

## Found in the Fog of the Male Myth: Analysing Female Political Roles in Pre-Colonial Africa

*R. A. Sargent*

African historiography is incomplete and gravely distorted because of its treatment of women as potential actors in the economic and political arena. A number of factors combine to minimize historical analysis of female roles, including the virtual domination of this field by male historians; few women have, in fact, ventured into African historiography.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the male chauvinism of many African societies limits opportunity to study the political role of women. Also, when references do occur in the traditions the research focus has often been spotlighted elsewhere and reduces the flexibility of the individual researcher. Where the influence of women has been dramatic as traders among the Yoruba, administrators in Dahomey, land owners among the matrilineal societies of Central Africa, or as overt political actors throughout the continent, researchers have dismissed the evidence for these or a variety of other equally spurious reasons. There seems to be a continuing reluctance to accept that the influence of women was substantial, that male domination and chauvinism may have been significantly less entrenched in some societies than others, and that real opportunities exist for substantial revisions of the African past. This reluctance established the existing stereotype. But evidence now casts some light through the fog of male generated traditional views of the past. Generally references to female economic and political activities have been interpreted as aberrations, errors or flaws in the collective memory of a particular community.<sup>2</sup> In most cases the activities of a female politician have been mis-represented or ignored. Furthermore, research seems convinced that early oral traditions of female rule are little more than stories invented by males for entertainment or as a way to justify male dominance by denigrating female political action. Consequently research has been blocked before it gets underway by a myriad of assumptions, most of them false and misleading, and distorted by entrenched false dictates.

The following discussion seeks to partially redress this imbalance by opening potential avenues for research and revised reconstructions. This discussion also seeks to present a more logical and acceptable perception of

female power and authority in pre-colonial Africa by introducing a methodological approach whereby these significant traditions about female political actors can be evaluated. It is hoped that this brief introductory analysis will encourage others to reconsider their own evidence and perhaps contribute to revisionist African historiography.

The fundamental bias in African pre-colonial historiography also exists in many histories of Western Europe and North America. One only has to analyse our school history and social studies textbooks to realize that the role and contribution of women has been less than adequately dealt with. It is thus obvious that revisions are necessary in many textbooks and academic studies; in this respect African historiography is not unique. All social, economic and political history, regardless of male perpetuated myths, will have powerful actors of both gender. Our problem in Africa, however, has been that the female role has been almost totally ignored or buried. For the most part the following focuses on the political arena, but the arguments apply equally in other spheres.

In order to understand the contribution of any political actor it is necessary to have a framework within which the forms of power relationships can be described. For the purpose of this study, therefore, power and authority in the political arena<sup>3</sup> may be defined as the centralized, legally constituted, and recognized influence of the state in the administration of a particular community.<sup>4</sup> It also represents one of the highest expressions of political might through which a member or members of a dominant group express demands and expect obedience. Power itself can be defined as the ability to influence the decisions of others, while authority is the recognized right to govern or command. In this sense both power and authority must be exercised within recognized rules and procedures, and cannot be considered to be arbitrary by the members of the community.<sup>5</sup> Authority requires a degree of voluntary co-operation and recognition of the legal value of the decision-maker.

For a woman in pre-colonial Africa to achieve

power she was obliged to actively exploit various avenues through which status and privilege might be enhanced. This overt activity could lead to an increased political standing. Kinship relations and marriage links provided two avenues through which political power might be acquired. Active participation in commerce and community religious institutions might also contribute to the accumulation of status and thus increase the potential for political power. To be influential in the political arena and community decision-making a woman would have to be successful in the chosen sphere. It was not unusual for a successful trader to command special status, enjoy special privileges, and acquire a measure of economic independence; all three are criteria for political power, as defined by status, privilege and wealth. All three are also accessible in a particular community at a particular moment in time.

To develop authority from a defined power base the women in pre-colonial Africa were obliged to transform such power into a community recognized status. The rules and procedures of the community thus define access to authority, and only when the female politician was recognized as legally or constitutional justified and warranted was she afforded political authority. Status, privilege and wealth, therefore, were important components in the development of political influence, and could be exploited to enhance both power and authority (Dawson, "Women, Power and Authority").

