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EDNA G. BAY

Twentieth Century

The West African region, an expanse of land nearly as large as the United States, is home to more than 240 million Africans—approximately one-third of the people on the African continent. Nigeria is the most populous country in the region and in Africa, and Nigerians make up half of all West Africans. The peoples of West Africa are extremely diverse, speaking hundreds of distinct languages and practicing different religions. In precolonial times the inhabitants of this region that is part savannah, part forest, lived in communities that ranged from small decentralized village groups to large states and empires.

Women in precolonial West Africa enjoyed many liberties. Government was divided between men and women in a dual-sex complementary political system in which each sex managed its own affairs. West African women wielded political power as queens, queen mothers, titled women, and market "mothers"; religious power as deities, priestesses, masked spirits, and diviners; and economic power as farmers, traders, potters, and weavers.

The women of the great kingdom of Dahomey, in what is now southern Benin, were perhaps best known for their role as the famous Amazon soldiers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These Abomey women also functioned as royal bodyguards and retainers and ruled in a complementary manner with the kings of Abomey as queen mothers, *kpojitos*. In the Asante Empire (present-day

Ghana), the *asantehemma* (the queen mother of the empire), *ohemaas* (queen mothers of the paramounts), *oba panins* (queen mothers of the towns), and *abusuapanyins* (queen mothers of the clans) shared political power in a complementary manner with the kings of each section of the empire. Just east of the Asante Empire were the small-scale societies of the Igbo of present-day Nigeria. The women organized into groups of daughters (*otu umuada*), wives (*otu inyomdi*), age grades (*ndi ogbo*), and titled women (*umunwanyichi echichi*), and wielded considerable clout as the supreme court of the society (*otu umuada*) and the lower court (*otu inyomdi*), and they served as other important political functionaries in society.

During these precolonial times, West Africans were ordered by the wills and decrees of unseen female forces—deities and spirits—who represented the most powerful spiritual forces in the West African religious pantheons. What was more, female diviners, priestesses, and masked spirits were said to be endowed with the gift of "seeing," which allowed them to explain the unseen and interpret the unknown. In most West African countries the deities in charge of the waterways and the land had female personifications.

West African women also played important roles in the economic realms of their societies. The market women of Asante (Ghana) and Yoruba and Igboland (Nigeria) were known for their extremely enterprising nature, and the vast majority of West African women were farmers.

Colonialism marked the beginning of the end of any kind of equality between the sexes in West Africa. Women suffered the greatest loss of power and clout. They were for the most part relegated to the background and could no longer take part in decision making. The colonial government befriended young West African men, whom they elevated to junior partners of the colonial enterprise—both in politics and economics—to the detriment of women, who were systematically removed from the public positions they were used to occupying in the precolonial era.

West African women, however, did not let their disempowered position go unchallenged. In 1900, for instance, Yaa Asantewaa, the *asantehemma* (queen mother) of Ejisu (present-day Ghana), led her people into war. Two years earlier the British had exiled Asantehene (King) Prempeh II. The British governor Frederick Hodgson, in an attempt to humiliate them further, demanded the Golden Stool, a symbol of Asante unity. In the face of this insult, even the bravest male members of Asanteland were cowed. In her now famous challenge, Yaa Asantewaa declared:

How can a proud and brave people like the Asante sit back and look while white men took away their king and chiefs and humiliate them with the demand for the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool only means money to the white man; they searched and dug everywhere for it. . . . If you, the chiefs of Asante are

going to behave like cowards and not fight, you should exchange your loincloths for my undergarments."

(quoted in Aidoo, pp. 668–669)

That was the beginning of the Yaa Asantewaa war, which eventually led to her capture and deportation to the Seychelles Islands but, like the fine examples shown by her foremothers, she revived the spirit of pride and resistance among the Asante.

Twenty-nine years after the Yaa Asantewaa war, the Igbo women of colonial Nigeria nurtured the same smoking flame. In a war remembered as the *ogu umunwanyi*, the "women's war," Igbo women mobilized and made war on the colonial government, using their precolonial mechanism of "sitting on a man"—when all the women in the village gathered together, sang songs that called the manhood of the offender into question, roughed him up, stripped him naked, and symbolically "sat on him" by planting their nakedness on every exposed element of his body—to call attention to the adverse way they were being treated.

West African women also played a major part in the nationalist revolutions of their countries. In Sierra Leone, women formed new organizations that became central to local and national politics. Constance Cummings-John parlayed her efforts into creating the Sierra Leonean Women's Movement, which united Creole and protectorate women in their mission to defeat colonial policies that had an adverse effect on their political and economic rights. Nigerian market women during this time organized nonviolent protest movements, calling attention to their economic and political concerns. In Guinea, women played a direct role in the rise of Sékou Touré, the first president of independent Guinea. They gave money, acted as communication links among the revolutionaries, and through their market associations became key resources for the nationalists during this time. In Guinea, Bissau women were active in the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC). While pushing for nationalism they also channeled their energies into advocating the general liberation of women, establishing programs and mechanisms to this end.

