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'For their freedoms': The anti-imperialist and international feminist activity of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria

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SYNOPSIS

Because most of the nations of the African continent did not gain independence until the second half of the twentieth century, sub Saharan African women have appeared rarely in histories of international feminism. Cheryl Johnson Odim begins to remedy this omission in her consideration of the first cohort of African women to be politically active beyond the continent. Johnson-Odim gives her most complete account of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the Nigerian born, British educated, "mother of women's movements in Nigeria and an inspiration to those in other parts of Africa."

Among the international women's organizations in which Ransome-Kuti was active was the Women's International Democratic Federation, a post WWII organization that grew out of European resistance movements and was connected to the Communist International. The WIDF, about which much is yet to be learned, played a major role in recruiting women leaders from Asia and Africa, and bringing them onto an international stage, including at the United Nations.

In an interview in 1976 Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (also known as Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti and henceforth in this article as FRK) commented on her struggles from the 1940s through the 1960s to travel to communist countries. She said: "All our big men and women now travel to China and Russia. I suffered for their freedoms." (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997 xii) With this plain and understated remark she spoke to part of her legacy to the international anti-imperialist and transnational feminist activity of African women. Regarded by many as one of the most important twentieth century Nigerian historical figures, the mother of women's movements in Nigeria, and an inspiration to those in other parts of Africa, FRK was active in anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-sexist struggles for most of her life. Even though she dedicated herself, at local, national and international levels, to issues such as woman suffrage and representation in government, and on at least one occasion used the term "women's liberation" as one thing she hoped to accomplish, she considered herself primarily an advocate for human rights, not solely women's rights. On her death in 1978 a major Nigerian newspaper hailed her as "…a progressive revolutionary whose immense contribution to the continued crusade for the educational emancipation of the country will never be forgotten" and another as an "anti-imperialist and a Pan-African visionary." (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997 170). Nonetheless, in her political philosophy we recognize a general thread in the feminist political activity and philosophy of African women, not only in FRK's time, but also both before and since.[1]

Particularly in the twentieth century when its direct effects reached into both small villages and densely inhabited urban areas, the onslaught of European colonialism created a maelstrom of conditions that marginalized women as the result of intersecting and mutually re-enforcing European and indigenous African patriarchies, and as the result of the racial, political, cultural and socio-economic oppression systemic to the colonial enterprise. These conditions set into motion resistance by African women at the local, regional, national and international levels.

In the twentieth century massive numbers of women, poor and rich, educated and uneducated, were deeply involved in resistance to European colonialism and male domination at both the local and national levels. The 1890s rebellion led by Charwe in present-day Zimbabwe, the 1929 women's rebellion in Eastern Nigeria, the 1940s women's marches in Senegal as part of the strike of African male railway workers so

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beautifully chronicled in Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood,* (1960) the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya (1952–1960) and the revolution against the French in Algeria (1954–1962), are a few among the many examples of women critically centered in African resistance. (Johnson-Odim, 2005). From the 1970s through the 1990s women's roles as troop support and combatants against the Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique and apartheid in South Africa are all well-documented. Women's resistance to European colonialism also often involved confronting African male collaborators, and ultimately, the patriarchal practices of African societies.

Contemporary African women theorists of African feminism such as Marie Angelique Savane, Ifi Amadiume, Filomina Chioma Steady and Amina Mama, to name just a few, also do not isolate the struggles of African women *as* women from their struggles as "third world" people and as black people. Savane, the first president of the Association of African Women Organized for Research and Development (AAWORD), which was organized in 1977, wrote in 1982:

> …women of the third world perceive imperialism as a main enemy on their continents and especially of women…Feminism is international in defining as its aim the liberation of women from all types of oppression and providing solidarity among women of all countries… Equally we condemn discrimination and injustice based on race or ethnicity as much as that based on gender. We believe our hope lies in joining with those progressive forces which will achieve a future human society in harmony with the environment and free of discrimination and inequality between men and women, black and white, believer and unbeliever.[2]

FRK was part of, and contributed to, a long tradition of widespread women's activism across the continent.

In the international context, African women of FRK's time also did not try to isolate their oppression as women from their oppression as colonial subjects and as black people. They understood that their liberation as women was as connected to issues of imperialism and racism as to sexism. In fact, these oppressions *could not be* disaggregated. Thus then, as now, there was a reluctance to embrace a solely feminist identity, even in the process of waging struggle against indigenous patriarchy, and certainly not when waging struggle against international patriarchy and oppression.

Given this perspective it is not surprising that the internationally active feminist activists of FRK's generation were often involved with international organizations that promoted women's rights in the context of human rights and often as part of their anti-imperialist and anti-racist activity, such as the Women's International Democratic Federation WIDF), to be discussed below, or the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). African women international activists of her generation were also drawn to and active in the Pan-Africanist and Garveyite movements. These are the movements which most easily accommodated their holistic sense of the struggles of African women.

