



Of Rumors and Transfers: The Short Life of Western-Educated Women's Associations in French Sudan (1955–1960)¹

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the activities of independent organizations of women, their programs, and their regional initiatives during the last period of colonization of French Sudan (now Mali). As colonial territories were increasingly gaining autonomy and self-representation, women's activists and their organizations worked to improve the status of women both within and outside the household. As independence approached, the independence party US-RDA was progressively morphing into a monolithic and autocratic machinery, intolerant vis-à-vis independent organizations (including women's groups). The US-RDA party leadership resorted to a series of tactics and strategies that divided women's groups and belittled their leadership, ultimately managing to dismantle their organizations and quell any resistance to US-RDA's dominance. This article chronicles women's effort to resist and influence US-RDA's gender politics, and some of the reasons behind the demise of those groups. It also reflects on some Malian women's more recent critical engagement with their activist past in an effort to develop a more gender-inclusive narrative of the nation. More broadly, this article elucidates some of the social divisions and political practices that continue to affect the work of Malian women's organizations even today.

Keywords: French Sudan/Mali; Late colonial period; Western-educated women; women's independent associations; women's rights agenda; abolition of polygyny; repression of women's independent movements; US-RDA gender conservative agenda.

Introduction

In a 1955 report on the status of women, politician, women's activist, and author Aoua Keita criticized the Western-educated women of French Sudan (today's Mali) for their limited participation in politics.² Keita asserted that the women elite “cannot and [do] not seem to

¹ The present manuscript has been long in the making. It is a heavily updated revision of parts of my 1997 doctoral dissertation, *Female Elites, Women's Formal Associations, and Political Practices in Mali (West Africa)*. Since then many more resources have become available via the publication of fundamental work by African women (e.g., more recent work by Ba Konaré 1999; Diop 1999, 2007; Sanankoua 2004, 2005, 2007, 1990); the recent work of scholars of the region (e.g., Rillon 2016, 2018; Barthélémy 2010a, 2010b; Pauthier 2018); new memoirs (e.g., Dore-Audibert 1999; Condé 2012; Cissé 2009), and the digitization of documents formerly difficult to access.

² In the 1950s and 1960s many women, especially the wives of prominent party members, were known as “Mme [husband's name].” Thus the first wife of Modibo Keita, Mariam Travélé, was most often referred to as Mme Modibo Keita. Current practice is to precede a woman's name by her husband's last name, followed by her first name and her family name. However, there is much variation; some of the best-known leaders are known either by their family names (e.g., Aoua Keita) or by their husband's names (e.g., Sira Diop). In this text I follow prevailing naming practices and provide further details about the women's names in notes.

want to play either the role of leaders or of emancipators which one might have the right to expect of it” (cited in Morgenthau 1964: 287). She viewed nonliterate women (which she estimated to make up 95 percent of French Sudan’s female population) as much more willing than Western-educated women to sacrifice time and energy to participate in parties’ activities and struggles for their country’s independence (Morgenthau 1964: 277).³

This was not the only time that Keita expressed such a negative assessment of Western-educated women, a group to which she herself belonged.⁴ Keita had graduated in 1931 from one of the few secondary schools that admitted women during the French colonial period (L’Ecole de Medecine de Dakar) and had successfully practiced one of the few professions then available to women (midwifery). Like many other Western-educated women in French Sudan at the time, she had married men (twice, actually) who shared her socioeconomic status – that is, Western-educated men who were also often employed by the colonial government and constituted a new emerging elite (Barthélémy 2010a; 2010b: 115). She had no children of her own (a fact several of her party comrades regularly brought up when talking to me about her) but saw her childlessness as an asset: she said she could see all Malians as her own children – that is, she was free to pursue the interests of *all* people without personal favoritism (Ouattara 1996: 16). During Mali’s first republic (1960–1968) Keita became the only woman representative at the national level. She sat on the National Political Bureau of the independence party, the Union soudanaise-Rassemblement démocratique africain (US-RDA). She also served as the only woman deputy in the national assembly until Namissa Touré joined her in 1964. Keita was a Western-educated woman and the most successful woman politician of her time. Why then, was she so critical of her peers’ political participation? And what historical responsibilities were Western-educated women unwilling to assume?

In this article, I examine what Aoua Keita described as Western-educated women’s reluctance to engage in party politics as the result of a series of experiences they had accumulated during the last years of French colonization (1946–1960). I argue that some Western-educated women’s hesitancy to participate reflected a conscious political position; that is, their discomfort with (if not opposition to) the conservative gender politics pursued by the US-RDA. Some of them had attempted to pursue a women-centered agenda and influence the US-RDA’s gender politics, but their efforts had ultimately resulted in the party’s firm opposition, which led to their disenchantment with politics. My overall aim is to contribute to an understanding of some of the strategies and techniques of power (Bennett 1995 and 2006; de Jorio 2016) that gender-conservative segments of Malian society (a majority of the population within the time frame under consideration) deployed to oppose the Western-educated women’s agenda and create disunity among the women. The US-RDA political leadership of the time, building on oppressive colonial practices, ultimately

³ “Western-educated women” refers here to the few women (1 woman per 100 000; see Barthelemy 2010a: 15) who attained post-primary education during the French colonial period. They attended vocational schools and found employment in the French administration as midwives, visiting nurses, and teachers (that is, the few jobs that were open to women at that time). “Nonliterate women” refers simply to the women who had not attended French colonial schools. Nonliterate women were differentiated by marked differences (based on family status and individual resourcefulness among others) that are beyond the scope of this article. Some of them were extremely influential socially, and their support was sought after by the educated leaders of women’s independent organizations.

⁴ E.g., see interviews with Aoua Keita on March 6 and October 30, 1961, published in *L’Essor*.

resorted to circulating divisive rumors and transferring politically influential women away from Bamako, the capital and the primary center of power. Such power plays and political tactics eventually eroded the women activists' relationship with their base (leveraging the disruptive power of emerging new social hierarchies) and discredited their public image. They will continue to be deployed throughout the Malian post-colony often jeopardizing women's ability to implement their gender programs (see de Jorio 1997, 2010 and 2016).

The events described here are located within the last colonial period – that is, since the 1944 Brazzaville conference that opened a phase of increasing autonomy and self-government on the part of the colonial territories. This was a period of intense political activism that included the creation of independent African parties, African leaders' explorations of federal solutions to the problem of autonomy, and then (once the federal dreams failed) the pursuit of national independence. Women were also active participants in these epochal transformations. They participated in various capacities in the political parties of the time: nonliterate women were particularly active in the work of campaigning and recruiting new adherents, and Western-educated women attended political meetings early on, often in the company of their own Western-educated husbands. However, some of the women elite chose instead to concentrate their efforts on the improvement of women's socio-economic conditions, an area that the French administration had been very reluctant to address for fear of antagonizing important local constituencies and in which it had initiated very limited reforms in marriage laws as a result (Burrill 2015).

