Beyond an Epistemology of Bread, Butter, Culture and Power

Mapping the African Feminist Movement

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> For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct or framework … Feminism is structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever-shifting local and global exigencies.
>
> — Nnaemeka, 2003; 378

The objective of this study is to identify and frame the elements that make up African feminisms and the African feminist movement. In this task, I borrow Sperling, Ferree and Risman's definition of feminism as, "that in which participants explicitly place value on challenging gender hierarchy and changing women's social status, whether they adopt or reject the feminist label" (2001, p. 1158). As stated in the preceding quote, African feminisms are shaped by a variety of contexts, movements and historical moments; a reading of African feminist movements must be grounded in these elements.

Thus, the African feminist movement is characterized by: an ongoing process of self-definition and re-definition; a broad-based membership; a resistance to the distortions and misrepresentations by Western global feminism; a 'feminism of negotiation'; as well as efforts to reconcile power dynamics on the continent, nationally and within the movement.

Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYW), Kenya's oldest and largest women's organization, embodies the tensions and transformations inherent in African feminisms. MYW personifies African feminisms as it enjoys a broadly-based membership. It is also continuously engaging in processes of definition and re-definition; although the organization pursues feminist ideals, it is unwilling to subscribe to the label of 'feminist', as within the Kenyan context this is coded as Western, anti-religious and anti-man. Additionally, MYW has periodically contended with issues of power brokerage within the movement and nationally. Lastly, MYW undertakes a 'feminism of negotiation,' tackling specific cultural issues in a manner which emphasizes and is embedded in the emancipatory elements of Kenyan traditions.

This paper shall map the evolution of the African feminist movement from its genesis in pre-colonial women's activities and social organizations to its contemporary incarnation in women's organizations. Much of the literature shall draw specifically from examples in Eastern and Western Africa. The majority of early theorizing on African feminisms originates from West African scholars in the Diaspora or on the continent. As such, this study shall draw from historical examples from East and West Africa, and shall be framed by the theories produced mainly by West African scholars.

The African feminist movement, in spite of its internal lack of homogeneity, often posits itself as counter-canonical to certain tendencies of mainstream Western feminism and encompasses various sometimes-oppositional strands, which inform each other and create a reflexive internal dialogue (Edwin, 2006). By referring to Western feminisms, the aim is not to essentialize the different

strands of feminism stemming from the Global North, but to draw attention to the spatial distinctions between African feminisms and Western feminisms, the relationship between the two, as well as the power asymmetries, distortions and co-optations that have characterized this relationship. In light of these tensions and history, it remains difficult for African feminists to unite in 'true global sisterhood' with feminists of the Global North (Nnaemeka, 2005). Such 'global sisterhood' remains somewhat elusive as the aforementioned distortions, co-optation and silencing persist.

African feminisms cast a critical eye on the processes of colonization and on post-coloniality with regards to writing, activism and theorizing around Africa. African feminisms also point to a diversity of tactics, theories and standpoints, especially in the interplay between scholarship, practice and activism and how these inform each other.

The first section of this essay will look at the concept of social movements and what it means for African feminisms. The second part of the paper then explores a definition of African feminisms. This is followed by a mapping of women's movements in African history and an examination of gender and social organization and the impact of processes of colonization and nationalist struggles thereon. Colonialism transformed traditional modes of social organization, predicated for the most part on status and kinship, rather than gender. Additionally, nationalist struggles created a space for women's organizing within the independence movement. These were largely ghettoized or co-opted into the state machinery of primarily single-party states after independence (Wanyande, 2009). Lastly, the paper looks at the evolution of women's organizations and their contemporary representation as embodied by the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization from its origins in the colonial era until the single-party state period of the 1990s.

Maendeleo Ya Wanawake is an interesting example of a home-grown broad-based women's organization that cuts across social

class differences. It is led by middle class women but has a large rural base made up of women in trading and agricultural occupations (Nzomo, 1989). Maendeleo Ya Wanawake was allied with the dominant nationalist party but has built an extensive nation-wide independent base of women's groups genuinely involved in large-scale zonal mobilization of women (Nzomo, 1989). Because of its broad-base it is ideologically eclectic and is better defined as an 'umbrella' of women's issues that recognize its multi-class, multi-regional and multi-ethnic composition.

