

WOMEN, LAND STRUGGLES, AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE COMMONS

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This article examines the question of communal land property in Africa and its implications for women's land rights. Among the themes discussed are: the reforms of communal land tenure attempted by the World Bank in the 1990s, the critique of communal land relations that feminist organizations have made on account of their patriarchal discrimination against women, and the simultaneous efforts by landless rural and urban women to appropriate unused plots of public land for subsistence farming. While warning that the feminist attack on communal land ownership may strengthen the neo-liberal drive towards the privatization of land, the article looks at women's reclamation of unused public land for subsistence farming as the path to the constitution of new commons.

... when [in 1956] hunters killed the last elephant that strayed into Gusii territory . . . and, for the last time, people from the surrounding area helped themselves to free meat [the] event was memorialized in a folk song . . . “‘the mother of commodities for free’ has died in Gesabakwa.” From that time on, commodities began to be sold for cash so that anybody expecting otherwise would be reminded rhetorically, “have you not heard that ‘the mother of commodities for free’ has died in Gesabakwa?” (*Ogembo 2006, p. viii*)

The concept of the “commons” has become a major theme in the literature of social justice movements internationally, proving very useful for expanding the scope of political analysis beyond the confines of the wage struggle. Lodged halfway between the “public” and the “private” but irreducible to either category, the idea of the commons expresses a broader conception of property, referring to social goods—lands, territories, forests, meadows and streams, or communicative spaces—which a community, not the state or any individual, collectively owns, manages, and controls. In contrast to the “public,” which presuppose the existence of market economy and private property and is “typically administered by the state” (Anton 2000, 4), the idea of the commons evokes images of intense social cooperation. Through this concept, moreover, the history of the class struggle can be rewritten so that the indigenous people’s resistance to colonial expropriation in the Americas can be seen on a continuum with peasant resistance against the English enclosures, and farmers’ struggles in

India can be described as the complement to the struggles of anti-intellectual property programmers in the free software movement. All are “commoners,” after all (Caffentzis 1995; De Angelis 2007; Linebaugh 2008).

As with the real commons, however, the concept itself has been the object of many manipulations and appropriations mostly by the institutions that have made the abolition of communal property their mission. Thus, the World Bank’s definition of seas, water resources, and forest covers as “global commons” is serving to legitimize a new wave of enclosures, presumably in the interest of “conservation,” driving aboriginal people off their lands and restructuring access to them on a monetary base. Similarly, the World Bank has promoted “community-based” land reforms in Africa that purport to guarantee a more equitable allocation of communal lands but actually promote commercial interests and reduce the resources that people can claim. A further problem is that with the expansion of capitalism, the existing commons have become home to many of the divisions and disparities that we find in the rest of society. Thus, not only, as the epigraph at the beginning of this section suggests, commons can not be viewed as unproblematic realities, especially where they involve the shared management of natural resources, they have become a terrain of conflict that the international financial institutions exploit to their ends. What are these conflicts and what do they tell us about the state of the commons?

With these questions in mind, I look at two kinds of struggle that women are making in Africa that have a direct impact on the future of communal lands. First is the women’s movement that has developed in the 1990s to fight for land rights and which has declared its opposition to customary tenure because of its patriarchalism and discrimination against women. Second are the struggles of women in urban areas who, in contrast to the prevailing trend toward privatization, take over plots of public land to farm them for their families’ subsistence.

I discuss these struggles because there is much that we can learn from them as to the interests that are today shaping people’s relation to communal resources and the role that gender issues play in this process. These struggles show that egalitarianism is for commons a question of survival, for unequal power relations within them open the way to outside intervention and expropriation. In particular, they show that gender-based disparities generate dynamics that consolidate the dominance of the market over agricultural relations for they weaken the solidarity between women and men in front of the siege to which the commons are subjected by state business, and international institutions and lead many women to demand a strengthening of the very legal machine upon which land privatization depends (Adoko and Levine 2005; Tripp 2004; Wanyeki 2003). This is a lesson social justice movements need to learn if commons are not to remain pure ideals but are to become an object of struggle. The same movements can learn from the example of the women who instead of turning to the law, opt for direct action, farming on public land, thus subverting the neoliberal attempt to put a monetary gate around all natural resources and reaffirming the principle the earth is our common.