These avenues, through which power and authority could be acquired, were not blocked for the female actor or entrepreneur. In the pre-colonial market, for example, the individual could accumulate wealth or at least a measure of economic independence. Also, women in groups could enhance their community standing through successful co-operation in the exploitation of the avenues to political power and authority. Their combined voice could be more effective than a single voice expressing unpopular decisions. Authority, however, required not only the accumulation of wealth, status and privilege, but necessitated active participation and success in two or more of these defined avenues plus the recognition that her authority was both justified and warranted.<sup>6</sup> While success enhanced status, wealth and privilege, when coupled with the recognition of legal value and the need for authority in the political decisions of the community, a woman could emerge as paramount authority. Thus a female could command the decisive voice in the community.

The examples throughout Africa are common. The detailed analysis of the evidence and balanced reconstructions that in many cases are possible, are not. One possible explanation for this aberration can be found in the history of Bunyoro-Kitara. When the second Babito dynasty abandoned female administrators

and encouraged royal princes to govern vassal states, the empire fragmented within a generation. Not surprisingly, male transmitted oral tradition lauds King Insansa, who led the change of administrative structures as a great ruler, ignoring that upon his death the empire rapidly fell apart. Thus tradition perpetuates the male myth and apparently applauds political failure. Yet, insightful historical analysis reveals an alternative view in which political hegemony in Bunyoro-Kitara had been structured through female regional administrator and governors.

The first avenue through which political power may be developed came through marriage. A marriage liaison with the royal house often afforded status and privilege from which political influence, through the existing constitution, might develop. Occasionally, oral tradition recalls the name of a particularly famous queen, and relates her to the political arena.<sup>7</sup> These traditions, although relatively rare, are extremely important. Unfortunately, pre-colonial history has not yet fully examined the social and political significance of these memories in the collective mind of the society. In Onitsha, for example, few queens are mentioned in the royal tradition, but when they appear they represented one of the most prominent individuals of the generation (Henderson 87; see also Sargent, "Female Politicians"). Usually the oral tradition recalls not only the name of that famous queen but her kinship affiliation as well. It would seem, therefore, that it is not only the political influence that counts, but the source of the power and authority that must be considered. Unfortunately, little work has been done to place these traditions within the social framework of Onitsha, and no work has been done to analyse the political significance of Onitsha's female politicians. However, marriage, in these examples, contributed to the status and privilege of the individual, and apparently provided an opportunity to exercise political power and authority.

A second category through which socially recognized political power and authority could be achieved can be described as the kinship affiliation of the individual concerned. For example, the role of the Queen Mother has been important in many pre-colonial polities, including Benin, Bornu and Swazi, among others. Thus, a Queen Mother can be the focus of powerful political institutions, and her authority often parallels the King's as check on the power of the monarch. She might also exercise considerable influence within her own kinship network. As a prominent and respected member of a kin grouping all women married into the royal family could be afforded status and privilege by her relatives and clan and may extend this network across a broader segment of the society. Princess Ebele of the Igala is a classic example, whereby kinship relations laid the foundation for a powerful

socio-political movement that transformed Igala political history (Sargent, "Female Politicians"; "Politics and Economics").

The third avenue which contributed to the acquisition of political influence came from religious activities and the control of cults, shrines and rituals. One of the most famous examples of religion as an avenue for political power and authority comes from the activities of Queen Kitami and the development of the Nyabingi cult (Freedman "The Collapse of Ndorwa"; Kamuhangire "Bunyoro and Rwanda"). This powerful cult was dominated by women, and controlled the political decisions of a large region. It completely swept away the male-dominated Cwezi cult over the whole southern half of Bunyoro-Kitara. The oral traditions about the reign of Queen Kitami are probably more coloured by attitudes of male chauvinism than those regarding any other figure in East African history. Unable to question the "golden age" of peace and prosperity over which she presided male traditions denigrate the past in a manner almost unequalled in African oral records. In real terms economic activity, through the collection of fees, could be linked to religious institutions, and thus formed dual purpose politically oriented activity which could enhance power and authority.

