

# Editorial: Feminism and pan-Africanism

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In May 2013, the African Union (AU) officially celebrated its 50th anniversary, adopting ‘Pan-Africanism and Renaissance’ as their theme. Marked with a lavish gala, the summit brought dignitaries from all over the world, the occasion saw Africa’s Heads of State congratulating themselves on rising Gross Domestic Products (GDPs), visibly excited at the prospects of increased foreign investment. Their enthusiasm contrasts starkly with more sobering realities that belie pan-Africanist visions. Instead of the liberation pursued by generations of Africans, the continent has entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century with increasing inequalities and social abjection facing the majority of Africa’s peoples, crudely indexed by poor performances on the Millennium Development Goals (2005-2015). Africa’s lack of progress on what might be better referred to as the “Minimal Development Goals,” reveals the unpalatable scenario of an African continent characterised by the extreme social injustices that economists refer to as “growth without development”. The implications for the multiply oppressed majorities of African peoples are dire.

What are the conditions that legitimise a development trajectory that sees social injustices and inequalities – among them those based on gender and sexuality – deepen while GDPs grow? How should feminist movements challenge the yawning gap between the pan-African vision for Africa in the millennium, and grim material, social and political realities? How does this gap relate to the contradictions between rhetoric and reality with regard to the liberation of African women? Issues 19 and 20 of *Feminist Africa* ask: what can a radical pan-African engagement contribute to the transformation of systemic oppressions, including those based on gender, which continue to sustain the under-development of a resource-rich African continent?

Feminists have a responsibility to critically appraise just what half a century of African liberation from colonialism and institutionalised pan-Africanism has delivered to women. Indeed, feminists ask the same question on behalf of all those African peoples who are not part of the global capitalist elite or their local political and military functionaries. Hard struggles have seen women's movements achieve modest legal and policy inroads (on paper at least) and gain some (often problematic) forms of visibility, but the overt oppression and exploitation of most women continue. There is a troubling irony in the sudden "discovery" of African women by the AU, multinational corporations and development agencies, half a century after women actively participated in independence struggles and contributed significantly to African liberation movements. However, the terms of this new-found recognition need to be scrutinised. Some such questioning occurred in the parallel civil society sessions convened by Nkosozana Dlamini Zuma, first woman Chair of the AU, who also set up a panel to speak directly to the Heads of State in a novel attempt to be more inclusive. By way of example, this issue of *Feminist Africa* includes Dzodzi Tsikata's closing statement to the intellectual debate convened by CODESRIA to generate a pan-African research agenda.

In an article revisiting the gender politics of the liberation movement in Guinea Bissau, historian Aliou Ly asks: "Is the recognition, by Africa's Heads of State, of women as agents and equal partners true or is it just a hoax?" Unfortunately the prevailing neoliberal construction of African women as the capitalist world's latest "emerging market" is more than a hoax. It places women in particular relation to corporate-led globalisation, within which Africa remains a source of raw materials essential to the functioning of silicon valleys all over the world, while being further captured as a market from which profits can be made. Neoliberal constructions of "gender equality" set up women – most of whom are still impoverished – as fair game for profit-seeking investors interested in them only as fee-paying consumers of privatised public services. Critical perspectives argue that the current GDP data heralds a renewed scramble for the wealth of Africa. There is evidence of massive land and resource grabs jeopardising communal access to land and water, as the interests of industrialised agri-business corporations prevail to secure monopolies through patents, and create new market dependencies among the impoverished.<sup>1</sup>

Corporate exploitation runs counter to the interests of over a billion African citizens, just as it has since the early encroachments of colonial

mercantilism. Facilitated by neoliberal economic doctrines, the international financial interests that have come to dominate the global economy undermine the capability of states that many women's movements still call on to protect the interests and rights of African peoples. However, with public institutions and services severely weakened (with the problematic exception of the military – discussed in FA Issue 10) – African states are less able than ever to provide basic human security, or protect their lands and peoples against pillage-for-profit. Market-driven development – in which many government functionaries and home-grown profiteers are complicit – thus looks set to put paid to revolutionary pan-African dreams of unity, freedom and justice, dreams which feminists in Africa have consistently embraced.

