

***“We are strong as men
and we cannot be bent!”***

**The impact of women’s political activism
on the transition from British trusteeship
to Nigerian self-government
between 1914 and 1960.**

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a woman in a changing world?

As an international student from Pakistan who had never ventured beyond the confines of her hometown before I arrived at Mount Holyoke four years ago to enroll myself into a college, or rather, a city of women. The first few days will forever be the hardest in my memory. I was watchful of stereotypes because everyone seemed to have an opinion about my homeland. I harbored a mixture of awe and apprehension towards those who did not look like me. I was laden with heavy expectations of my family back home who had never before let a woman go off into the unknown. It was overwhelming to undergo so many waves of change.

Imagine my surprise when I found hidden on the dusty shelves of a History Professor one thousand pages of about ten thousand women who were not resisting change, but welcoming it and adapting to it, trying to make it fit the crooks and crevices of their particular society. The change they faced was much more overwhelming and much more terrifying. The only thing that surpassed this change was their courage. These women lived eighty-seven years ago. I believe the impact they wrought lived for decades to come.

My motivations

My decision to write an honors thesis focusing on the Women's War of 1929 was motivated by two factors.

First and foremost was a desire to study how British indirect rule impacted the political rights of colonized women. I was curious to know to what extent the British included or excluded women from their study of "native institutions". Once I realized that women were almost uniformly left out of the native authorities set up by the British from South Asia to the African continent, I wanted to learn how women pushed back against, what has been called, a British induced "world historic defeat of the female gender" (Mamdani, 41). I wanted to see how women fought for political relevance and social visibility in spite of the gendered barriers legitimized by indirect rule.

Second, I was determined to understand the duplicity inherent in the system of British indirect rule. The British widely touted the use of native authorities and native institutions as a means of relegating ruling power to local people so they could govern themselves using their own indigenous ways and customs. It was supposed to mark a departure from the method of setting up British benches to rule directly over non-British peoples. Not only that, indirect rule was acknowledged as a means of enabling "trusteeship" between the colonizer and the colonized. Through indirect rule and trusteeship, the British supposedly taught the native trustee how to successfully chart his path towards self-government. The forcibly colonized territory was thus

transformed into a school for democracy. I found these claims a little hard to stomach. Britain controlled one fifth of the world's territory and one-fourth of its population by the First World War. It seemed dubious that the largest empire in human history could absorb so much information that it was able to set up custom institutions for every indigenous person under its control. Additionally, I felt that colonialism was an authoritarian structure where the powerful relied on sheer force to colonize the weak. How could such an empire claim to hold superior knowledge about democracy? How could it further claim to be imparting this knowledge while it was serving as the authoritarian center across every indirectly controlled colony?

I decided to answer these questions using the case study of the Women's War of 1929. This war in southeastern Nigeria serves as a historic example of women coming together to juxtapose the position they held in society before British rule against the loss of political agency that colonization represented. It explains how in spite of any institutional barriers to the participation of women in the economic, political or social arenas, women's agency was a constant force in the movement from colonization to self-government.

The Women's War of 1929 is also one of the first critiques of British indirect rule. It prompted the development of colonial anthropology. It alerted the British that their ideas about native society were incomplete, if not inaccurate. It helped Nigerians realize that in spite of the imbalance of power between the colonizers and colonized, they could speak out against a broken system that delivered none of the outcomes it professed to be working towards. The war provides an example of successful anti-colonial revolt, highlighting the principles of

egalitarianism and decentralization in government and thus helping found not only the basis for Nigerian nationalism but also Pan-Africanism.

Newly aware of the failings of indirect rule and bolstered by the courage and agency of local women, the British and Nigerians approached each other from the opposite ends of a spectrum. The farce of trusteeship was thus transformed into the movement towards partnership and finally, the establishment of self-government.

Use of terminology

Please note that I have used the term “Women’s War” in exchange for “Igbo Women’s War” to acknowledge that while the women organizing the war in 1929 were predominantly Igbo, they also included women of Ibibio, Annang, Ogoni and other ethnic backgrounds.

Please also note that I use the definition of indirect rule that is offered by Sir Donald Charles Cameron (Cameron, 1), who served as the Central Secretary, Governor, and Commander-in-Chief of Nigeria between 1908 and 1935. Cameron defines indirect rule as a system that adapted tribal institutions for local government, while allowing native people to benefit from British advice on self-government and develop constitutional modes of behavior.

Structure

Chapter one discusses the changes introduced to southeastern Nigeria between 1914 and 1929 under the Lugardian system of indirect rule. It details the installation of warrant chiefs and native courts, the subsequent introduction of direct taxation and the external economic atmosphere that characterized the decade and a half leading up to the Women's War. It provides an insight into the wide chasm between British expectations and Nigerian experiences of indirect rule and trusteeship.

Chapter two focuses on women's political activism in Owerri and Calabar provinces of Nigeria between 1925 and 1930. It helps establish a distinction between the positions prominent historians and anthropologists have taken on the Women's War. As a result, it separates my view of the war from that of some of the most widely cited existing literature on the subject.

Chapter three chronicles the change that female demonstrators of 1929 wrought collectively. It traces the long-lasting impact of the women's massive protest through the years between the Women's War in 1929 and Nigerian self-government in 1960. It highlights how women's activism and agency enabled the transition from trusteeship to partnership and finally to independence.

Finally, my conclusion connects the legacy of British indirect rule to how gender and ethnicity continue to influence politics today. It discusses how the lessons of the Women's War highlight

ways in which gendered imbalances in power have outlasted the British Empire in former colonies like Nigeria. It argues that authoritarianism and ethnic divisions were essential not only to the way British colonization was managed but also to how the process of decolonization was undertaken in Nigeria and beyond.

Bibliography for the introduction

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Chapter one:

The establishment of indirect rule in southeastern Nigeria, 1914 - 1928

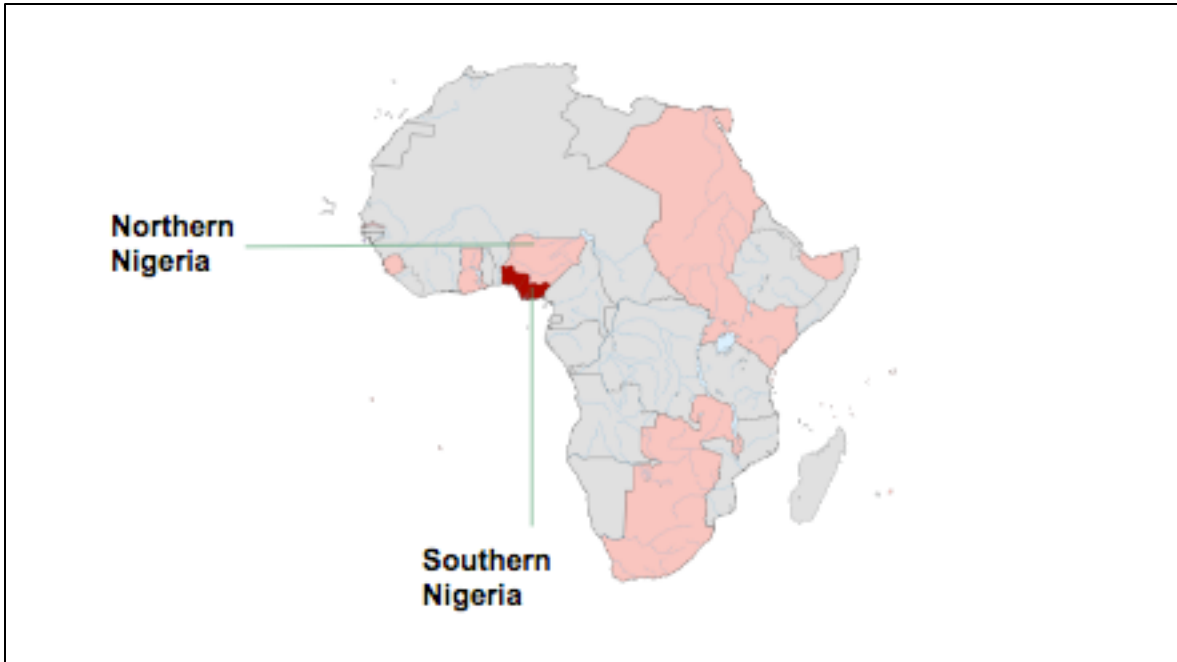


Figure 1: Northern and southern Nigeria in 1929

Section one: Introduction

The Women's War began on November 23, 1929, with over 10,000 Igbo and Ibibio women coming together to demonstrate their dissatisfaction at being ignored, disparaged and abused by Nigerian and European men alike. It affected an area spanning six thousand miles and containing two million people, killed 53 women and injured hundreds of others who were beaten with sticks by British troops. No European casualties were reported (Mba, 77). The women attacked between ten and sixteen native courts from the village of Oloko in the Owerri

Province to the district of Opobo in the Calabar province, breaking and burning these houses of governance by native chiefs in addition to looting factories and freeing prisoners at the central trading center of Aba. While sporadic demonstrations continued into 1930, the war is considered to have peaked on December 16, 1929 and ended by December 27, 1929 when soldiers were withdrawn from Owerri province.

