

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Militant Mothers: Gender and the Politics of Anticolonial Action in Côte d'Ivoire

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Abstract

On 24 December 1949, two thousand women marched on the prison at Grand Bassam in protest of the detention of militants of the Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI). Considered the first mass demonstration by West African women against French colonial rule, the march on Grand Bassam was a watershed moment in the Ivoirian anticolonial movement. Though party officials have framed women's activism as a political 'awakening', women's militancy was in keeping with longstanding practices of public motherhood, whereby women's status as caregivers — both biological and symbolic — authorized their moral interventions in community life. Maternal authority enabled a variety of powerful political tactics, yet in an Ivoirian anticolonial context dominated by elite negotiations, it also circumscribed women's activism. This article examines the women's march on Grand Bassam as a case study for understanding the possibilities and limits of women's participation in the Ivoirian anticolonial movement.

Keywords: Côte d'Ivoire; decolonization; women; gender; motherhood; politics

On 24 December 1949, two thousand women marched on the prison at Grand Bassam in protest of the detention of militants of the Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI). Considered the first mass demonstration by West African women against French colonial rule, the march on Grand Bassam was part of a larger series of Ivoirian women's protests. Drawing on a Baule mode of women's resistance called *adjanou*, they sang, danced, and marched for the liberation of the detainees, all while leveling scathing sexual insults against French authorities.¹ While negotiations between party leaders and colonial administrators have dominated the historiography of West African decolonization, Ivoirian women's vibrant, self-motivated activism was indispensable to the anticolonial cause.² In the weeks following the march on Grand Bassam, top PDCI officials encouraged women's mass action. They celebrated women's political 'awakening', acknowledging that women's methods had produced results where men's strategies had failed.³ But while narratives

¹While this article uses the Baule term *adjanou*, analogous practices of sexual insult are common throughout southern Côte d'Ivoire, variously known as *egbiki* among the Abidji, *bomampi* among the Attié, and *momomé* among the Agni.

²For recent literature on decolonization in French West Africa, see F. Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton, 2014); T. Chafer and A. Keese (eds.), *Francophone Africa at Fifty* (Manchester, 2013). T. Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization?* (Oxford, 2002); F. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996). On the ongoing challenges to incorporating women into histories of decolonization, see Y. Bouka, 'Women, colonial resistance, and decolonization: challenging African histories', in T. Falola and O. Yacob-Haliso (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies* (Cham, 2020).

³As PDCI President Houphouët-Boigny declared at a meeting of the PDCI women's section in November 1949, 'the savage repression was enough to awaken the women', quoted in H. Diabaté, *La marche des femmes sur Grand-Bassam* (Abidjan, 1975), 25.

of women's activism exist for the months after the march on Grand Bassam, written evidence of women's anticolonial action all but disappears after the early 1950s.

At first blush, patriarchy — along with the attendant ills of male paternalism and troubled masculinity — appears a fitting explanation for the erasure of women's activism. Unsettled by the women's unruly, unauthorized march on Grand Bassam, men 'did not rest until they returned them to the home', suggests historian Vincent Joly.⁴ Yet this is to imply not only that the so-called 'domestic sphere' was a historically disempowered location for African women, but also that the caring labors of motherhood were incompatible with political activism. In their public actions, women consistently presented themselves as wives and mothers. Beyond the organization of mass demonstrations, performances of *adjanou*, and sale of party membership cards, the provision of food, clothing, and emotional support to prisoners formed a central tenet of their political work. While PDCI women are best remembered for their dramatic march on Grand Bassam, daily acts of caring resistance constituted the bread and butter of their activism. To suggest that this 'women's work' was incongruous with political action would be to define both politics and motherhood in exclusively Western terms.⁵

Far from an aberration, I argue that Ivoirian women's militancy was in keeping with longstanding practices of public motherhood, a West African social institution whereby women's status as mothers authorized their moral interventions into community life. For women of the PDCI, motherhood was not a subordinate status, but rather, a site of power, prestige, and responsibility. Confronted with wanton violence and incarceration, women were moved to direct maternal imperatives for leadership and care toward critiques of the colonial state. Their self-conscious acts as mothers — both the spectacular and the mundane — drew on an existing, socially recognized repertoire of political tactics. Yet their motherhood did not exist in isolation from the wider world. In a context of political turmoil and shifting allegiances, expectations of African motherhood became especially malleable, readily rejiggered to suit the needs of those in power. As male PDCI officials worked behind the scenes to negotiate a compromise with the French administration, women's public militancy struck an increasingly jarring note.

In interpreting the history of the Ivoirian anticolonial movement, the 1949 women's march on Grand Bassam — much celebrated in Côte d'Ivoire due to the pathbreaking work of historian Henriette Diabaté, but little-known elsewhere — is instructive on two counts.⁶ First, this article's retelling of women's participation in the PDCI demonstrates the ways women navigated the duties of public motherhood, drawing on recorded testimonies to emphasize how women themselves understood the nature of their activism. Second, by exploring how and why women faded from the political scene after 1950, I argue that PDCI elites denaturalized maternal activism. While women's grassroots militancy was well suited to anticolonial action, it was not easily integrated into the more conciliatory politics of late colonial Côte d'Ivoire. Though revered for their march on Grand Bassam, the militant mothers were soon recast as 'Amazons', whose political action, while potent, required careful regulation.

⁴V. Joly, 'Femmes et décolonisation en Afrique occidentale française: autour de la marche des femmes de Grand-Bassam (décembre 1949)', in M. Bergère and L. Capdevila (eds.), *Genre et événement: du masculin et du féminin en histoire des crises et des conflits* (Rennes, 2006), 116.

⁵See S. Geiger, 'Tanganyikan nationalism as 'women's work': life histories, collective biography and changing historiography', *The Journal of African History*, 37:3 (1996), 465–78.

⁶Henriette Diabaté's study offers the fullest account of the march written to date. Written for publication in conjunction with the 1975 United Nations International Women's Year, the text, while eminently scholarly, is somewhat triumphalist in its narration of women's activism. See Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*. See also B. de Vaulx, 'Le rôle des femmes ivoiriennes dans les luttes pour l'émancipation au sein du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain 1946-1952' (unpublished MA thesis, Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1990). For a fictional account, see M. Amondji, *Sidjè ou la marche des femmes sur la prison de Grand-Bassam* (Paris, 2007). Writer and translator Edwige-Renée Dro is currently at work on a fictionalized biography of Marie Koré, a leader of the march.

Motherhood, public authority, and political action

In tracing the history of Ivoirian women's anticolonial activism, this article engages the robust literature on women and political mobilization in colonial Africa.⁷ It is by now a truism that women were lively participants in African resistance movements. Yet these audacious periods of political action were often short-lived. African historiography is replete with episodic accounts of women's activism.⁸ Long-standing practices of female militancy — which ranged from grassroots organizing, to rousing song and dance, to physical violence and property destruction — clashed with European obliviousness to women's precolonial political institutions. As Judith Van Allen has described in her history of the 1929 Women's War in southeastern colonial Nigeria, whereas Igbo men accepted the ritual of 'sitting on a man' as a valid form of public dissent, British authorities regarded women's militancy as irrational rioting and responded with brutal repression.⁹

For decades, feminist historians have pointed to incidents like the Women's War of 1929 as an example of the impact of colonialism on women in African societies.¹⁰ In contrast with precolonial worlds where women could inhabit a range of social locations — from slaves and concubines, to traders and property-owners, to queens and spirit mediums — colonial officials circumscribed African womanhood according to Victorian notions of gender and domesticity.¹¹ Colonial gender norms privileged African men, who later became keen to perpetuate these patriarchal dynamics on their own terms, limiting or obscuring women's roles in decolonization to secure male control of the postcolonial state.¹²

A longstanding task of African women's history has been to counter these exclusions by recuperating women to narratives of the past. In an academic landscape that continues to thrive on stories of 'women worthies', tales of women's precolonial political authority and anticolonial activism are particularly seductive.¹³ But as Lynn Thomas counsels, while they can and should inspire

⁷For a representative sample, see N. E. Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965* (Berkeley, 1982); C. Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1991); C. A. Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya* (Boulder, CO, 1992); S. Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965* (Portsmouth, NH, 1997); T. Lyons, *Guns and Guerilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle* (Trenton, NJ, 2004); E. Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939-1958* (Portsmouth, NH, 2005); J. A. Byfield, *The Great Upheaval: Women and Nation in Postwar Nigeria* (Athens, OH, 2021).

⁸For examples from West Africa, see J. Van Allen, "Sitting on a man": colonialism and the lost political institutions of Igbo women', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 6:2 (1972), 165–81; B. N. Lawrance, 'La révolte des femmes: economic upheaval and the gender of political authority in Lomé, Togo, 1931-33', *African Studies Review*, 46:1 (2003), 43–67; J.-B. Tchouta Mougoué, 'The Anlu Rebellion', in T. Spear (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (New York, 2018).

⁹Van Allen, "Sitting on a man". For a critique of Van Allen, see C. Ifeka-Moller, 'Female militancy and colonial revolt: the women's war of 1929, Eastern Nigeria', in S. Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women* (New York, 1975). See also T. Falola and A. Paddock, *The Women's War of 1929: A History of Anti-Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria* (Durham, NC, 2011); M. Matera, M. Bastian, and S. K. Kent, *The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria* (New York, 2012).

¹⁰See D. L. Hodgson and S. McCurdy (eds.), *'Wicked' Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH, 2001); S. Geiger, N. Musisi, and J. M. Allman (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories* (Bloomington, IN, 2002); E. L. Osborn, *Our New Husbands Are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule* (Athens, OH, 2011); I. Berger, *Women in Twentieth-Century Africa* (Cambridge, 2016); K. Sheldon, *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century* (Bloomington, IN, 2017); N. Achebe and C. Robertson (eds.), *Holding the World Together: African Women in Changing Perspective* (Madison, 2019).