Africa, Still the Land of Commons

Africa is a good test case for a discussion of communal land tenure—the material foundation of all other communal forms of property (woods, forests, waters)—because it is the region where this form of property has survived longer than in any other part of the world despite repeated attempts to put an end to this “scandal.” As Liz Alden Wily, a Nairobi-based “expert on land tenure and rural development” writes,

... despite a century of purposeful penetration of non-customary tenure ideology and legislation ... unregistered, customary tenure not only persists, but also is by far and away still the majority form of tenure in the region. None of the strategies adopted to ignore or diminish it have been successful. (Wily 2001, 85)

Indeed, most people in rural Africa live under communal tenure systems,¹ though they may have individual titles to land under statutory law as many African countries have dual or plural legal regimes (Cotula, Camilla, and Ced 2004, 2).

Today’s African commons bear little resemblance, however, to the “traditional” models as much as these can be reconstructed through oral histories and what we know of precolonial African societies.² As a vast literature has documented, the shift from subsistence farming to cash crops and the colonial introduction of private property regimes, based on titling and the enclosure of individual holdings, have increasingly undermined what used to be “an egalitarian pattern of social organization” (Laesthaeghe 1989b, 51; Snell 1986, 108, 112–3), Decolonization did not counter this trend. Whether the goal was capitalist or socialist development, the independent African nations contributed to undermine communal land systems by making all land the property of the state, thus establishing its right to appropriate it for public projects. As a result of these developments, already by the late 1970s, landlessness in rural areas was growing and so was class differentiation.²

There is a general agreement that those most harmed by these developments have been women. For as the value of land increased and scarcity expanded, new rules were devised to restrict women’s access to it, which had been always guaranteed under traditional systems. I will return later to this point. Here, I want to stress that the “debt crisis” of the 1980s and the subsequent liberalization of African political economies were a turning point with regard to land tenure relations. For the World Bank and other international capitalist institutions saw the crisis as their historic opportunity to put an end to the African communal land tenure systems, which in their eyes were the key impediments to the development of capitalist relations in the region (World Bank 1989).

Africa’s land “must be enclosed, and traditional rights of use, access and grazing extinguished, [because] it is private property of land that has made capital work,” wrote the London Economist in a “Nigeria Survey” of May 3,

1986. Presently, the Economist complained, investors must negotiate with the communities “for each tree, for firewood rights, for the grazing of women’s goats, for grandfather’s grave” (quoted by Federici 1992, 304).

Not surprisingly, the privatization of African land was to be the first task of the Structural Adjustment Programs, which the International Monetary Fund and World Bank demanded (Caffentzis 1995, 28). All the conditionalities written into these programs—the shift from food production to export-oriented agriculture, the opening of African lands to foreign investment, the privileging of cash crops over subsistence agriculture—were premised on the success of a new privatization drive, which was to formalize land tenure through individual titling and registration.

However, these expectations have only been partly satisfied. A new “scramble for Africa” and a rush to land grabbing have taken place and are still underway that have expropriated the best, most fertile, and most mineral-rich of the African commons and transferred them to business ventures. However, by the 1990s, only a small percentage of African communal land had been registered (in some areas, less than 1 percent) because small farmers saw no need for it, assuming that they already owned their land and not being willing to pay the high fees and taxes that titles and registration require (Joireman 2006, 7). It seems that people also resisted “giving all rights over to one person” (Adoko and Levine 2005, 6). Worse yet, from the viewpoint of prospective investors, even in those areas where the land had been registered, customary regulations were still observed as people could not be convinced the land was not a collective asset (Ogolla and Mugabe 1996, 102–3).