The factors that motivated the war were rooted in the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria when Frederick Lugard, the Governor General of Nigeria between 1914 and 1919, hastily but determinedly implemented indirect rule without assessing whether the changes were as effective as he had imagined them to be or paying enough heed to criticism emanating from local and colonial circles alike. "We have been rushing this country rather too fast, and we have not waited for them (the natives) to settle down," said District Officer Ferguson who had helped govern Southeastern Nigeria for 12 years (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 185). The political, economic and societal changes that constituted the installation of indirect rule had failed to deliver the positive outcomes Lugard envisioned.

Not only that, these systemic changes had eroded the influence local women held in society. The women saw the shortcomings that undermined their political and economic interests as a slight to their status as 'fruit-bearing trees' who birthed, nurtured, and supported society. "Don't you agree that the world depends on women - that it is the women who multiply the population of the world," asked Enyidia, a leader from Oloko. Resounding echoes of "Yes, we do" met her query as her companions responded before the Aba Commission of Inquiry (Aba

Commission of Inquiry 1930, 80). Thus, besides being reliant on inefficient chiefs, double-dealing courts and overwhelmingly high taxation rates, Lugard's vision for Nigeria was also disproportionately detrimental to female interests.

Central Idea

The political, economic and social circumstances culminated in a situation that rendered women and their interests invisible to male decision-makers, both local and colonial. Women found themselves almost suddenly peripheral to a political and economic system that depended heavily on their roles as mothers and wives, as well as their labor as traders and farmers.

The political shortcomings in the system were induced by poor leadership of native chiefs introduced by Frederick Lugard, Governor-General of Nigeria between 1914-1919 and the supposed father of indirect rule in Africa. These chiefs were often chosen arbitrarily for their superficial loyalty to the British rather than any recognition they had earned among locals (Afigbo 1972, 169). The chiefs freely abused female labor and refused to pay appropriate bride wealth (Matera et al., 141). If women sought recourse in native courts, they were likely to "receive no justice" (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 90). Typically, only those who paid the highest bribes were able to solicit a favorable verdict (Afigbo 1972, 191). The political and legal system hence disparaged women, ignoring their preference for who was deserving of attaining chiefdom and exploiting them if they took their concerns to court. Women repeatedly asked for

inept chiefs to be replaced. “Chiefs whom the women say are good men, such are the people we want,” explained Ahudi, a demonstrator from the town of Nsidimo (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 114). While most demonstrators did not ask for women to be included among the ranks of chiefs, they did demand recognition of their true leaders instead of those hand picked by the British.

The situation was further exacerbated with growing male dependence on female labor and income (Ifeka-Moller, 140) as direct taxation on “male incomes” was collected for the first time in 1928. Unlike the women in Britain, local women in southeast Nigeria arduously supported their husbands and paid for their underage sons and widowed daughters. Through a combination of farming and trading activity, women earned independent incomes and spent them towards supporting their families. Contrasting the economic role of local women versus British women, the resident of Calabar province, Edward Falk had explained to British men, “In Nigeria she is an asset... Women’s presence raises the earning power of the community” (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 362). Many wives were richer than their husbands. There were frequent “cases of wives supporting their husbands instead of husbands supporting their wives” (Meek, 203). The payment of any tax, like the maintaining of a family was thus a joint effort between men and women. Any tax on “male property” was equally, or even overwhelmingly reliant on female labor.

In previous years women may have helped support male income-earners pay tax by relying on middle women trade whereby they bought tobacco, spirits, cigarettes and cloth on the coast

and sold it for a profit in markets inland. Alternately, they may have profited from selling palm kernels and oil to European traders.

However, in 1929 they faced increasingly hostile economic circumstances. The economic system belittled women's contributions, refusing for instance to accept palm products because they were considered "adulterated", without pausing to explain the new inspection regulations for palm products the women painstakingly cultivated all year round (Matera et al, 140). The inter-village markets they operated as central gathering spots for trade as well as the dissemination of news were being replaced. Instead, European style buildings called "factories" (Matera et al., 140) were being promoted because of government legislations requiring that all business transactions occur within mercantile factories. The pathways they built to connect markets were obliterated by newly constructed British roads (Bastian, 124). Competition from other European colonies was escalating, as were British customs duties in the wake of the global depression. This led to rising import prices and falling export prices. The women thus faced unfavorable import duties, unfamiliar inspection regulations and falling palm prices as tremors of the great depression were felt and tax was levied on locals for the very first time.

Thus, the female demonstrators of 1929 inhabited a rapidly changing living environment that demanded more economic labor and allowed less political visibility. To European eyes, the evolution of the region may have looked like progress. But to the women it signified a gradual replacement of their most precious roles and ideals.

Section two: The introduction of direct taxation

While direct taxation was collected for the first time in southeastern provinces like Calabar and Owerri in 1928, discussions on the importance of natives paying tax to colonial authorities were being held as early as 1914. According to Lugard, there were several motivations for imposing direct taxes. These taxes could produce better chiefs, more responsible natives and greater respect of colonial sovereignty, not to mention a convenient method of supplementing British income right after the expensive First World War and right before the global depression.

To Lugard, taxation represented an agent of civilization and morality that could “emancipate natives from indolence” and promote “individual and collective responsibility” in a region where lawlessness seemed rampant (Matera et al., 69). In addition, to Lugard the tax-less, chief-less system of governance in Southeastern Nigeria seemed to “sprawl without unity or purpose,” and he was determined to install centralized authority through native chiefs (Matera et al., 66). Teaching the chiefs to collect taxes seemed like a means of training them to be responsible leaders and validating their authority amid natives unaccustomed to recognizing one central leader (Afigbo, 146). Thus, Lugard considered taxation an “indispensable foundation” for indirect rule in Nigeria (Perham, 203).

Interestingly, the actual monetary benefit to the British of taxing natives was put forward as a secondary, almost peripheral advantage. After emphasizing the benefits of taxation for locals,

Lugard added, "Recent events in Europe have altered the outlook... Direct taxation will be necessary not only for its indirect benefits but also in order to enforce revenue" (Afigbo, 146). The revenue gain was presented like an afterthought by the administration.

Lugard used these factors to explain why taxation was the way forward, but it was not until 1926 that male property was counted by compound heads and warrant chiefs. Following the census, taxation was introduced in five southeastern provinces on April 1, 1928 (Gailey, 84). Native treasuries were established in each province by October 1, 1927, due to receive 50% of all funds.

While people in eastern provinces were informed about taxation, locals of the Bende Division in Owerri were kept in the dark. "The people of Bende were not aware that the counting had any connection with taxation," explains Gailey (89). They were told the purpose of the count was a census headcount. "The real reason for the numbering of men in 1926 - namely taxation - had been deliberately concealed from the people," confirms Perham (216). It is not surprising then, that when a second census count was commissioned, this time on female stock and poultry, the women of southeastern Nigeria considered it a confirmation that they too were about to be taxed. Bende was thus the first division where women began organizing demonstrations in 1929.

The impact of taxation

There were several problems that direct taxation created for taxpayers and tax collectors alike. For tax collectors, there were not enough human resources to implement taxation smoothly. Because Lugard had severely reduced the number of British staff, according to British Resident Falk of Calabar the shortage of administrators created “a state of transition and confusion” (Afigbo, 205). District officers had little to no time to complete census reports, leading to poor decision-making. Men under the age of nineteen for instance, were counted as full members of society, to be assessed at the same rate as men of age (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 222). This policy was determined in spite of the fact that underage men had no land, livestock or trees (Gailey, 92). Older men and women thus paid more than their allotted individual payments.

For taxpayers, there were discrepancies in the way the system was implemented. The headman of each compound was given a lump sum to collect from each compound, supposedly based on the number of bread-earning men who inhabited it. The assumption was that each man would be taxed at a flat rate of 2.5% (Perham, 203) or 7s (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 183) since it was considered that all people in one compound made similar incomes. Yet, the numbers of men in agricultural compounds declined as more and more male workers were “swept away” to work on colonial projects such as road and railway building, even as the lump sum taxes remained constant (Matera et al., 30). Mba confirms this, explaining how even after the British received information that the number of taxable males had been overestimated, there was no

reassessment of tax rates (75). Thus, the amount of tax paid by a family was not proportional to the number of family members.

In addition, every time a man died (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 184) or emigrated (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 201) his wife or mother continued to shoulder the burden of the tax since the lump sum was not adjusted to account for the change. Several women had to pay tax on behalf of husbands who had passed away or moved elsewhere as well as sons who were underage (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 184). Despite British insistence that no tax on women was levied, direct taxation was never a burden shouldered by only, or even primarily local men.