A brief statement on methodology is in order. This paper is not a comprehensive study of African feminisms or feminist movements but rather an exploration of how certain strands within the broad movement are defining and asserting themselves in response to certain dominant trends emerging from conventional Western feminism. It is based mainly on content analyses, literature reviews and examination of secondary sources that profess this counter-canonical trend. The aim is to outline the differences and enrich our analysis of the broad range of alternatives that constitute the feminist movement and feminisms.

African Feminisms

The project of circumscribing the parameters of a social movement is a potentially difficult one to undertake. Movements by their very nature evolve and are subject to changing objectives, goals and contexts. Political scientist Cyrus Zirakzadeh defines social movements as:

> – A group of people who consciously attempt to build a radically new social order;
> – Involve people of a broad range of social backgrounds; and
> – Deploy politically confrontational and socially disruptive tactics. (1997, p. 4)

While this paper examines an African feminist movement, it recognizes that African feminisms are multi-faceted, multi-purpose, and reflect the diverse nature of feminist organizing, practice and scholarship on the continent.

In her discussions on African feminism, Nigerian scholar and feminist Obioma Nnaemeka notes:

> It will be more accurate to argue not in the context of a monolith (*African feminism)* but rather in the context of a pluralism (*African feminisms)* that captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, and localized realities conditioning women's activism/movements in Africa...the inscription of feminisms...underscores the heterogeneity of African feminist thinking and engagement as manifested in strategies and approaches that are sometimes complementary and supportive, and sometimes competing and adversarial. (1998a, p. 5)

As such, African feminisms are in continuous flux; engaging with the context in which they are wrought, they resist elements of Western feminism which do not speak to the African experience. They are in constant negotiation with elements of custom and tradition and the goal of emancipating women. Lastly, they wrestle with the various power dynamics implicit in the movement, as well as those outside of it.

Important variants of African feminisms resist the importation of certain European feminist paradigms into African society because the latter are defined by the struggles and contexts from which they emerge. One such notion is the idea of the social construction of gender. According to Oyewumi (2005), understandings of the social construction of gender as a means by which all women are oppressed universally and across the world does not take into account variations in histories, world-views and social organization across the globe. Indeed, women are not all socialized in the same way. Additionally, the primacy given to gender as the 'primary unit of social analysis' may not be universal according to all cultures and worldviews. The emphasis on gender as a means of delineating so-

cial positionality does not occur the same way everywhere. Oyewumi writes:

> From a cross-cultural perspective, the implications of Western bio-logic are far-reaching when one considers the fact that gender constructs in feminist theory originated in the West, where men and women are conceived oppositionally and projected as embodied, genetically driven social categories...On what basis are Western conceptual categories exportable or transferable to other cultures that have a different cultural logic? This question is raised because despite the wonderful insight about the social construction of gender, the way cross-cultural data have been used by many feminist writers undermines the notion that differing cultures may construct social categories differently. (2005, p. 11)

She further asserts, "In Yoruba society...social relations derive their legitimacy from social facts not from biology. The bare biological facts of pregnancy and parturition count only in regard to procreation, where they must. ...the nature of one's anatomy did not define one's social position" (2005, p.13).

Nnaemeka (2004) coins the term nego-feminism to speak to the tensions and aspirations of African feminisms. She speaks of this as the feminism of compromise, contending with the multiple aspects of patriarchy on the continent and dealing with this in an African-specific way:

> First nego-feminism is the feminism of negotiation; second nego-feminism stands for "no ego" feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance. African feminism[s] (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. (2004, p. 22)

Thus, nego-feminism is a guide for dealing with the feminist struggles that occur on the continent; it considers the implications of patriarchal traditions and customs and aims to dismantle and negotiate around these. Nego-feminism also hopes to detach personal gain and pride from the overall goal of achieving equity for women –

thus 'no ego'. This is not always the case, as with all ideological con-
structs, the practice of nego-feminism on the ground is subject to
emotionality, personal goals and even ego. However, aspirations for
a more complete form of nego-feminism remain a noteworthy goal.