In the postcolonial era the proliferation of military regimes in West African states coupled with internal warfare in Liberia and Sierra Leone had especially far-reaching implications for women. Rape, a recognized weapon of war against women, became common in both countries, creating a generation of people desensitized to crimes that during an earlier time were regarded as abominations.

In the early twenty-first century more than half of the West African population survived on less than one U.S. dollar a day, making the region home to ten of the twenty poorest nations in the world. All was not bleak, however, as the war-torn country of Liberia elected Africa's first female

president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, in 2005. Other West African nations—Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, and Guinea-Bissau, for instance—have also made considerable strides, slowly inching toward gender parity in their national legislatures and parliaments.

There is also increased female visibility in the workforce, with rural West African women producing between 70 and 80 percent of the food supplies in the region. In the Federal Republic of Benin, for instance, female agricultural workers provide 44 percent of their individual families' subsistence requirements. The female farmers in Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Gambia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, to name a few, do likewise. Though the vast majority of working women in West Africa are employed in the informal sector as farmers, the number of female salaried workers in government jobs is fast approaching that of men.

Changing Attitudes in the Twentieth Century. Following the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, women in West Africa made significant strides in education and in the economic and political landscapes of their countries. During the decade of Education for All (EFA) in Côte d'Ivoire, the enrollment ratio for girls versus boys in primary and secondary schools jumped from 33 percent to 64 percent. The national coordinator for the EFA 2000 assessment, Salimata Blé, attributed the advance to measures taken by the ministry of education to reduce the gender gap. The same country boasts that one-sixth of the students at the National University of Côte d'Ivoire are women. Grace Alele Williams, mathematician, academic, and businesswoman, became the first female vice chancellor of a federal university in Nigeria (1985–1991), thus pioneering the way for other women to follow.

However, there still exists a measure of gender inequality in many West African nations. Despite significant strides made in education in Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire, gender parity, especially at the primary school and secondary school levels, has been slower than expected, especially in Benin, where an estimated 74 percent of all women remain illiterate.

One of the most striking features of West African economies has been the feminization of the labor force. Although West African women have often concentrated their talents in areas of self-employment as opposed to government jobs, in the last few decades of the twentieth century women's access to paid employment rose in most West African nations, and so did the terms and the conditions of these salaried positions for women. By the late 1980s women in Côte d'Ivoire were beginning to emerge on the local and national fronts as education enabled them to challenge the established order. Consequently, role expectations for women changed as the number of female salaried workers increased drastically. Ivorian women filled one-fourth of the civil service positions, and still greater numbers of women held positions

previously closed to them in medicine, law, business, and university teaching.

Moreover the national governments of all West African nations enforce gender equality in employment practices, creating provisions for paid maternity leave with full salary and guaranteeing job security for returning mothers, who for fifteen months after they return to work may take breaks of up to one hour to nurse their babies. Benin, Chad, Mali, and Senegal have been at the forefront of these revolutionary policies. These laws, while exceptionally protective of the salaried working West African mother, apply only to women employed in the formal sector.

One of the major impediments facing rural West African women has been access to credit. To this end women across western Africa are increasingly forming their own savings and credit groups. In Benin these groups, called *banques des femmes*, have sprung up all over the country. In Cotonou alone more than two thousand lower-income women are members of fifteen such groups, with combined savings amounting to 10.2 million FCFA (U.S. \$20,400) in March 1996. These *banques des femmes* offered more than a thousand individual loans of 19,200 FCFA (U.S. \$40) to Beninese women, privileging poorer women in their loan selection process.

Though most West African governments have national property and inheritance laws that regulate the equitable division of property and treatment of widows, often tradition and local custom do nothing to uphold national law. To counter this situation, a group of West African women's rights organizations held a landmark meeting on 29 July 1999, dubbed Day of Action for Women's Inheritance Rights, to promote awareness of the devastating effects of discriminatory inheritance rights practices on women and children. Women's rights activists in eight West African countries—Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo—held activities concurrently to draw attention to the discrepancies in inheritance laws as they relate to women.

Even the landlocked country of Chad has introduced national social services legislation to lessen some of the gendered disparities between men and women in the country. This legislation provides family allowances to women, funded by employers, who match 6 percent of the employee's wage. Other government mandated payments to working parents include prenatal allowances—a lump sum payable at the births of an employee's first three children to assist in purchasing clothing—and, if the mother is employed, a recuperation allowance for fourteen weeks. In Chad, old-age and disability pensions are provided only to female salaried workers.

