

A Miscarriage of Revolution: Cameroonian Women and Nationalism¹

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Abstract

This article gives an account of Cameroonian women's role in the radical, anti-colonial nationalist movement led by the UPC (Union des populations du Cameroun). Drawing on women's petitions to the UN, one of the largest collections of political documents written by ordinary African women, as well as archival research and oral interviews, the article explains the formation of the Union démocratique des femmes camerounaises (UDEFEC), a women's political party linked with the UPC. The study demonstrates that the UDEFEC transcended ethnic, class, educational, and social divides, and popularized nationalism in both urban and rural areas throughout the Trusteeship Territories of Cameroon under French and British administration. By premising issues such as economic autonomy and biological and agricultural fertility, UDEFEC politics wove anti-imperial democracy into locally based political philosophies. More "womanist" than "feminist," UDEFEC's history sheds light on the essential components of women's successful political mobilization in Africa, and contributes to the discussion of women's involvement in nationalist movements in formerly colonized territories.

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In 1949, Cameroonian women from throughout the United Nations trusteeship territories under French and British administration began to petition the UN Trusteeship Council, demanding an end to racial discrimination, increased economic opportunities, and better social services for women and children. From 1949 to 1960, over a thousand petitions written by women nationalists, members of the *Union démocratique des femmes camerounaises* (UDEFEC) flowed into the Trusteeship Council. An additional 5,000 were composed by members of the *Union des populations du Cameroun* (UPC), the *Jeunesse démocratique du Cameroun* (JDC), and the *Union des syndicats confédérés du Cameroun* (USCC). The petitioners wrote from both sides of the Anglo-French border in Cameroon, indicating that the movement spread from Cameroun under French administration to the British Cameroons. Together these parties comprised the popular nationalist movement claiming independence for Cameroon, and reunification of the territories under French and British rule.

Archival records in Cameroon, Britain, and France, the UN petitions and oral interviews with survivors of the nationalist period, reveal that women's involvement in the anti-colonial movement reshaped gender roles within the liminal space of nationalism.² Defying arrest, women such as Elisabeth Mapondjou in the 3rd Ward of Nkongsamba opened their homes to UPC freedom fighters, allowing them to spend the night when traveling from place to place. Young married women such as Thérèse Mewa carried UPC documents and petitions to the UN under their dresses, smuggling them across the Anglo-French boundary, where they could be posted from British territory. *Biyam-sellams*, or trans-local women traders hid firearms in sacks of groundnuts and smuggled them across the Nigerian border near Calabar. Young women joined the ranks of male youths in the *Armée de libération nationale du Kamerun* (ALNK), the UPC's liberation army formed in the Bamileke region in 1957, as spies, informants, and fighters. UPC exiles awarded scholarships to women for military training in North Africa and Peking. For example, Gertrude Omog learned to parachute from planes.

² I use liminal in the sense developed by scholars of postcolonial nationalism, drawing on the work of Victor Turner. In sum, "liminality" implies the unstable stage of transition (rite of passage) from one stage of life to another. I am suggesting that the period of popular nationalism and decolonization represents a liminal stage in Cameroon's history. See for instance Homi K. Bhabha (1991) and Victor Turner (1995[1969]).

In short, during the twilight years of the Trusteeship, Cameroonian politicians' struggle for independence took place against the backdrop of shifting gender roles. As they conceived the nation-to-be, Cameroonian politicians debated the role of women in society, and sought to redefine ideal womanhood and manhood. The conservative *Evolution sociale camerounaise* (ESOCAM), founded in 1949 with the support of the French administration to combat the UPC's growing popular influence, cautioned that Western-educated women "nearly always look forward to rising above African society," and that Cameroonian women "are not sufficiently trained in household duties."³ ESOCAM party members, drawn from the ranks of the *évolués* – those Africans whom French administrators deemed "civilized" – collaborated with the French administration in gradual nation-building projects that kept pace with De Gaulle's visions for a Greater France (Joseph, 1977: 176-77). Many elite Cameroonian politicians such as those who belonged to ESOCAM envisioned becoming part of a French Union or Community, made up of the inhabitants of France's colonies.

In contrast, the UPC, aligned with the *Rassemblement démocratique africain* (RDA), desired to sever political and cultural ties with the *métropole*. The fountainhead of the UPC, Secretary-General Ruben Um Nyobé, clearly emphasized the importance of women's agency in the nationalist movement. Defending the autonomy of UDEFEC to reluctant male *upécistes* (UPC members) who wished to control UDEFEC's funds and strategy, Um Nyobé declared, "If UDEFEC only struggled for the interests of women, the UPC would be glad, because the UPC wants freedom and a better life for every Cameroonian, man or woman (UDEFEC, 1992: 2-10)." Um Nyobé continued by stating that "If UPC comrades have intents to take charge of the UDEFEC, it means that they have appropriated the language and assertions of colonialists who claim that UDEFEC and the JDC are mere affiliates of the UPC and do not represent separate movements." Minimizing women's role in the politics of decolonization, in the way the ESOCAM did, was tantamount to behaving as colonialists. Um Nyobé had stated the UPC's official policy towards UDEFEC, recognizing the women's wing as a party in its own right, and its members collaborators, on equal grounds with male *upécistes*. The revolutionary *upéciste*, according to the

³ United Nations Trusteeship Council (UNTC), Petition from the *Evolution sociale camerounaise* concerning the Cameroons under French administration, 22 Nov 1949, T/PET.5/54.

movement's leader, was one who necessarily advocated women's active participation in political processes.

Very soon after women began to enter the political scene, many urban women gravitated towards the UPC as their party of choice, not least because the popular nationalist party fractured the binary oppositions between men and women, and between urban and rural spheres. These gendered categories had been reified by a colonial regime which reconfigured men and women's roles through changing labor patterns, forced migrations, and redefined land ownership and usufruct. The greatest changes introduced by colonization were the limitation of women's economic independence within the household, and the disruption of fertility patterns, both agricultural and biological. By destabilizing the gendered trends set in motion by a European administration, Cameroonian nationalists attempted to cast off the colonial legacy in a radical way.

Discussions of women's participation in nationalist movements in formerly colonized territories have proliferated during the last two decades. Much of the recent historiography of decolonization portrays women's involvement in anti-colonial movements as subversive of the colonial order, and as challenging patriarchally ordered "nation" as a modular form derived from post-Enlightenment European political tradition (Chatterjee, 1993; Lyons, 2004; Schmidt, 2002; Kanogo, 1987). Many theorists of revolutionary nationalism in colonial territories suggest that men embodied the struggle for political and economic emancipation, and assigned to women the passive role of upholding cultural, moral and spiritual traditions managed through hearth and home. The consensus that nationalism is constituted as a gendered discourse premising male citizenry is upheld by scholarship on nation and nationalism ranging from Europe to the Americas to South Asia to Africa (Grandin, 2000; Mallon, 1994; McClintock, 1991: 108).