Note also that as prices of agricultural produce declined and incomes decreased proportionally, tax sums were not adjusted accordingly. More and more locals had to take on costly debt they could never pay back (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 201). Local men and women considered resorting to selling their offspring to make ends mean. Perham cites how several people asked if the government could withdraw a previous ban on natives selling their children (204).

Archdeacon Basden, a missionary working with natives, echoed her statement, telling authorities that natives were pawning children to pay debt and taxes (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 201). The British were to present local opposition to taxation as the Nigerians' inability to stomach centralized authority or governance. However, the people's attempts to sell their own kids to pay colonial dues are a sign of the despair taxation had brought upon the region.

In spite of how much people struggled to pay their tax, they seldom saw any results for their payments (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 201). Young and educated members of society requested in vain some discretion in how their taxes were put to use (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 201, 245). Not only was direct taxation poorly and unevenly implemented, it also seemed of little to no consequence to the local taxpayers.

Static, disproportionate taxes at a time of falling palm oil prices led to a severely unhappy local population. Yet, even before the incidence of direct taxation, Nigerian as well as British officers were criticizing the system of indirect rule.

In a 1919 survey led by Lugard's successor Sir Hugh Clifford, British officers from four Southeastern provinces including Calabar and Owerri claimed that Lugardian native courts "did not dispense anything that could be called justice and warrant chiefs were not fit to exercise the powers given to them" (Afigbo, 166). Their comments came ten years before the Women's War of 1929. Even then, they highlighted the inefficiency and corruption of warrant chiefs and court clerks.

Therefore, the frustrations that culminated in the Women's War of 1929 might have been aggravated by taxation. But the inherent and deep-seated administrative flaws in the region were merely worsened, not created by taxation. In the next section, I will discuss the weaknesses of indirect rule, as introduced by Lugard beginning in 1914.

Section three: Exploitation by warrant chiefs and court clerks

In 1914, Lugard, the newly installed Governor General of Nigeria, decided to amalgamate northern and southern Nigeria in spite of their apparent differences in political organization. In a bid to extend the system of chief-led indirect rule to southeastern Nigeria, Lugard and his staff decided that the fragmented system of political organization in the region was too chaotic to be considered effective. According to Perham, Lugard was not as interested in whether the system functioned well or not, because for him, the idea of many disparate groups governing their own affairs was inherently wrong (Perham 231). In addition, he believed that principles of western legal ideology were wasted on local people. He claimed that they deserved to be governed by their own native lawmakers instead of the British Supreme Court. "It bothered the Lugardians that Supreme Court control had led to the penetration of indigenous society by English legal ideas thus causing disruption and confusion," explains Afigbo (123). What Lugard needed was a system of native organization that was less fragmented and more concentrated, but instead of being shaped by British political or legal officers, relied on native, centralized authority.

Thus, Lugard's rule from 1914 saw several drastic changes to the political system in Southeastern Nigeria. For one, while previously native courts were directly linked to the Supreme Court, now a Provincial Court was constructed to act as a buffer between them (Afigbo, 132). Additionally warrant chiefs were given several new responsibilities to build their character as leaders and relieve some pressure from British officers increasingly involved in the

war being waged in Europe. Previously, warrant chiefs sat alongside district officers in native courts, observing the officer perform most if not all the major judicial duties. Now, district officers no longer served as prime authorities in courts (Afigbo, 132). Instead, warrant chiefs sat at the head of native courts while district officers reviewed appeals speedily (about 50 a day) spending as little as two minutes on each appeal (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 249). If they had time, which many of them professed not to have, they would pay occasional and hurried visits to check on court proceedings (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 191). Meanwhile, the number of court staff was drastically reduced to “compress the former system into something more manageable” (Matera et al., 33). A court clerk sat above multiple court messengers to assist the warrant chief in implementing judicial duties.

While the new system gave native chiefs much more control, required less manpower and relieved the colonial administration of several duties not to mention expenses, it was unsuccessful in achieving its objective of responsible native administration. We can divide the criticism of the new Lugardian system into two interconnected sections - criticism of the warrant chiefs and criticism of the native courts.

Criticism of warrant chiefs

The warrant chiefs installed in Southeastern Nigeria were, for the most part, artificial. That is, the selection of these men as chiefs had little to do with their natural authority in their communities. Instead, either these chiefs were “clever, pushing men who knew how to catch

the eye of the European officer” or they were rich enough to “bribe a mass meeting into choosing them” (Perham, 202). According to a Christian missionary, the British had no illusion of these men being the real and authentic leaders of their areas. It was inevitable that the men chosen as chiefs were artificial rulers, since “regular chiefs would not give assistance” for the first several decades of British administration (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 200). In addition, several communities where these chiefs were forcibly imposed upon natives did not recognize the system of a sole native authority let alone an artificial one (Afigbo, 142). Local people saw these chiefs as unrepresentative and unpopular agents reporting to white rulers (Perham 234). The fact that these chiefs blatantly exploited locals added fuel to the fire.

Women in particular faced abuse at the hands of warrant chiefs. Chiefs were known to confiscate their domestic animals and produce without paying full price. They would force women to serve for no pay in “unspecified, often spurious community projects” (Matera et al., 141). The chiefs were also notorious for forcibly taking women as wives without paying the usual dowry to their families (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 234). They would keep at one given time as many as 200 wives when the average native could barely afford to feed a small family of one or two wives (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 258). There were also several cases of chiefs demanding women as bribes in return for resolving local issues. Frank Hives, a British resident who served four southeastern provinces including Owerri explained that the decision returned by chiefs was determined by whether they had received their asked price from those in need. “Bribes are not confined to money alone but to cows, goats... (Or) a girl for

a wife,” said Hives (Afigbo, 191). Women were akin to currency as far as these chiefs were concerned.

Moreover, while typical marital practices in the region dictated that any groom should pay a sum of bride wealth to his in laws as appreciation of his wife-to-be, the chiefs did not abide by these norms. Since women were active participants in the economic and political arena, the assumption was that the groom would benefit from the partnership of his wife. It was considered only fair that he acknowledge her true worth by paying a token sum of money towards her family’s well being. The groom and wife and their respective families determined this sum collectively. However, warrant chiefs and other native administrators regularly outraged women by taking them as wives and delaying indefinitely the payment of any bride fees (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 90). Not only that, if other men and women approached chiefs with the intention of getting divorced, the chiefs would often keep women’s returned bride wealth rather than repaying it to their husbands. This was akin to rendering any divorces invalid in the eyes of the village (Matera et al., 141). Note that divorce was a widely accepted phenomenon in local society. Any woman was free to “leave her husband at will, abandon him if he becomes a thief and summon him to a tribunal where she would get a fair hearing” (Uchendu, 87). Thus, for women to be unable to obtain their bride wealth, either as wives of the chiefs or as aspiring divorcees was a refutation of their ability to live their lives as they saw fit. The chiefs’ disrespect towards bride wealth was considered as an insult to local women, their contributions to society and their right to leave an unsatisfactory marriage.

These are some examples of the ways in which the installation of artificial and exploitative warrant chiefs disproportionately affected the liberty local women were accustomed to. Note that it was predominantly men who were installed as chiefs, court messengers and administrators. Meanwhile, it was women who were swindled out of bride wealth, abducted as bribe payments and cheated out of their possessions and produce. There thus was an explicit gendered dimension to the system of warrant chiefs. The people who exploited the system were male, while the people who were exploited were overwhelmingly female.

While previously local people could take their complaints to the British administered Supreme Court, now the chiefs had the authority to stop them from doing so. When asked by the commission why she did not bring up complaints against her chief before the war, a woman responded that she would be killed if she approached the British (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 207). “They come between us and the white man... They do not treat us fairly,” lamented the witness. Hence, Lugard’s system, instead of creating accountable chiefs who understood their subjects, empowered greedy men who created insulated pockets of oppression in local compounds.

Criticism of native courts

As part of the installation of warrant chiefs, artificial court areas were established to provide the chiefs a means of trying local cases independently. Ignorant to the natural village-groups in the region, the British drew lines to create court areas that lumped together as many as

100,000 people from several unrelated and unconnected groups (Perham, 234). With arbitrary court areas, overburdened British administrators and illiterate local chiefs, a disproportionate amount of power ended up in the hands of court clerks and messengers (Perham, 202). Since the clerks were relatively more literate than the warrant chiefs and understood a smattering of English unlike the warrant chiefs, their supposed bosses frequently deferred to their judgment for decisions (Afigbo, 124). "What the clerk said was law was accepted as law since he was the only man in the court who knew what was in the 'white man's book'," says Afigbo (184). Afigbo calls the period from 1914-1930 "the golden age of clerks." They were free to not only exploit local people, but also claim that their exploitation was legitimized by British principles of governance as presented in instructive English texts. Reductions in the numbers of court clerks and court messengers had caused those who remained to become "highly paid and infinitely more powerful" (Matera et al., 33). Unscrupulous messengers thus added to the general mistrust of local men and women in native systems of administration.