¹¹For a pithy reflection on the diversity of female power and authority in African history, see N. Achebe, *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa* (Athens, OH, 2020).

¹²See J. Allman, 'The disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: nationalism, feminism, and the tyrannies of history', *Journal of Women's History*, 21:3 (2009), 13–35.

¹³See N. Z. Davis, "Women's history" in transition: the European case', *Feminist Studies*, 3:3/4 (1976), 83–103. The ongoing historiographical attention to powerful women, however, should not discount the rich literature on African women's life histories. See P. W. Romero (ed.), *Life Histories of African Women* (London, 1988); S. Mirza and M. Strobel (eds.), *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington, 1989); B. Bozzoli and M. Nkotsoe, *Women of Phokeng:*

scholarly work, women's agency — however heroic — is not the endpoint of historical analysis.¹⁴ Following Lorelle Semley, Africanists committed to the study of women and gender 'are not limited to bashing patriarchy or dreaming of lost matriarchies'. The task of the historian is 'to recognize and convey the ways that the seemingly real (biological) and the lived and imagined (social/cultural) are overlapping, discursive, and politicized'.¹⁵

In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, feminist attention to public motherhood offers an alternate genealogy of women's politics. Motherhood has long been the source of moral and political authority for women in African societies. Far from a static concept, motherhood is an institution and ideology that encapsulates women's political, economic, and spiritual responsibilities in their communities. Recognizing Western tendencies to associate motherhood with private life, recent historians of Africa have used the term 'public motherhood' to describe this more capacious conception of maternity.¹⁶ Historically, practices of caregiving, organization, and guidance have been as vital to the African family compound as they are within the wider community. For this reason, gender scholar Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí suggests that 'mother' is 'the most important and enduring identity and name that African women claim for themselves'.¹⁷ The desirable status of motherhood is not confined to biological maternity; instead, it draws on the *symbolic* power of childbirth to confer authority on women as reproducers of their communities. This is not to romanticize African mothers as all-powerful matriarchs, nor it is to essentialize women as natural nurturers. Childless women may claim maternal authority, and elderly, postmenopausal women enjoy special prestige.¹⁸ Supreme in their literal and figurative power to give life, public mothers become fearsome in their threat to take it away. By approaching motherhood as an 'experience, institution, and discourse', public motherhood untangles biologizing connotations of 'mothering' from social and political expressions of women's leadership and power.¹⁹

Public motherhood has a long history in Côte d'Ivoire. The nation's most celebrated founding myth centers on Queen Aura Pokou, an eighteenth-century Ashanti monarch who led her people from Gold Coast to present-day Côte d'Ivoire to establish the Baule kingdom. According to legend, in order to secure safe passage for her followers, Pokou willingly sacrificed her only child. The word 'Baule' thus comes from '*Bà wouli*', meaning, 'The child is dead'.²⁰ Maternal sacrifice, then, functioned not only as a legitimization for political sovereignty, but also bequeathed a legacy of maternal

Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983 (Portsmouth, NH, 1991); M. Wright, *Strategies of Slaves & Women: Life-Stories from East/Central Africa* (New York, 1993).

¹⁴L. M. Thomas, 'Historicising agency', *Gender & History*, 28:2 (2016), 335.

¹⁵L. Semley, 'When we discovered gender: a retrospective on Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*', *Journal of West African History*, 3:2 (2017), 121–2.

¹⁶I join historians Lorelle Semley, Rhiannon Stephens, and Meghan Healy-Clancy in borrowing the term 'public mother' from literary scholar Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. See C. Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago, 1996); L. D. Semley, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town* (Bloomington, IN, 2011); R. Stephens, *A History of African Motherhood: The Case of Uganda, 700-1900* (New York, 2013); M. Healy-Clancy, 'The family politics of the Federation of South African Women: a history of public motherhood in women's antiracist activism', *Signs*, 42:4 (2017), 843–66. On political motherhood, see C. Walker, 'Conceptualising motherhood in twentieth century South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21:3 (1995), 417–37; A. Jetter, A. Orleck, and D. Taylor (eds.), *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right* (Hanover, NH, 1997); J. Van Allen, 'Radical citizenship: powerful mothers and equal rights', in M. Ndulo and M. Grieco (eds.), *Power, Gender and Social Change in Africa* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009), 60–76; S. Makana, 'Motherhood as activism in the Angolan People's War, 1961–1975', *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 15:2 (2017), 353–81.

¹⁷O. Oyèwùmí, 'Family bonds/conceptual binds: African notes on feminist epistemologies', *Signs*, 25:4 (2000), 1097.

¹⁸L. Semley, 'Public motherhood in West Africa as theory and practice', *Gender & History*, 24:3 (2012), 601.

¹⁹Semley, 'Public motherhood', 610.

²⁰For literary retellings of the Pokou legend, see C. Nokan, *Abraha Pokou ou Une Grande Africaine* (Paris, 1970); J.-N. Loucou and F. Ligier, *La reine Pokou: fondatrice du royaume baoulé* (Dakar, 1977); V. Tadjó, *Reine Pokou: Concerto pour un sacrifice* (Arles, 2005).

moral authority to Baule society.²¹ As public mothers, women played a complementary role to men in all domains of precolonial Baule life. To be sure, women tended to the family's caregiving needs, responsible for cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Yet they were also equal partners to men in agricultural production, charged with the cultivation of both foodstuffs and commodities like cotton. Enjoying a considerable degree of economic autonomy, some traveled away from their villages and achieved great wealth through gold mining in the region of Kokumbo.²² In her study of Baule women's politics, N'Dri Thérèse Assié-Lumumba notes that it was common for senior women to participate in public meetings, sit on councils of notables, and influence men's decision-making.²³ In more exceptional cases, women served as village chiefs and warriors in their own right.²⁴

Off the battlefield, public motherhood authorized a powerful mode of spiritual combat that was unique to women. Known as 'the mothers', postmenopausal women led the ritual of *adjanou*, in which they sang and danced to exorcise malevolent spirits from their communities.²⁵ The spiritual significance of *adjanou* hinged on women's capacity to bring life, and thus rooted the ritual's power in the female genitals.²⁶ Through *adjanou*, women sought to shame and humiliate male wrongdoers. Loudly airing their grievances, women not only admonished men for their offenses, but also cast doubt on their virility. Armed with sticks, women would roam their villages, chanting to the rhythm of their weapons as they pounded them into the ground. By day, the women marched in white *pagnes*; by night, they danced naked and covered in white kaolin clay, gesturing toward their genitals. From a disrespectful husband to enemy combatants, no one was immune to this fearsome rebuke. Oral testimonies concerning *adjanou* invoke its timelessness. Written reports of the practice — a common occurrence during the Anglo-Ashanti Wars — extend back to the seventeenth century.²⁷ Vincent Guerry, a missionary stationed among the Baule in the 1960s, wrote with reverence of *adjanou*: '[Woman] has the greatest, most powerful fetish in all Baoulé culture: her female sex.... So terrible is the power of this fetish that a man is punished by death for seeing it: if he catches sight of a woman during her vaginal ablutions, he must die'.²⁸ Importantly, *adjanou* not only served to insult male aggressors, but also to support male allies. During times of war, it was women's inviolable duty to perform *adjanou*. When men left the village for battle, women remained at home to dance. Should they fail to perform the ritual, returning warriors could respond with anger, blaming the women for their losses on the battlefield. Strong was the belief, noted colonial

²¹Some oral traditions suggest that the Baule kingdom adopted its patterns of matrilineal descent in recognition of Pokou's status as their figurative mother. It is also possible that the Baule simply continued the tradition of matrilineality already practiced by their Ashanti cousins.

²²J.-P. Chauveau, *Notes sur l'histoire économique et sociale de la région de Kokumbo (Baoulé-sud, Côte d'Ivoire)* (Paris, 1979), 95.

²³N. T. Assié-Lumumba, *Les Africaines dans la politique: femmes baoulé de Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris, 1996), 82–102.

²⁴K. Sylla, 'La femme et l'exercice du pouvoir en pays baoulé de 1730 à 1910', *Les lignes de Bouaké-La-Neuve*, 11:2 (2020), 110.

²⁵Tactics of sexual insult are common across the continent. On genital power in West Africa, see L. S. Grillo, *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa* (Durham, NC, 2018). On African women's naked protest more broadly, see N. Diabate, *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* (Durham, NC, 2020). See also S. Ardener, 'Sexual Insult and Female Militancy', in S. Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women*; A. Jones, "'My arse for Akou": a wartime ritual of women on the nineteenth-century Gold Coast', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 33:132 (1993), 545–66; S. Boni, 'Female cleansing of the community: the *momome* ritual of the Akan world', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 48:192 (2008), 765–90.

²⁶Group interview with contemporary practitioners of *adjanou*, Sakassou, Côte d'Ivoire, 18 Jan. 2019.

²⁷The earliest identifiable account of female genital power was recorded by a German surgeon living at Fort Nassau (Mouri) in central Gold Coast from 1617–20. S. Braun, *Samuel Brun des Wundartz und Burgers zu Basel, Schiffarten* (Basel, 1624), cited in Jones, "'My arse for Akou'", 554. For further accounts, see A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa* (London, 1887), 227; P. Steiner, *Dark and Stormy Days at Kumassi, 1900* (London, 1901), 133–4; C.-H. Perrot and A. van Dantzig (eds.), *Marie-Joseph Bonnat et les Ashanti: journal (1869-1874)* (Paris, 1994), 132.

