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Gender and (Militarized) Secessionist Movements in Africa

An African Feminist's Reflections

Abstract: Utilizing interdisciplinary and multimethodological approaches, this essay explores women's roles in buttressing the political cohesion of secessionist movements in postcolonial Africa. It argues that African women have supported the actions of male-dominated secessionist movements in order to garner their own social and political power. Using case studies from Anglophone Cameroon, Western Sahara, Cabinda Province (Angola), and Biafra (Nigeria), the essay historicizes and outlines a new analytical framework that explores women's multifaceted participation in secessionist movements in modern-day Africa.

On January 19, 2017, a Cameroonian woman known as "Mami Margaret" released a six-minute video for YouTube, imploring women in the two English-speaking areas of the country to come together to protest Francophone rule (Ekan 2017a). Speaking in Pidgin English, or Cameroonian Creole, she lamented the disappearance, execution, and imprisonment of male leaders of Anglophone opposition groups over the preceding four months. She also called upon women to support the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium's "ghost town" campaigns, in which activists in Anglophone regions would withdraw from everyday activities in public spaces for two days to protest Anglophone marginalization. She further proposed that women protest naked in the streets, referencing a tradition in which the Takumbeng (or Takembeng), a rural-based

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traditional secret society of women in their sixties and seventies, protest naked to intimidate and shame men who consider the sight of their vaginas bad luck. Her message was clear: Anglophone women in Cameroon should unify.

Mami Margaret broadcast her video from Tamulong, a section of Bamenda, the capital of the modern-day Anglophone Northwest Region of Cameroon, which is an important stronghold against Francophone hegemony. The Northwest and Southwest Regions were once part of the British Empire, unlike the rest of the country, which was French-ruled. Following a 1961 plebiscite organized by the United Nations, the British Southern Cameroons federated with the (formerly French-ruled) Republic of Cameroon, while the British Northern Cameroons became part of Nigeria. Since that time Anglophones have felt increasingly marginalized by the Francophone-led state, as they account for less than 20 percent of the country's population. In October 2016 the Anglophone regions erupted in protest after the president announced that all Cameroonians must give pride of place to the French language. By November this discontent had evolved into a larger political movement dubbed "the Coffin Revolution" because a key leader appeared in public in a coffin and many declared that they were willing to risk death in order to combat fifty years of socioeconomic marginalization by the politically dominant Francophone state. Some demanded federalism, while others sought secession. The state responded by shutting down the internet in Anglophone towns from January to April 2017 (*Cameroon Concord News* 2017).

Given the internet blockade, Mami Margaret's video was likely uploaded from a Francophone region of the country or even from Nigeria, since Anglophones had become "digital refugees" (*Al Jazeera* 2017; Atabong 2017). The video's reference to the Takumbeng would have been familiar to many Cameroonians. In the early 1990s the group engaged in mass protests after the military tried to arrest an Anglophone political opposition party leader following the reintroduction of multiparty politics (Kah 2011, 75). Takumbeng women surrounded the candidate's compound to thwart his formal arrest and provided him with food and access to supporters. When the military entered his compound, the women disrobed, knelt, and lifted their breasts with their hands. The women successfully repelled the advance of the soldiers armed with guns, tear gas, and grenades. The soldiers feared that the women's exposed vaginas and breasts would become "guns of war" (Kah 2011, 75). The age of the women, all seniors in their

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community, was a significant aspect of their power, as it gave them authority drawn on maternal associations (DeLancey et al. 2010, 357). Although the Takumbeng did not likely participate in protests in 2016 or January 2017, they did eventually respond to Mami Margaret's call for unity and took part in protests in Anglophone Cameroon and abroad in September and November 2017 (Manunga Studio 2 2017; Ekan 2017b; Yombo 2017).

In this essay, I historicize and explore women's participation in African secessionist movements, such as the one just described in Anglophone Cameroon. I argue that African women have supported male-dominated political organizations that advocate for secession by drawing upon their gendered positioning within communities in order to garner social and political power. They endeavor to draw strict cultural, social, and political boundaries between themselves and the "other" (i.e., the hegemonic state) in an attempt to solidify an "imagined community" within real geographical boundaries vis-à-vis succession (see Anderson 1991). As I explain, women's participation in these types of secessionist movements is wide-ranging, from serving as militants to heading nongovernment organizations and campaigning for women's rights while working for politically dominant governments.

