

THE PUBLIC SPHERE, WOMEN AND THE CASAMANCE PEACE PROCESS

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Abstract: Women in the Casamance are traditionally confined to the private sphere as mothers, wives and farmers while a few are female priests. The protracted nature of the Casamance conflict has had devastating effects on the civilian population including women. But it has also provided opportunities for women to contribute to the peace process thereby thrusting them into the public sphere, which otherwise, is the domain of men. The paper focuses on the reconciliatory efforts in the Casamance showing the link between the public sphere, women and the resolution of conflicts. It will also proffer solutions that can lead to a more inclusive process, taking into consideration the exclusionary approach of the Casamance peace efforts which has contributed significantly to the failure to achieve durable solution to the conflict.

Keywords: Casamance peace process, the public sphere, women.

INTRODUCTION

The public sphere is that communicative space that allows citizens to interact with a view to dealing with issues of common concerns. The public sphere also promotes discursive relations that are outside the private sphere.¹ In other words, the public sphere is beyond the domestic or private sphere, which is concerned with interpersonal and relational issues. The public sphere exhibits gender roles that distinguish it from the private sphere. While the private is perceived as the feminine domain the public sphere is regarded as a masculine domain.

From a broader perspective a peace process involves all efforts to prevent the outbreak of

violent conflict, restore cooperative relations between warring parties and ensure that peaceful relations are maintained after the cessation of hostilities. In other words, a peace process involves the various stages of conflict management which include conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace building efforts. With regards to the Casamance peace process much of the efforts were focused at resolving the conflicts beginning from 1982 when the violence erupted in Ziguinchor, the regional capital of the Casamance.²

The resolution of the Casamance conflict featured mainly men on either side. The predominance of men in governance has been a universal norm since government officials and militant organizations are headed by men. As such, men are the majority among mediators and negotiators who are representatives of warring parties. Women are not totally excluded especially in cases where they are in positions of authority, but this is often the exception and not the norm. In the case of the Casamance peace process very few women were involved as either representatives of the Senegalese government or the Movement of the democratic forces which demonstrates the patriarchal nature of peace processes. A majority of women were involved as members of civil society and as such they have not been able to influence the peace process decisively. The need to ensure gender balance in the search for peace is important as the involvement of official representatives of warring parties confers legitimacy on a resolution process and it is at this level that terms of agreement are recognized. The involvement of official representatives of the state is important in the politics of resolving conflicts whether the conflict involves groups within the state such as the Aguleri-Umuleri.

Ife-Modakeke crisis.³ This is also the case in conflicts between the state and groups such as the civil war in Sudan, the Niger Delta crisis and the Casamance conflicts where the militant organization are engaged in long drawn armed conflict with the Sudanese, Nigerian and Senegalese states respectively.⁴ To this extent, conflict resolution can be seen as the continuation of the normal business of governance, which tends to be the exclusive preserve of men, since they dominate the political sphere at almost all levels of administration. The predominance of men in government excludes women from actual deliberations so that a majority of women make up the unofficial and unarmed actors in the efforts to resolve conflicts.

While this has been the practice in Africa and elsewhere, there have been noticeable changes in the role of women in conflict situations. Firstly, there has been an increase in the population of women involved in governance. There has also been an increase in the number of women engaged in actual combats in the recent times. Based on a study of some African conflicts including Sierra-Leone and Liberia, John Lahai, agrees that the participation of women in actual combats has increased but adds that they are more engaged in resource and opportunistic driven wars.⁵ Similarly, Lahai also observes that although politics is still the exclusive preserve of men, there has been a relative increase in the number of women parliamentarians in some African countries. Women's political representation increased by 11.7 % in Chad 17.3% in Burundi and 11.9% in Senegal between 1990 and 1993.⁶ In spite of the impressive accounts women are still largely excluded from conflict resolution processes and this partly explains the global outcry for a greater representation of women in peacemaking efforts.

