

# Taking the Beast by its Horns: Formal Resistance to Women's Oppression in Africa

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**Résumé:** *L'article pose deux questions fondamentales: comment les femmes africaines conceptualisent-elles les injustices qu'elles ont eu à subir et comment naît et grandit chez elles, le sentiment de pouvoir revendiquer leurs droits et remettre en cause l'autorité formelle ? Il étudie, par ailleurs, des cas de résistance féminine en Afrique au sud du Sahara, aussi bien durant la période coloniale que postcoloniale. Deux études de cas sont ainsi proposées sur la défiance collective des femmes durant la période coloniale: La Guerre des femmes de 1929 en pays Ibo, au sud-est du Nigéria, et la rébellion Anlu de 1958-59, dans le Cameroun britannique. En outre, l'article s'intéresse à trois cas contemporains de femmes africaines qui ont, seules, fait face à diverses formes d'oppression et de discrimination politiques ou liées à leur statut social de femmes. Il s'agit en l'occurrence de Wambui Otieno du Kenya; Laeticia Mukurusi de la Tanzanie; et Unity Dow du Botswana.*

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## Introduction

African women played extremely important and diverse roles in the various spheres of social existence well before colonization. Folklore is abundant with the feats of women leaders and warriors who were prominent in social and political events of ancient times. All over the continent, women wielded substantial economic and political power although this is not to suggest that the status of African women was equal to that of men (Amadiume 1987; Hay and Stichter 1984; Sweetman 1984; Hafkin and Bay 1976). Men dominated positions of political, economic, and social power in most parts of the continent. The advent of colonialism, however, pushed the African woman to the limits of subordination. Colonialism eroded most of the power and autonomy that women had previously enjoyed relegating them in the process to second class citizenry (O'Barr 1984; Mba 1982; Sacks 1982; Okonjo 1976; Van Allen 1976).

The various ways in which the domination of women was manifested—gender, economic or political—was not achieved without a fight. Unfortunately, it is only of recent that the role of African women in colonial and postcolonial struggles against various forms of oppressions has been acknowledged and discussed in scholarly texts. Commendable attempts have been made during the past two decades to chronicle the opposition by

African women, and their confrontation with the structures of formal power (e.g. see Walker 1991; Geiger 1990; Wipper 1982; Lapchick and Urdang 1982; Denzer 1976; Ardener 1975; Steady 1975). This paper reviews some of the literature on this important subject and attempts to re-visit an issue of considerable political and epistemological importance to current gender struggles on the continent: *under what circumstances did African women decide to resist domination?*

The paper addresses two critical questions: How do African women conceptualize when they have been wronged and how do they then construct a sense of entitlement in their claim for rights and in challenging formal authority? It discusses both colonial and post-colonial cases of women's resistance in sub-Saharan Africa. Two case studies of women's collective defiance during the colonial period are revisited: the 1929 women's war in Iboland, south-eastern Nigeria, and the 1958-59 *Anlu* rebellion in the British Cameroons. Additionally, the paper considers three contemporary cases of African women who have single-handedly challenged various forms of political and gender oppression and discrimination: Wambui Otieno of Kenya; Laeticia Mukurasi of Tanzania; and Unity Dow of Botswana.

The paper is divided into four sections. This introduction comprises section I. Section II outlines brief facts about each of the five cases under consideration to provide an indication of the scale and diversity of the struggles exemplified by each case. In section III, an attempt is made to analyze the different dynamics behind the specific forms of militancy adopted by the women in the five cases. The last section of the paper makes several general conclusions about the issue of formal resistance to oppression by African women.

## **The Facts of the Five Cases**

### ***The Women's War of 1929***<sup>1</sup>

The setting is Iboland in the south-eastern part of colonial Nigeria; the people are the women of the Igbo- and Ibibio-speaking ethnic groups, most of whom engage in the lucrative trade of palm oil and kernels. These women shared the same grievances felt by the general population against colonial rule, such as excessive and unjustified taxation, forced labour, cash crop production, etc. They were particularly incensed by the fact that the price of palm produce had fallen sharply due to an international economic depression, while the prices of imported goods were constantly increasing.

