
The Voice of the Oppressed in the Language of the Oppressor: Indigenous Canadian Feminist Activism and African Feminist Activism in the 20th Century

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Abstract

In many ways, British colonial economic exploitation and social oppression have evoked tumultuous responses and resistance. One can observe a sequence of binaries in the relationship between British imperialists and the colonized. These binaries are not limited to the following: master and slave, oppressor and the oppressed, the civilized and the primitive, traditional and modern, colonial Settler and Indigenous people, the economically advantaged and the downtrodden, etc. These binaries perpetuate stereotypes and offer a myopic lens when it comes to the examination of the condition of Indigenous women in colonized societies. A gendered and comparative analysis of the interaction between local women and British imperialists in Canada and Africa will show the role played by these women to exert agency, resist male hegemony, and advance the interest of women through activism.

Keywords: *Activism, British imperialists, male hegemony, women*

Introduction

Thelma Chalifoux an Indigenous politician from Alberta and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti a major agent in the independence struggle of Nigeria are activists and politicians who dedicated their lives working for the advancement of women in their respective countries. Their various forms of activism helped the process of decolonization in Canada and Nigeria. British imperialist's journey covers all the habitable continents of the world without exception. These places have witnessed the dichotomies of superiority and inferiority between European imperialists and Native people. Lawal (1994) attest to the simultaneous political and economic expansion of the United Kingdom in Africa. In the case of the British, the activities of commercial firms such as the Royal Niger Company (later the United African Company) and Unilever and of the individuals like Cecil Rhodes and Sir George Taubman Goldie in the evolution of the British colonial empire in Tropical Africa are well known (Lawal, 1994). Canada and Africa are two examples of places where general economic and social situations of the colonized have necessitated some forms of resistance and activism in the twentieth century. This discourse will focus on women's activism in these two colonial regions. The peculiar nature of the struggles of women in these regions makes a comparative and gendered analysis of their condition a fertile ground for discussion. One can draw parallels in the way they have been colonized, disenfranchised, subjugated, banished, and dehumanized. There is a huge gap in research when it comes to comparing British colonial structures in Canada and in Africa. This research aims to fill this gap a little bit. This paper will help expose similar patterns of oppression on two different continents. It would expose the power of women activism. This research would also aid future comparative discourses about the Indigenous people of Canada and colonized Africans. The comparability of their conditions points to the fact that the establishment of patriarchy is orchestrated in different parts of the world through similar techniques. In both regions, there was a point of contact

through trade, followed by the missionization of the areas. This missionization was an effective tool to oppress women and to dispossess them of their rights. Christianity is used by Europeans to perpetuate male dominance in conquered lands. Education is also another tool of subjugation for the Europeans; they hijacked the didactic process of the colonized so as to ensure that they are colonized mentally. They also entrench patriarchy by controlling the economic system by the establishment of capitalism.

What will a gendered and comparative analysis of activism by women in sub-Saharan Africa and their counterparts in Canada in the 20th century contribute to the ongoing discourse on the reclamation of Indigenous identity? What would it add to the continuing discourse by Indigenous women in the area of resistance of colonial power and repositioning of Indigenous culture? Women have played active roles in the decolonization of many countries. A gendered and comparative analysis of the condition of Indigenous women shows that acts of oppression on colonized lands are premeditated because they manifest themselves in the same manner everywhere. This comparison will also show that women are dynamic, they are passionate, they are powerful, and they always lead the way when it comes to community building in colonized territories. They are very resourceful; they always find ways of emancipation, and they respond effectively to their changing environment. There is need for a continuous discourse on colonized women. These discourses would help to illuminate dark areas on the involvement of women in nation building in many colonized countries. It will recognize their importance and help respect their place and position in history. It will reveal that an allyship can also be built when the pattern of resistance and activism in emancipation struggles of women are compared.

