

# Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies

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Volume 6  
Issue 1 *Women's Activism for Gender Equality  
in Africa*

Article 3

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12-1-2008

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### Recommended Citation

Musandu, Phoebe (2008) "Drawing from the Wells of Culture: Grace Onyango and the Kenyan Political Scene (1964-1983)," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 3.

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## Chapter 2

### Drawing from the Wells of Culture: Grace Onyango and the Kenyan Political Scene (1964-1983)

*Phoebe Musandu*<sup>1</sup>

#### *Abstract*

This paper examines the career of Grace Onyango in a bid to recover the history of independent Kenya's most prominent female politician. To find success as a politician, Onyango had to have an understanding of the interplay between her ethnic culture, the cultures of those with whom she interacted as well as the dynamics of newly independent Kenya's local and national politics.

As a politician, I wanted to prove to the 'just government of men' that women can do as well if given the chance...which I think I did ("Grace Onyango," 1989, p. 11).<sup>2</sup>

This paper illuminates the way in which Kenya's first female Member of Parliament (M.P.), Grace Onyango, merged her own ethnic culture with the demands of the country's political scene, rising to political prominence while meeting the various goals and challenges of her public life. As a post-colonial M.P., Grace Onyango was not dissimilar from prominent women who came before her in colonial Kenya who balanced their cultural milieu with contemporary political and economic dynamics. For example, Mura'a Ngiti, a Gusi medicine woman in Western Kenya, led an anti-British movement in Gusiiland during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ochieng, 1974, p. 220 – 247). Ngiti possessed medicine that she had previously employed to aid the Gusi in their battles against the neighboring Luo and Kipsigis before the arrival of the British. Once the British made their debut in Gusiiland, Ngiti used her medicine and the power and influence that accompanied it to mobilize the Gusi to fight the new enemy and his equally new weaponry (guns and bullets).

Similarly, in Kenya's coastal region, Mekatilili wa Medza, a Giriama woman who held no political office amongst her people, attempted to revitalize the Giriama's traditional Mukushekushe and Fisi oaths that rally and bind both men and women to a common cause. In this case, that cause was the struggle to preserve their economic independence in the face of British labor conscription and taxation between 1913 and 1914 (Brantley, 1981, pp. 85 – 88). Medza was a talented speaker and charismatic figure who also tried to revive the *kaya* (residential and political unit) as well as the exclusively male *kambi* (council of elders) to fight the British. These uprisings ultimately ended in bloody reprisals,

but the point, as historian David Schoenbrun has argued, is that these female leaders were creatively “using acts of selecting and composing arrays of cultural material to meet particular challenges” (Schoenbrun, 2006, p.8). Such cultural material did not disappear in the face of colonial oppression, and continues to exist in forms that have morphed with the times. Both Nigiti and Medza were ingeniously drawing from the wells of their cultural heritage to meet colonial challenges. This paper will demonstrate how one female postcolonial politician, Grace Onyango, drew from her own cultural heritage to meet the challenges of politics in independent Kenya.

Grace Onyango is one of the most prominent women in modern Kenyan political history. Born in 1927 at Gobei, Sakwa Location in the Nyanza Province, she occupied various positions of responsibility in the course of her working life. She started as a teacher but gradually steered her career towards politics. The second of nine children, she attended local primary schools in Sakwa before enrolling in Ng'iya Girls Secondary School. Between 1951 and 1964, Onyango became the principal of a teachers' training college for women, a Girl Guide Assistant Commissioner in Kisumu District, as well as the Chair of the Kisumu Branch of the Child Welfare Society. Grace Onyango was married to Onyango Baridi, a teacher who later joined the Kenya News Agency as a journalist, and they had six children.

Though successful in her chosen career, she was constantly drawn to community service and soon entered electoral politics. Onyango became the first East African woman to serve as a councilor (1964), mayor (1965), official of the Luo Union of East Africa (1969), Member of Parliament for Kisumu Town (1969), and temporary speaker of the House (“Grace Onyango,” 1989, p. 11). After 1983, Onyango left politics and gradually withdrew from public life.<sup>3</sup> Her career as teacher, social worker, and politician provides insight into her leadership challenges, duties and roles, as well as how she fashioned her attitudes towards gender and politics within the Luo cultural context as related to contemporary Kenyan politics.