In this article, I will be using the UDEFEC as a case study to challenge three particular aspects of the existing historiography of women and African nationalisms. Rather than consider women nationalists as a category separate from, or even in opposition to, their male nationalist counterpart, I will suggest that UPC nationalists, both male and female, guided by the UDEFEC's action, came to understand that independence from foreign rule meant disrupting the gendered polarities upheld by a colonial administration and economy. Drawing on archival records, local meeting minutes, petitions authored by women nationalists, and village

songs, here I will argue that the UDEFEC constituted an essential part of UPC nationalism, and in fact men and women nationalists joined in a mutually beneficial relationship. The role of women in the nationalist movement helped to bridge an urban-rural divide that the French administration had begun to impose.

Furthermore, in studies of African women nationalists, the moment of nationalist or anti-colonial protest has often been considered outside the diachronic continuum of African women's response to political and/or social crisis. Recent historians of women's role in independence struggles in African territories under foreign rule have argued that "stretching the limits [...] of gender norms" was "crucial" to anti-colonial movements, emphasizing the essential role women played in fighting for independence (Geiger, 1997: 162). While I certainly agree that most, if not all, nationalist movements in Africa depended in some capacity on women's active role in the struggle for independence, I would suggest that it was not the nationalist era that prompted women's reconfiguration of gender roles.

In my analysis of Cameroonian women's nationalism, I draw on Cheryl Odim-Johnson's argument that women's involvement in independence wars followed the same trends that women's political resistance had established in the past even prior to European occupation (Odim-Johnson, 1998). I seek to demonstrate that UDEFEC women followed preexisting patterns of mobilization when joining the struggle for Cameroon's independence. Women's participation in or precipitation of political upheaval constitutes the norm, not the exception, across time throughout Africa (Odim-Johnson, 1998: 77-93; Amadiume, 1997; Van Allen, 1972: 165-81). A violation of gender norms – on the part of both men and women – was historically a socio-political reaction to catastrophic change and was often accompanied by the transgression and renovation of other social norms – including oligarchies and structures of traditional power and governance (Mikell, 1995: 408; Hanretta, 1998; Bay, 1998). Gendered tensions increased in many cases during the colonial period, particularly when linked to collective resistance against colonialism and the economic changes it introduced (Kanogo, 2005: 129-63; Sunseri, 1997; Bastian, 2001: 260-82; Robertson, 1997: 23-47). In addition to concerns over access to land and its fecundity, Cameroonian women nationalists focused on reproductive fertility, and began to reclaim motherhood and birthing practices as an act of resistance to colonial rule. In so doing, they voiced

their insecurities during the chaotic and violence decolonization era and articulated their political critique of men in power as African women periodically had in previous generations, and throughout the colonial era.

Finally, much of the literature on women's radical anti-colonialism and/or nationalism falls short in explaining why their political role was confined to the temporary and fleeting space of revolution only to be thwarted thereafter, often by their male comrades-in-arms (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000; Urdang, 1979 and 1989; Suad Joseph, 1999). Here I argue that it was the triumph of the neo-colonial status quo that excluded women from participation in the post-colonial state government after Cameroon's independence. The radical Cameroonian nationalist movement - comprised of the UPC, the women's party, the UDEFEC, the youth party, the JDC, the labor syndicate, USCC, planters' cooperatives, and student unions at home and in the *métropole* - was constituted from the beginning as a gendered movement. Rather than provoke a polarization of male and female agency during the nationalist period, the movement was equally contingent upon the political and social agencies of its men and women members. However, after the formal independence of Cameroon on 1 January 1960, UPC politicians and activists found themselves excluded by the patriarchal and repressive Ahidjo regime which, relying upon French support throughout the 1960s, strategized the imprisonment or elimination of all remaining *upécistes*. Following Cameroon's independence on 1 January 1960, Julienne Keutchu, of Ahidjo's *Union Camerounaise* party, would become the only woman to occupy a position in the state assembly, comprised of eighty members. After reunification with The Cameroons (which became independent from British rule on 1 October 1961), the Ahidjo government included only three women among its 191 parliamentary representatives ((Ndami, 1997: 48). Excluding women from government became, for the post-colonial state, a way of halting the progression of an *upéciste* revolution that had envisioned total socio-economic and political change.

The UPC's failure to come to power thus marked the triumph of patriarchy in a post-colonial government that inherited much of its state apparatus from the colonial period. In the years after Cameroon's independence, male members of the UPC, or *upécistes*, were disempowered, marginalized, and under-represented, politically, while UDEFEC women were doubly so, for both their politics and their gender. UPC and UDEFEC history suggests that it was not a patriarchal nationalism that excluded

women from the “same privileged access to the resources of the nation-state” as men in post-colonial African states (McClintock, 1991: 105), but rather the nation-building characteristic of single party states which came to power with the support of former colonial administrations. In launching an assault on *upécistes* that targeted the bodies of women in particular, state officials reestablished the binarisms that the UPC and the UDEFEC had begun to fracture. Just as UDEFEC women redefined motherhood and local birthing practices as their own, the state contested women’s autonomy in these matters, effectively causing a “miscarriage” of women nationalists’ political and social objectives. Furthermore, the state’s resettlement project during the years immediately after independence established concentration camps throughout the Bamileke and Bassa regions which brought women’s economic autonomy as agriculturalists and merchants to a standstill.

The formation of the UPC and the UDEFEC

In April 1948 demands for political and economic independence and the reunification of territories under British and French rule became increasingly popular and found voice in the radical nationalist party, the Union of the Populations of Cameroun (UPC), created in Cameroun’s main port city, and economic capital, Douala (Joseph, 1977: 176-77). The twelve men who finalized the UPC statutes had actively participated in discussions of politics common to most of colonial Africa after the war. Initially a part of the RDA, taking root throughout French West Africa, UPC’s definition of nationalism fit a Fanonian, revolutionary and Pan-African model, one that necessarily included women (Fanon, 2004 [1963]: 142; Fanon, 1967 [1965]). The UPC’s founders included low-level administrative functionaries, entrepreneurs, planters, traditional notables from the territory’s various regions, and wage laborers. These diverse representatives envisioned a nationalist movement that would usher in independence from foreign rule while transforming the lives of Cameroonians throughout the territories, economically and socially, for the better (Um Nyobé, 1984 and 1989). *Upécistes* (party members) advocated for higher wages, better working conditions, the right for African farmers to cultivate cash crops, such as coffee, cocoa, and bananas for export, and the removal of price controls, export laws, and licensing restrictions which limited the economic

autonomy of Cameroonian merchants and planters while benefiting white settlers, who numbered around 17,000 by the 1950s (Joseph, 1974: 670-1).

The UPC combined grassroots support, built up by the proliferation of local committees (some 500, with a minimum of ten members each by 1955), with a visible presence in the international political arena cultivated through annual visits to the UN General Assembly in New York, publications in sympathetic metropolitan presses, and links with African student groups throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia.

