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# Gender, Justice, and the Environment: Connecting the Dots

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*I would like to dedicate this lecture to Olufunso Yoyoye and Wangari Maathai, both of whom contributed to this paper and both of whom passed away on September 25, 2011.*

In this paper I attempt to connect several dots, specifically my research on African women's activism, environmental justice, and climate change. The book on which I am currently working is tentatively entitled "The Great Upheaval': Women, Taxes and Nationalist Politics in Abeokuta (Nigeria), 1945–1951." The study examines the struggles of Nigerian women to shape the nationalist agenda and their setbacks as the country moved decisively toward independence. At its core lies an analysis of a tax revolt launched by women in Abeokuta in 1947. The Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), under the leadership of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (the mother of the late musician Fela Kuti), began a protracted protest against a tax increase. This revolt is well known in Nigerian popular history, and many people outside of Nigeria were introduced to it in Wole Soyinka's memoir, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981:164–218).

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By the time the women's protests ended in July 1948, they had succeeded in getting the colonial government to temporarily abolish taxes on women and they had forced the traditional king and Sole Native Authority, Alake Ademola, into exile. The tax revolt was the beginning rather than the end of a process for Ransome-Kuti, built on the AWU's success in launching a national women's organization, the Nigerian Women's Union (NWU), in 1949. The NWU had branches throughout Nigeria, thus knitting together a wide cross-section of women's organizations to present a uniform set of issues and concerns to the newly formed political parties.<sup>1</sup> Based on the strength of the NWU and the emergence of other women's organizations, Ransome-Kuti and the NWU organized what she described as a "parliament of the women of Nigeria" in August 1953. Four hundred delegates from across Nigeria met in Abeokuta, August 5–7, and at the conclusion of this meeting they established the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies (FNWS) (Johnson-Odim & Mba 1997:101).

The NWU and its constituent organizations brought a gender critique to both local and national developments. For example, member organizations continued to challenge poll taxes and fight for a reduction in bride price in each region, while Ransome-Kuti took these issues to the Western Region constitutional conference in 1949.<sup>2</sup> Her actions resulted in many letters of praise. For example,

We, the undersigned, the accredited representatives of the Women Community in Ibadan, beg to show our appreciation of your speech during the sittings of the Western Regional Conference at Ibadan recently, when you fearlessly and freely champion the cause of women in Nigeria in general, and in the Western Province in particular.

You have bravely revealed to the House all our present sufferings, and the need for allowing women to rub shoulders with men in the Councils of our land, the exorbitant income tax imposed upon us without giving us chance to explain our financial positions, and so many other things which you have made the House to know about us. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Ransome-Kuti was engaged in politics at the national level as well. She was a founding member of the NCNC—the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon. She was the only woman on a seven-member NCNC delegation that included Nnamdi Azikiwe and toured Nigeria in 1947 condemning the current constitution, the Richards Constitution.<sup>4</sup> After the tour, they visited colonial officials in England demanding constitutional changes. This agitation produced results quickly. In 1948 the British Labor government announced a series of changes that radically altered the terrain for all political organizations across Nigeria, including a plan to revise the Richards Constitution early and to seek the input of Nigerians.<sup>5</sup>

This announcement made clear that self-government would unfold much sooner than anyone had anticipated. By 1950 the structure of the

new constitution was taking shape and it was evident that it would preserve the old regions and greatly increase their power. Within a year, 1951, a new constitution, the McPherson Constitution, was enacted. These developments combined to accelerate the emergence of regionally and ethnically based political parties. Three dominant parties emerged: the NCNC, which began as a pan-Nigerian organization, became increasingly identified as an Ibo nationalist party; the Action Group, which emerged as the dominant party in the western region (to which Abeokuta belonged), was dominated by Yorubas; and the Northern People's Congress, the main party in the North, was largely dominated by Hausas.