Fourth, it is possible to identify specific economic criteria through which political influence was acquired, and how legitimacy might be developed. For example, market activities, in some societies, provided access to economic resources which could translate into economic independence if not actual wealth. This economic potential could in turn lead to elevated social and political status. As a case in point it is possible to consider the political advantages gained from economic activity by the royal women of Idah (the Igala capital). The rigid control of markets in Idah (near the confluence of the Niger-Benue rivers of West Africa) allowed the royal women to utilize their marriage relations, kinship ties and social standing (status) to develop an economic base.<sup>8</sup> With the revenue from commerce these royal women gained effective political power, and were afforded a measure of political authority in the administration of certain aspects of the state. They were, therefore, an example where the accumulation of status, privilege and wealth translated into political power and authority. The evidence suggests that it was their entrepreneurial activity that tipped the balance in favour of political authority, and distinguished Igala royal women from other royal females who depended solely on kinship and marriage to elevate their political roles.

Kinship might also reflect matrilineal descent and inheritance patterns which may oppose patrilineal royal succession. The kinship network, as a potential avenue

for political power, is probably the most complex to analyse, but clear evidence exists to provide opportunities for a revised historical reconstruction.

Exploitation of any one of the defined avenues could contribute to political power in a particular community. Exploitation of any combination of two of these mechanisms increased the opportunity to exercise that political power. Success in two or more, particularly when one of the avenues was marriage or kinship, provided opportunities for legitimacy and authority. The evidence suggests that the articulation of marriage and kinship potential with economic and religious activities elevated female politicians to positions of prominence if not paramouncy in the political affairs of some communities.

One brief example may illustrate this point. In the interlacustrine region of East Africa Paroketu tradition seldom mention women.<sup>9</sup> They do recall that Rwoth [King] Nyabongo had two wives, Akura and Akech, and recall their kinship affiliations. The first wife came from a Bunyoro clan, the second had Bugungu kinship ties. It is interesting that this is the only generation where the names of royal wives are recalled. The *Munyoro*, Akura, gave birth to a number of royal princes, including Nyabongo's eldest son, Jobi, who was heir to the throne.<sup>10</sup> The *Mugungu*, Akech, gave birth to Roketu. The normal succession pattern in the political culture of Paroketu, and many other interlacustrine chiefdoms was such that the eldest surviving son inherited the throne. One of the main reasons for this change in succession pattern was the power and influence of Queen Akech, Roketu's mother.

In terms of marriage relations Akech and Akura were relative equals, except that Akura was the senior wife, and as such was the prospective Queen Mother. As the elder statesperson in the Paroketu court Akura may have held more influence. What then enabled Akech to achieve such status, and change the political culture or normal succession patterns in favour of her own offspring? The distinguishing characteristic, that provided Akech with enhanced political power and authority was the distinctive, socially recognized value of her religious activity. Religion thus set Akech apart and afforded her legal value that Akura could not hope to enjoy. Between c. 1760-1787, therefore, Queen Akech emerged as a political paramount in Paroketu affairs, first as the wife of the ruling Rwoth, second as a ritual or spiritual leader, and third as mother of the successor to the throne. Ultimately the *jokal* (people of the palace) became recognized as the Pa-Akech (children of Akech) (J.H.T. no. 9; no. 2; Apecu, "Pre-Colonial History").

This unusually powerful queen, therefore, was given the honour of having her name inscribed on the royal house of Paroketu. Few women in pre-colonial Africa have been credited with the foundations of a clan or

lineage. Akech, on the other hand, has been credited with founding a female-side dynasty, the Jokal Pa-Akech.

The analysis could be pursued in some depth in order to fully understand the bases of Akech's power and authority and the potential interpretations of political history. It is clear, however, even from this brief discussion, that a revisionist historiography is possible. A different perspective on the past can be based upon the existing evidence, and that gender can become a much clearer issue in the reconstruction of the past.