That the legal and political system within native administrations was in shambles was no surprise to British officers on the ground. Nor was the Women's War of 1929 the first time they heard of these deficiencies. When asked by the commission of inquiry whether native court clerks were corrupt or extortive, District Officer Ferguson responded that the clerks "were prone to make use of opportunities" to demand bribes. When asked why, knowing the flaws of the native courts, Officer Ferguson did not spend more time assisting the hearing of cases he responded, "I have no time" (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 191). It seems that the British

were aware that warrant chiefs were inept and court messengers were extortive well before local women protested against these issues in 1929.

The most apparent result of the flawed legal and political system was that local people felt not only detached from but also resentful towards their own supposed leaders. During the riots, native courts were damaged, as was the property of native chiefs. These items represented tools of oppression to the protesting women. “There was no recognition that these people were the leaders or the servants of the people, any more than when they destroyed the courthouses there was any recognition that these buildings were their own,” says Perham (216). Whether it was junior court officials or senior warrant chiefs, the women saw these men and their institutions as symbols of betrayal. Lugard’s plan to encourage local loyalty towards native institutions had backfired. Instead, protesters were desperate for greater intervention by white men to replace local leaders.

Section four: External economic pressures

So far I have explained some of the internal faults in the native system of government in southeastern Nigeria. However, it should also be noted that the Women’s War of 1929 was rooted in externally induced economic turmoil as well.

Palm products were the primary produce of natives in southeastern Nigeria, forming five-sevenths of the total exports of the region in 1913 and making southern Nigeria a “one-crop

country” (Perham, 62). According to David Meredith, in 1913 palm products constituted 92 percent of Nigeria’s total domestic exports. Yet, this figure had fallen to 57 percent in less than a decade (Meredith, 312). “By 1922, it was apparent that Nigeria’s position in the world export for palm products was deteriorating,” says Meredith (312). This phenomenon had not as much to do with internal changes in palm oil or palm kernel production, as it had to do with external changes in the global palm products industry.

Even though the volume of world exports for palm oil and palm kernels was twenty percent higher in 1922 than it was in 1913, the increased revenue went towards the palm plantations of the Belgian Congo and the Dutch East Indies (Meredith, 312). These Dutch and Belgian colonies had adopted large, efficient expatriate-owned plantations. However, British authorities continued to favor native-led cultivation on “moral grounds”, refusing to engage in long-term land leases to create palm plantations (Meredith, 328). It is not clear how much of the policy to avoid large-scale commercial plantations in favor of primitive native methods of oil and kernel cultivation had to do with British sympathy for local producers versus British resignation to the fact that with or without plantations, the Nigerian farmer “had no future in the export side of the industry” (Meredith, 324). “It can hardly be hoped that the local, primitive methods of extracting the oil will be able to hold their own against the competition of well-managed and well-equipped Dutch factories,” said a British administrator in 1923 (Meredith, 313). In either case, colonial administrators believed that replacing native methods of cultivation with large plantations would harm the social and political fabric of southeastern Nigeria (Meredith, 328). The policy instead was “to encourage European expatriate investment in every stage of palm-oil

production except that of cultivation” (Meredith, 313). Needless to say, this policy was not successful.

Between the amalgamation of 1914 and the Women’s War of 1929, British capitalists refused to invest in palm product processing in Southeastern Nigeria, citing the lack of long-lease land for palm-oil plantations. As for improvements in the cultivation process led by locals, the British knew little, if anything, of native methods of oil extraction (Meredith, 323). Hence, research was seldom undertaken or completed, and funds for investment in the palm products industry were non-existent.

With uncompetitive products, the Nigerian palm products industry continued to shrink, even as increasing supply from other colonies led to falling palm-oil prices. “(Prices have not fluctuated) to such as extent in the past... because then there was not such intensive competition,” explained Alexander Henderson, the Supervising Agent for United Africa Company (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 225). Gailey estimates that in 1929, most towns of Owerri and Calabar experienced at the very least, a reduction of eight to twelve percent in their earning capacity over a twelve month period (99). Note that the reduction in income occurred in sync with the levying of direct taxation. Just as the women and men of the region had less to offer, they were asked to pay dues towards an unknown purpose, supposedly for their communal gain. Their skepticism and despair does not seem out of place.

No explanation for economic changes

Here, it must be mentioned that besides just seeing lower and lower incomes from palm-oil produce, local men and women were also witnessing increasing prices of imports. "Tobacco, cigarettes and kerosene form the three out of the leading half dozen articles of consumption by native provinces," explained Henderson (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 225). Spirits, another chief import for the region, were also heavily taxed, forming nearly 70% of customs revenue as early as 1913 (Perham, 63). It is interesting to note that most economic data I have found in this regard does not point to an external rise in prices for these products; instead it cites a rapid increase in the import duties added to the prices of imports products by the British themselves. Tobacco for instance bore an import duty equal to two-thirds of its actual price, while kerosene duties were also high (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 225). While the local response to increases in prices of spirits and tobacco was to decrease consumption and attempt to fill the resulting void with local distillations and smuggled products from French colonies, kerosene consumption did not fall. "Duty on kerosene is high but the government has got to get money from somewhere. Kerosene can stand it," said Henderson (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 230). With increasing kerosene prices and decreasing palm oil prices, local incomes fell even as taxation remained flat and economic exploitation was rampant.

These price changes for exports and imports came at a time of seemingly arbitrary transformations in the economic environment. In 1926, the British began buying by weight rather than measure, leading to lower revenues for local, overwhelmingly female traders. In 1928, a produce inspection system was implemented, rejecting produce if it was adulterated

with a combination of water and potash as was customary among many local producers. Meanwhile, mercantile factories had been installed to inspect, evaluate and buy women's palm oil and kernels, replacing the open air markets women had organized and regulated for so long. These changes, including the changes in price and quantity demanded, occurred without much explanation. "The native has no one to teach him, no one to explain to him these mysterious economic happenings that occur thousands of miles away and yet have power to raise him up or cast him down without warning and apparently without reason," said Leith-Ross (62-63). Uchendu, an Igbo scholar writing three decades after the war seconded her. "In the midst of this poverty we could not understand, the property assessment of our women was launched by the colonial administration," he said (5). In this vacuum of knowledge, the people of southeastern Nigeria were bewildered by a series of economic changes, each of which seemed to thrust their welfare to the backburner as the British sought to conserve expenses. Many demonstrators in the war genuinely believed the changes were all part of a campaign to undermine their interests. "How could they be sure what they were told was trade depression was not the government's secret form of punishment? They had a subtle conviction that they had gone back in the social scale because they were pushed back" (Leith-Ross, 179). The global depression towards the end of the 1920s did not help the situation, as British government resources in Nigeria shrunk even further following the First World War.

Strangely enough, even with prior knowledge of the many flaws in the system of indirect rule, it was not until well after the Woman's War of 1929 that the British took decisive action to amend an evidently broken system. Even worse, in several colonial circles the War was

considered an “unconscious cultural protest” (Perham, 218) rather than a legitimate criticism of a system that had failed. Rather than recognize the validity of the women’s concerns, British administrators had a tendency to blame a European versus non-European dichotomy.

The British had long considered the southern people of Nigeria to be “pagans” with a particular “lack of stability, slovenliness, drunkenness, promiscuity and general messiness” (Matera et al., 66). It was thus no surprise that the women of Calabar and Owerri had to organize a massive collective protest spanning 15,000 participants and two million people. This seemed like their best shot at being heard by administrators who thought so little of them.

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Chapter two:

Women's political and social activism, 1925-1930

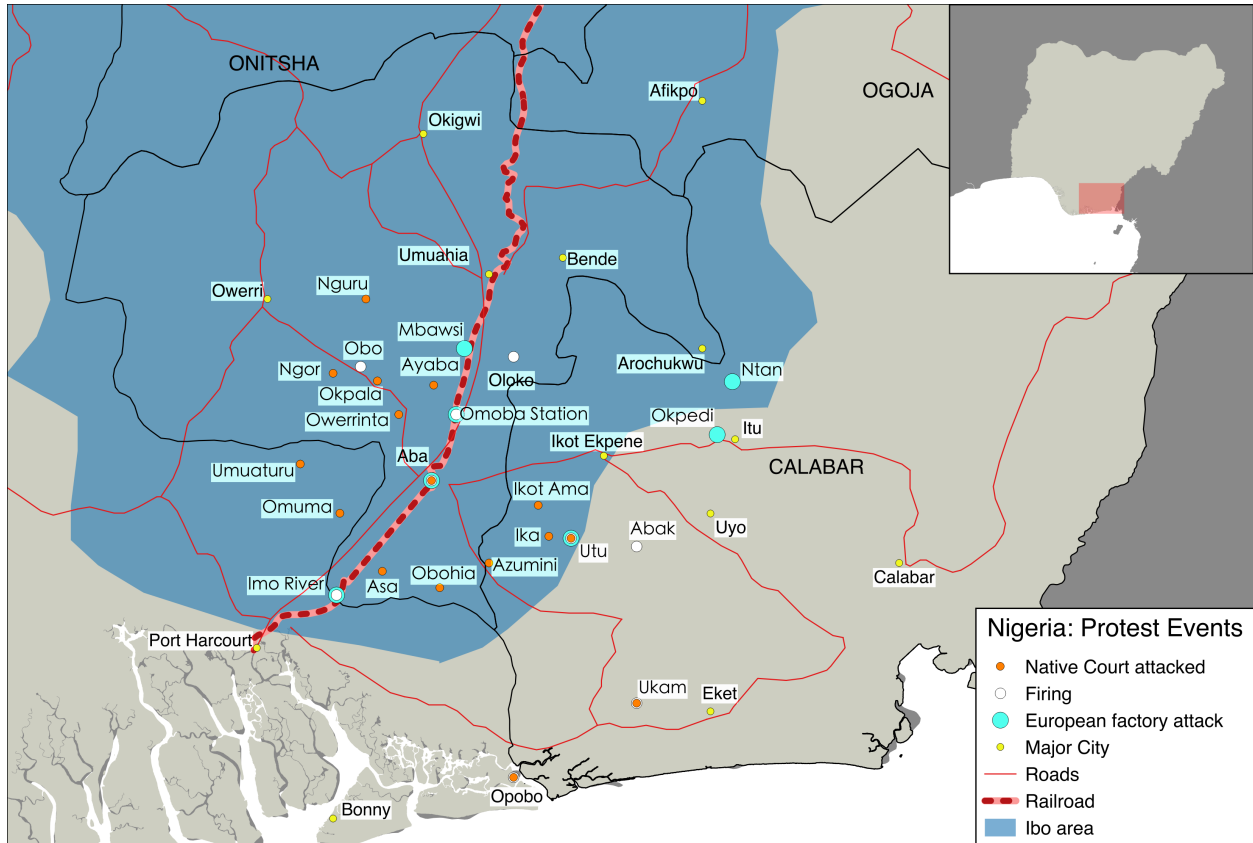


Figure 2: The areas affected by the Women's War of 1929

Section one: Introduction

The Women's War has been widely portrayed by colonial authorities, British anthropologists and even contemporary historians as an anti-taxation, anti-authoritarian or anti-British demonstration. I feel that the events of 1929 were much more complex than any of those explanations will have us believe.

It is true that the women's demonstrations were rooted in complex political and economic shortcomings of the environment the women inhabited in 1929, that I have underscored in the previous chapter. However, because it was women who waged the war, it was not merely a plea for political or economic reform, but also for the restoration of women's local agency.

Over a decade, southeastern Nigeria had transformed into "a space where the value of women's production and reproduction would be measured not by women themselves, but by an elite group of men" (Matera et al.: 144). Hence, I strongly believe that the Women's War was a manifestation of the women's frustration not merely at the economic circumstances or at the political or social marginalization they were facing, but at their invisibility in a system imagined by men, realized by men and controlled by men. I will explain this view in more detail in the following section, where I detail the conceptual frameworks I found in some of the prominent literature on the Women's War.

Central Idea

Taxation on men was introduced on April 1, 1928 with no major disturbances, although local men and women were unhappy with the institution and skeptical of British assurances that payment of tax meant better native authorities as well as the end of forced labor. By the end of 1928, the British had collected £364,824 (Gailey: 95), with at least half of all tax proceeds given to native treasuries to boost the semblance of rule by native institutions. When another census

was ordered by Captain Cook of Owerri and Resident Falk of Calabar to improve nominal tax rolls, it sparked fears the British would begin taxing female property.

The Women's War was perceived by much of the British leadership in southeastern Nigeria as a riot against this possibility of taxation on female property. Since authorities provided repeated assurances in late 1929 that women or their domestic property were not going to be taxed, the women's vehement demonstrations seemed illogical to British officers, particularly after tax on male income had been introduced and collected the previous year in relative peace. "(The revolt) is stupid because Essene (in Calabar) has been assessed and the demand for next year's tax is unchanged in 20 towns out of 24," wrote Falk in a letter to his wife Helen on December 8, 1929, just before the escalation of violence in Calabar (Falk Papers: 8/12/1929)¹. Historians and anthropologists alike have since augmented this perception of the demonstrations in late 1929.

Margery Perham, the official biographer for Frederick Lugard and an avid observer of local people in southeastern Nigeria offered the view that the Women's War occurred as a result of a complaints about a myriad of issues, not limited to the rumor of taxation but certainly relating to several issues that "in their [the women's] eyes are real injustices and hardships" (Perham: 219). For Perham, the war was a result of frustrations that had been brewing in the minds of local women and had ultimately taken the form of a "pathological condition common to the whole of negro Africa" whereby primitive communities like Igbo and Ibibio women found themselves overwhelmed by the "strong, all-embracing pressure" of British authorities. Perham

¹ Falk Papers are currently housed in Oxford. I obtained records of some correspondence between Edward and Helen Falk via secondary sources. This letter is quoted by Matera et al. on page 163

² Matera et al. justify this amnesia succinctly on page 110: "As Perham and Leith-Ross had the closest personal as

believes that the Women's War was an "unconscious cultural protest" where local women were propelled towards violence out of the stress of a fast-changing environment. She implied that the women were voicing their frustration with the rapid progress that the presence of European domination has induced.

While Perham's claim that the women inhabited a rapidly changing economic and political landscape are certainly true, I find her claims incomplete, not to mention disparaging. The demands made by Igbo and Ibibio women during the war are specific to the region of southeastern Nigeria and their reaction to centralized rule by native authorities is significantly different than that of other members of African, even Nigerian society, if we are to consider for instance the relatively smooth installation of native chiefs in northern Nigeria by Lugard. To deem the war a result of a pathological condition common to all black Africans seems like a broad generalization, one that fails to appreciate the uniqueness of Igbo and Ibibio women's practices. Unsurprisingly, a deeper look at the war gives us several other instances where the British fail to appreciate the specificities of local society, mixing up the languages of local people, glazing over the specific functions of political organizations or local markets, and failing to understand symbolic vernacular, dances and songs used by the women. As for Perham's assertion that the war is primarily a cultural protest, considering that the key demands of women encompass installing accountable chiefs, fixing prices of palm produce, and reversing taxation on men, there are clear economic and political causes and implications involved that we can hardly do justice to if we are to consider the protests chiefly cultural.

Perham is further determined that the women's war assumes a violent nature because native society is incapable of expressing itself via constitutional outlets. "People who do not know how to communicate or even to formulate their sense of grievance in constitutional terms may resort to violence as the only effective way in which they can show their dissatisfaction with their conditions," she offers (206). Ironically, it was the British who resorted to deadly violence. British troops were responsible for killing 53 unarmed, predominantly female demonstrators. No European lives were lost. Nevertheless, her belief that the women are propelled forward towards revolt by an internal sense of grievance that makes them behave in violent and illogical ways is echoed by Harry A. Gailey, professor emeritus at San Jose State University who specialized in British colonial Africa and wrote a commonly referenced work on the war titled *The Road To Aba*. While Gailey presents a rich picture of the situation, taking time to explain the specific economic and political circumstances in 1929, he too characterizes the conflict as an overly emotional endeavor by women who could barely articulate their reasons for revolting. "It is doubtful whether even the leaders of the women knew what impelled them towards revolt," he claims (Gailey: 97), going on to say that the women were governed by emotion and hatred, not to mention a false sense of immunity (Gailey: 113).

I want to problematize the assertion that the war was an emotional, rather illogical and overdone, affair. I took this assertion with a grain of salt because I believe that political action by women, whether historically or in contemporary society, is prone to being categorized as being driven by emotion and sentimental feelings. I believe that the fact that the movement is run by women from diverse walks of life, "pagan" and Christian, young and old, Igbo and Ibibio,

traditional leaders and newly chosen spokespersons, signifies that there is a system of careful collective organization, not to mention an efficient communication system that spans towns in two large provinces from Oloko to Umuahia and from Aba to Opobo. This is no coincidence; women's organizations were prevalent across the Southeast. Judith Van Allen details such an organization called *mikiri*, a forum where women discussed their interests as traders and farmers, in addition to their concerns as wives and mothers (Van Allen, 169). Female governed markets throughout the region were used as a firmly regulated "locus for the announcement of news and grievances" (Bastian: 112). In addition, the Women's War was the last of a series of demonstrations in what Ifeka-Moller terms as the "decade of protest" when local women fight to become politically relevant, as will be detailed below in the description of the 1925 demonstration called the *Nwaobiata*. Thus, it is over-simplistic to believe that the Women's War of 1929 was a sudden outpouring of emotion by women who were half unaware of their true motives. These were women highly skilled in collective organization, who had come together systematically to express their disapproval of the political and economic circumstances that had rendered them invisible to male decision-makers. They may have been emotionally invested in building a more gender-equitable world for themselves and their kin, but this does not mean that their demonstrations were based solely or even primarily on some sort of a subconscious, overpowering sentiment ungrounded in pragmatism.