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1 My major sources for the facts of this case are the official Aba Commission of Inquiry set up in the wake of the women's war (Nigerian Government, 1930, hereinafter referred to as the Kingdon Commission after its chair Donald Kingdon) and Van Allen (1976).

The imperious and corrupt government-appointed warrant chiefs were an additional cause of political grievance. The spark that ignited the fire was a rumour that the colonial administration was planning to tax women.

In October 1929, an overzealous British Assistant District Officer inaugurated a system of updating and streamlining the information in the nominal rolls of adult males for the purposes of establishing a system of taxation. This entailed obtaining details of the number of wives, children, and livestock in each compound. Government agents commenced the process of taking a census of women, children and property such as chickens, sheep and goats. The women, who had watched a census of the male population two years earlier culminate in a taxation assessment for all men, deduced that they too were about to be taxed. Assurances from the acting District Officer fell on deaf ears. The women were convinced that this time around, the planned census had an ulterior motive. In their eyes, the counting of heads was synonymous with taxation and such an ominous development had to be halted by any means necessary. When government agents directly approached Nwanyeruwa, a woman from the village of Oloko, the suspicions of her colleagues were confirmed; an alarm was sounded and a palm leaf was sent around for all women to gather.<sup>2</sup>

In an unprecedented feat of militancy against colonial oppression, approximately ten thousand women took up arms, burning and destroying government buildings, overrunning prisons, looting factories, and rebelling against government agents such as chiefs. This bore a striking similarity to the traditional sanctioning device women utilized, known as 'making war', with some modification. As Van Allen (1976:61) explains:

To 'sit on' or 'make war on' a man involved gathering at his compound at a previously agreed-upon time, dancing, singing scurrilous songs detailing women's grievances against him (and often insulting him along the way by calling his manhood into question), banging on his hut with the pestles used for pounding yams, and in extreme cases, tearing up his hut...

The women protesters were scantily attired in a war outfit consisting of *nkpata* (a species of fern) in their hair, palm leaves around their waists and dye or charcoal daubed on their faces. It is further reported that 'the women were led by an old and nude woman of great bulk. They acted in a strange manner, some lying on the ground and kicking their legs in the air, and others making obscene gestures' (Ifeka-Moller 1975:129). The British colonialists described the uprising as riots. The women called it *umunwanyị*

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<sup>2</sup> The Kingdon Commission, which conducted a formal inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the women's war, explained that use of a palm leaf in this way was 'a time-honoured custom [which] signified that the sender was in trouble and needed help (Nigerian Government, 1930, para. 37).

or war. Communication and co-ordination during the war was accomplished through marketing networks (*Mikiri*) spread throughout the region. The war lasted throughout the month of December 1929. At its conclusion more than 50 women had died, 50 others had been wounded by gunfire but no significant casualties were reported on the government side. From the women's perspective, the war was a success in so far as it prevented their (alleged) taxation, resulted in the dismissal and prosecution of many warrant chiefs, and secured a few seats for women in the native courts (Mba 1982:96). We shall return to a critical analysis of the women's war following a consideration of women's resistance to the colonial regime—the *Anlu* rebellion.

### ***The 1958-59 Anlu Rebellion***<sup>3</sup>

The setting is Bamenda province in the northwestern region of the British-colonial Cameroons (present-day Cameroon); the people are Kom women who are matrilineal agriculturists with a long tradition of collective disciplinary action against offenders. The spark that ignited the fire was the rumour that women were going to be dispossessed of their land — fuelled by the colonial government policy requiring horizontal farm ridges instead of the existing vertical contours to check soil erosion. The modernizing policy was unpopular among women from the outset because the construction of horizontal ridges required more time and labour. The women defied the measure and were faced with fines. When a government agent attempted to enforce the policy by uprooting farm crops and another one destroyed some bad food and liquor in the marketplace ostensibly in a bid to enforce hygiene standards, the women invoked *anlu*. *Anlu* was a traditional disciplinary practice among the Kom women to punish and chastise a man for any offences committed against women such as insulting a parent, an old woman or beating a pregnant woman. Ritzenthaler described *Anlu* as follows:

A Woman thus offended would summon women to her aid by sounding a war-cry made by beating the lips with the fingers while uttering a high-pitched sound... The women of the quarter and sometimes the neighbouring quarters then were enlisted. On a set day they dressed in leafy vines, articles of men's clothing, and paraded to the culprit's compound around five o'clock in the morning. There they danced, sang mocking and usually obscene songs composed for the occasion, and defiled the compound by defecation or by urinating in the water storage vessels. If the culprit was seen he could be pelted with stones or a type of wild fruit called 'garden eggs.' Then the women shed their vines and garden eggs in

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3 My major sources for the facts the Anlu rebellion are Ardener (1975) and Ritzenthaler (1960).

the compound, leaving some of each hanging on the threshold as the *Anlu* sign that its use had been banned (Ritzenthaler 1960:151).

*Anlu* was not a common occurrence, and was only invoked in very serious circumstances. Prior to this occasion it had not been used for mass political purposes. The offender was ostracized until he repented. The display of women's 'private parts' was the ultimate curse and a disgrace to the offender. The women destroyed property, closed schools, and damaged market stalls. The rebellion lasted nearly a whole year, effectively crippling colonial rule and stalling the colonial experiment in the area. At the conclusion of the uprising the women had established their own court as well as a 'shadow government' which remained in place for another year (Ritzenthaler 1960). Furthermore, the horizontal ridges policy was suspended and the *Anlu* leader was invited to sit on the local council. Striking similarities exist in the two cases that occurred under colonial rule. Against this background, we can turn to a consideration of the post-colonial instances of women's resistance.

#### ***Wambui Otieno***<sup>4</sup>

The setting is Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya in 1986. The sole fighter is Wambui Otieno, a 50-year-old Kikuyu widow who has recently lost her Luo husband — Otieno. The spark that ignited the fire was the action of her late husband's clan which insisted that their son be buried in his ancestral home in Luoland, against the wishes of both the deceased (who had died intestate) and his wife who wanted his final resting place to be his city farm-land. Wambui perceived the clan's action as contempt toward her simply because she was a woman. She launched a law suit against the clan over the right to bury her husband. In a court battle which lasted one and a half years, the court of Appeal finally awarded custody of Otieno's body to his clan. Wambui boycotted the burial ceremony which took place in Luoland. Instead, she erected a symbolic memorial monument at the original site where she had planned to bury her husband.

The courts rejected all Wambui's arguments (based on national and international law) which challenged the discriminatory customary law. A closer analysis of Wambui's case reveals that it was much more than a battle for Otieno's body — which merely became a symbolic subject of the struggle. It involved deeper issues concerning (a) a women's right to administer her deceased husband's estate; (b) women's rights *vis-à-vis* the rights of a clan; (c) the state as custodian of patriarchal power; (d) 'tradition'

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4 My major sources for the facts of this case are Cohen and Odhiambo (1992) and Stamp (1991).

vs. ‘modernity’; (e) Luo vs. Kikuyu; and (f) the role and place of the court in the African polity (Stamp 1991; Cohen and Adhiambo 1992).

***Laetitia Mukurasi***<sup>5</sup>

The setting is Arusha, in northern Tanzania in 1985. The sole fighter is 30-year-old Laetitia Mukurasi, a Tanzanian female manager of a big parastatal corporation — Fibreboards (Africa) Limited (FAL). The spark that ignited the fire was Laetitia’s dismissal from her post as manager following the abolition of her department ostensibly ‘in the national interest’. Her formal letter of dismissal pointed to a government directive, motivated by the IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), as the reason for abolishing her post. Mukurasi had worked at Fibreboards for ten years and had held the post of Development and Administrative manager for three. Over that period she had become aware of the unconcealed hostility of her male colleagues and subordinates who felt challenged by her qualifications, competence, and independence.