In response to such findings and aware of a growing peasant mobilization, in and out of Africa, taking the form of land takeovers, African governments and the World Bank have, since the 1990s, adopted a softer, less conflictual road to land privatization. Confident that much of the task of privatizing land can be left to the market, they have sponsored a model of reform that recognizes communal tenure but ensures that the alienation of land and formation of land markets continues and is, in fact, expanded, especially in the case of better quality land (Tripp 2005, 11; Yoshida 2005, 141fn).

Already implemented in various forms in several African countries and promoted in typical World Bank fashion as a “pro-poor rural development policy,” the new reform is based on four innovations. It decentralizes the administration and management of communal lands, placing them in the hands of politically appointed “boards” or elected “village councils” responsible however to the central government. It introduces “group titling” so that land can be registered in the name of land associations as well as individuals. It makes it possible for local management bodies or associations to sell land to outsiders for business purposes, provided it is under the guise of joint ventures (Alden Wily 2001, 88; Cotula, Camilla, and Ced 2004, 5). In sum, a two-tier system has been devised that avoids a head-on confrontation with small farmers while enabling the local capitalist elite to pursue its interests and open the door to foreign investors.

The new land reforms also contain provisions against discrimination on the basis of gender, e.g., through the introduction of the right of cotenancy between husbands and wives (Alden Wily 2001, 92–3). Indeed, gender equity is a key theme in the ideological presentation of the reform. However, these provisions have failed to satisfy the many women’s organizations that have formed in the 1990s to fight for women’s land rights. These organizations charge that placing the decision-making process with regard to land in the hands of local bodies, and validating local customs, makes women vulnerable to abuse. What these organizations demand instead is that customary tenure be eradicated and a rights-based system be instituted through legal and legislative reform so that women can buy, own, sell, and obtain titles to land—all entitlements, they claim, that under customary law they can obtain only through the goodwill of men (Tripp 2005, 2).¹

In a detailed article on this matter, the Ugandan feminist Aili Mary Tripp defends this strategy, stating that it represents the dominant position among women’s organizations, especially in East Africa, and it has won also the support of some pastoralist groups. However, she acknowledges that women’s land rights groups are accused of being used to promote the agenda of foreign investors (Tripp 2005, 13). In fact, a debate is taking place in Africa that questions the idea that the consolidation of private ownership can benefit women and also that customary tenure can be abolished without serious consequences for the livelihood of the rural and urban populations (Manji 2006; Yoshida 2005, 148).

Across differences, however, there is a consensus that the discrimination that women face in customary law has less to do with “tradition” than with the pressures resulting from the commercialization of agriculture and the consequent loss of communal land.

Women, Customary Law, and the Masculinization of the Commons

As it is the case today, in precolonial times, customary laws gave men priority with regard to land ownership and management on the assumption that women would eventually marry, leave the clan, and the clan’s land should be protected (Tripp 2004, 2, 10; Wanyeki 2003). Thus, despite variations, depending on whether the system was matrilineal or patrilineal and other historical and cultural factors, also in precolonial times, women had access to land through their relations with husbands and kin.

“Ownership,” however, had a very different meaning than in statutory law as customary law worked “on a principle of inclusion” rather than exclusion (Barrow 1996, 264). The owner had the right of occupancy and held the land in trusteeship for the other members of the family, including the generations to come. Ownership did not confer absolute proprietorship or the right to sell. Thus, either through their families or their husbands, women always had fields of their own, their own crops, and controlled the income they earned from the sale of the produce they farmed (Wanyeki 2003, 187–8).

Things changed, however, with the commercialization of agriculture and the beginning of production for the international market. As a rule, the more the demand for land increased, the more strict the “constraints [placed] on women’s access to it” (Tripp 2005, 2).