With regards to the Casamance conflict, women and children were a bulk of the unarmed population who died or survived and have been subjected to all forms of deprivation. A majority of women became a part of internally displaced persons (IDP'S) and refugees. Apart from the displacements, the sustained periods of armed violence in the Casamance has had a destabilising effect on family structures where women play prominent roles.⁷ Nevertheless, the war has provided a basis for agitation by Casamance women and this in turn has increased awareness on the part of political

leaders to grant women greater access in deliberations to resolve it. Women in Casamance have been able to contribute to the Casamance peace efforts through several civil society organisations and this has translated to an increase in the participation of women in the public sphere.

1. ORIGIN OF THE CONFLICT AND A REVIEW OF THE PEACE PROCESS

The Casamance conflict involves the Mouvement des forces démocratique de la Casamance (MFDC), which is mainly dominated by the Jola and the Senegalese government (GOS), controlled by the Wolof ethnic group. The southern part of Senegal is known as the Casamance territory.⁷ The territory is located in the rain and swamp forest vegetation belt of Senegal and is inhabited by the Jola, Fulakhunda and the Manding, who constitute Senegal's minorities. The majority ethnic groups inhabit the northern region of Senegal and include the Tokolor, Fula, Sereer and the Wolof. The Wolof alone, make up about one third of Senegal's population and they dominate the socio-economic and political process of the state.⁸

The origin of the Casamance conflict is rooted in the territorial arrangements that were reached by the European powers at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1886 and the establishment of the French colonial administration afterwards.⁹ The partition was such that, Casamance which was a Portuguese territory was transferred to the French in 1886. The Casamance territory was administratively merged with northern Senegal with the result that northern and southern Senegal are separated by the state of Gambia.¹⁰ Senegal's early colonial history and the territorial isolation of Casamance explains, the claims of marginalisation by the Movement of the Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) and the demand for independence. The MFDC resorted to violence against the Senegalese government (GOS) from 1982 under the leadership of a Jola Catholic priest, Augustine Diamacounne Senghor. In addition to the isolation of Casamance, other reasons for agitation by the MFDC revolve around the adoption of the land policy of 1964 which the government of Senegal began to implement from 1972. The land policy made it possible for northerners who inhabit the arid region of northern Senegal to acquire strategically located land in the fertile Casamance region.¹¹ In spite of

these factors, the conflict has been blamed on ethnicity, since it involves the Wolof and Jola who are culturally distinct ethnic groups.¹² Initially the MFDC was a political association but became a militant organisation from the early 1980's. Since 1981, the MFDC and the GOS have been engaged in intermittent violence and by 1998, the conflict spread to Guinea-Bissau.¹³ Ironically, the escalation of the conflict and its regional spread intensified the search for peace from the state, regional and international organisations and actors. The regionalization of the conflict coincided with the emergence of Abdoulaye Wade as the President of Senegal in 2000.¹⁴ Wade's liberal stance with regards to Casamance peace efforts encouraged the participation of civil society groups and ultimately created avenues for women to contribute to the peace process.

2. CASAMANCE WOMEN AS PEACEMAKERS

The involvement of women in the Casamance peace process can be traced to 1943, when Aline Sitoe Diatta, a Jola female priest, began to preach against the policies of the French colonial government. Sitoe relied on preaching as a means of asking her fellow the Jola to reject the requisition for cattle and rice made by the colonial administration in Dakar which was to boost food supply during the Second World War. She also preached against the planting of groundnut and particular grain of rice as requested by the colonial government and opposed the conscription of men into the French army. The refusal to obey the French authorities was on the ground that many of the Jola men who fought in the First World War, never returned home.¹⁵ Sitoe was arrested by the French colonial government and deported to Mali where she died and was buried. She has since become a motivating factor for Casamance nationalism as the demand for her remains constitutes a major basis of disagreement between the MFDC and the Senegalese government. Sitoe has remained an icon and is celebrated as the Casamance 'Joan of Arc'.¹⁶

The Sitoe incident marked the early Casamance resistance and nationalism. Apart from its propaganda effect, Sitoe's efforts has been used to mobilise Jola elements in the Casamance. It is also clear that apart from the emotional attachment to Sitoe's bravery in confronting the French colonial government as a woman, the MFDC became a men's affair and was founded

by some of the Casamance male elite including Emile Badiane, Ibou Diallo and Asane Seck.¹⁷ Although women were not included in the founding of the MFDC, they were to play significant roles in the Casamance peace efforts, in later years.