In the last year of French colonization, a number of women's groups emerged in French Sudan. They resulted from unexpected collaborations that developed in late-colonial institutional settings such as Social Services and certain Catholic milieus, but also in international women's organizations. Women activists quickly realized that their participation in male-dominated political parties would not enable them to advance their gender agenda, in part because at that time women were often discouraged from speaking up in the presence of men, although women's opinions were consistently sought within the more private boundaries of their own homes (Diop 1959, 1960; A. Keita 2014, 297–8; de Jorio 2010; see Ammann 2020).⁵ Moreover, French colonization had created new gender-based divisions and solidified men's prerogatives, such as providing men with greater educational and employment opportunities than women (Diop 1999; de Benoist 1987; Rodet 2009). The creation of independent women's organizations was key to enabling women to self-organize and develop their gender-specific agendas. Of course, there were additional reasons for the establishment of those groups, such as avoiding retaliation from colonial administrators and uniting women beyond political divisions (e.g., Sow Dia 1995). But the pursuit of solutions to women's specific problems was their main motivation and built on a well-established tradition of gender-based associationism in the region.⁶

Despite their participatory efforts and emancipatory goals, women's independent organizations had a very short existence in Sudan.⁷ As the prospect of Mali's independence

⁵ Namissa Touré, Segou personal communication 1994.

⁶ E.g., Sira Diop in *Rencontres africaines* 17/1959; Rokiatou Sow, personal communication, 1994; Ba Konaré (1991, 1993); de Jorio (1997); Schmidt (2005).

⁷ Women's organizations and their leaders were experiencing a similar fate in the region; for Senegal see Sow Dia (1995) and Cissé (2009). Women were more integrated in Sekou Touré's Guinea, but they were mostly represented in the lower echelons of the party infrastructure (see Pauthier 2018 and Schmidt 2005).

began to materialize, the US-RDA leadership, convinced that only they could represent people's interests and ambitions, hardened their position and dissolved all independent organizations (Simonis 1995; Ba Konaré 1991, 1993, 1999; Diop 1999, 2007). They believed that women's independent organizations (and all interest-specific organizations) were potentially divisive and as such were obstacles to the territory's increased autonomy. Through these actions the US-RDA leadership also accommodated the wills of large segments of the population (as well as much of the party's leadership itself), which opposed any changes that would transform the organization of the household and its internal hierarchies. The US-RDA did not embrace the activist agenda of Western-educated women. Instead, for most of the 1950s and 1960s it celebrated "the woman" as the mother, the child's primary educator, the considerate and economizing wife, and the nonliterate militant with no political ambition for herself yet ready to sacrifice even her meager financial resources for the success of the party and the country.⁸ The redefined women's agenda was to be pursued only within the framework of the party program.

However, the repression of women's organizations was the result of a complex and at times uncertain progression of events. Most of all, some of the women activists were determined to play a leading role in the gender policy of the emergent nation and attempted to resist their marginalization by the US-RDA party. In this article I follow the rise of women's initiatives, the development of their emancipatory agenda, and their efforts to resist the US-RDA's development into a monolithic party that was increasingly intolerant of any form of opposition. First I describe women's organizations shortly before independence, highlighting the institutional milieus in which they emerged, some of their activities, and aspects of their leadership. Next I discuss the first West African women's congress (held in July 1959 in Bamako) and its revolutionary agenda, which included the abolition of polygyny⁹ by 1960. In the third section I examine some of the reasons and strategies that led to the dismantling of women's organizations right before independence and point out some of those groups' more enduring legacies. I conclude by highlighting the experiences of some Western-educated women and how they adapted to those turbulent and rapidly changing times.

In this work I draw on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with women leaders, and analysis of primary documents to provide a women-centered account of these organizations at the twilight of French colonization. In particular, I build on an analysis of a Catholic women's journal, *Rencontres africaines*, published from 1958 to 1964 by the association of the same name. At first the journal covered only the activities and goals of the *Rencontres africaines* association, but it soon widened its scope to include developments within youth organizations and especially women's organizations.¹⁰ Some of the most outspoken and influential leaders of the time, such as Sira Diop but also the less known but very eloquent

⁸ See Gologo (1960); Aoua Thiero personal communication 2005; Ba Konaré (1991, 1993). For Guinea, see Schmidt (2005).

⁹ *Polygamy* (marriage of one person with two or more people of the opposite sex) is the term most often used in the literature of the time, but I prefer to use *polygyny* here, because it specifically describes the marriage of one man with two or more women.

¹⁰ *Rencontres africaines* was published from January 1958 (issue 1) to March 1960 (issue 23). When the organization *Rencontres africaines* was dissolved along with all other independent women's groups, the journal changed its name to *Rencontres*, which was used from issue 23 onward. Sister Jean Bernard continued to be the editor until June 1960 (issue 26). Sister E. Bellais replaced her from 1960 (issue 27) to 1964 (issue 54), when the journal ceased to exist. Many of the articles in *Rencontres africaines* have no author listed; those that do not have listed authors are identified here solely by issue, year, and page number.

Henriette Kouyaté Carvalho D'Alvarengo¹¹ (who was the wife of one of the leaders of the US-RDA, Seydou Badian Kouyaté), published in the journal articles and informational material about their associations' initiatives. My own interviews with some of the most active and influential women of the time complement archival data to document and analyze the early history of the Malian women's movement and some of the early obstacles that some African women activists faced as they approached independence.

The Women's Movement in French Sudan (1946–1959)

Women became increasingly active within political parties created from 1945 onward, after more legislative changes enabling Africans' political participation were adopted in the wake of the 1944 Brazzaville Conference. Many women joined the US-RDA at its inception in 1946 (Ba Konaré 1993). Nonliterate women composed songs, dressed in imaginative clothing covered with expressions of their party affiliations, facilitated party events by hosting political delegations, and enthusiastically campaigned (often at their own expense) to disseminate the party's messages and recruit new party members.