Tremendous pressure was brought to bear on all civic organizations to align themselves with the emerging political parties. Since Ransome-Kuti had been a founding member of the NCNC and maintained her membership even when it transformed itself into a political party, she was asked to bring the women's union into its fold. In a very revealing letter Idise Ogoegbunam, one of the leaders in the NCNC, encouraged Ransome-Kuti to "take a country-wide tour whereby your mission is sure to be a source of inspiration to a host of our thirsty womenfolk who only need female leaders who would ignite them to action. . . ." He also urged her to bring her organizations into the NCNC, for "the success of any organisation as important as yours depends upon how it is identified with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons. . . . Any organisation that fails to realize the acceptability of Dr. Azikiwe's leadership especially in the East, North, and the Cameroons is destined to flop."<sup>6</sup>

Ransome-Kuti did not follow this advice. During the 1950s she tried to steer the women's organizations under her leadership away from aligning with any of the political parties. Instead, she tried to maintain these organizations as spaces where women from all political affiliations could gather to learn from one another. The parties did not respect this approach, however, and sometimes forced prominent women to resign. Such was the case of Margaret Ekpo, Ransome-Kuti's counterpart and contemporary in Enugu in Eastern Nigeria. In her letter of resignation in 1954 from the Nigerian Women's Union and the recently formed Federation of Nigerian Women's Organisations, Ekpo wrote, "This decision arises from the fact that I have now found out that these two organisations stand independently from the N.C.N.C. of which I belong and devoted my life to work and die for."<sup>7</sup>

Ransome-Kuti's resolve to maintain the independence of these organizations reflected her own critique of the way nationalist politics had evolved. She had envisioned the nationalist period as an era that would open a range of social and political opportunities for women. Instead, the parties did not support women as candidates; they primarily wanted women as voting fodder. It was this issue that led to her own break with the NCNC in 1959. When the party refused to support her as a candidate, she resigned and formed her own political party, the Commoner People's Party (Johnson-Odim & Mba 1997:117). In this political climate, the continued

existence of the Nigerian Women's Union and the Federation of Nigerian Women's Organisations as independent pan-Nigerian spaces for women's political work must be appreciated as bold organizational challenges to male-dominated political leadership and ethnic nationalisms.

Ransome-Kuti's activism was not limited to nationalism; it expanded into environmental issues. On July 24, 1959, in her capacity as president-general of the Federation of Nigerian Women Organisations, she sent the following cable to HRM Queen Elizabeth II.

The Federation of Nigerian Women[']s Organisations on behalf of millions of Nigerian mothers and children protest vehemently against French Government's decision to test atomic bombs in [the] Sahara. . . . Nigerian women pray your majesty as leader of commonwealth to protect the lives of Nigerians and persuade [the] French Government [to] cease [the] proposed test forthwith. . . . With our independence next October we prepare developing our resources and raising our living standards not being maimed and rendered useless. . . . [The] Tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki [is] still a challenge to mankind. . . . Your majesty as a mother, we appeal. . . . [P]lease help. . . .<sup>8</sup>

This cable is striking for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates that Nigerian women's organizations followed national as well as international events.<sup>9</sup> Second, it reveals their appreciation of the geographical scope of environmental actions; they understood that radiation released into the atmosphere did not stay in one location for long.<sup>10</sup> Third, Ransome-Kuti framed the women's concerns in language that anticipated what scholars today call "human security," which, as Kuwali argues, "requires a seven-pronged approach addressing economic, food, health, environment, personal, community and political security" (2008:24). In the cable Ransome-Kuti clearly linked the potential harm of the tests to health, development, and the community's social and economic well-being.