And yet, African peoples are everywhere resisting these onslaughts. Women are tenaciously organising across colonial borders in unprecedented numbers, enabled by independent networks and technological adeptness. Thus we see women taking part in large-scale popular uprisings such as those in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as leading their own movements to challenge agri-business and end conflicts. Feminist-led struggles are challenging widespread violence, deepening their solidarity with women in war-zones, working across the class and educational spectrums, as well as with the various gender non-conforming and queer communities who are the latest target of state-orchestrated violences.

This is the context in which FA Issues 19 and 20 provide a platform for critically examining current iterations of pan-Africanism. Our contributors consider which pan-Africanist legacies are being invoked by governments, civil society organisations and social movements, to ask whose interests these invocations are serving. Is today's gender rhetoric informed by women's substantive but neglected contributions to pan-Africanist movements? Contributors to this issue discuss these contributions, exploring past and present engagements between feminist and pan-Africanist discourses to offer a variety of insights on these questions.

The first pan-African liberation movements were the uprisings of African peoples, in the form of armed and unarmed rebellion, resisting colonial occupation and enslavement while pursuing visions of 'Black Republics' that first came to fruition in the Haitian Revolution. As CLR James notes: "The only place where Negroes did not revolt is in the pages of capitalist historians" (CLR James, 1939). Pan-Africanism can therefore be understood

as an insurrectionary discourse that emerged in direct opposition to European capitalism, manifest in the worst forms of human exploitation, and occupation. Women who challenged enslavement and colonisation were thus also in defiance of imperialist patriarchal culture. Feminist pan-Africanism emerges as the visionary ideological frame of its times, to fast become a transnational political movement concerned with nothing less than the complete liberation of all African people.

The pan-African movement spanned the 20<sup>th</sup> century ideological spectrum, ranging from more right-wing, pro-capitalist, race-based nationalism to more revolutionary socialist discourses advanced by men like George Padmore, Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Amilcar Cabral, Stephen Bantu Biko and Frantz Fanon, all of whom locate Africa's underdevelopment in capitalism, challenging the class system, racism and in the case of Fanon in particular, race-based nationalism. Yet an accurate historic record must include women like Mable Dove Danquah, Adelaide Caseley-Hayford, Bibi Titi Mohamed, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Gambo Sawaba, Muthoni Likimani, Thenjiwe Mtintso, Djamila Bouhired, Charlotte Maxeke, Albertina Sisulu, and the other uncounted numbers of women who mobilised for Africa's liberation. The contributions of Ly, Reddock and Boyce Davies explore women's involvement in anti-imperialist struggles, illustrating the dynamic conjuncture between feminism, nationalism and pan-Africanism in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, thus interrupting and transforming the hegemonic androcentric narratives of pan-Africanist history that erase women's participation. Boyce Davies provides a compelling discussion of the pan-Africanist antecedents of today's transnational Black feminism, cautioning against the tendency towards identity-based analyses that neglect the material basis of inter-related gender and class exploitations to depict a mythical, pre-colonial Africa devoid of gender contradictions.

It has often been observed that African liberation movements included an understanding of the importance of women's emancipation, at least at the level of discourse. However, the fact that class oppression was often given primacy in the false 'hierarchy of oppressions' points to a level of expediency that may be unsurprising given that nationalist movements pre-date contemporary understanding of the manner in which multiple vectors of oppression interact, to facilitate colonial divide-and-rule. So while there was no material basis for neglecting to challenge the oppression of women,

male domination of Africa's liberation movements commonly foiled women's liberation by treating 'the women question' as divisive. The conservative import of this discourse became evident with the establishment of nation-states that re-institutionalised colonial exclusions of women. The new ruling elites unashamedly re-entrench patriarchal power, so leaving it to feminist movements to pursue the liberatory principles of a pan-Africanist vision of an Africa that works for all African peoples.