The main point of contention by feminists in the Global South
with regards to Western feminism has been in relation to the repre-
sentation of Third World women and feminists. These distortions
have been elaborated upon by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her
seminal 1988 essay "Under Western Eyes". In her work, Mohanty
points to the universalization of Third World women in Western
feminist writing, alternatively, concurrently and unceasingly as vic-
tims of patriarchy, religion, globalization, development, economics,
neo-colonialism and colonization. Not only are they described as a
homogenous group, the nebulous conflated entity that is 'Third
World' women rarely resists or challenges the multiple forms of op-
pression she is subject to. Even while challenging and resisting, she
never sheds the status of 'victim'. Thus, according to Mohanty:

> ...third world women as a group or category are automatically and neces-
> sarily defined as: religious (read "not progressive"), family-oriented (read
> "traditional"), legal minors (read " they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-
> rights"), illiterate (read "ignorant"), domestic (read "backward") and
> sometimes revolutionary (read "their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they-
> must-fight!" (1984, p.352)

Both Oyewumi and Nnaemeka seek to challenge the distortions,
misrepresentations and silences that occur in history, theorizing and
teachings about African women, both in Africa and the West. Nnae-
maka notes that African women are either portrayed as a universal,
singular entity, or left out of the narrative altogether;

> Distortions in the study and teaching of African concerns stem from impe-
> rialism's refusal to historicize and differentiate African space and people.
> We Africans must realize that our survival depends to a large extent on our
> ability to reclaim our history. As bell hooks correctly notes, "our struggle is
> also the struggle of memory against forgetting." (2005, p. 63)

Such distortions construct African women as a homogenous mono-lith without a diversity of experiences, knowledge and objectives. Additionally, the misrepresentations of African women further re-produce relations of inequality, with the first world and first world feminist writing doing the objectifying and defining of Third World women. Lastly, the stereotyping of African women creates a neo-colonial discourse, whereby *knowledgeable* and *enlightened* Western feminists step in to save poor African women.

This distortion and silencing also occurs in the dissemination of African feminist thought for Western (in this specific case, American) study. Nawal El Sadawi, Egyptian feminist and novelist, speaks to her experiences in producing work for consumption in the United States:

> Yes and here is a very subtle form of exploitation practiced unfortunately by feminists…. Gloria Steinem of Ms magazine writes me a letter in Cairo and asks me for an article about clitoridectomy. So I write her an article setting forth the political social and historical analysis as well as comments about my personal experience. She cuts the political, social and historical analysis and publishes only the personal statements.... The second example is Beacon Press in Boston. I gave my book, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, to the publisher in London: he published all of the book- the preface, introduction, everything. The preface which is a long preface is crucial and important to the book. Beacon Press cut it without my permission, making me feel that I have been exploited and my ideas distorted. Without the preface, it appears that I am separating the sexual from the political, which I never do. (as quoted in Nnaemeka, 2005, p. 54)

In light of these distortions, misperceptions and silences, it is impossible to reach true global sisterhood, a political goal of Western global feminism. Such global sisterhood is represented by standing in solidarity with women across the globe, acknowledging and recognizing their unique struggles and contexts, as well as by *not* further replicating systems of oppression through the silencing of their voices and potential usurpation of their roles:

> We African women have witnessed repeatedly the activities of our overzealous foreign sisters, mostly feminist who appropriate our wars in the name

of fighting the oppression of women in the so-called third world. We watch with chagrin and in painful sisterhood these avatars of the proverbial mourners who wail more than the owners of the corpse. In their enthusiasm, our sisters usurp our wars and fight them badly-very badly. The arrogance that declares African women "problems" objectifies us and undercuts the agency necessary for forging true global sisterhood. African women are not problems to be solved. Like women everywhere, African women *have* problems. More important, they have provided solutions to these problems. We are the only ones who can set our priorities and agenda. Anyone who wishes to participate in our struggle must do so in the context of our agenda. In the same way, African women who wish to contribute to global struggles (and many do) should do so with a deep respect for the paradigms and strategies that people of those areas have established. In our enthusiasm to liberate others, we must not be blind to our own enslavement. Activities of women globally should be mutually liberating. (Nnaemeka, 2005, p. 57)

Lastly, Oyewumi (2005) points to branches of Western feminism that posit African feminisms as singularly concerned with bread, butter, culture and power -- a politics of subsistence and survival as it were, which speak to the conditions and concerns of women on the continent. Oyewumi (2005) challenges this depiction of 'bread and butter politics' as not representing the multiplicity of concerns expressed, and struggles and ideological battles waged, by feminists on the continent. The African movement draws from a wide base of membership that includes: urban women, rural women, scholars, activists, politicians and community workers. Issues of survival and culture are present in the movement, but so too are concerns over political representation, gender and sexual identity, and class.