Several strategies were used for this purpose. In parts of East Africa, men have refused to pay the bride price, opting for marriage by elopement for it makes it easier for them to dissolve the relationships with their wives and refuse them any transfer or donation of land. A study conducted in Gusii land (Southwestern Kenya) showed that by the 1980s, 80 percent of marriages there were by elopement with the consequent creation of “a whole category of landless women,” something unprecedented in the region (Gray and Kevane 1999; Hakansson 1986, 1988). A similar study found that in a Rwandan village, in the late 1990s, two thirds of the couples had married without the payment of the bride price, again a proof that rural women are losing one of their main forms of protection, for without this payment they have no claim to land, and can be asked to leave their husbands’ homes at any time (Gray and Kevane 1999, 21).

Another tactic used to deny women’s land rights has been the redefinition of what constitutes kingship and who therefore “belongs” to the clan and who does not. As the recent conflicts in Kenya’s Rift Valley have shown, the politics of “othering” and “belonging” have been used to expel different ethnic or religious groups from the land. However, the same politics have been used to curtail women’s access to land by defining wives as outsiders, nonfamily members. Witchcraft accusations—the ultimate “othering” strategy—have served this purpose (Federici 2008). In Mozambique, in recent years, women who have insisted on demanding their deceased husbands’ land or their share of the crops have been accused of being witches and of having murdered their husbands to inherit their belongings (Bonate 2003, 115, 122).

Lands and crops too have been reclassified—along with increases in their monetary values—to demonstrate that men have unique title to them (Gray and Kevane 1999, 22). However, aside from these expedients, women’s access to land is increasingly precarious because the dual legal system enables men to strip women of their due. As Judy Adoko and Simone Levine from the Land and Equity Movement in Uganda explain:

... the fact that customarily a woman gained access to land via her husband is now (deliberately) confused with notions of individualized ownership. Thus, “[m]en is now claiming rights that under customary law they never had,” like selling land without consulting the family or even their wives. (Adoko and Levine 2005, 11)

Widows, divorcees, and women without male children have been particularly penalized. Often, widows can not hold on even to the property that the couple acquired together (Gray and Kevane 1999, 18) for they are threatened with expropriation by their husband’s in-laws, who can claim what he had, making some concessions only if the widow has sons and holds the property in

their name (Tanzania Gender Networking Programme 1997; Tripp 2004; Wanyeki 2003, 267).

The literature on women “land rights” is filled with stories of widows stripped of their belongings and forced to leave their homes by the relatives of the deceased. In an apparently typical case, one widow had hardly buried her husband, when she had to fight her in-laws trying to dig up their brother’s yams from her fields, despite her pleas that they leave some for her children. In another case, a Ugandan widow found out that her in-laws had sold her husband’s land behind her back when the new buyer came to evict her (Kimani 2008, 10). Mary Kimani reports that in Zambia, more than one third of widows lost access to the family land when the husband died (Kimani). Women in polygamous families are also among the losers, for men usually register only one wife, so that in case of divorce or death the other has no rights.

In sum, there is little doubt that customary laws as presently defined discriminate against women despite the fact that they are the bulk of the African farmers, the main producers of food—in many countries providing up to 70 percent of the food people consume—and they perform the majority of agricultural tasks: sowing, weeding, harvesting, storing, processing, and marketing (Snyder and Tadesse 1995, 17).

Because of these contradictions, women’s position on the African commons has been compared with that of “servants” or “bonded laborers,” being expected to provide various types of unpaid work to their male relations, without having control over the land they farm nor security of access to it (Bikaabo and Ssenkumba 2003, 262; Palmer 2002).

Lack of control over land implies for women also lack of control over their sexuality and reproductive functions. Access to land is often conditioned on irreproachable sexual behavior and at the same time, willingness to accept a husband’s extramarital relations and most important, it is conditioned on the ability to have sons (Palmer 2002, 263). Some women have more children than they desire hoping to gain a more secure access to land. More broadly, lack of control over land makes it difficult for women farmers to have some autonomy and lessens their bargaining power in the family, making them more vulnerable to sexual harassment and domestic violence (Palmer 2002, 246). It has also serious implications for people’s food security. Women are the bulk of subsistence farmers. In an economic environment where food is exported, land is taken out of production for mining and other business ventures, or is devoted to the cultivation of non edible crops, and where international institutions are pressing on African governments to convince them to import staple crops, their farming activities are essential to people’s survival.