One of the first incidents which involved women as peace makers was the Djignabo incident of 1980, popularly referred to, as the Lyceen Djignabo incident. The protest was organized by secondary school students of the Djignabo High School in Ziguinchor. The protest can be regarded as part of the general wave of protests that swept through Senegal as a reaction to government's decision to cut down students stipends as a result of Senegal's dwindling economy. Apart from protesting the slash, the students were also demanding the removal of the school's principal, who was not a Jola. Attempts by the Senegalese government authorities to disperse the protesters led to the death of a male student. The death of the student further intensified tension in the city of Ziguinchor and the women of the region mobilized under the platform of the Association of Initiated Women and Priestesses (USANA).¹⁸ During the protests, women adorned their heads with calabash hats, carrying red brooms in their hands and marched to the principal's office, the governor's office and the police station.¹⁹ The women used the occasion to demonstrate their anger at the killing of the student and hoped that the peaceful protest march could bring about some changes both in the school and the Casamance as a whole. After the incident, women continued to contribute to the political stability in Casamance territory by expressing their discontent through peaceful protests.

Women featured significantly in the 1982 protest march, tagged the '1000-man pacifist walk', and was led by the Secretary General of the MFDC, L'Abbe Augustine Diamacounne and Ansoumane Abba Bodian. The accounts state that women participated in the peaceful protest adorned in their traditional attires. The women wore charms and carried the branches of palm fonts. Some carried calabashes and together with the men chanted traditional songs.²⁰ The aim of the protests was to draw the attention of the Senegalese government to the plight of the Casamancais (people of Casamance).

Apart from their physical involvement in the demonstrations, it is important to note that, the

Jola women actually initiated the 1982 protest march. Their role as initiators of this protest is one that has antecedents in the Jola traditional society. Like several other African societies, the Jola society is patriarchal in structure. In spite of this, Jola women play significant roles in the traditional institutions. The Jola traditional society revolves around the worship of the Sacred Bush institution, which is, the soul of the community and a symbol of traditional and political authority. According to Marrie Diatta, irrespective of their educational background, social status and religious inclinations most Jola identify with the indigenous religion which is mainly practiced in secluded forests. Such designated forests are regarded as the sacred bush. The religion involves the performance of rituals, age grade initiation and ceremonies that take place at planting and harvest times.²¹ Traditionally, the sacred bush is where social disputes are settled based on local customs so that the indigenous Jola religion is an important aspect of the village of conflict management.²² The religious practice of the Jola exhibits specific gender roles with men placed at the hierarchy and excising authority while women play complimentary roles as priestesses. Priestesses are initiated and among other duties they are the keepers of the fetishes used during traditional ceremonies. The priestesses also use their office as female priests to disseminate information and mobilise women for social and political events in the communities. During the 1982 protest, women gathered in the sacred bush near Oussouye, one of the major Jola dominated towns in Casamance, to perform some rituals. These activities included the chanting of incantations to the gods and the offering of prayers. This was followed by the collection of a heap of sand by the women which they used to make fetishes in several sacred bushes in the community. Having performed these rituals, the women accepted the pledge of the men to fight for the independence of Casamance.²³ The role women played at the beginning of Casamance resistance showed that women were more concerned with peaceful change. Although the women shared a common desire for the attainment of Casamance independence, they shunned actual violence but rather provided emotional and spiritual support for their men.