²⁸V. Guerry, *Life with the Baoulé*, trans. N. Hodges (Washington, DC, 1975), 88.

administrator-ethnographer Maurice Delafosse, that wartime victory belonged to the party whose women sang and danced with the greatest fervor.²⁹

Colonial rule steadily eroded women's authority over the course of the twentieth century. In so doing, it redefined African motherhood in Western terms. Seeking to install their own canton chiefs throughout Côte d'Ivoire, colonial officials systematically excluded women from local systems of rule.³⁰ French administrators associated the production of cash crops like cotton and palm oil exclusively with men, marginalizing women from the profits of the rapidly expanding agricultural economy.³¹ Stripped of recourse to these forms of power and authority, women were relegated to the home, a space that had never been the sole locus of their social responsibilities. Administrators reinforced this role through education projects, which trained women in European arts of *enseignement ménager* (home economics). Though graduates of colonial schools went on to become prominent, professional figures in their communities, colonial officials nevertheless maintained that women were primarily responsible for domestic labor.³² Yet as their participation in the anticolonial movement shows, many women — particularly those who came of age outside of the colonial education system — held fast to a more assertive vision of motherhood and its time-honored practices of moral rebuke. As colonial disruptions to the stability of their communities became increasingly intolerable, the women, in the words of activist Anne-Marie Raggi, 'woke up'.³³

Women, forced labor, and motivations for anticolonial action

In Côte d'Ivoire, as elsewhere in French West Africa, forced labor formed the crux of local grievances against colonial rule.³⁴ The terrifying and demeaning experience of labor recruitment fueled the 1944 formation of the Syndicat Agricole Africain (SAA), a union of planters led by future president Félix Houphouët-Boigny to challenge French exploitation.³⁵ But while men figure largely in narratives of the *corvée* regime, women in northern Côte d'Ivoire — the site of the bulk of French recruitment — also found their lives destabilized by labor conscription.³⁶ Women suffered to see thousands of their children sent southward to European plantations. Moreover, they themselves were subject to labor recruitment.³⁷ Naminata Cissé, head of the PDCI women's section in Korhogo, reported tamping roads in the hot sun while pregnant.³⁸ Defiance of French

²⁹M. Delafosse, 'Coutumes observées par les femmes en temps de guerre chez les Agni de la Côte d'Ivoire', *Revue d'ethnographie et de sociologie*, 4 (1913), 268.

³⁰J. P. Chauveau and H. Memel-Foté, 'L'identité politique baule (Côte-d'Ivoire)', *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, 34 (1989), 37.

³¹M. Etienne, 'Women and men, cloth and colonization: the transformation of production-distribution relations among the Baule (Ivory Coast)', in M. Etienne and E. B. Leacock (eds.), *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York, 1980).

³²On French colonial girls' education projects and their consequences, see P. Barthélémy, *Africaines et diplômées à l'époque coloniale (1918-1957)* (Rennes, 2010).

³³A.-M. Raggi, trans. G. G. Dick and J. Miller, 'That is how the women woke up', in A. Diaw and E. Sutherland-Addy (eds.), *Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel* (New York, 2005).

³⁴See B. Fall, *Le travail forcé en Afrique-Occidentale française, 1900-1946* (Paris, 1993); R. Tiquet, *Travail forcé et mobilisation de la main-d'œuvre au Sénégal: Années 1920-1960* (Rennes, 2019).

³⁵Beyond moral concerns, local planters also contested forced labor on economic grounds. Eliminating the practice would not only put an end to the suffering of recruits, but also reduce European competitive advantage over African agricultural producers. The *corvée* regime monopolized the local labor supply in favor of European planters, leaving their African counterparts with limited options at harvest time. See F. Cooper, 'Conditions analogous to slavery: imperialism and free labor ideology in Africa', in F. Cooper, T. C. Holt, and R. J. Scott (eds.), *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

³⁶Today part of Burkina Faso, this region was formerly the colony of Upper Volta. From 1932 to 1947, the French state administratively incorporated the region into Côte d'Ivoire to facilitate labor recruitment.

³⁷On women's experiences of forced labor, see H. Diabaté, 'Le rôle des femmes dans la lutte du R.D.A.', *Fondation Félix Houphouët-Boigny - Revue Semestrielle*, 2 (1978), 90-1.

³⁸Fondation Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire (hereafter FFHB), 'Audition de Naminata Cissé', in *Enquêtes orales sur l'histoire du PDCI-RDA, vol. I: Korhogo et sa région, 1975-1978* (Abidjan, 1987), 112.

administrators' directives was a dangerous business, as women were also vulnerable to corporal punishment.³⁹ For these reasons, though they were generally excluded from the organization of the SAA, women were invested in its mission.⁴⁰ Upon hearing of the union's founding, women rejoiced. 'Everyone was happy; the women danced'.⁴¹

With the founding of the pan-African anticolonial political party, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) on 22 October 1946, women's marginalization from political organizing persisted. Though early RDA materials expressed both respect and concern for women's rights, party leaders did not expect women to play a decisive role in their realization. Prior to 1949, women's activism within the PDCI, the Ivoirian branch of the RDA, was mainly superficial, consisting of purchasing membership cards and receiving political and party officials.⁴² According to historian Henriette Diabaté, 'For [women], the RDA membership tag and card constituted a passport to a better future. But while they were a real support during elections, they were not necessarily integrated into the political organization. All told, there was no women's movement, but rather, political action that was sporadic, passive, indirect, and in the shadow of men'.⁴³

French repression would soon push women toward more public action. Colonial administrators had not greeted the formation of the RDA with pleasure. With over 350,000 registered members, the PDCI comprised the largest territorial section of the RDA.⁴⁴ As it generated support for its challenge to colonial rule, the party actively critiqued French administrative authority, presenting its own leadership as an alternative to French structures. Despite the party's oppositional politics, however, the French colonial state lacked an explicit rationale for its repression. The PDCI was hardly engaged in the sort of bloody revolt pursued by their Malagasy comrades, who, after failed legal negotiations for independence, had launched a rebellion against the French state in March 1947. The RDA's affiliation with the French Communist Party (PCF) offered a Cold War rationale for suppression, yet any accusations would be made on unsteady ground. Party elites like Houphouët-Boigny had long argued that their PCF affiliation was purely strategic, not ideological. Given that the PCF was the lone party in the French National Assembly to adopt an explicitly anticolonial orientation, it was a ready ally for the RDA.⁴⁵ Absent legal justification, French officials began to supply their own, escalating minor disputes with PDCI members into more violent conflicts.⁴⁶ Steadily jailing over three thousand Ivoirian activists, the French state provoked even further

³⁹J. Vermeersch, quoting C. 'Macoucou' Coulibaly, 'Débats parlementaires de l'Assemblée Nationale', *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, 12 (27 Jan. 1950), 616. French administrative decrees issued from 1929 to 1936 nominally excluded African women and children from punishment under the *indigénat*, or regime of sanctions governing 'native' subjects. But these exemptions did not constitute unqualified immunity. See G. Mann, 'What was the *indigénat*? The "empire of law" in French West Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 50:3 (2009), 345.

⁴⁰A key exception was Denise Gadeau, who, as wife of a prominent activist Coffi Gadeau, was recruited to the SAA. See D. Gadeau, 'Ce n'était pas un patron commode', in F. Grah Mel (ed.), *Rencontres avec Félix Houphouët-Boigny* (Abidjan, 2005).

⁴¹FFHB, 'Audition de Mme MOH Akissi Josephine', in *Enquêtes orales sur l'histoire du PDCI-RDA, vol. II: Ville d'Abidjan, 1975-1978* (Abidjan, 1987), 381.

⁴²Similarly, the women's wings of the Guinean and Malian branches of the RDA did not pick up steam until the late 1940s and early 1950s. See E. Schmidt, 'Emancipate your husbands! Women and nationalism in Guinea, 1953-58', in S. Geiger, N. Musisi, and J. Marie Allman (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories* (Bloomington, IN, 2002); O. Rillon, 'Quand les militantes de quartier "jouent les gros bras": genre et violences politiques au tournant de l'indépendance du Soudan français', *Le Mouvement Social*, 255:2 (2016), 87-101.

⁴³Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 23.

⁴⁴In 1948, the RDA had registered a total of 800,000 members in French West and Equatorial Africa. *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁵See F. Houphouët-Boigny, 'Circulaire aux cadres pour information', 26 Feb. 1947, in G. Lisette, *Le combat du Rassemblement démocratique africain pour la décolonisation pacifique de l'Afrique Noire* (Dakar, 1983), 53-5. On communist influences in the French empire, see A. Keese, 'A culture of panic: "communist" scapegoats and decolonization in French West Africa and French Polynesia (1945-1957)', *French Colonial History*, 9:1 (2008), 131-45.

⁴⁶Banned for many years in France, the documentary film *Afrique 50* documents French atrocities in Côte d'Ivoire. See R. Vautier, *Afrique 50*, Documentary (Ligue française de l'enseignement, 1950).

unrest among local militants and European planters.⁴⁷ One disgruntled settler remarked to Côte d'Ivoire's then governor, Georges Orselli, 'This matter can only be settled with 10,000 deaths'.⁴⁸

The events of 6 February 1949 marked a turning point in the PDCI's struggle. At the Comacino cinema in Treichville, anti-RDA activists backed by the French administration clashed with PDCI members. Chaos ensued, resulting in at least one death, many wounded, and substantial property destruction.⁴⁹ In the days following the incident, French officials arrested eight prominent RDA leaders (along with at least thirty-five other militants) for suspected wrongdoing: Mathieu Ekra, Jean-Baptiste Mockey, Albert Paraïso, Philippe Vieira, Lamad Camara, Bernard Dadié, Sery Koré, and Jacob Williams. All insisted that they had been arrested on trumped up charges.⁵⁰ In the suffocating heat of the afternoon, colonial policemen transported the now infamous Eight to prison in a hearse that was still streaked with the blood of the cadaver that it had transferred earlier that morning.⁵¹ The incident at Treichville catalyzed a series of arrests of RDA members throughout Côte d'Ivoire, inspiring a period of renewed dynamism in the local anticolonial movement.