Land is Women’s Right: Women’s Movement for Land Privatization

Given this situation, it is not surprising that the question of women’s relation to land and communal tenure should have become a central issue in African feminist politics. However, it was the United Nations (UN) campaign for

women's rights that put the land question on the feminist agenda and not in Africa alone (Tripp 2004; Wanyeki 2003). Similar movements to those who have formed in Africa in the 1990s have also developed in Latin America with similar strategies and demands (Deere and León 2001). By the 1990s, international policy-makers and developers had concluded that many rural development schemes intended to boost cash crop production had failed to materialize because they had "ignored women's contribution."

They had assumed that male farmers could easily recruit their wives as unpaid helpers, overlooking the fact that African women have always had their own economic activities separate from those of their husbands and that lack of secure access to land and other resources strengthened their reluctance to work at their husbands' dependence for free. Undoubtedly, the UN campaign for women's right was to remedy this situation, its efforts doubled by those of the World Bank, which in the same years was discovering women and the need to "genderize" its agenda. Thus, the prominence that the land question was given at the Beijing Conference of 1995 was the spark for women's land right movements across the planet.

In Africa as well, it is thanks to the support from the UN organizations and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that the women land rights movement gained momentum over the last decade. Scores of organizations have formed, conferences, workshops, and publications on women's land rights have proliferated. Meanwhile, the women who can afford it have pooled resources to purchase land—often using women's informal saving systems—not wanting to find themselves dispossessed in case of their husbands' deaths.

So far, despite institutional backing, the movement has scored few successes and even those have been "more declamatory than real" (Alden Wily 2001, 85). Only in Ethiopia and Eritrea have women been made "owners of the land they till" (Alden Wily 2001). However, here too the movement has faced an uphill battle. For even when statutory laws strengthen women's rights, there is resistance to their implementation. How entrenched the opposition to granting women broader land rights has been can be gauged by the fact that a mobilization of women's associations in Uganda could not secure the introduction of a clause giving wives co-ownership of land, when a Land Act was passed there in 1998. This defeat, in which President Museveni played a crucial role, may explain why many women are adamant about the need for stronger legal and constitutional provisions (Tripp 2005, 9).

The problem, however, is that by advocating laws that strengthen private ownership and the elimination of communal tenure, women's land rights organizations give support to the very liberalization program that has served to transfer thousands of acres of African land to foreign investors and dispossess millions of farmers, many of them women.

As Ambreena Manji writes, in *The Politics of Land Reform in Africa* (2006), by seeking social change through legal reform of land tenure, the women's land rights movement has embraced the language of international financial institutions and contributed to obliterate the question of land redistribution—the

African people's most crucial demand since the end of colonialism. It has also underwritten the use that international financial institutions are making of the law as a means for the globalization of capitalist relations and the placing of African localities under the control a transnational power structure (Manji 2006, 67–8, 99ff).

What Manji suggests is that African women should fight for more land rather than for more law; for buttressing individual land property is of little use when landlessness becomes a general condition.

Manji is not alone in her criticism. There is a widespread sense that the campaign for women's right to land represents the interests and viewpoint of a limited group of formally educated, economically better-off, mostly urban-based, middle-class women who have the money to buy land, pay the taxes that the acquisition of legal titles requires, and perhaps invest in some agricultural business (Moyo 2007; Palmer 2002).

There is also a justified concern that the demise of what remains of communal land tenure will tear apart rural African societies and intensify land disputes. Land for the majority of African people, women in particular, is the main means of production and subsistence. It is Africa's "social security system," more important than money and wages can be for Americans or Europeans, who have become used to the infinite precariousness and abstractness of monetary relations. Having some land at the village or the prospect of it at the end of a life of work away from it makes the difference for many between life and death or increasingly, between life in Africa and migration. Not surprisingly, land conflicts are the most bitter, most murderous ones, often resembling true wars. In this context, a key question is whether a privatizing legal reform will not worsen the social/economic position of rural women, who are the population that would be most directly affected by it. This is an important question, also keeping in mind that communal land tenure often involves access to a broader range of resources, such as trees—the pastoralists' "saving bank"—grazing grounds, forests, lakes, ponds (Barrow 1996, 267).