Women's Movements in African History

In keeping with Zirakzadeh's (1997) definition of social movements, this paper describes the African women's movement as the diversity of activities, engagements and tactics used currently and historically to advance the rights and opportunities of African women in multiple spheres of their lives. As such, this would span a broad-range of multi-class, multi-generational and ideologically- and

spatially-differentiated individuals and groups advocating for African women's concerns. Such movements could include pre-meditated organizing by formal groups such as trade unions, or spontaneous acts of protest that turn into collective political dissent. I will give a few examples from colonial Nigeria and Kenya.

Historian Judith Van Allen (1972) details the collective action of the Igbo women of South-eastern Nigeria as practiced in the custom of 'sitting on a man', whereby the public censure by the women in the community was a form of discipline. 'Sitting on a man' or 'making war on a man' involved:

> Gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women's grievances against him and often called his manhood into question, banging on his hut with the pestles women used for pounding yams, and perhaps demolishing his hut or plastering it with mud and roughing him up a bit. (Van Allen, 1972, p. 171)

A man could be sanctioned in this manner, if he mistreated his wife, disobeyed the women's market rules, or let his cattle eat their crops (Van Allen, 1972).

The Aba Women's War in South-eastern Nigeria in 1929 was a seminal display of women's political action in African history (Geiger, 1990). Upon discovering that they were to be taxed by the colonial government, women in the South-eastern region of Nigeria proceeded to 'sit on' British warrant officers. This became a mass movement involving more than 10,000 women who, with painted faces and fern-covered sticks, set upon the administrative offices of the colonial government. The women destroyed several colonial buildings before intervention by soldiers and police, resulting in the death of 50 women, and 50 more were injured. There were no male casualties, either British or Igbo (Van Allen, 1972).

In the South-western region of Nigeria, women grouped together to form three different kinds of organizations: the Lagos Market Women's Association, which came to its inception in the mid-1920s, the Nigerian Women's Party and the Abeokuta Women's Union of

the 1940s (Hunt, 1989). These groups were distinctly concerned with the organization of women's markets, the mobilization for women's welfare, and anti-taxation protests.

In the 1920s in Kenya, women subversively resisted unfair labour policies by singing scurrilous songs while engaged in work (Hunt, 1989). Additionally, during the anti-colonial Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s, several women were imprisoned; some participated in secret networks supplying food, weapons and medicines to the fighters. Other women joined the struggles and went into the forest to care for their families and to fight.

Colonialism and gender (dis)parity

With the advent of colonialism came the practice of 'benign female exclusion' by colonial administrators. During colonial reign there were three main apparatuses for spreading and consolidating Western control in East and West Africa: the colonial administration, the mission/church, and trading establishments. With the use of colonial control as a tool for instituting the mechanics of capitalist economics, and Western Christianity as a means of regulating African social and cultural life, the colonial regime drastically altered the conditions and roles of African women from the late nineteenth century and through to World War II. Colonial governments controlled economic life through law, taxation and the creation of an economic and bureaucratic infrastructure. Western Christianity regulated much of social and cultural life, delimiting the boundaries of what was socially and morally acceptable and right. As such, this process had the unprecedented result of granting power to local imperialist regimes.

Colonial rule led to the decline of various Islamic imperial regimes in the West African region. One of these was the Sokoto Caliphate, ruled by Usman 'dan fodio from 1802, which encompassed the region of now-Northern Nigeria and Niger. Umar Tal also

formed a similar empire in Senegal in the 1850s (Hill, 2009). The British and French colonial governments disbanded the political and geographic holdings of the various caliphates and imperial regimes (Hill, 2009). Yet, even while its political structures were eroded, Islam as a religion tended to spread widely under colonial rule, in part as a way to resist the latter. In West Africa the spread of Islam was often accompanied by the institution of Shari'a, according to which the practice of *purdah* required the seclusion of women from the opposite sex, public space, status and office (Bergstrom, 2002). The combined influences of Islam and Christianity further eroded the traditional rights and roles ascribed to women.