Inspired by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) classic work on Nigerian women, I use what I term tri-(neo)colonialism as a lens, based on the understanding that African women in secessionist movements confront three layers of social and political subjugation. Ogundipe-Leslie contends that there are six mountains on African women's backs: traditional or indigenous viewpoints on culture, backwardness because of European colonization, race, patriarchy, external oppression and foreign intrusion, and, most significant, women themselves. I adapt her typology to focus on the multilayered oppressions that women in African secessionist movements face: male-dominated political organizations, hegemonic states, and Western neocolonialism. Using case studies from Anglophone Cameroon, Western Sahara, Cabinda Province (Angola), and Biafra (Nigeria), I historicize and outline a new analytical framework that explores women's multifaceted participation in secessionist movements in modern-day Africa.

My position as a researcher who is Francophone Cameroonian-born drives this comparative research. When researching Anglophone Cameroonian history, my Anglophone interviewees were always slightly suspicious of my interest in Anglophone nationalism, given my Francophone

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background. But as I explained, having lived most of my life in the United States as a black woman, I identified with the sociopolitical marginalization of Anglophone Cameroonians, even if our grievances differed because of different geographical and historical contexts. This explanation seemed to make my interviewees more relaxed and eager to engage in conversation, seeing me as an ally.

Being myself marginalized piqued my interest in trying to understand the experiences of women in separatist and/or secessionist movements on the continent. As an African feminist who is concerned with the needs and conditions of women on the continent, I was curious to know if liberation struggles (read: secessionist efforts) elsewhere on the continent also suffered from erasure and, if so, whether that erasure was more severe in women's case. My African feminist curiosity compels me to move beyond women's history per se and to connect the histories of women to contemporary political movements. While African feminism seeks to resist multiple axes of oppression, *including* tradition, the goal is, as the African feminist Minna Salami (2012) points out, is "to enable tradition to adapt to its times so that rather than stagnate, it can enrich society, as customs and culture should do."

With this in mind, my African feminist interjection endeavors to illuminate some of the distinct strategies that African women have used to advocate for gender and political equality within volatile political landscapes, such as utilizing centuries-old traditional women's organizations to demand change. Such insight might illuminate key strategies—often dismissed by the selective gaze of some scholars—that women have adapted in order to preserve authority (and survival) in turbulent (militarized) political landscapes. Thus this work and these reflections are meant to start a conversation about how feminist scholars—particularly those identifying as African feminists—can begin to analyze secession through the lens of gender.

Theorizing Gender and Secessionist Movements in Africa

Since the 1960s Africa has seen the rise of political resistance movements, including separatist and secessionist movements, which are rooted in beliefs about sociopolitical, ethnic, cultural, and even linguistic differences. According to Jean-Pierre Cabestan and Aleksandar Pavković (2012), separatism is "a political objective that aims to reduce the political and other powers of the central government of a state over a particular territory

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and to transfer those powers to the population or elites representing the population of the territory in question." Secessionism, on the other hand, seeks to remove all power from the central government (1–2). They argue that separatist movements often develop in a secessionist direction and caution that the distinction between them often blurs because some political movements waver between both political goals. This is certainly the case with English-speaking Cameroon, where some of the separatist intentions have transformed into secessionist movements, while others have ambiguously wavered between the two political objectives, depending on the given political climate.

Political scientists, sociologists, and economists have attempted to explain the causes and effects of secessionist and separatist movements, as well as state reactions to them, while political theorists have focused on the politics and political legitimacy of secessionist governments (Buchanan 2017). Thus far, most of this research has not had much to say about women's roles in secessionist or separatist movements across the world. There is also "surprisingly little feminist scholarship on militarism in Africa," according to Amina Mama and Margo Okazawa-Rey (2008, 2). However, as this work will show, women and gender have been central in shaping African political identities, particularly within secessionist movements, which are often heavily militarized.

