

Introduction

CELESTINE (MACOUCOU) OUEZZIN COULIBALY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

This is a story about women like Celestine (Macoucou) Ouez-zin Coulibaly. This is a story about a theory of anti-colonialism and internationalism that women built. This is a story about a strategy to build socialism, a strategy with women at its center, not on its peripheries. This is a story about one conference held by Asian women in concert with the pro-socialist women of the Women's International Democratic Federation that dared to imagine an African, Asian, Caribbean, and Latin American future without imperialism of any kind. This is a story about one conference held by revolutionary women in 1949 that rippled outward to challenge warmongering as the only way of life. This anti-imperialist internationalism sought peace, democracy and women's rights. Peace included the willingness to fight for a just peace; democracy sought power to the people over monopolies and the aristocracy; women's rights sought the rights to live one's full humanity.

The Asian Women's Conference was held over one week in December 1949. It consolidated an anti-imperialist women's movement, one embedded in the communist and leftist traditions of organizing and Marxist-Leninist theory. Its praxis was hard-won by Asian and African women who organized agricultural workers and farmers, as well as women working in the informal economy for piece rates and minimal wages. This was a mass movement of women rooted in the countryside rather than one fanning out from metropolitan centers. The Asian Women's Conference sought a stage and a megaphone for anti-colonial leaders of communist parties and leftist formations in Asia, but also Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America—yet its traces have been covered over in the archives and our shared political memory on the Left.⁵ This story reconstructs an event that enacted as truth global leadership by anti-colonial women

working to shape a better future in the ashes of Empire's two world wars. For the legacy of our own present, it recovers the genealogy for feminist internationalism as a praxis, a theory of women's organizing against imperialism.

ARCHIVES, MEMORIES, AND PROPAGANDA

In her diary about the Asian Women's Conference, Betty Millard, a communist party member from the United States, jotted notes about the film shot during the seven days of the conference. On December 17, 1949, she described a "chilly film taken to replace those burned up. Will falsify history considerably—will convey impression the Presidium listened to speakers which was seldom the case. Will also seem the very gay conference since we found our own histrionics amusing..."⁶ Two films were created about the conference: one by the Chinese and one by the Russians. However, the footage taken over the six days of the conference burned. The day after the conference ended, it was hastily re-shot. Gita Bandyopadhyay, a key organizer of the conference from the Paris-based central office of the Women's International Democratic Federation, provided a more light-hearted assessment of the two films. In a letter to Millard, she described watching the Russian version in Budapest, Hungary almost a year after the conference. "Yesterday I went to a movie to find you in various moods—mostly laughing. It was the Soviet version of the Asian Women's Conference.... [O]n the whole it was better than the Chinese version and the particular attraction was the Iranian and Indian delegates shouting "Van Sui" which I recognized very much."⁷ The celluloid recording the conference burned before the conference ended. Its reconstruction was immediate and on-site, but it was a reconstruction of

the event. These records were made by Chinese and Russian filmmakers to portray what happened and who was there. In this educational sense, they are propaganda films that sought to inform and inspire their audiences. Neither film is easily accessible, through digitization or even by mention in the film archives of the former Soviet Union or in China.

In my research, this story began with a conundrum. Until 1951, WIDF records showed that the conference happened, but it was rarely mentioned in WIDF bulletins or pamphlets after this date. Additionally, the usual archives that held substantial records about communist women's movements had no records about the content of the AWC. Memoirs, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and diaries held in these archives described the conference, but none held the official conference documents themselves: the record of discussion among delegates, of participant reports or, most importantly to me, the resolutions or appeals. In part, the lacunae stemmed from the lack of propaganda about the conference. The WIDF never published a transcript of the conference discussions and reports, as it did for its 1945 founding conference, the 1948 Second Congress of Women, and the 1953 Third Congress of Women. Neither did WIDF publish a descriptive brochure to widely share an overview of what happened, as they did for the Mothers Conference held in Lausanne in 1955. The records of the AWC turned out to be hiding, perhaps in plain sight, in the Swedish Labor Movement Archives in Huddinge, Sweden, where the collection was aptly named after the WIDF-affiliated national organization, "The Left Federation of Swedish Women." The conference delegates' speeches were published in the *Information Bulletin*, proof that they were disseminated among members of the WIDF. Even more intriguing, then, is why even the rich holdings of other WIDF materials in the Atria Institute on

Gender Equality and Women's History, the Sophia Smith archives at Smith College, and the International Institute of Social History did not hold copies of the newsletter in their collections from this period. In the Huddinge archives, records of each day's events were carefully typed on WIDF letterhead. They were probably sent to Andrea Andreen, an important executive council member and later vice-president of WIDF who didn't attend the AWC in person. While her personal archives are held in Stockholm, these official records of the AWC proceedings, resolutions, and *Bulletins* were considered organizational records and thus stored in the Huddinge archive.