A second example of a powerful female politician in the interlacustrine region comes from the Jonam chiefdom of Koch-Ragem. The activities of Queen Daga eventually accounted for Lwo political domination in many areas north of the Victoria-Somerset Nile. She was personally responsible for the emergence of no less than three separate Lwo chiefdoms, including Koch-Ragem, Koch-Labongo and Okoro Attyak.<sup>11</sup> These achievements alone should have established Daga's status and prestige as the heroic founding figure in Lwo political ambitions, but this powerful woman remains relatively obscure. The emergence of three states which claim connections with the Munyoro Queen are clear reminders, however, of the power, influence and authority exercised by this representative of Bunyoro's imperial domination in conquered Madi territory:

Ragem elders...all agree that their chiefdom originated from one of the Abakama of Bunyoro-Kitara, whose...wife, called Daga, left Bunyoro-Kitara...and came to the land of Rwoth Abok. (Apecu, "Pre-Colonial History; J.H.T. no. 27; no. 28; no. 35)

As previously noted, in the administrative system of Bunyoro-Kitara it was common for the Babito dynasty (c. 1463-1680) to utilize female regional administrators in the courts of non-Bunyoro vassal states. This system of governors and regional representatives established a wide-spread network of political influence that supported the political authority of the imperial government. Daga was one of these regional governors, and as such had ascribed political powers in the Madi vassal administration. It was regional governors like Queen Daga that contributed to the growth and stability of the Babito period in Bunyoro history. Nevertheless, no historian to date has made any link between the system of regional government under female appointees and the success of this state as a regional power. Lwo informants indicate, however, that the ascendancy of their political ambitions over the Madi north of the Nile was directly influenced by the resident female administrator, Queen Daga:

...the chiefs of Ragem, like those of Mukabo in Zaire, claim descent from Cuwa (Cwa-Nyabongo) of Bunyoro.... Bunyoro traditions agree with Ragem...that the chiefdom of Ragem or Koch, was given by a Mukama of Bunyoro to one of his wives, called Daga...the Acholi Koch (Koch Labongo) seem to be of the same origin. (Southall 210-11)

The chiefdoms of Okoro Attyak, Koch-Ragem and Koch-Labongo were Lwo states that emerged from the political power and authority developed by Queen Daga, and represented a change in northern interlacustrine politics of a magnitude never before experienced by the Lwo. Daga's political machinations certainly had positive results for the political aspirations of the Central Lwo. Her kinship, marriage and political relationships provided the basis for economic support, and as a tribute receiving official Queen Daga accumulated a degree of wealth and forged a series of economic links which consolidated political power. Daga was able, therefore, to exploit a number of avenues through which her own power and authority were ensured, and used this advantage to entrench Lwo political ambitions across a broad region of the northern interlacustrine area. When Daga died her memory lingered on, especially among the Koch-Lwo of Jonam, Alur and Acholi. In fact, the memory of this powerful queen was so strong that in c. 1733-1760—more than two hundred years after her death—a chiefdom in Acholi called Koch Pa-Daga, or Koch, The People of Daga, emerged that bore her name. Clearly Daga should be considered one of the most famous Lwo politicians, and yet she remains relatively poorly documented. This obscurity seems primarily due to the fact that she was a woman, and as such was considered an aberration rather than a real political force. Daga should be clearly regarded as a Lwo heroine, and must be considered an influential figure in the political transformation of the northern interlacustrine region.

Hopefully, these brief reconstructions will encourage further research and perhaps help promote revisionist history. The evidence exists, and only requires more detailed research and the active pursuit of traditions which clearly and explicitly indicate the role of females in positions of power and authority. The collective memory of interlacustrine societies has not forgotten the heroic women, and pre-colonial history must be aware that Africa was not necessarily a sole preserve of male actors.

The data on prominent female politicians does exist in pre-colonial oral tradition, and it only remains now to utilize the framework to analyse female power and authority and revise political history accordingly. The trend which has tended to emphasize male references and denigrate female political activities should cease.