Since the early 1990s, as Mali's turn to democracy led to a commitment to unearth and reexamine often traumatic chapters of Malian history, scholarly literature has increasingly recognized nonliterate women's participation in party life (Ba Konaré 1993; Sow 2010; de Jorio 2016). Since the founding of the US-RDA, nonliterate women were key in campaigning for and recruitment of party members. For example, in 1951 Fado, a nonliterate woman from Gao, voted for the US-RDA just minutes before giving birth to her son, whom she named after Mamadou Konaté, the party's president at that time. Following the birth, Fado's comrades composed a song to celebrate her dedication and also to invite other women to join the party (A. Keita 2014; Ba Konaré 1993: 289; Rillon 2016). Similarly, on the occasion of the 1956 elections, Badayouma Coulibaly "traveled around the city of Bamako, her body covered in pictures of President Mamadou Konaté" to drum up support for the US-RDA (Ba Konaré 1993: 335; Rillon 2016). Also, after their demonstration against the victory of Fily Dabo Sissoko in the 1945 elections, some of the women of Mamadou Konaté's electoral committee (the precursor of the US-RDA) were briefly imprisoned by the French colonial administration, which supported Sissoko's party.¹²

Elite women too, had been present in the US-RDA early on. Schmidt reports that when one Guinean RDA militant (Léon Maka) and his wife (Mira Baldé) attended the first congress of the Sudanese party in 1949, they were surprised by the extent of Sudanese "elite women's active involvement in party activities and the fact that they all wore national, as opposed to Western, dress. In Guinea [...] educated women – the teachers and midwives – distinguished themselves from the masses of women by imitating European fashions" (2005: 115).¹³ On the other hand, women seemed to have been less active within the Parti progressiste soudanais (PSP), the rival party of the "traditional" elites and favorite of the colonial administration. Ba Konaré's impressive coverage of Malian women's achievements

¹¹ Henriette Kouyaté Carvalho D'Alvarengo (1936–2016) was the first Malian woman to obtain a doctorate in medicine with a specialization in gynecology. For her work in the field of women's health, and particularly for the development of family planning and her work against female genital cutting, she was one of the 1000 women proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 (see word.world-citizenship.org/wp-archive/2377).

¹² The women imprisoned included Fankéle Diarra, Yama Diallo, and Djenebou Dagnon (Ba Konaré 1993).

¹³ Thanks to Sekou Toure's initiatives, women's involvement in national politics rapidly increased in Guinea. By 1954, Guinean women's participation in the RDA party had grown so much that a Guinean trade unionist, Abdoulaye Diallo, remarked that "while the RDA was strong in the French Sudan, the women were not as well organized as in Guinea" — a marked contrast to the Maka's observations in 1949" (Schmidt 2005: 126).

in a variety of domains from politics to sport lists only one woman (Dyodo Yattassaye of Kayes) as a PSP militant (Ba Konaré 1993: 274).

In addition to their militancy in mostly male-dominated party organizations, some Western-educated women also founded a few apolitical organizations broadly concerned with “women’s emancipation.” One such organization was the *Comité des femmes travailleuses* created in 1956 by Aoua Keita and Sow Assitan Coulibaly, two active members of the US-RDA.¹⁴ Its membership comprised some of the most dynamic and politically active women of the time. In addition to the association’s founders, members included Sira Diop and Rokiatou Sow, as well as other future leaders of the national women’s organization (the *Union nationale des femmes du Mali*, UNFM) under the dictatorship of Moussa Traoré. Informed by “the quest for equality with French standards” (Cooper 2002: 78) of the time, the *Comité des femmes travailleuses* strived to improve the working and living conditions of women wage workers. Its demands included salary raises, the creation of nurseries and kindergartens, and the allocation of child benefits. Its leaders were well connected internationally and participated in a number of women’s meetings in Africa and abroad (Ba Konaré 1993: 54). According to Aoua Keita, the organization was initially well received by wage-earning women, and in a few months most of them (90 percent) joined the union. However, such support did not last long: some men waged a disparaging campaign against the organization, which ended up dividing the women (Turrutin 1993). Some of them leveraged the susceptibility of their women and accused wage-earning women of showing no regard for the work of nonsalaried women, thus sowing mistrust and creating disunity among women. Other men directly impeded their wives’ participation, arguing that it interfered with their domestic responsibilities. Although the *Comité des femmes travailleuses* continued to exist until the end of 1959, it never recovered its initial membership numbers.

The other independent women’s organizations reflected more closely the rapidly evolving and mixed contexts of the semi-independent state in which they emerged and had a marked orientation toward education and women’s development. This is in particular the case of *Diemanguelé*,¹⁵ an organization that was created in 1955 as an extension of Social Services to strengthen its development-oriented messages, but also to promote mutual aid and a greater understanding between Western-educated women and nonliterate women. Social Services was first established in French Sudan in 1953, a time when the colonies were becoming increasingly independent from the metropole and depended almost exclusively on their own territorial budgets for their operations (see Dore-Audibert 1999; Cooper 2014). Key members of *Diemanguelé* included Andrée Dore-Audibert, the founder of Social Services in French Sudan, social worker, writer, and wife of a colonial administrator; and Fanta Thiam Diallo, a teacher and president of the association.¹⁶ Although a few French women also joined the organization, the great majority of its members were Sudanese women.

¹⁴ The organization will become the *Inter syndicat des femmes travailleuses* in 1958 (Diop 1999: 57; Keita 2014: 340–41; Turrutin 1993).

¹⁵ *Djemanguelé* also published a journal by the same name. Its first issue can be found at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*. Subsequent issues are held in private collections (Diop 1999). Further information on the journal can be found in Dore-Audibert (1999).

¹⁶ Dore-Audibert’s work was carried out in collaboration with Renée Cissé (see Dore-Audibert 1999: 348).

As the first independent women's organization, Diemanguelé provided women with formative experiences that they would build on in their subsequent work for women's movements. It sought to "modernize" the organization of the African family and women's work, but also to create new opportunities for women's socialization across new and old social divisions (e.g., education, but also race and ethnicity). Diemanguelé was the most popular of these formal associations because of its practical orientation and attention to problems of interest to most women, and also because it received some support from the French administration (Dore-Audibert 1999). Moreover, although most of the leadership was formally educated, a large portion of Diemanguelé's membership consisted of nonliterate women whom the organization sought to expose to "modern" childrearing and household practices as well as to bourgeois ideas about family and the role of women. Women remembered Diemanguelé fondly because of its attention to the social dimensions of women's life and because it provided women with opportunities to get together and support one another at family celebrations (naming ceremonies, weddings, etc.).¹⁷

The last of the three associations of this period, *Rencontres africaines* was funded at the White Fathers headquarters in Bamako in January 1958 and had distinct educational goals (*Rencontres africaines* 1/1958). The idea had emerged in the course of several parents' meetings on the topic of young women's education in which men and women "of all social classes and political and religious convictions participated" (*Rencontres africaines* 1/1958: 3). The organization aimed "to complete the female and African education of young girls outside the school system" (ibid.). It was created in response to criticism from numerous parents that Western education was alienating young women from their environment because it lacked programs to prepare women for their roles as wives and mothers and focused solely on Western culture (e.g., the history of France). The activities of *Rencontres africaines* included conferences, study trips, excursions, and correspondence with other youth organizations in an effort to internationalize its membership. Sister Jean Bernard (whose preordination name was Odette Pégard), a leading figure of the organization, was also editor in chief of its journal (also called *Rencontres africaines*) and later completed a doctorate in France on the Bissa of present-day Burkina Faso (Pégard 1966). Other prominent members of the organization were Assa Diallo and Pauline Diarra, both of whom would later participate in the national women's organization under Moussa Traoré (Ba Konaré 1993: 54). Though not as widespread in the region as Diemanguelé, branches of *Rencontres africaines* were also created outside of Bamako. Additionally, the editorial team of *Rencontres africaines* facilitated conversations around legislative changes that, if implemented, would have improved the legal status of women in French Sudan. Most of all, *Rencontres africaines* provided a forum for Western-educated women to participate in public debates about the status of women in French Sudan and to develop their activist agenda.