Four factors were instrumental in instituting a new form of gender bias that pervaded the African colonized states: Christianity, Western education, the adoption of Western marriage systems and alternative legal systems (Mikell, 1997). Christianity's emphasis on monogamy as well as its imputed message of female subjugation, obedience and domesticity redefined roles for African wives, mothers and daughters (Mikell, 1997). By the same token, Western education privileged the scholarly advancement of men over women (Mikell, 1997). Male education was emphasized as men were expected to later be integrated into the labour market and formal systems of production. Additionally, in a concession to traditional modes of social organization, colonial governments allowed for both Christian and traditional marriage systems (Mikell, 1997). Christian marriage, however, often gave property rights to women, something traditional marriage did not do. Alternative legal systems instituted by the British colonial governments acknowledged women's rights to independence in theory, while substantively treating them as legal minors (Mikell, 1997). These preceding changes affected gender relations, progressively undermining the power, freedoms and positions women had traditionally held, while at the same time limiting their access to new forms of status which were increasingly male-dominated, male-focussed and patriarchal.

In this period, however, European settler women, colonists' wives and missionaries, were instrumental in creating some of the formalized structures of social welfare and activism still in existence in parts of Africa today (Wipper, 1975). They created community groups, charities and services, which although not radical in nature, saw to the needs of women, children, families, the poor, sick and indigent. One such group was Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, as discussed below.

With the introduction of capitalism in the pre-colonial period came the transformation of gender roles and relations. In economic activity, male-focussed modes of production were emphasized above all else. For example, in West Africa women's production of cotton was taken over by the colonial government who sought to expand and consolidate cotton production and exportation (Mikell, 1997). As such, women were progressively eliminated from the production of cotton, effectively removing the former from an independent source of income and autonomy. The arena of cotton production came to be solely dominated by men who benefitted from its avails. As land became more important for cash cropping, there arose a general confusion over the means by which wives and children were to be compensated as it was difficult for women to inherit property within the traditional system (Mikell, 1997). Traditionally in much of West Africa wives and children farmed the land and received shares of the crops they had cultivated for the running of their respective households. Additionally, modes of colonial governance as well as labour market dynamics resulted in the predominance of men in urban settings and government bureaucracy positions, despite the increased presence and migration of educated women to city centres (Mikell, 1997). According to Mikell, "most African women were restricted from the cities by either statutes, the dynamics of apartheid, or the difficulty of finding housing and employment" (1997, p. 21).

The Promises of Independence

With the advent of nationalist struggles and independence, leaders promised gender inclusion and a return to traditional modes of corporatism and social equity, in return for women's support for and engagement with the independence cause (Mikell, 1997). Post-independence, African leaders betrayed their promises of corporatism, claiming that a return to traditional modes of organization would result in tribalism. What emerged were single-party states, meant to symbolize a classless African society devoid of ethnicity, status distinctions, traditional political models, and above all, gender differences (Mikell, 1997). State efforts to ensure social services in health provision, access to education, water, sanitation and roads, were seen as benefitting both men and women, and notable reasons to defer the gender question. Gender bias continued to pervade in governance structures with a marked absence of women, despite increasing female literacy and education (Mikell, 1997). The end of the liberation and nationalist struggles in the 1970s was characterized by the popular injunction for women to retreat from the public sphere, take on the role of caregiver and 'rebuild communities' (Mikell, 1997).

The 1980s saw the continued oppression of women in the labour market as a result of the financial crisis at the time. The implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs designed by the IMF and World Bank resulted in cuts to social programs across the continent, an emphasis on free trade, tax cuts to foreign investors, and the production of goods for export (Rakodi, 1997). This was a process global social policy analysts dubbed 'the race to the bottom,' which further resulted in the excessive downloading of social welfare activities such as childcare, care for the sick, poor, old and indigent to communities, families and ultimately women (Gibson, 2003).