Finally, Ransome-Kuti used motherhood as a political platform for this appeal. On a general level she believed that women had to be politically active, but she thought that motherhood prepared women for politics in distinct ways. She believed that mothers established the values through which good citizens were nurtured, including those of kindness, selflessness, and a willingness to contribute to progress. Furthermore, women who were good managers of their home displayed "a full fledged life as a citizen in your country." For her, citizenship meant not only being born in a certain location, but also contributing to one's community, and motherhood in particular invested in women the qualities that make good politicians:

To be a good politician you must be wise like a snake, calm like a dove and kindly like an angel. You must be ready to do good to your fellow men and be prepared to save them from trouble. By virtue of our temperament,

women are made to be good politicians, for we are created to be patient, loving and sagacious. (Ransome-Kuti n.d.)<sup>11</sup>

On the surface Ransome-Kuti appears to have championed a conservative reading of women's role within society; these comments seem to reinforce the expectation that women, in their role as managers of domestic space, are responsible for rearing children who will become good citizens. But whereas this logic had been used in the past to keep women from direct political engagement, she used it to argue, instead, that precisely because of women's values, the political arena should be a female space. "In our country here," she wrote, "we turn the meaning of politics upside down. . . . [W]e turn the word politics and practice it to mean callousness, deceit and fraud. While it actually means prudent and honourable dealings" (Ransome-Kuti n.d.). In her estimation, Nigeria's male leaders lacked the selflessness necessary to put into practice a politics that brought progress to the nation and its citizens. While men turned politics upside down, women had the skills to turn it right side up. For these Nigerian women on whose behalf Ransome-Kuti sent the cable to Elizabeth II, motherhood invested them with the "right" to demand action at the same time that it established their common bond with the queen, for she too was a mother.

In many ways Ransome-Kuti's actions exemplify what Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor (1997) have called "mother-activism": the use of motherhood as the basis for inclusion in activism and as "the inspiration for and the foundation of visions of large-scale social change" (Orleck 1997:3). "Mother-activism" does not subscribe to any one political orientation; in their book *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right*, the three editors present a collection of articles and interviews that explore the complex array of political activism in which women have used their position as mothers to fight, for example, against racism and imperialism, the Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan (see Orleck 1997; Blee 1997). In this instance Ransome-Kuti deployed "mother-activism" as part of a larger critique of French imperial actions and policies that threatened all humankind.

## Women and the Environmental Justice Movement

On many levels, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's appeal to protect the environment on behalf of Nigerian women resonates with the problems of our contemporary period. We only have to think of the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan which led to the damage of the Fukushima nuclear plant and put atomic energy and the danger of radiation exposure back on the front burner. Struggles around the environment have assumed greater attention since Ransome-Kuti sent her cable to Queen Elizabeth, and they have galvanized women activists in Africa and other parts of the world. In the U.S. what has become known as the Environmental Justice movement was galvanized by mothers, most of whom were poor women of color who

were protesting the effects of the dumping of toxic wastes, pesticide runoff, and deforestation on their communities and their children (see Bullard 1993, 2000[1990]). These efforts were consolidated in 1991 when leaders of the movement like Dollie Burwell from Warren County, North Carolina, organized the first People of Color Environmental Summit in Washington, D.C. (see Jetter, Orleck, & Taylor 1997:23, 24).<sup>12</sup> The conference generated a national network that campaigned for and ultimately won the creation of an environmental equity office in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

There are also prominent African women in the global environmental justice movement. We are probably most aware of the Greenbelt movement in Kenya that was led by Wangari Maathai. In her contribution to the volume *The Politics of Motherhood*, Maathai says that it was the complaints from poor rural women about the health status of their children that motivated her involvement in the environmental movement. She came to realize that there was a connection between malnutrition, cash crop production, and deforestation, and this realization made her rethink the whole premise and priorities of development.

The wind that swept me into environmentalism and politics came when I was at the University of Nairobi. A group of women in the university linked up with the National Council of Women of Kenya, and it was there that we met our rural sisters and started to listen to each other's problems. I already knew that rural women had very little income, low social status, and had to go long distances to get fresh water. But I also got the message that, in the rural areas, children were suffering from malnutrition and assorted diseases. . . .