Though the examples of women's resistance to colonialism at the local level are many, the list of African women who were involved at the regional, national and international levels (and we must remember that work across African countries is also international activity) either at the forefront of the local struggle against colonialism, as participants in an intellectual and political community of the Black Atlantic Diaspora, or in international feminist struggles, grows much smaller. Only a handful of West African women contemporaries of FRK had similar international connections: Adelaide Casely-Hayford, Mabel Dove Danquah and Constance Cummings-John. It is informative to briefly examine their lives both in comparison to that of FRK and as illustrative of African women's feminist philosophy and activity discussed above. Each of these women, like FRK, traveled internationally, was active in women's education, and espoused a feminist, Pan-African, anti-racist and anti-imperialist philosophy. None felt she had to choose between marriage and an activist life, but each chose a husband who was active in struggle, had strong international connections, and encouraged her independent activity and understood and supported her activist philosophies on behalf of women and the independent nation she hoped to help create. Each had parents who believed in girls' education, which was not the norm for Africa or Europe of their time.

Adelaide Casely Hayford (née Smith) was born in 1868 in Freetown, Sierra Leone and was educated in both England and Germany. (Cromwell, 1986; Desai, 2004). Just before her thirtieth birthday she returned to Sierra Leone to begin what would be a long career in girls' education. Within a few years she married Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford (a.k.a. Ekra-Afiman, 1866–1930), one of the best known Pan-Africanists of the twentieth century. He was a prolific author who was very involved in the anti-colonial struggle and a founder in 1919 of the National Congress of British West Africa, one of the first formal nationalist and anti-colonial organizations in West Africa.

Adelaide Casely Hayford (ACH) traveled widely to raise funds for girls' education in Sierra Leone. She spent a considerable amount of time in the United States, living for a while in Harlem (New York), but visiting over thirty other cities. Her time in the U.S. was partially facilitated by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. As Lisa Materson shows in her contribution to this volume, ACH was also involved in the International Congress of Women of the Darker Races. She met and interacted with prominent African American leaders including Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, Dr. Robert Moton (President of the Tuskegee Institute), and Ms. Nannie Burroughs (an activist in black education in the U.S. and in the black women's club movement in the U.S.). She even developed an Advisory Board, composed of prominent African Americans, for her school in Sierra Leone.

For a while she served as president of the Women's section of the Sierra Leone branch of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which had spread since its founding in 1914 to over 40 countries, including in Africa to Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, Namibia and South Africa. The school founded by ACH was eventually forced to close due to declining funding. She died in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1960.

Mabel Dove Danquah (MDD) was born in 1905 in the Gold Coast (which upon independence in 1957 became Ghana), though part of her family had its roots in Sierra Leone (Denzer, 1992). She was educated in Sierra Leone and England but spent most of her active adult live in the Gold Coast. Except for a trip to the U.S. in 1956 most of her political work took place in Ghana and Sierra Leone.

In 1933 MDD wed Joseph Kwame Kyeretwi Boakye Danquah (J.B. Danquah, 1895–1965), the first continental African to receive a doctorate in law from the University of London and a good friend of J.E. Casely Hayford. J.B. Danquah was the first president of the West African Students' Union (WASU), begun in 1925 as an anti-racist and anti-colonialist organization of African students studying in England. He also founded the first daily newspaper in Ghana, the *Times of West Africa*, for which his wife, MDD, wrote a "ladies'" column under the pen name of Margaret Mensah. MDD was a politician and a journalist and in 1954 she was elected to the colonial legislature in the Gold Coast, the first woman legislator in a national assembly in West Africa. She became an active and ardent member of the Convention People's Party (CPP), founded in 1949 by Kwame Nkrumah, it was the party that led Ghana to its independence. At one point at Nkrumah's invitation, MDD became editor of the *Accra Evening News*, but when they disagreed over editorial policy he fired her as editor though she continued to write a column for the paper. In 1951, with her friend Constance Cummings-John, she helped found the Sierra Leone Women's Movement, an expressly pan-ethnic organization.

Though MDD's initial journalistic writings focused on family affairs issues, politics would eventually become her primary focus. As she moved to an explicitly political focus in her writings she particularly championed the anti-colonial struggle and girls' education. She remained politically involved in independent Ghana and died in 1984.

Constance Cummings-John (née Horton) was born in 1918 in Sierra Leone and was educated there and at Achimota College in the Gold Coast and in London (Cummings-John, 1981, 1995). While in London she was involved with the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), serving for a short time on its Executive Committee. The LCP, founded in 1931 by Harold Moody, a native of Jamaica, was a Pan-Africanist organization that fought for equality of treatment in Britain of all people of color and sought to define British citizenship, throughout the empire, to include colonial peoples. In 1936 Constance Cummings-John (CCJ) visited the United States to study at Cornell University. While there she visited several historically black institutions of higher education including Hampton, Spelman and Tuskegee. She was shocked by the racism and discrimination she encountered in the U.S. Equally disturbing and disappointing were the stereotypes of Africa she encountered among some African Americans.