Both Diemanguelé and *Rencontres africaines* intended to complement Western education and make up for some of its shortcomings. There were insufficient schools to cover the population's needs,¹⁸ and the curriculum was not adapted to African realities and created anxieties and tensions surrounding the young women's futures. Very few girls were

¹⁷ Diarra Jagossa Sidibé, personal communication, 1994; Sissoko Travélé, personal communication, 1994; see de Jorio (1997).

¹⁸ See letter by Aoua Keita and Sow Assitan Coulibaly in *Diemanguelé* 1, 15.

able to attend school, and a large percentage never completed their studies. For instance, at the end of the school year 1957–1958, only 18 girls out of 47 completed 8th grade, and only 7 out of 12 completed high school in French Sudan (Diop 1999: 79). Thus, besides offering preparatory courses for marriage, *Rencontres africaines* aimed to ensure that girls could achieve “100 percent success at the [school] exams” (Diop 1999: 61). Both *Rencontres africaines* and Diemanguelé published educational journals and held informative conferences on themes of interest to women.

In November 1958 the Union of Sudanese Women (Union des femmes du Soudan, UFS), which included the three independent organizations discussed above, was created on the initiative of some of the women of the Comité des femmes travailleuses. The UFS’s goal was to discuss and identify solutions to women’s issues (“questions féminines”) (*Rencontres africaines* 9/1958: 17; Diop 1999). Sira Diop was nominated to be the organization’s president. UFS rejected all party affiliation and prohibited political discussions at the meetings – an important move that reflected women’s efforts to maintain some independence from male-dominated party politics but also prevented party-line divisions among women (see also Sow Dia 1995). As the country was approaching independence, Western-educated women resolved to act as catalysts of major changes that were to ameliorate women’s conditions and opportunities. The improvement of women’s rights had been mostly neglected by European colonization (apart from the emergence of unexpected alliances at certain interstices), an enterprise that was firmly rooted in race- and gender-based distinctions and promoted pervasive forms of discrimination and exclusion.¹⁹

Women’s Unions and Pan-African Orientations

A major objective of the Union of Sudanese Women was the development of a West African women’s network to foster unity and facilitate the exchange of experiences among African women. UFS leaders put extraordinary effort into organizing the founding congress of the Union of West African Women (Union des femmes de l’Ouest africain, UFOA) in 1959. During this era of semi-independence and the search for federal solutions to the problems of independence and African unity (Cooper 2014), leaders of the UFS and other such groups throughout French West Africa were determined to identify pan-African solutions to women’s issues. The women of French Sudan were at the forefront of this movement, positioning that was partly facilitated by the support they received (at least until that point) from their predominantly male political leaders, but also strengthened by their participation in international organizations. At a meeting of the Mali Federation that year, Modibo Keita (then president of the leading party, the US-RDA; later president of the short-lived Mali Federation during 1959–1960 and president of the independent Republic of Mali during 1960–1968), did address the issue of women’s participation in the process of African independence. In his speech, Modibo Keita did encourage women to further collaborate with men for the self-determination and empowerment of the African people: “The woman must also be associated to the party’s action . . . Women must be convinced of the importance of their role in the conquest of the African personality” (cited in Voltolina 2007: 159). However, the idea of the women’s congress seems to have originally emerged in the course of conversations among the African women representatives who attended

¹⁹ See classic work by McClintock (1995); Stoler (2002) among others.

the congress of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in Vienna in 1958, a meeting dedicated to the themes of decolonization and peace.²⁰ Later that year West African women met again and furthered the organization of their congress at the 1958 Youth Festival in Bamako (Diop 1999). As part of the careful planning for the Bamako congress, Sira Diop had developed a questionnaire to assess women's conditions in variety of contexts (e.g., family, education, work, politics).²¹ Distributed in French Sudan as well as in other countries participating in the festival, this questionnaire sought to provide the empirical basis for the assessment of the issues at stake and the identification of common strategies for action.

Held as planned during July 20–23, 1959, the congress of the Union des femmes de l'Ouest africain (UFOA) opened with women delegates from Dahomey (today's Benin), Senegal, and Guinea, in addition to French Sudan; four delegates from Haute Volta (today's Burkina Faso) arrived a day late (*Rencontres africaines* 17/1959: 11).²² The initiative had the full support of the Sudanese government, and Modibo Keita himself attended the last day of the conference. Radio-Soudan reported that “almost a thousand women gathered this afternoon at the Technical College for the opening of the first congress of the West African Women's Union” (ibid.). A similar number was also recorded by *Rencontres africaines* for the last day of the conference, when the commissions presented their analyses of women's conditions and programs for women's emancipation to the wider audience for discussion (ibid.).²³ These records confirm that the conference reached a much broader audience than often acknowledged.

Some of the most important political leaders and key figures of French Sudan attended the opening day of the congress. Sira Diop, who presided over the congress, delivered the welcoming speech in which she stressed upon the importance of African women's unity in the resolution of common issues (Diop 1959). African women, she added, were determined not just to act as mothers and wives but also “to take an interest in all social, cultural, and political activities” (Diop 1959: 4), to analyze their own problems and identify possible solutions, and to “fight for the construction of the African Nation” (1959: 3). She maintained that “the evolution of a country cannot be done without women” (1959: 4). Diop also expanded on Western-educated women's historical responsibilities in the project of national construction. In particular, they were to act as “guides for their illiterate sisters” and work together with them to improve women's conditions within and outside

²⁰ Dembele Bassata Djiré gave a short presentation on the status of women in French Sudan (WIDF 1958: 66–67; Ba Konaré 1993: 378; Diop 1999: 66). Jeanne Martin Cissé attended as a representative of the Union of Senegalese Women. Cissé (then married Touré) resided in Senegal until after the referendum of 1958, when she returned to her native Guinea. (For more on the WIDF Vienna congress, see Gradska 2020: 276).

²¹ The summary of the questionnaire's results can be found in Diop (1999: 75–80). The specific questions were not included in Diop's 1999 publication.