Nigerian historian Adiele Afigbo meanwhile characterizes the conflict as one that was primarily anti-authoritarian and anti-government. "The women were asking for an exodus of the British," claims Afigbo (Afigbo 1966: 554), who believes that the women were vying for a return to the

former political and moral order that existed in pre-colonial society. Nina Mba, a feminist historian who published the first full-length publication on Nigerian women in politics in 1982, disagrees. She points to the demands of the women not to eliminate legal courts but to improve them, and the women's desire to return not to pre-colonial legal order but to pre-Lugardian legal order when British district officers presided over courts and ensured what the women felt were more equitable verdicts (Mba: 91). "The women's war was primarily a movement of women to protect their economic and political interests, who were endangered by taxation, the economic crisis, and the actions of the warrant chiefs," explains Mba, who spent time in Nigeria interviewing women who had been a part of the demonstrations in 1929 (Mba: 90). We can add to Mba's ideas by noting that the women do not offer a return to pre-colonial diffuse political authority but instead suggest a system that uses natural, traditional rulers who the women support. In addition, the women make the suggestion of appointing chiefs for specified periods, potentially for three years at a time (Mba: 87-88). They cited their own roles as wives, pointing to a trial period when women are taken as wives on probation before they can be proven to fit the required role (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 279). Thus, it might be more fitting to consider that the women wanted to improve the colonial system of governance, rather than reverse the measures implemented by British Lugardians. Mba's thesis undergirds the basis of my own conceptual framework.

I believe that the Women's War at its core was a mass demonstration by Igbo and Ibibio women to make themselves visible to British male authorities and relevant to Nigerian male authorities. They had been marginalized by a male-dominated Lugardian legal system (think of

the local woman whose divorce from an undesirable male partner is not recognizable in society because her bride wealth cannot be monetized due to a dearth of British money). Their economic interests had been hurt by British economic regulations as well as the dawn of the global great depression (think of the woman who suffered a loss of up to 12% in selling palm produce, her chief means of income in 1929, even as taxation solidified into an ongoing expense for her family). These political and economic slights were construed by the women as insults to all reproductive females, the “fruit-bearing seeds” belittled by a system constructed by men for other men. We cannot pretend to make a non-gendered idea such as taxation or indirect rule by native authorities the core takeaway of the war.

This war was a *women’s war*, a gendered demonstration that attacked male institutions of authority and countered not merely foreign authority but also local authority, namely men in power who marginalized women. While several men became chiefs and court messengers, women’s voices were completely and absolutely displaced. “Women had lost more than men... The ranks of men were divided whereas the women had no stake in the preservation of the system,” explains Mba fittingly (Mba: 92-93). The war may have deep roots in economic and political distress but this distress was felt, articulated and demonstrated by women who were collectively, logically and systematically protesting against men who made them peripheral in their own homes.

Section two: The *Nwaobiala* of 1925

Following the Women's War of 1929, British authorities repeatedly expressed disbelief to the Aba Commission of Inquiry that the women of southeastern Nigeria were capable of collective organizing. Kenneth Cochrane, the District Officer of the Bende division, claimed before the Commission that the war proved that "they (the women) were able to organize, which was a thing that was doubted to a certain extent before" (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 157).

Likewise, District Officer Whitman of Opobo expressed utter astonishment at seeing a large congregation of women at his doorstep for a community meeting, in spite of having called them to come speak to him about their concerns. "I was very surprised to see 1,000 women coming to see me," he told the Commission (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 376), despite it being pointed out that if tax were to be imposed on female property, at least ten times as many women would have been affected. Meanwhile, District Officer Weir of Okigwi passed off the entire affair as one that could not possibly be attributed to the women's logic and discipline. "The whole affair was so well organized, I think there must have been (a mastermind behind it)," he claimed before the Commission, citing Lagos, the capital, as a potential source where such a mastermind might be situated, pulling hidden strings to make the women act with the precision and determination that they exhibited.

In fact, British authorities' puzzlement at the women's ability to organize a collective mass demonstration can hardly be justified. I have already discussed women's organizations such as the *mikiri* as well as the markets women built and maintained in their communities. Even if we

were to consider the British completely ignorant of what they called women's "secret societies" (even though these institutions operated in clear view of any interested observers), it is hard to justify their bewilderment, considering that less than four years before the war, women in Owerri had organized a powerful demonstration to protest what they felt were undesirable changes in their social infrastructure. This amnesia is baffling. Many of the leading British officers such as Cochrane who were jolted into action in 1929 were very much in power in 1925. Nevertheless they fail to recall, understand or analyze the well-organized, loud, symbolic demonstration that had so much in common with the war of 1929. There are clear parallels between how women used song and dance to demonstrate their frustration in 1925 and then again in 1929, in the emphasis they placed on their reproductive capabilities and sexual identities and in the way they attacked material manifestations of indirect rule such as native courts to show their disapproval of the chiefs and courts. As Matera, Kent and Bastian put it, "For Cochrane, with his fifteen years of experience in Igbo country, as for other colonial administrators, it was as if the "riots" of late 1929 burst out of nowhere and no-time, being without precedent (Matera et al.: 109)." Had the British appreciated these factors in 1925 and tried to better understand the reasons behind and symbolism inside the protest, the events of 1929 could have been better managed or even prevented. Instead, British historians such as Perham as well as anthropologists such as Leith-Ross failed to even cite connections between the events of 1925 and 1929.²

² Matera et al. justify this amnesia succinctly on page 110: "As Perham and Leith-Ross had the closest personal as well as professional ties to colonial administrators, their research openly reflected their approval of and participation in colonial structures of domination. It should therefore come as no surprise that they neglected what administrators obviously considered a minor incident, or had forgotten completely in the intervening years."

One might say this amnesia indicates a somewhat deliberate resolve to consider female mass demonstrations unimportant, female demands trifling, female voices for change irrelevant. I will explain the events of 1925 below briefly since any explanation of the Women's War of 1929 that does not recognize the significance of the *Nwaobiala* would be grossly incomplete.

The events of the *Nwaobiala*

The *Nwaobiala* began in late October 1925 led by "several hundred women", although it did not catch the attention of the British up until November. Women, often those without paternal ties to the town or region, would appear in the marketplace and perform an *egwu*, a female-specific dance performance traditionally used to bring an issue pertinent to women to the attention of men in power. "These songs / dances were formulated, practiced, and polished during the women-only meetings and unveiled at public events like markets or town festivals," explains Misty Bastian (Bastian: 111)³. The women called their dance the *Nwaobiala*, i.e. the child from the compound of Ala, where Ala referred to a critically important female deity in the Igbo belief system that held absolute power over all land and earth. In traditional Igbo belief, children who had some sort of deformities at birth, e.g. more or less than the usual number of fingers, signified a warning from Ala for people to mind their actions (Bastian: 111). The dancers spoke of such a "miraculous birth" as they began dancing in the marketplaces of the Okigwe region in October 1925. They followed the dance with sweeping first the public town square

³ Misty Bastian's work *Dancing Women and Colonial Men* is widely referenced as the authoritative work on the *Nwaobiala*. Bastian used colonial documents as well as material from the National Nigerian Archives at Enugu to highlight the *Nwaobiala* that has otherwise only been talked of as a prequel to the Women's War in 1929. She believes it was not merely a precursor to the Women's War of 1929, but also significantly more important than it.

and then local chiefs' compounds. According to Bastian, in a typical Igbo setting only local women who belonged to the village group of a specific location were expected to clean the public squares. For external women to appear suddenly, dancing and sweeping over territory they were not overtly associated with was not only unusual but also highly symbolic of women's "usefulness" in terms of their roles as traders and mothers, and above all the disciples of Ala who purified the land she governed (Bastian: 114). The progression from the marketplace to the town square to chiefs' compounds, as well as the act of caring for the earth and establishing intimacy with it, showed that the women were stressing the need for vigilant purification in the spaces they could easily access and apparently control, i.e. marketplaces and town squares, as well as the spaces beyond their feminine reach, i.e. the warrant chiefs' compounds (Bastian: 115). We can presume that by stepping outside of their traditional roles as the caretakers of only the village groups they were born or married into, the women established control over public and private spaces alike. It should be noted that unlike the Women's War of 1929, this demonstration was predominantly comprised of one specific type of local women - older, non-missionized "pagan" women.

The protesters' demands

In addition to the symbolic demonstration that may or may not have been fully appreciated by local men and was definitely not understood by foreign authorities, the women also articulated a clear list of demands. I will highlight five of these factors that I consider critical to the development of the Women's War four years later. They were: preventing the contamination of

fruit trees, payment of bride wealth in native and not British money; condemning British built roads that impinged upon the trade and safety of local women; opposition to Christian-inspired clothing for young and unmarried women; and governance of any poor man's legal affairs at the hands of traditional chiefs instead of the appointed native warrant chiefs.

