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Sisters in the Struggle: Celebrating African female resistance to slavery, colonisation and the legacies of chattel enslavement



Deborah Gabriel

In the spirit of International Women's Day on March 8, Deborah Gabriel examines the role of African women in forms of resistance against slavery and colonisation and the continued struggle to address the legacies of enslavement.

Black women's resistance to slavery goes back to the 7th century



“ If you men of Ashanti will not go forward, then we will... I will call upon my fellow women. We will fight the white men until the last of us falls on the battlefields ”

Yaa Asantewa, Queen Mother of Ejisu

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It seems entirely fitting that in commemorating a day that pays tribute to women around the world and which examines the issues confronting women today, that we look specifically at black women of African descent. In 2007, 200 years since Britain passed an Act making it illegal to ship slaves from Africa (which did not abolish slavery); it is also especially relevant to draw attention to our black sisters in the struggle and feel pride at the role they have played in defending African nations against slavery and colonisation.

As early as the seventh century, a formidable black woman, **Dahia al-Kashina of Mauritania** became leader of the African forces around 690 and forced Arab invaders into a temporary retreat. But as the invasion persisted and defeat seemed a certainty, rather than yield to the Arabs she took her own life. In the fourteenth century, **Queen Nzingha** presided over Angola and Zaire and was a formidable opponent for the Portuguese army who were hell-bent on enslaving Africans.

Her military expertise held off the Portuguese for over 40 years and Queen Nzingah was determined to destroy the slave trade. She sought a coalition of forces through Africa to rid the continent of the Portuguese invaders and died still fighting for Africans at the age of 81 in 1663. In the seventeenth century, **Mbuya Nehanda (1862-1897)** was a famous Shona spirit medium who hailed from the Chidamba village located in the hills around Mazoe, in Zimbabwe. Nehanda

played a key role in the mobilization of resistance to colonial rule in 1896-7, which is known as the First Chimurenga.

The Shona people occupied Zimbabwe since the 1730's, (displacing Bushmen) and were followed by the Ndebele people 1000 years later. When white British settlers migrated from South Africa and set up a white colony in 1890 which they called Rhodesia, after Cecil John Rhodes, problems arose when they started imposing taxes on black Africans, forcing them into labour and taking their land. Nehanda and two other spirit mediums called Chaminuka and Kaguvi inspired the first uprising against the white invaders, but were later captured and hanged.

Yaa Asantewa, Queen Mother of Ejisu, (1850-1921) was a leader among the Ashanti nation, powerful warriors of the former Gold Coast, now known as Ghana. Around 1900, the British deposed the King Prempeh and tried to acquire the 'Golden Stool' a symbol of Ashanti sovereignty, by sending a governor to demand it from the Ashanti people. During the meeting Yaa Asantewa was incensed when the Ashanti Kings did not rebuke the British governor and said:

"If you men of Ashanti will not go forward, then we will. We the women will. I will call upon my fellow women. We will fight the white men until the last of us falls on the battlefields." She led a courageous resistance to the British who sent 1400 soldiers to fight the Ashanti, who were eventually captured and sent into exile.

In the eighteenth century, **Queen Nanny of the Maroons (c1680-1730)**, who is honoured as one of Jamaica's National Heroes, was the spiritual, cultural and military leader of the Windward Maroons, who put up a fierce resistance against the British army between 1725 and 1740. Born in the former Gold coast, she came from either the Akan or Ashanti nation. Over a 50 year period, through slave rebellions, Queen Nanny helped free around 800 slaves. Equally as important was her role in preserving African culture and identity.

The 20th century saw black women in heroic battles against colonisation

Despite the Abolition Act being passed in 1807, British colonisation on the African continent was equally destructive and black women played key roles in the resistance. **Mau Mau freedom fighter Field Marshall Muthoni Kirima**, who is now in her seventies, was brought up on a white settlers farm and chose to fight for land and freedom. She became second in command to Dedan Kimanhi, the Mau Mau leader and as part of the movement helped to win Kenya's independence.



Winnie
Mandela -
'supported a

Kirima recently appealed for justice for Mau Mau veterans at the World Social Forum and at the unveiling of a statue in honour of Dedan Kimanathi in Nairobi. The Mau Mau were displaced from their land during the struggle with British settlers during the 1950s. While they fought valiantly in the forests, land was consolidated and given to others. Many of them ended up in emergency camps, which they are still living in, in poverty and destitution. Their struggle is ongoing.

Women also played key roles in the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa, within various organisations from church groups and trade unions to political organisations.

The Federation of South African Women, which was established in 1954 represented around 230,000 women, including members of the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League. It was the start of increased political activism by black women which included school boycotts, bus boycotts and large scale protests.