The women 'awaken'

With the colonial state steadily jailing their husbands, brothers, and sons, militant mothers flocked to the PDCI, forming the party's women's wing in May 1949. Célestine Ouezzin Coulibaly (alias 'Macoucou'), an early leader of the PDCI women's wing, described their motivations: 'We thought it useful to create a group of women, politically supported by male comrades, but having a certain independence. It will be closely linked to the men's movement, but it will remain a women's affair. Our methods will be more varied in their forms, more visible in their manifestations'.⁵² From the start, then, women recognized the unique talents they could bring to the PDCI. Activists like Coulibaly not only visited the party members incarcerated at Grand Bassam and other prisons on a weekly basis, but also traveled throughout Côte d'Ivoire, urging their fellow women to join the RDA cause.

Who were the women of the PDCI? In 1949, the women's wing comprised approximately 15,000 women.⁵³ It was a diverse cohort, featuring a range of ethnicities, class statuses, and education levels, mobilized across Côte d'Ivoire and concentrated in its urban centers. Many activists like Marguerite Williams, Odette Ekra, and Georgette Mockey found their way into politics through marriages to prominent RDA men.⁵⁴ Some like Coulibaly and Denise Gadeau had received French colonial educations. Trained as primary school teachers and midwives, these women were known as '*femmes commis*' (women clerks), the feminine complement to male functionaries. Yet

⁴⁷On the French colonial administration's pattern of provocation, see R. S. Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa* (Oxford, 1964), 198.

⁴⁸Testimony of G. Orselli, *Rapport Damas*, 4 July 1950, 108.

⁴⁹FFHB, Centre de Recherche et de Documentation Africaine (hereafter CRDA) 119, Personal Archives of Claude Gérard, Letter from P. Divay, Chef de la Sûreté de la Côte d'Ivoire, to Governor of Côte d'Ivoire, and Inspecteur Général de la Sûreté en Afrique Occidentale Française, 7 Feb. 1949.

⁵⁰Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (hereafter ANOM) 1 AFFPOL/2145/5, folder 4.

⁵¹ANOM 1 AFFPOL/2145/5, folder 4, 'Audition de Monsieur Paraïso Albert', 13 Dec. 1949. From his cell, Dadié wrote a poem titled 'The Hearse of Freedom', referring to the grotesque conditions of their arrest and imprisonment. B. Dadié, 'Le corbillard de la liberté', in *Carnet de prison* (Abidjan, 1981), 141. The poem was first published in a French newspaper under a pseudonym. B. Coffi Bernard, 'Le corbillard de la liberté', *Les Lettres françaises*, 29 Dec. 1949.

⁵²Archives nationales du Sénégal, Dakar, Senegal (hereafter ANS) 17G-532 [144], 'La Semaine en A.O.F.', 16–22 Dec. 1949'. In Dec. 1949, Macoucou represented French West African women at a meeting of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in Beijing. On her role in international anticolonial politics, see P. Barthélémy, 'Macoucou à Pékin. L'arène internationale: une ressource politique pour les Africaines dans les années 1940-1950', *Le Mouvement Social*, 255:2 (2016), 17–33.

⁵³See D. O. Coulibaly, *Combat pour l'Afrique: 1946-1958, lutte du RDA pour une Afrique nouvelle*, ed. C. Gérard (Abidjan, 1988), 171, n11.

⁵⁴They later remarried, taking the names Marguerite Sacoum, Odette Yacé, and Georgette Ouégnin, respectively.

the vast majority of the *militantes* (female activists) were unschooled and non-francophone. Whereas educated elites like Grand-Bassam resident Raggi served as secretaries of local women's sections, uneducated women were often even more enthusiastic proponents of the PDCI cause, disseminating the party's message in local languages like Baule, Jula, and Bété. Marie Koré, a prominent Bété woman and political organizer, was as unlettered as she was notoriously undaunted by French repression.⁵⁵ As Diabaté notes, these urban women occupied an 'intermediate class', spending their days tending to their households and hawking their wares in the marketplace. Unlike the *femmes commis*, they did not fear 'the sanctions of a white employer'.⁵⁶ Such women adopted the RDA cause of their own accord and fervently urged their men to follow suit.⁵⁷ Marie Gnéba, an activist from Guiglo, even went so far as to divorce her husband for his refusal to join the RDA.⁵⁸ While the events of 6 February had certainly been a catalyst, uniting this heterogeneous group was a longer-term frustration with the injustices of colonial rule. As one woman later reflected, 'It was certainly because my father had died of forced labor while working on the opening of the Gagnoa-Sassandra route that I was naturally drawn to become an active RDA militant'.⁵⁹

Women performed essential caring labor for the PDCI — the 'women's work' of the anticolonial movement. Largely unschooled, they were not privy to negotiations between PDCI leaders and colonial officials. As African mothers, wives, and sisters, however, they possessed a variety of practical skills that were invaluable to a party under siege. The prison at Grand Bassam was notoriously decrepit and overcrowded. Men and women behind bars suffered from poor sanitation and perennial food shortages.⁶⁰ Women of the PDCI were instrumental in conveying food, clean clothing, and comfort to the incarcerated activists. '[The committee in Grand Bassam] fed us morning and night, everyday', recalled one detainee.⁶¹ Beyond tending to the needs of those in jail, women also spread the party's message to those outside of it. As an activist from Toumodi acknowledged, 'We didn't know how to read or write, but we understood what was going on. So we helped the president [Houphouët-Boigny] to establish the PDCI-RDA in the country'.⁶² Women toured the colony, selling RDA membership cards at 100 CFA francs apiece to raise funds for the party.⁶³ Their recruiting efforts paid off. By December 1949, the PDCI boasted over 800,000 members, more than double its membership from the previous year.⁶⁴ Though colonial repression had undoubtedly inspired local men and women to join the PDCI cause, it is realistic to suggest that women's advocacy contributed to the party's massive expansion.

Dedication to the party cause required significant sacrifices that not all women were willing to make. PDCI women recognized the challenges of balancing political leadership with other expectations of motherhood. Georgette Ouégnin (formerly Mockey) emphasized the time that party

⁵⁵One of the most celebrated heroes of the anticolonial movement, Marie Koré once figured on a commemorative stamp issued by the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, as well as on the 1000 note of the West African franc.

⁵⁶Diabaté, 'Le rôle des femmes dans la lutte du R.D.A.', 91–2.

⁵⁷One mode of persuasion featured a *Lysistrata*-esque withdrawal of sexual favors. Women whose husbands did not belong to the party bought RDA membership cards and placed them in their undergarments. When their husbands attempted to engage in intercourse, they cheekily informed them that a member of the RDA had already reserved that privilege. A.-M. Raggi, 'That is how the women woke up', 206.

⁵⁸K. K. Félicien, 'Témoignage de M. Konian Kodjo Félicien', in Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire (hereafter PDCI), *Il y a 40 ans naissait le PDCI: 1946–1986* (Abidjan, 1986), 151. One might argue that divorcing her husband was not Gnéba's greatest sacrifice to the movement; she once lost all her teeth to the buttstroke of a colonial policeman's rifle. M. Guédé, 'En vedette: Mme MARIE GNÉBA', *Ivoire Dimanche*, 27 June 1976, 40.

⁵⁹D. Kôli, 'Rien ne pouvait nous arrêter', *Fraternité Matin*, 28 Oct. 1983.

⁶⁰On the prison's state of dereliction, see A. Diabaté, 'La prison de Grand-Bassam des origines à 1952', *Revue Ivoirienne d'Histoire*, 17 (2010): 24–33.

⁶¹FFHB, 'Audition de Méangui Guibossé André', in *Enquêtes orales sur l'histoire du PDCI-RDA II*, 92.

⁶²FFHB, 'Audition de Mme Kouadio Aya', in *Enquêtes orales sur l'histoire du PDCI-RDA II*, 131.

⁶³This sum was equivalent to the minimum annual head tax that colonial subjects would have owed to the French administration. See A. R. Zolberg, *One-Party Government in the Ivory Coast* (Princeton, 1964), 118.

⁶⁴G. d'Arboussier, 'Où le gouvernement veut-il en venir en Afrique Noire?', *L'Humanité*, 19 Dec. 1949.

membership took away from women's household duties: 'Every Saturday or Sunday we would bring [our men] food to eat from Abidjan.... During the week, we did not have a lot of time, what with the children, housework, and jobs'.⁶⁵ Indeed, for Ouégnin, political participation came to entail the ultimate sacrifice: 'Doing politics is not easy. You have to go on tour. You're never at home to educate your children. I lost one of my children, a baby, for the sake of the common cause'.⁶⁶ Yet PDCI women also recognized that sacrifice was intrinsic to public motherhood. In a speech in August 1949, Coulibaly urged her fellow women to join the RDA, reminding them of their foremother Queen Aura Pokou, who sacrificed her only son to save her people.⁶⁷ To be a public mother was to make difficult choices for the greater good of the community.

In this way, while political action could be extremely intensive, many PDCI women understood their militancy as equally essential to their motherhood as their familial caregiving duties.⁶⁸ In an interview, Marie-Louise Mourrich reported advice she once received from colonial commissioner Lerat: 'Mademoiselle Mourrich, listen, worry about your child instead of doing politics'. To this, she replied, 'Listen, Monsieur Lerat, so long as the affairs are not in order, I will not withdraw'.⁶⁹ Mourrich's intention was clear. As a public mother, she viewed political affairs as inseparable from her household responsibilities. 'Politics' were neither an abstract concept nor the exclusive province of men. Her brother was in prison! Colonial repression was a concrete reality that shaped her world. So long as her friends and family members languished in the prison at Grand Bassam, she could not stand down.