### *Grace Onyango and Luo Political Culture*

John Mugo, a *Kenya Times* journalist, once described Onyango as “a woman of many parts,” one who “is at once modern, while she is also versed in Luo *kitgi gitimbegi* [and their traditions], a term depicting culture and etiquette (Mugo, 1985, p. 9).”<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that when Grace Onyango became mayor<sup>5</sup> of Kisumu, she enlisted a mayoress to play the role of “mayor's” wife. Phililia Olang took up that position and served Onyango in that capacity throughout her term in office (“Grace Onyango,” 1989, p.11). Grace Onyango attended various functions in the company of both her mayoress, and her husband, Onyango Baridi (Mugo, 1985). Although Onyango's relationship with Olang was officially political it was culturally permissible for a Luo woman to marry another woman.<sup>6</sup>

As Onyango operated within the larger political context, she also functioned within the changing political space of the Luo community. According to a collection of Luo oral traditions compiled by *Ker* (title of Luo elder and leader) Paul Mbuya, Luo society appears to be traditionally patriarchal and politics, at first glance, is a solely male affair (2001).<sup>7</sup> The traditions described the *piny* as the largest administrative political unit headed by a *ruoth* (chief). The *ruoth* was responsible for appointing *jodong dhouidi* (clan leaders). These leaders subsequently became members of the paramount decision-making body of the community, the *buch piny* (supreme council). Mbuya also mentioned the *ogulmama* (standing force/policemen), *jodong' oteke* (junior elders), *ogayi* (peace maker) as well as the *osumba mrwayi* (military commander) as other key political figures in the community. Mbuya did not explicitly state that these positions were exclusively for men. In fact, the terms are all gender neutral in the Luo language.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the male pronoun, and noun are used throughout the English translation of Mbuya's description of the system. This is probably because at the time, in accordance with colonial-era Luo society, men were viewed as the rightful holders of these positions. Did that mean an end to change? Mbuya himself did not think so. He was aware of the shifts that were occurring in Luo society as a result of colonization and argued that "society should use its good customs as the foundation upon which foreign customs and practices can be laid" (Mbuya, 2001, p. vii).

Grace Onyango was also probably aware that in her community, leadership had always been impossible without consensus. Mbuya's description of the Luo political system reveals a decision making body that was driven by consultation and deliberation. Indeed, the *ruoth* did not seem to have wielded a substantial amount of political power. The members of the *buch piny*, though not elected by the people, must have been very conscious of their responsibility to the community. After all, they each represented diverse segments of the community to which they were genealogically linked. At the same time, the interests of other clans had to be heeded in the spirit of political reciprocity. Conflicts had to be solved in a *bura* (a meeting place of wisdom and deliberations). Since Grace Onyango understood these traditions, she also recognized that although times had changed, the essences of these traditions lived on and could not be ignored.

Change in relation to oral traditions is important as it is one of the factors that helps explain Grace Onyango's electoral victories, made possible by electorates comprising of both Luo men and women. As historian Bethwell Ogot argues, African oral traditions were dynamic and while they were human-based records of a community's history and heritage, they were flexible enough to reflect societal changes (Ogot, 2002). As historians, we now know that a specific oral tradition has within its structure its own composition history as the custodians of that tradition reworked it to reflect contemporary epistemological postures. This was so until oral traditions began to be written down. According to Ogot, therein lay the cause of the gap between contemporary Luo realities and traditions. Ogot argued that written oral traditions came to be "sanctified as the final authorities on Luo cultures and traditions" (Ogot, 2002, p. 231). As a

result, small incremental changes in the lives of the Luo in post-independent Kenya were not reflected in the now-calcified stock of communal oral traditions. These changes included the entrance of women, like Onyango into local and national politics.

Moreover, in one of the very few texts that makes specific reference to Grace Onyango, *Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs* edited by philosopher don Odera Oruka, women who exhibited certain skills were considered "complete equals of men in decision-making" (Odinga in Oruka, 1992, p. 110).<sup>9</sup> These included oratorical skills and rational decision-making. In addition, a woman could ascend societal power structures if she was wealthy. Odinga argued that Onyango was elected because of her own hard work and "the Luo did not mind that she was a woman" (1992, p. 110). As far as he was concerned, her gender was irrelevant and "people sometimes forget that men are not given leadership or recognition just because they are men" (cited in Oruka, 1992, p.110).

### ***Onyango Joins Local Government***

The town in which Onyango started her political career is located on the shores of Lake Victoria (Victoria-Nyanza). The Kisumu Municipal Council was charged with the management of the town's public services which entailed the management and provision of public housing, municipal roads and drainage systems, healthcare facilities, remand prisons, daycare facilities, educational institutions, the municipal dairy, entertainment facilities, and town cleanliness and hygiene among other functions. Kisumu has always been a *mélange* of different peoples. However, it is located in what is demographically Luo Nyanza. Onyango understood the culture of the majority of its people, the Luo. This understanding was crucial to her career at both the local and national levels of government.<sup>10</sup>