Shortly after she returned to Britain CCJ married Ethan Cummings-John, a lawyer, with whom she returned to Sierra Leone in 1937. She became principal of the African Methodist Episcopal Girls' Vocational School and with her husband set up a local branch of the LCP. In 1938 she joined forces with I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, a radical activist and trade union leader, in establishing a chapter of the West African Youth League (WAYL). The WAYL fought for the rights of workers, popular representation in government and political rights for women. That same year CCJ ran as a WAYL candidate in the Municipal Council elections in Freetown. She was elected with the highest number of votes of any of the candidates and went on to serve a total of twenty years (1938–1942 and 1952–1966) as Municipal Councilor.

In 1946 CCJ returned to the United States to work with the American Council for African Education, a Pan-Africanist group, and the American Council on African Affairs (ACAA). The ACAA was founded by Paul Robeson and Max Yergan and sought to bring Africa to the attention of Americans, particularly African Americans. It fell in the repression of left-wing groups spurred by the McCarthy hearings.

CCJ returned to Sierra Leone in 1951, opening a school for girls and eventually became vice president of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), helping to form its women's section. Many of the West African nationalist parties of the 1940s and 1950s had women's sections that often struggled with the broader party to integrate women into the policy making apparatus and the higher echelons of leadership. CCJ organized the Sierra Leone Women's Movement (SLWM) that genuinely worked towards trans-ethnic cooperation. By 1961 she was able to leverage her leadership of the SLWM to guarantee women's representation in the Sierra Leone delegation sent to London to discuss the colony's independence. In 1966 she was elected the first woman mayor of Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown. She went into exile the following year due to a military coup but subsequently returned and remained active on political issues. She died in 2000.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (FRK) was a well known contemporary of Adelaide Casely-Hayford, Mabel Dove Danquah and Constance Cummings-John, with whom FRK maintained a long correspondence. (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997). More than the others, the origins of her activism were firmly rooted in grassroots organizing and perhaps that is why her class analysis was the most developed. Her first international activity was in other African countries and she was well regarded among those involved in the independence struggles of Ghana and Sierra Leone, and elsewhere on the continent. She was courted by international women's organizations, most notably the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Kwame Nkrumah, who was an acknowledged architect of the philosophy of Pan-Africanism, regarded her as a friend and credited her with being an inspiration to the Ghana Women's Association. As a guest in 1960 of the Sierra Leone Women's Movement she was carried shoulder high by the women and presented them with a song she'd composed and dedicated to them.

Though Abeokuta, Nigeria was her primary residence for her entire life she traveled extensively internationally and espoused a global perspective. In addition to her travel to many countries on the African continent including Algeria, Cameroons, Dahomey (now Benin), Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Togo, she traveled outside of Africa including to Austria, China (where she met with Mao Tse-tung), Czechoslovakia, Denmark, England, Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Soviet Union and Switzerland. In her correspondence there are letters from women's organizations in South Africa (an especially poignant correspondence after the 1960 Sharpeville incident in which several women protesters were killed), Trinidad, Korea, India, Viet Nam and Bulgaria. In 1949 Amy Ashwood Garvey, widow of Marcus Garvey, visited Abeokuta and spoke on women's need for equality. Subsequently FRK wrote to the UNIA Women's Corps and asked if the NWU could affiliate with it. FRK was well informed on women's issues world-wide.

Though very active in Nigerian politics FRK considered herself foremost a human rights activist. She headed several

women's organizations and championed the rights of women, but she constantly articulated a philosophy and engaged in actions for the rights of the poor and disenfranchised of both sexes, and around the world. It is important to examine FRK's initial activism at the local and national levels in Nigeria, which, over time, shaped her political philosophy, facilitated her international activity and formed her legacy.

FRK was born in Abeokuta, Nigeria (a city in the southwest of the country) on October 25, 1900. Her parents, Lucretia Phyllis Omoyeni Adeosolu and Daniel Olumeyuwa Thomas, as might be suggested from their Christian names, were early Yoruba converts to the Anglican Church. Both had been baptized Christian as young children and both were educated in Christian missionary schools. Both also were among the early nationalists who, though Christian, maintained many of their Yoruba customs (including sometimes polygamy) and who struggled for African leadership in the church and the mission schools. FRK was given the Christian names Frances Abigail (which she dropped as a young woman studying in England) and the Yoruba name Olufunmilayo, and she was known by the shortened version, Funmilayo, for the rest of her life. FRK's parents, unlike those of many of her contemporaries, believed in girls' education beyond the primary level and she was among the first cohort of girl students when in 1914 the Abeokuta Grammar School became co-educational. Because she showed great intellectual promise, FRK's parents determined to send her to England to further her education. She had already met her future husband, the Rev. I. O. Ransome-Kuti, and in a 1919 letter to him just before sailing for England she wrote: "My heart has been so much filled of you that I could scarcely part with your portrait for a good two days…never shall I forget you, the man to whom I first gave my heart." (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997, 30).

FRK did not particularly enjoy her time in England, feeling that both her race and her national origin were disparaged. Though the Horsfield family (friends of her uncle, the prominent trader, Moses Coker) with whom she boarded, was kind to her, she dropped all use of her European names and after used only Funmilayo. She attended the Wincham Hall School for Girls in Cheshire and in 1922 returned to Abeokuta to teach algebra, English and geometry. On January 20, 1925 she married Rev. I. O. Ransome-Kuti.