As early as 1949, women created UPC “women’s committees” within which women’s concerns ranked second to a male UPC leadership. One such *comité féminin* of the UPC complained in 1949 that women were “kept to one side when it is a question of the political, economic, social and cultural interests of their country.”⁴ Three young, Western-educated Cameroonian women, Marie-Irène Ngapeth, Marthe Ouandié, and Julienne Niat, met as a result of their common interest in politics in the twilight of the trusteeship period, each holding a leadership position in the nascent *Union des femmes camerounaises* (UFC), a women’s party subordinate to ESOCAM. Specifically, these three women shared a desire to increase the political rights of women in the territory during the new postwar age. Although they agreed that democracy was contingent upon the rights and equality of women, their paths soon diverged. Frustrated by the UFC’s submission to a patriarchal, socially and politically conservative ESOCAM, Ngapeth-Biyong, Marthe Ouandié, Gertrude Omog, and Emma Mbem began to discuss the foundation of a women’s party to be a companion to the UPC, while maintaining their membership in the UFC. In 1953, Niat complained to the French administration that Ngapeth and Ouandié were carrying out “Communist activities” and had them expelled from the UFC.⁵

Women’s participation in the UPC nationalist movement was supported by leftist, anti-imperial non-governmental organizations such as the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF). It was after the WIDF invited Cameroonian women political activists to Vienna in 1951 to participate in planning the International Conference in Defence of Children that UDEFEC was founded, with a Directors’ Bureau, Regional Committees

⁴ UNTC, Petition from the Comité féminin de l’UPC concerning the Cameroons under French and British administration, 20 Nov 1949, T/PET.4/32.

⁵ Archives nationales, Yaoundé (ANY), 3 AC 3520, 12 Jan 1953, Mme Félix Ngoumou, née Julienne Niat, to Haut-Commissaire de la République Française au Cameroun.

and Local Committees – the same pyramidal organization as the UPC. A combination of local women’s mobilization, international interest, and UPC support, guided by Um Nyobé, strengthened UDEFEC as a nationalist political party. During Um Nyobé’s second trip to New York in 1953 to address the General Assembly, Mrs. Menon,⁶ representing India in the 4th Committee, asked “whether women showed an interest in the country’s political life and what part they took in the movement.”⁷ Both the WIDF invitation and Mrs. Menon’s intervention became part of UDEFEC oral history and were recounted in local meetings in urban and rural areas alike, providing members with a sense of the movement extending beyond their own locale.⁸ The way these stories were recounted at local meetings demonstrates women’s cultural translation of (inter)nationalism, and their local appropriation of far away anti-colonial discourses.

Following the lead of the UDEFEC’s international supporters, male leaders of the UPC and the JDC upheld women’s decision to mobilize. The UPC Director’s Committee founded the *Ecole des Cadres* on 7 March 1955, in New Bell, Douala, in order to educate and train nationalists as future administrators and civil servants. The strategies learned in the halls of the *Ecole des cadres* radiated outwards into local committee meetings, until most members became familiar with the act of petitioning, the importance of tracts, and the UPC’s progressive stance on women’s involvement in politics. Courses such as one on Colonial Administration underscored “the difference between a national government, institution of a sovereign state, and a colonial administration, the apparatus of a foreign power’s oppression of a subjugated people,”⁹ while others drew comparisons between UPC nationalism and anti-colonial political activism on an

⁶ Unfortunately, Mrs. Menon’s first name does not appear in the UN General Assembly reports, although she is referred to as Mrs. Menon, perhaps to distinguish her from the prominent V. K. Krishna Menon, Chairman of the delegation of India to the United Nations from 1953 to 1962. In contrast, Mrs. Menon was India’s representative on the UN Fourth Committee, overseeing Trusteeship and decolonization matters.

⁷ United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Report of the Trusteeship Council, 5 Dec 1953, Fourth Committee, 393rd Meeting, 8th Session, Official Records, A/C.4/SR.393.

⁸ ANY, 1 AC71, 7 Dec 1956, Réunion d’UDEFEC and 4 Dec 1956, Grande Conférence d’UDEFEC, Section de Babimbi.

⁹ Centre d’Archives d’Outre-Mer (CAOM), Affaires Politiques 3335/1, 10 May 1955, Ecole des Cadres, Douala, New Bell, Note de renseignements.

international scale. The school educated nationalists in six-week sessions, comprised of some 30 students selected by their central committees.

The first class of the *Ecole des Cadres* which lasted from 18 March until 21 April 1955 included UDEFEC leaders among its graduates: Marie Ndjat, Marie-Irène Ngapeth, Marthe Ouandié, Gertrude Omog, and Marthe Mourié. Mourié, Ouandié, and Ngapeth were married to Félix Roland Mourié, Ernest Ouandié, and Job-René Ngapeth, president, vice-president, and treasurer of the UPC, respectively. The *Ecole des cadres* promoted lasting cross-gender bonds among members of a graduating class. The school's highly educated graduates, together with those who participated in the creation of the school and the education of its students in New Bell, Douala, formed the educated elite of the nationalist party.

By 1955, alarmed French administrators conservatively estimated the number of nationalist members and sympathizers at some 100,000, significantly more than any other political party.¹⁰ In May 1955, leaders of the UPC, UDEFEC, the affiliate planters' cooperative, the USCC, and the youth party, the JDC publicly stated a "Joint Proclamation" of solidarity before assembled crowds in Yaoundé, the political capital, in Douala, and in Nkongsamba. They declared that Cameroun's independence and reunification with the Cameroons under British rule must occur by 1956, ten years after the signing of the UN Charter foretelling autonomy for trusteeship territories. In the days that followed, nationalists launched attacks on French administrative buildings in Douala, Yaoundé, and Nkongsamba, blocked roads to prevent the circulation of vehicles, and attacked European merchants and businessmen. The administration retaliated violently, rounding up members of the UPC, UDEFEC, JDC, and USCC for interrogation and imprisonment. Citing a decree passed in Algeria on 10 January 1936, which prohibited political parties associated with para-military groups, High-Commissioner Roland Pré, officially proscribed the nationalist parties by decree on 13 July 1955, an action the UPC insisted was illegal in a UN trusteeship territory (UPC, 1958: 30).

Most of the Directors' Bureau of the UPC fled to Kumba, in British territory, to regroup, while the UPC's Secretary-General, Ruben Um Nyobé, remained in hiding in the forests of his native Sanaga-Maritime. Marie-Irène Ngapeth and thousands of other nationalists also remained in French

¹⁰ CAOM, Aix-en-Provence, Affaires politiques 3335/1, 1955, Synthèse sur l'implantation de l'UPC au Cameroun.

territory, forming the *maquis*, or the underground resistance. In June 1957, the British administration banned the party as well, and deported 13 leaders of the UPC, UDEFEC, and the JDC. From afar, the exiled leaders established headquarters in independent African countries, including Ghana and Guinea, contributed funds, held international press conferences, acquired military training and scholarships for young exiled nationalists, and funneled them back into the newly formed *Armée de libération nationale du Kamerun* (ALNK).¹¹ The ALNK also recruited youths – men and women – from rural areas, particularly the Sanaga-Maritime, the Mungo, and the Bamileke regions, establishing *maquis* camps throughout the territory, on both sides of the Anglo-French boundary.