Significant Women. The overall percentage of West African women in decision-making positions in national government is encouraging. The vast majority of West

African nations—Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Togo, Guinea-Bissau—have had numerous women national ministers, judges, and diplomats since independence; however some countries, like Burkina Faso, Mali, and Senegal, have fallen far below their articulated expectations, recording a dismal number of women ministers and advisers in national government. Even the smallest country in West Africa, Gambia, produced a female vice president, Aisatu N'Jie-Saidy; more than thirteen female ministers; a female attorney general, Fatou Bensouda; and female members of the national parliament. And in May 1984 the second smallest country, Guinea-Bissau, swore in a woman, Carmen Pereira, as acting head of state for two days. In March 2001, Marie-Elise Gbedo, a practicing lawyer, was the first Beninese woman to stand in a presidential election. Her campaign platform pushed for women's rights in public affairs and decision making. Gbedo also vowed to run Benin like a business that would make money for its people. But she did not win election.

On 23 November 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, running under the auspices of the Unity Party, was elected the first woman president of war-torn Liberia. She was sworn in on 16 January 2006, becoming the world's first black woman president and Africa's first elected female head of state. Johnson-Sirleaf's distinguished political career, however, did not begin with her election to the Liberian presidency. Between 1972 and 1978 she was the assistant minister of finance, and from 1979 to 1980 she was the minister of finance, both positions under the presidency of William Richard Tolbert Jr. She later filled the position of vice president of the Africa Regional Office of Citibank, Nairobi, between 1982 and 1985. The next year she became vice president and member of the executive board of Equator Bank in Washington, D.C. Nicknamed the "Iron Lady" after Britain's Margaret Thatcher, she is a founding member of the International Institute for Women in Political Leadership.

Johnson-Sirleaf's ascendancy to the Liberian presidency was not the beginning of female political activity in West Africa. A number of feisty and capable women nationalist politicians paved the way for Johnson-Sirleaf. The women of the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) in French West Africa were perhaps some of the most militant. Aoua Keita of Mali became the first woman in her country to be elected a deputy to a national assembly in a French-speaking West African country, as well as the first to be elected to a national political bureau of the RDA. In the newly independent nation of Ghana, Mabel Dove became the first woman in West Africa to be elected to a national legislature. Just east of Ghana, Wuraola Adepeju Esan became the first woman to be appointed senator in the federal legislature of Nigeria and the first to be on the executive committee of the Action Group of Nigeria. And in President Johnson-Sirleaf's



The Liberian President. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf at her inauguration ceremony, Monrovia, January 2006. REUTERS/JASON REED

own Liberia, the diplomat Angie Elizabeth Brooks-Randolph became the first female African president of the United Nations General Assembly in 1969.

West African women have also distinguished themselves in creative writing. The Nigerian Flora Nwapa, who first published in the early 1960s, is considered the mother of the African novel. Her novels include *Efuru* (1966), *Idu* (1970), *Never Again* (1975), *One Is Enough* (1981), and *Women Are Different* (1986), and although she did not identify as a feminist, her works address questions of tradition and transformation for women. The societies she depicts are at a crossroads between Igbo traditions and mores and Western thought. She elegantly weaves these realities to create complex female characters struggling for independence in their societies. A number of other West African women writers have followed Nwapa's pioneering example. Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Efua Sutherland (playwright, Ghana), Mariama Bâ, (Senegal), and Aminata Sow Fall (Senegalese writer and educationalist) have all

distinguished themselves as critically acclaimed international writers.

The West African newspaper movement of the 1950s acted as a watchdog of the colonial government. That period was distinguished by an almost total absence of female journalists. The postindependence era ushered in a change, however, with more and more prominent female journalists, photojournalists, and editors. The Ghanaian Kate Abbam falls into this category as a journalist and owner and editor of the women's magazine *Obaa Sima, Ideal Women*, a publication intended to educate Ghanaian women about their rights. Becky Ayebia, also from Ghana, was the cofounder of Ayebia Clarke Literary Agency and Publishing (2003) and editor of the *African and Caribbean Writers Series* for Heinemann (1990–2002).

Other Ghanaian journalists and editors include Kathleen Ofosu-Appiah and Nana Kwakye Yiadom. The Liberian journalist and editor Helene Cooper pursued a distinguished journalistic career in the United States, serving as international economics reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* for four years starting in 1999. She was then promoted to assistant bureau chief of the Washington Bureau for the *Wall Street Journal*, a position she held until 2004. In October 2004 she left to serve as assistant editorial page editor for the *New York Times*. The Senegalese editor and director Yandé Christian Diop of *Présence Africaine* has also been making a mark as a successful journalist and editor.