Shortly after, she and her husband relocated to the town of Ijebu-Ode where the Rev. Ransome-Kuti was principal of a school. FRK founded one of the first kindergartens in Nigeria, and she began her organizing of women with a "young ladies' club" aimed at instructing relatively privileged young women in handicrafts and the domestic sciences. She also held literacy classes for the market women which began to radicalize her perspective on gender and class relations. These early organizing efforts would soon transform themselves into far more explicitly political activity.

The Ransome-Kuti marriage was atypical. By all accounts she and her husband were equal partners at a time when that was almost unheard of in a marriage. The marriage lasted thirty years (until his death in 1955) and they shared political views. The Rev. Ransome-Kuti, nine years senior to his wife, was a Pan-Africanist and a nationalist. Both he and FRK were among the founding members in Nigeria of the supporters of the WASU and were among the charter members of the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), founded in 1931. The NUT was national in its orientation and argued for both women's education and state supported education for the needy rather than fee-based education. The Reverend Ransome-Kuti served as president from 1931 to 1955. In 1939 the NUT became affiliated with the National Union of Teachers in England and the reverend traveled to England to argue for better funded education in Nigeria. Education, and especially women's education, remained a primary concern of FRK for all of her life. In the late 1940s she was one of three NUT representatives on the Central Board of Education of Nigeria.

While in Ijebu-Ode the Ransome-Kutis had two children, a daughter, Dolupo, born in March, 1926 and a son, Olikoye, born in December, 1927 (two other sons, Fela and Beko, were born in 1938 and 1940 respectively). Three of the Ransome-Kuti children went into the medical field. Dolupo was a nurse, both Olikoye and Beko became medical doctors — Beko was a well-known human rights activist who served on the Commonwealth Medical Association's Eminent Persons Advisory Group on Human Rights, Olikoye became Minister of Health for Nigeria and received awards from both the World Health Organization and UNICEF for his innovative health programs aimed at decreasing infant mortality and developing community health programs in rural areas. The most well-known Ransome-Kuti child was Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, world-renowned for his musicianship and his radical political activity. In publications ranging from *The New York Times* to the *Chicago Reader*, and in British and French documentary films, Fela is compared to James Brown, Bob Dylan and Mick Jagger musically, and to Stokely Carmicahel and H. Rap Brown politically (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997, 176).

In 1932 the Ransome-Kutis returned to Abeokuta when the reverend accepted a position as principal of the Abeokuta Grammar School. This would be the family's home base until FRK died in April 1978, and where she began her true career as a political activist. In Abeokuta FRK continued her literacy work among a small group of women. She later reported that she had a friend who, when they went to church, held her hymnal upside down because she could barely read. This inspired FRK to found the Abeokuta Ladies' Club (ALC), a larger group that worked to involve uneducated market women in a widespread literacy effort. In its inaugural 1944 "Rules and Regulation," listed among its aims were "to help in raising the standard of womanhood in Abeokuta…to help in encouraging learning…and thereby wipe out illiteracy." (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997, 64).

In this context of increasing interaction with mostly poor and illiterate market women FRK began to hear their stories of woe, injustice and ill-treatment by the colonial system and particularly at the hands of the *Alake* Ademola, the traditional ruler of Abeokuta, who many felt operated as a pawn of the British in his role as head of the Sole Native Authority (SNA) system, a colonial governing board. As FRK's reputation grew as someone to be trusted, the Abeokuta market women came seeking her help with the colonial government and those, such as the *Alake* Ademola, who implemented its policies.

By the mid nineteen forties the colonial government had enacted several policies that were inimical to the interests of the market women. The government had set price controls for goods sold in the market, demanded that the women turn

over quotas of goods to the government to offset shortages induced by World War II, imposed conditional sales whereby if a market woman purchased (for re-sell) fast moving goods such as sugar she had to agree to purchase so many slow moving goods (such as cutlasses), and levied taxes on women without any women's representation on colonial governmental bodies. The colonial government delegated to traditional bodies such as the *Ogboni* chiefs and the *Alake* the job of enforcing these unpopular and unfair policies, thereby giving them far more power than they had traditionally wielded.

The ALC, led by FRK, organized to protest these policies. Later, FRK recalled her mounting anger as she became aware of the women's plight. FRK began to feel, in her own words, that "We educated women were living outside the daily life of the people." She abandoned her western clothing for the traditional Yoruba wrapped cloth to "…make women feel and know I was one with them." (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997 66) No photograph of her taken after the mid 1940s, including those on her international trips, shows her in anything other than traditional Yoruba dress. This was clearly a statement of her class allegiance as much as of her cultural pride. She also began using Yoruba rather than English in all her public meetings and addresses.

The British system of indirect rule in Nigeria meant that all colonial policies were contracted out to local traditional authorities who were paid for implementing them. Thus it was the local, indigenous authorities as much as the European representatives of the colonial government, who sometimes were deemed to be enemies of the people, especially the *Alake*, viewed as closest to British authorities.