After the ban of the party in July 1955, *Ecole des cadres* graduates spread out throughout the territory, educating others, and planting the party's nationalist ideology in the fertile ground of rural areas. Soon, Marthe Mourié launched the periodical *Femmes kamerunaises* as the official mouth-piece of UDEFEC, with herself as editor-in-chief, Marie Ibang as manager, and Ngapeth and Omog as regular contributors.¹² UDEFEC women in exile remained visible in Pan-African conferences organized in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At the All African Peoples' Conference held in Accra in 1958, Marthe Mourié of the UDEFEC was the only African woman to address the assembled audience.¹³ Her public appearance demonstrated that the UPC, alone among African political parties represented at the conference, continued to support women's role, even in this Pan-African forum.

The UDEFEC's firm foundation rested upon the initiative of the women activists who founded it, its international recognition from sympathetic Trusteeship Council members and other organizations such as WIDF, and the formal support of UPC leadership. As a result, UDEFEC leaders found themselves on equal footing with their male counterparts from the party's inception. Ruben Um Nyobé's clearly defined position enabled UDEFEC's leaders to defend their party's autonomy when

¹¹ Centre historique des Archives Nationales (CHAN), Paris, Section du 20^e siècle, Foccart Papers, Fonds Privés 153, n.d. (apparently 1960), "Situation du Cameroun après le referendum."

¹² CAOM, Affaires politiques 3325, 11-18 Feb 1956, Rapport de Sûreté, Note de renseignements.

¹³ CHAN, Foccart Papers, Fonds publics 2092, 11 Dec 1958, Special Outre-Mer, Bulletin Sud-Sahara.

challenged by other members of the UPC Directors' Bureau, once the French administration proscribed the party in 1955.¹⁴

The UPC's official support of the UDEFEC did engender social changes, and occasionally tensions with husbands, families, or competition and disagreements with male UPC members. UDEFEC women claimed a good deal independence as part of their lives of social and political activism. Many of the early UPC and UDEFEC leaders consciously embodied an "anti-tribalist," national identity by marrying outside their ethnic group.¹⁵ As a result of the increased mobility of nationalists, who traveled to form new local committees, to smuggle documents and arms across borders, to escape arrest, or to flee into exile, women left their homes, and sometimes their children.¹⁶

The gendered tensions introduced in nationalist circles paled in comparison to the upheavals UDEFEC women prompted at large, particularly in rural societies. In the Sanaga-Maritime, where ESOCAM had formed early on to counter the UPC's growing popularity, four male members of ESOCAM lodged a complaint against Marie Ndjat leading to her arrest and trial. Ndjat was elected Secretary General of the UPC Central Committee of Songmbengue on 18 May 1955, soon after her graduation from the *Ecole des cadres*. She led a group of *upécistes* in an effort to liberate a political prisoner held at the Babimbi subdivision office, and harassed ESOCAM leaders throughout the region. In their testimony against her during Ndjat's trial, four ESOCAM men and local civil officers sought to discredit her by pointing out that she often spent the night with various male members of the UPC during her travels throughout the region, stating: "Everywhere she passed, she ordered destruction and pillaging. She had my hut pillaged and destroyed."¹⁷ For those testifying on behalf of the administration, Ndjat's behavior constituted *upéciste* "savagery," with Ndjat embodying morally reproachable and "un-feminine" conduct, intimidating of the up-standing members of society.

¹⁴ On challenges to UDEFEC's autonomy, originating with the exiled leaders in Kumba, see, for example, CAOM, Affaires politiques 3336, 4 Nov 1956, Um Nyobé to F. Moumié, Kingue, and E. Ouandié.

¹⁵ Interview with Marie-Irène Ngapeth-Biyong, July 1999, Yaoundé.

¹⁶ Interview with Jacqueline Kemajou, exiled in Accra for 25 years (1959-1985), July 2005, New Bell, Douala.

¹⁷ ANY, 1 AC 71, 28 Mar 1957, Procès verbale, Section Douala, Poste de Songmbengue, Ngambé: Marie Ngo Tchat (sic) Marie, accused by Daniel Mbomo, et al.

From Cities to Villages: A Local Gendered Nationalism

Throughout the Mandate and Trusteeship periods, French administrative policies limited women's economic independence, and the migration of male laborers had disrupted fertility patterns. Guided by the women of the UDEFEC, economic opportunity for women and the issue of reproductive fertility gradually became an essential part of nationalist ideology. As issues of concern to both urban and rural women, *upéciste* political strategies easily spread across the urban-rural divide, fracturing yet another binarism set in place under European administration.

The city of Douala provided fertile ground for UDEFEC to take root, since in 1947, 71 percent of the female population was unmarried and working mainly in the informal sector (Mbembe, 1996: 225-27 and Joseph, 1974: 673). As early as 1949, the women's committee of the UPC had requested the "abolition of licenses required for seamstresses working at home," permission for women to sell alcoholic beverages, and to sell food in public and private work yards, especially at meal times.¹⁸ Marie-Irène Ngapeth, the Secretary-General of UDEFEC at the time, confirmed that founders of UDEFEC in 1952 protested against the fees required by the French administration for market stalls that targeted women sellers.¹⁹ UDEFEC's strategy of seeking economic independence for traders and the self-employed must have appealed to single women, eking out a living in the cities (Schler, 2002: 331).

As the administration's persecution of UPC and UDEFEC members increased in late 1954 and 1955 after the arrival of the new High-Commissioner Roland Pré, French administrators and police singled out members of the nationalist parties, subjecting city laborers and sellers to arbitrary searches under the pretense of verifying their licenses and permits. The administration imprisoned offenders, confiscated merchandise, or revoked their licenses on the slightest infraction. UPC and UDEFEC members found they had to wait abnormally long periods for any administrative paperwork, such as when applying for sales permits or identity cards. UDEFEC women insisted that these bureaucratic obstacles amounted to harassment of nationalists and stifled economic activity in the cities. Petitioners such as Anne Langue, whose goods were impounded and

¹⁸ UNTC, Petition from the Comité féminin de l'UPC, 20 Nov 1949, T/PET.4/32.

¹⁹ Interview with Ngapeth-Biyong, July 1999, Yaoundé.

whose clerk, Nestor Noumba, was imprisoned for forgetting her license for selling at her home, asked the UN what citizenship meant for Cameroonians if the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights could be so violated.²⁰ In their petitions and speeches, UPC and UDEFEC nationalists, as RDA supporters in Guinea, “expertly exploited the rhetoric of French universalism” in claiming their rights (Schmidt, 2005: 61, 82).

Premising the issue of economic autonomy, traveling UDEFEC delegations visited local committees in villages, and facilitated linkages between literate and non-literate women, single urban workers, widowed planters in the towns of the Mungo region, and farmers in the Grassfields. As the movement spread beyond the boundaries of urban centers, the women of UDEFEC shifted the anti-colonial struggle to the contested terrain of agricultural and reproductive fertility. Specialists in the technology of cultivation and birthing, women had long negotiated their power and place in society through the idiom of fertility, critiquing local rulers as inept when fertility rates fell, planting crops to ensure financial autonomy and the ability to provide for their children, as heads of their own households. The era of nationalism provided an opportunity for rural women to revisit and reshape these crucial spheres to their advantage once again.