The Black Women's Federation which was formed in 1975, was opposed to laws governing black Africans and also delivered literacy, nutrition and health classes. **Winnie Madikizela-Mandela**, former wife of Nelson Mandela, held several government positions and also headed the ANC Women's League. A staunch activist and fierce opponent of white minority rule, Winnie Mandela was affectionately known as **Mother of the Nation.**"

She later became embroiled in controversy when convicted for the kidnapping of fellow ANC Activist James Seipei in 1991. She served no time in jail following an appeal to her six year sentence. In 2003 Winnie Mandela was convicted of fraud and theft and sentenced to five years in prison. She resigned from all her leadership positions shortly afterwards.

In 2004 her jail sentence was quashed when a judge ruled that she had made no personal gain from the fraud. The judge's comments at the ruling echoed the sentiments of many who had been part of the resistance movement. He said that Winnie had had : "...**a long and often difficult role in public life**" and that **"during her lifetime, she supported a greater cause than her own."**

Reflecting on the role of African women in resistance struggles, Esther Stanford, chair of the *Pan African Reparations Coalition in Europe*, told Black Britain:

"If we look at the contributions of African women from the beginning of time...we will see that African women outside of the western experience have always played a central role in the establishment of community...in defending African humanity, defending African civilization, defending African culture and fighting for emancipation and

greater cause than her own,' in the struggle against apartheid.

“African women outside of the western experience have always played a central role in...defending African humanity, defending African civilization, defending African culture and fighting for emancipation and self determination.”

*Esther Stanford,
Chair of
PARCOE*

self determination.”

But it would be fair to say that if we look at the role of African women in the UK today, there is a dearth of information about black women in contemporary resistance movements. Stanford believes that the history of black female resistance is being lost due to class dynamics at play:

“It’s down to a bourgeois approach. It’s all about black women in business, but we are not seeing recognition being given to black women who are proactively involved in the contemporary abolitionist struggles,” she said.

Where are black women in the UK in contemporary resistance against the legacies of enslavement?



In particular, Stanford feels that there is an insidious disregard for grassroots activism, despite the fact that there continues to be many grassroots women at the forefront of campaigning for better rights for African descendants in the UK, on the continent and elsewhere in the Diaspora.

“As women, I believe we have a liberation struggle that is ongoing, but it is not separate to or distinct from the liberation struggle that we as a global people are going through.”

“Generally, there is a paucity of research or study of the African experience in the UK, or of the black experience in the UK from a movement perspective,” she said.

Pan Africanism is certainly a movement that had strong links to the UK, particularly in respect of the 5th Pan African Congress meeting in 1945 which was co-chaired by Amy Jacques Garvey, with Amy Ashwood Garvey also involved in organising it. But there has clearly been a lack of historiography that documents any activities after the seventies and eighties when names like Claudia Jones emerge.

The UN World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001 which acknowledged for the first time that slavery was a crime against humanity and that racism was a consequence of slavery, was a turning point in terms of the focus of contemporary resistance movements. The localised version of that event, which was the **World Conference for Afrikans and Afrikan Descendants Against Racism** in Barbados has brought about a resurgence in reparations movements with a clear focus on addressing the legacies of enslavement.

*Esther
Stanford,
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Stanford told Black Britain that although many human rights, Pan African and

Black Nationalist organisations have sprung up in the UK: **“There isn’t a great track record of women being considered leaders in their own right, as opposed to appendages of men...on the basis of their own activism as part of a wider global movement.”**

This is a pity, since Pan Africanism has always inspired women’s involvement and leadership. There are many reasons for this, one of which is the internalisation of aspects of male chauvinism, but there is also a lack of engagement in these issues by black women themselves:

“As women we must recognise that part of the reason for our lack of visibility is because we are not stepping up into these leadership roles,” Stanford said.

Patriarchy is not endemic to traditional African societies but is a consequence of colonisation and westernisation. Black women, as Africans in the Diaspora, have to contend with racialised sex discrimination in addition to working to eliminate the legacies of chattel enslavement: **“As women, I believe we have a liberation struggle that is ongoing, but it is not separate to or distinct from the liberation struggle that we as a global people are going through,”** Stanford said.

But there is an urgent need for black women, who are perhaps already campaigning against many injustices today to recognise and articulate the link between these present day problems as a continuation of chattel enslavement, not contemporary problems that have just appeared out of nowhere. For it is only when the link is made that the real job can begin of addressing these issues effectively:

“The reparations movement is about repairing relationships with ourselves, repairing our relationships with men, our family systems, our political organisation systems and our systems of governance which have always recognised women leadership.”

So as we acknowledge the roles that our sisters in the struggle have played historically, today black women must recognise that because we are no longer in chains does not mean we are free, and we must rise to the challenge of ridding our global African communities of the social, economic, political and psychological damage suffered through chattel enslavement. Above all, we must acknowledge that what befell African peoples was not merely an ‘international trade’, but a *mass destruction*, the *Maangamizi*, which continues to this day.

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