Subsequent to the ALC protests (and limited victory in getting the food control laws abolished) the organization changed its name to the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), with FRK at its head. The name change signaled a new commitment to avowedly political purposes and an activist orientation. Thousands of market women began to swell the organization's ranks. In his autobiographical novel *Aké: The Years of Childhood (1982),* the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka (nephew of FRK), refers to these women as "wrapper wearers" based on their traditional Yoruba clothing. He describes himself as a young child being an "odd jobs man" for the women's movement, relaying messages, running errands and distributing leaflets or other materials. The Abeokuta Grammar School courtyard became a primary meeting place for the women. In a passionately descriptive passage about one of the women's meetings he writes:

> Women of every occupation — the cloth dyers, weavers, basket makers and the usual petty traders of the markets — they arrived in ones, twos, in groups, they came from near and distant compounds, town sectors and far villages whose names I had never heard. They smelt of the sweat of the journey, of dyes, of dried fish, yam flour, of laterite and the coconut oil of their plaits…" (Soyinka, 1982, 185)

FRK began to adopt an explicitly anti-colonial philosophy. Though she did not believe an end to colonialism would automatically resolve the oppression of women or other disenfranchised groups, and she was equally critical of those elements of indigenous Nigerian cultures that she felt were oppressive, she saw ending colonialism as a *sine qua non* in the democratization of the country.

The AWU adopted the motto "Unity, Cooperation, Selfless Service and Democracy." Included among its aims and objectives were "…to unite women, to defend, protect, preserve and promote social, economic and political rights and interests of women; to cooperate with all organizations seeking and fighting genuinely and selflessly for the economic and political freedom and independence of the people." (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997 73) The AWU had a dues-paying membership of over twenty thousand women, including Christians, Muslims and followers of indigenous religions, and both illiterate and western-educated women.

In the late 1940s the AWU spearheaded massive protests against colonial policies. In a 1975 interview with *New Breed* magazine FRK remarked of the protests: "What people are saying is that I attacked Ademola [the *Alake* at the time]. I didn't really attack Ademola, I attacked imperialism. Those Europeans were using him against his people…I was attacking Europeans indirectly and they know it."[3] The women utilized many tactics in their protests. They wrote petitions, they hired accountants to audit the SNA's books, they marched and surrounded government house and the *Alake* Ademola's palace and meetings of the SNA.

In November 1947 the women organized impressive mass demonstrations in which as many as ten thousand women participated. FRK held training sessions for the women in which she instructed the women how to cover their mouths, noses and ears when tear gas was thrown at them. She also encouraged them to pick up the tear gas canisters and throw them back at the policemen. Unable to get permits to protest the women referred to their protests as "picnics" and "festivals."

There is a particularly enchanting story of FRK rebelling courageously against a traditional custom used to silence women. The *Ogboni* society operated as a traditional balance of power to kings, and part of their power rested in *oro,* a power that "came out" to compel people to obey the sanctions of the society. Only men could be out when *oro* paraded and women were forbidden to be in the streets or even to look when the instrument that embodied *oro* (a long wooden stick, with a hole through which a string was attached at the end, to whirl it above one's head, emitting a whirring sound) was paraded. When *oro* "came out" during the women's demonstrations to forbid them from continuing, an angry and fearless FRK left her home and approached the male led parade, snatched the stick and later displayed it in her home. Actions such as this prompted several market women, when later giving testimony, to refer to FRK as their "king [sic] who made their lives better" and who said "It was their God who created Mrs. Kuti, that made a gift of her to them as their mother." (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997 76).

Women used the traditional protest tactic often referred to as "sitting on a man," surrounding a man's home or office and detaining him, and singing derisive songs to insult him. Just before one such protest in November 1947 FRK stopped just before reaching the *Alake* Ademola's palace, the *Afin*, and turning from the women with her, closed her eyes. She said that any woman who wished to leave should do so while her eyes were closed. The women then proceeded to the *Afin* and sang songs such as these: "O you men, vagina's head will seek

vengeance…white man, you will not get to your country safely, you and *Alake* will not die an honorable death…" (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997 83) At one confrontation the British District Officer reportedly told the women to shut up, to which FRK replied, "You may have been born but you were not bred! Would you talk to your mother like that?" (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997 84) The women are said to have threatened to cut off his genitals and post them to his mother.

On January 3, 1949 Ademola abdicated as *Alake.* The women's protest is seen as the primary reason and the women achieved representation on the SNA. During the protests FRK had kept in touch with her friends in England, notably writing to Reginald Sorensen, a Member of Parliament for the Labour Party, and Arthur Creech-Jones, who was Secretary of State for the Colonies. An article entitled "They Made the Ruler Run," chronicling the women's protests, appeared in the left wing London based newspaper the *Daily Worker* on August 18, 1948. Although the *Alake* Ademola returned to power nearly two years later, the women had achieved a historic victory. FRK had become a nationally and internationally recognized heroine in the struggle for women's rights.