In nations where freedom of speech is often lacking, West African female journalists face the same dangers that their male counterparts do. The Guinea-Bissauan radio journalist and programming director Paula Melo made headline news after she was arrested on the orders of Prime Minister Caetano N'tchama in May 2000, demonstrating how prone West African journalists are to human rights threats and violations.

West Africa is also home to many internationally respected musicians and artists. French West Africa has particularly distinguished itself in this regard. Some of the better-known musicians include the Beninese Angelique Kidjo, the Burkinabe Amity Meria, the Ivorians Antoinette Konan, Aicha Koné, Monique Séka, and Ano Mira, and the Malians Khaira Arby, Nana Coulibaly, Djeneba Diakite, and Nahawa Doumbia. English-speaking West Africa is not far behind with Sade Adu, Christy Essien-Igbokwe, and Nelly Uchendu making their mark on the international recording scene.

With the explosion of the video and film industry in West Africa has come a proliferation of women making a living in entertainment. Most West African women work in front of the camera, but a few have made their mark behind the scenes as producers and directors. Some of the most remarkable of these include Fanta Régina Nacro (film

director from Burkina Faso), Cheryl Dunye (Liberian film director), Rahmatou Keita (Nigerian film director, writer, and journalist), Funmi Martins (Nigerian actress and producer), Lola Fani-Kayode (Nigerian television producer), Amaka Igwe (Nigerian film director, writer, and producer), Safi Faye (Senegalese film director), Fatoumata Kandé Senghor (Senegalese filmmaker, photographer, and designer), and Anne-Laure Folly (Togolese film director). The critically acclaimed filmmaker and director of *Monday Girls*, Ngozi Onwhura, also deserves mention.

Gender and Work. Work in West Africa is gendered, and rural West African women tend to be responsible for all household tasks, including water fetching, firewood gathering, and food processing and preparation. They often administer their duties with the help of female extended family members who live with them and help married women with the everyday running of their households. In some communities only women can become weavers or pot makers. In Chad, for instance, the harvesting and processing of the versatile *karite* tree has traditionally been women's work. Women participate actively in the processing of its bark for traditional medicinal purposes, its shell for mosquito repellent, and its seeds for cooking oil, soap, and body lotion.

Regional Women's Groups. The number of West African women's associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) quadrupled in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. Many of these organizations promote women's rights in the arenas of income generation, savings and credit, literacy, health, and environmental protection. Other groups have focused on women's legal rights, legal reform, and legal literacy. In the Republic of Benin, Action des Chrétiens pour l'Abolition de la Torture-Bénin (abolition of torture), AHAVA (knowledge sharing), the Association des Femmes Juristes du Bénin (women's rights), the Association pour le Développement des Initiatives Villageoises (development and promotion of women's initiatives), and the Commission Béninoise des Droits de l'Homme (promotion and protection of human rights) have been particularly prominent.

The Federal Republic of Chad boasts a few prominent NGOs as well, including Coordination des Associations Féminine, Femmes de Charité des Assemblées Chrétiennes au Tchad (FCACT), and Secours Catholique et Développement. In 1963, Ivorian women formed the Association des Femmes Ivoiriennes (AFI, the Association of Ivorian Women) to improve education and employment opportunities for women and establish judicial equality. Many decades later they formed the Republican Front to protest the ruling party's control of television. Other Ivorian NGOs include the Association des Femmes Ivoiriennes, Association des Juristes de Côte D'Ivoire (AFJCI), Association Internationale pour la Démocratie

en Afrique, Comité International des Femmes Africaines pour le Développement (CIFAD, women, agriculture, rural development, handicrafts, small enterprises, training), Côte D'Ivoire-Ecologie, Développement par l'Épargne et le Crédit—Organisation Non Gouvernemental, and Union des Coopératives des Commerçantes de Vivriers de Bouaké.

Women in the small West African country of Gambia have also established a number of NGOs to advise the government on mobilizing and integrating women as equal partners in economic, social, and cultural development, to improve maternal health and agricultural production, to provide skills development and training, to disseminate information, and to serve as credit and savings groups. The Association of Non-Governmental Organizations, Gambia Business and Professional Women (GBPW), and the Gambia National Women's Council and National Women's Bureau have been particularly effective.

[See also African Liberation and Nationalist Movements; Bâ, Mariama; Codes of Law and Laws, *subentry* Islamic Law; Cummings-John, Constance; Dual-Sex Political Systems; Gender Roles; Imperialism and Colonialism, *subentries* Modern Period and Anticolonial Protests; Islam; Johnson-Sirleaf, Ellen; Markets and Trade; Nigeria; Nwapa, Flora; and Yaa Asantewaa.]

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