In contrast to many decolonization movements, which often garner widespread political support, secessionist movements usually face obstacles in their efforts to mobilize populations (Pavković 2015). Consequently gender roles and conduct, specifically for women, fluctuate more in secessionist movements than they did in independence movements, as women face challenges accessing social, political, economic, and educational rights in such volatile environments. Such movements are often highly militarized, and as Alicia Decker's (2014) work on Uganda clearly illustrates, gender profoundly influences women's (and men's) understandings and experiences of military rule and militarized events. Secessionist movements often face opposition from powerful states that want to protect their own political interests and territorial integrity with military force, which has the potential to displace thousands of people. Displacement can expose women to heightened levels of gender-based violence, particularly within refugee camps, where local and national authorities, as well as international peacekeeping forces, may prey on them (Clarke 2008). Women can also experience new opportunities and challenges if war

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breaks out during or after secession, which suggests that we must carefully examine the entire secession process through a feminist lens.

Feminist political theory allows us to understand how women in secession and separatist movements have used various strategies to garner greater political, social, and economic authority. As the political scientist Valerie Bryson (2016, 1) explains, "Male political theorists ignore the existence of ongoing gender-based inequalities and injustices, or treat these as marginal issues, irrelevant to mainstream political theory . . . [while] most feminist political theory sees women and their situation as central to political analysis." Thus, using feminist political theory as a tool of analysis can illustrate how women are active agents who challenge larger political systems of inequality rather than merely passive subjects in secessionist movements (Allen 2013). As the feminist political scientist Jill Vickers (2016) observes, such "narratives portray women as passive victims of male violence and few consider women's active participation in separatist projects." And Decker (2017, 102) writes, "Women are not simply victims of militarism. They can employ a number of different strategies to mediate the violence." She notes that women exhibit "strategic agency" even when navigating a militarized setting.

This work also builds upon Stephanie Urdang's (1979) groundbreaking book, *Fighting Two Colonialisms: Women in Guinea–Bissau*, which discusses the parallel struggles of women for independence and for their rights as women. I see postcolonial secessionist movements as similar to anticolonial movements in that they seek to combat a foreign other in order to achieve self-determination. Like anticolonial movements, African women in secessionist movements are frequently asked to ignore gender concerns until after "liberation" (e.g., Geiger 1997; Lyons 2004; Schmidt 2005). However, contemporary examples of persistent patriarchy in many African countries reflect the fact that liberation from colonialism does not necessarily result in gender equality, belying the argument that the triumph of secessionist movements will make space for women's concerns. As the protracted conflict in South Sudan illustrates, secessionist movements may face long and bloody decades of struggle, even after "victory." Ignoring women's voices and stories from past and current secessionist movements only serves to obscure our understanding of internal forms of colonization, or intracolonization.

Secessionist movements are part of a larger pattern of (militarized) political movements on the African continent. Mama and Okazawa-Rey

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(2008, 1–2) contend that when "political transitions to African rule came, the institutions of state bore the marks of a patriarchal and militaristic history. . . . Individual nations found themselves variously enmeshed in Cold-War politics and the arms race, and embroiled in a series of deadly proxy wars." Moreover "the vast majority of these conflicts were carried out within nations, with increasingly devastating impact on civilian populations and rising casualties among women and children" (1–2). Secessionist movements in postcolonial Africa reflect this pattern of internal civil strife, and women are often the chief casualties. By examining secessionist movements through the lens of gender, we can clearly see that women experience the quest for self-determination in very different ways than men.

Militarization and Womanhood

This section explores how women in two contemporary secessionist movements have experienced militarization and how they have challenged, renegotiated, and reinterpreted various ideas about gender and femininity in military-occupied environments. It also examines how militarized secession movements have used women to advance their larger political goals.

The Sahrawi

The Polisario Front has led the separatist movement of the indigenous Sahrawi of Western Sahara, who have sought liberation from Morocco through active resistance since 1976. A stalemate in the mid-1980s led to a 1991 truce and ceasefire, supervised by the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). Although Morocco initially promised a referendum on independence, this vote has yet to take place, ostensibly due to disagreements about Sahrawi voter rights. The ceasefire remains, but the Polisario Front have repeatedly threatened to recommence fighting because of Morocco's failure to hold a referendum. While the Moroccan government considers membership in the Polisario Front illegal, the United Nations recognizes the organization as the Sahrawi people's legitimate political representative and contend that the Sahrawi have a right to demand the referendum promised in the ceasefire agreement (Vasquez 2014).

