

New Complex, New Phases, New Opportunities

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Powerful women in Africa

Strong stuff

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Sometimes love does indeed conquer all

ONE day last January, the west African representatives of the world's press were called to a concrete house in the Liberian capital, Monrovia, by a large lady named Ayesha Conneh. There was something Mrs Conneh (above) wished to get off her chest. The rebels who had recently seized power in Liberia were not, as advertised, commanded by her husband, she said. Rather, she was the "boss lady"—and her husband and deputy, Sekou Conneh, a former second-hand-car salesman, was facing the sack. "I put him there as chairman," said Mrs Conneh gruffly, dandling a baby in her capacious lap. "If you open a big business and put your husband in charge, if you see that things are not going the right way, you step him aside and straighten things up."

Mrs Conneh's words caused a stir, not least at the United Nations, which was then launching the world's biggest peacekeeping mission in Liberia. UN experts thought Mr Conneh was in charge of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), a rebel group that had toppled a crazy tyrant, Charles Taylor, in 2003. They had persuaded Mr Conneh to share power with other rebels and bring peace to his ruined land. Now his wife seemed to be threatening war.

Mr Conneh insisted he remained LURD's leader. But his senior commanders preferred Mrs Conneh, and said so, setting off fighting that claimed several lives. To the UN's relief, Mrs Conneh, who calls herself the "Mother of Peace" as well as the "Iron Lady", let her husband keep his job. But no one now doubts who is boss in Liberia.

Few Liberians doubted it before. It had been Mrs Conneh who had made LURD so potent, by persuading the ruler of neighbouring Guinea, Lansana Conté, to arm it; and it was through her that the guns had been channelled to the rebels, who were then, in 1999, unleashed on Mr Taylor. Mrs Conneh had found favour with Mr Conté after fleeing to Guinea as a refugee, and prospering there as a soothsayer. In 1996 she had correctly predicted that a coup would soon be attempted against Mr Conté, after which he had adopted her as his daughter.

In fairness to the UN, it must have been hard to imagine that Mrs Conneh would command such loyalty. Africa has had female ministers, female chiefs, female warriors and even, briefly, in Liberia, a female acting leader. In 1981 King Sobhuza II of Swaziland made his senior wife, the "Great She-Elephant", Dzeliwe Shongwe, joint head of state, a title he later revoked. But no modern African state has been ruled by a woman—to Africa's cost, say students of development. In Africa, they sigh, women bring up children, draw water, turn the earth and stir the stew, while men make merry and make war. The excesses of Africa's post-colonial dictators—the "big men"—have ravaged the continent. Only the efforts of millions of small women have saved it from greater ruin.

Figures of substance

That is only partly true, because Mrs Conneh is far from unique. In fact, behind many an African big man has been a substantial woman. Often, these ladies have tussled with their husbands for power, and sometimes won. As for their excesses, some could make a wanton big man blush. Take one serving African first lady, whose dictator-husband married her to mask his homosexuality. Or consider the former first lady who ran an extensive cocaine operation. Or she who took a photograph of her murdered husband's corpse and sold it to an American newspaper. More could be said but, alas, big African ladies have big London lawyers.

Of course, it is not only in Africa that extravagant first ladies can be found. Imelda Marcos tried to turn the Philippines into a giant shoe-rack. Neither have many continents been spared their Ladies Macbeth, such as Romania's Elena Ceausescu. Yet, for consistent big shopping and big ambitions in the office of the first lady, the poorest continent stands alone. In Africa, chaotic and corrupt, where proximity to power is paramount, first ladies can wield greater influence than any minister. And in male-chauvinist Africa, where most conventional paths to power are closed to women, what else is an ambitious girl to be? Compared with other big women, Africa's are bigger.

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It's a steal

They may also be a useful indicator of the state of their nation. Sally Mugabe mirrored the qualities of her husband, Robert, when he struggled to power in Rhodesia, or Zimbabwe, as he renamed it. She was bright, scholarly, pan-Africanist—a Ghanaian, who opened diplomatic channels to west Africa. But as Robert grew demented, his taste in women changed. While Sally lay dying of kidney disease, he lay with a secretary 40 years his junior. A creature of surpassing greed, Grace Mugabe appears to have been shopping, in the boutiques of Europe and Asia, ever since.

Mrs Mugabe's trips to Europe have now been cruelly curtailed by an EU travel ban. So she has started collecting other people's farms. The wife of a white farmer, having been turned out by Mrs Mugabe last year, said: "My goodness, she is getting a lovely home." Not that the first lady needed it: she already had several farms and a breathtakingly vulgar mansion, called Graceland.

Only one African leader seems to have jibbed at his wife's excesses: Nelson Mandela. In 1990 he walked to freedom with Winnie, his second wife, on his arm. In 1996 he divorced her. Warped, perhaps, by three decades of hounding by racists, Ms Madikizela-Mandela had turned violent, venal and unfaithful. She was convicted of involvement in kidnapping, assault and fraud. Mr Mandela then married Graça Machel, a philanthropic former first lady, and minister, of Mozambique.