Well before her 1964 election to the Kisumu Municipal Council as a councilor, Onyango was aware of its gender imbalance. She and a group of local women formed the Gill Women Group under the chair of a Mrs. Shabir. The group served as a problem-solving arena for its members. At this time, Onyango recalls that "there was no woman in the municipal council, not even a sweeper!" (Baraka, 2000, pp. 8-9). Women found the *status quo* untenable and organized a demonstration in the streets of Kisumu to agitate for representation in the Council. Soon after, Grace Onyango and Masella Osir were nominated to run for one of the municipal council's seats. In an interview with journalist Karama Baraka, Onyango explained that "many men" opposed their nomination and argued that the council was no place for women (Baraka, 2000, pp. 8-9). Onyango explained to Baraka that the opposition against their nomination was so immense that Masella Osir opted to step down from the race leaving Onyango to do battle with the other nominees.

Kenya had changed a great deal in the years before and after independence. Ethnic political structures and ideologies, though still important, had not only

undergone drastic colonial-era alteration but were now subordinate to national structures of government. This meant that Kenyan men and women, including Luo women, who wished to enter politics and articulate issues of importance for themselves and for their communities had to work towards accessing post-independence structures of government. In addition, one year after independence, the Council was still undergoing the Africanization of its staff and there were just three Africans in it: Otunge Moso, Onyango Radier and Peter Abwajo. Therefore there was a spirit of all-inclusive representation that women could exploit. In 1964, Onyango contested for a council seat alongside three male candidates and emerged the victor in charge of Kaloleni ward.<sup>11</sup> This was a ward with a number of schools, and Council members thought Onyango's background in education made her the most ideal person to serve the area. By 1965, Onyango was not only a councilor, but also the Chair of the Education Committee in the Municipal Council. In that year she was among four councilors who were elected to serve as aldermen (Mugo, 1985).<sup>12</sup> Onyango's political career made fast progress and she became mayor of the town.

Grace Onyango was formally elected East Africa's first female mayor on April 1, 1965, when the incumbent Mayor, Mathias P. Ondiek, died. Ondiek, elected in 1961, was the first African mayor in Kenya (MCK, 1965). After Ondiek's death, Onyango sent an application to the relevant council committee to act as deputy mayor for a period of 90 days which was approved (Baraka, 2000, pp. 8-9).<sup>13</sup> Perhaps, due to her personal charisma, the Municipal Council was recognizing Onyango's potential and ability to assume greater leadership responsibilities. On the other hand, the Council members may not have expected Onyango to do much in the course of the 90 days. Onyango was then just 27 years old and while acting as deputy mayor she continued to teach. She taught at the Kisumu Union Primary School during the day and attended council meetings in the evening (Baraka, 2000, pp. 8-9). However, Onyango was interested in the mayoral seat and this meant that she had to face the electorate once again not long after her first electoral victory. Time was short and she remarks that "this was the only time that I could prove my capability" (Baraka, 2000, pp. 8-9). Thus, she used the 90 days as acting mayor to lay the ground work for her election campaigns by making the provision of housing her central campaign platform.

In the mid-sixties, one of Kisumu Municipal Council's main concerns was the provision of housing for the rapidly growing town, and as a mayoral candidate, Onyango was quick to latch on to the issue. Perhaps the fact that she was the sole female in the Council pressured her into working even harder to prove her worth as a leader. In the 2000 interview granted to journalist Karama Baraka, it emerges that Onyango was concerned that Anderson was the only formidable residential estate<sup>14</sup> in Kisumu, and it was exclusively white, a reminder of Kenya's colonial legacy (Baraka, 2000, pp. 8-9). The end of racial segregation after independence eventually resulted in the opening up of such areas to Africans who could afford to live there. Before then, Africans were relegated to lesser abodes in Obunga, Manyatta, Nyalenda and Kaloleni areas.

According to the Council's Annual Report for 1964, it (the council) was optimistic that the city's housing problems could be solved. The council's Social Services and Housing Department reported that "prospects of providing housing accommodation to alleviate the acute housing shortage in the town was bright" (Municipal Council of Kisumu [MCK], 1964, p. 2). This optimism was pegged on a loan that the Kenya Central Housing Board had made to the Council. Plans were "in hand to build 82 houses of various types, either for rental or tenant purchase according to demand" (MCK, 1964). The Council planned on completing construction by early 1965. The municipality was also engaged in negotiations with the Government and other financial institutions to acquire about three quarters of a million pounds in order to build houses for Kisumu Cotton Mills (KICOMI) employees (MCK, 1964). KICOMI was a large textile industrial investment that the municipality was aggressively pursuing. Construction of the houses was to be spread over four years and part of the money was to be used for slum clearance.