Rural women desired to broaden their economic opportunities, traditionally mediated through access to land. Women farmers understood land usufruct in various ways, depending upon their local modes of land distribution. For example, by the 19th century, the Grassfields region was comprised of a hundred or more chieftaincies, linked by shifting alliances. The chiefs (*mfo* or *mfen*) distributed the land to titled notables and lineage heads in each chieftancy. According to the customary system of land titles, compatible with a cosmology that views land as a sacred whole from which many may reap the fruits of their labor (Goheen, 1992: 390), the principal heir or notable within each lineage, compound, or quarter indicated which plots were available to cultivate. Once granted permission by a notable, a male landholder, or a titled representative, women acquired the legal right to cultivate plots, and settled disputes over particulars among themselves (den Ouden, 1980: 46).

Foreign rule limited Grassfields women’s access to land in several ways. One way was through colonial policies on traditional chieftaincies.

²⁰ UNTC, Petition from Anne Langué, a dealer, mother of six children, widow of the late Augustin Leuton, former dealer, Manjo station, Mungo region, 4 April 1955, T/PET.5/573.

The French administration employed chiefs as tax collectors and auxiliaries to mediate between traditional polities and the colonial state. New colonial land policies, requiring land permits and titled ownership – documents which could only be acquired by those knowledgeable in the colonial system – obstructed women's access to land, by premising the new modes of access over "rights of usufruct guaranteed by traditional tenure arrangements (Goheen, 1996: 118)." In regions such as the Sanaga-Maritime, where traditional governance was more decentralized prior to colonization, European administrators centered an artificially hierarchical, "traditional" government around a "chief," similarly changing patterns of land use and farming (Guyer, 1980: 341-56).

Cameroonian women nationalists also requested that the colonial state's appropriation of unoccupied or uncultivated land under the "scheduled forestry" law be banned, except in cases in which the rightful owner of the land gave his or her permission.²¹ Administrative policies on "scheduled forestry," passed on 19 April 1948, forbade the cultivation of lands that the French had set aside for their own use.²² Information about the scheduled forestry decree had not been made available to women farmers, and often administrators attempted to retrieve the land only after cultivators had planted their crops. The Fonkouakem (Bamileke region) UDEFEC committee wrote in 1954, "the foreigner makes use of this famous term [scheduled forestry] to gain possession of our inheritance... The colonialists have even found a 'scheduled forest' in an area of grasslands and crops with a dense population."²³

The classification of the most fertile lands as cash-cropping plantations in the Mungo and Grassfields also limited women's access to land. The introduction of cash-crops, especially coffee, cocoa, and bananas, impacted the gendered division of labor. Whereas previously, men had undertaken certain tasks associated with the cultivation of food crops, such as clearing the plots and enclosing them, the cash-crop boom removed men from agricultural production at the household level. The French administration controlled access to coffee seedlings and monitored cash-

²¹ UNTC, Petition from the Comité féminin de l'UPC, 20 Nov 1949, T/PET.4/32.

²² ANY, 2 AC 1032, 8 April 1954, Le Conservateur, Chef du Service des Eaux et Forêts, à M. le Directeur des Affaires Politiques et Administratives, Yaoundé.

²³ UNTC, Petition from UDEFEC, Fonkouakem, Bafang region, to the Chairman of the 4th Committee, 9th Session of the UNGA, 22 Nov 1954, T/PET.5/512.

crop productivity by requiring plantations to be registered with state authorities (Guyer, 1978: 577-97 and Mbapndah, 1994: 41-58). In 1949, women members of the UPC writing from the coffee-planting regions of Bamileke and Bamun demanded complete freedom to grow coffee and to sell produce wherever they wished.²⁴ The petitioners considered that administrative policies prevented women from cash-crop farming, thus minimizing their economic opportunity vis-à-vis male planters (Goheen, 1996: 66, 72-3, 84-5). The 1949 petition also requested technological improvements for women farmers, including “the supply of agricultural machinery to free women from the toil of hoeing in plantations and of extracting palm oil [from kernels] by pounding,” and asked UN authorities to grant women the right to bear arms to protect their crops from marauding elephants and cattle (Diduk, 1989: 338-55 and Shanklin, 1990: 159-81).

It was no wonder that in regions, like the Grassfields, where women were the primary agriculturalists, anti-colonial tactics included digging up roads and planting them with crops. In 1959, in the French portion of the Grassfields (the Bamileke region), women planted crops in the roads, effectively aiding ALNK troops by preventing the circulation of administrative and military vehicles. Women’s stand as agriculturalists formed a counterpoint to the ALNK’s eventual sabotage of European-owned plantations.²⁵ At the same time, by growing crops in roads, women bypassed the traditional requirements for gaining permission to plant fields. These tactics can be understood as women’s commentary on colonial classifications of land.

In their claims to the UN as UDEFEC nationalists, women in the Grassfields, Mungo, and Sanaga-Maritime regions argued that colonial land policies had eroded their options as cultivators. Women nationalists voiced the popular consciousness that land shortages arising in the Grassfields and Mungo regions were linked directly to administrative land policies that deprived Cameroonian planters of their limited land-holdings, just as licensing requirements had targeted women sellers and seamstresses in

²⁴ UNTC, Petition from the Comité féminin de l’UPC, 20 Nov 1949, T/PET.4/32.

²⁵ These tactics became widespread in the Mungo and Bamileke regions, especially after independence. See Archives préfectorales de Nkongsamba (APN) Rapports hebdomadaires, 1962. The APN documents are not catalogued.

urban areas. The UDEFEC became a medium through which women could seek to dismantle the colonial economy which threatened their livelihood.

As petitions from women farmers in the Mungo and Bamileke regions increased, UDEFEC membership spread easily along the social networks created by agricultural patterns in the region, following women's associational structures already in place (Odim-Johnson, 1998: 82). Prior to European occupation and colonization, women's access to land constituted a "household level network," forming "intergroup ties [that] were and are realized by women cultivating their food crops in the estates of various principal heirs (den Ouden, 1980: 44-5)." Women's cultivation of various land plots besides their husbands' holdings created specific links between households and villages that facilitated women's economic autonomy by providing them with neighborly and familial networks spread over a vast territory. Furthermore, in the Grassfields under British rule, women belonged to village associations such as *fombuen* or *anlu* in the northwest – which safeguarded agricultural and biological fertility. Historically, women in associations such as these joined together when they felt it necessary to publicly voice their disapproval of male chiefs and notables, husbands, and other "high-ranking, politically and economically privileged men," in the village polity (Diduk, 1989: 343). In the nationalist era, women's associations expressed their opposition to male colonial administrators' abuses of power.

By supporting the role of women as cash crop producers and farmers, the UDEFEC spread its message along these existing channels. What was new about women's political mobilization in the UDEFEC, besides its trans-regional and inter-ethnic base, was that it allowed women to speak directly to state systems of power, whereas before they had relied on male intermediaries to do so. Furthermore, through their petitions, UDEFEC women aired local political concerns in the international atmosphere provided by the UN.

