

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Mrs. C.J.P. - I

A MATTER OF TIME

July 22, 1962
13 Brechin Place,
London, S.W.7.
England.

Mr. Richard Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Africa, known for generations as the land of pre-civilized peoples who, as some chroniclers say, had advanced only to the stone age period in human development, and which now has been joltingly thrust into the 20th century, is alive and bursting with the struggle for independence and national recognition. Hard on the heels of the consuming quest for independence and political freedom is the African woman's battle for equality.

To westerners, who have known and felt the power of woman, this should not be an altogether surprising concomitant. American history is sprinkled with accounts of the activities of women, individually and organized, who pushed and fought for such things as education in the 19th century, job opportunities and the franchise in the 20th century and peace in the nuclear age. They are familiar with the vision of the ferociously hatted female counterparts of Hannibal and Napoleon marching resplendent down the main streets of cities and towns with placards stating their cause, or vociferously shouting from street corners and community houses urging the all powerful male and the adamant legislature to give them and insure their rights as citizens.

It has been a matter for speculation whether or not the females of the species have chosen some intuitively known, psychologically infallible moment to launch their campaigns or whether they have simply reached the pinnacle of frustration and had to change the status quo or perish.

In western countries women have, in most cases, waited until constitutions have been written, bills of rights signed and male attitudes firmly anchored by national and local laws before realizing they have been written out of citizen's rights. Not so with the African women. Their battle, one to be long and hard fought, is coincident with their countries' and the continent's fight for freedom.

These women face strong emotional if not physical opposition to their fight for emancipation. They reject the notion of their countries taking

their places among those of the east and west, with dignity and respect being accorded them, while women are still relegated to the role of breeding machines in an anachronistic social structure. They, as women in other countries, realize they have a vital part to play in their countries' futures. They see certain unique areas in which they can function effectively and seem determined to shoot ahead despite opposition. It was of them the tragic Patrice Lumumba spoke when he said "When you civilize a man you only civilize an individual, but when you civilize a woman, you civilize a whole people."

Some of the women spearheading these campaigns have been fortunate enough to have had understanding fathers with foresight coupled with a providing pocketbook. They have been able to avail themselves of education at home and abroad, and now see their task as refuting the idea that education is wasted on women because of the probability of marriage. They seek to change the system which reserves education exclusively for males or at best limits the female to the elementary school level.

They are most interested in reaching rural families which are untouched by 20th century thinking and pressure for trained minds. They are active in metropolitan areas where schools are available but not permitted for girls because of social and economic needs in the home, religious restrictions and anti-female attitudes. They see much of their countries' potential being wasted.

Their desire is not simply for education but for equal opportunity in all spheres. They are wisely aware that education is but the first step toward first-class citizenship. They want job opportunities according to their training and abilities, the right to engage in political activity and public life, the right to vote, they want careers and professions in keeping with their interests.

Much has already been done by individuals to improve the position of women in Africa in many areas: Mrs. Salwia Abayomi has, with great effort and determination, initiated adult literacy campaigns for women in Nigeria. Mrs. Joan Cummings-Johns founded Roosevelt School for Girls, the first in Sierra Leone. Some through their personal successes are furthering the cause such as Efua Sutherland who not only manages a home and family efficiently but also has written plays for Ghana's first indigenous theater which she directs, and Ella Kablo Gulania, Paramount Chief and only female member of the Sierra Leone House of Representatives.

Some efforts have been made toward organizing. The National Council of Ghana Women, The Federation of Sierra Leone Women and the various Nigerian groups are examples. Their purpose is to promote the cause of women.

These are but few of the accomplishments to date and they are a small cry against the roar of resistance. This is a struggle which will be waged against great odds and over many years. Already some try to tie social illness directly to female freedom. This quote from the widely read magazine, West Africa, July 7 1962, gives some of the flavour of feeling. "Emancipation of African woman is producing adverse social and medical consequences. Very few modern African women are able to accommodate their newly found freedom without repercussions in the domestic sphere."

Not much effort has been expended assessing that amount of frustration, anger and unhappiness accompanying the old practises such as polygamy. These customs have been affectionately endorsed by those to whom the existing patterns are valuable, but agonizingly endured by the exploited. The case of the African woman is much like that of the Negro slave in America. For generations she has had no one to write on her behalf and no one to speak on her behalf. Now the winds of change are blowing not only for the new States of Africa but also for the new African women.