The areas the council targeted for slum clearance were those very areas that Africans occupied including Grace Onyango's Kaloleni ward. The slum clearance project must have been of great concern to Onyango. Slum clearance without the provision of alternative and affordable accommodation for Kaloleni residents, her electoral base, would certainly have wrought negative repercussions on her budding political career. As is evident from the council's *Annual Report for 1965*, Kaloleni was actually one of the main targets for slum clearance:

Following its policy to clear the town buildings unfit for human habitation and other slums the Council considered the condition of Plot No.16 in Kaloleni Village and Plots No.32 and 33 Section XXIX Accra Street and agreed that these dwellings should be condemned for slum clearance under the Public Health Act (Cap.242) and that the necessary nuisance and demolition notices be served upon them along with the 53 plots previously condemned in Kaloleni (1965, p. 8).

The council had actually initiated slum demolition and clearance by 1965, but these efforts had stalled "due to [the] difficulty of finding alternative accommodation" (MCK, 1965, p. 8).

The admission was symptomatic of the council's failure to respond to Kisumu's housing problem. Prior to independence, the British paid minimal attention to African housing. They had based urban African housing on urban labor demands, specifically the single African male. With the coming of independence, local government councils now had to expand their budgetary obligations to provide acceptable urban housing for African families. The financial means to meet these obligations were difficult to obtain. The optimism of the Social Services and Housing Department in 1964 quickly evaporated. Onyango ascended to the office of Mayor in the year that the Council admitted that "the acute housing shortage continued to be one of the Council's greatest

problems during the year and approximately 1,000 people were known to be genuinely in need of housing accommodation” (MCK, 1965, p. 7).

By 1964, the Council had a total of 442 houses in the African estates of Lumumba, Ondiek, Pembe Tatu, Kibuye and Mosque. 122 of these houses were for tenant purchase and would soon be out of the Council’s management (MCK, 1964). In addition, of the 95 plots the council had allocated to private developers for residential or commercial purposes, only 34 had been fully developed. The Council was eager to assist developers because the completed projects would generate revenue for the municipality through taxation. Subsequently, in the same year (1964), the Council sent a loan application to the government’s Central Housing Board with the hope of re-lending the money to private residential plot developers (MCK, 1964). Getting Kisumu Municipality’s housing development plans with minimum dislocation to inhabitants was, therefore, high on Onyango’s agenda, both during her campaign for mayor and after she had won the election.

Under Grace Onyango’s leadership, the council made significant progress towards solving the Municipality’s housing shortage as well as boosting its infrastructural needs. In 1966, the Council’s waiting list for housing had grown to 1,500 and there was concern that 8,000 people living in the peri-urban areas of the municipality who worked in the city could not get houses that they badly needed. However, there was reason for an optimistic note in the Council’s 1967 report. By that year, the Council had constructed a total of 502 low cost houses for rent and a further 124 houses for tenant purchase (MCK, 1967).<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, since the Council was well aware of its financial inability to meet the housing demands of Kisumu, other development sources had to be sought which meant encouraging private investment.

The provision of adequate and affordable housing was to remain a chronic struggle not only for Kisumu but also for other urban centers in post-independent Kenya.<sup>16</sup> According to a municipality report, “the year 1967 showed a lot of good progress in the town and a fair deal of capital work was carried out throughout the town” (MCK, 1967, p. 10). This was the year the council succeeded in marshalling and utilizing a considerable sum of money for both low and high cost housing. In addition to housing, Onyango’s administration tackled several infrastructural projects. Other capital works carried out in that year (1967) included roads (constructed on contract or Council labor), the extension of water mains, and street lighting. Nevertheless, these projects did not provide Onyango with immunity from political challenges.

As a mayor, Onyango had to deal with the political problems that came with being at the helm of a municipal council, particularly in the second half of her term (1967 and 1968) when Kenya’s national political scene was mired in heated Kenya African National Union (KANU) versus Kenya People’s Union (KPU) battles.<sup>17</sup> KPU, which the government accused of being communist in orientation, was highly critical of the manner in which the KANU government was functioning in the years following independence.<sup>18</sup> KPU was the only opposition party in existence at the time, and therefore KANU’s only check. As



a result, KPU found itself on the receiving end of repressive tactics deployed by both KANU and the government.

### ***Onyango Comes into the National Limelight***

Between 1967 and 1968, Onyango was embroiled in vicious battles to maintain her seat at the Municipal Council as a result of national party political conflicts that seeped into local government structures. Conflicting accounts of what was going on during this period are a reflection of the volatile nature of the political scene. According to the minutes of the Social Services and Housing Committee of 17 May 1967, the Mayor of Kisumu is listed as Alderman Farjallah (MCK, 1967). Furthermore, in her November 2000 interview with journalist Karama Baraka, Onyango said that she left the council in 1967 because two senior Luo leaders and elders, Oginga Odinga and Paul Mbuya, were pressuring her for political support. She says she decided to leave the council because "I did not belong to any party" (Baraka, 2000, pp.8-9).