Feminist scholarship overwhelmingly demonstrates that ideals of "normal" family life and adherence to rigid gender roles are often

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suspended during times of conflict (e.g., Geiger 1997; Lyons 2004; Schmidt 2005). For Sahrawi women, however, disruption of this kind has been normal for the past four decades. This complicates scholarly understandings of gender role reversals during politically tenuous times. In fact, for indigenous Sahrawi women, playing a role outside of the home represents a continuation of tradition. Sahrawi women have always run camps when men traveled for battle or for trading, taking up key responsibilities that bolstered their social and political control within the home and their communities (Morris 2013). Women also governed their family's tents—making, repairing, and moving them—and took care of their family's animals and children. Traditional Sahrawi society is matrilineal, and women can inherit property. They can thus survive independently of their fathers and husbands (Lippert 1992).

Just as Sahrawi women have managed nomadic camps for generations, they have also managed refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. These camps are home to the Polisario Front and thousands of exiled Sahrawi. Many able-bodied men who joined the fight died, leaving women as camp leaders. The Sahrawi in Tindouf have struggled to rebuild their communities in their extended period of exile, and women have played an integral role in this process. Erica Vasquez (2014) has explored women's leadership roles in these camps. She has found that some women head up community-building projects that support the education of Sahrawi youth, while others work in clinics and schools. Still other women work as journalists and police officers. Vasquez's study demonstrates that Sahrawi women have expanded their authority in exile, forming new strategies to garner social and political power even as they support the actions of male-dominated political organizations that are fighting Moroccan occupation in their home region. As citizens of a state-in-waiting, these women ensure the survival and continuation of their communities, renegotiating their citizenry in powerful ways. Community-building projects make them important decision makers for their exiled communities, suggesting that women can obtain social and political power, even in volatile landscapes. Whether women will retain this power after "liberation" is unclear. Nonetheless, as Vasquez concludes in her study, the ability of Sahrawi women to find ways to maintain and extend their social and political authority "shows the elevated roles of women in the movement, their organization, and the discrimination inflicted upon them by the Moroccan forces. It also challenges orientalist narratives about the subjugated Muslim woman" and illustrates

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how different cultural contexts can enhance power for women, allowing them to participate in secessionist movements differently from their male counterparts (5).

In fact women are often the most visible figures of secessionist movements. A 2013 *Washington Post* interview with a prominent Sahrawi activist, Sultana Khaya, clearly reflects this (Morris 2013). In this interview Khaya remembers how a police officer brutally beat her face during a 2007 protest, crushing her eye socket and leaving her blind in one eye. She refused to back down, insisting that such great strength was normal for Sahrawi women. "The Sahrawi woman is very great; she's very powerful," she says. Khaya articulates a militarized ideal of womanhood, noting, "I don't even think about getting married until the Sahrawi women become independent." By emphasizing a militarized femininity, women like Khaya disassociate themselves from their bodies and gendered expectations by postponing marriage and motherhood (Saltman and Gabbard 2011; Hentz 2014). Similar to what Decker (2014, 11) discovered in Uganda, "new constructions of masculinity and femininity . . . emerged from militarist practices, which significantly influenced gender roles and relations." In proclaiming that they did not want to marry until all women were free, women like Khaya embraced a militarized femininity that justified the sacrifice of wifehood and motherhood. Within this context women's support for secession defined a new version of womanhood that was militarized, altering extant perceptions of ideal womanhood during times of war.

On the other hand, evidence belies the claim of Sahrawi women like Khaya that they have achieved gender equality in exile (Saltman and Gabbard 2011). Women do not occupy the highest political posts in Tindouf camps. Moreover, because the Algerian government does not police the camps, gender-based violence often goes unchecked. A recent Human Rights Watch (2014) report describes the failure of some intergovernmental organizations to prioritize combating gender-based violence in militarized environments such as refugee camps. While noting that the United Nations "maintains a permanent presence in the refugee camps in Tindouf and Western Sahara," the report finds that MINURSO is the most prominent UN entity and that it "has no human rights mandate and conducts no ongoing human rights monitoring or reporting" (5). Human Rights Watch describes the Moroccan state's opposition to such a mandate, in spite of Polisario's support. Thus multilayered neocolonial influences and

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policies—by Algeria, Western Sahara, and the UN—shape and influence Sahrawi women's daily access to security and human rights while in exile.