In May 1949 the AWU resolved to go national to increase support for its long term objectives of the enfranchisement of all women in Nigeria, and FRK proposed the founding of the Nigerian Women's Union (NWU). Thus began her foray into the organizing of women on a national basis. In August 1953, as NWU president, FRK called a conference of all women's organizations in Nigeria, attended by four hundred delegates from fifteen provinces, and, true to NWU principles, many ethnicities and classes were represented. From this conference the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies (FNWS) was founded with FRK as its first president. The FNWS pledged itself to achieve universal adult suffrage and advocated the use of symbols in elections so illiterate voters would be enfranchised. The next decade was a volatile one, leading up to Nigerian independence in 1960. Political rivalry and fractiousness grew, sometimes based on ethnicity and sometimes on individual greed or lust for power. FRK's political fortunes waxed and waned during this period and the FNWS membership dwindled in the face of a government supported rival and self-pronounced non-political group, The National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS).

It is in the midst of the women's protest in 1947 that FRK was drawn into the international orbit outside of Africa when she accompanied a delegation of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) to England. Founded in 1944 by Nnamdi Azikiwe and Herbert Macaulay, the NCNC was among the most important of the early nationalist parties in Nigeria. The Ransome-Kutis were among the first to join the NCNC. During his travels to England on behalf of the NUT the Reverend Ransome-Kuti had struck up a cordial relationship with Arthur Creech-Jones, a founder of the Fabian Colonial Bureau (FCB). The FCB, founded in 1940, was a group with socialist principles that sought to influence British colonial policy, serve as a clearing house for information on the colonies and act in Britain on behalf of the interests of people of the colonies.

When Creech-Jones visited Nigeria in 1944 he met FRK and by 1945 she was carrying on a lively correspondence with Creech-Jones and his wife, Violet. In 1947 when the NCNC resolved to send a delegation to London to protest the limits of the Richards Constitution, Azikiwe called for a woman to be part of the group. Though she was not the group's first choice, FRK ended up joining the delegation. The group's first choice was Madam Alimotu Pelewura. A generation ahead of FRK, Pelewura was best known for her role in organizing the market women in Lagos and leading thousands of them in protests aimed at securing woman suffrage, against taxation on women without their representation in government, and against the colonial government's usurpation of women's traditional power to set prices for commodities they sold in the local markets.[4] Pelewura, however, was sick and frail in 1947, and the next best known women's activist was FRK, who was asked to accompany the delegation.

The NCNC delegation spent two months in London in the late summer and early fall of 1947. The trip was poorly organized, especially since Parliament was in recess much of the time the delegation was in London, but FRK, undeterred, resolved to contact women's and workers' organizations to make her trip fruitful. She began by contacting her friends the Creech-Joneses and Arthur Creech-Jones assigned a woman from his office to help her plan an itinerary, and Violet Creech-Jones lined up engagements for her. On her own FRK got in touch with the British Broadcasting Corporation. She was invited to address the London Women's Parliament Committee, a reception of women journalists, the London National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs, the National Federation of Women Institute and the National Townwomen's Guild. She visited several factories and day care centers and the National Council for Maternity and Child Welfare. She made a day long visit to a factory in Surrey, Mitcham Works Ltd. On September 20 the Lord Mayor of Manchester held a reception at which she spoke about the problems of women in Nigeria.

While in London FRK published a controversial article in *The Daily Worker* (August 10, 1947) under the title "We had Equality 'til Britain Came" in which she argued that colonialism had marginalized Nigerian women in the political and economic spheres and oppressed them with unjust taxes while denying them the right to vote. She asked the help of British women in liberating Nigerian women from colonialism, who, she said, suffered under political and economic slavery. The article was reprinted in several Nigerian newspapers and though it was denounced by some elite Nigerians, the AWU and the Lagos Market Women's Association supported FRK. They held mass meetings and organized a major welcome home reception for her. Later, in defending what she wrote, FRK stated "The true position of Nigerian women had to be judged from the women who carried babies on their backs and farmed from sunrise to sunset…not women who used tea, sugar and flour for breakfast." (*West African Pilot,* September 2, 1948).

During this 1947 trip FRK met London-based members of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF). Founded in Paris in 1945, out of the French resistance movement and with backing from the Soviet Union, the aims of the WIDF were uniting women regardless of race, religion, nationality or political opinion to prevent a resurgence of war and defend the rights of women and children. The WIDF worked on behalf of national independence movements, against racial discrimination and fascism and for peace and universal disarmament. The WIDF is still an active organization and continues to work on behalf of gender

equality and for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Shortly after FRK met with the WIDF members, the organization's secretariat set up a commission to investigate the conditions of women in Africa and Asia. At their request FRK wrote a one-page report on women in Nigeria which was published in an issue of the WIDF Information Bulletin (1948) and then, along with reports compiled from other areas of Africa and from Asia and the Middle East, was re-printed as a book, *The Women of Asia and Africa: Documents.*[5]