An example of the intensity of feeling was evidenced in a meeting of the African Democratic Congress, London Branch, to which I was invited to speak on the Position of Negro Women in American Society. This Meeting was attended by 10 women and 30 men all of whom were African or of African descent. Most were from east and west Africa with a sprinkling from the West Indies and Brazil, my husband and I, of course, being from America.



EFFA OKUPA
of NIGERIA

After dealing with the subject of the position of women in general and Negro women historically and currently, in particular, the discussion began with the question "Would Afro-American women be prepared to accept polygamy?" (This was, incidentally, the only question related to Negro women). After my

brief reply the chairman of the meeting, Miss Effa Okupa, a Cambridge educated Nigerian woman spoke with the kind of intensity born only of personal experience.

She explained that the system flourishes not only because having many wives and fathering many children is a status symbol and provides labor for the land but also because it is against religious custom to be intimate with one's wife during the period of lactation (breast feeding); therefore other wives are needed. In addition it is a social means by which to accommodate extra women who would otherwise remain single.

Miss Okupa flatly denied the necessity for prolonging the practise today because the economic system does not support it and morally it is wrong to treat women as cattle. She felt that Africa's future demands that all with potential be afforded an opportunity to develop and use their ability regardless of sex differences.

Following this, one bright chap from Uganda countered with a monologue on the importance of the male position in traditional African society. He suggested that if given equality, women would automatically try to dominate men, take over their positions and their power, and be quite disrespectful.

A young Ghanaian lady challenged him first in regard to position and power. She suggested there are many areas which are of almost exclusive interest to women and which are necessary to the state's growth and development.

Therefore qualified women should be given equal consideration when scholarships are being provided since the state needs more than a "highly developed



MINIKA ARCHEBONG and
FRANCES BOCO of NIGERIA
for tea at the PATTERSONS

system of bureaucratic administrators trained in law and politics." She further stated, "women do not want power, they want to be individuals in their own right with respect given them as human beings, not chattels." She suggested that women will continue to respect those people, male and female, who are deserving of it.

A somewhat conservative Nigerian fellow offered that he didn't think women should be treated as inferior but they should maintain their subordinate role within African society, whereupon everyone fell silent trying to fathom the meaning of this.

Another gentleman rhetorically questioned the true ability of these women who claim they want to stand in full partnership with men who are forging ahead in this highly complex universe. He reminded those present that there are certain dangers inherent in the kinds of business in which they are engaged, not the least of which are jail and physical danger.

At this point a slight, studious looking, young woman from Gambia, wearing glasses, mildly asked what he thought of the women who took part in the Sharpville riots and those in Katanga. Did he not think they proved their physical courage and militancy? Had he any idea how important it was to African women to join in the struggle for progress and improvement of those things they all share and hold dearly? Did he have any concept of how utterly defeating and frustrating it had been for women to see their men in the role of servants and pawns of colonial masters? Containment during those years had surely taken courage.

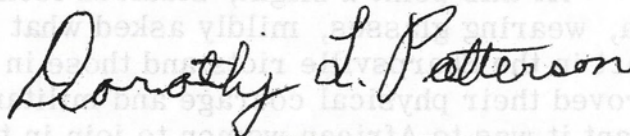
Before her words cleared the air a dapper young Nigerian in Continental dress began to speak. He mentioned several issues already discussed then proceeded to the "one which bothers me most: African women have begun to mimic western women." He elaborated. "So many of our women want to wear western dress, they want to indulge themselves in the same activities western women seek such as education and public life. I hear in some countries they are sending delegations and organizing to protest such things as lack of voting privileges, malnutrition and the like. Women are doing this, mind you!"

It was a heretofore quiet man from Kenya who then suggested that the young man's argument was a bit inconsistent. Were not some of these the very tools the African male had taken from Western societies and found useful in pressing his case for independence? Was he not using the colonial argument if he were to deny these same tools, with which he proved his readiness for self determination, to women?

The dialogue continued in this vein, each voicing some special concern of his or hers. Unlike many meetings I've attended there was no compromise proposed, no setting of priorities to determine what could reasonably be given to pacify the demands and what must yet be denied in light of the needs of the male ego.

It occurred to me that it will be only a matter of time before more inroads are made into traditional African society and its women are able to participate to a greater degree in its development. It is as inevitable as has been the coming of independence. I would hope with all sincerity that they stop short of full equality because as some who have crossed that bridge know, having equality with males is no fun unless one can enjoy the privileges of being a woman along with it.

Sincerely yours,



Mrs. Dorothy Patterson

Received in New York August 21, 1962