Imprisoned militants respected and encouraged women's contributions to the party cause. The best evidence for their esteem for women's participation lies in Bernard Dadié's *Carnet de prison*, which chronicles his daily experiences of incarceration. Punctuated by news brought to him by various visitors, Dadié's account offers a rich depiction of the incidents of 1949–50, despite the limits of his narrational perspective as a political prisoner. His descriptions of women's activism echo women's testimonies to the constancy and determination with which they approached the anticolonial cause.

A regular character in Dadié's account, Raggi paid weekly visits to the incarcerated PDCI activists. In addition to meals, she brought them pillows and sleeping mats to alleviate the discomforts of life behind bars. On 24 April 1949, she arrived at the prison to report a meeting with a judge regarding her visits to the detainees. The judge had inquired as to why she was so unafraid of traveling to and from Abidjan and the prison, given that fraternizing with prisoners put her at risk of prosecution. Raggi proudly recounted her defiance: 'I went to Abidjan several times because I am free to go wherever I see fit. You are free to arrest me... I am not the only woman; there are thousands of others like me, women who fight for their freedom'. Bristling, the judge stated that he was willing to arrest her, but lacked the necessary evidence. 'And for the others, did you have proof?' she boldly replied. Rattled, the judge once again threatened to arrest her. 'Don't waste your time', she retorted. 'Prison doesn't scare me'.⁷⁰ Reaffirming her commitment to the PDCI, Raggi asserted that she and her fellow party members would not hide from colonial authorities. They would fight in

⁶⁵G. Ouégnin, 'La marche des femmes et le combat du comité féminin', in PDCI, *Il y a 40 ans naissait le PDCI*, 175. Weekly food deliveries often involved acts of subterfuge. 'When we would go to Bassam', recounted Denise Gadeau, 'we would put the letters that we carried for the prisoners in the *foutou* until one day, we came across a guard named Fakar who, having discovered the trick, began searching the meals': P. Touzard (ed.), 'La marche des femmes sur Bassam: Témoignages', in *Mémorial de la Côte-d'Ivoire: Grandes figures ivoiriennes, Volume IV* (Abidjan, 1987).

⁶⁶Ouégnin, 'La marche des femmes et le combat du comité féminin', 181.

⁶⁷Service de Sécurité de la Côte d'Ivoire, 'Réunion R.D.A. à Adjamé', 1 Aug. 1949, *Rapport Damas*, 569.

⁶⁸In the parallel case of Nigeria, Byfield notes the use of motherhood as justification for political action by the Abeokuta Women's Union, particularly in the writings of its president Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. See J. A. Byfield, 'In her own words: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the auto/biography of an archive', *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, 5:2 (2016), 117–19.

⁶⁹Entretien avec Madame Marie-Louise Mourrich', in PDCI, *Il y a 40 ans naissait le PDCI*, 189.

⁷⁰Dadié, *Carnet de prison*, 58.

plain sight. Fellow activist Alima Ouattara of the northeastern city of Bondoukou expressed a similar faith in women's political action in a letter to the prisoners at Grand Bassam:

You must not believe that they scare me like that, that they will make me afraid. No! I am not afraid! You must not believe that I will leave our movement. Never! I am a woman, certainly, but I want to fight with you. The commandant asked why I agreed to be the secretary of the women's wing... I did not even respond. He threatened to lock us all up... Let him try! I will never abandon the path of the RDA, even if the commander kills me. In Bondoukou, we have 451 women.⁷¹

Raggi and Ouattara's belief in the strength of the women's political action was not overblown. In a testament to the menace PDCI women posed to colonial authority, Raggi reported to Dadié in June 1949 that French officials had attempted to bribe her away from the anticolonial movement: 'Anne-Marie tells us that they would have granted her 30,000 francs and a car if she abandoned us. Obviously, she refused'.⁷²

For Dadié, women of the PDCI were as militant in their activism as they were nurturing in their care. As wives and mothers, they buoyed the men who struggled under the harsh conditions of their incarceration. He described their support in a journal entry on 8 October 1949: 'They told us to have courage and confidence and that the movement is growing every day.... They are with us in this ordeal.... They, who are mothers, assure us that laughter will follow the tears. Every week a delegation of women comes to see us'.⁷³ And if Dadié's account of colonial attempts to buy off Raggi is any indication, French administrators were all too aware of the potency of women's anticolonial action. Women were at once vital caregivers and legitimate actors in political affairs. Their public motherhood presented a credible challenge to colonial rule.

Adjanou, mass protest, and the Affaire Sibou

If feeding and clothing prisoners constituted the 'women's work' that maintained the 'household' of the anticolonial movement, some PDCI men feared that women's protest and sexual militancy might disrupt it. As they recruited members to the party, women regularly performed *adjanou*. Every Wednesday and Friday, women dressed in white gathered to dance. 'This wasn't easy for us', noted one *militante*, 'because the soldiers and the gardes-de-cercle would flog us'.⁷⁴ Despite the risks, women viewed the practice as indispensable. As PDCI activist Madeleine Amino N'Doli described in a 1987 interview, 'Of all the women's protests, the one that is the most charged with meaning is *adjanou*. The one that is the most important, the most serious, is *adjanou*. Among we, the Baule, what we do to collectively bolster a man, to give him the strength to do important things, like to fight, for example, is to dance *adjanou* while our men fire the gun'.⁷⁵ In the context of the violence of 1949, then, women danced *adjanou* not only to rebuke the colonial state for its crimes, but also to support their husbands and brothers in their struggle against colonial rule. Yet some of their male counterparts were less convinced of the utility of performing *adjanou*. Noting its provocative and disruptive qualities, they feared arousing undue attention from colonial authorities and preferred instead to seek negotiation.⁷⁶

The women did not heed the PDCI leaders' concerns. In August 1949, organized in large groups, the women sang and danced into the wee hours of the morning, loudly proclaiming their

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 96.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 69. According to French surveillance reports, Raggi later reaffirmed her incorruptibility at a women's wing meeting in Nov. 1949, encouraging her comrades 'to continue the struggle and not to abandon the party as did some men who betrayed their brothers for money'. ANS 17G-532 [144], 'La Semaine en A.O.F.', 11-7 Nov. 1949.

⁷³Dadié, *Carnet de prison*, 93.

⁷⁴FFHB, 'Audition de Mme Abohè Le', in *Enquêtes orales sur l'histoire du PDCI-RDA II*, 101.

⁷⁵Touzard, 'La marche des femmes sur Bassam : Témoignages', 125.

⁷⁶Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 26.

commitment to the RDA and its leadership. Agni and Bété women joined in, leading their own forms of sexual insult. ‘Because we didn’t have guns’, reasoned N’Doli, ‘we said to ourselves, we must be numerous so that the whites know that Houphouët has support’.⁷⁷ Spurred by her comrades, a young woman named Marcelline Sibó organized a contingent of women to dance *adjanou* in her Treichville neighborhood on the evening of 2 August. She marched in front of her boyfriend’s house, hurling insults against him and his family for their lack of RDA affiliation.⁷⁸ Angrily, he filed a complaint with the local police, who subsequently arrested Sibó for public nuisance and unlawful public demonstration.

Sibó’s allies would not accept her arrest without a fight. They resolved to march on the Grand Bassam police station to demand her release. Nervous about the risks of a direct challenge to the colonial police, PDCI leaders cautioned against the mass action, assuring them that their friend could be released through less disorderly means. The women paid the men no mind. ‘We said that this situation would not go down in the same way that it had for the men’, recounted N’Doli.⁷⁹ Descending upon Grand Bassam in a convoy of 30 cars and trucks, women installed themselves in front of the Tribunal, riotously refusing to move until their friend was released. ‘They all went to the court, where they were left to stew in a corner, so they started dancing and undressing’, described Raggi. ‘Such a thing had never been seen before.... This is what the women said, “They lulled us to sleep, but now we’ve awakened to defend our children, to defend our families.... We want to take matters into our own hands”’.⁸⁰

Unable to stop the upheaval, colonial authorities eventually gave in, releasing Sibó to a joyful crowd. The women ushered Sibó home, reveling in the liberation of their friend and their triumph over colonial officials. As one protester later reported, ‘Certain men even acknowledged that if they had acted like us women, their comrades would have long been released’.⁸¹ Indeed, at a 6 November meeting of the women’s wing, Houphouët-Boigny seemed to have changed his tune: ‘It is thanks to your combative action, your awareness, your example as determined women, that the country was able to make its voice heard’.⁸²

In engaging in public protest, the women of the PDCI had explicitly ignored men’s wishes. Their actions bore fruit, further validating the importance of their activism and drawing ever-increasing numbers to the PDCI cause. Just days after the *Affaire Sibó*, Dadié wrote in his journal, ‘The women’s movement is gaining momentum. Grand Bassam is registering 200 women per day’.⁸³ Yet women’s activism also struck a note of unease among some men. Though Houphouët-Boigny eventually lauded women for their actions, he now recognized that they would be difficult to control in the future. Houphouët-Boigny soon professed an interest in a new mode of action at a 25–9 November PDCI conference. When it came to popular protest, party members would henceforth ‘refrain from disturbing the public order’.⁸⁴ Mass demonstrations — now a key tactic in women’s political arsenal — would cede to petitions, formal delegations, and boycotts.

The march on Grand-Bassam

By December 1949, ten months had passed since the incidents at Treichville, and the PDCI was no closer to its goal of liberating the prisoners at Grand Bassam. If anything, conflicts had intensified, with violent confrontations between PDCI activists and their rivals in Ferkessédougou, Bondoukou,

⁷⁷Touzard, ‘La marche des femmes sur Bassam : Témoignages’, 125.

⁷⁸Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 26.

⁷⁹Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 29.

⁸⁰Raggi, ‘That is how the women woke up’, 206.

⁸¹Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 30–1.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 31.

⁸³Dadié, *Carnet de prison*, 81.

⁸⁴ANS 17-532 [144], ‘La Semaine en A.O.F.’, 9–15 Dec. 1949.