While it is evident that both men and women suffer from the evil effects of colonialism; research suggests that women are particularly more vulnerable and suffer most. The negative representation of women is also common due to their perceived consciousness and innate ability to discern. Oppression in many societies emanates from class struggles and an attempt to perpetuate and protect the upper class in the society or a dominant race. This paper will draw parallels between the condition of Indigenous women in Canada and sub-Saharan African in the twentieth century. Their response through activism will be analyzed to see how effective they were in reclaiming their culture and identity and liberating themselves economically and socially. Indigenous struggles rooted in decolonization and self-determination historically have a distorted relationship to the terms activism and feminism and while Indigenous thinkers and scholars advocate for self-determination and decolonization, these terms are situated in different frame works (Julie Nagam 2008). We need to be careful not to mix the struggle for self-determination and colonization with feminist struggles. Even though they happened simultaneously most of the time, we need to critically look at the subjugation of women in colonized societies, their role in community building, and their contribution to men's liberation in their communities. I will compare the ways by which Indigenous women in Canada and sub-Saharan Africa have been colonized through missionization, education, and forced assimilation. Their response to the establishment of patriarchy and the displacement through activism would also be compared. Their efforts in community development and leadership perpetuate their culture, create a strong support system, and maintain a strong identity in the face of western imperialism and colonialism. These activism and resistance are imperative due to the continuous suppression of Indigenous cultures.

The negative representation of Indigenous women in both Canada and sub-Saharan

Africa as being promiscuous, the weaker sex, revelers, and as beings who must sell their body in order to survive demands a re-evaluation of their condition in the society. Men cannot be exonerated when it comes to the travails that women go through. Irrespective of race, women of all nationalities and complexions face the same challenges all over the world in communities under the total control of male hegemony. Still Harmon et al remain hopeful, since there is much to learn by cross-listing scholarship in Indigenous history, while greater interdisciplinary integration enables deeper thinking. Decolonization is an internal and external process, which allows the colonized to oppose or change the conquest and control of their people's land and goods (Munro, 2014).

Contrary to the belief that women only face oppression and abuse in developing countries, especially in Africa; their challenges are similar. They face terror everyday including: rape, mutilation of their sexual organs, forced abortions, and incarceration. Indigenous women in Canada and their counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa have been colonized by the same people, the British crown. In order to reclaim their cultures, they both use activism through clubs and protests to decenter European patriarchy. They both share similar patterns of oppression: limited economic power, displacement of matriarchy, gender discrimination, and racism. These are some of the problems they face under colonial rule in the 20th century. An interdisciplinary research in this field would promote a sort of allyship in intellectual discourses in the areas of resistance and reclamation of culture between Indigenous people in these regions.

Research suggests an active engagement by Indigenous women in community development and leadership through clubs. This active engagement involves activities to ameliorate their social condition, to perpetuate Indigenous culture, to create a strong support system, and to maintain a strong identity in the face of western imperialism and colonialism. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the Aba women of Nigeria in 1929 fought against colonial discriminatory practices by warrant chiefs. Aba women protested nude against colonial police. Indigenous women of Canada and African women also have comparable heroines. Funmilayo Ransome kuti was instrumental to the independence of Nigeria; she was the first Nigerian woman to be educated and she was the first Nigerian woman to drive a car. In Canada, Thelma Chalifoux serves as a local heroine who fought colonial oppression through her activism and her position as a senator. Both women are educated and are very conscious of their environments.

African women in sub-Saharan Africa and their Indigenous counterparts in Canada lacked access to most professional jobs and professional education. Despite the upward movement of some these women, they are far behind the colonial settlers economically. They continue to resist the colonizers and reclaim their culture and identity with few economic resources, using clubs to gain political power and agency. Despite their industriousness and community engagement, the European migrants and the media at large portrayed them in a negative way. This shows that there was widespread segregation throughout these countries. It also shows the existence of institutionalized racism by the colonialists. Indigenous women in Canada and their counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa resort to activism due to their disadvantaged economic and political condition, rejecting colonized stereotypes about their being.