According to Baraka, Onyango retreated to her home but emerged determined to jump into national politics in 1969. The Council minutes referred to previously support the timeline present in the *East African Standard* report, but it is certainly not supported by the journalism of the sixties. Interviews Onyango gave to journalists in the eighties, including one to the *East African Standard*, also do not support the above timeline.<sup>19</sup> Regardless, by mid-1968 not only did Kenya's Central Government still recognize Onyango as Mayor of Kisumu, but it also viewed her as a political threat as a result of her perceived KPU leanings. This led one of the government's most articulate and well-known cabinet ministers, Tom Mboya, to get her out of Kisumu Municipality's Council. The government, however, in the person of Mboya, was about to meet its match in Onyango.

In her last years of service at the local government level, Onyango had to constantly mediate between KANU and KPU officials who brought their political battles into Kisumu's Municipal Council Hall. There was a severe contraction of democratic space to the disadvantage of the KPU party during that time.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Onyango increasingly encountered opposition from Tom Mboya. Mboya was then arguably the best-known national politician as the influential Minister for Economic Planning and Development as well as KANU's Secretary General. He was convinced that Onyango had become a KPU member and accused her of having bought a KANU membership ticket and then refusing to admit that she had done so. Mboya wondered: "Is she KPU or is she KANU?" He demanded that Onyango "Tell us where she stands and we will know where we [the government party] stand" ("Mrs. Onyango Attacked," 1968, para. 3). He doubted her allegiance to KANU and asked "How long can she go on bluffing?" (*Ibid.*, para. 7).

The mayor, in all her political shrewdness, initially chose not to reveal which party she belonged to. This enabled her to manage successfully the frictions within the municipality without sabotaging its functions. In addition,

she avoided alienating herself from those in her electoral base who would have been offended had she taken a partisan stance against Odinga who was one of the top leaders of KPU, a party that had gained considerable grassroots support in the municipality. The Luo people also regarded Odinga as *Ker*, their ultimate moral and spiritual leader, and Onyango had to be careful not to offend her people's sensitivities. However, she was also a leader in her own right according to Luo customs and Kenyan politics. She was at an ethnic and national political crossroads, and her survival as a politician depended on successfully balancing the two important interests. According to press reports, when KANU officials started attacking her at public rallies, Onyango rose to the challenge and retaliated in the same manner. Onyango fell back on her career in local government and presented herself as a hard worker and a hands-on official ("Mayor," 1968; "Mboya's 'No'," 1968).

Onyango appears to have been confident of her council record and by 1968 she was a KPU civic nominee ("Mboya again," 1968). In July 1968, Mboya took the battle to Onyango's home turf and opened a campaign office at Kaloleni, the mayor's own ward.<sup>21</sup> Opponents accused Onyango of having shown "her true colors" ("Mboya again," para. 3). According to an article in the *Daily Nation*, Mboya "pointed out that KANU's campaign in Kaloleni ward would be conducted as strongly and as effectively as possible and he was convinced that Kisumu would at the end of August have a KANU mayor" ("Mboya again," para. 4). Onyango was undaunted and challenged Mboya, who was famous for his oratorical skills, to a debate that "would settle the question of his popularity as a leader of the town" ("Mboya's 'No'," para. 2). Mboya surprisingly declined rather haughtily and Onyango retorted in jest. She remarked, "it appeared that the honorable Minister seemed to be over-excited about my political influence in Kisumu" ("Mboya's 'No'," para. 5).

The KANU government, however, was determined to smother KPU. By 1968, the KANU government was engaged in a relentless battle against the KPU that only ended in 1969 with the banning and detention without trial of some of the KPU leaders. Before then, KPU members were intimidated and constantly harassed in all manner of ways. It is amidst such anti-KPU activities that the KANU government disqualified Onyango and 21 other KPU candidates from the Kisumu civic election campaigns of 1968. The mayor argued that she had filed her nomination documents correctly, and "in full compliance with the law" ("Mboya's 'No'," para.4). However, KANU, led by Mboya, intensified its attack on Onyango. Mboya even played the gender card arguing "Mrs. Onyango is reaping the fruits of what she herself had sown... if she is asking for sympathy as a woman then she should leave politics alone" ("Mboya's No," para.7). In saying so, Mboya seems to have been implying that Onyango was going against Luo ethnic norms that frown on leaders using their sex as grounds for preferential treatment. Mboya was actually addressing potential Luo voters he hoped would buy into his verbal portrayal of the mayor. Onyango kept her sex out of campaign rhetoric. At this point, according to newspaper reports, Onyango played the KANU card—the membership ticket she had up her sleeve

all the time—the sign of a politician who understood the political vicissitudes of her time well enough to leave all strategies open.