It turned out we had cut trees and planted cash crops for international markets and that by doing so we had forced the women to change the diet of their families. This community now grows cash crops instead of traditional food. . . . In addition, to save on firewood, Kenyan mothers were feeding their children processed white bread, refined rice, margarine and sweetened tea.

That triggered my thinking about so-called development. We appeared to be moving toward affluence. But in fact we were killing our future by having children who were suffering from malnutrition. . . . Something triggered in my mind, a good idea at the right time. "Why don't we plant trees?" I said to the women at the National Council. "Sounds like a good idea," they said. "Why don't you do it?" (Maathai 1997:71–72)

The activism of the Greenbelt movement and the broader environmental justice movement has helped transform the discourse about the environment internationally. Forty-one African countries, for example, have endorsed international frameworks such as Agenda 21 of the 1992 U.N. Conference for Environment and Development. This document has two critical tenets: that there is a crucial and positive link between economic development and the environment, and also that environmental prob-

lems do not respect borders and require regional and global action (see Adelekan 2009).

In the wake of the 1992 conference, members of the Nigerian government enhanced and introduced appropriate institutional and policy frameworks. They encouraged private initiatives and collaboration with international organizations by signing and/or ratifying a number of international environmental conventions and treaties. Although significant improvement is still elusive, discussion of environmental issues has increased substantially in the last twenty years. Studies of the two most widely read national newspapers, the *Daily Times* and *The Guardian*, show that before 1988 environmental issues other than local floods, spills, or environmental hazards were not discussed frequently. Environmental awareness grew substantially in 1988, however, when a ship dumped 38,800 tons of toxic waste from Italy along the Nigerian coast. In response to this event the Nigerian government created the Federal Protection Agency.

Despite the increased attention to environmental issues, researchers found that in the period 1999–2002, more than 60 percent of environment-related stories focused on energy issues. Ibidun Adelekan (2009), a geographer at the University of Ibadan, found that most reports had an economic slant and focused on analysis of the production of oil and natural gas, oil prices in the international market, and the implications for the national economy. The reports on these topics did not analyze the links among energy, the economy, and the environment. Similarly, the environmental dimensions of oil production did not feature in press reports except when conflicts occurred between multinational oil companies and local communities of the oil-producing areas. As Adelekan notes, this is especially striking, since the conflicts in the Niger Delta revolve around the environmental impacts of oil production as they affect the livelihood and socioeconomic development of the communities. Damage to the human and biophysical environment from oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation from oil prospecting has been substantial. It is estimated that since the 1960s more than four thousand oil spills have been recorded in this area, resulting in the loss of large stands of mangrove trees, a major source of fuel wood for local people and habitat for the area's biodiversity.

The coverage of the environment in the main Nigerian newspapers offers a troubling snapshot. Not only is the topic of environmental quality submerged, but little attention is given as well to environmental issues that extend beyond local borders. The quality of the coverage may reflect debates in academia and international environmental politics. Rodney White (1997) notes that some scholars and activists argue that Africa should focus its priorities on the "brown agenda," which includes the provision of water, food, and shelter, otherwise known as "basic human needs." In contrast to the "brown agenda" is the "green agenda" which dominates environmental debates in the wealthy countries of the global North. Many who argue for the primacy of the "brown agenda" in Africa insist that the "green agenda" focuses on



“aesthetics and a higher quality of life, which is not a practical goal for low-income countries such as those in Africa” (White 1997:302,303). This discussion has now shifted somewhat, and even institutions like the World Bank now recognize that environmental quality and human health are not luxuries as countries develop but are an integral part of any strategy to meet basic human needs and beyond. Nonetheless, atmospheric change is still largely marginalized as belonging to the “green agenda.”

Adelekan’s research confirms this, for he also found that climate change has received relatively limited coverage in the Nigerian press. He argues that the information contained in global news reports on climate change has not been perceived as useful to the majority of Nigerian readers because the content did not have any immediate or practical relevance to them. This finding is extremely important, since climate change is becoming an increasingly significant determinant of socioeconomic development and environmental change. Studies being conducted on climate change suggest that it needs to become a greater part of the discussion on the environment, in part because its consequences are already upon us.

