

Introduction

CELESTINE (MACOUCOU) OUEZZIN COULIBALY

It wasn't as if she was afraid of crowds. Celestine Ouezzin Coulibaly, familiarly known as Macoucou, had spoken to mixed gatherings far from home all her adult life. She knocked on the doors of people she'd never met before, in neighborhoods that didn't know her or her family. She was lucky. She grew up with the knowledge she could lead, maybe even should lead when necessary. Her father led the Sindou canton in Upper Volta. She had an education, a good one, and grew fluent in the French of schooling, great books, and well-honed essays. She traveled the region. She worked as a schoolteacher. By 1949, when she addressed the Asian Women's Conference in Beijing, she was a storied organizer of anti-imperialist women. In 1949, she led the movement of the thousands of women who stormed the prison of Grand Bassam holding over two thousand men from her political party, the African Democratic Assembly (RDA). "The men did not believe in the need for this movement and doubted

our ability,” she said at the founding conference of the women’s organization of the RDA on November 6, 1949.¹

Her attendance at the Asian Women’s Conference might seem surprising, since it was led by and held for Asian women. But the conference was anti-imperialist, and fostered solidarity with other movements against colonial occupation. It was not simply a gathering for women from one colonized continent: it welcomed anti-imperialist women from around the world. Coulibaly’s words nurtured the seeds of the African and Asian women’s solidarity movement that emerged from this early conference hosted by the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and the All-China Democratic Women’s Federation. Well before the Bandung conference in 1955, the Asian Women’s Conference developed an inside/outside political praxis for women’s anti-imperialism. The 1949 Asian Women’s Conference consolidated a militant, two-part strategy for women’s internationalism in the fight against fascism. On the outside of imperial centers, women joined the military resistance against colonial occupation. On the inside of imperialist ruling nations, women fought a war that refused to accept their nations’ belligerence abroad. In both locations of struggle, in occupied and occupying countries, this strategy relied upon reaching large numbers of women from rural locales, alongside cities and towns, to join the movement.

Thus, the conference resolutions in 1949 drafted two parts to this strategy, one for women from colonized (and recently independent) countries, and one for women from imperialist nations. In Asia, Africa, and parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, women fought imperialism and feudalism with renewed unity. To do so, they should organize “the masses of women, help to educate them and defend their basic rights!”² For women in impe-

rialist countries, their activism should be rooted in an ethical and personal refusal to be accomplices in murder: “Do not permit our sons to kill each other! Stop colonial wars! Insist that your governments recall the troops from Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaya, Korea.”³ This linked strategy mobilized rather than ignored or universalized the differences in women’s activism around the world. Internationalist women shared commitments to anti-fascism, anti-white supremacy and anti-colonialism; but their conditions of struggle were specific. This strategy dispensed with allies in the struggle to create accomplices in the fight against fascism, racism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Solidarity was not an invocation of shared intent, empathy or ethics; it was a battle cry enacted.

Conference organizers from the Women’s International Democratic Federation invited women from around the world who shared their politics and organizing strategies to build the largest possible women’s movement. The popular classes of women, agricultural workers and farmers, as well as wage workers in the informal sectors of towns and cities, joined together to fight colonial occupation. On the inside of colonial powers, women sought to grind the war machine to a halt by refusing to allow family members to enlist, or permit ships to load armaments and soldiers bound for counterinsurgency warfare in the colonies. On the outside of imperial centers, women took up arms, built fortifications, passed intelligence, hid insurgents, doctored the wounded, harvested the crops and fed the front-lines, all to strengthen the fight against occupation. Together they sought to bury colonialism.

Celestine Ouezzin Coulibaly joined this gathering at a critical moment for her own liberation struggle from French occupation. Daniel Ouezzin Coulibaly, her husband, was a leader of