The matter was further complicated by Mukurasi’s estranged husband who conspired with her employers to ensure her dismissal. At one point prior to the dismissal, for example, Mukurasi’s employers served her with a seven days’ eviction notice to vacate the company house she was occupying. The eviction order stated that she could only stay in the company house upon a formal divorce or on the production of a letter from her husband ‘giving his consent of [her] living separately from him’ (Mukurasi 1991:11). Her case thus raised broader gender issues of what constitutes a ‘good’ woman and a ‘good’ wife. Mukurasi provided a chain of evidence pointing to an intricate formal and informal network constituted by her male colleagues, the state, and her husband which colluded to ‘put her in her rightful place’ — as second-class citizen. She writes:

I did not conform to the female stereotype which sees women as docile, passive and timid. Had I conformed this would have put me in the good books of my superiors. Firmness, decisiveness and truthfulness are undoubtedly not seen as desirable attributes in a female manager (Mukurasi 1991:111)

Mukurasi interpreted her dismissal as ‘a classic example of an extension and glorification of those negative patriarchal values which seek to define women as members of the inferior sex within a sexual hierarchy and which accord women a lower rank in terms of status, temperament and sex role’ (1990:1). She accordingly filed a suit against her employers with the Labour Tribunal, urging her reinstatement. After two years of bitter struggle,

5 All facts of this case were collected from *Post Abolished*, a book that was authored by Laetitia Mukurasi (1991).

Laetitia was eventually reinstated to her post of manager and her salary paid in arrears.

### ***Unity Dow***

Unity Dow is a 31-year-old Motswana mother of three who is a lawyer and married to an American citizen. The setting is Gabarone, the capital city of Botswana in 1990. The spark that ignited the fire was the government's denial of a grant of citizenship to her two younger children, borne of her foreign husband. Dow challenged the discriminatory Citizenship Act of Botswana which refused citizenship to the children of women married to foreign men while conferring such right to the children of men married to foreign women. As non-citizens, Unity's youngest children would be denied the rights to vote, to hold public office, to public education, to be employed without a work permit, to permanent residency, and to own land in Botswana (Olsen 1993).

Unity invoked customary international law, relying on the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights to buttress her case (Stratton 1992). She challenged the distinction between sexes in the Citizenship Act and argued further that it violates the principle of equality of rights and respect for human dignity enshrined in the constitution (Dow 1991). The court in the first instance found for Unity Dow, ruling that the Citizenship Act was unconstitutional on grounds of sex discrimination. The court reasoned *inter alia* that:

...the effect of section 4(3) of the Citizenship Act is to hamper unnecessarily free choice, the liberty of the subject to exercise her rights in terms of the constitution...

...the time when women were treated as chattels or were there to obey the whims and wishes of males is long past and would be offensive to modern thinking. (quoted in Dow 1991:260).

The Attorney-General appealed this decision. After almost two years of legal battle the Court of Appeal upheld the decision of the lower court. The full success of Dow's legal battle, however, is contingent upon the re-writing of the Citizenship Act by Botswana's parliament. Until that is done, Dow's legal success remains a paper victory.

The three cases demonstrate African women's action against gender discrimination. Next, we analyze all five case studies taking into account spatial and temporal factors that facilitated the acts of militancy and resistance.

### **The Conceptualization of Intolerable Wrongs**

Depending on one's gender, social class, educational level, religious beliefs, lifestyles, ideology, etc., people view the world through different lenses. The

unique characteristics of such lenses, which are amenable to change, will shape one's perception of reality (cf. Klatch 1988). This explains why certain individuals decide to take one course of action and not another. It also explains why action is taken in a specific time and space and not another. Why, for example, did the Kom women decide to transform *Anlu* into an anticolonial strategy in 1958 and not at any time earlier? After all, British rule had been imposed in the Cameroons at least forty years prior to the date of the uprising. The 1929 women's war in south-eastern Nigeria also took place almost three decades after the colonial structure had been entrenched in that country. Male domination had preceded colonization but it had not elicited such corporatist militancy of opposition. Nor had such action ever led to the direct result of women assuming political roles and positions in colonial society as was the case in both instances. Both cases are also reflective of a high degree of organization and shared visions of oppression and the necessary action to counter it.

Turning to the contemporary cases we have reviewed, why did three different women decide to challenge formal power at the time that they did and in the different sophisticated contexts that they did? What were the similarities and distinctions in methods adopted? No doubt that before the 1980s several widows of intertribal marriages had been denied custody of the bodies of their husbands, others had been unjustly dismissed from their jobs, and numerous women with foreign spouses had seen their children denied citizenship, particularly since the laws in ex-colonial territories had been constructed around similar principles which had not been modified.