FRK continued an active correspondence with various WIDF members after her return to Nigeria, even as she tried to sort out what she wished her relationship with them to be. After some initial doubt and concern, likely due to the increasing anti-communist fervor in Nigeria, FRK warmed to the WIDF, and by 1952 began to accept their invitations to various conferences. She attended a WIDF conference on the "Defense of Children" in Vienna in April 1952 and a WIDF sponsored World Congress of Women in Copenhagen in June 1953, at which time she was elected a vice president of the WIDF. In May 1952 she was interviewed for the London-based *Daily Worker*. In August 1953 FRK authored another brief report on women in Nigeria for the WIDF.[6]

As the cold war heated up FRK was faced with considerable government scrutiny because of her relationship with the WIDF, which the US and the UK regarded as a Communist front organization oriented toward women, particularly in the Third World. In July 1954 the secretary general of the WIDF, Mollie Mandel, visited Nigeria and spent some time in the home of FRK. That same year the Nigerian government enacted a ban on communist literature in Nigeria, including that of the WIDF, and announced that no communists would be employed in the civil service.

In May 1955 FRK and two FNWS members were invited to attend the World Assembly of Peace organized by the WIDF and held in Helsinki. When she applied to renew her passport FRK was told that the government had determined that the WIDF and the World Assembly of Peace were communist organizations and that if she persisted in visiting communist countries her passport might be revoked. In 1956 when FRK was invited to attend a meeting of the WIDF Council in Beijing she accepted nonetheless and went to China for three weeks. This visit attracted attention even in London where the *London Times* carried a May 28, 1956 article on "The Indoctrination of Africans" that critically cited FRK as an example of Communist manipulation. FRK responded that she visited countries all over the world to find strategies to help her effect the "improvement and liberation of Nigerian women." (Johnson-Odim and Mba,1997 146).

In 1957 when she submitted her passport to the Nigerian government (still under colonial rule) for renewal to attend another WIDF conference, Tafawa Balewa, the Nigerian Prime Minister, denied her a renewal. There was a huge furore, with both FRK supporters and detractors criticizing the government's action as an "unnecessary restriction of civil liberties."[7] Balewa made a statement before the House of Representatives and listed the many communist countries to which FRK had traveled, saying the government first thought her a pawn of the WIDF but now believed she was out to influence Nigerian women to be communists. FRK issued a public statement ridiculing Balewa's remarks and asking if his recent trips to Egypt and Saudi Arabia meant he was out to Islamize Nigeria. She accused the British senior assistant secretary of immigration, who had tried to get her to sign a "confession" that she had not traveled to communist countries for health reasons as she had maintained for one of her trips, of both racism and sexism. She bridled at the idea that she was a pawn, an insinuation she considered an attack against her intelligence and her integrity. Still, she maintained that she was independent and not a communist.

This was a time when any support from or affiliation with communist or socialist leaning organizations or individuals was seen as very dangerous by western governments. They were particularly afraid of such activities in their colonies as they saw the potential for colonies to become communist, once independent, and independence in sub-Saharan African nations was definitely in the air by the 1950s. The Gold Coast became the independent nation of Ghana in 1957, and its leader, Kwame Nkrumah, was widely viewed as a socialist.

By the late 1950s FRK tried to tread a delicate balance regarding her affiliation with communist and socialist organizations, because all power still flowed from Britain, where cold war politics ruled the day. In her efforts to get external as well as internal support for the struggles of Nigerian women she sought help from diverse ideological sources and her actions were often pragmatic. For instance, she assured G.R. McGregor-Wood, an anti-communist leader of the British Women's International Association (BWIA), that she was not a communist — a position she always maintained, when she wished to have the BWIA's support for women's protests in Nigeria. But she continued her affiliation with the WIDF. In the 1950s and 1960s she accepted a donation of scientific equipment from the Soviet Women's Committee for her school in Abeokuta. A few graduates of the school were given scholarships to study at Lumumba University (named after Patrice Lumumba, the African anti-colonial leader assassinated in 1961 who was the first elected president of an independent Republic of Congo) in the Soviet Union. When she felt she was engaged in a just cause she sought help from those who may have considered themselves to be one another's enemies, but not her enemy.

In 1958 when she wished to attend a women's conference in San Francisco, the United States denied her a visa on the grounds of her alleged communist connections. There were many protests by men and women in Nigeria of the denial of a passport to FRK, but still her passport was not renewed until after Nigerian independence. She then subsequently traveled to Budapest, Moscow, Prague and Warsaw to various women's conferences. Still, in 1975 she once again applied for a U.S. visa but her request was again denied. She was never able to visit the United States.

FRK was also involved with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The WILPF was founded in 1915. Its aims of enfranchising women and bringing peace to the world were initially focused on Europe and North America but by the 1950s it had begun to look toward the rest of the world. The first Nigerian affiliate of the WILPF was organized in 1950 but became defunct within a few years. In the early 1960s the WILPF was referred to FRK by Sam Enwerenzu, a Nigerian student in Pennsylvania who they had asked for advice about women leaders in Nigeria whom they might contact. In February 1961 a WILPF representative, Emily Simon, visited Nigeria and was hosted by FRK in Abeokuta. By November 1961 FRK founded a Nigerian branch of the WILPF in Abeokuta and

was attempting to set up branches elsewhere in the country. By 1963 the WILPF was listing FRK as president of its Nigeria section though it is unclear how active the section was. Given the WILPF's actively anti-communist orientation and its reputation for wishing to "lead and teach" African women, and though FRK was not a communist, given her involvement with the WIDF and her strong pride and personality, one is not surprised that she had difficulty getting along with some of the organization's leadership. During the 1960s there were WILPF leaders such as Dorothy Steffens who cautioned against "[Marching] into Africa carrying the torch of enlightenment" pointing out that there were Africans able to think for and lead themselves (Foster, 1989, 58–59). In any case, by 1970, the WILPF seems to have once again become defunct in Nigeria.