The absence of records about the AWC outcomes in more well-known archival records of WIDF have shaped how I read these resolutions. Their very hiddenness became a methodological question about "propaganda," since these ongoing decisions of not sharing the conference discussions, appeals and resolutions shaped their meaning.⁸ Conference resolutions are often the most public aspect of political meetings like the AWC. In this case, they were the most obscure. Marion Ramelson, the delegate from Great Britain, did not mention any of the appeals or resolutions in her book about the conference.⁹ Neither did Betty Millard in her *Daily Worker* articles, nor in her book that described the speeches from the conference.¹⁰ The 1949 AWC resolutions, appeals, and discussions were *not* disseminated widely—that is, they did not become propaganda, or information put in the hands of as many women as possible. This omission of information is particularly strange since delegates at the Asian Women's Conference, and members of the WIDF as a whole, sought to shape a women's movement that spanned the world.

Instead, the political theories for women's internationalist activism developed at the AWC were communicated to audiences

in a couple of different shorthands. One invoked motherhood and peace as the alternatives to the unending acquisitive wars of Empire. The language of what I call revolutionary motherhood invoked women as the reproducers not only of people, but of the cultural fabric at large and its ethical commitments to peace. Revolutionary motherhood, in these appeals, sought a global peace that would keep sons and husbands out of the war machine. When these men were conscripted by an imperialist state, revolutionary motherhood intervened to blockade the loading of trains and ships with the materials for war. The other shorthand for women's anti-imperialism in WIDF's public broadsheets appealed more generally to women's solidarity against colonialism as an unjust system, rather than detailing the strategic logic of differential solidarity necessitated by imperialism. Revolutionary motherhood against war and women's solidarity against colonial oppression were the public face for the inside/outside political praxis solidified at the AWC. However, AWC resolutions and appeals were actively hidden by lead organizers, most of whom were members of communist parties. Why weren't these public declarations to anti-imperialist women spread by the WIDF information network among their members? Why were the conference appeals against colonialism, and their theories for a better feminist internationalist praxis, hidden even decades after the conference?

In 1949, anti-colonial, pro-socialist women gave collective voice to a method of global organizing that demanded accountability from all women of the world. That praxis did not entirely disappear for at least two decades, if not longer, since it demanded women's accountability for colonialism and imperialism in global women's movement settings. Yet its explicit address—to women from colonized countries, women of imperialist countries, and sometimes also women from state-socialist countries—was

largely absent in the WIDF's own widely-disseminated literature after the Asian Women's Conference ended, with the exception of a Special Issue about the conference and one additional issue of their newsletter, *Information Bulletin*. As a strategy, it defined WIDF's approach to women's anticolonialism, one that fought for peace and explained how peace could require military struggles against violent enemies of nations' right to self-determination. As propaganda, it was largely erased from the public record. The loss of materials and centralized archives for this conference suggests that the erasure of a differential strategy to organize women of the world against imperialism was an active choice rather than an oversight. Instead, for public consumption the WIDF's own publications chose a different mode of address, as seen in the glossy magazine, *Women of the Whole World*, that in 1951 replaced the more rough and ready reports in the *Information Bulletin*.

During the 1950s, WIDF's publications emphasized women's political subjectivity through revolutionary maternalism and their rights to economic and political independence. For public consumption, they supported another kind of unity, a simpler one that invoked political unity among women as mothers and workers and citizens striving for a peaceful world. The Asian Women's Conference strategy was a differential one that addressed women where they stood in order to better address the contradictions of imperialism. Women from colonizing countries had a different activist role than women from occupied countries. But they worked towards common goals: peace, women's rights, and an end to imperialism. Perhaps the blunt tools of propaganda were not up to the task, and the easier unity based on women's common social roles alongside shared political aspirations would have to do. However, the years after the 1949 conference suggest another story, one that's a little more complicated, about how the WIDF's

praxis took wings. The traces of this praxis may be hard to find in the archives, but they galvanized a sweeping range of struggles for radical women's activism in the 1950s, particularly visible during the global campaign against war crimes perpetrated by the United States forces during the Korean War.