Researchers who discover references in the traditions to women in the political arena should develop strategies to examine those traditions with considerable care and attention to detail. Pre-colonial history will be all the richer once this recognition of women as potent,

powerful, and influential actors is recognized and incorporated in the reconstruction of the past. Hopefully, in the future, there will be an awareness among researchers that will encourage the study of female political history and emphasize female political power.

## Notes

1. There have been very few women who have researched the pre-colonial past in Africa. Those that have seem to be swept up in the male orientation, or have not had the opportunity to examine first hand traditions concerning female political activities. The situation is changing, and future research by both males and females may be more enlightening.
2. For example, refer to J. Freedman, "The Collapse of Ndorwa and the Spread and Recreation of the Nyabingi Outside Its Homeland," where it was stated that "Kitami is said to have been a woman—a Queen or simply an important figure among the Baishekatwa—Kitami's ghost becomes the powerful spirit Nyabingi and an avenger of Kitami's death." Freedman reluctantly admits that Kitami was a woman, and thus implies a sense of doubt to this tradition. The detail and widespread nature of the Kitami and Nyabingi tradition contributes to the potential for a detailed re-evaluation. Refer, also, to E. E. R. Kamuhangire, "Bunyoro and Rwanda, the Changing Balance of Power and Its Effects upon the Marcher Region, c. 1650-1900." For indicators of potential change in the status quo, refer to K. D. Dawson, "Women, Power and Authority."
3. In this context the political arena refers to the decision-making process of the community or state. "Power" is the recognized ability to influence the decisions of others, while "authority" is the legitimate right to make decisions and expect obedience. This simple formulation helps make sense of a complex set of relationships operating in the decision-making process of the community as a whole.
4. "Legal value" can be defined as the right to power and authority as recognized by the members of the community. Such legal value also implies justification and legitimacy in the process of governing an administration. The realization that the administration is warranted affords the political leadership legal value within the code of laws of that community. This particular aspect of the state and government in pre-colonial Africa has been discussed by R. A. Sargent in his "Social Formations and Social Stratification."
5. A. P. Entreve (1-2) makes a distinction between might, power and authority. Might is associated with force outside the individual's will and superior to it. Power is exercised in accordance with definite procedures, "with rules that are known, or at least knowable." Authority is the final stage where power is recognized as warranted and justified in practice. Also refer to F. Oppenheimer, *The State, Its History and Development Viewed Sociologically*, H. Krabbe, *The Modern Idea of the State*, and G. Mosca, *Elementi di Scienza Poltica [The Ruling Class]*, where he argued that "consent is merely the aftermath of force and force in turn does not necessarily imply the use of physical force, but may well consist in the possession of skills on the part of the rulers" (53).
6. The legitimization of authority has been discussed by G. Sjoberg, *The Pre-Industrial City* (224-31), and has applications for pre-colonial Africa.
7. Refer, for example, to J. U. Egharevba (27): "Esigie the Oba of Benin had his mother Idia made Queen and sent her to reside at Lower Uselu. Ever since, every Oba of Benin has given his mother the same title, Iyoba of Uselu." Also refer to H. Kuper, *An African Aristocracy*, for more information on the Swazi Queen Mother. R. N. Henderson, in *The King in Every Man*, provides a good example where the influence of the Onitsha Queen is indicated but, unfortunately, not fully discussed.
8. Information collected during research among the Igala in 1976 and 1977. Much of this data has been included in the Benue Valley History Project Collection, Killam Library, Dalhousie University. A good example of this process was discussed in F. I. Ekejiuba's short biography: "Omu Okwu, The Merchant Queen of Ossomari."
9. Refer for more details on Paroketu and Jonam history to A. J. Apecu's "The Pre-Colonial History of the Jonam Chiefdoms" and Sargent's "A Political History of the Koc in the Northern Interlacustrine Region, c. 1544-1814." Also refer to the oral traditions collected by Apecu and catalogued as the *Jonam Historical Texts* (hereafter cited as J.H.T.) in the Makerere University Library. Refer specifically to J.H.T. No. 2.
10. The traditions collected from the Jopa Jobi are much less kind in their references to Queen Akech. J.H.T. No. 9 was collected from the Jopa Jobi, while J.H.T. No. 2 came from the Jokal Pa-Akech. they are a real

study in contrast, and indicate the different perceptions on the history of Akech as a female politician in Paroketu affairs. this kind of comparative analysis reinforces the importance of identifying informants and their relationship to the evidence they provide.