Abengourou, Dabou, and Agboville taking place between March and October of the same year. The incarcerated Eight were beginning to lose faith in the efficacy of their fellow militants' activism. Conditions at Grand Bassam remained bleak as ever. Nearly a year into their imprisonment, they resolved to take action. On 12 December, the men commenced a hunger strike.⁸⁵ Widely publicized in French and African newspapers, the strike drew attention to the abuses committed against prisoners at Grand Bassam.⁸⁶ But after a week of refusing all food, the men had only grown weaker, their health becoming increasingly precarious.⁸⁷

It was time to up the ante. In a 19 December circular transmitted to all sections of the RDA, Gabriel d'Arboussier declared the need to abandon legal negotiations with French authorities. He suggested that the party consider taking its cues from women's activism, saying, 'It is...clear that *only resolute mass action* can achieve our cause on both the parliamentary and the juridical level.'⁸⁸ d'Arboussier proposed a boycott of all French goods sold in Côte d'Ivoire, crediting the idea to Raggi, who now led the women's wing of Grand Bassam:

The idea has come from a woman. Yes, comrades, she has made a very simple case: 'All the miseries we are currently undergoing, they're due to the money that colonialists take from our country, and that is why they have imprisoned our husbands, our brothers, and our children.... But this money comes largely from the spending that our husbands undertake for us, their wives. So if we decide to go without all that is superfluous and so expensive, those are the profits that will slip away from these colonialists. Here we have the means to hit them where it hurts'.⁸⁹

As traders and market women, they were keenly aware of the power that market transactions held over local life. With the capacity to literally starve their adversaries, women wielded a critical weapon. In addition to refusing to purchase French goods, women also encouraged the prohibition of the sale of provisions to 'enemies of the RDA'.⁹⁰

Women's activism did not stop at boycotts.⁹¹ In a 20 December letter to Governor Péchoux, leaders of the women's wing made a heartfelt appeal for the liberation of their party's activists.

⁸⁵ANOM 1 AFFPOL/2145/5, folder 3, letter from B. Dadié, M. Ekra, L. Camara, et al., to Procureur Général, Chef du Service Judiciaire en Afrique Occidentale Française, 9 Dec. 1949.

⁸⁶See 'Depuis le 12 décembre les dirigeants R.D.A. détenus à Bassam font la grève de la faim', *Réveil*, 19 Dec. 1949; 'Les dirigeants du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain emprisonnés par les colonialistes font depuis huit jours la grève de la faim', *L'Humanité*, 19 Dec. 1949; 'Depuis deux semaines, grève de la faim à Grand-Bassam...', *Les Lettres françaises*, 29 Dec. 1949.

⁸⁷When weighed by a doctor on 20 December, the eight men were each found to have lost between 16 and 30 pounds since the start of their detainment. Dadié, *Carnet de prison*, 121. Communist newspaper *L'Humanité* expressed particular concern for the strikers' health. 'Les colonialistes attendent-ils que les dirigeants du R.D.A. de la Côte d'Ivoire soient morts de faim?', *L'Humanité*, 27 Dec. 1949.

⁸⁸G. d'Arboussier, 'Circulaire à toutes les sections Rassemblement démocratique africain', 19 Dec. 1949, *Rapport Damas*, 577.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 578. The daughter of a Fanti mother, Raggi likely took inspiration from the 1948 Gold Coast boycott of imported goods.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 573. Market women's refusal to sell goods to the wives of RDA defectors later prompted a violent conflict in Séguéla on 31 Jan. 1950. Among other casualties, police forces killed a pregnant protester named Madingoué Binaté with a bullet to the head. ANOM 1 AFFPOL/997, Service de la Sûreté de Côte d'Ivoire, 'Renseignements a/s de Séguéla', May 1950. In the struggle, French officials arrested celebrated PDCI section leader Mamba Bakayoko, who died in prison over a year later at the age of 70. Vautier's *Afrique 50* eulogizes her death; the *Union des Femmes Françaises* (UFF) decried her demise. ANOM 1 AFFPOL/2174/9, letter from F. Leclercq, Secrétaire de l'UFF, to F. Mitterrand, Ministre de la France d'Outre-Mer, 7 May 1951.

⁹¹The efficacy of the boycotts is disputed. While Houphouët-Boigny claimed that they resulted in a 90 per cent decrease in French companies' sales, historian Laurent Gbagbo contests this figure, noting that local chamber of commerce bulletins provide no evidence of such a decline. A true challenge to the French, Gbagbo suggests, would have been to withhold the sale of coffee and cocoa — a strategy that Houphouët-Boigny rejected, on the grounds that it would harm local planters. See L. Gbagbo, *La Côte-d'Ivoire: Économie et société à la veille de l'indépendance (1940-1960)* (Paris, 1982), 95–6.

Explicitly presenting themselves as concerned wives and mothers, they urged Péchoux to grant the enfeebled prisoners a provisional release:

No decision has yet been taken and the latest news we have learned is that three of [our husbands] are already in a state of extreme weakness. You are ignoring the considerable emotion already raised throughout the country by the news of the decision taken by our husbands [to go on a hunger strike]. Eight men are now dying in a prison, that is the hard truth. In the name of our children, and in our own names, we have come, Mr. Governor, to place your responsibilities before you.⁹²

Péchoux ignored their request. The militant mothers resolved to take more drastic measures.⁹³

Two days later, scores of women began to descend on the prison at Grand Bassam. Organized by ethnic group, they streamed into the seaside town from across the colony, many with babies strapped to their backs.⁹⁴ Banned from public taxis by French officials, several groups traveled the 40 kilometers from the Abidjan neighborhoods of Treichville and Adjamé by foot.⁹⁵ Recalling their first assault on the prison to rescue Sibou, they armed themselves with batons, chanting and dancing *adjanou*. Following the fracas from his prison cell, Dadié wrote, 'The women keep coming from Abidjan. Their numbers are growing... and have taken an unprecedented scale'.⁹⁶ Though colonial gendarmes ultimately rebuffed their protest, the women returned to the prison the next day with renewed vigor. In a delegation of over 500 protesters, they demanded that the court prosecutor responsible for the PDCI members' imprisonment listen to their pleas. The prosecutor refused. Despite party leaders' recommendations of patience and calm, the women resolved to return to the prison the following day in an even greater demonstration of strength.⁹⁷

On 24 December 1949, the women launched their greatest march on the prison at Grand Bassam. Two thousand strong, they thronged to the bridge separating the prison from Grand Bassam's quartier Impérial. Confronted with military and police opposition, the women were boldly defiant of colonial authority. Singing, dancing, and shouting vulgarities at the gendarmes, they fiercely defended their position. In the face of demands that they halt their protest, the women responded only with insults, calling officials names like 'dirty white man, colonialist, bastard', and the like.⁹⁸ As more women joined the tumult, they threw rocks and empty bottles at the police officers. Sexual insult also played a role in the unrest. Refusing to obey French officials' orders, many of the women 'turned their backs to the police and, hitching up their *pagnes*, exposed their backsides'.⁹⁹

Police forces readily resorted to violence against the women, launching tear gas grenades on the marchers. Though officials claimed that the grenades were non-functional, one woman reported blindness upon exposure to the gas; many others noted profusions of blisters following the chemical's contact with their skin.¹⁰⁰ Some officers employed fire hoses against women they deemed

⁹²ANOM 1 AFFPOL/2174/4, folder 4, letter from Madame Mockey, Madame Ekra, Madame Vieyra, et al. to L. Péchoux, Governor of Côte d'Ivoire, 20 Dec. 1949.

⁹³French authorities almost unilaterally dismissed the women's concerns. See Testimony of L. Péchoux, *Rapport Damas*, 26 July 1950, 263; Testimony of P. Franceschi, *Rapport Damas*, 26 July 1950, 299; Testimony of R.-P. Beretta, *Rapport Damas*, 29 July 1950, 512.

⁹⁴Dozens of men also joined the protest, including prominent PDCI activists Gabriel d'Arboussier, Coffi Gadeau, and Auguste Denise. See Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 56.

⁹⁵ANS 17G-532 [144], 'La Semaine en A.O.F.', 23-9 Dec. 1949.

⁹⁶Dadié, *Carnet de prison*, 125.

⁹⁷Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 44.

⁹⁸ANOM 1 AFFPOL/2145/5, folder 1, letter from R.-P. Beretta, Administrateur-Maire of Grand Bassam, to L. Péchoux, Governor of Côte d'Ivoire, 25 Dec. 1949.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 51.