²² Women representatives from Niger had completed the questionnaire but ultimately did not attend the UFOA congress. UFS members who participated in the congress included Diop Sira Sissoko (Sira Diop), Sow Assitan Coulibaly (wife of US-RDA leader and union activist Lamine Sow), Kouyaté Henriette Carvalho D'Alvarengo (wife of US-RDA leader and writer Seydou Badian Kouyaté), Keita Nankoria Kourouma (wife of US-RDA leader Madeira Keita; see Mann 2013), Sow Rokiatou Sow, Dembelé Bassata Djiré, and Sister Jean Bernard. Keita Aoua Thiero also represented the UFS section of Bafoulabé, thus suggesting that women's participation extended beyond the 20 formally appointed women delegates.

²³ Of the approximately 1,000 women gathered at the conference, most were nonliterate women who were there to support their leaders.

the household (Diop 1959: 4; see Gologo 1960). Following Diop, N'Douré Hamaciré, the representative of the Sudanese government, stated the importance of the congress for the improvement of women's conditions and for "the rehabilitation of the African personality and African independence" (Anonymous 1959: 5; Dagenais 2005). Camara Loffo, the head of the Guinean women delegation, emphasized the great steps forward that women had taken since gaining independence in 1958 under the leadership of Sekou Touré (Pauthier 2018). Guinean women were represented at every level of the state administration, and their rights had much improved since the adoption of a family code that had radically transformed gender relationships (e.g., prohibiting marriage between minors, requiring the celebration of civil marriage before religious marriage and prioritizing the former).

The officially appointed delegates, around 20 women, were for the most part Western-educated, but a few (10 percent) were housewives, the occupation most often attributed to nonliterate women. Most of the female delegates were young women between 18 and 39 years old (with an average age of 29). They had attended the few prestigious French colonial schools open to women at the time (Barthélémy 2010a) and were employed in one of the few professions then available to them: teaching, midwifery, and secretarial work.²⁴ Most (67 percent) were married with at least three children. Furthermore, 57 percent of them had celebrated the civil marriage, a practice encouraged by decrees passed by the French colonial administration and limited to the elites of the time (*Rencontres africaines* 17/1959: 11). These delegates represented some of the most politically engaged women among the tiny group of elite women at that time.

After the opening day ceremonies, the following two days were devoted to the work of the commissions. The session was opened by Henriette Kouyaté, who presented an in-depth analysis of the results of the pre-congress questionnaire, which served as the basis for the final reports and recommendations. The women were then divided into three commissions, each charged with examining particular dimensions of women's lives: family, schooling, and women's living conditions (including the laws available to protect women's and children's rights). Each commission was tasked with an analysis of the causes of women's oppression and the identification of remedies to effectively address them. Their results would be discussed, amended and eventually approved on the fourth and final day of the congress.

There is little record of the debates that ensued during the commissions' work. In her speech accepting the presidency of the UFOA, Leonida Adjano of Dahomey, alluded to some tensions but did not identify their causes; instead she foregrounded women's ability to ultimately come together and find constructive solutions (*Rencontres africaines* 17/1959: 18). The only newspaper coverage of some of the controversies that emerged at the conference was a *New York Times* article written by Emil Lengyel (1960), a New York University history professor of Hungarian origin who noted that the subject of polygyny had provoked heated debates.²⁵ Women (from several religious backgrounds) who favored polygyny had used references to the Old Testament, the Quran, and "natural law" to justify what they viewed as the polygynous propensity of men. The pro-monogamy faction had persuasively argued that polygyny lay at the root of women's devaluation and fostered rivalry between women and should therefore be abolished. The latter group appeared, at least within the space of

²⁴ Radio Soudan followed the event and reported that the delegates were mostly teachers (52 percent). Midwives (21 percent), secretaries (10 percent), housewives (10 percent) and students (5 percent) made up the rest.

²⁵ I would like to thank Bruce Whitehouse for generously sharing with me this news article.

the conference, to have won the argument: the elimination of polygyny was included in the conference's final resolutions.

The conference ended with a series of motions that reflected the meeting of multiple sensibilities and often-dissonant viewpoints (see also Soares 2009; de Jorio 2010). Some of the leaders were active in progressive international women's movements (such as the WIDF) and demanded equal civil and political rights. But their views were also informed by other frames of reference, including their cultural milieus, religious affiliations, bourgeois colonial values, and Western educations. Women's political demands therefore reflected some of these conflicting viewpoints and included objectives that were difficult to reconcile, such as opposition to women's abandonment of their marital residences (an action that was often a woman's last resort to escape spousal abuse), support for measures to create greater stability within the household, discouragement of divorce and men's repudiation of women, and attempts to dissuade women from engaging in certain conduct they saw as questionable (wearing "inappropriate" clothing, being "sexually promiscuous," spending excessively on life-cycle celebrations). They also looked for ways to strengthen parental authority, even suggesting that fines be imposed on parents whose children were not home by 10 p.m. Conference attendees also espoused a conservative conception of the family in which the man should act as the primary provider; they argued that expecting women to make substantial contributions to household expenses in the absence of reliable sources of revenues would put women in a position of vulnerability and may lead them to what the women delegates euphemistically called "misconduct" – in other words, to "fall prey" to the attentions of men of means (*Rencontres africaines* 17/1959: 13).

The women identified multiple causes of their subordination, including traditional customs, religion, and French colonization. In particular French colonization, in favoring the education of men over the education of women, had greatly restricted women's access to modern employment opportunities. Without questioning their roles as spouses and mothers, women demanded an improvement in their everyday lives as well as a widening of their fields of action. Their primary objective was the transformation of marriage into an institution that would guarantee them more stability and rights. They demanded the institution of civil marriage (with spousal rights and duties precisely defined), the abolition of early marriage, the right to choose their spouses, the imposition of a cap to the dowry (whose commodification had led to its exponential growth), and the establishment of a woman's right to inherit and to have custody of her children. They also stressed the importance of a closer and more supportive relationship with their husbands and hoped to strengthen fathers' participation in the education of their children, a task that fell predominantly on women (particularly in a polygynous environment). But the changes they sought were not limited to the institution of marriage. Women wanted more schools, more vocational training opportunities, equal working conditions, and a more developed infrastructure (including the modernization of domestic work) that would free them from at least part of their domestic responsibilities.²⁶

Among the many resolutions the women adopted at the 1959 UFOA congress, the one that received by far the most attention was the one on polygyny, an institution the attendees identified as one of the major sources of women's oppression. Polygyny had been a typical target of the colonial propaganda (and missionaries' writings), but had been de facto left

²⁶ They also discouraged mixed marriage; for an analysis of this position, see Rillon (2018: 123) and Condé (2012).

untouched by the French colonial administration, which mostly tended not to interfere with “*les coutumes indigènes*” (although in their efforts to standardize “the local customs,” colonial administrators proceeded to codify and transform them; see for instance, de Benoist 1987; Rodet 2007). UFOA delegates boldly demanded the eradication of polygyny by January 1960. They also urged radical changes in households that were already polygynous. In particular, they demanded that all co-wives be treated equally, referencing the Quran as an additional legitimizing reference.²⁷

The response of the political leadership of the time was positive, if overall noncommittal. Delivering one of the last speeches at the congress, Modibo Keita praised women for their selfless sacrifice for the independence of the country. In recognition of the congress’s ambitious resolutions, he wished participants the unity and strength to overcome the “inertia” as well as the “opposing forces” on their path to emancipation. He expressed hope that the Western-educated women would be successful in forming bonds of solidarity and trust with nonliterate women, a necessary condition for their success (Anonymous 1959: 5). Keita must have already sensed the mounting dissatisfaction that some of the congress’s resolutions had generated among nonliterate women and large strata of the population, including within his own party’s leadership. His speech, while supportive of women’s aspirations, remained rather vague. Stating “your resolutions will be carefully examined,” he promised to grant future consideration to the women’s agenda but prudently avoided committing to it.