Women's Organizations

Women's organizations in the colonial period were the primary social organizations upon which the formal institutional structure of the African Women's Movement – and subsequently African feminisms – was built. These organizations were legitimately recognized state and civil society institutions that brought women's issues and concerns to the fore. They provided services to a wide range of women, sought to improve the conditions of women's lives, were implicated in the political struggles of the time, and shifted their priorities according to the changing concerns of women.

The arrival of colonialism transformed the roles and status of women, as a result of patriarchal capitalist norms and their collusion with pre-existing patriarchal gender relations (Akin Aina, 1997, p. 2). This instigated the creation of new and different forms of female autonomy that addressed the changing social and material conditions of women, such as women's market associations, farmers' groups and hawkers' associations (Akin Aina, 1997, p. 3). Apart from representation in various municipal structures, and a platform from which to air their concerns, these economically-focussed groups also provided mutual support, personal development and communal aid. In the post-independence era however, women's groups were perceived as having lost their autonomy and as mere puppets of the state machinery (Akin Aina, 1997, p. 4). Ngunyi and Gathaika identify three major factors in the erosion of autonomy of women's groups in Kenya, these include:

1. The beginning of gravitation towards a "maximum leader" and the disintegration of the "nationalist coalition".
2. The emergence of factional patronage networks.
3. The enfeeblement of certain institutions of civil society and actors on the…political stage. (1993, pp. 31-32)

Aili Mari Tripp further details how women's organizations in Tanzania were repressed in efforts to centralize political power:

> The government and party expanded their monopoly control of social relations by gradually centralizing party activities, by abolishing local governments in 1972, and by absorbing, eliminating or curtailing key independent organizations, creating new ones and preventing others from being formed... The crowding out of interest group activity was part of a trend of party and government expansion that saw these institutions increasingly encroach into new political, economic and social spaces. (Tripp, 1992a, 230)

In many postcolonial African nations, the formal women's organization was co-opted by state powers in a bid to further the party agenda. Informal organizations, which were involved in activities such as 'mutual aid', childbirth, local death, and burial organizing, were largely ignored by the state. As a result of the economic crisis of the 1980s, African states were unable to provide services and guarantee protection; people then looked to informal organizations to fill the widening gap left by state abandonment of social welfare.

> Where the state's attempts to exert monopolistic control over society and the economy exceeded state capacity to regulate social relations and allocate resources effectively, people own organizational structures often emerged to fulfil a variety of societal needs. The state's growing inability to guarantee adequate police protection, ensure that wages bore some relation to the cost of living, and provide basic social and public services led people to form their own organizations to cope with the difficulties they faced. (Tripp, 1992a, 235)

In African city centres, women were a main component of this welfare provision, both as women's groups and with men, responding to the AIDS pandemic, providing health, education and a myriad of other services. The state reaction to this surge of global interest and independent organizing was to integrate these groups into the political infrastructure, in what Amina Mama terms a 'femocracy':

> State-directed feminism operated via the first ladies (wives of African presidents and heads of state). With the dual intention of cornering the increasing international funding for women's organizations and directing efforts away from protests, femocracy emerged in the 1980s as an alternative mode of organizing the relations between the state and women's organizations (1994).

Thus, African states saw the integration of women's organizations and single party politics. On the one hand women's organizations granted the state some of the popularity and mass appeal it enjoyed, while the government provided these organizations with a broad range of resources. This gave women's organizations mainstream and state-sanctioned legitimacy, moving them from the periphery of social movements to a position of relative primacy. However, this was not always in the interest of all women, as women's organizations were often aligned with the power elite and served to keep dissenting female voices in line. This system however was only tenable as long as there were resources to sustain it and only through its connection to a male head of state or first lady (ladies) who controlled it (Akin Aina, 1997, p. 5).

Maendeleo Ya Wanawake: Ongoing African Feminist Activism

Maendeleo Ya Wanawake was part of this original breed of colonial women's organizations, and it has remained active through the colonial period, the independence struggles of the 1960s, the subsequent single-party government and is still thriving in Kenya's present democratic state. Today, the organization exemplifies the African feminist movement as it embodies the tensions, ideals, struggles and objectives inherent in African feminisms. MYW enjoys a broad-based membership, has and is undergoing a process of self-definition and re-definition, engages in a 'feminism of negotiation', and, lastly, pursues efforts to reconcile power dynamics on the continent, nationally and within the movement.