The repressive response by the GOS to the 1982 protesters, led to the escalation of the conflict and ironically the violent phase stimulated wider interest by civil society groups within the region as well as associations which have women as

members. The arrest and detention of many of the MFDC leaders including Diamacoune Senghor, became the basis for more protests. The women in Casamance reacted in 1983 and during the protest they marched naked in the streets as a form of protest²⁴. Nudity is a common practice in Africa and elsewhere. It is mainly used by women to express extreme anger. It is often adopted as the highest price to be paid by women to reverse, a situation that is considered to have grave consequences on the citizenry. At the level of traditional society, nudity can be used as a veritable tool in the management and resolution of conflicts because it is believed to have dire consequences on those who are considered to be offenders. The recourse to nudity by the Jola women attracted attention with many of international media flashing the incident as a major news item. To a great extent, the case of Casamance women shows that nudity has lost its potency as a conflict management strategy. Nevertheless, the incident was indicative of the sacrifice women were willing to pay in return for durable peace in Casamance. More importantly, the incident also became a source of inspiration to Casamance women elsewhere who were motivated to contribute their quota to Casamance peace process. The Casamance continued to experience intermittent violence with attendant problems of insecurity to life and property of the inhabitants of the Bignogna and Ziguinchor region where the fighting has been heaviest.²⁵

Outside the traditional fiat, women have continued to use existing civil society organisations as platforms to contribute their quota to the peace process. One of the associations that played a key role in the Casamance peace process, was the Association de jeune agriculture Casamance pour la promotion de L'Arrondissement de Nyassia (APRAN). Women constitute 850 of the 1100 members of the association.²⁶ The association had been active in the area of agricultural development in the Casamance region since the 1970s focusing on the dehydration of fruits such as mangos, which has become a source of foreign exchange earnings. With the cycle of violence in the Casamance, members of APRAN channeled their efforts to the restoration of peace to the Casamance region. The association became increasingly involved in the rehabilitation projects especially with the rise in the population of internally displaced persons and refugees in the region. APRAN's

commitment to peace attracted the attention of the GOS and as a result, the association was able to facilitate the peace agreements of 1992, between the MFDC and the GOS.²⁷ In acknowledgement of APRAN's role in the Casamance peace efforts, the organisation was selected as a participant in the special Senegalese project, which was attended by the Senegalese military and civil society groups in 1993. Such efforts have helped to build create possibilities for closer relations between the Senegalese military and the representatives of groups in Casamance.²⁸

The continued demand for Casamance independence by the MFDC partly explains the restriction on the participation of civil society groups by the Senegalese government. Consequently, the Casamance peace process was exclusionary and the approach is often the posture taking by states especially in the instances where the sovereignty of the state is likely to be undermined. In the case of Senegal, the continued demand for Casamance independence by the MFDC was a secessionist bid. Although military action was principally directed at the MFDC rebels, with the aim of weakening the organizations resolve, it also deterred civilians from mobilizing for peace for fear of being arrested, tortured or even imprisoned without fair trial.

As a result of the militarist approach by the GOS several civil society groups including women groups in the Casamance were constrained from participating in the peace process. For instance, in 1993 the Yewwi-Yewwu, a Dakar-based feminist association, organized a protest march with the aim of launching a new organization to be known as Mouvement des femmes pour la Paix en Casamance (MOSEFAC).²⁹ The organization comprised mainly of Casamance women residing in Dakar. However, the movement was not allowed to take off, as the GOS prohibited its existence.

One of the organisations which played a central role in mobilizing women in the Casamance was the Conseil Des Ong D'appui au Developpment (CONGAD). CONGAD is an umbrella body embodying several other smaller associations in Casamance and its major objective is to promote agricultural development and inter-communal relations. With the war, the organisation helped redirect the focus of local associations to include the promotion of peace in Casamance. Some of such activities include the organisation of

meetings where members of the smaller associations could interact, establish relationships and forge a common interest in issues of development and peace. Other activities include training in food processing and various cropping technics. One of the associations under the umbrella of CONGAD, Association Culturel d'Aid a la promotion Educatif et Sociler (ACAPES) led by Seynabou Male Cisse, contributed to the peace process by conducting studies with a view to emphasizing the importance of women in the area of conflict resolution. Such studies helped to raise the consciousness of women with a view to showing greater concern in the Casamance peace efforts.³⁰