Significantly, both as individuals and through their organizations, rural women have demonstrated little interest in formal land ownership for much of the same reasons that male peasants have dismissed the importance of titling and registration. Rural women know that the land is scarce, that it belongs to the community, and that only wealthy people can buy it and do not want nor can pay the taxes formal ownership entails. Thus, though they are vitally interested in having more land and more security, they do not think of individual titling as the means to obtain it. Some women also fear that if they bought land, their husbands might feel threatened by it, seeing it as an attack on their power.

In view of these resistances, some women's organizations think they can negotiate a better deal working "within" the customary law system and outside the "rights" framework, while engaging in educational campaigns to change the power relations on the ground. As political theorists Bikaako and Ssenkumba put

it: "The solution seems to lie in a compromise position—away from completely abolishing customary law and practices and away from leaving land to the market" (2003, 276).

Presumably, by increasing women's participation in rural committees and decision-making processes, much can be gained without resorting to policies that risk expropriating the bulk of female farmers. However, it is doubtful that if the commercialization of land continues and land redistribution remains a dead letter, negotiations at the community level can make a significant difference in women's land security for the defining problem is that the commons are shrinking and the premise for a peaceful road to communal egalitarianism is more land.

Women against Enclosures: Land Appropriation and Urban Farming in Africa

What, then, is the destiny of the Africa's land commons seen from the viewpoint of women? Are continuing privatization and masculinization the inevitable outcomes of the present balance of forces on the land? Undoubtedly, as the recent bloodshed in Kenya and South Africa has demonstrated, the picture is not optimistic. As an African proverb has it: "When elephants fight, the grass underneath gets trampled upon," which means how can women gain more land when their communities are destroyed because the competition for land is driving people to despair? Land disputes and land expropriations are also at the root of the witch hunts that have taken place in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s in conjunction with the "adjustment" of African economies (Federici 2008; Heinfelaar 2007; Ogembo 2006).

Under these circumstances, feminists would agree that a broad-based mobilization is needed to build the power of women in every sphere of life: health, education employment, reproductive work as well as to ensure women's access to land. Short of it, all gains would be temporary and most hard to win. In the meantime, a different type of struggle has taken place that has been ignored by the literature and the initiatives in the field, which are largely dominated by institutionally supported NGOs working within a neoliberal framework.

While women land rights organizations have fought for stronger private property laws, rural movements have grown in Africa, resisting dispossession and/or struggling to de-privatize land by taking it over and squatting on it. An example is the Landless People's Movement in South Africa, which has developed over the last six years and whose backbone is women and youth. While negotiating with the government for the implementation of a redistributive land reform, the movement also favors land occupations as articulated in its 2004 Plan, which includes a "Take Back the Land Campaign" (Xezwi 2005, 185–7). Rural movements using direct action tactics have also been active in other parts of Southern Africa (Moyo 2007, 16–8).

However, perhaps the most significant land movement is one that does not call itself this way, appearing as a set of spontaneous and separate initiatives. This is the “movement” of landless women who have migrated to the towns and using direct action tactics have begun to appropriate and farm vacant plots of public land.

This practice is not new. A communistic culture is so engrained in African societies that even today, after decades of commercialization, a use of public space is accepted that would be unthinkable in Europe or in the U.S. Not only is roadside selling the norm, crops are grown on university campuses; in some southern Nigerian Universities, in some parts of the year, one can see cows pasturing on campus grass before being brought to the market.

Women, the bulk of subsistence farmers, have always cultivated any vacant land available to them. However, since the 1980s, as economic conditions have deteriorated, this practice has become more widespread, especially in the urban areas to which many have migrated.