MYW has long enjoyed membership from a wide range of women, a result of its long history as well as its status as an umbrella organization under which women's groups with a variety of concerns, needs, and contexts can be integrated. MYW is the largest of the women's organizations currently operating in Kenya, both in

terms of membership as well as the number of women's groups associated with it (Nzomo, 1989).

The organization was started in 1952 by a small group of European women with the injunction of the colonial government's Department of Community Development and Rehabilitation, to "promote "the advancement of African women" and to " raise African living standards" (Wipper, 1975, p. 99). The name of the group roughly translates to "women's progress" in Kiswahili. In the first ten years of its existence MYW was quite effective in mobilizing and engaging women, especially those who lived in rural areas. During this time, the organization focused on subsidizing skills-based training for women in areas such as hygiene, nutrition, housekeeping and childcare. MYW was also able to offer financial incentives to its members through a number of its subsidized programs (Nyancham-Okemwa, 2000). The organization was also closely linked to and supported by the colonial administration, both socially and financially. Kenyan women joined MYW in large numbers in their search for respite and diversion from the harsh conditions of forced colonial labour (Nzomo, 1989).

MYW was also characterized by moments of definition and redefinition of their objectives, goals and aspirations for women in Kenya. One such period was in the early 1970s following independence. At this time, the role of MYW had decreased significantly to the point where the organization was ineffective at mobilizing a mass group of rural women (Nzomo,1989). This was as a result of the overall exclusion of women's organizations in the post-independence political landscape, as women and women's issues were ignored in the nation-building project. Upon realizing that women had been left out of the nation-building process, and were not given the space to speak their concerns or opportunity to provide input and leadership, MYW articulated a clear position on the social and political marginalisation of women in Kenya in their magazine, *Voices of Women*:

> Although women have an important role to play in the development of the nation, yet the role which women have to play in Kenya in the nation building seems as yet undetermined. Open though the opportunities are, the men assume that the women have not as yet reached a level where they can effectively participate in the nation building.
>
> According to the African man's view, a woman is only supposed to be in the house. Her role educated though she might be seems only to look after the home and the entire nursing of the young ones. This view has been taken to such extremes that the men appear to neglect or completely underrate the part which our women folks can play in the nation. (Wipper, 1971, p. 433)

MYW was subject to the power struggles that characterized the Kenyan state from the colonial period to President Moi's post-independence single-party rule. In his 1986 bid to do away with civil society, President Arap Moi gave the directive for MYW to be officially affiliated with KANU, the then-only political party in what was a single-party country. By 1987, MYW had officially changed its name to KANU-MYWO (Adar and Munyae, 2001). Thus, with presidential support as well as the internal restructuring that took place earlier in 1975, MYWO had returned to the privileged status it previously enjoyed under the colonial government. This had an effect on membership and participation; the organization again became the leading NGO with the ability to muster and mobilize a wide range of women, particularly rural women (Nzomo, 1989). By 1985, MYWO had the largest countrywide membership, 300,000 divided into 8,000 women's groups (Nzomo, 1989).

Despite the external power struggles it was subject to, this period marked a shift in the focus of MYW's programmatic activities from one concerned primarily with care work (childcare and domestic activities) to one concerned with women's health, livelihoods and human rights. From the mid-1980s to today, MYW's programmes have centered on reproductive health, maternal health, infant mortality, family planning, female genital cutting, forced child marriages and employment training (http://mywokenya.org, Mazire, 1994). Although some of their programs were firmly located in specific are-

nas such as healthcare and economic livelihoods, a number of MYW's programs sought to address the intersecting struggles of Kenyan women. One such program was the *jiko* or cookstove program established in 1992. Women and girls were spending a significant amount of time and labour collecting and using firewood for various domestic tasks, and activity which had a significant impact on their health, safety and standards of living (Kammen, 1995). Women in both rural and urban households were continuously exposed to the smoke from the fire, were at potential risk when collecting firewood, and were required to collect firewood in addition to their other domestic duties and possibly after a full day of work (in or outside the home) or school (Kammen, 1995). The *jiko* stove program provided women with cookstoves and training in the repair and upkeep of the *jikos* as an income-generating activity (Kammen, 1995). The *jiko* program was an energy-saving measure, as well as a livelihoods and public education campaign.