Onyango managed to stay on as mayor to the end of her term in 1968, determined to further her political career. On 26 August 1968, she addressed the last municipal council meeting of the year with a speech that both defended her record and left her the freedom to choose between either party in the political divide. The mayor “was pleased with the co-operation shown by councilors and council officials” (“Defends Council,” para 3). However, it is unlikely that all councilors had been co-operative in light of the political battles that had been waged in the council’s hall. Onyango also thought it important to defend the council against accusations of corruption and herself against accusations of not having helped develop the municipality since her ascension to the mayoral seat because:

In any case mostly these remarks have been made by someone who does not live in the town and, therefore, not in the best position to assess what has been going on. I shall, however, reply on your behalf to the allegations because although made during the heat of an election campaign they may permanently smear the good name of the Kisumu Council (*Ibid.*, para. 7).

Addressing the council’s relationship with government, she said amid cheers that, “I would like to put it that these have been excellent...Our object has always been the same, that is to deliver the goods of independence to the people (*Ibid.*, para. 8)

The Central government, particularly in the mid-sixties, had indeed supported two large-scale healthcare and industrial investments in Kisumu.<sup>22</sup> Still, one may speculate that Onyango had another reason for her congenial words for the government. Onyango may have sensed that the repressive, anti-multiparty atmosphere created by the government would soon leave politicians like her with no option other than to battle for national office as KANU members. Significantly, the *East African Standard* at this time reported Onyango believed that “attempts had been made to remove her and all councilors before their time expired” (“Defends Council,” 1968, para. 5)

Ultimately, in 1969, Onyango was unable to continue her career in local government because in 1969 the Kenyan parliament limited the number of mayoral terms to four. Onyango believed she was the target of the term limit, part of a plan hatched by her political opponents to cap her ever-growing influence in the Kisumu region. Furthermore, KPU was banned in October 1969 and all those who wished to continue their political careers had to face the electorate once again in December 1969 on KANU tickets. In that year, Kenya became a single-party state and remained so until 1992.

It appears that Onyango became popular not only because of her council duties but also because of exemplary political skills that had won the mayoral election four times. In 1985, Onyango said she was confident she could have garnered more electoral victories at this level (mayoral) because she had an

enviable performance record (Mugo, 1985). As in other interviews she has given to the press, Onyango was more than ready to talk about development projects she oversaw. These included the construction of over 700 houses in Kisumu Municipality by 1968. Onyango also argued that she had encouraged real estate investment, insisting that the council under her leadership had kept the town spruced up, which provided incentives to private investors to construct several middle-income housing units to supplement municipal housing efforts (“Defends Council,” 1968). Admirably, Onyango was able to serve until the last year of her last term. In 1969, Onyango left the Council undefeated and ready for her next challenge – winning elections to Kenya’s parliament.

Grace Onyango viewed her electoral contests as political battles, not as referendums on gender, and she appears to have been comfortable using society’s structures to navigate her career. It is not surprising that Onyango chose to de-emphasize the role of her sex in the fashioning of her political platforms at the municipal and, later, parliamentary level. On December 21, 1969, Enid Da Silva, a newspaper journalist, interviewed Onyango, the newly elected M.P. Da Silva appeared surprised at Onyango’s responses to questions that were addressed to her as a woman.

**Q.** Do you feel that you have something special to do for the people of Kisumu which another elected member would not be capable of doing?

**A.** Well, it is the representative’s duty to see that things are done according to the *wishes of the people*.

**Q.** Do you have any plans of what you propose to do for the people of your constituency once you become an M.P.?

**A.** I think it is for the people to tell me what they want done.

**Q.** As one of the pioneer women in Kenyan politics, what are your views on the role of women both in the political life of a nation and in nation building?

**A.** As an elected representative of both men and women, *I will not represent women only in Parliament*. I don’t think I could say anything directly to the women because it was not only women who elected me (p. 17).<sup>23</sup>

Da Silva then went on to ask Onyango to respond to the abolition of the *Affiliation Act*,<sup>24</sup> and to claims that a woman’s presence in the house would have prevented this. Onyango was unmoved from her stance. She had been elected by a community and was going to serve as an M.P. for everybody, male and female, and would not confine her parliamentary career to gender issues. If people felt a woman was necessary to represent female interests, then “we must as elected Members ask the President to kindly nominate a lady who will serve this purpose” (Da Silva, 1969, pp. 17). Such a position was not what Onyango aspired to hold. Also, Onyango appeared to have been conscious of the need to accommodate the interests of all. Onyango was aware of the diverse nature of her power base and knew she represented an area she understood very well. Her constituency in Kisumu was located in the heart of Luoland and she was not blind to the nature of her community’s social structures.