Urban farming has evolved into an important economic activity for landless women and some men as well, providing the means by which many families manage to survive. In Accra (Ghana), urban gardens supply the city with 90 percent of its vegetables. In Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania), one adult in every five grows fruits or vegetables. In Guinea Bissau, in the capital city and other towns, women began in the early 1980s to surround their houses with vegetable gardens, planting cassava and fruit trees, in times of scarcity preferring to renounce the earnings they might have made selling their produce to ensure that their families would have enough food (Galli and Funk 1995, 20–1). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, too, there has been an explosion of “urbanization.” As described by Theodore Trefon, “manioc is planted all over the city, while goats graze along a central boulevard that is considered the Champs Elysees of Kinshasa” (Trefon 2002, 490). This picture is confirmed by Christa Wichterich. Calling subsistence farming and urban gardening “cooking pot economics,” she writes that:

There were onions and papaya trees, instead of flower-borders, in front of the housing estates of underpaid civil servants in Dar Es Salaam; chickens and banana plants in the backyards of Lusaka; vegetables on the wide central reservations of the arterial roads of Kampala, and especially of Kinshasa, where the food supply system had largely collapsed . . . In [Kenyan] towns [too] Ö green roadside strips, front gardens and wasteland sites were immediately occupied with maize, plants, sukum wiki, the most popular type of cabbage [which literally means “push the week”]. (Wichterich 2000, 73)

Most of the land that women farm is public or private land that they have appropriated—along roadsides, rail lines, in parks—without asking anyone’s permission or paying anyone a fee. In this sense, we can say that this land is the beginning of a common in that its appropriation produces a different relationship

than that we have to public space. It is a relation of direct management and responsibility, restoring people's symbiosis with the natural environment.

Keeping the land clean and farming it is a big addition to women's workloads, particularly when the plot is not near their homes. There are also many risks involved: theft or destruction of the crops, police harassment, and of course, urban pollution. As Freeman describes it, on the basis of the interviews he conducted with female farmers in Nairobi, in the early 1990s, women use many devices to confront these problems and hide their crops. However, the difficulties they meet are compensated by the satisfaction they gain from being able to provide their families with extra food and a more varied diet, and from being self-supporting. Urban farming is also, for women, an assertion of autonomy as it gives them some independence from their families and the market (Freeman 1993, 14). Some women build subsidiary activities out of it, such as processing and selling the food they grow. Not surprisingly, Freeman found that urban farming is an activity that many women continue even when they have a job, a proof that something more than pure survival is at stake.

What is at stake can be described in Fantu Cheru's words as the "silent revolution of the poor," (Cheru 2005, 78) by which he refers to the growth of self-help activities among peasants and urban poor, who seeing that the state is "becoming irrelevant to them" are reclaiming "the self-reliance that was theirs until the advent of the modern nation state." It is a revolution that is not organized, though it requires careful/strategic thinking and planning and a readiness to battle to defend land and crops. It also appears as a proliferation of individual initiatives rather than a collective process. However, this appearance is misleading. Women urban farmers learn from each other, gain from each other's example the courage to become more self-supporting. There are also unspoken rules establishing which land can be taken and who has precedence to it, and there is a collective transformation of the social and physical reality of the cities. In disobedience of city laws, and to the disappointment of urban planners, who from colonial times have tried to reserve Africa cities for the elite, urban farmers are breaking down the separation between town and country and converting African cities into gardens (Freeman 1993, 19–20). They are also putting limits to urban development plans and commercial housing when it destroys communities and the residents' ability to support themselves with farming.

