

Retelling Our Stories, Redefining Our Heroes
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The ability to remain undeterred in our most passionate pursuits is a huge step towards success. This has been the basis for extraordinary transformations throughout history – the decision to reach inside without restraint and unearth one’s capacity to be an agent of change. Instances abound where human determination has surmounted seemingly impregnable forces. Africa and its Diaspora are replete with such stories, many of which are yet to be told.

In 1929, thousands of southeastern Nigerian women handed the colonial administration its first major challenge when they organized a massive revolt against taxation policies imposed on market women. The rebellion was a prime instance of feminist and anti-colonial crusades several years before such rhetoric became a part of common parlance. Gathering in large numbers at various administrative offices, the women questioned the new tax laws and confronted power-crazed “warrant chiefs” that had been appointed to serve as local agents of the British through the system of indirect rule. Effectively using song and dance as vehicles of ridicule and denunciation, they forced some of the chiefs to resign. As the protests gathered momentum, the women became more aggressive, attacking and looting European owned stores and banks as well as native courts managed by British officials, some of which they burned to the ground. The colonial police were eventually called in to intervene and fired into the crowds, killing several women. It is estimated that about 25,000 women participated in this revolt, which compelled colonial authorities to revoke their intended imposition of taxes and to significantly clip the powers of the warrant chiefs.

Seventeen years later, in 1946, a similar uprising began in Abeokuta in western Nigeria (Egbaland), when market women objected to arbitrary colonial taxes and the apparent failure of their traditional rulers to address their grievances. Some of the methods allegedly adopted to force women to pay taxes were degrading and entailed beating them up and searching their houses. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a teacher and mother of celebrated musician, Fela, subsequently established the highly effective, Abeokuta Women’s Union (AWU) – estimated to be 20,000 members strong – which organized massive, protracted anti-tax demonstrations, some of which were held outside the palace of the Egba King (Alake of Egbaland), Oba Ademola II. In spite of being challenged by a police force that utilized teargas among other aggressive methods, the women remained steadfast and in the end their demands were met, leading to the abdication of the King in 1949.

These uprisings were among the earliest campaigns against British rule in Nigeria and West Africa during the colonial era. The women were armed with their conviction, united by their determination and motivated by a sense of dignity and justice. Otherwise, they were technically powerless since they were still deemed socially inferior and subservient to their menfolk. A significant number of them were not formally educated and did not have the privilege of engaging the colonial master diplomatically, whether at home or abroad. Still, these women were trailblazers in resisting colonial domination and are rarely recognized in historical accounts that continue to glorify men whose later impact, though noble, were heavily facilitated by education, status and gender.

There are other more recent stories that display unusual determination, even if they are not all informed by collective action. In the 1970s and 80s, for instance, Nigerian musician, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti singularly accused, challenged, exposed and withstood military dictatorships with a ferocity and audacity that remain unmatched. Fela's music and political views were deeply influenced by the 1960s Black Power Movement in the United States, which engendered the birth of his unique "Afrobeat" style – a blending of Yoruba and African rhythms with American blues and jazz. His hit song, "Zombie" criticized and ridiculed robotic compliance as well as the suppressive impact of regimental military traditions and administrations.

In 1977, Fela's "Kalakuta Republic" (an imposing residence and commune-cum-recording studio) was attacked and burned down by soldiers, during which his elderly mother was hurled from a two-storey window and suffered fatal injuries. Although the government released statements that blamed the attack on Fela's recalcitrance, widespread opinion has maintained that it was simply retribution from an army that was infuriated by the release of "Zombie." Undeterred by the death of his mother and clashes with the military, Fela rebuilt his musical outfit and continued to use it as a channel for criticizing political exploitation and military rule until his death in 1997. More than a brilliant performer, he emerged as a formidable cultural rebel and voice of the deprived masses. His audacity was perhaps best demonstrated in his release of "Army Arrangement" in 1985, which, this time, undoubtedly lambasted a corrupt and unruly Nigerian army. In a brazen style for which Fela had become notorious, he mentioned specific military personnel in the song and listed their crimes.

There is an enduring link between the Mandelas, the Ellen Sirleaf Johnsons, the Felas and the defiant Nigerian women, all of whom were inspired by their unyielding faith in a set objective and mission. They rejected the constraints of doubt, weakness and fear, all of which serve as principal impediments against progress. They took a stand for something that they believed in, they had a strong sense of optimism, a desire for empowerment, a grand ambition and an unwavering tenacity. In other words, they

embody the seeds of regeneration that Africa is certainly not lacking but that need to be uncovered and set in motion.

Africa's stories of achievement need to be recounted over and over again by ourselves. No one else can tell your story quite like you. Evolving from an oral tradition, the African storyteller has always served the sacred role of preserving history, of teaching, of upholding societal mores and values, of sustaining commonality, of disseminating information, of entertaining and of energizing the people. It is a role that has not changed, not even within modern, urban settings, and where it has been lost it can still be reclaimed. Beyond recounting our stories, we also need to revise them so that they do not become a predictable recycling of similar themes and personalities.

As we re-explore our stories, we must also pay attention to those characters that do not fall within the elite category of kings, queens and lords. Most people do not belong to a favored group but it is mainly to this vast majority that we are grateful for sustenance, growth and security – the same majority that history tends to forget. They flaunt unshakable courage; their achievements are extraordinary, their survival instinct confounding. Within their heroic stories lies an unmitigated and largely untapped source of strength and restoration in the face of difficulty.

We must therefore visit and revisit the uneducated grandmother single-handedly (but successfully) raising several grandchildren whose parents have succumbed to war or disease. We must try to understand and learn from the mindset of the 12-year old orphan who refuses to topple under the weight of taking care of three younger siblings, all fellow orphans. We must pay attention to the mechanic who performs technological feats without the advantage of formal training or the privilege of standard machinery. It is important that we learn and build on the creative ingenuity and fortitude of these Africans.

As we review our stories, we will recognize in them the ingredients that are needed for growth. Much like fertile ground is needed for germination, the creativity of Africans is in dire need of a conducive and nurturing setting and not handouts that rarely reach or inspire the people. There are enough Africans that are willing to work to create that conducive environment. Together, we can usher in a new era of enlightenment as opposed to book knowledge that promises employment, so that we reach boldly on the inside and seize what we already possess.