Decolonization through Feminism

Feminism advocates for women's political, social and economic rights in the face of

male domination. For this paper, it is imperative to state that Indigenous feminism would be used as a frame in the comparative analysis of the activism of Indigenous people in Canada and their counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa. Indigenous feminism in many ways is similar to Anarchist feminism. Anarchist feminism is a combination of anarchism and feminism. Anarchist feminism advocates for the abolition of all governmental structures and male domination. This form of feminism is associated with class struggle which is a central theme in the discourse of colonization and decolonization. Indigenous feminism as a lens would help to appreciate and include the role that women played to advance the community and social development of Indigenous people in these regions. Indigenous feminism can be considered as a form anarchist feminism because it advocates for the total reclamation of Indigenous culture and Identity, and it seeks to decenter European hegemony so as to bring back the glory and pride of early Indigenous women who thrived as queens under a matriarchal society. Indigenous feminism is a body of political, philosophical and social idea that seek to promote women rights and interests. Indigenous feminists seek to improve the status of Indigenous women in the society. They seek to find new ways of defending Indigenous women rights. Indigenous feminism explores the intersection between imperialism and feminine oppression, and the intimacy between colonial explorers and indigenous people. It also explores the displacement of Indigenous women and the establishment of patriarchy by colonial Settlers. It explores how Indigenous women can reclaim their culture and identity. It explores indigenous women's place in history and how they adapted to continuous changing realities around them. Thelma Chalifoux's and Olufunmilayo Ransomekuti's style of activism which would be analysed later in this paper serve as an ideal epitome of Indigenous feminism.

The discourses I would analyse have been divided into three categories: scholarly works about missionization in colonized lands, works on the perpetuation of injustice by law enforcement agencies in colonized lands, feminine activism in colonized lands by women. These previous research works consistently show a similar pattern of the establishment of patriarchy through Christianity and education in colonized lands; they consistently show that the colonizers used law enforcement agencies to oppress and subdue the colonized. Research show that missionization of indigenous lands was an effective way of subduing the colonized. The intersection between the establishment of colonial patriarchy and the spread of Christianity through Methodism, Catholicism, and the CMS church is consistent throughout. The discourses also explore how Indigenous women played significant roles in trade, religious expansion, and conjugal relationships. One can deduce from these discourses that the survival of the male colonial Settlers could have been almost impossible without the skills and knowledge of the colonized people. Religion as an agent of patriarchal structures is consistent in all the discourses. The enforcement of monogamous relationships and Eurocentric moral values is seen throughout. The encouragement of male dominance and the attempt to domesticate women and perpetuate female oppression is also evident. The close link between the government and the church is also consistent. It can be deduced that the church is an extension of the government and in some cases independent, but united with the goal of assimilating the colonized by language, dress, and the establishment and encouragement of European style monogamous family system. In early twentieth century, many missionaries from Britain went to different parts of Africa. One of such missionary establishment was the Anglican Church in East Africa. The Anglican Church Missionary Society started the first national women's organizations, including the Mothers' Union (formed in 1908). Several smaller European dominated women's organization existed prior 1945, including the Uganda Red Cross Society (formed in 1921), Uganda Women's League

(formed in 1938), and the Women's Emergency Organization of Uganda (formed in 1939) (Aili Mari Tripp 2004). Christian evangelists were intimately involved in the colonial process throughout Africa. The kind gestures of the Europeans have always had an ambivalent angle to it. Despite its numerous advantages, there always loop holes that ensure that the colonized remained dependent on their benefactor/oppressor. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1986) demystify these ambivalent gestures.