The lack of protection for Sahrawi women exists against the backdrop of heightened violence because of pre-displacement norms as well as disturbed gender relations. Militarism can strengthen the equation of masculinity with violence and create an environment that seems to encourage violence against women (Mama and Okazawa-Rey 2008, 3). Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Ulrike Krause (2017, 4–5) assert that men sometimes react violently to displacement and encampment "in order to maintain their social status as patriarchs." The authors therefore find higher levels of "domestic violence [and] sexual abuse . . . by fellow refugees." They likewise describe gender-based violence by officials empowered to keep order in refugee camps. Imprisoning women for adultery or other "honor crimes," such as having children out of wedlock, has been documented in Tindouf (Human Rights Watch 2008, 2014; Amnesty International 2016). Larger narratives about the ongoing conflict often eclipse reports of such gender-based violence. Thus, while women are recognized as critical to the secessionist movement, they must also navigate multiple layers of political, social, and violent physical subjection in support of the movement.

Cabinda, Angola

The gender-based violence that women encounter in highly militarized spaces is also evident in Cabinda, a region of Angola that is separated from the rest of the country by the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) has sought independence from two external powers since 1963: from Portugal until 1975 and, after that, from the Luanda government after Angolan independence. Activists contend that Cabinda has a culture and history distinct from the rest of Angola. Soldiers in the armed wing of FLEC have waged a low-level guerrilla war for independence for forty years. They operate in exile with branches in Congo-Brazzaville and Paris as well. The Luanda government, however, has resisted giving up Cabinda because the province accounts for more than half of the country's oil production (Koné 1998; Reid 2015).

European and North American petroleum companies have also endeavored to exercise economic and political control in Cabinda since the discovery of oil in 1966. For instance, France supported separatist intentions in the country for decades by providing military and arms support to FLEC fighters to protect the interests of Total, a multinational integrated oil and

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gas company and the largest French company in Angola (Koné 1998). Such external meddling declined after the international Angolagate scandal (1993–2000), in which individuals in the French and Luanda governments were exposed for corruption and illegal arms deals (*The Economist* 2008). Yet interference likely continues through the same channels; as research on the illicit arms trade in Africa has demonstrated, it is "opaque, amorphous and dynamic," and thus it is impossible to determine which entities supply the arms that fuel conflict (Schroeder and Lamb 2006, 69).

The persistence of the conflict certainly has an impact on women's lives. A 1996 press release reveals that although most FLEC fighters are men and teenage boys, women also actively participate. According to Silou, one of approximately fifty women who are part of the armed wing of FLEC, "Our role as women who have joined up is to increase the fighting capacity of Cabinda's women. . . . There are nearly 80,000 women in Cabinda and we are trying to make them understand the meaning of mobilization. . . . We devote ourselves totally, body and soul, to keeping the Cabindese cultural patrimony alive" (Ngangoue 1996). She explains that she is a teacher of children and does not ask for a salary to "improve the intellectual capacity of Cabindese children who will continue this liberation struggle" (Ngangoue 1996). Many women also help to feed combatants and see the involvement of their sons as an important contribution to the political movement. An elderly woman, whose twenty-one-year-old son fights for FLEC, stated, "By producing cassava, yams, bananas and other crops we feed our fighters, our husbands and sons. . . . In this way we give them the courage to face our Angolan enemy. . . . By accepting to send our young sons to the front, we are sacrificing ourselves for the independence of our country. We accept this with heavy hearts, but we have to do so in the interest of future generations" (Reid 2015). While some Sahrawi women delay marriage and motherhood, Cabindese women sacrifice their sons to a greater cause and seek to preserve some semblance of patriarchy (or "cultural patrimony" as Silou puts it), demonstrating the varied ways that women, drawing on their gendered positioning as mothers (or potential mothers), support male-dominated secessionist movements.