11. For a more detailed study of this period in Jonam history, and an analysis of Daga's role in interlacustrine politics, refer to Sargent, "A Political History of the Koc," and "The Generations of Turmoil and Stress."

#### Works Cited

- Apecu, A. J. "The Pre-Colonial History of the Jonam Chiefdoms." Graduating Essay. Kampala, Makerere University, 1972.
- Dawson, K. D. "Women, Power and Authority." Paper presented to the African History Workshop. Boston, Johns Hopkins University, February, 1984.
- . "Women, Power and Authority in Pre-Colonial Africa." Honours Essay. Halifax, NS, Dalhousie University, 1984.
- D'Entreve, A. P. *The Notion of the State: An Introduction to Political Theory*. Oxford, 1967.
- Egharevba, J. U. *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: 1968.
- Ekejiuba, F. I. "Omu Okwu, the Merchant Queen of Ossomari." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* (1967).
- Freedman, J. "The Collapse of Ndurwa and the Spread and Recreation of Nyabingi Outside Its Homeland." Paper presented to the Canadian Association of African Studies Conference. Halifax, NS, Dalhousie University, 1974.
- Henderson, R. N. *The King in Every Man*. New Haven, 1972.
- Kampala. Makerere University Library. *Jonam Historical Texts*. No. 2, 5/4/1972, "Omach of Paroketu"; No. 9; No. 27, 27/4/1972, "Ali and Oketh Dogu of Ragem"; No. 28, 24/4/1972, "Ogwech Adela of Ragem"; No. 35, 3/5/1972, "Munguata of Ragem Paten."
- Kamuhangire, E. E. R. "Bunyoro and Rwanda, the Changing Balance of Power and Its Effects upon the Marcher Region, c. 1650–1900: A Case Study of the Bachwezi and Nyabingi Cults." Paper presented to the Canadian Association of African Studies Conference. Halifax, NS, Dalhousie University, 1974.
- Krabbe, H. *The Modern Idea of the State*. Trans. G. H. Sabine and W. J. Shephard. New York: 1930.
- Kuper, H. *An African Aristocracy*. London: 1961.
- Mosca, G. *Elementi di Scienza Politica*. Vol. 1. Rome: 1896. Trans. into English as *the Ruling Class*. New York: 1939.
- Oppenheimer, F. *The State, Its History and Development Viewed Sociologically*. New York, 1914. Rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1972.
- Sargent, R. A. "Female Politicians in West Africa: Two Examples in Pre-Colonial History." Dalhousie University History Seminar. Halifax, NS, Dalhousie University, August, 1980.
- . "The Generations of Turmoil and Stress: A Proliferation of States in the Northern Interlacustrine Region, c. 1544–1625." *Chronology, Migration and Drought in Interlacustrine Africa*. Ed. J. B. Webster. London: 1979. 231–262.
- . "A Political History of the Koc in the Northern Interlacustrine Region, c. 1544–1814." MA Thesis. Halifax, NS, Dalhousie University, 1976.
- . "Politics and Economics in the Benue Basin." PhD Dissertation. Halifax, NS, Dalhousie University, 1984.
- . "Social Formations and Social Stratification: A Process of Political Re-Formation in Pre-Colonial Africa." Paper presented to the Canadian Association of African Studies Conference. Antigonish, NS, St. Francis Xavier University, 1984.
- Sjoberg, G. *The Pre-Industrial City*. Glencoe: 1960.
- Southall, A. W. *Alur Society*. Nairobi, 1970.