All the above suggest that when the women (individually or collectively) decided to challenge the structures of domination, a very sensitive chord, deep within their selves had been struck. The domination had become intolerable and required immediate action to claim their rights. In the following pages, I focus on the different lenses deployed by the women in the five cases which shaped their distinct perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Had these women suddenly been liberated from a 'false' consciousness? <sup>6</sup> (Marx and Engels 1964). If so, what process had opened their eyes to a 'true' consciousness? What was it that transformed their perceptions of injustice into militancy and a determination to resist the oppression with which they were faced? Is there a common denominator that unites all the "new" lenses in the five instances?

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6 By false consciousness is meant an internalization of the values and worldview of the dominant group, e.g., the colonialists or the patriarchs. Such consciousness inhibits women from visualizing their subordinate position, compelling them to accept the status quo.



### ***The Pre-Colonial Protests***

Several scholarly attempts have tried to assess both the women's war and *Anlu*. The wide-ranging interpretations offered by different scholars reflects the different vantage point from which the scholars analyzed the rebellions. Their respective disciplines, for example, influenced their construction of knowledge about the uprisings, as did their ideological and conceptual outlooks.

Anthropologists Ifeka-Moller (1975) and Ardener (1975) have both focused mainly on symbolic interpretations of the women's war and *Anlu*, respectively. Ifeka-Moller suggests that the women's use of sexual symbols as the ultimate insult against men meant that their biological make-up, especially their fertility, held a central position in their self-image. They were proud of their role in procreation and as the 'mothers of the nation.' She argues that the women were 'directed by their own 'inner' beliefs, and by the sexual values of their culture... Ideas of sexual equivalence and complementarity echo the interdependence of men and women in reproduction, but also conceal the unequal position of women in society. They function as an ideology' (Ifeka-Moller 1975:135). Thus, according to Ifeka-Moller, it is this sexual ideology that formed the lens through which the militant women perceived themselves and the world around them. It also shaped their conceptualization of intolerable domination and the means of dealing with it. Ardener too argues that Kom women used sexual insults because they valued the dignity of their sexual identity or 'femininity' (Ardener 1975:47).

I would agree that the Igbo/Ibibio and Kom women manifested a strong sense of themselves as wives and mothers, I would however, hesitate to reach the reductionist conclusion that such a perception primarily shaped their decision to rise against colonial oppression. In fact, focusing mainly on the symbolic actions of the rebellions is an insult to the feminist goals<sup>7</sup> behind the women's struggles that predominate in contemporary literature. As Rogers (1980:25) warns us, 'If our symbolic actions derive their power or force from sexist stereotypes and perceptions of 'female nature' rooted in dominant male ideology, do we not run the risk of reinforcing that ideology when we rely on them?'

Van Allen (1976) who is a political scientist, on the other hand, adopts a functionalist analysis of the women's war. She describes how the women had utilized a traditional technique of chastising men and redirected it toward their colonial oppressors on a much larger scale. The British colonial

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7 Indeed, the Kingdon Commission likened the women's war to the women's suffrage movement of England (para. 56, also see Mba, 1982).

administration underestimated the mobilizing potential in African women's market networks and the solidarity with which they could rally against colonial and male domination. Historian Rogers offers some feminist insights into Van Allen's functionalist analysis:

Through the transformation of a method used to curb individual men's abuses against women into an instrument of mass protest against the entire male-dominated colonial system, patriarchy and colonialism were equated. In the context of the women's fight, the meaning of the familiar form of protest stretched out to relate in a condensed way the personal to the political, the individual to the mass; it overlapped the structures of family, community and colonial state to expose the political threat linking them all. (Rogers 1980:24)

That the women's war and *Anlu* were political movements can hardly be disputed in spite of several attempts to colour it otherwise and belittle the women's actions. For instance, the memorandum to the Kingdom Commission from Southern Province attributed the women's behaviour to the dry season. It stated that at this time of the year, 'women are in a more neurotic condition than at other seasons and consequently are more liable to break out into disorder' (Nigerian Government, para. 55). Many residents of Calabar and Owerri Provinces who testified before the Commission expressed doubt that women were capable of such an effective demonstration and believed that a '*master* mind' was behind the movement. In his testimony, Mr. Falk said: 'The real conspirators were the men; they remained outwardly disinterested and used women as a catspaw' (*ibid.*, para. 344). But the commission found no evidence to support such contentions.