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By Africa's standards, however, Ms Madikizela-Mandela's demise was but

a modest warning to aspiring big women. For stronger stuff, consider Jewel Howard-Taylor, once Liberia's glamorous first lady. While her husband, Mr Taylor, enjoyed a comfortable exile in Nigeria, she was marooned in Liberia's capital, Monrovia. Now seriously ill, Ms Howard-Taylor is said to be selling her household possessions. A former roving UN ambassador, she had been prevented from leaving Liberia for medical treatment by a UN travel ban. Shortly before the order was overturned, allowing her to seek treatment in Ghana, a journalist stumbled upon her, perspiring in a hospital with no electricity. The once ebullient big lady murmured weakly: "You leave me with your camera business. I am sick."

Even before her husband's flight, Ms Howard-Taylor had had her troubles. In 2002 Mr Taylor, a Baptist preacher, had declared that he was entitled to four wives. He said it was his wife's duty to "fish for a woman and bring her over to me". Ms Howard-Taylor's response went unrecorded, as also when Mr Taylor caned the couple's daughter in public for disobedience.

Ms Howard-Taylor was not, by a long chalk, the first big lady to share her husband. King Mswati III, Swaziland's ruler, has 11 wives, at present. Idi Amin, Uganda's former tyrant and the self-styled Conqueror of the British Empire, had five, though he dismembered one of them. Mobutu Sese Seko, despot of Zaire, as he called Congo, gave himself a name to inspire little confidence in his marriage vows. In full, it meant "the cock who goes from homestead to homestead leaving no hen uncovered". After the death of his first wife, Marie-Antoinette, Mobutu married his mistress, Bobi Ladawa, and filled the vacancy thus created with her identical twin. He also slept with his ministers' wives.

Yet a big lady spurned can be a bitter foe. When Omar Bongo, Gabon's seasoned tyrant, divorced his first wife, Joséphine, she moved to Los Angeles and became a pop singer. Mr Bongo married the much younger daughter of Congo-Brazzaville's president, Edith Lucie Sassou-Nguesso. But he had not heard the last of Joséphine. In 1990 she returned to Gabon in triumph. "Who is the first lady?" she asked an adoring crowd at her home-coming concert in Libreville, the capital. "You, Madame!" the crowd replied. Soon after, the first Mrs Bongo released a song about her successor: "You used to call him papa, but now you call him darling..."

Mr Bongo got off lightly. In 2002 Frederick Chiluba, then president of Zambia, divorced his wife of 33 years, citing infidelity. In recompense, he invited her to take some bauble from State House, but instead Mrs Chiluba tried to sue him for \$400m—her share of the riches he had allegedly stolen during a decade in power. Her case was dismissed, and he is on trial for plundering the state.

In Kenya this Christmas, no one will be treading the corridors of power more softly than Mwai Kibaki, the country's frail president. Mr Kibaki, a polygamist, can give the impression of being pecked by every hen and by one muscular bird, his first wife, Lucy, in particular. At a Christmas dinner last year, the vice-president made the error of questioning Lucy's right to be called first lady over Mr Kibaki's second wife, Wambui. Within minutes, the banqueting hall had emptied. Mr Kibaki arrived at the New Year's Day state banquet unaccompanied.

That a proud African woman should covet the title of chief consort is understandable: she is unlikely to hold any higher office. Lower down the ladder, only 13% of African parliamentarians are women. That is little less than the world average, but there are better clues to the state of African women: 1% die in childbirth—twice the proportion in South Asia—and over 100m have had their genitals ritually mutilated.

Feminists tend to blame the disfranchisement of Africa's women on the slave trade and western colonialism. One describes how the Kongo tribe of central Africa abandoned matrilineal inheritance through contact with Portuguese slavers: an increased



Roving Howard-Taylor



Mugabe gated

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demand for labour to hunt for slaves led Kongolese men to start claiming their children. When European missionaries and lawmakers bulldozed the continent's traditions, many female institutions were lost. These included dualist beliefs: as the Akie of Tanzania once sang, "God above is our father, God below is our mother."

In Zambia and Malawi, as their rights vanished, women were increasingly prone to possession by *vimbuz* spirits, which entailed chanting "complaint" poems. Robbed of their matrilineal identity by British common law, they called themselves orphans: "Why are we orphans dying? (Today! Oh no!)/We are dying as wanderers! (Today! We are just orphans)". The British banned *vimbuz* too. In 1890 French foreign legionnaires massacred the amazonian army of Dahomey, one of west Africa's great kingdoms. In 1892 a Boer government grabbed 90% of the land of southern Africa's biggest woman, the Rain Queen of the Lobedu, immortalised by H. Rider Haggard in "She".