Women in Cabinda face gender-based violence as well. A 2003 report from the Institute of Security Studies mentions that Angolan soldiers frequently rape women and girls in the province (Porto 2003). A 1997 report on human rights violations in the province by the Ad-Hoc Commission for Human Rights in Cabinda also reveals systematic gender-based violence. It

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shows that both the Angolan Armed Forces and the National Police of the Republic of Angola failed to investigate or prosecute the army's abuses against civilians. The report notes that the army responded to accusations of gender-based violence and human rights violations by transferring suspected perpetrators to different areas of Cabinda or to another province of Angola (Human Rights Watch 2004). Although rape is a common tool of war, it is not always recognized as a war crime. As Helen Scanlon (2008, 31) asserts, rape is "often simply viewed as an 'unfortunate' consequence of war even though it has been integral to war strategies." Deeming gender-based violence an "unfortunate" consequence of violent militarized movements sidelines women's experiences and ignores the fact that secessionist movements are entrenched in larger patriarchal societies. As feminist political theory emphasizes, acknowledging women's experiences during war and seriously interrogating them provides an opportunity for change.

Womanhood in Public Protest

Women have led protests in several African countries in the postcolonial period, adapting colonial-era strategies to resist other Africans (vis-à-vis intracolonization) rather than imperial authorities. Next I discuss some of the complex political and embodied strategies that such protesting women have used.

Biafra, Nigeria

In May 2017 Nigerian soldiers chased the attendees of an Indigenous People of Biafra women's conference from the stadium they were using as a venue. A nineteen-minute video circulated on YouTube depicting the ensuing protest as women disrobed to the waist or completely, marching to the house of a chief in the Abiriba community in southeastern Nigeria to protest the attack. The chief told them he would stand up for them. "Everybody has a right to associate with anything or any organization. It's a free world," he said. He implored the women to "conduct themselves in a peaceful manner" and noted, "This is a fight that doesn't require guns but wisdom. We don't want the Biafra [War] that killed people. I urge you to use diplomacy to follow this struggle" (Onyeji 2017). In this instance, women used public spaces to protest in a way that may be distinct from men. Women figuratively and symbolically stage and embrace national belonging, emphasizing varied public rituals and performances. At the same time,

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this makes women's activities ripe for co-optation by otherwise male-dominated secessionist movements.

The women's protests were the culmination of long-standing secessionist intentions in eastern Nigeria. Nigeria gained independence from British rule in 1960, and a violent conflict began six years later when rioting erupted after General Yakubu Gowon seized power in a military coup in September 1967. A massacre (many scholars say it was an attempted genocide) of Igbo people in the North followed. Many Igbo fled to the Eastern Region for protection. In response, Chief Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, the governor of the region, launched plans for secession, declaring the independence of the Eastern Region and the establishment of the Republic of Biafra on May 27, 1967. Fighting broke out less than two months later between federal and Biafran forces; the ensuing war resulted in high casualties, as well as widespread starvation and famine in Biafra (Falola and Ezekwem 2016). Civil conflict between the federal government of Nigeria and the secessionist Republic of Biafra lasted until January 1970. Much of the fighting took place along the Bight of Biafra, the southeastern coast of Nigeria.

While much has been written about the Biafran secessionist movement—the civil war has been the subject of novels, plays, and poems as well as academic literature—scholars have not fully addressed the participation of women and girls. Making their case based on human rights norms, pro-Biafra activists have called on the international community for help. Most recently, in 2017, acting through the Organization of Emerging African States (OEAS), they sought help from the European Union, calling on the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, to conduct a referendum for Biafra's independence (Akpan 2017). In response, the chief administrative officer of OEAS, Jonathan Levy, stated that the "protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms remains a priority for the EU," calling on Nigeria to respect such rights (quoted in Akpan 2017). He also cautioned the OEAS and Biafra agitators that established international law might limit their claims, and that armed secession could not lead to the establishment of an independent state (Akpan 2017).