In the domain of formal political process, of the concrete exercise of power, the effect of the non-conformist mission to Tswana, as elsewhere in Africa, was inherently ambiguous. However, in the domain of implicit signs and practices, of diffuse control over every day meaning, it instilled the authoritative imprint of western capitalist culture. But there was a contradiction between these dimensions: while the mission introduced a new world view, it could not deliver the world to go with it. And this contradiction in turn, gave rise to various discourses of protest and resistance (p.1)

The hypocrisy of the church and government in Canada and sub-Saharan Africa is evident in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff's *Christianity and Colonialism in South Africa* and Derek G. Smith's *The Policy of Aggressive Civilization and "Projects of Governance in Roman Catholic Industrial Schools for Native Peoples in Canada*. Both discourses show the state and church are intertwined and how this hypocritical condition was resisted by Indigenous women.

Research also suggests that the colonizers used the justice system to oppress the colonized and entrench patriarchy. This is evident in the reserves and work places, where women are continually abused and manipulated by the police. Federal investigation into some of these cases of abuse did not come to a conclusive end. Recommendations to improve the relationship between law enforcement agencies and the people have been largely ignored. They continue to reinforce European values and they continue enforce them, ignoring Indigenous values and culture. They approach crimes and the justice system generally in an individual way, instead of addressing the root of the problem. They refuse to address long-lasting structural displacements caused by colonialism and lack of respect for Indigenous culture.

In Nigeria, November 18, 1949 was an important day in the history of colonialism and Labour Liberation Movements. On that day, irate European superior police officers and men of the Nigerian police detachment unleashed a terrible attack by opening fire on Enugu coal miners at the Iva Valley Mine, one of the two mines then Enugu in South-Eastern Nigeria (Jaja, 1982). The indiscriminate use of force and power to dominate Indigenous land is noted by S. O. Jaja in *The Enugu Colliery Massacre in Retrospect: An Episode in British Administration of Nigeria* and Evelyn J. Peters in *We Do Not Lose Our Treaty Rights outside The... Reserve": Challenging the Scales of Social Service Provision for First Nations Women in Canadian Cities*. They both note how women and the general Indigenous populace resisted the suppression of Indigenous people on Indigenous land. Activism has proven to be an effective way of reclaiming the culture of the colonized. Research has shown a substantial progress in the conditions colonized women in the 20th century. These improvements are evident in the educational sector, politics, and socially. There has been a gradual and steady growth, which can be directly linked to an increase in agency. In Cristina Stanciu's *An Indian Woman of Many Hats: Laura Cornelius Kellog's Embattled Search for an Indigenous Voice*, she notes that like Daniel Bread's activism her political action and later work on the Oneida

land claims were grounded in traditional tribal values and favorable of adaptation to new economic and political changes (Cristina Stanciu 2013). Her representation of Indigenous activism incorporates the notion of motherism and womanism. This kind of activism is not a radical one. It is an activism that searches for an agency through increased political and economic power. Much like how African women seek to advance the course of women with the incorporation of motherism and womanism in their feminist agenda, her emphasis on a search for agency through collaborative efforts to assert authority and growth within the frame work of carrying everybody along.

Judy Iseke and Leisa Desmoulins in *Spiritual Beginnings of Indigenous Women's Activism* explore the roles of Indigenous women in communities and the way their works have contributed to the well-being of women, their children and the community at large. She uses Thelma Chalifoux to highlight the success of Indigenous feminist activism. Thelma Chalifoux is a community activist, educator, politician, and the first Indigenous woman in the Canadian senate. She suggests that women should collaborate, and she notes the powerful role of grandmothers in the society. Each of these grandmothers had a large family, but in their later years stepped into their grandmother roles as leaders and activists, historians and researchers, educators and healers in their communities (Iseke and Desmoulins, 2011). Thelma advocated for adequate welfare and safe living conditions for community members. She challenged the work of the governmental bureaucracy and iniquities that directly impacted Métis people (Iseke and Desmoulins, 2011). During her time in the Canadian senate, Thelma facilitated various research studies. One of these was regarding property rights on First Nations reserves and inequalities in this area for women and children entitled, *A Hard Bed to Lie in: Matrimonial Real Property on Reserve: Interim Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights* (Iseke and Desmoulins, 2011). Thelma's stories illuminate her activism as action based in grandmother's roles in contemporary times and relational, spiritual, and communal responsibilities and relations. Her own experiential knowledge informed her work to create positive change within the contexts of her family and Métis communities, and broader Indigenous communities across Canada. As an Indigenous woman, mother and grandmother, Thelma's purpose, her experiences and relations within the private realm provided the contexts for and informed her commitment to social justice and guided her social and political work within various sites within the public realm (Iseke and Desmoulins, 2011).