These colonialists had probably never encountered women's traditional sanctions against offending men before. They were not prepared for this 'informal' technique of protest being turned against them. One can almost feel the shock and bewilderment in the English Lieutenant's words who testified to one of the smaller Commissions of Inquiry set up to inquire into specific incidents:

Some were nearly naked wearing only wreaths of grass round their heads, waist and knees and some were wearing tails made of grass... I [told] the women not to make a noise. They took no notice and told me that I was the son of a pig and not of a woman. (Minutes of Evidence by a Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Inquire into Certain Incidents at Opobo, Abak and Utu-Ekpo in December, 1929, Nigerian Government, 1930:7).

Terms such as 'vulgar', 'obscene' and 'disrespectful' were used by European and African men to describe both the women's war and *Anlu*. Indeed part of the success of the militancy of the women resides in the shocking effect of their sexual insults. The technique of exposing women's private parts to sanction offenders as a tool of protest is a well known one in

many parts of sub-Saharan Africa even today. For example, in March 1992 the mothers of political detainees in Nairobi, Kenya demanded for the release of their sons by staging a hunger-strike and stripping their clothing in Uhuru Park, central Nairobi as an expression of umbrage and anger at the repressive government. As described by one commentator, this 'act of defiance... [was] the most effective traditional method of cursing the Moi government' (Nzomo 1993:68).

Whether dominance was expressed through the threat of taxes or through the threatened sale of the land on which women had traditional usufructory rights, it boiled down to one thing in the consciousness of these women: That the colonial government was encroaching on their prerogatives. Since these women lacked a formal educational capacity to use the colonially-established avenues of protest such as petitions, and because they did not possess any knowledge of contemporary Western forms of bargaining such as deputation, they resorted to the most powerful resource at their disposal — traditional techniques of sanctioning.

Some commentators have argued that despite their conscious assertion of their rights as women *vis-à-vis* the male-dominated colonial system, the Ibo/Ibibio and Kom protesters still held the belief that men were superior to women (see e.g., Mba 1982). Mba (1982) holds that this is manifested in their failure in either case to demand equal political participation with men and for transformation of the status quo. However, such an assessment totally ignores the local council seats won by the Igbo/Ibibio women and the shadow government established by the Kom women. These two examples illustrate aptly that the protesting women believed that women had the right to participate in politics on an equal footing with men.

### ***The Post-Colonial Cases***

Patriarchy and (neo)colonialism were still alive and well in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the cases of Wambui Otieno, Laeticia Mukurasi, and Unity Dow were to exact a lasting and historical impression in the texts of African feminism. The three cases demonstrate the power dynamics at play between the state, patriarchy, law and custom in postcolonial Africa. When Kenya, Tanzania and Botswana achieved independence in the 1960s, they inherited British common and statutory law which was riddled with numerous blatantly discriminatory provisions against women, the most relevant for purposes of this paper, being that of citizenship. Traditional customs were also 'invented' and accorded the force of law by the independent states. These customs lacked those elements of precolonial jurisprudence that recognized African women's autonomy and political power (Stamp 1991:810-11). Disregarding the wishes of a man with respect to his burial place and dismissing Wambui's plea under the guise of custom is testimony of this.

In the wake of the world conference that concluded the UN Decade for women hosted in Nairobi in July 1985, a number of feminist organizations<sup>8</sup> were formed in the sub-Saharan region. The conference lit the fire that spurred the many African women who attended it into local action when they returned to their respective homes. These organizations took on the task of openly challenging the traditional structures of political and sexual domination. They also shaped the way that individual women perceived their subordination and the action they took to challenge it. Thus, the development of new women's organizations in the region result in a nascent feminist consciousness among many educated women throughout the continent. In part, it is as a result of Nairobi — which all three women allude to as an underlying influence — that the post-colonial cases we have reviewed assumed such distinct gender dimensions.

