Chapter 6

Nationalist Anger; Colonial Illusions: Women’s Responses to Decolonization

It was not justice the settlers wanted; it was retribution and they didn’t much care how they got it.

David Anderson Histories of the Hanged

I came back to Paris and summed up my impressions for Francis: All Saint’s Day is not an incident.

Colette Jeanson

The upheavals to settler society in the two colonies caused by World War II were compounded in its aftermath by a noticeable change in the tone of Algerian and Kenyan nationalism. Prior to the war the majority of Algerian and Kenyan activists had been more concerned with obtaining equal political, economic or social rights, but by the end of the 1940s, demands for independence from colonial rule were added to those for rights. In the interwar period settlers in both colonies had either chosen to ignore their “subjects” demands completely or had implemented palliative measures that failed to address the political, economic, and social inequalities in their societies. Militant frustrations were compounded as a result of the war, during which Algerian and Kenyan troops fought on the side of the French and British, respectively. Any expectations that their war service would be rewarded at armistice with more than medals were dashed as settlers, fearful of the political implications of the colonies’ demographics, continued to block the type of reform that would have granted their “subjects” the degree of political and economic participation they wanted. The extensive alienation of land by the settlers had also created problems for the local populations that would come to a head in the 1940s: in Algeria migration to urban centers and to
France; in Kenya the squatter problem and, to a lesser extent, urban migrants to Nairobi, which now qualified as a developing city. In both Algeria and Kenya the political and economic inequalities between the settlers and the local population caused the hardening of the nationalist line and a push to capitalize politically on the alienated groups in their respective societies.

In Kenya, settlers had responded to the 1930s depression by switching to beef-farming and high-grade dairy produce. Squatter owned cattle, not subject to veterinary controls, held the threat of disease and settlers attempted to introduce legislation restricting the number of cattle squatters could own. Their efforts met with success in 1940, although they did not act on the law until 1945. When it was enforced, it was a serious blow to the squatters, most of whom were Kikuyu. To make matters worse, the demand for agricultural produce increased during the war enriching white farmers but pauperizing the Kikuyu. Not only did the average annual income of a squatter family drop from 1400 shillings in 1940 to 300 in 1946, but the 1940 cattle legislation made it impossible for squatters to redress their unfortunate economic situation.

During the forties, therefore, Kikuyu discontent greatly increased providing the more radical militants with an opportunity to induce the squatters to rally to their cause. The campaign to obtain reform started in the Rift Valley in 1946. Militants demanded the full support of the squatters in the form of an oath of loyalty.

The increase in oath-taking ceremonies, occurring during this period, was the first sign of the emergence of the Mau Mau movement, the British response to which was “the Emergency.” Initial squatter resistance to oath-taking led to intimidation and manhandling of resisters, some of whom complained to their European employers about the violence they suffered at the hands of the militants. As a result the British construed Mau Mau as essentially a movement of Kikuyu hard-core activists, who used their societies’ cultural practices to baneful ends. The initial response in the colony was to try and outwit the Mau Mau at their own game by introducing counter-oathing ceremonies. Spearheaded by the archaeologist and ethnologist, Louis Leaky and pro-British African chiefs and elders, the campaign accelerated the spiral of violence that led to the deaths of more than 1800 African civilians at the hands of the Mau Mau (as opposed to only 32 settlers deaths), the hanging by the British of 1090 Kikuyu, and the detention of tens of thousands more in special camps.

In 1954, two years after the declaration of “the Emergency” in Kenya, the French started what they termed as operations to preserve order (Operations de maintien d’ordre) in Algeria, in response to the beginning of what was to escalate into a bitter war of independence. In fact, in much the same way as