As urban, educated UDEFEC activists passed the baton to rural, non-literate agriculturalists, women's political perspectives in rural areas began to mold and shape the movement into one which would draw increasingly on a locally rooted political culture comprised of spiritual, and socio-political meanings (Terretta, 2005: 75-101). Urban and rural women forged a common mode of expression, and once again it related to fertility. As the movement gained popularity in rural areas, however, women's reproductive fertility began to take precedence over agricultural fertility in a

new nationalist vernacular. In part this was due to mounting fears over the disappearance of male *upécistes* in hiding, in exile, or in prison. These anxieties were exacerbated by rumors of the administration's project to exterminate nationalists by injuring or even killing babies and expectant mothers.

The UDEFEC and Reproductive Fertility: A "Womanist" Nationalism

As the nationalist leadership disintegrated, after the proscription of the parties, the exile of the Directors' Bureau, and the assassination of Um Nyobé in the *maquis* by French military patrol on 13 September 1958, the number of petitions sent to the UN Trusteeship Council increased.²⁶ Unable to participate in elections, nationalists turned to petitions in lieu of the vote to voice their political objectives. Petitioning reached its peak in 1958, when women and youths smuggled petitions addressed to the UN to post offices across the Anglo-French border under their dresses or overcoats.²⁷ These petitions were hand-written on scraps of paper, and carried thumb-prints more often than signatures, indicating the growing number of non-literate petitioners.²⁸ Rural women and women laborers used less Europeanized language than their leaders, adapting nationalist narratives to their own cultural, social and economic needs. Women and men's concerns over the well-being of pregnant mothers and children rose to prominence as the independence war engulfed the Grassfields.

As UDEFEC women joined together, they cast off colonial perceptions and models of gender-roles, reclaiming instead patterns of women's access to power that predated European occupation. European administrators and settlers most often perceived motherhood as a domestic quality removing her from socio-economic spheres outside the house (Van Allen, 1972: 165-81). But for many African women, as was the case in the Grassfields of Cameroon, identity as woman revolved around motherhood, as a source of institutional and ideological empowerment within the household

²⁶ CAOM, Affaires politiques 3348/1, 26 Sept 1958, "Circonstances dans lesquelles Ruben Um Nyobé a trouvé la mort," Rapport de Sûreté.

²⁷ Interviews with petitioners from the period: Ngakou, Joseph, 16 November 2002, Bamendjou; Néguin Djoko, Ignace, *dit* Soupchuichoue, 2 and 22 March, 26 Aug 2002, Pounsze, Baham; Mewa, Thérèse, 6 September 2002, Baham.

²⁸ UNTC, Petition from the Merged Branches of the JDC Concerning the Cameroons under British Administration, 2 Aug 1957, T/PET.4/144/Add.1.

(Amadiume, 1997: 198).²⁹ In most Cameroonian societies, motherhood brought women outside the household, by marking their transition to adulthood, their entry into socio-economic realms of planting, trade, and belonging to associations, and their participation in political processes (Diduk, 1989: 346). It is thus only fitting that the question of reproductive fertility should become one of the most crucial as the nationalist movement took root in rural areas during the years before and after independence.

From the early days of the UDEFEC, its founders stressed the importance of medical care for women, particularly pre-natal care, and the need for improved birthing clinics and maternity wards in dispensaries. The importance of biological fertility, reproduction, and maternity care resonated with Cameroonian women in urban and rural areas alike. As women from regions such as the Grassfields, the Mungo region, and the Sanaga-Maritime voiced these concerns, they began to refuse European medical facilities or medical care altogether, perceiving them as threatening to biological fertility. Petitions contained numerous references to the administrations' abuse of pregnant women in the wake of the party's dissolution, which often resulted in miscarriages.³⁰ Women complained to the UN that after members of the UPC and the UDEFEC had to flee into the *maquis*, "nursing mothers feed their babies in disease-ridden forests... Children die of malnutrition or parasitic diseases."³¹ After the UPC launched a successful boycott of the elections of December 1956, Hélène Siewe wrote from the Bafang region "while the men are away in the bush [fleeing arrest], the French colonialists come and maltreat women, untold numbers of whom have been killed, including some who were pregnant."³²

Naturally, the disappearance of their husbands, whether they had fled into the *maquis* or had been arrested or killed, threatened women's reproductive fertility (Feldman-Savelsberg et al, 2005: 10-29). Poline

²⁹ The emphasis on motherhood sits uneasily with Western notions of feminism. The term "womanist" calls for an alternative reading of women's empowerment, one which envisions both men's participation, and motherhood as essential components (Arndt, 200: 709-26).

³⁰ UNTC, Fifty-three petitions containing complaints relating to various repressive measures in the Cameroons under French administration, 5 Nov 1958, T/PET.5/1351. Three of these petitions referred to miscarriages at the Adlucem hospital in Bafang.

³¹ UNTC, Petition from Marie-Irène Ngapeth, 20 June 1955, Kumba, T/PET.5/913.

³² UNTC, Petition from Siéwé Hileine, Member of the UDEFEC Committee, Mouméé, 19 Feb 1957, T/PET.5/1108.

Matachange, a farmer from the Grassfields village of Bamendje, wrote, "Since 1955, the women of Kamerun no longer give birth, you know well that a hen can lay eggs only if she has been with the cock. We women of Kamerun want to have back our husbands."³³

In the Bafang region, petitioning women demonstrated their mistrust of the medical facilities and care provided by the French. In early 1957, a series of petitions came into the UN expressing concern over the injections given to children in the region. Passa Tchaffi and Agathé Matene wrote: "the French ... have prepared injections and put schoolchildren into a hut, where they gave them these shots to weaken their minds."³⁴ Rose Marie Mouna of the Bafang subdivision wrote: "On October 1956, France prepared medicaments with which to inject school-children; the shots drove the children mad."³⁵ Elisabeth Aguemani believed that "the most scientific French men have infected all the dogs in the Cameroons by means of injections and all these mad dogs have now bitten almost 100 per 1,000 of the total population of the Cameroons."³⁶ Chrestine Emachoua wrote, "When a woman gives birth at the dispensary, they give the baby an injection to kill it."³⁷ The description of injections coincided with rumors of French doctors' project to nationalists by eliminating the schoolchildren in Douala and Yaoundé.

L'Effort camerounais explained the rumors as "Communist propaganda" circulated by the UPC to use terror to destabilize the already tense political situation.³⁸ However, the rumors may have resonated with women because they reinforced women's tendency to distrust European bio-medicine. At UDEFEC meetings in Babimbi, the Sanaga-Maritime, regional leaders told women that the administration wanted to exterminate all members of the nationalist movements and that European bio-medicine

³³ UNTC, Petition from Poline Matachange, farmer, Central Quarter, Bamendje to President of the 13th Session of the UN, 10 Dec 1958, T/PET.5/1399.

³⁴ UNTC, Petition from Mrs. Passa Tchaffi, Chairman of the UDEFEC Committee at Bafang, and Mrs. Agathé Matene, received 20 Feb 1957, T/PET.5/1109.

³⁵ UNTC, Petition from Mrs. Rose Marie Mouna concerning the Cameroons under French Administration, received 20 Feb 1957, T/PET.5/1113.

³⁶ UNTC, Petition from Elisabeth Aguemani, Bafia, 30 Aug 1956, T/PET.5/949.

³⁷ UNTC, Petition from Mrs. Chrestine Emachoua concerning the Cameroons under French Administration, Baboucha, 13 Dec 1956, T/PET.5/112.