### The Impact of Climate Change in Africa

In an article in *Africa Geographic* March Turnbull (2005) argued that studies conducted in several locations on the continent show that Africa is getting hotter. In the Amboseli National Park in Kenya, for example, the maximum average temperature has increased by seven degrees. Scholars estimate that Mount Kilimanjaro will be glacier-free by 2020, and research has shown that Mombasa is already affected by climate-related disasters, especially floods, droughts, and strong winds. It is projected that these will increase in frequency and intensity with long-term climate change (see Awuor, Orindi, & Adwera 2009:80). Rising sea levels contribute to these disasters and may in time make some areas unsuitable for commercial activities and food production or even uninhabitable.

Flooding takes on more urgency when one realizes that more than one-quarter of Africa’s population resides within 100 kilometers of a sea coast, and 12 percent of the urban population lives in low-elevation coastal zones (Douglas et al. 2009:206). The rising sea level is already being felt in West Africa and is changing the landscape. In Cotonou (Benin Republic), rising sea and ocean levels have resulted in the regression of the coastline. Infrastructure such as roads and even houses in the heaviest populated districts of the city has been lost to the sea. In addition to the loss of land for housing or farming, a host of consequences flow from the rise sea levels including (1) salt intrusion and an increase in the salt content of the soil; (2) the loss of fishing grounds, destruction of fishing communities, and forced migration of residents; (3) disruption of ecological niches of crabs and marine turtles; and (4) changes in average rainfall patterns and increased atmospheric temperature (Dossou & Glehouenou-Dossou 2009).



Lagos is also experiencing rising sea levels, which are having their most severe effects on those living in settlements created in swamps and lagoons that are natural flood basins. High tides are damaging houses built on stilts at the same time that they bring all sorts of organic waste into people's homes. Researchers acknowledge that other significant factors contribute to the flooding, including the indiscriminate dumping of waste into the lagoon and the lack of official attention to maintaining and improving the drainage network (Douglas et al. 2009:210–11). Certainly in Lagos and many other cities, the urban poor are most vulnerable to the impact of rising sea levels.

## Conclusion

This quick overview illustrates that the complexity of environmental issues has grown substantially since Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti sent that cable to Queen Elizabeth in 1959. At that time, oil exploration was still in its infancy. Nonetheless, certain issues link these moments in time. Just as Ransome-Kuti tried to get the queen to step up and defend the interests of Nigerians, Nigerians today still struggle to get the state to defend their interests. Then as now, a part of the struggle is over the control of resources and the distribution of the wealth they generate. Then as now, women still struggle to shape the national agenda and priorities. Women in the Niger Delta have carried out their own protests against the environmental degradation and the loss of economic life that are created by the oil industry. Like Ransome-Kuti, some have used motherhood as the basis of their demands. Just as the women in 1959 asserted themselves in the discussion about the atomic bomb and nationhood, Nigerian women today assert themselves in discussions about the environment and how it affects the family and their capacity to care for their children.

The effort to connect these dots is significant because environmental justice is one of the most important social and political movements that will link constituencies around the globe. Whether individuals organize under the banner of ethnicity, gender, race, or class, environmental debates are fundamentally about unequal relations of power. I want to encourage more interdisciplinary collaborations that bring together scientists, social scientists, and humanists. In order to both understand and anticipate the social and political responses to climate change, we need to understand the science as well as the cultural and social lens through which people envision and act on our natural world.