Just a few months later (November 1959), the US-RDA proceeded to dissolve women’s independent organizations, claiming that the groups’ revolutionary agenda – in particular, their stand on polygyny – did not reflect the wills and aspirations of the women of those groups. The party leadership also questioned the apolitical position of the women’s independent movement, demanding that all forces rally behind the party in its struggle for increased autonomy. The events that followed the congress caused a profound rift among the women and compromised the realization of many of the issues in the women’s agenda.²⁸

The Dissolution of Women’s Organizations

Notwithstanding the richness and variety of the UFOA women’s propositions, it was the determination to end polygyny by January 1960 that received the most attention. This issue divided women and men and caused disunity among the women, particularly between the Western-educated women elite and nonliterate women. The possibility of the abrogation of polygyny and the potential consequences of that shift on the familiar moral order unleashed firm opposition from large segments of the male and female populations alike. Men opposed the loss of their control over their female kin’s marriages, a change that would have altered their ability to establish social networks of solidarity. They were also determined to preserve their right to marry multiple wives and have many children, because they derived social status

²⁷ At the end of the conference the women also issued a set of motions via which they manifested their engagement with a number of international political issues of the time (perhaps to avoid the charge of representing exclusively special group interests). They opposed the nuclear tests France was then conducting in the Sahara, expressed their hopes for a peaceful resolution of the Algerian war, and denounced the mistreatment of African students in France (*Rencontres africaines* 17/1959: 16).

²⁸ The UFOA would cease to exist, but it nonetheless inspired the creation of subsequent pan-African women’s organizations (Barthélémy 2010b).

and economic security from those practices.²⁹ Fear surrounding the abolition of polygyny was nothing new, though. Rumors of its possible eradication had already circulated after the 1944 Brazzaville conference, where the fate of the French empire was discussed, and new reforms were planned to widen Africans' political and civil rights (Joly 2006: 570). At that time, too, large segments of the Sudanese population had opposed such drastic changes to their social and familial order.

Resorting to tactics conservative men had already deployed to hinder the initiatives of the women's union headed by Aoua Keita in 1957, some men helped spread rumors that sowed divisions and mistrust among the women (A. Keita 2014; Turriffin 1993). They escalated latent dissent that was rooted in part in the rapid socioeconomic changes and the new inequalities that the French colonial system had introduced. In particular, these men accused elite women of harboring feelings of superiority and of looking down upon their nonliterate sisters whose mobilization had been essential for the success of the party. According to one influential woman activist of the time, men were key to the propagation of divisive tactics, such as exacerbating the opposition between "pretentious intellectual women" and "illiterate women" (Diop 1999: 69). The party was thus simultaneously embracing and contributing to the propagation of the image of the (mostly nonliterate) selfless woman militant willing to sacrifice her meager means for the success of the party and for the independence of her country (Diop 1999, 2007).

In fomenting disunity among the women, some of the men were quick to point out Western-educated women's "superiority complex," as evidenced by some women activists' language choices. Politician and writer Mamadou El Béchir Gologo, in a much advertised and discussed 1960 contribution titled "Women's role in the national construction" (to which I shall return later), critically alluded to elite women's framing of their relationship with their nonliterate sisters. For instance, in her opening speech at the 1959 Women's Congress, Sira Diop had described Western-educated women as "guides for their sisters" (July 20, 1959). Criticizing such an elitist disposition, Gologo suggested that instead of presenting themselves as informed guides, Western-educated women should learn to collaborate with their nonliterate sisters as equals (Gologo 1960: 5; personal communication 2004).³⁰ French colonization had brought dramatic social and economic transformations to local societies. Education and modern employment had opened some new opportunities for people of lower socio-economic status and introduced new criteria for social distinction and new divisions. Since women in particular had to a large extent been unable to benefit from modern education and the new emerging employment opportunities (Diop 1999; Barthelemy 2010a), marriage remained one of the few venues open to women and their extended families to negotiate economic security and advancement.

In fact, the abolition of polygyny divided not only women and men but also created profound divisions among the women themselves. Aoua Thiero, then a delegate from Bafoulabé at the UFOA congress, remembered how, at the news of the possible abolition of polygyny, nonliterate women had taken to the streets and protested against the resolutions

²⁹ Shortly after the 1959 congress, female activists dismissed the abolition of polygyny as an unattainable goal. They believed that in time the institution would ultimately die a natural death (Diop 1999; Sissoko Travélé, personal communication, 1994).

³⁰ Like Gologo, Aoua Keita believed that women's contributions were first and foremost at the household level. Most of all, she thought that the promotion of a women's agenda was premature and that all efforts should first be devoted to the attainment of independence from France (Ba Konaré 1993).

of the women's 1959 congress, accusing their proponents of being "selfish." Often married to Western-educated men with regular salaries, Western-educated women were seen as restricting nonliterate (and particularly, but not exclusively, poorer nonliterate women) women's access to better economic conditions (Aoua Thiero, personal communication 1994, 2005; de Jorio 1997; Barthelemy 2010a). In their opposition to the abolition of polygyny, nonliterate women were also resisting their potential socioeconomic marginalization and mobilizing for the preservation of marriage options that increased their economic mobility.

That news of the women's agenda had led to popular unrest finds further evidence in an interview Aoua Keita released to *L'Essor*, shortly after returning from a women's seminar held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, during December 12–23, 1960. While at the seminar, Aoua Keita (who was unable to attend the 1959 UFOA congress because she had been overseas at that time³¹) was asked to speak of her government's position vis-à-vis the UFOA women's resolutions, particularly regarding the women's demand to abolish the institution of polygyny. She was clearly very annoyed by this and other questions, partly because they had originated from some of the European women in attendance, some of whom were looking for some kind of public statement recognizing France's role in improving African women's condition.³² Keita characterized these questions as ill-informed or disingenuous given the French colonial state's poor record of accomplishments in the domain of women's education and women's rights. She then firmly defended her government's commitment to meet what she called "women's legitimate demands." In regard to the congress's request to abolish the practice of polygyny, she clarified that this demand did not reflect the aspirations of the majority of the population but only those of a minority of Western-educated women. This particular proposition had in fact resulted in major popular protests that the government had had a hard time controlling.