Against this backdrop, Biafran women resurrected traditional methods of social protest. For example, their actions recalled those who protested British colonial activities in 1929 by "sitting on a man," a form of shaming practice traditionally used only by (Igbo) women of Nigeria when

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confronting serous grievances (Van Allen 1972). "Sitting on a man" "could include singing vulgar songs outside the home of a man who had violated women's rights and activities" (Sheldon 2016, 17). In 1929 the colonial government had undertaken measures to impose direct taxation on women, which women strongly resented. Many of those who protested the taxes worked in markets and thus had significant economic and political control in society. Subsequently women collectively mobilized to express their discontent with the erosion of their political and economic authority in what became known as the "Women's War." The widespread protests included attacks on local African male authorities; the protesting women saw such men as collaborators in the colonial system. Women also attacked the British court building and sang insulting songs to male colonial officials. The women demanded their exemption from taxes, the removal of corrupt chiefs, and the introduction of female judges. The tradition of "sitting on a man" was well established and women had periodically used it against local African men as a mechanism to protect their rights (Van Allen 1972). The May 2017 protest reflects a pattern in which African women reinterpreted traditional forms of protest to fit modern times. Their protest reflects a pattern in which women use their bodies to participate in contemporary liberation struggles, providing a useful alternative to navigating the complexities of secessionist movements that seek help from international organizations that do not always prioritize women's experiences and grievances.

Few local Igbo men dared interfere in the 1929 women's protest. By contrast, when Nigerian women launched a traditional protest against the state in 2017, male leaders issued a warning calling for peaceful protests only. They sought to enforce male authority, demanding that the protesting women behave "civilly." At the same time, as they had in 1929, Pro-Biafra Igbo men generally did not interfere with the protest to any great extent because it aligned with their interest in asserting political power against the hegemonic state.

Anglophone Cameroon

Men's co-optation of women's political activities also took place in neighboring Cameroon, where they urged women to support male-dominated Anglophone opposition organizations. The YouTube video featuring Mami Margaret represented an attempt by the male-dominated Anglophone Civil Society Consortium to co-opt women's protests against national

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celebrations of International Women's Day (IWD) that had taken place the prior March. IWD, which takes place annually on March 8, is typically a significant event for women in Cameroon, as they celebrate and participate in seminars and networking events over the course of several weeks. Bertrade Ngo-Ngijol Banoum and Anne Patricia Rice (2015, 5) observe that IWD involves "a rich web of interrelated programming including seminars, debates, capacity-building workshops, arts and craft fairs, theater, music and dance performances, political rallies, commemorative parades, and business conferences and networking events." They write that the wearing of the IWD *pagne*, a colorful wrapper, which features images and phrases related to the year's global theme, is the most visible sign of women's unity on IWD. Yet in 2017 many Anglophone women did not purchase it because they joined a boycott to protest Francophone domination, taking to heart the year's theme, Be Bold for Change. In Bamenda, an Anglophone opposition stronghold, local newspapers reported that there were so few participants that the IWD march lasted less than an hour rather than the usual two to three hours (*Cameroon Concord News* 2017).

The outlawed Anglophone Civil Society Consortium had requested that citizens in the Northwest and Southwest regions observe a "ghost town" on March 8. The choice of the date represented an attempt to co-opt women's political power, as their abstention from IWD would make a bold statement. Some women protested by going about their usual activities in lieu of participating in IWD. In a video circulating on social media, Tassang Wilfred, a male program coordinator of the outlawed consortium, thanked women who boycotted, saying, "You have told the government that you want your husbands and your children to come back home [from detention] and you have told the world that you are unhappy" (*Journal du Cameroon* 2017). He urged citizens to be steadfast in the protest and warned they would suffer greater marginalization if they gave up "the struggle" for equality with Francophones.

The rhetoric Wilfred employed crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries. Edith Kah Walla, a Douala-based Francophone female politician and social activist, called on both Anglophone and Francophone women to boycott Women's Day (Enow 2017). She reminded women that children had been killed during protests and that children had lost the ability to go to school. She called on them to protest a government that arrested leaders of peaceful protests and violated their rights to communicate (by shutting down the internet), pointing out that the Cameroonian economy was in a

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slump. Wallah endeavored to unify women around mutual grievances. Thus she implied that women could not be truly free if they did not focus on freeing *all* Cameroonians, regardless of social, cultural, linguistic, and political cleavages.