'hysterical'. Still other gendarmes engaged in direct physical violence against protesters, though not without reproach from the women, who drew on their status as mothers to berate them. As a policeman tried to take down Marie Koré, she scratched at him, allegedly yelling, 'Bad white man! Bad white man! If a woman had not birthed you! (Dirty white man! If you had not been brought into the world by a woman, would you be here, at this moment, abusing women?)'¹⁰¹ The women were indefatigable. Dadié, writing with admiration from his prison cell, described their tenacity: 'They hose the women with water. The women do not retreat. Beaten with rifle butts, the women advance just the same'.¹⁰² In the end, it was not colonial officials who put a stop to the women's march, but Houphouët-Boigny. Having privately negotiated with French administrators, he convinced the women to conclude their protest. Though they did not wish to leave without the liberation of the prisoners, they ultimately agreed to retreat.¹⁰³ Four women, however, were arrested and each sentenced to two months in prison. Koré shared a prison cell with her daughter.¹⁰⁴

The women did not succeed in liberating the prisoners at Grand Bassam. But their efforts raised important awareness of the detainees' plight. In telegrams published in party newspaper *Réveil*, Houphouët-Boigny and d'Arboussier alerted the West African region to the role of women in forcing the colonial authorities to 'face their responsibility'.¹⁰⁵ Other RDA women's sections declared their solidarity with the marchers.¹⁰⁶ French lawyers allied with the RDA cause highlighted the violence against women in their writings to win support for their judicial challenges to colonial repression.¹⁰⁷ Political and humanitarian organizations worldwide wrote to the French government to laud the women for their march and to call for the release of the imprisoned activists.¹⁰⁸

The image of militant mothers had struck a chord among audiences across the globe. Yet its rhetorical power operated on multiple registers. Moral imperatives of African motherhood had animated women's activism. In the face of unprecedented levels of colonial violence, PDCI women had organized at a dazzling scale. Communist and antifascist women's organizations like the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and the Union des Femmes Françaises (UFF) celebrated their efforts, championing a 'mothers' international' as an antidote to the ills of colonialism and violence.¹⁰⁹ Other observers, however, interpreted women's mass action according to less empowered notions of maternity. International commentators — likely unfamiliar with the institution of public motherhood — drew on the rhetoric of maternal vulnerability to draw sympathy to the PDCI cause. 'These are hundreds of women, *mothers like us*, who walked the 40 kilometers separating Abidjan from the prison at Grand Bassam', wrote a woman for *Femmes Françaises*.¹¹⁰ Whereas the PDCI understood the action as a manifestation of motherhood, outside observers viewed it as a brave departure from expectations of domesticity. Ultimately, the PDCI women

¹⁰¹Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 52, citing information from Augustin Gnapi.

¹⁰²Dadié, *Carnet de prison*, 125.

¹⁰³'Témoignage du Président Félix Houphouët-Boigny', in Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (hereafter RDA), *Actes du colloque international sur l'histoire du R.D.A., Yamoussoukro, 18–25 Oct. 1986, Volume II* (Abidjan, 1987), 20.

¹⁰⁴ANOM 1 AFFPOL/2145/5, folder 1, telegram from L. Péchoux, Governor of Côte d'Ivoire, to High Commissioner of Dakar, 29 Dec. 1949.

¹⁰⁵'La lutte héroïque de nos camarades détenus à Bassam continue', *Réveil*, 26 Dec. 1949.

¹⁰⁶R. Ndengue, 'Social imaginaries in tension? The women of Cameroon's battle for equal rights under French rule at the turn of the 1940s–50s', in S. Larcher and F. Germain (eds.), *Black French Women and the Struggle for Equality, 1848–2016* (Lincoln, NE, 2018), 249.

¹⁰⁷See B. Matarasso, "'Un noir n'est pas 'une personne humaine'", *Ce soir*, 30 Jan. 1951. On anticolonial legal advocacy, see M. Terretta, 'Cause lawyering and anticolonialism: activisme politique et État de droit dans l'Afrique française, 1946–1960', trans. C. Deslaurier, *Politique africaine*, 138:2 (2015), 25–48.

¹⁰⁸ANOM 1 AFFPOL/2174/4, folder 4. Supporters included organizations like the Women's International Democratic Federation, the All-India Trade Union Congress, and women's activist groups from Finland, Romania, and Hungary.

¹⁰⁹S. Fayolle, 'L'UFF: une organisation féminine de masse du PCF, 1945–1965' (unpublished PhD thesis, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2005), 131–3, cited in Barthélémy, 'Macoucou à Pékin', 31.

¹¹⁰R. Weber, 'L'Afrique noire marche vers la liberté', *Femmes Françaises*, 18 Feb. 1950, emphasis added.

had made their point. The detention of activists at Grand Bassam was cruel and unjust. But with its meanings open to interpretation on the global stage, the power of public motherhood was also precarious. Maternal actions that read in some venues as natural and necessary could be dismissed in others as unconventional, even excessive.

Violence in Daloa and perceptions of women's political action

Though the march on Grand Bassam was undoubtedly the women's most dramatic anticolonial action, it was not their last moment of activism. On 3 January 1950, just two weeks after the march on Grand Bassam, conflict resurfaced in Daloa, 400 kilometers northwest of Grand Bassam. In response to the arrest of Robert Druid, secretary-general of the Daloa subsection of the RDA, the local women's wing led by Rokia Sidibé (*née* Touré) deployed a delegation to the courthouse the next day to demand Druid's liberation. They argued that Druid, as the father of eighteen children, was essential to his family's survival. Police forces responded with violence, gravely injuring at least two women and jailing several others. In the days that followed, hundreds more Bété and Jula women marched through the town marketplace and toward the prison, loudly calling not only for Druid's release, but also for that of their imprisoned comrades.¹¹¹ Several protesters attacked the gendarmes with sticks and projectiles, in an audacious attempt to liberate the prisoners by force. The guards, only lightly hurt, responded with disproportionate cruelty, striking and wounding thirty women.¹¹²

Given the abuses that marked this period, the incident — though brutal — is hardly extraordinary. Women were involved in other high-profile, bloody encounters in Bouaflé, Dimbokro, and Séguéla in January and February 1950.¹¹³ The deposition documented in the *Rapport Damas* regarding the violence in Daloa, however, is more revealing than most. When presented with the *militantes* of Daloa, the men of the inquiry commission saw fit to intervene. Commission chair Pierre July did not feel it was a woman's place to engage in public protest: '[W]hen there is an incident like the one you reported earlier, I believe that women should just stay home and not present themselves in a delegation to protest.... You see, in Europe, in France, there are also demonstrations, but the women do not go in organized groups'.¹¹⁴ His fellow commissioner René Arthaud did not share this opinion, arguing that it ran counter to the equality of men and women's civil rights. Rapporteur Léon Damas presented an illuminating comment on the stakes of women's anticolonial action in Côte d'Ivoire:

[W]hat applies to the metropole does not apply to the overseas territories. At this point, the women of Côte d'Ivoire have not sufficiently evolved such that we can afford not to give them advice. I believe that recommendations of moderation and wisdom are necessary since, until there is a new order, it is the men in sub-Saharan Africa who still pull the strings in politics. I believe the role of political parties in Côte d'Ivoire is first to empower women before sending them out to protest.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ANOM 1 AFFPOL/2255/6, Inspecteur-Général de la France d'Outre-Mer L. Ruffel, 'Événements survenus en janvier-février 1950 à Daloa', 21 Mar. 1950.

¹¹²Testimony of G. Touré, *Rapport Damas*, 11 Aug. 1950, 855. The *Rapport Damas* incorrectly records Touré's first name as 'Grokia'.

¹¹³Protesters in these towns faced gunfire, torture, and sexual violence. In Bouaflé, two women were killed. Martinican poet and political leader Aimé Césaire penned a poem in homage to the Ivoirians massacred during this period. A. Césaire, 'Le temps de la liberté', *L'Humanité*, 10 Feb. 1950, republished in A. Césaire, *Ferremets: poèmes* (Paris, 1960), 59–60. See also G. Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC, 2015), 127–8.

¹¹⁴Touré, *Rapport Damas*, 856. Mr. July evidently was unaware of the women's march on Versailles during the October Days of the French Revolution of 1789.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 857.

Damas's response, along with those of July and Arthaud, reflected not only the racist, evolution-ary logic of colonial rule, but also French observers' propensity to misread African women's public motherhood. July represented the stereotypical European view of women in African society — it was the duty of women to deal with matters of the household, not to concern themselves with politics. Damas, dismissive of African women's capacity to engage in politics, highlighted their limited education as a constraint on their political action. By contrast, Arthaud recognized both the validity and the utility of women's political participation.¹¹⁶ As evidenced by their militancy, literacy played little role in public protests defined by sexual insult and mass action.

But by focusing exclusively on the visibility of the women's protest, July, Arthaud, and Damas missed the point. For the women of Daloa, participation in public life was no anomaly. Many *militantes* were also market women who spent as much time outside of the home as they did within it. Selling goods to support their children was a daily occurrence—one that muddied any clear distinction between a 'masculine' public and a 'feminine' domestic sphere. Moreover, their status as mothers made them particularly sensitive to social concerns. As Rokia Sidibé and her comrades recognized, Druid's political internment had serious consequences for his many dependents, who relied on him for their food, clothing, and shelter. Without his paternal support, they were sure to suffer. In interceding for Druid, their motherhood informed their militancy.

Despite the commission's ignorance of public motherhood, one fact is clear — women's activism was meaningful in Côte d'Ivoire, to colonial authorities and PDCI officials alike. Immediately following the incident at Daloa, Daniel Ouezzin Coulibaly asserted the necessity for the RDA to draw more women into their anticolonial action: 'To succeed, we need mass action, and particularly from women. *Women have a special role to play. They can play a role in political struggles that men cannot fulfill.* In Daloa and in Bassam, they showed what they could do. There, through their mass action, they liberated the prisoners.'¹¹⁷

Women's activism was not only visible, but valuable. After nearly a year of minimal progress, PDCI leaders had come to recognize the talents that women brought to the anticolonial movement that their male counterparts did not. Though limited in their capacity to negotiate with French officials, women had mastered the art of mass protest—a mode of public dissent they saw as potentially more effective than the RDA's legal challenges to French oppression. As one *militante* wrote in *L'Humanité*,

We clearly feel that justice is powerless to do its duty. Personally, I no longer count on it. This is why, in full agreement with my husband, I decided to devote myself entirely to the Party. I have three children to raise, in addition to those entrusted to me by relatives or friends. But I consider my political work to be the best revenge to take on the colonialists.¹¹⁸

From mothers to 'Amazons'

PDCI women's activism persisted into the early 1950s, featuring marches and mass assemblies in protest of the ongoing detention of party members.¹¹⁹ Praise from international organizations

¹¹⁶Tellingly, Arthaud published biting critiques of French colonial rule soon after the hearing. See R. Arthaud, 'Reportage sur la terreur coloniale en Afrique noire', *L'Humanité*, 13 Nov. 1950; R. Arthaud, *Le Grand complot des négriers* (Paris, 1951).