In the late 1960s and in the 1970s FRK continued an active life as an educator, as an advisor and mentor to younger activist women, and as an elder stateswoman in the political arena. In 1965 the Nigerian government awarded her membership in the Order of the Niger for her contribution to the nation. In 1968 she received an honorary doctorate from the University of Ibadan (Nigeria) and in 1969 appeared in the *International Women's Who's Who.* In 1970 she was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and the Soviet ambassador to Nigeria, A. Romanov, wrote to her that the prize was "in recognition of your noble activities for many years in promoting friendship and mutual cooperation between Nigerian and Soviet peoples." (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997 173). He enclosed a letter of congratulation signed by the Chair of the Soviet Women's Committee, Valentina Nikolaeva-Tereshkova.

On her death on April 13, 1978, FRK was hailed in major Nigerian newspapers as "The Voice of Women" and "The Defender of Women's Rights." She was also hailed as a progressive revolutionary and an anti-imperialist. Her role in the international feminist movement was informed by her role in the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and feminist struggles that she engaged in locally and nationally. Her philosophy of transnational feminism, articulated as much by her actions, which were many, as by her writings, which were fewer, is illustrative of the idea of *action as theory* that I have articulated elsewhere.[8] She is also considered a pioneer in the articulation and practice of African feminism and an important figure in the rise of Nigerian radical political philosophy.[9] FRK will continue to be studied and analyzed through use of her papers (and those of her husband) available in the archives at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and through the increasing number of secondary works written about her. Analyses of twentieth century African and transnational feminism will continue to be informed and complicated by her story.

Endnotes

[1] For discussions of this, and why I choose to use the term "feminist" in describing this activity, see Johnson-Odim, Cheryl (1991) "Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third World Women and Feminism" in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* ed. Chandra Mohanty et al. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, pp. 314-28, and Johnson-Odim, Cheryl (1998), "Actions Louder than Words: The Historical Task of Defining Feminist Consciousness in Colonial West Africa" in Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds. *Nation, Empire, Colon: Historicizing Race and Gender,* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, pp. 77–93.

[2] Savane, Marie Angelique, "Another Development with Women" in *Development Dialogue* 1, no. 2, pp 8–16. See also Cheryl Johnson-Odim "Common Themes, Different Contexts" pp. 320 and 325.

[3] *New Breed Magazine* (May 1975), pp. 23–31. Lagos, Nigeria. See also Cheryl Johnson-Odim, "On Behalf of Women and the Nation" in eds., Johnson-Odim, Cheryl and Margaret Strobel (1992), *Expanding the Boundaries of Women's History* p. 146. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

[4] For a brief biography of Alimotu Pelewura see Cheryl Johnson (1981), "Female Leadership During the Colonial Period: Madam Alimotu Pelewura and the Lagos Marketwomen" in Tarikh, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 1–10.

[5] Ransome-Kuti's one page report on Nigeria was first published in the WIDF Bulletin No. 33 in Budapest in 1948. *The Women of Asia and Africa: Documents*. Budapest: Second World Congress of Women for Peace, 1948.

[6] That They May Live: African Women Arise. Berlin: Women's International Democratic Federation, 1954.

[7] *Daily Times*, January 2, 1958.

[8] See Johnson-Odim, Cheryl "Actions Louder than Words: The Historical Task of Defining Feminist Consciousness in Colonial West Africa" and Cheryl Johnson-Odim (2001), "Who's to Navigate and Who's to Steer: A Consideration of the Role of Theory in Feminist Struggle" in M. DeKoven, ed. *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice." Rutgers, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, pp. 110–29.*

[9] There are too many references to FRK's importance in this regard to cite, but I will cite a few: Tijani, Hakeem Ibikunle (2005) "Britain and the Development of Leftist Ideology and Organizations in West Africa: The Nigerian Experience, 1945–1965, Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Africa; Pereira, Charmaine (2004), "Review Essay, Locating Gender and Women's Studies in Nigeria: What Trajectories for the Future?" in the *Gender and Activism Studies in Africa* Series of the Council for Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Vol. 3; Brodnicka, Monika (2003), "When Theory Meets Practice: Undermining the Principles of Tradition and Modernity in Africa" in *Journal of African Philosophy*, Issue 2; Nzegwu, Nkiru (2000), "African Women and the Fire Dance" in *West African Review,* Vol 2 no 1; Simola, Raisa (1999), 'The Construction of a Nigerian Nationalist and Feminist: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti" in *Nordic Journal of African Studies,* 8(1).

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