Although women's participation has been critical to the Anglophone male-dominated movement, the international community has largely ignored their concerns. In 2009 the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights rejected a case filed for Anglophone independence by a leading Anglophone self-determination organization, the Southern Cameroon National Council. In their decision they noted that the state should abolish "all discriminatory practices against people of Northwest and Southwest Cameroon, including equal usage of the English language in business transactions" (23). At the same time, they affirmed the status quo by concluding that comprehensive national dialogue, rather than secession, must address Anglophone concerns. Similarly, when Sam Egbe, a Cameroonian living in the United Kingdom, asked the British government to offer assistance in early April 2017, Tobias Ellwood, a British Parliament member in charge of relations with Africa and the Middle East, declined, saying that the 1961 referendum should stand. He recommended "broad-based dialogue with a range of interlocutors and a return to normalcy in [Anglophone] regions" (*Pretoriavibe* 2017).

While men have protested Anglophone subjugation on both sides of the Atlantic by appealing to the international community, women have used traditional forms of protests, like their Nigerian counterparts, to draw attention to the situation in their own unique ways. In September 2017, for example, Anglophone Cameroonian women in the United States mobilized Takumbeng, surrounding the hotel of the Cameroonian president Paul Biya during his recent visit to New York to participate in the 72nd Ordinary Session of the United Nations General Assembly (Aliguena 2017). The women used traditional forms of protest and transnational networks to foster political solidarity, Anglophone inclusion, and nationalist aspirations.

Failure to analyze how women, individually and collectively, serve the goals of secessionist movements that are embedded in larger patriarchal orders leads to an incomplete picture of how gender shapes such movements. By not participating in IWD and by protesting in public spaces that make their collective agency visible across national boundaries, Anglophone women focused on the broader political goals of secession. As the

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political scientist Aili Tripp maintains, such co-optation of women's sociopolitical activities is a recurring pattern in postcolonial African states where women's organizations are co-opted by their governments and encouraged to applaud the actions of male-led organizations (Tripp 2000; Tripp et al. 2012). Hence Anglophone Cameroonian women chose to sacrifice a political unity that traversed ethnic, political, linguistic, and social boundaries to support male-dominated political organizations that advocated for secession. Even more, as Aliguena (2017) demonstrates, women turned their attention to demanding the release of imprisoned Anglophone male political dissidents, which may further marginalize their political unity and sideline issues of gender equality in Cameroon more generally. At the same time, a limited and technocratic approach to "women's issues" is often used strategically by postcolonial elites to obscure patriarchal control over the state, such as the use of IWD celebrations to bolster nationalist aims.

Conclusion

While Western and African media and academic literature continue to diminish women's participation in past and present secessionist movements, this essay shows that African women have found new and varied strategies to access social and political power in politically turbulent environments. While there are many active secessionist movements in contemporary Africa, this work serves as an entry point from which to understand African women's roles and activities in postcolonial liberation struggles. While most scholarship has ignored women in secessionist movements, this has begun to change. Most recently, Sondra Hale (2001) examined South Sudanese women's activism in exile during the secessionist struggle, and Nada Mustafa Ali (2015) conducted an extensive study of women's experiences during the South Sudan secessionist movement and the plight of women in the initial state-building process afterward. Yet there is much more work to do on gender and secessionist movements in contemporary Africa. I hope these reflections serve as an entry point to a larger conversation. Key questions remain unanswered, such as how religion and gender intersect to drive secessionist movements forward. The role women play in movements such as that of Uamsho (means "awakening"), a Muslim religious group in Zanzibar advocating for secession from mainland Tanzania, might be different from that of Muslim Sahrawi women in Western Sahara.

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Another important issue to explore relates to the alliance of secessionist movements that cross geographic boundaries. The closeness between English-Speaking regions of Cameroon and Nigeria, based on geography and the legacy of shared European rule, may add another layer of political challenges that women must navigate within secessionist movements. Recent international news reports have suggested that the West African coast could be further destabilized if Anglophone Cameroonians and pro-Biafrans join forces to seek self-determination (Iaccino and Murakoshi 2016). What it means for women if transnational secessionist movements attempt to unite politically and militarily remains unclear. As many of these movements are still active, their effects on women's lives, and the ways that women negotiate within them, remains unclear. It is evident, however, that women and gender will continue to play a significant role in secessionist movements across the continent.

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