By the next international WIDF conference, held in Copenhagen in 1953, WIDF had grown tremendously. In five years, over sixty-six countries from around the world had joined the organization. Yet, somehow, the story of the Asian Women's Conference disappeared from the WIDF's own record of its activism, and as a result, from the archives. Archives are regularly culled for the story they tell. Archives are a kind of propaganda in that they advocate in favor of a particular argument by the records they hold, and, as Anjali Arondekar persuasively argues, by what is left out.¹¹ Archives are never innocent. As propaganda, the archives' silence says something like this: "The 1949 AWC is not an important conference. The AWC did not accomplish anything of record. Look elsewhere. Look at the 1948 Budapest conference; look at the 1953 Copenhagen conference to understand the thinking within the WIDF at this time." Yet the mobilization of the anti-imperialist strategies developed at the AWC powerfully shaped the campaign against the Korean War that began in June, 1950, from the "save our sons" campaigns to the WIDF delegation's brave fact-finding report, *We Accuse* first requested by the Korean Democratic Women's League. The two-part strategy that took women's differential relationship to imperialism and the importance given to leadership by women from colonized countries drew on the AWC's lessons. They shaped the campaign against the Korean War for its three years (1950–1953), as well as other WIDF campaigns in this decade, including their support for the Mau Mau movement for Kenyan independence

and their fight against the brutal pass laws that cemented formal apartheid in South Africa.

Left feminism, particularly a communist left feminism for the Third World, currently has no archive, no finding aid. Pivotal actors like Cai Chang of the PRC who joined the Communist Party of China in 1923, Gita Bandyopadhyay of India who had fought against colonialism since she was thirteen, Gisele Rabesahala of Madagascar, who co-founded the communist Congress Party of Independence of Madagascar in 1948, and Celestine Ouez-zin Coulibaly, are almost unknown internationally. To delve into the archives of India, Morocco, Algeria, or Lebanon gives more detail of these national anticolonial women's movements. However, all of these archival collections are structured through an active resistance to telling this story of Marxist feminism through anticolonial internationalism. Solidarity among colonized women produced this anti-imperialist internationalism. And its theory depended upon the shared lessons of organizing rural women who fought patriarchy embedded in the feudal-colonial-capitalist relations that oppressed them. These archival occlusions are instances of anti-communism, where leftist women from the Third World may have actions, even hold a gun to their oppressors, but not thought, nor strategy, nor any systemic demands for women of the world. Francisca de Haan locates the Cold War historiography in Europe and the United States as the primary silencing mechanism that has erased communist and socialist women from the historical record of women's transnational movements in the twentieth century.¹² The historiographic occlusion of women across the occupied world is compounded by adding racism to that Cold War lens, and reveals an anti-communist historiography at work.

Anti-communism has stolen this story of women's internationalism. We have lost the stories of women, even those like

Coulibaly, who were not members of a communist party. Activists like Coulibaly were not politicized by World War II itself, since resistance to colonial occupation is as old as colonialism. But during this Imperial event, the myth of colonialism's inevitability finally crumbled to dust. The willingness of women like Coulibaly to tear down colonialism through building women's collective strength came from their own conditions of survival. They drew on a central leftist tenet: organize the largest possible numbers of people to become their own leaders, to fulfill their own needs and create their own destinies. Coulibaly's anticolonial internationalism stood too close to the women who were communists. Her vision for freedom from occupation in West Africa was too close to socialism. This proximity rendered her not simply invisible to our memories of mid-century women's activism, but impossible in the lens of anti-communism. African women could not willingly, knowingly choose time-honed collectivist methods or redistributive ideals to demand a completely different world. Nor could African women join with women in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean to lead the international women's movement in its vision and its practice. Writing a story of a global, mass-based women's organization, one that sharpened the tools of internationalism to demand an end to patriarchy, to colonialism, to fascism, to racism, to war itself is to write the impossible. The story that cannot have happened. But it did.