The first demand asked for no "nuisance" to be committed under fruit-bearing trees. It was construed by the British to imply a desire for better sanitation in society (Bastian, 120).

However, a closer observation of the women's rhetoric before the Commission in 1930 yields a radically different, much deeper meaning. Here, Enyidia, a leader from Oloko called out to British authorities, expressing deep shock at any thought of taxing or even counting fruit bearing, reproductive women. "What we have we women done to warrant our being taxed? We women are like trees, which bear fruit. You should tell us the reason why women who bear seeds should be counted," she said (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 80). We can consider the dancers in 1925 to be using the same metaphor, standing against any action that served as a "nuisance" to women who could not be harmed without harm occurring to the rest of local society as well. Had the British attempted to decipher this remark in 1925, they might have understood better the centrality of reproductive abilities to Igbo women's perception of their own selves, and how critical it was for them to be visible in the society they believed they quite literally gave birth to.

The second demand was that bride wealth should be paid in native money such as brass rods or cowries (Mba, 70) instead of British currency. "Most of British currency immediately circulated

back into mercantile capitalist or mission pockets... (Or) to colonial treasuries through male taxation," explains Bastian (123). Thus, we can imagine that it was increasingly hard for women who could previously divorce a partner by repaying the bride wealth in native money to muster up enough European currency to break free from an undesirable marital relationship. Women cited concerns about bride wealth again in 1929, when they pointed to chiefs who failed to pay the full amount due to a woman's family (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 90)⁴. Whether or not the British comprehended the full breadth of meaning within this demand, we can see that it was in the interest of several local men not to pay heed to it. Maintaining the status quo meant keeping wives under male control regardless of their desire for divorce, and in the case of local chiefs, less money spent in acquiring desirable partners.

The third demand criticized British roads that frequently disrupted or blocked pathways built by women between periodic markets they frequented to trade and socialize (Bastian: 124). The women resented the erasure of bush roads that had connected their sacred market spaces, found modern vehicular traffic intimidating, disliked the spread of disease they attributed to the increased movement between regions these roads enabled and detested the forced labor that was required to build the roads in the first place and that had resulted in several laborers leaving their natal societies, or even dying in the arduous process of construction (Bastian: 124). The women's fear of British roads and vehicles was proven to be well-founded when at least two to three demonstrators were killed in 1929 when a British medical servant ran over them in trying to escape a flock of protesters (Gailey: 119 and Matera et al.: 172).

⁴ This complaint was made by Nwosu of Umuahia before the Aba Commission of Inquiry in 1930

The fourth demand called for a return to the pre-colonial and pre-missionary tradition for unmarried young women to go unclothed until they had married a man and produced his offspring (Bastian: 125). Clothing was for senior women who had earned the right to cover their body, usually via a simple loincloth, by becoming “useful” and fulfilling their reproductive responsibilities. Younger women were asked to leave their bodies naked so older women could ensure there were no signs of pregnancy before marriage. However, with the advent of conservative British authorities and Christian missionaries, young women were encouraged to wear “modest” frocks and cover their bodies whether or not they had attained the expected level of seniority in society. “The social value of the cloth-wealth older women had accumulated over the course of their lifetimes was seriously eroded,” explains Bastian (122). The British did not pay much heed to this demand, considering it an illogical desire of old-fashioned, unprogressive pagan women. However, had they stopped to consider the significance of women’s reproductive abilities, covering or uncovering of bodies or traditional loincloth, the manner in which demonstrators presented themselves in 1929 may have appeared less threatening and more meaningful. Just four years later, the appearance of thousands of women, largely unclothed in the modest frocks the British had so ardently advocated, wearing instead a combination of traditional loincloths and palm leaves shocked the British, who believed this near nudity to be a sign of sexual immorality, instead of a signifier of the life-giving powers of a woman’s body (Matera et al.: 158).

Finally, the fifth demand to try the cases of poorer men in the houses of traditional and socially sanctioned authorities as opposed to artificially appointed warrant chiefs was perhaps the most transparent of all the factors to consider (Mba: 71). It spoke to the mistrust that local women (and men in this case) associated with British installed chiefs and indicated the need to reform the legal system. Had the British investigated the reasons behind this demand, they may have given greater consideration to those leaders the women of the land had unanimously proclaimed rightful societal authorities instead of local men who had been chosen often arbitrarily to come to power. This criticism of native chiefs and courts was not only repeated verbally but also expressed materially by the burning of native courts by women in 1929 (Perham: 211). Thus, the *Nwaobiala* of 1925 offered clear indications that local women had been severely marginalized by native authorities as well as British officers, and that they could not be expected to accept this treatment as reproductive mothers, trading wives and useful contributors to society.

Yet, instead of investigating the meaning behind the female performances and rhetoric of the movement, the British spent time and energy looking for proof of “intelligent, criminal-minded” men who may have set up the *Nwaobiala* to undermine British male authority, since it was seemingly incomprehensible that local women could organize themselves to demand reform. “The first reaction was to look for men who must be behind the women,” says Mba (Mba: 71). By December 1925, the women had been subdued and no evidence of a male conspiracy had been unearthed (Mba: 71). Thus, the British largely ignored the dances and sweeping, and

passed off the demands as needless noise created by orthodox women who opposed modern society.

By the end of the year, Cochrane had written to his superiors that the campaign was nothing but a civil matter, unworthy of being considered a threat to local peace let alone an indicator of the need for reform (Bastian: 109). In spite of the closely linked events of 1929, British authorities failed to recall the *Nwaobiala* or consider the meaning or warning behind it even when the war of 1929 was widely investigated. In fact, the only reference to the events of 1925 was made vaguely by a local woman from Oloko, who spoke to the Commission in 1930 about being assaulted by her chief four years back when women were massed during a demonstration (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 61).⁵

⁵ This reference was made by Nwanyeruwa, the first woman to be approached by an agent appointed by the chief of Oloko for the purpose of a census recount and who was the first to raise the alarm about women being taxed and thus trigger the war in 1929.

Section three: The Women's War of 1929

October 14 - December 10, 1929: The war takes root

-  **October 14, 1929**
Census of women's property ordered in Bende division of Owerri Province
-  **November 23, 1929**
Confrontation between Nwanyeruwa and Emeruwa in Oloko
-  **November 24, 1929**
Women march to Okugo, the chief of Oloko to begin demonstrating
-  **November 29, 1929**
Okugo is arrested for attacking demonstrating women
-  **December 1, 1929**
Census count of women's property begins in Ukam region of Calabar province
-  **December 2, 1929**
Demonstrators approach Captain Hill's wife to voice their demands
-  **December 3, 1929**
Chief Okugo is tried and convicted
-  **December 4, 1929**
British officers organize meetings to refute rumors of taxation on women at Opobo
-  **December 5, 1929**
Police reinforcements brought to areas of Calabar to counter women
-  **December 6, 1929**
Women begin large demonstrations at Aba.
-  **December 9, 1929**
Massive demonstrations at several towns including Okpala, Nguru and Ayaba.
Native courts occupied and attacked.

Figure 3: Women's War - Oct 14, 1929 to Dec 10, 1929

The needs of local women, their utility in society and their capability to mobilize for the advancement of their interests were all invisible to British men by virtue of perhaps a willful

ignorance, as well as an inability to face the reality that the roles and responsibilities of women were radically different in southeastern Nigeria as compared to Europe. Meanwhile, local men were content to let this situation continue, since for many of them, especially those who were associated with the agency of chiefs and legal courts, the marginalization of female interests meant a direct increase in their own power and reach. It was under these political circumstances, as well as in the face of deteriorating economic conditions discussed previously that news of the revision of previous census counts and tax rolls swept through the Owerri and Calabar provinces in October and November 1929.

Captain John Cook, the Assistant District Officer for Owerri, called a meeting of local warrant chiefs on October 14, 1929, asking them to revisit the tax information they had gathered in 1926 and 1927 for the purposes of the first incidence of tax in 1928 that was based on an estimation of the number and incomes of Nigerian men. Cook decided the information previously gathered was insufficient, and a recount was in order, especially one that paid greater attention to the number of women and children, as well as to the property and produce associated with the women of the land (Matera et al.: 135). Roughly one to two weeks later, cadet Floyd in Calabar embarked upon a similar mission, recounting the Ikpa clan in the Essene region (Gailey: 126) upon orders of the resident of Calabar, Falk, who wanted to acquire a fresh count for the population of each unit of taxation (Matera et al.: 152).