As soon as the [1959 congress] resolutions were known and translated, our sisters, who represent 95 percent of the women masses, spoke out against [the proposition to ban polygyny]. Since their participation in the national liberation struggle has always been decisive, our party and government, taking into account the situation, considered it necessary to postpone this issue. I would even say that it took many efforts and numerous interventions on the part of President Modibo Keita to appease their protests. (interview with Aoua Keita, Anonymous 1961)

Women's divisions were strategically amplified and used by some of the US-RDA leadership to question Western-educated women's ability to represent all women's concerns or establish collaborative relations with their nonliterate sisters. Elite women were represented as primarily occupied with the preservation of their privileges and unable to take the problems of ordinary women to heart.³³ The protests undoubtedly made the party leadership less receptive to the

³¹ Aoua Keita sent a telegram from Paris in which she expressed her regrets for being unable to attend the congress and wished the UFS full success with its program (*Rencontres africaines* 17/1959: 9).

³² Marie-Hélène Lefaucheu (1904–1964) was one of the women in attendance at the December 1960 meeting. She was a key leader of the women's movement in France and had represented her country at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Lefaucheu and Aoua Keita had numerous heated exchanges in Addis Ababa, no doubt due in part to Lefaucheu's overall positive views of France's role in Africa and her (imperialist) take on feminism.

³³ See also Sira Diop's letter from Mopti, published in April 1960. Diop's letter refers briefly to some misunderstandings and tensions among the women: "If we had a difficult phase in Bamako, this is not a good reason to lose faith in the movement. There are lots of women in Sudan who do not ask anything else but to be in a position to follow the women who can enlighten them" (*Rencontres* 24/1960: 27; my translation and emphasis).

demands of Western-educated women and also reinforced its view that politics was the exclusive domain of the party, which had no room for other potentially divisive movements (Simonis 1995). By November 1959, the party had summoned the leaders of the women's organizations and demanded the dissolution of those groups. Women activists were also asked to integrate with the US-RDA (*Rencontres africaines* 19/1959). Sister Jean Bernard—the only Westerner to have been invited to the 1959 congress and already a member of the UFS—commented on these political measures as a clear indication of men's fears vis-à-vis this “team of lucid, intrepid women” who were not afraid to denounce the injustices to which women were subjected (*Rencontres africaines* 19/1959; see also Diop 1999: 69).

Resistance and Accommodation

At first, UFS women resisted the dismantling of their association and tried rebuilding their relationship with the public and with the US-RDA leadership. A series of UFS's letters, press releases, and updates show some of the tactics women resorted to in an effort to keep their organization alive (up to April 27, 1960).³⁴ Women redefined their position in relation to the rapidly changing historical context and, in particular, to their country's approaching independence. Reconsidering their apolitical option, the leadership of the women's movement indicated that they were ready to collaborate with the US-RDA in the construction of an African nation. They remained, however, firm in their commitment to fight against the double oppression of women: colonialism's and men's exploitation (e.g., *Rencontres africaines* 19/1959: 2, 4; see also *Rencontres africaines* 17/1959: 12). Women even went so far as to agree to integrate with the party but declared that they would not desist from executing their agenda for women's liberation.³⁵

The UFS continued to work on some of its most pressing agendas. It completed the first draft of a family code (modeled after similar codes in Tunisia and Romania) and deposited it at the legislatures of French Sudan and the Mali Federation by the end of 1959. Although it was not implemented at the time, this draft code later constituted the basis of a marriage code that was passed after independence. The 1962 Marriage Code (as it came to be known) is still celebrated as the US-RDA's major contribution to the improvement of women's conditions, even though its various components were never fully implemented (see Diop 1999: 68; Sanankoua 1990; Ba Konaré 1993). For instance, most marriages continued not to be celebrated at the town hall, and the religious marriage usually preceded and did not follow the civil marriage as otherwise established by the code. UFS women also laid the foundations for a women's national union, a project they hoped to finalize after independence.³⁶ They even accepted that the US-RDA would select new leadership for their movement (though no information exists as to whether the change in leadership was ever executed and, if it was, who was the newly appointed head of the UFS).

³⁴ The documents were published in *Rencontres africaines* 19/1959 and *Rencontres* 24/1960. Despite the ephemeral existence of those organizations, some of the Western-educated women continued to identify themselves as members of Djemanguelé and of the Inter-syndicat des femmes travailleuses in international women's meetings, even when they were the wives of prominent US-RDA representatives, perhaps in an effort to extend the lives of their associations in at least supranational contexts.

³⁵ In their press release of November 1, 1959, Djemanguelé, *Rencontres africaines*, and the Inter-syndicat des femmes travailleuses communicated their decision to integrate with the US-RDA but also restated their commitment to work for “woman's rapid development (*promotion*)” (*Rencontres africaines* 19/1959: 5).

³⁶ The goal of building a women's union (UNFM) was not achieved until 1974, and then only under the challenging conditions of Moussa Traoré's dictatorship.

Despite women's efforts at appeasement, the US-RDA was determined to dismantle all independent organizations and worked to do so by making threats, carrying out disparaging campaigns, belittling the women's agenda, fomenting disunion, and encouraging the forced dissolution of those organizations (Simonis 1995; Diop 1999: 69). Resorting to colonial tactics, the party leadership also transferred to outside of the capital some of the most determined and vocal members of the women's movement: they sent Sira Diop to Mopti with her husband in mid-November 1959, Bassata Djiré to Bougouni, and Rokiatou Sow to Ségou (Ba Konaré 1993: 55).³⁷ Assitan Coulibaly avoided being transferred and stayed in Bamako only because her husband, Lamine Sow, was then a prominent member of the party (ibid.). Despite the US-RDA's repressive practices, seventy women from the UFS gathered at Bamako's Cultural Center a few days before Sira Diop's departure for Mopti to celebrate her extraordinary work as the president of the UFS and promised to keep the UFS agenda alive.

Even after being sent to Mopti, Diop continued for a few months to work for the UFS, though no longer as its president. Although the UFS stopped its activities in Bamako, it remained active in the regions. In April 1960, UFS members from Mopti and Kayes communicated their readiness to resume their activities. They even discussed holding a new UFS meeting in July 1960 and had identified Koutiala as a possible location for it (*Rencontres* 24/1960: 28, 30). Diop sent letters to assess the feasibility of the meeting. She also contacted at least one government representative to renew the UFS's commitment to support the US-RDA's programs, particularly in the much-advertised human-investment field (that is, voluntary work for the development of the country) but received no answer (1960). From April 1960 onward the organization stopped all activities, and no further communication by the UFS is to be found in *Rencontres*. Eventually, women's groups were dismantled and assimilated within the party infrastructure, and some of their leaders integrated into the party ranks.