³⁸ "La panique tournante. 'Les Blancs tuent nos enfants ... Est-ce que tu doutes?'" *L'Effort Camerounais* (Yaoundé), 4-10 Nov 1956.

served their purpose: “Whites came to Cameroon for no other reason than to cheat blacks... The Doctor infects us with all sorts of sicknesses. For us, dying is as common as shitting; this is what decreases the population so they can uproot our liberation movement.”³⁹ In light of the all-pervasive rejection of colonialism throughout the territory, the injections became an idiom expressing women’s refusal to allow European medical personnel to regulate child-birthing practices.⁴⁰ The birthing centers, bringing mothers and their newborns under their control, seemed the perfect place for the administration to carry out its project of eradicating the nationalist movement by eliminating future generations of nationalists (see Kanogo, 2005: 164-96). As they became more prominent in the nationalist struggle, members of UDEFEC pieced together a view of the European administration and missions as disseminating ill health, infertility, and death, framing the achievement of independence as a restoration of health and well-being.⁴¹

Issues of fertility were of equal concern to women and to men, not only as husbands and fathers, but also as “traditional” political leaders in particular regions of Cameroon, as, for example, in the Grassfields where governments of chieftaincies included male notables responsible for regulating both reproductive and agricultural fertility. Tabitha Kanogo argues that with the advent of colonialism in Kenya, elite men’s role as mediators between women and the colonial administration facilitated their control of women’s reproductive practices (Kanogo, 2005: 166). The end result of women nationalists’ rejection of European bio-medicine was the reification of traditional notables and spiritual specialists in their roles as protectors of biological fertility (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999; Malaquais, 2001). At the same time, those notables perceived as French administrators’ allies were mercilessly hounded by village women, and painted as “sellers of the nation” in village songs. The *mwala djyeh*, presiding over fertility in the Grassfields chieftaincy of Baham, was a collaborator of the French administration, and the most maligned notable in village songs dating to the

³⁹ ANY, 6 Dec 1956, Marie-Anne Nsoga to UDEFEC meeting held at the home of Suzanne Mbok, Babimbi.

⁴⁰ For a parallel reading of rumors about “injections” in colonial Central and Eastern Africa, see (White, 2000, 113-9).

⁴¹ ANY, 7 Dec 1956, Ernestine Mouthamal to UDEFEC meeting, Babimbi region.

independence era. For example, one such song includes the following verses:

If you meet the *Mwala Djyeh* on your road, disappear quickly
 For the independence of Cameroon
 The *Mwala Djyeh* put a pregnant woman to death
 For the independence of Cameroon.⁴²

Torture, Rape, and Unburied Bodies: The State's Assault on Women Nationalists

Ahmadou Ahidjo, groomed for the presidency by the French administration, presided over Cameroun's transition to independence on 1 January 1960. The new state's first priority was to suppress the on-going UPC revolution, relying heavily on French military support throughout the 1960s. *Upécistes* cast Ahidjo as a neo-colonialist at the helm of a "puppet" government. The nationalists opposed Ahidjo's concessions to France, declaring that he had failed to free them from their economic subjugation to the *métropole*, demanding a withdrawal of French troops, requesting amnesty for all imprisoned nationalists and ALNK fighters, and popular elections supervised by the UN. For a decade after Cameroun's independence, the state government waged war on the "political subversives" who remained loyal to the UPC, UDEFEC, and the JDC. When the ALNK Commander-in-Chief, Ernest Ouandié, was arrested and publicly executed for treason on 15 January 1971, Ahidjo and his ministers declared the UPC rebellion officially ended. Throughout the first post-colonial decade, tens of thousands of civilians were killed, hundreds of thousands displaced – forced into exile or resettled into concentration camps – and thousands more imprisoned in the *Brigade Mixte Mobile* (BMM) military prisons where they underwent torturous interrogations, or served sentences of hard labor.⁴³ For *upécistes*, and most of the population in the Bamileke,

⁴² Song performed by Mékù Tchuenden, Ngougoua, Baham, 12 Nov 2002. Transcribed and translated by André Gabiapsi.

⁴³ CHAN, Foccart Papers, Fonds Publics 466, Benard to the Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, Au sujet du pays Bamileke, 30 Apr-3 May 1962; APN, Notes de renseignements, Sûreté, and Fiches d'Interrogatoire, Gendarmerie, 1960-1975.

Mungo, and Sanaga-Maritime regions, state “pacification” strategies before and after formal independence in 1960 were indistinguishable.

As conflicts in the Grassfields region under French administration escalated, numerous petitions flowed into the UN citing rape as a weapon wielded by soldiers under French command. At this point, the threats to fertility and thinly veiled extermination strategies became a blatant assault on the bodies of women. Women in the Grassfields wrote: “Since 21 March 1957 the French Government has been bringing in thousands of soldiers from all the neighbouring colonies and..., in the Bamileke region in particular, the authorities have the wives of political prisoners and *maquisards* raped, each woman by ten soldiers.”⁴⁴

Other petitions referred to rape in the Bamileke region: “[At Bandenkop] there are more than 2,000 soldiers who commit all kinds of inhumane barbarities, raping little girls eight and nine years old.”⁴⁵ At Bafoussam, the regional capital, “women were [...] taken to the army camp where more than 110 soldiers violated a single woman and when she was nearly dead she was automatically burned or thrown into the water.”⁴⁶

Perhaps no region suffered as severe military repression during the war for independence as did the small village of Bandenkop, bordering Baham to the southwest. The location of the UPC army headquarters, Bandenkop was regularly bombarded with napalm and aircraft gunfire. Likewise, the area around Mbouda, another UPC stronghold further to the north on the Anglo-French boundary, was targeted by low-flying French military planes and helicopters. In these areas, and other sites of ALNK camps, vast areas of the sparse land are today left uncultivated because of the number of unburied corpses they hold in their soil. The landscape bespeaks the memory of these mass graves, which are rarely mentioned aloud. No similar physical marker exists to commemorate women and girls raped during the independence war, an unmentionable trauma. The

⁴⁴ UNTC, Thirty-nine petitions concerning the dissolution of the three organizations in the Cameroons under British administration and repressive measures in the Bamileke region of the Cameroons under French administration, 12 Sept 1957, T/PET.4&5/20. Out of the 39 petitions recorded, four contained references to the rape of Bamileke women. Other petitions refer to rape in the Bamileke region. For example, UNTC, 45 Petitions, 5 Feb 1958, T/PET.5/1312.

⁴⁵ UNTC, 45 Petitions, 5 Feb 1958, T/PET.5/1312.

⁴⁶ UNTC, Petition from Mrs. Marie Mowolio, housewife, Bamendjida region, Mbouda Subdivision, via Bamenda, PO Box 20, 21 June 1957, T/PET.5/1287.

petitions' accounts, while unverifiable by archival or oral sources, are the only evidence that such rapes occurred. Whether or not mass rape did take place on the scale suggested by the petitions, the numerous accounts indicate that UDEFEC women sought to awaken global indignation to the gendered violence unleashed against them by the foreign administration.

