general assembly, adult males known as *Ama-ala or Oha* directly participated in the legislative and decision-making process pertaining to public affairs. During this gathering, public matters are brought up and every male attendee who wants to contribute to the debate is entitled to a hearing. After thoroughly discussing the matter, the leaders from each lineage within the village retire for *izuzu* (consultation). Participation in *izuzu* is highly imperative and treasured; it is restricted to men of substance, wit, and prestige who possess the wisdom to analyse all strands of thought and suggest a compromise that the *Ama-ala* would accept. After the *izuzu*, a spokesperson is selected, based on his power of oratory, persuasive talents and his ability to pronounce a verdict. This decision is either accepted by the *Ama-ala* by general acclamation or rejected outright, and in the event of the latter, the view of the assembly prevails by popular consent.

Women have their own assemblies, which follow the male pattern. The very powerful political roles of African queens and queen mothers in the indigenous society remain very instructive. While colonial officials portrayed African women as having no role in political affairs, for Maillu (1997:255), this erroneous notion about African women exhibited European cultural male chauvinism that was carried over to Africa. Nevertheless, like ancient Greeks, the village system was analogous to the citystates as each village was autonomous and sovereign in most matters affecting it and tolerated no interference or dictation from any other group. At the village-group level, consisting of several villages, a representative system in the form of modern representative democracy evolved whereby each village elected or appointed its own delegate to the village- assembly. At all levels, the denominators were consultation, participation and consensus.

Another example is the indigenous political structure of Gikuyu (Kikuyu) of Kenya, which represented some form of participatory democracy. Among the Kikuyu as among the Igbo, there was no sole paramount ruler; eligible adults constituted the legislative assembly. In the eyes of the Gikuyu people, Jomo Kenyatta (1959, cited in Khapoya 1998:62), asserted that 'the submission to a despotic rule of any particular group, white or black, is the greatest humiliation to mankind'. According to Khapoya, the origins of the Gikuyu democracy are embodied in their historical-political legend. According to this legend, a despotic monarch who was ultimately overthrown by the people initially ruled Gikuyuland. After his overthrow, the government of the country was at once changed from despotism to a democracy that was in keeping with the wishes of the majority of

the people. This popular revolution is known as *itwika*, derived from the *twika,* which signified the breaking away from autocracy to democracy (ibid:63).

Accordingly, government among the Kikuyu villages was vested in the elders of one generation or age known as *riika.* The accession to power of a new generation took place at recurring intervals, inaugurated by the handing over ceremony known as *ituika.* The determination of the period of a generation was contingent on the composition of society at the time. However, once most of the firstborn grandsons of the ruling generation were circumcised, the generation prepared to relinquish power to the next generation. Circumcision was the only qualification, which conferred recognition of manhood and the full right of citizenship. Legislative duties were conducted in the senior rank of the elders' lodge representing the various constituent villages. Consultation, representation and consensus, as in the Igbo system, were the main features of the Kikuyu indigenous political system (Khapoya 1998:64).

The Buganda Kingdom of Uganda presents another good example of an 'absolute king' whose powers were checked by parliament. While the *Kabaka* (the king) was in principle supreme, he ruled the kingdom in conjunction with a prime minister (katikkiro) and a parliament (lukiiko). Members of parliament were made up of the chiefs of outlying districts that comprised the kingdom. Although in theory the *kabaka* was not bound to take the advice of the *katikiro* and the *lukiiko,* in practice he could not afford to ignore them. Kiwanuka (1972:125) pointed out how Kabaka Mutesa learned to consult his chiefs on questions of great national importance such as war, peace and religion. The *Kabaka* did not become king through an automatic succession arrangement, as one would expect in a monarch; instead he was elected from among a number of competing princes who equally had legitimate claims to the throne (Khapoya 1998:63).

Role of Women in Peacemaking and Peacebuilding

Although the indigenous African society was organized and structured in ways that encouraged cohesiveness and peaceful coexistence, from time to time, like in any other human society, conflicts were experienced. Conflicts arose between individuals, within a family, between different families or inhabitants of different communities.