## Postscript

Just ten days after the ASA annual meeting, the United Nations Climate Change Conference began in Durban, South Africa. The U.N. hailed the conference for “deliver(ing) a breakthrough on the international commu-

nity's response to climate change," and in its spirit of celebration the conference's Web site elaborated that one of its outcomes was a decision "to adopt a universal legal agreement on climate change as soon as possible, and no later than 2015" (U.N. Framework Convention 2011). The document that emerges in 2015 will limit carbon emissions from developed and developing countries under a legally binding framework, but it will not take effect until 2020. While any serious attempt to redress the negative impact of climate change is still several years down the road, Eugene Robinson (2011) argues that at least it keeps "the slow, torturous process of climate negotiations alive." However, keeping the negotiations alive while Africa struggles with the real and current consequences of climate change does not seem adequate. In response to the outcome of the conference, critics like the organization Climate Justice Now, a coalition of social movements and civil society organizations, is making the case for a global movement not unlike the anti-apartheid movement. As its statement from the Durban conference said, "Here in South Africa, where the world was inspired by the liberation struggle of the country's black majority, the richest nations have cynically created a new regime of climate apartheid" (Climate Justice Now 2011).

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## Notes

1. See Mba (1982: 166–73). NWU branches existed in Enugu, Aba, Asaba, Abikaliki, Benin, Ijebu-Ode, Ikare, Onitsha, Zaria, Kaduna, Jos, Kano, Kebba, Kafanchan, Funtua, Ilorin, Ekiti, Ilesha, and Ado-Ekiti. See Johnson-Odim and Mba (1997:100–101).
2. See Johnson-Odim and Mba (1997:13). This issue was of special concern to women as well as young men, since high bride prices made it difficult for young men to marry. High bride payments also made it difficult for women to divorce, because in order to secure a divorce they had to refund their bride price.
3. Letter from The Women Community, Ibadan, September 13, 1949, to Ransome-Kuti. Ransome-Kuti Papers (hereafter RK Papers), Box 89, File 3. Special Collections, Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan.
4. Letter from Ransome-Kuti, February 9, 1957 (RK Papers, Box 88, File 5).
5. See Coleman (1958: 310). The other changes introduced in the announcement included an acceleration of the Africanization of the senior service, advisory boards, and committees; the rapid and substantial democratization of the native authority system; and the extension of facilities for higher education. Ransome-Kuti was on the Commission that recommended the creation of the University of Ibadan in 1948.
6. Letter from Idise Ogoegbunam 'Dafe, June 6, 1950 (RK Papers, Box 89, File 5).
7. Letter from Margaret Ekpo, July 31, 1954 (RK Papers, Box 89, File 5).
8. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Cable to Queen Elizabeth, July 24, 1959 (RK Papers, Box 89, File 2).
9. Ransome-Kuti was especially aware of many international developments because she was vice-president of the Women's International Democratic Federation in 1953, an international women's organization associated with the Soviet block. A number of radical black women from the diaspora also belonged to the WIDF branch organizations—such as Thelma Dale Perkorsor, who belonged to the Congress of American Women, a WIDF branch—or supported their activities, such as the Trinidadian activist Claudia Jones. See Gore (2011).
10. Other Nigerians understood the implications of atomic testing as well. At the inception of the French atomic tests in Sahara Desert in 1960, the then Prime Minister of Nigeria, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, led a delegation to the United Kingdom to protest through the British Government to the French Authorities. On his return from London, he appointed the United Kingdom–Nigerian Scientific Committee as an ad hoc body for the purpose of monitoring radioactive fallout. By 1963 the Federal Ministry of Health established the Federal Radiation Protection Service and charged physicists at the University of Ibadan with the task of monitoring radiation levels in Nigeria through the six monitoring stations that were established across the country in Kano, Sokoto, Maiduguri, Kaduna, Port-Harcourt, and Ikeja. See FRPS (n.d.).
11. Unfortunately, the date and the location of the talk were not indicted on the draft of the speech. Nonetheless, phrases such as “return to peace in the country” and a “new reconstruction of the country” suggest that it was written in the early 1970s after the Nigerian civil war.
12. Burwell first captured attention when she and the mothers of Warren County and their children lay down in front of trucks carrying high toxic PCBs in 1982.