Unlike the women in the precolonial protests discussed earlier, the three women who instituted court cases against their oppressors were members of the elite and generally well educated within formal established structures. Each of them had specifically been exposed to contemporary feminist consciousness in one way or the other. Wambui had personally been active in the *Mau Mau* rebellion against British colonialism during the 1950s and been exposed to the feminist sentiments within that movement. For example, the Kikuyu women who joined the *Mau Mau* movement had been active in protests against the colonial government's policies on land alienation and the co-optation of women into the wage labour force (Presley 1986). Presley reports that the young Wambui (nee Wagarama) had been imprisoned by the colonial authority as a *Mau Mau* terrorist (ibid. 58-59).

Mukurasi's introduction to feminist issues came in the United Kingdom where she has pursued postgraduate studies.

It was in Manchester that my perspectives altered and my consciousness of women's issues began to develop. I started to look for possibilities for social change that would affect the lives of women (Mukurasi 1991:24)

Dow's activism in the feminist movement can be traced to her work in the regional non-governmental organization — Women and the Law in Southern Africa Research Project (WLSA) — of which she was a founding member. Indeed, WLSA provided substantial moral and financial support during her court battle against the government of Botswana (Olsen 1993:12).

These three women were in all probability as proud of their roles as mothers and wives as their forebears in the *Anlu* movement and women's

8 For purposes of this analysis, the term 'feminist organization' is broadly defined as an organization whose political orientation recognizes that, relative to men, women are oppressed and that such oppression results from the socio-economic and political structure of society.

war.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the central concept of themselves and the manner in which they related to the world was not dictated by their roles as mothers and wives. Quite clearly, the values within feminist discourse had helped in shaping the self-perceptions of the three women. Examples of such values include, gender equality, non-discrimination in employment, education, and citizenship, the elimination of customary practices which regard women as the inferior sex, etc. These values were embedded in their sense of responsibility to the general community of women and to future generations.

It is interesting to note how each of the three women traced their inspiration to the 1985 Nairobi conference which formally concluded the United Nations decade for women. Situated in the host country, Wambui had served as treasurer to the international conference (Cohen and Adhiambo 1992:33) Her activism was well known in Kenya and beyond.

...Wambui Otieno was respected as one of the leaders among Kenyan women — through the National Council of the Women of Kenya — as well as one who carried and energetically claimed the credentials of a vigorous and radical fighter for national independence in the 1950s (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992:32)

Mukurasi also attended the Nairobi conference in the midst of her personal struggle and in her autobiography reflects that, 'I came out of the conference determined to pursue the case to the bitter end. I also came out of it convinced that no one was going to assist me in this crusade. It was up to me to use the existing laws to redress this wrong' (Mukurasi 1991:57-8).

Although Unity Dow was not personally present at Nairobi, its positive outgrowth which resonated throughout Africa empowered her to pursue her case to the very end. About three years after Unity Dow filed this landmark case, the author met her at a feminist conference in Nairobi. In an informal conversation Dow told me of the gruelling and emotionally-draining experience she had to endure fighting the more powerful government machinery. Only the feminist principles of gender equality and justice that she was pursuing provided the necessary stamina to see the case through the appeal process. Indeed, the Attorney-General of Botswana was well aware of the merits in Unity Dow's case even as he was preparing to fight it.

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9 For example, in the course of her ordeal, Mukurasi had to fight another court battle for the custody of her youngest daughter. She writes, 'My unemployment had provided a good opportunity for my husband to humiliate and ridicule me even further by striving to deprive me of my last source of company, on the grounds that I did not have financial means to shoulder responsibility for her care.' (Mukurasi 1991:54).

Stratton reports that:

Before filing its response with the High Court, the Attorney-General prepared a memorandum directed to the Permanent Secretary to the President. The memorandum stated that the government would probably prevail in the case, but 'for technical reasons, and not because the Citizenship Act is non-discriminatory' (Stratton 1992:229).