To manage such conflicts indigenous societies in Burundi, for example, had well-organized regulatory machinery in which women generally played a major part. Under this system a woman was recognized as having an advisory role, behind the scenes, mainly where her husband was concerned, and as playing an active part in strengthening solidarity and social harmony. Examples from Burundi show that while Burundian women traditionally did not hold public office of any kind as men dealt with matters outside the home, there were some women such as Nteturuyo, also known as Nzirikane, who took on political and administrative

responsibilities of either going to war or holding chieftainship positions (Ntahobari & Ndayiziga 2003:16). Women were expected to set an example, within their families and in their immediate communities. Their role in relation to their husbands was an important one, as they were to advise them and be a constructive influence on them in the decisions they made. When conflict threatened to break out, a woman would adopt her advisory role in order to prevent conflict from escalating. She would counsel her peers, where the matter involved women, or through her husband in a disagreement between them.

Women also made significant contributions to facilitating peace within the family community. For example, Ntahobari and Ndayiziga (2003:19-20), observed that a group of wise and respected Burundian women of experience known as *Inararibonye* 'those who have seen many things' intervened whenever women were in conflict. The *Inararibonye* were selected for their leadership qualities and integrity. When a dispute arose, they held a hearing of the parties in an isolated spot, known as *Mukatabesha,* literally 'the place where no lies are told', and after deliberation, passed judgement. They mediated between both sides and would lay down a course of behaviour, particularly, for the party in the wrong. The *Inararibonye* took a similar role when a woman behaved badly in wider society, in cases of insolence, drunkenness and delinquency, and would be taken to the *katabesha* to receive advice from *Inararibonye.*

A study by Valerie Ngongo-Mbede (2003:27), on traditional mediation by women in Cameroon showed that peace was equated with freshness, health, well-being, harmony, calm and tranquillity. Because women were the main actors with respect to peace in the community, the education of girls was primarily based on peace. Keeping this system of education enabled the girls to supplement the role played by their mothers by mediating in small conflicts that could hinder good domestic management. In polygamous marriage, the first wife (called *Dada Sare* among the Fulbe, *Kindag* among the Bassa, and *Ekomba* among the Besi) was the chief mediator of conflicts in the family. She was responsible for restoring peace and tranquillity in situations of conflict between the husband and one of his wives. In the Beti and Bassa communities, the first wife was sometimes invited to deliberate with the men in the Assemblies. As a woman, being present in what was essentially masculine forums was unique as it gave her the confidence and responsibility to 'soften' sentences considered to be too severe or which could lead to revolt or revenge (ibid:29).

Many communities afforded a special place in society to paternal aunts in matters of crisis management and conflict resolution. Among the Bakossi of Cameroon, for example, it was paternal aunts who were responsible for reconciling the individuals involved in conflict. Other categories of women played the same role in other societies, for example, in the Lua Mfumte society in the North West Province of Cameroon, the Nkwuyi women took part in discussions aimed at resolving conflicts. This community also has the very influential and feared secret

society called the Djudju whose members initially were exclusively women. The role of the Djudju women was to maintain peace in the community. One of the characteristics of the Djudju mask was that it could sometimes become very dangerous and very aggressive. As a result, when its power was unleashed, only pregnant women or recently delivered women could calm it as children represented a potent symbol of peace in society (ibid:30).

Not only did women mediate conflicts between human beings, but they could also serve as intermediaries in conflicts between human beings and nature. In the land of the Mungo, of the Cameroon, and more particularly among the Mbo, any misfortune occurring in the community brought the latter to seek mediation of the *Kalbia,* who were married women. Not every married woman though was a *Kalbia*. Only those women recognized by the clanswomen as having supernatural powers (the gift of clairvoyance, for example) became a *Kalbia*. Once discovered, the *Kalbia* was associated with all meetings and consultations. She had a very wide range of actions, she could determine the causes of the evil undermining society and hindering peace, and she could ward off fate between disruptive forces and society by restoring peace (ibid:31).

In the land of the Beti, in Cameroon, the Mangissa and the Eton had what was known as the *Mbabi*. This was a purification rite aimed at restoring peace. The initiative came from the women when they realized that peace did not exist in the community, when people were ill, and were experiencing drought, hunger or epidemics. In the philosophy of these communities, such a succession of misfortunes was not fortuitous. It was the sign that love and peace were absent from the community, prompting women to organize a *Mbabi*. The *Mbabi* always ended with the drinking of the mystic potions by each of the members at the meeting. Thus, for the Cameroonian women of the past and those of the present as in the rest of Africa, peace is not an abstraction. It is a reality that is very rich, but also very fragile and has to be nurtured (ibid:32).