How do Indigenous women acknowledge and pay tribute to their own and other's expression of Indigenous ways of knowing, including principles of humanity and relationship to all that lives? One crucial way is through bearing witness and giving testimony: most importantly, they tell a story. Conscious of the way language(s) mediate, conscious of how narratives are created, how and where and why they emerge, whose interests are served, which stories become official (for some), which ones are ignored (by some), which ones could help humanity and the relations of the earth they will tell a story (Iseke and Desmoulins, 2011). One of their methods of activism is sharing stories, which aims at preserving culture and identity. This ensures that didactic stories that can guide future generations of Indigenous women are not erased. The story of Thelma Chalifoux shows that persistent and consistent activism do yield results, no matter how small it may seem at the grassroots level. Her rise from local activism in Alberta to senate in Ottawa shows the power of continuous advocacy for women's rights. Her impact on the lives of Indigenous women in Alberta and nationally show a consistent passion and growth when it comes to the economic, political, and social liberation of Indigenous women.

In Africa, Nigerian activist Funmilayo Ransomekuti expressed feminism as an apolitical, transnational, Pan-African philosophy (Maria Martin 2016). Funmilayo Ransomekuti can be compared to Thelma Chalifoux. Nolte (2018) notes the following:

As in many parts of Africa, women participated in the decision making of pre-colonial Yoruba communities through female lines of authorities that existed. Yoruba women held specific female chieftaincy titles, such as Iyalode title representing the interests of women, as well as other ritual positions reserved for them in ancestral masquerade societies or the Ogboni association, which advises the rulers of Yoruba towns and is generally concerned with the maintenance of social order and communal well-being (p.86).

Women's roles in the OPC are deeply rooted within a traditionally gendered experience, and they also reflect traditional understanding of female agency. Drawing on these sources, women's contributions to the OPC are highly dynamic. Women's contribution to the OPC is not only aimed at the maintenance of social order, but potentially also at the transformation of the community (Nolte 2008). Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti is one of such women with great political influence. Her powers were so great that she independently led a team of Nigerian politicians to London to advocate for Nigeria's independence. Her primary profession was that of teacher, just like Thelma. As a women's right activist, she fought against the disenfranchisement of women during the colonial period. She fought against the economic exploitation of women. She was interested in feminine struggles all over the world. She is the founder of the Nigerian Women Societies. She supported the activism of women in Nigeria, Cameroon, China, and in other countries of the world despite the difficulty of moving around and several confrontations with the government. Elsewhere in Africa, in Uganda, the activism of local women slightly contrasts some other parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Canada. Tripp (2004) notes the following:

Throughout the history of colonialism in Uganda, missionary women, female colonial administrators, and educators, primarily from Great Britain, but also a few from the United States, fought for women's rights the promotion of girls' education and women's clubs. They saw both indigenous cultures and the colonial administration as imposing constraints on women's advancement. Their activities, which were focused in the areas of education and improving domestic and life skills, ultimately resulted in the evolution of local and national women's organizations (p.123-124).