The undocumented gender politics of the PAIGC between 1956 and the assassination of Amilcar Cabral by Portuguese secret police in 1974 are discussed by Aliou Ly, who draws on interviews with former freedom fighters that show how women and men in the PAIGC leadership held a range of positions on 'the woman question' rather than a consensus. Two other features trace trajectories that illustrate how women's movements have variously articulated and pursued the unfinished business of liberation for Africa's women in the post-independence period. Josephine Ahikire's article offers critical but reflections on Ugandan feminism, observing how the ruling National Resistance Movement has actively mobilised women to its service creating new contradictions for women to engage. The situation has given women some space, but at a cost, yielding a scenario that is quite different from that of Sudan, explored here by Amira Osman. Osman discusses how women initially organised to redress colonial exclusions of women from education and the formal economy. She proceeds to trace the evolution of the Sudanese women's movement from the early days of the socialist-inspired Sudanese Women's Union, to its banning in the 1980's by the Islamist state, through to the current challenges posed by an ethno-nationalist politicisation of 'Arab' identity and Islam that run counter to any notion of African unity, while manifesting in the systematic repression of women's resistance.

Trinidadian scholar-activist Rhoda Reddock traces the complementary and contradictory relationship between early 20th century diaspora, pan-Africanism and feminism in the British Caribbean colonies. She excavates Amy Ashwood Garvey's substantive intellectual and political contribution to the pan-African movement, providing evidence that many of the more radical pan-African ideas were initiated by women, sometimes in partnership with men. Amy Ashwood Garvey, who was briefly married to Marcus Garvey during the emergence of the Garveyite movement, is only now being credited as its co-founder. Eric McDuffie's book *Sojourning for Freedom* is reviewed

here by Maxine Craig because this too makes new inroads into the history of black feminist contributions to left politics in the West, showing that Amy Ashwood was in the company of other women activists at the centre of early to mid-twentieth century freedom struggles. But how many of us are familiar with the lives and work of Audley “Queen Mother” Moore, Louise Thompson Patterson, Thyra Edwards, Bonita Williams, Williana Burroughs, Claudia Jones, Esther Cooper Jackson, Beulah Richardson, Grace P. Campbell, Charlene Mitchell, Sallye Bell Davis, discussed in this work?

Kenne Mwikya’s standpoint *Unnatural and Un-African*, challenges the heterosexist and homophobic rhetoric of Africa’s present-day political leaders, with a focus on the Ugandan example. He argues that pan-Africanist ideas are selectively invoked as populist tools that appeal to colonial insecurities over African culture in order to re-direct public attention away from economic neo-colonialism. Contributors to Ekine and Abbas’ seminal edited volume *The Queer African Reader*, reviewed here by Danai Mupotsa, starkly reveal the analytic and strategic challenges posed by the obfuscatory cultural politics of heterosexism and anti-feminism, as do many of the contributors to *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure*, judiciously reviewed here by Nana Sekyiamah.

Pan-Africanism as theory and praxis is in constant dialectic with other African political and intellectual thought including socialism, Black consciousness, Black nationalism, African queer thought and activism, as well as in polemic counter-position with present-day manifestations of imperialism. The feminist movements on the African continent are shaped by pan-Africanist visions, yet they pursue a critical engagement both with the bureaucratic and political structures of the African Union, and with the broad range of political and civil society formations, calling them to account in numerous ways, thus continuing the more progressive possibilities that pan-Africanism offers Africans in contemporary times.

## Endnotes

1. Africa’s lands are being auctioned at alarming rates: with 15 to 20 million hectares of farmland being subjected to negotiations or transactions following the food price crisis of 2008.

## References

- C.L.R James Revolution and the Negro, in the *New International*, 1939.