In line with the above, Mathey *et al* (2003:41) observed that in indigenous central African societies the elderly were greatly respected and in particular elderly women. Elderly women were respected by all, as they played key roles in crisis management and conflict management. For example, if war broke out among the Zande, the oldest women of the clan would go to meet the opposing clan, and interpose themselves between the fighters in order for them to see reason. When words proved fruitless, the women would threaten to expose their nakedness or to go down on their knees as a way of signifying a curse for those who bore the responsibility for such violent acts. Because of the respect that the enemy soldiers had for women, they would usually put down their weapons before war and violence erupted.

Again, in indigenous African societies peace germinates and flourishes only on the manure provided by the presence of a number of key African cultural values. However, the Somali culture embodies many conflicting and contradictory norms,

which can encourage conflict and war-making through the glorification of warriors and men at war. For example, warriors are perceived and idolized as heroes and some Somali women play a crucial role in perpetuating war through song, dance and poem. However, despite the embodiment of some cultures that fuel violence, Somali indigenous societies also respectthe norms and values of tolerance, honesty, respect for elders, communality and mutuality, compassion, regard for due discretion, gentleness, modesty, self-control, moderation, flexibility and open-mindedness (Mohamed 2003:42-43).

Mohamed (2003:89) observed that in Somalia which functions under three interrelated authority systems of customary law, religion and the state, emphasis is placed on customary law which encourages people to uphold the principles which constitute the basic pillars underpinning the culture of peace through tolerance, inviolability, respect for human rights and equality. Through the customary law of inviolability, the killing of women, children, the elderly and the sick is forbidden and the offender is considered a coward and ostracized. In addition to their central role of managing all household chores, caring and educating the family, Somali women occupied powerful positions in society. Somali folk tales chronicle the reign and legacy of Queen Arraweelo, whose inspiration encouraged Somali women to resist a multiplicity of injustices and inequities perpetrated against women. Thus, while they were the backbone of the struggle against injustices and colonialism, Somali women also contributed to peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation through song and poem. For example, Faduma Qasim Hilowle and Zeinab Hagi Ali are renowned for speaking on behalf of Somali women through peace songs such as:

> We the women
> Have a complaint against men
> In the name of marriage, love and friendship,
> We the women
> Demand peace in the country
> We demand security and prosperity
> The boys that we bring up
> We want them to grow up in peace

> (Faduma Qasim Hilowle & Zeinab Hagi Ali, 2003:100)

Somali women also represented symbols of peace, through rituals practiced when fighting clans resulted in death. Steps were taken to organize the collection and payment of blood money through marriages involving the two conflicting parties, where a girl was offered as compensation for the death of the male relative. The main objective of the marriage was to heal the wounds and to cement the settlement. In support of this practice, the Somali say 'Where blood is shed, it must be soaked with birth fluids'. The symbolic meaning in this ritual is that the

girl offered as reparation will give birth to sons who will fill the void created by the man who was killed. Also marriage was meant to build bridges between families and clans, thereby minimizing the possibility of conflict recurring. However, in most modern societies such practices are being challenged by human rights women activists who perceive such practices as violating the rights of the girl child (Mohamed 2003:100). Women in modern Somali society play a critical role of empowering women, promoting tolerance and non-violence.

Conclusion

The conceptual issues outlined in this chapter focus attention on three concerns: the need to keep in mind at all times African historical experiences; the interaction between the indigenous, the colonial and the postcolonial and the role of women as agents of change in contemporary Africa. Informed by *Fundi wa Afrika*, a logical inference of the study is the need for the reconstruction of the African state based on the African cultures, history, values, traditions, priorities and needs in a manner that will be responsive to the challenges of the people. Any system that condemns women to violence, poverty and disease must be overhauled as most indigenous African systems respected women. As such the African state must put women back in the rightful places in society as economic, political and social actors. Thus, tackling the barriers to women's involvement in formal political systems remains a crucial aspect of achieving greater gender equity in political participation. Yet, addressing gendered exclusions with respect to political participation also necessitates looking beyond electoral politics to gendered relations of power within society and the so-called private sphere. One of the central tasks of feminist critics and activists has been to interrogate the entrenched public/private divide that confines the activity of politics to the masculinised public sphere while defining the feminised private sphere as a distinctly apolitical realm. Finally, women's participation in positions of power and decision making is a complex process that calls for deeper analysis of the multi-layered factors that constrain democratic spaces for women's active participation at all levels of society.

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