A female politician in another part of the world could have made Onyango's 1969 remarks in the above interview. However, Onyango's political attitude towards gender issues needs to be examined within the context of her own national and ethnic environment. While the nature of her community's oral traditions appears to have left little room for women to politick, a woman's gender did not damn her ability to influence or make decisions. For example, differential provision of education during the colonial era favored Luo men, but some women could and did access education. Though she had accumulated a considerable amount of socio-political power, Grace Onyango still had to manage her working relationships rather carefully and these included political friends and foes, whether male or female. By 1969, her ever-growing political stature was undeniable. The executive committee of the Luo Union (East Africa) "unanimously elected" Onyango to act as secretary-general of the organization before the elections scheduled for later that year ("Luo Union," 1969, para.1). The Union, founded in 1922, took its inspiration from the *buch piny*, a council of elders (masculinized by tradition). The election of a woman by the *buch piny* committee to serve in such a prestigious position is a testament to the presence of non-gendered Luo leadership. More importantly, Onyango had to interact closely with Luo elders and leaders. These included Oginga Odinga (former Vice-President), Paul Mbuya (author of *Kitgi gi Timbegi*), and Tom Mboya, the articulate politician and KANU ideologue she had 'wrestled' with in 1968 in Kisumu.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Grace Onyango vis-à-vis Perspectives on African Womanhood***

Further explanation of some of Onyango's political choices can be found in various social science works on African women. Enid Da Silva, in her interview with Onyango, appears to have expected Onyango to adopt a gendered stance as her political career moved to the national level. Onyango's reluctance to do so provides an interesting point of investigation. Scholars like anthropologist Ifi Amadiume (1987), sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), and philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu (2003) among others, have undertaken the interrogation of the meanings of gender and feminism in different African cultural contexts. In one of her works, *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting On the Politics of Sisterhood*, Oyewumi defines feminism as the "struggle for female equality," and says that the term feminist "describes a range of behavior indicating female agency and self determination" (Oyewumi, 2003, p. 2). Feminism, therefore, can be said to encompass a wide range of female initiatives against sexism. However, at the foundation of the concept is/was a Western-based perception of what it means to be a woman within a specific part of the world. The term feminist engenders a woman's self-identity first as a female in opposition to a male in a hierarchically structured relationship that unfairly favors the male. More importantly, the female believes that her status in society and the challenges posed by patriarchy can be addressed by taking the initiative to seek

equality by confronting the benefactor of the gender disparity. For Oyewumi, it is important to recognize that not all women view themselves as feminists.

Oyewumi's account further elucidates Onyango's experience. She argues that in much of Africa, "womanhood does not constitute a social role, identity, position or location." This is because "each individual occupies a multiplicity of overlapping and intersecting positions with various relations to privilege and disadvantage" (Oyewumi, 2003, p.2). These include age-sets, age groups and commerce based social groupings. Moreover, despite the recent construction of gender as a social category in Western epistemology, "gender cannot exist without the body since the body sits squarely at the base of both categories" (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 9). Hence gender is always traceable to the human body. Oyewumi argued that a distinction between the anatomical body and gender could be found in many African societies since there are several social categories not based on the "bodily distinctions of gender" (p. 9). Oyewumi has also used Ifi Amadiume's elaboration of the concept of the "female husband" in Igbo society in, *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in the African society* to demonstrate her point (Oyewumi, 2003, p. 2). These arguments have particular resonance with Onyango who clearly saw herself within a specific African context that provided her with several social categories in which she could act in various capacities.

Significantly, the "female husband" was not uncommon among a number of ethnic groups who inhabit modern day Kenya, and Grace Onyango's actions help to illuminate the varied constructions of gender in Africa. It is with such gender constructs in mind that she thought it important to recruit a woman to serve alongside her as "mayoress." The concept of gender in African society is thus part of a complex network of social categories that need to be analyzed and understood within diverse social systems. For this reason, Oyewumi argues, "it would be counterproductive in an African setting to single out gender...as the primary source of political agitation" (Oyewumi, 2003, p. 3). Therefore, Onyango was an individual who was well aware of her society's social set-up and the dynamics of its peoples' varied social roles. Though she was a member of parliament during the 1970s when feminism was at its height in the West, Onyango was still part of a society in which women defined themselves as, first, an inextricable part of the community. Their interests as women were ultimately tied to the interests of the family and community. Women had to ingeniously utilize their social structures to exercise initiatives for change and development. It follows that once in parliament, Grace Onyango raised and contributed to a wide range of issues, a few of which did relate to women in particular, two of which demonstrate her meshing of gender issues with community or national interests. It is also evident that Onyango chose to broach these issues as a member of Kenya's parliament and not as a woman. Such an approach helped her gain considerable support from male M.P.s.