International feminism was invoked in the court arguments of all three cases.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, the African women's movement did not capitalize enough on these cases to highlight issues of gender oppression in the three countries or at a more generic level. Perhaps this is on account of the nascent stage of the movement in Africa, the failure to mobilize beyond the respective borders of each country, or the fear of reprisals in contexts where challenging gender oppression was a direct attack on the composition of state power. Lamenting the failure of the women's movement in Tanzania to use her case to focus public attention on the wider issue of women's inferior status, Mukurasi, for example, wrote: 'The women who might have politicized this issue appeared not to see the positive elements which might have enabled them to utilize it to benefit other women' (1991:85). At the same time, she acknowledged the fact that the power of the apparatus she had taken on was so overwhelming that these women could have been intimidated into silence by the patriarchal bureaucratic system and the 'national (read male) interest' in the civil service and the party structure (Mukurasi 1991:68 and 85).

Stamp reported a similar situation with respect to the Kenyan context: 'The women's movement in Kenya indeed tried to act on Wambui's behalf, but the case precipitated a political crisis among women that rendered the movement ineffective' (Stamp: 827). This was particularly evident when women (especially women politicians) found themselves caught between the backlash against the feminist overtures of the case and the reassertion of male hegemony and patriarchal domination. The women's movement in Dow's case was more visible than in either of the other two. For example, the regional office of WLSA in Harare, Zimbabwe, and its national office in Gabarone raised the much needed funds for Dow's onerous legal expenses (Olsen 1993:12).

The decisions of these women to challenge the structural, cultural, and legal edifices of male dominance had consequences far beyond the immediate outcomes of their dispositions. As Stamp (1991:844) correctly points out:

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10 While both Wambui Otieno and Unity Dow directly invoked CEDAW in their court arguments, Laeticia Mukurasi used international feminism in her written appeal to the former president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere (Mukurasi, 1991:64-5).

The court triumph can be seen as a Pyrrhic victory for the lineage... Wambui showed Kenyan women the possibility of defiance. Not many would wish to be defamed as she was, but she proved that women could resist the control of their marital lineage and use the courts to do so. Wambui thus opened the political space for other women's actions and, in this sense, she won.

No doubt the Tswana and Tanzanian cases also achieved similar ramifications to the Wambui case in so far as they reverberated beyond the borders of the respective countries where the primary battles were fought. Mukurasi (1991:1-2) pointed out that '...it is women's silence that has rendered them invisible... My intention here is to make visible to a wider audience a case which started as a private matter but was transformed into a very public issue within Tanzania... I hope that my story will serve as a source of understanding and inspiration for women and men who have had similar experience'. As the three cases aptly illustrate, when the seemingly mundane 'private' or 'personal' issues are elevated to the 'public' sphere their political character is immediately exposed, thereby reinforcing the need to deal with them politically rather than privately.

### **Conclusion**

All five cases discussed in this paper represent strong political statements by assertive individuals and groups of women brave enough to challenge the structures of political and gender domination. Whether such domination assumed the form of colonialism or patriarchy, these women stood their ground and ensured that their demands were not ignored. Whatever the outcome of each case, the feminist message was loud and clear in all the situations: women can no longer be taken for granted irrespective of the obstacles that stood in the way and the sacrifices that had to be made in the struggle for equality. At the same time, the cases raise interesting issues in feminist epistemology: At what point in time, and under what material conditions will women challenge their conditions of oppression? What is the utility of pursuing the formal structures of state and society (courts, media, etc.) in the attempt to achieve liberation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the women's movement in the struggles of individual women and how can they be sensitized in order to be supportive of the struggles of individual women? What strategies do they need to pursue in order to hasten the struggle to dismantle the barriers of discrimination erected by society?

The five cases analyzed in this paper epitomize the feminist truism: the personal is political. At the same time, they represent only a small portion of the progressive development of feminism made in Africa. Women will go about their 'feminine' business as usual until a core part of their self-perception is shaken to such threatening proportions as to compel them to take action challenging it. When such a time comes, there is no

regressing. An important lesson that may be gleaned from all this is that African women's perceptions have to be sensitive to the political nature of their personal being. This process increases their understanding of feminism and empowers them with the intellectual tools to participate in the women's movement.

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