With the women's opposition quelled, the party asked a male politician, Mamadou El Béchir Gologo, to speak on the role of Sudanese women in national construction as the country's independence approached (22 September 1960). The choice of Gologo was significant, because there were certainly women (such as Diop and Kouyaté) who could have been asked to deliver a speech on women's role at independence (*Rencontres* 25/1960: 3).³⁸ Gologo's speech was given great coverage: Radio Soudan broadcast it in Bamana three times within a week, and the newspaper *L'Essor* published it in French shortly afterward (Gologo 1960). According to Gologo, whose speech made numerous references to oral literature, Sudanese women were key to the recovery of African dignity and the attainment of independence. He praised their spirit of sacrifice, their ability to motivate men when they were discouraged or unmotivated, and their fierce courage in defense of their families when no other hope was in sight. On these foundations, Gologo argued, women's role for the good of the nation was to be primarily situated at the household level: to support men's actions and to educate the future generations of Malian citizens.

³⁷ See also *Rencontres africaines* 19/1959: 6–7; Diop (2007).

³⁸ In 1959 – only one year before the Gologo's article was published – Henriette Kouyaté Carvalho D'Alvarengo had published an article on a similar topic: "Rôle de la femme dans l'émancipation de l'Afrique" (Kouyaté 1959). Although Kouyaté foregrounded the importance of women's roles as mothers and wives, she demanded a much more active role for women in the public sphere: "women should have access to public life in order to be able to make their full contribution to the country's development" (1959: 17).

We particularly count on you, dear MOTHERS and SISTERS, on your good qualities (*qualités de coeur*), your mighty influence on us, the men (your sons, brothers, husbands) to assist us in facing the challenges to our honor . . . Independence is a delicate child, and you are responsible for his vitality, his education, and his reputation. Your mission is without any doubt the most difficult. Never forget it. (1960: 8 and 9)³⁹

Gologo's speech marks the end of the early phase of women's associationism in which elite women had played a dynamic role. Integrated within the US-RDA, several women activists left politics (though some would eventually return to the political sphere in more prominent roles). But the spaces for women's action had been dramatically reduced. As the party entered independence under less-than-ideal conditions following the collapse of the Mali Federation (and separation from the wealthier Senegal), the party had other priorities (Ba Konaré 1993; see also Diop 1999:71; Sanankoua 2004: 147). The women's agenda would occupy a very limited place in the political programs of Modibo Keita's first Republic (see Ba Konaré 1994; de Jorio 1997; Diop 1999; Rillon 2018).

Conclusion

As independence approached in the 1950s, a vocal segment of the tiny population of educated elite women became very active in women's independent associations. This dynamic group created a number of national organizations and even a regional organization (UFOA) to work together in pursuit of a shared women's agenda. Some of the leaders were aware that women's double exploitation (colonization and sexism) could be addressed only within the context of women's groups and that political parties, dominated by men, would stifle their agenda. While always foregrounding women's specificities as mothers and wives, the organizations' programs included a number of reforms that would have significantly transformed gender relationships and the organization of the household. These women activists also asserted their determination to play a greater role in the public sphere, where they sought to fully engage as citizens of an independent nation.

Shortly before independence, the US-RDA used rumors, intimidation, and personnel transfers to dismantle the women's organizations. Rumors in particular, created irreparable divides among the women, amplifying many women's anxieties surrounding rapid socio-economic transformations and the emergence of new (schooled) elites, that ultimately weakened the women's agenda. The US-RDA blocked the Western-educated women's agenda on the ground that it promoted those women's personal interests. The work of those women was seen as dangerously outside the perimeters of party politics and therefore a source of disunion among the people. Some of the women activists attempted to counter the party's decisions but eventually had to dissolve their organizations and integrate with the party ranks. Once in the party, some eventually recovered positions of responsibility, whereas others disengaged (at least temporarily) from party politics. However, once those women were in the party, their programs and initiatives were significantly reduced and largely defined by the US-RDA leadership.

The defeat of pre-independence women's organizations had long-lasting consequences. After independence, the US-RDA's record on women's political and civil rights continued

³⁹ Gologo's and Diop's debates in the pages of *Rencontres* reveal some of the profound ideological differences between Western-educated women and large segments of the US-RDA at the end of the 1950s.

to be rather modest. Its major realizations included the creation of a Social Commission (*Commission sociale*) in charge of women's affairs, and the passage of a marriage code in 1962 (Ba Konaré 1993; Diop 1999; Sanankoua 2004).⁴⁰ The Commission sociale though, was not a women's wing of the party, but rather, just a committee with little latitude for political action and a limited agenda (Ba Konaré 1993: 55-56; Bazin-Tardieu 1975: 116).⁴¹

Aoua Keita, who had originally expressed such critical views of the agenda of Western-educated women and facilitated the integration of women's forces within the US-RDA party, eventually opened up to the idea of pursuing a moderate women's agenda from the early 1960s onward. She was instrumental in the adoption of the 1962 Marriage Code and the creation of the Commission sociale (Ba Konaré 1993: 346). Keita worked to mend some of the rifts between women activists and to bring some of their estranged leaders (e.g., Sira Diop) back into the Commission. She herself was eventually sidelined during the 1967 revolution: rumor has it that it was once again men's political maneuvering and women's disunion – in this case, the profound dislike that Mariam Travélé, Modibo Keita's wife, felt for Aoua Keita – to put an end to Aoua Keita's political career (A. Keita 2014: 378).

Despite her moderate women's-rights agenda and her acceptance of the US-RDA's largely male leadership's objectives and political practices, Aoua Keita is today considered one of the most influential early leaders of the Malian women's movement. She became a crucial reference for women activists during Mali's turn to democracy in 1991, and women activists have ever since acknowledged and celebrated Aoua Keita as a founder of the Malian women's movement (e.g., Siré Diakitité 1996). Ultimately, contemporary women activists have reclaimed her legacy as an indispensable step for the recovery and reevaluation of Mali's anti-colonial struggle and early years of independence in more gender-inclusive terms (Sow 2010; de Jorio 2003, 2016).

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⁴⁰ However, women were present at every level of the US-RDA—there were women's committees at the level of villages, neighborhoods, arrondissements and cercles. One woman representative always sat in the various male-dominated political bureaus that oversaw the work of their committees. Most activities were framed by the Bamako-based party leadership, which then used this capillary infrastructure to spread party messages and instructions. The US-RDA infrastructure sought to erase educational differences among the women and force the Western-educated women and nonliterate women to work side by side (Diop 1999: 100). Women had thus been reduced primarily to work in the service of the party.

⁴¹ The Commission sociale's agenda included welcoming political delegations and facilitating US-RDA events and folkloristic performances. The commission also spearheaded a number of initiatives in the fields of public health, civil and moral education, and general education (Diop 1999: 111–12).

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