¹¹⁷Service de Police de la Côte d'Ivoire, 'Réunion R.D.A. le 3 janvier 1950, à Séguéla, par le député Ouezzin Coulibaly', *Rapport Damas*, 584, emphasis added.

¹¹⁸'Rien ne pourra nous arrêter dans notre lutte et nous comptons sur nos sœurs de France pour nous aider', *L'Humanité*, 7 Jan. 1950.

¹¹⁹Thousands of women marched in Abidjan on 8 Mar. in recognition of International Women's Day. In the months that followed, women and men continued to militate for justice for the 400 activists who were to be tried at the criminal court in Abidjan for 'rebellion and complicity in rebellion' against the French colonial administration. See 'Les femmes manifestent', *Le Démocrate*, 11 Mar. 1950; '400 Africains, rescapés des fusillades de 1950, en Côte d'Ivoire sont trainés devant les tribunaux d'Abidjan. Défendons-les!', *La Défense*, 22 Sep. 1951.

like the WIDF and activists like French journalist Claude Gérard reflects the continued salience of this political work.¹²⁰ Yet within the PDCI, women's political purchase had begun to fade. References to women's activism all but vanish from party histories after 1950. Why was this the case?

A shift in the PDCI's political orientation suggests the answer. By late 1950, after over a year and a half of unrest in Côte d'Ivoire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny was ready for compromise. The RDA's funds were quickly depleting, and their death toll was mounting. Moreover, planters had lost large sums of money due to their inability to harvest during the unrest. Violence was bad for business, and administrators and activists alike were eager to resolve the tension. On 18 October 1950, in a deal quietly brokered between Houphouët-Boigny and François Mitterrand, then the Minister of Overseas France, the RDA agreed to formally disaffiliate from the PCF — a longtime sticking point for the French administration.¹²¹ Colonial officials would no longer harass RDA activists, and party leaders like Houphouët-Boigny would now enjoy far more cordial relations with French colonial authorities, free from fears of arbitrary incarceration. In a famous speech at Abidjan's Géo André Stadium on 6 October 1951, Houphouët-Boigny publicly affirmed the PDCI's split from the PCF and its renewed commitment to European and African unity.¹²²

For many, Houphouët-Boigny's relationship with the French colonial state became entirely *too* cordial. Ivoirian writer Marcel Amondji has sharply critiqued Houphouët-Boigny's '*repli tactique*' (tactical retreat), arguing that the RDA's disaffiliation from the PCF marked the party's rejection of democratic mass action.¹²³ Though the party continued to elect leaders to its various subsections and steering committee, Houphouët-Boigny held ultimate sway. And in the eyes of the new 'father of the nation', more avowedly anticolonial groups like women, students, and trade unionists were sorely in need of discipline.¹²⁴

What did this ossification of leadership mean for the women of the PDCI? In the years following its disaffiliation from the PCF, the RDA continued to feature women's wings in its branches throughout Côte d'Ivoire. Yet women would no longer enjoyed the independence that had marked their activism in 1949–50. In a 1955 party report, RDA officials acknowledged the strength of women's political contributions, yet they cautioned that women's action could not go unchecked. Left to their own devices, women could easily be driven to recklessness. They advised that regional parties grant women's wings the illusion of autonomy, while continuing to pull the strings: 'Direct and guide, advise and temper, but leave the impression of freedom of action... because in terms of evolution, African women are jumping the gun'.¹²⁵ Though women's sections in Guinea and Mali continued to thrive during this period, the women's wing in Côte d'Ivoire appeared to retreat, their presence trivialized. When speaking of the women's wing at a PDCI congress in March 1959, for example, party secretary Coffi Gadeau criticized their tendency to get 'carried away'. He went on to accuse women of petty acts of materialism and insubordination, citing disputes over party uniforms, trinkets, and perfumes.¹²⁶ The party's attitude toward women's activism was now less of celebration and more of dismissal, even scorn.

¹²⁰ 'Les mères africaines veulent faire de leurs enfants des êtres libres', *Bulletin de la Fédération démocratique internationale des femmes*, June 1950; C. Gérard, 'Voici ce que les femmes de Dimbokro m'ont appris', *Monde Ouvrier*, 10 May 1952.

¹²¹ J. R. de Benoist, 'Le désapparement et ses lendemains', in RDA, *Actes du colloque international sur l'histoire du R.D.A., Yamoussoukro, 18-25 octobre 1986, Volume I* (Abidjan, 1987).

¹²² F. Houphouët-Boigny, 'Solennelle déclaration publique au Stade Géo André à Abidjan, 6 octobre 1951', in *Anthologie des discours 1946-1978 Tome I* (Abidjan, 1978), 83–90.

¹²³ M. Amondji, *Félix Houphouët et la Côte-d'Ivoire: l'envers d'une légende* (Paris, 1984), 6. See also G. d'Arbousier, *Le R.D.A. est toujours anticolonialiste (Lettres ouvertes à Félix Houphouët-Boigny)* (Paris, 1952).

¹²⁴ Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa*, 118. On Houphouët-Boigny's efforts to quash political dissent, see S. Diarra, *Les faux complots d'Houphouët-Boigny: fracture dans le destin d'une nation, 1959-1970* (Paris, 1997).

¹²⁵ RDA 'Rapport sur l'organisation présenté à la réunion du comité de coordination du R.D.A.' (Conakry, 8 July 1955), in Coulibaly, *Combat pour l'Afrique*, 183.

¹²⁶ FFHB, CRDA 564, C. Gadeau, 'Rapport d'organisation', in *Congrès du Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire*, 19–21 Mar. 1959.

Language deployed by state and party histories documenting the women's march reflects this shift. Published at a time when the PDCI faced numerous challenges from rival political groups, these texts commonly refer to PDCI women as 'Amazons' — a race of women immortalized by Herodotus for the threat that female power posed to Greek civilization.¹²⁷ One such description comes from Gadeau himself: "They were many, valiant, and magnificent, our mothers, wives, and sisters of Abidjan and Bassam, parties to the assault on the civilian prison.... They have, these valiant and magnificent militants of the PDCI-RDA—*Amazons*, then—more than served their country."¹²⁸ To be sure, the word 'Amazon' could also reference West Africa. The kingdom of Dahomey famously employed a corps of women warriors, whom Western observers labeled 'Amazons' in recognition of their military prowess. Importantly, however, the Fon themselves referred to these women not as warriors, but as 'mino', meaning 'our mothers'.¹²⁹ In labeling their own *militantes* 'Amazons', PDCI authorities like Gadeau denied the maternal impetus for women's action. Whereas the Amazons of lore were defined by their refusal to adopt feminine norms, PDCI women pursued anticolonial action only to honor their roles as public mothers. Motherhood — the social institution that had made women's activism legible — was now being leveraged against them.¹³⁰

Conclusion

Women's political action was central to the early years of the Ivoirian anticolonial movement. Drawing on the range of political tactics at their disposal, women demonstrated their unique capacity for mass action as they translated West African institutions of public motherhood and sexual insult into militancy against the French colonial state. Engaging in noteworthy protests at Grand Bassam and Daloa, among several others, the PDCI women proved that their activism could attract necessary attention to the injustices taking place in Côte d'Ivoire. Crucially, this activism was no accident; rather, it was a logical extension of women's maternal role in community life. In the struggle against colonial rule, militancy and motherhood went hand in hand.¹³¹

Public motherhood, however, did not exist in a vacuum. Though Ivoirian women actively militated in service of the anticolonial movement, they did not do so as they pleased. In their political actions — from caring for incarcerated activists, to organizing meetings and protests, to performing *adjanou* — women drew on their status as public mothers to lend authority to their claims. Yet as their political struggle drew increasingly international attention, their invocations of motherhood became subject to misreading, both willful and benign. To left-wing observers sympathetic to the PDCI cause, Ivoirian women's militancy appeared exceptionally heroic, transcending European conceptions of maternal domesticity. But for party elites interested in tempering women's activism, Western interpretations of motherhood presented a strategic opportunity. Whereas PDCI officials had previously celebrated women's ability to organize protests at a moment's notice, their tacit cooperation with French authorities meant that they would no longer condone such spontaneity. Despite its efficacy, the women's brand of activism was far too public in its critique of French

¹²⁷See PDCI, *Il y a 40 ans naissait le PDCI*; Z. T. Roger-Camille, *De 1946 à 1996: les souvenirs d'un parti politique* (Abidjan, 1996); PDCI and RDA (eds.), *50 ans: 9 avril 1946 - 9 Avril 1996. L'âge d'or du PDCI-RDA* (Abidjan, 1996). On the politics of nationalist historical writing, see K. N'Guessan, *Histories of Independence in Côte d'Ivoire: An Ethnography of the Past* (Leiden, 2020), 98–106.

¹²⁸C. Gadeau, 'Préface', in Diabaté, *La marche des femmes*, 3, emphasis added.

¹²⁹See H. d'Almeida-Topor, *Les Amazones: une armée de femmes dans l'Afrique précoloniale* (Paris, 1984).

¹³⁰For a parallel case in Algeria, see N. Vince, *Our Fighting Sisters: Nation, Memory and Gender in Algeria, 1954–2012* (Manchester, 2015).

¹³¹Even colonial administrators recognized a relationship, albeit biologizing, between motherhood and women's political autonomy. In May 1951, the French National Assembly granted the right to vote to mothers of two children living in overseas territories. On the 'mothers' vote', see G. Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West Africa Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (New York, 2015), 56–62.

colonial rule. In the context of Franco-Ivoirian cooperation, there was little tolerance for women's mass action and sexual insult. In engaging in conciliatory politics with France, party officials had imbibed colonial expectations of African motherhood. Rather than encouraging women's public resistance to colonial rule, PDCI leaders now delegitimized women's protests as anti-feminine, 'Amazonian' recklessness and disorder.

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