An organisation which gained recognition for its Casamance peace efforts at the regional level was the Comite Regional de Soliditaire des Femmes pour la paix en Casamance (CRSFP). Members of the association were among other civil society groups that attended the Banjul Conference of 1998.³¹ The Conference was organized by the governments of Guinea Bissau and Gambia with the support of the GOS. The major aim of the conference was to bring all parties in the Casamance conflict to negotiate a settlement that is acceptable to all. At the conference, women expressed their desire to participate in the peace talks, but were denied the chance to contribute to actual deliberations. However, under pressure from the women, the conveners of the conference allowed them to make a presentation, during which they made a passionate plea for peace to be restored to the Casamance. Commenting on the relegation of women to the status of observers at the conference, Eye and Massey observed, "traditional and notably Jola, patriarchal and status norms were observed and grassroots social structures were not represented, in particular the Kafoo gender groupings, leading to a negligible involvement of women and youths".³² The exclusion of women in the Banjul peace process can be regarded as a great omission especially in view of the fact that women have suffered from the negative impact of the conflict and as victims, they were best suited to contribute to its resolution. Besides, the history of the conflict shows that women have been involved in the Casamance struggles since the days of Aline Siteo Diatta.

After the 1998 Banjul Conference, a breakaway group of CRSFP formed another association in 2000 called the Kabonketoor.³³ The organisation

tended to be exclusive in its membership as a majority of its members were Jola women. Another criticism against the organization is that the language of communication was in Jola while many of its deliberations were held in Sacred Bush. In spite of its ethnic coloration, the organisation continued to use the traditional fiat to mobilise support from the Jola women to seek peace in the Casamance. Members of Kabonketoor organized rallies in several Casamance towns to mobilise women to support peace in the Casamance.³⁴

A major aspect of the Casamance peace efforts, which provided the vent for women's participation at the local level, was the organisation of Cultural Weekends in various locations in Casamance. The Cultural Weekends were sponsored by the World Education and were primarily aimed at reviving the associative life of the indigenous groups and by implication restore the village conflict management regime. Women were part of the social peace building activities which included storytelling, poetry, music and dance. These activities were avenues to promote reconciliation between communities and families who had been torn apart by the prolonged conflict.³⁵

The peace campaign of 2003 was another occasion that allowed women to contribute to the Casamance peace process.³⁶ The Senegalese government mobilized the youths, religious leaders, women, musicians and civil servants to embark on peace rallies and sensitization campaigns. The aim of the sensitization campaign was to extend the peace process to the unofficial members of the warring parties and such a citizen-centered approach helped to move the parties towards a more co-operative interaction. As expected, the mass rallies helped to build an atmosphere of positive change in the Casamance and this gave the GOS more confidence to increase its presence in the region. Consequently, the Wade administration held a cabinet meeting in Ziguinchor, the regional capital of the Casamance. In the past, Ziguinchor was not the choice of venue for such important government meetings. Thus, women were not excluded from what can be regarded as a practical implementation of the policy of integration of the isolated Casamance territory. The act, although, appeared inconsequential, was a step in the right direction considering that Dakar has remained Senegal's administrative and commercial capital since the colonial period.

Most women participated in the Casamance peace process within their local groups, and in a few instances as individuals. Lucy Shouk, a female Jola entrepreneur was one female who contributed to the Casamance peace process. Using the radio, she was able to disseminate messages to people in the Ziguinchor region and promote peace by providing opportunities for skill acquisition for women. She also used the same medium to train women in textile and juice making and other local crafts using locally available products. On the whole her peace programme was based on the attainment of peace through development.³⁶

A combination of these earlier efforts in which women played significant roles culminated in the celebrated peace pact of 2004. The peace agreement between the MFDC and the GOS was significant as it was witnessed by over 3,000 people at the Ziguinchor stadium.³⁷ According to some accounts the attendance of women was appreciable especially since many of them were already mobilized through the existing local associations.³⁹

SUMMARY

The escalation of the Casamance conflict and its regional spread necessitated interaction between actors beyond the domestic sphere. This level of interaction is understandable, given that the state was one of the conflicting parties. Initially, women tended to play complimentary roles using their traditional offices and associations, which appeared to confine them largely to the domestic sphere. However, the escalation of the conflict and its negative consequences generated greater public concern. With the escalation many international organizations became interested and focused on the involvement of the civilian population in the peace process. The existence of local associations provided the platforms for bringing women who are members into the Casamance peace efforts. It was with the broadening of the peace process that the conflict entered the de-escalation phase.