To begin with, on 6 November 1970, she raised question No. 815 on "Paid Maternity Leave,"<sup>26</sup> It was posed to the Minister for Labour:

Mrs. Onyango asked the Minister for Labour if he would tell the House whether he would consider awarding employed married women [paid] leave when they proceeded on maternity leave since it was a period when financial aid was greatly needed (Kenya National Assembly [KNA], ques. no. 815).

The Assistant Minister, Mr. Peter Kibisu, responded that since Kenyan women at the time were agitating for equal pay for equal work, "to grant full pay for maternity leave, therefore, would render women more expensive to employ" (KNA, ques. no. 815). He added that some unions had made considerable progress in winning women partial payment during maternity leave and the Industrial Court had been supportive of women in this respect. The minister then argued that the matter was best left to unions to negotiate with individual employers. This response did not please Onyango and she persisted, with the support of other M.P.s:

Mrs. Onyango: Mr. Speaker, Sir, will the Assistant Minister agree with me that in some occasions you can only be paid while you are on maternity leave and only if the doctor approves that you were sick as well as being on maternity leave (ques. no. 815)?

Mr. Kibisu: Mr. Speaker, Sir, maternity leave is not structurally speaking illness. It is a natural hazard (*Ibid*).

This is what other M.P.s said on this issue:

Mr. Kanja: Mr. Speaker, Sir, would the Assistant Minister take into consideration that it is only that our ladies have to bear children otherwise if they do not, we shall have no nation? Would he consider that they should also be given privileges when they are delivering babies for this country (*Ibid.*)?

Mr. Wanjigi: Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the Assistant Minister repudiating the fact that bringing forth children is a part of nation building and without children there is no nation (*Ibid.*)?

Mr. Karungaru: Mr. Speaker, Sir, arising from one of the Assistant Minister's reply, is he denying the fact that when a woman gives birth to a child, that is better than when somebody is receiving full pay because he happens to be sick? This is because this lady has brought a child into this world and it is high time that she were paid for maternity leave (*Ibid.*).

The wording of her question on "Civil Service Terms of Employment for Married Women" (KNA ques. no. 783) is also of interest in the above regard:

Mrs. Onyango asked the Minister of State, President's Office, if he would tell the House in view of the fact that the *Government had always advocated the policy of equal treatment for all its citizens* and in view of the fact that women in the Civil Service as well as other women working in offices were honest, genuine and hardworking:

- a) Why married women were not eligible for appointments on pensionable terms.
- b) Why a pensionable woman officer was required to resign on marriage.
- c) Since all Government jobs which were advertised in the Press were on permanent appointment or agreement terms, why women officers were offered employment on agreement terms only and not on permanent terms (*Ibid.*)<sup>27</sup>

This question also received considerable support from members.

Though only women were affected, Onyango had chosen to present the issues as a concern of all; as a deficiency of the State that was a problem for everybody, not just a single gender. As French and Women's Studies professor, Obioma Nnaemeka, in writing about Malicounda women and female circumcision, argues, African women seek to include men in issues of concern to them "because they are culturally attuned to such thinking" (Nnaemeka, 2001, p. 187). Such an approach was a crucial component of female political agency among the Luo as they are not unlike women in societies who come "from an environment in which women's issues are village/community issues requiring the participation of villagers regardless of sex" (*Ibid.*). Nnaemeka adds that:

[W]omen are politically astute in ensuring the participation of all branches of local authority, regardless of which gender holds the authority. They also believe, as many African women do, that if the men are part of the problem, they should be part of the solution (p. 187).

One may therefore argue that Onyango's contributions as well as the contributions of male M.P.s who supported her were given in this spirit.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper, I have examined the career of Grace Onyango in a bid to recover the history of independent Kenya's most prominent female politician and her contribution to those she represented in various capacities. I have also analyzed her career to illuminate the societal dynamics through which she had to navigate in order to succeed as a leader and public servant. As a politician, Onyango had to have an understanding of the interplay between her ethnic culture and the cultures of those with whom she interacted as well as the dynamics of newly independent Kenya's local and national politics. The understanding of that reality enabled Onyango to contextualize her roles as elder, female, wife, politician, and teacher appropriately and thus, enabled her to shrewdly apply herself in various scenarios which enabled her to ascend politically and make her mark on Kenyan politics. Onyango's understanding of the non-gendered approach to leadership that was part of her ethnic heritage led her to adopt political stances that allowed her to present herself as a formidable leader of both men and women.



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