his political party the African Democratic Assembly (RDA), and they agreed that enough was enough. When she moved south of her home, she moved to the political center, not of Upper Volta, but one of several centers of Western Africa: that is, the enforced-French-speaking territories of Western Africa. There were other centers, other cities that hosted important meetings for their movement, like Abidjan, like Bamako, like Conakry, like Dakar. The fluid coalition of their political formation both recognized French colonial borders and marked those borders as arbitrary. They questioned the fiction of even “natural” borders: sometimes a river border is more about the river than about the differences between peoples on each side of that river. Worse were the borders that a cartographer drew in negotiation with other imperial mapmakers. The straight lines underscored their own understanding of that territory as a theft not from the land’s inhabitants, but from another European tyrant. These borders dismissed the questions that mattered: Where did languages border each other? Where were there distinct cultural practices with an old, yet ever-changing syncretism of overlapping traditions? These maps that named Upper Volta or Ivory Coast as sharply distinct heralded the lines of independence before the people who lived there had decided if they agreed. To build a movement of many locations, often with vast acreages that held very specific histories and antagonisms, was also a necessary fiction. It allowed another set of borders to emerge, or at least, it held a place for a more integral ordering of space. But how easy it was for an anti-colonial independence movement to become a nationalist one: not easy in practice (of building common terms of polity, language, and history) but easy in rhetoric, easy to invoke as a goal standing in for freedom and self-determination.

Coulibaly honored that promise of borders not yet known, of invaders not yet ready to leave but already being shown the exit. When she moved south to the coastal cities of Ivory Coast from Upper Volta, she didn't stay at the level of invocation. Hers was not, strictly speaking, a nation-building project. It was a movement for power taken by the people. When she moved to Abidjan, she went to the markets. That's where the women were. In these markets, French essay-writing was not her most powerful tool. Her voice, alongside her willingness to listen to all that the market women knew and told her, enabled her gift for shaping a collective force that already existed into a political one. Anti-colonialism meant that market women had to listen to rural women: the products of subsistence farming done almost exclusively by women were an integral part of what market women sold. If the collective within the market sphere could extend, consciously, to include the rural lives of women, then anti-colonialism had a network, a supply chain that could break the rough, dangerously aged bones of colonial wealth extraction. It could end the arbitrary and exorbitant taxation demanded so that even the smallest peasant landholder needed cash; the enforced, unpaid labor for the colonizers that ripped children, women, and men from their own grueling work to survive; the practice of filling the most verdant land with crops grown strictly because they would be purchased with European-backed cash. And it could destroy the most devastating of all these policies, the export of these mass-produced food crops far from the people who grew them, far from the people who deserved their nutrients and calories.

In Western Africa, each locality remained a locality. Of course it did. The roads and train tracks so efficient for carting away the bounty often had little to do with the roads and paths traveled for commerce and trade, let alone the extended visits

for generational ceremonies of celebration and burial. Colonialism sought replicability: of wealth extraction, of systems of control, of enforced obedience to unilateral demands. Resistance movements sought the power of their masses: of land, of people, of languages, of cultures and creativity. Their movement sought national independence against the borders themselves, borders that were not simply arbitrary, but also violent, since they tore histories, languages, cultures and families apart with a line in a cartographer's notebook. Coulibaly knew the larger strategy of her movement's anti-colonialism. She stayed firmly in the masses and networks of her place, but sought to inspire them to the larger purpose of throwing the occupiers out.

So, when she flew to Beijing, the new capital of the People's Republic of China, in 1949, it is hard to imagine her frightened. That brittle, wintry place welcomed her. Many women from her movement wanted to go in her stead. She was chosen to represent all of them, not just the ten thousand women organized in greater Abidjan, but hundreds of local groups that refused the same colonial occupation, the same colonial robbery. It is easier to imagine how she drew on her family's heritage, on the dignity of her upbringing, on knowing the value of her place. She packed her clothing, not the French-codified uniforms of her schoolgirl youth, but the West African fabrics from her organizing among market women, among farming women, among women of the towns. She wrapped her head using the full intricacy of folds to signify the importance of the occasion as well as her own importance. She probably guessed (here colonialism taught its lessons to her advantage) that she would have to single-handedly make her dress legible in all of its significations: independence of history, willingness to lead, the wealth of her past traditions, knowledge, and its visionary possibilities for the future.



Figure 1. “A Place Where We Think About Humanity” Hall, Asian Women’s Conference, Beijing, December 1949. Photo courtesy of Sophia Smith Archives, Smith College.

When she stood up in front of hundreds of people, in the bitter cold of the People’s Great Hall in China, with steaming breath and chafed hands, she used French to speak of what they shared. She reminded the delegates of how they had all lived under the boot that sought to scrape away their value, but not because of any inferiority. Quite the opposite. European colonizers bullied their way into unjust overlord status because that value—which they sought to steal—was so rich, because that value could line their pockets. “I am an African woman. I bring greetings from the black women of Ivory Coast, and at the same time I bring their fears, hatred, their living conditions.... Although we are of different origins, different languages, we suffer similarly. And we have the same sense of righteousness.”⁴