Ugandan women found allies in colonial women who had empathy for them. They shared a common sense of sisterhood due similar oppressions they experienced in the patriarchal society they found themselves. Beyond the help they got with the establishment of clubs and help with education, it is not clear if they were suppressed by colonial women or if any sort of segregation existed between them. A case can't be made at the moment of fake benevolent activities of British imperialist. "The Ugandan case underscores the importance of highlighting the varying role played by colonial women in different countries, but also the difficulty of generalizing about all colonial women, given the enormous differences in orientation among them based on their own class, educational and Ideological orientations." (Tripp 2004) "Missionary women, women colonial administrators, and activists were involved not only in formal education, but also informal education through the establishment of women's clubs at the local level. In part, these clubs aimed to provide women with skills to make them better wives, mothers, and caretakers of the family" (Tripp, 2004). Despite this

difference, one can observe the perpetuation of patriarchy during the colonial period in Uganda.

The history of European colonial enterprise is incomplete without adequate reference to the input of European companies in the partition of Africa among European powers (Lawal 1994). Throughout the 1950s, when Nigerian elite nationalists demanded and were granted some political power by the British, the issue of economic determinism, in terms of the role of foreign capital within the Nigerian economy, was hardly discussed (Lawal 1994). The pressure mounted by British commercial firms during the decolonization era, indicates that they came full circle vis-à-vis the history of British colonial enterprise in Africa. The firms were the initiator of colonial enterprise through their pressures on the British government from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards (Lawal 1994). The commercial interest of Britain increased their thirst for manipulation and oppression on colonized land. Their benevolent activities were all intertwined with capitalism and their desire for resource control. As these intentions became clearly understood by women, a resistance mode was activated. The disadvantaged economic and social conditions of these women made it imperative to resist, reclaim, and find ways of moving ahead.

Conclusion

Parallels can easily be drawn between the way women in Canada and sub-Saharan Africa sought to advance and improve the socio-political and economic condition of Indigenous women. They both use a distinct form of feminism that incorporates motherism, womanism and anarchical feminism. With the use of Indigenous feminism as a frame, the comparative gendered analysis of Indigenous activism in these two regions show that the colonizers used religion, capitalism, and propaganda to suppress women, which necessitated resistance and activism. British imperial activities have coursed long lasting disadvantaged economic and social situation for Indigenous women. Due to the often confusion of decolonization struggles and women struggle for emancipation. A gendered analysis of women's response to oppression in these two different regions shows a similar pattern of activism. The advancement of capitalism in these regions meant poor conditions for locals. The resistance that follow is a natural response to unbearable situations. Thelma Chalifoux and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti are two activists who shared similar background, same profession and similar form of activism, which involved their collaboration with Indigenous women to advance women interests in their communities. They use clubs to establish an agency for women. They use this means to improve the social and economic condition of Indigenous women. These clubs offer a form of sisterhood and support system to cater for their needs. The use of missionary by the government is consistent throughout. The intersection between imperialism and feminine oppression can't be ignored. The spread of Christianity through Methodism, Catholicism, and CMS church is one of the parallels that can be drawn from British imperial activities in Canada and in sub-Saharan Africa. Indigenous women played significant roles in trade, religion and economy despite moves to represent them negatively. In the face of oppression, Indigenous women in both regions continued to show great strength and charisma. They adapted to continuous changing realities around them. Religion as an agent of patriarchal structures is also evident in both regions. The close link between the government established by colonial settlers and the church is consistent. It can be deduced that the church and government are of one body and in some cases independent, but united with the goal of assimilating indigenous people. A consequence of this long-lasting oppression is women activism in both regions. To reclaim their cultures and identity, these women use activism through clubs and education to decenter European

patriarchy and local patriarchy. Due to limited economic power, displacement of matriarchy, gender discrimination, and racism an interdisciplinary research in this field would promote a sort of allyship in intellectual discourses in the areas of resistance and reclamation of culture between Indigenous people in these regions. This allyship would help to continually properly represent women's role in history. It would also help to continue the advancement of feminist goals and the achievement of gender equality. A continuous comparative and gendered discourse will help intellectual scholarship in the field of gender in both regions. It would also increase agency.

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