The smelly reality

But, alas for feminists, history is never straightforward. That southern Africa's women voiced their troubles only in a trance suggests their gardens were never rosy. Most *vimbuz* complaints were aimed at their menfolk: "Husband! You should take a bath! (Eee—you are a fool!)/Your armpits stink!" As for Queen Modjadji V, the Rain Queen reigning when Mr Mandela was released, she disliked Boers, but was equally suspicious of his left-wing African National Congress. And for a Dahomean woman to become a fully-fledged amazon, that great feminist icon, she first had ritually to become a man.

Yet the fact remains that most African women's best hope of gaining power is to acquire it through a man. Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, the childhood sweetheart and formidable wife of Ghana's former ruler, Jerry Rawlings, is one example. Of royal stock in the Ashanti, a matrilineal tribe, she had the whip-hand over her upstart husband (a flight-lieutenant turned coup-maker) in Ghanaian society. This helped her to build a female development agency—the 31st December Women's Movement, named after the day of her husband's first coup—boasting 2.5m members. She was also no stranger to scandal. An inquiry into several murders that followed Mr Rawlings's first coup, in 1979, found the killers had collected the keys of their getaway car from her house. She says that, if this was so, she had no idea of it.

If Mrs Rawlings was often said to be the force behind her husband's government, "Mama" Cecilia Kadzamira certainly controlled her lover's. When Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's life president and her lover of 30 years, turned senile, she sponsored her uncle to act in his place. To deter ridicule, Banda once banned a song by Simon and Garfunkel that ran, "Cecilia, I'm down on my knees/I'm begging you please to come home."

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In Uganda, Winnie Byanyima, an ambitious politician, has explored two paths to power. For a while she was a close personal friend of Yoweri Museveni, the country's president since 1986, but then she married his rival, Kizza Besigye. As an election approached in 2001, Mr Museveni seemed cowed by the coming confrontation. Only after his imposing wife, Janet, started campaigning did he follow suit in earnest, in due course winning the election and chasing Mr Besigye into exile.

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A more alarming big lady is Simone Gbagbo, the wife of Côte d'Ivoire's president, Laurent. Mrs Gbagbo's [website](#) shows her portrait being overflowed by a dove. It also lists the criteria for citizenship dictated by the Ivorian constitution. That may mean more to the millions of people living in northern Côte d'Ivoire to whom Mrs Gbagbo, as leader of the parliamentary wing of her husband's political party, is at best equivocal about granting citizenship. After rebels seized the north in 2002, Mrs Gbagbo called on Ivorian women to deny their husbands conjugal rights if they favoured making peace with the rebels. Her website, incidentally, is sponsored by the embassies of China and Israel.

As ethnic hatred grows, some fear Côte d'Ivoire may resemble Rwanda

before the 1994 genocide. That killing was planned by members of a Hutu fascist elite, including men linked to Agathe Habyarimana, the wife of Rwanda's murdered dictator, Juvenal. Mrs Habyarimana, popularly known as Kanjogera, after a brutal Rwandan queen of the early 20th century, refused a request from human-rights workers to call for an end to the genocide soon after it began.

Of all Africa's big ladies—as with so many of the continent's excesses—none has been bigger than Nigeria's. In the mid-1980s, the role of the African first lady was defined by Maryam Babangida, the wife of Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria's military dictator of the day. Mrs Babangida opened an office in the presidency to run her Better Life for Rural Women Project—or better life for ruling women, as some Nigerians mischievously called it. A development agency, the project apparently consisted of 10,000 co-operatives, 1,793 cottage industries, 2,397 farms, 470 women's centres and 233 health centres. Some Nigerians claimed it was a vehicle for self-promotion, which delivered few of the successes of Mrs Rawlings's movement, rallied support for General Babangida and soaked up state funds. "First ladyism and its attendant sycophancy", wrote Nigeria's Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, "had burgeoned into outrageous proportions."

In 1993 Sani Abacha, another general, took power, foisting his wife, Mariam, on the nation. Mrs Abacha started an ambitious women's group of her own, the Family Economic Advancement Programme. The couple's eldest child meanwhile opened the Office of the First Daughter. After Abacha died in 1998—in the arms of two Indian prostitutes and a local virgin—Mrs Abacha was reported to have been apprehended trying to leave the country with 38 suitcases, many of them stuffed with American dollars.

To end all this, Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria's current leader, ruled that his wife, Stella, would not hold the title of first lady. So the wives of 22 of the country's governors each assumed the title herself, as, belatedly, did an angry Mrs Obasanjo.



Citizen Gbagbo



AFP **Mandela was a warning**

If there are reasons to doubt the merits of first ladyism, do-gooders seem not to have noticed. The UN recently sponsored a summit in Geneva attended by 18 African first ladies to discuss ways to counter AIDS. Alas, when Constanca Mangué de Obiang, the wife of Equatorial Guinea's tyrant, invited 40 first ladies to her steamy country, only three came. And a wall fell on the choir of schoolgirls that welcomed them, injuring two children.