After the July 1955 ban of the nationalist parties and multiple arrests of men and women nationalists, rumors began to circulate that women prisoners were subject to the most heinous forms of torture. Marthe Bahida was "arrested, beaten with clubs and horribly tortured; her genitals were burnt with a red hot iron."⁴⁷ Gertrude Omog wrote that during the events of May 1955, those members of the UPC, the JDC, and UDEFEC held at the central police station after their arrest were "subjected to terrible tortures by officers of the French judicial police, that is, by officers of the law aware of the heinous crimes they were committing especially against women, including the mother of an infant."⁴⁸ Cameroonian nationalists' accounts of torture parallel those from Algerians during the same time period.⁴⁹ Methods employed during interrogations of women included the use of electricity and water "to the point of asphyxiation," while the questioning of men resulted in the use of the *balançoire*, or swing, a device which hung the detainee upside-down by his knees, sometimes over a tub a water, for hours at a time.⁵⁰

After the French administration banned the nationalist parties in July 1955, followed by the British in June 1957, it became clear to remaining members in the *maquis* that their struggle for independence would be carried out on the "perimeter of death (Mbembe, 1991: 108-21)." French "pacification" forces rounded up populations of entire villages in the Sanaga-Maritime and Bamileke regions, resettling them along roads or in

⁴⁷ UNTC, Petition from the WIDF, 14 Oct 1955, T/PET.5/818.

⁴⁸ UNTC, Petition from Mme Gertrude Omog, Maquis, 14 June 1955, T/PET.5/674.

⁴⁹ National Archives, Kew Garden (UK), Foreign Office 371/125949, 7 Sept 1957, WIDF to Representative of Great Britain in the UN.

⁵⁰ For archival accounts of excessive torture, see, for example, APN, 7 Feb 1970, Atteinte à la sûreté intérieure de l'Etat: Affaire Chedjui Jean, Commissaire de Police, Chef de la Brigade Mixte Mobile de Nkongsamba à M. le Préfet du Département du Mungo, Nkongsamba. I also collected numerous firsthand accounts of torture.

concentration camps.⁵¹ They searched homes for incriminating documents such as UPC tracts or meeting records and arrested anyone accused of being associated with the party (Um Nyobé, 1984: 350-1). Petitions flowed in with references to death, extermination, execution, disappearances, drownings, unexpected ambushes, searches, intrusions into private homes, and violations of privacy.⁵² The UDEFEC Central Committee from the Bamileke region met across the Anglo-French boundary in Kumba and mourned the disappearance of their husbands: “Some 75% of our women are without their husbands now, for some of the men are in prison and others are in the *maquis* outside the territory whither they have been driven by the severity of the local authorities ... We are driven to despair when we find the corpses of our husbands, who were imprisoned, thrown into creeks.”⁵³

Like Mau Mau, the anti-colonial war in Kenya, the UPC revolution in Cameroon lacks an accurate sense of scale. The French, seeking to avoid headlines describing Cameroon as a second Algerian revolution, convinced the UN that the numbers of troops, deaths, and arrests were merely hysterical fabrications (Michel, 1999: 229-57). Less biased accounts come from British records, which report *civilian* deaths from 1956 to June 1964 to be from 61, 300 to 76, 300 persons out of a total population of around 3 million. Eighty percent of these casualties occurred in the Bamileke region under French administration. The exact number of deaths was difficult to calculate, wrote the British ambassador to Cameroon in 1964, because prior to independence “the French army frequently burned or otherwise destroyed whole villages which were heavily infested with terrorists,” resulting in “the killing of an unknown number of non-terrorist civilians.” Similarly, after independence, the “Cameroon Armed Forces [...] inadvertently killed an unknown number of civilians,” and throughout the conflict, “it has frequently been impossible to ascertain whether a person killed was a terrorist [...] or an innocent bystander.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ CHAN, Foccart Papers, Fonds Publics 466, Benard to the Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, Au sujet du pays Bamileke, 30 Apr-3 May 1962; Interviews with Fo Jean Rameau Sokoudjou, Bamendjou, 2 Sept 2002 and Jeanette Noubi, 16 Feb 2002, Yaoundé.

⁵² UNTC, Petition from the Committee of UDEFEC, Douala, 13 July 1955, T/PET.5/742.

⁵³ UNTC, Petition from UDEFEC General Assembly, Bamileke Region, 10 Nov 1956, T/PET.5/984.

⁵⁴ National Archives, Foreign Office, 371/176876, 22 July 1964, Goodfellow, British Embassy, Yaoundé, to Mellon, West and Central Africa Dept.

Conclusion

While few historical accounts have highlighted women's political mobilization in Cameroon during the era of decolonization, it is apparent that UPC history offers a rare case study of the gendered politics of African nationalist movements. The autonomous women's wing, the UDEFEC, shaped nationalist discourse into one that spoke for women's economic and social rights, and facilitated the vernacularization of UPC nationalism.

From the time of the party's creation until well into the first postcolonial decade, the women of UDEFEC organized themselves according to the concerns that motivated them, and generated thousands of petitions defining their purpose in the movement. As such, the UDEFEC was not merely a women's wing of a male revolution, controlled by male party leaders. Instead, women remained active agents of change, collaborating with men within the struggle, and challenging male domination when necessary. UDEFEC women identified as wives and mothers as a way of empowering themselves to participate in and shape the nationalist movement, not to fit the metropolitan image of the dutiful domestic wife touted by assimilationist parties such as the conservative ESOCAM.

UDEFEC women's political mobilization, rooted in practices of cultural and social subversion or resistance, guided Cameroonian nationalism into a socially and politically transformative role, transcending the urban-rural divide. The creation of trans-local linkages cutting across ethnic identity and social classes was made possible by UDEFEC's inclusion of local political and social concerns in its larger nationalist framework, and the combination of oral and written modes of expression. In redefining gender roles, men and women nationalists politicized social and cultural issues of concern for much of the population, such as agricultural and reproductive fertility, the politics of chieftaincy, and human rights. Dismantling the boundaries between women and men's spheres of economic and political activity formed one of the crucial links between nationalists' appropriations of western-style political sovereignty and political philosophies of sovereignty, locally grounded in traditional governance. More "womanist" than explicitly "feminist," UDEFEC nationalism unfolded within the context of their greater struggle for liberation, and men were "a part of the change that [they] envisage[d] (Arndt, 2000: 717)."

ABBREVIATIONS

- ALNK: Armée de libération nationale kamerunaise
 ANY: Archives nationales de Yaoundé
 APN: Archives préfectorales de Nkongsamba
 BMM: Brigade mixte mobile
 CAOM: Centre d'archives d'Outre-mer
 CHAN: Centre historique des archives nationales
 ESOCAM: Evolution sociale camerounaise
 JDC: Jeunesse démocratique camerounaise
 NA: National Archives
 RDA: Rassemblement démocratique africain
 UDEFEC: Union démocratique des femmes camerounaises
 UFC: Union des femmes camerounaises
 UNGA: United Nations General Assembly
 UNTC: United Nations Trusteeship Council
 UPC: Union des Populations du Cameroun
 USCC: Union des Syndicats Confédérés du Cameroun
 WIDF: Women's International Democratic Federation

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