The regionalization also attracted the attention of international and non-governmental organisations such as the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Ford Foundation, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Frederick Ebert Foundation.⁴⁰ The increase in the activity of these organizations became sources of funding for the civil society

groups without which many of the local organisation would have been less active in the Casamance peace process. Such funding helped to activate local associations which had women as their members. But for the support of these organisations, the women's groups merely functioned as agricultural associations. Therefore, a major impediment to women's participation in the resolution of the Casamance conflict was the lack of funding.

Similarly there were other constraints that prevented women from playing more active roles in the Casamance peace process. One of this was their lack of institutional capacity. This factor partly, explains why the several associations that were engaged in the peace process were headed by men. For instance, the most prominent organisations working for peace in Casamance such as APRAN, CONGAD and World Education are headed by men, such as Demba Keita, Mane Martin and Abdou Sarr.⁴¹ The marginalisation of men in leadership and decision-making positions is clearly demonstrated in APRAN, where women constitute over three quarters of its membership.

The patriarchal structure of the associations also influenced women's representation at the Banjul conference of 1998. It was also observed that only five women were allowed to make a presentation at the conference. The figure was abysmally low as the conference was attended by over 150 delegate.⁴² For the most part negotiations were between the MFDC hierarchy and the representatives of the GOS and this demonstrates that the Senegalese government acted from the point of view that women were not in a position to influence the cycle of violence or its resolution. This is a reflection of the perception that women are the weaker sex, whose role should be confined to the domestic sphere. On the contrary, the Casamance women operate from a position of strength in many ways. Agriculture contributes over 70% of the region's economy and women constitute about half the population in this sector.⁴³ Rice is the major crop grown in the area and Casamance alone has the capacity to provide the rice needs of Senegal. Rice farming, and oyster picking are activities mainly dominated by the women.⁴⁴ Apart from the central role of women in agriculture, population figures show that women constitute over 58% of Senegal's population and this figure roughly represents the proportion of women in the Casamance.⁴⁵

It is generally stated that women are more predisposed to working for peace. According to Ntahobari and Ndayaziga, women are 'more concerned about what threatens life'. They also note, African women are peaceful beings, who personify gentleness and goodness.⁴⁶ Generally, the women in Casamance and elsewhere fit into these widely held views, but not so snugly particularly in situations of violent conflicts. Reports show that some of the women have acted to the contrary in the course of the Casamance conflict. Women in Casamance have acted as spies while others have been involved in the illicit trade in drugs and arms. In other cases the women have helped to conceal arms and provided safe havens for soldiers who are friends, brothers and husbands.⁴⁷ Such contradictory roles are not peculiar to Casamance women alone. In the Rwandan conflict, women participated in the genocide and many offered protection to combatants.⁴⁸ Thus, women are sometimes remotely involved in activities that sustain conditions of armed violence. The diverse roles women have played in the Casamance conflict demonstrates that women represent a significant link in the chain of participants that have sustained the cycle of protracted violence in the southern Senegalese territory and are then needed to secure a lasting peace. Thus, the exclusion of women is likely to force women into activities that are inimical to peace initiatives particularly at the grass root level where they play central roles in daily social activities.

In assessing the role of actors institutions in the resolution of West African conflicts, Biaya notes that the role of women in the Casamance peace process has been limited.⁴⁹ However, in view of the patriarchal structure of the Jola society and the constraints posed by government's policies, Casamance women have exhibited their potential to perform roles in the public sphere and in particular, the area of conflict resolution. The limited participation of women in the Casamance peace process, is also an indication that there is need to promote and equalize the role of women in the political sphere, which will then create a smooth transition for women to play more functional roles in the area of conflict resolution. This position has been the resolution of the United Nations at the Beijing Conference of 1995 and again reiterated in 2000 and 2005.⁵⁰ The adoption of this resolution was based on the realisation that women constitute 'a fundamental force for leadership, conflict resolution and the promotion of lasting peace at

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