As a result of its connection to the ruling party and the previous colonial government, MYW has been seen to benefit and prosper from its close relationship with state machinery. The organization itself was also embedded in power brokerage within the national women's movement and engaged in the *de facto* disciplining and censure of women's group and voices that did not reflect KANU's party line.

For example, MYWO was a vocal critic of Kenyan Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai and her activism around the Green Belt Movement, a grass-roots movement concerned with sustainability and the protection of the environment. Maathai was considered a threat to the single-party leadership as a result of her growing popularity and vociferous campaign against 'land grabbing' by Moi and his cronies (Mathenge, 2011). Maathai protested the co-optation of public forests and lands for private use by the members of Moi's cabinet. Moi engaged in multiple efforts to undermine her legitimacy and leadership, attempting to prevent her from accessing leadership positions

and re-directing funds and leadership upon her accession to the role (Mathenge, 2011).

MYW also engages in a 'feminism of negotiation' in their campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM). In 1995, MYW established an Alternative Rites Program, to counter the practice of FGM in Kenya. FGM is highly prevalent among the Kisii, Masaii, Kalenjin, Taita Taveta and Meru/Embu ethnic groups (Chege, Askew & Liku, 2001). MYW sought to address FGM in a culturally appropriate way, pointing to and eliminating the harmful practice of cutting itself , while emphasizing the beneficial components of the ceremony such as inter-generational exchange and education, peer socialization and the public recognition ceremony:

> An alternative rite of passage ritual refers to a structured programme of activities with community-level sensitisation to first gain support and to recruit the girls who will participate, which is followed by a public ritual that includes training for the girls in family life education (FLE), and a public ceremony similar to that in traditional rites of passage. The intention is to simulate the traditional ritual as closely as possible without actually circumcising the girls. (Chege et al, 2001)

As such, MYW engages in a 'feminism of negotiation', dealing with a culturally-specific issue in a way that upholds the rights of women and girls in Kenyan society, while also valuing the positive aspects of the tradition.

Maendeleo Ya Wanawake has always occupied a somewhat-paradoxical position, initially as representative of colonists, and later as that of the political elite, while at the same time striving to engage in grassroots organizing. Although this particular women's organization has been subject to many of the dysfunctions that have formerly plagued women's organizations (such as being implicated in power struggles, being a tool of the state machinery, or left out of the governance process altogether), it is still popularly recognized for its ability to effectively mobilize a large number of people and vast amount of support and resources, and subscribes to some of the key

values inherent in African feminisms, namely the inclusion of a diversity of women, advocacy for women's rights and strategies of negotiation.

Conclusion

Although MYW would not describe itself as a feminist organization, this group embodies much of the tensions, struggles and history of African feminisms. MYW is comprised of a broad range of multi-class, multi-generational, multi-regional and multi-ethnic women. It is fully embedded in the institutional history, struggles and successes that characterize the growth and formation of social movements in general and African women's organizations in particular. MYW has always reflected and advocated for a wide range of women's rights and opportunities. This group is the first and longest lasting institution of the women's movement in Kenya, and as such is integral to the definition, contestation, activities and pursuits of African feminisms. Lastly, in keeping with Nnaemeka's definition of nego-feminism, this group engages in the negotiation of cultural constructs and traditions while also ensuring the protection of Kenyan women's rights.

Much of the political action undertaken by the African feminist movement has been shaped by oppositional historical forces, differing trends, and sometimes competitive ideologies, including: traditional leadership vs. colonialism; colonial governments vs. nationalists; and single-party governments vs. civil society advocating for greater democratic space. The debates within this movement (over topics such as the contested notion of global sisterhood and power dynamics within the movement) have also played a central role in shaping what African feminisms look like, react to and engage in today. However, these debates, differences and oppositions force African feminist theory and activism to respond to the multiplicity of conditions and contexts on the continent, and to engage in real

women's lives and the naming of their own conditions. Whether through negotiation and compromise, rejection of hegemonic notions of gender and cultural identity, or working towards the emancipation of women through a variety of tactics, strategies and acts, these are all context- specific and reference the locations in which these struggles are waged.

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