An example is the struggle that women have made in the Kawaala neighborhood of Kampala (Uganda) where the World Bank, in conjunction with the City Council in 1992–1993 sponsored a large housing project that would destroy much subsistence farm land around or near people's homes. Women strenuously organized against it through the formation of a Residents' Committee, eventually forcing the Bank to withdraw from the project. As one of the women leaders put it:

Women were more vocal [than men] because they were directly affected. It is very hard for women to stand without any means of income. . . . most of these

women are people who basically support their children and without any income and food they cannot do it . . . You come and take their peace and income and they are going to fight, not because they want to, but because they have been oppressed and suppressed. (Quoted in Trill 2000, 183)

The struggle in the Kawaala neighborhood is not unique. Similar struggles have been reported in different parts of Africa and Asia, where peasant women's organizations have opposed the development of industrial zones threatening to displace them and their families and/or contaminate the environment.

What these struggles show is that in defending land from the assault by commercial interests and affirming the principle that "land and life are not for sale," women are also defending their history and culture. In the case of Kawaala, residents on the disputed land had been living there for generations and had buried there their kin—for many Ugandans the ultimate proof of land ownership. Reflecting on it, Tripp comments that

. . . the residents, especially the women involved, were trying to institutionalize some new norms for community mobilization, not just in Kawaala but more widely in providing a model for other community projects. They had a vision of a more collaborative effort that took the needs of women, widows, children, and the elderly as a starting point and recognized their dependence on the land for survival. (Tripp 2000, 194)

It is this implicit vision that gives significance to African women's land takeovers and struggles. By appropriating land, they are in fact voting for a different "moral economy" from that promoted by the World Bank and other international developers that, for years, have tried to eradicate subsistence farming on the ground that that land becomes productive only when brought as collateral for credit to the bank. It is an economy built on a noncompetitive, solidarity-centered mode of life. Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies call it the "other" economy saying that it "puts everything necessary to produce and maintain life on this planet at the centre of economic and social activity and not the never-ending accumulation of dead money" (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999, 5).

African women's struggle for the commons has also taken the form of a mobilization against the destruction of natural resources. The best known initiative in this context is the "Green Belt Movement," which under the leadership of Wangari Mathai has been planting a green belt around the main Kenyan cities and since 1977, has planted several millions of trees to prevent deforestation, soil loss, desertification, and fuel wood scarcity (Maathai 2008). However, the most striking struggle for the survival of the forests is taking place in the Niger Delta, where the mangrove tree swamps are being threatened by oil production. Opposition to it has mounted for twenty years, beginning in Ogharefe where in 1984, several thousand women from the area laid siege to Pan Ocean's Production Station, demanding compensation for the destruction of the water, trees, and land. To show their determination, the women threatened to disrobe should their demands be frustrated—a threat

which they soon put in action. When the company's director arrived, he found himself surrounded by thousands of naked women, a serious curse in the eyes of the Niger Delta communities, which convinced him to accept the reparation claims (Turner and Oshare 1994, 140–1).

Conclusion

While a new scramble for Africa is under way, it is evident that African women are not passive observers of the expropriation of their communities and their struggle for more land and more security will play a key role in shaping the future of the African commons. However, their strategies seem to move in opposite directions. Thus, an important conclusion to be drawn from an analysis of these struggles is that communalism in Africa is in crisis, undermined not only by outside forces but by the divisions among the commoners, starting with the divisions between women and men and continuing with those among women themselves.

At the same time, new commons are being created and we can be sure that the efforts to de-privatize land will continue to grow. For as the “food crisis,” among other “disasters,” demonstrates, the reappropriation of land and the creation of alternatives to the money economy and the market are today conditions for millions of people across the planet not only of personal and collective autonomy but physical survival.

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Notes

1. Customary Law is the complex of traditions that governed life and the management and distribution of land in precolonial African societies. In the majority of African countries, it is still part of the legal system, coexisting with statutory law and often with British Law and Sharia Law.
2. An example of how customary laws were reconstructed is G. S. Snell's Nandi Customary Law (Snell 1986). A British anthropologist, Snell conducted extensive interviews with local chiefs, trying to assess how the laws had changed under British colonial rule. He pointed out that only with time did customary laws evolve into static codes. For abundance of land and other resources made their provisions originally very flexible, and not in need of great detailing (xii).

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