Were Floyd or Cook part of an administration that took notice of the indigenous ways and beliefs of the society they were so ready to govern by British principles, they may have known

that the counting children or disclosing the number of offspring in a family was associated with bad fortune, a practice local men and women avoided discussing even in daily discourse. Alfred Butler, a British manager for a trading firm gave testimony before the Commission of 1930, confirming that disclosing a true count of one's offspring is associated with a fear that "some evil will happen" (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 403). Speaking about local men he bought oil from, Butler said, "He (the native) distinctly dislikes having to answer any question in which he has to state a definite number... I will probably say, 'and how many children have you got now?' Invariably, he will reply 'I do not know.'" Since British officials did not understand local cultural beliefs with much intimacy at this point in time, in spite of being in power for more than two decades, it was not possible for them to anticipate the reaction of local women to their decision to update their tax rolls with a more accurate count of their children.

To make the situation even worse, the initial incidence of tax in 1928 was not a transparent process across the entirety of the southeastern provinces. The first imposition of tax in 1928 was preceded by a census of people and property in 1926-27 that was remarkably similar in nature to the counting ordered by officers like Cook and Floyd in 1929. However, in the region of Oloko, this count was administered without the local people being told the motive behind the collection of information. Not only were they forced to engage in the practice of counting of human life that they considered ominous, they were later told that this census was part of a larger campaign to tax them in spite of their severe opposition to centralized, monetized taxation. "Faced with the known reluctance of the people to divulge information, the district officer did not inform the chiefs or people as to the purpose of the assessment," elaborates

Gailey (Gailey: 89). It was only later in 1928 that local leaders, male and female alike, learnt of the true meaning of the census they were already unwilling to engage in.

Thus, when the Okugo, the chief of Oloko, ordered a recount that emphasized women's property and familial offspring, it sparked a rumor that the taxation of female assets was to be soon implemented. The rumor was only too easy to believe for the residents of Oloko, where the previous census that focused on male property had resulted in taxation on men. The *Memorandum as to the Origins and Causes of the Recent Disturbances in the Owerri and Calabar Provinces, 1930*⁶ written by British authorities recognized this, saying that "(while it) never was the intention of government to impose a tax upon women in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces...every action in the matter of this reassessment pointed to such an intention" (Memorandum: 93). As the news of the census recount disseminated across Oloko, so did the rumor of an impending taxation on women's belongings. Thanks to the previous lack of transparency, the people of Oloko believed that any census meant imminent taxation. However, the women of Oloko decided not to rely on either piece of news unless they had decisive proof of a count, and hence of a fresh incidence of taxation (Matera et al.: 136).

The women of Oloko received what they believed was absolute proof of looming taxation on their income and property barely a month later, when Mark Emeruwa, a former Christian school teacher appointed by Okugo to assess the wealth of women in Oloko approached a local woman Nwanyeruwa to count her children as well as her domestic belongings. Nwanyeruwa

⁶ I will use the abbreviation "Memorandum" to refer to this document in this chapter.

who had heard the rumors of taxation on women and who resented the practice of putting a number on human life retorted, “Are you still counting? Last year, my son’s wife who was pregnant died. I am still mourning the death of that woman. Was your mother counted? (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 24)” Her response signified the reproductive capabilities that rendered women’s contributions to society invaluable, inviting Emeruwa to consider perhaps how his own mother might have perceived such a counting of her private property. In addition, she seemed to indicate her distaste for not only the counting of human life that local women believed “interfered with fertility and reproductive life” (Matera et al.: 136), but also for the taxation system that did not take into account the emigration or death of family members, failing to estimate accurately the number of people who should be paying tax and thus increasing the burden of taxation for the majority of local women who were supporting their families economically. Nwanyeruwa and Emeruwa were soon embroiled in an argument that turned into a physical fight, resulting in Emeruwa fleeing the compound and Nwanyeruwa rushing to Okugo only to (according to her version of the story) hear confirmation that the census had indeed been ordered by British authorities and women were to be taxed on their belongings (Gailey: 108). The events that ensued underscore the significance of the women’s communication networks and collective organizing capabilities. Within hours, Nwanyeruwa had informed Christian women who were having a meeting at the Oloko market of her encounter with Emeruwa and his employer, Okugo. Hearing Nwanyeruwa’s story, the women made their way over to Emeruwa’s compound to perform an *egwu* performance condemning his actions, following this with a visit to Okugo’s compound to once again express their contempt of his endorsement of the counting and taxation of women through songs and dances (Matera et al.:

137). When Okugo's household responded by attacking the dancing women, allegedly injuring several women including one pregnant woman Enyidie who subsequently miscarried her baby (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 63), word spread to nearby towns and districts that women were to be counted and taxed, and the chief had physically assaulted those who raised their voice against this news. This brought an outpouring of women into Oloko "from almost every part of the East (in Southern Nigeria)" (Gailey: 115). By November 27, it had become imperative for Cook to respond to the women's demonstrations. He traveled to Oloko to reassure them that there was to be no taxation on female property. Two days later, District Officer Hill responded to the women's complaints of being physically assaulted at the hands of Okugo's household by arresting the chief and taking him to Bende to be put on trial on November 29 (Gailey: 110).

At this point, it was clear that the women of Oloko and their supporters from nearby towns had set an example for successfully attaining visibility before British male officers. They raised their voice against taxation as well as against the malpractices of their local warrant chief and for once, were not only respectfully heard but were also able to achieve decisive and desirable action directed at assuaging and answering their concerns. After years of vying to divert the attention of male authorities towards their interests and issues, the women in other regions of Owerri and Calabar were to take this example to heart. Nwanyeruwa soon became a role model for them (Mba: 81), and they were encouraged to rise up against the possibility of taxation as well as abuse at the hands of native chiefs across the region.

On December 2, a delegation of at least 4,000 women marched from Oloko to Bende where Okugo was being put on trial. Instead of contacting District Officer Hill, they chose to reach out to his wife, requesting that Okugo be tried in court and a delegation of Oloko women be allowed to witness his trial. If this were to happen, the women told Hill's wife, they would help return order to the Oloko and Bende regions (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 9)⁷. Confused as to why it was his wife and not himself who the women chose to contact and skeptical about their ability to disperse a crowd spanning thousands of women, Hill nevertheless put Okugo on trial the next day, allowing a delegation of women to witness the process. Henry King, the commissioner of police for Owerri described the spectacle of Oloko women witnessing Okugo's trial in fascinating detail to the Commission, explaining how 3000 women came and sat down in orderly ranks (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 66). "There was no disturbance of any kind while the case was being heard... On the contrary I was struck by the discipline and order that prevailed amongst them from the time I reached there until I left," said King. The women stayed true to their word. When Okugo was sentenced to two years in prison for spreading news likely to cause alarm and allowing women in his region to be physically assaulted, the female leaders across Oloko and Bende responded by clearing out the crowds that had assembled to demonstrate their disapproval of taxation and the larger chief system. By December 7, the disturbances in the Bende division had diminished significantly, even though they persisted in other parts of Owerri (Gailey: 112).

⁷ Captain Hill shared this letter sent to his wife with the Commission in 1930

There are significant lessons evident in the period between the beginning of the conflict in Oloko on November 23 and its near conclusion in Oloko and Bende around December 7. The ability of the female leaders at Oloko and Bende to disperse flocks of demonstrators following Okugo's trial refutes any assertions that the war was an emotional, unsystematic, illogical or poorly organized affair. The spokespeople at Bende and Oloko were able to filter through the women's complaints and communicate the crux of their demands to the District Officer, organize demonstrators into neat ranks of attendees at Okugo's trial and restore order to much of the Bende district as promised. Nina Mba expanded upon the nature of leadership endorsed by the movement, explaining how a handful of women were chosen on the basis of their personal qualities to speak for the larger group, rather than any previous claims to leadership dating back to before the events of late 1929 (Mba: 83). However, in spite of the selection of these spokeswomen, the demonstrators retained their ability to operate democratically. "We have no special leaders. If any women had anything to say in connection with the disturbances, she came forward and said it," explained Chinwe, a prominent leader at Nguru to Mba (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 223).

The decision of Oloko women to contact Hill's wife instead of the district officer himself was a clear indication that this was a gendered conflict organized by local women to make themselves visible and relevant to men in power, where women considered other women their closest, most likely allies, even if they happened to be British and closely associated with the very male administration that had rendered local women invisible for several previous years. "(Local women) sought out the European women on hand... to appeal for the latter to intervene or act

as intermediaries as they had done at Bende with Captain Hill's wife, precisely because they were also women" (Matera et al: 169). The women confirmed their conviction in gender-based solidarity with European women when they spoke to the Commission in 1930 (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 115). Ahudi, a leader from the Nsidimo area said to the Commission, "No doubt women like ourselves are in your country. If need be we will write to them to help us. We shall continue fighting until all the Chiefs (who abuse us) have been got rid of." The demonstrators believed that women everywhere would wish to help secure their political visibility and economic security in an increasingly male-centric Nigerian land. Note that unlike the Nwaobiala that was waged largely by older, non-missionized women, protests in 1929 encompassed women who were old and young, missionized and pagan, local as well as foreign to the Oloko and Bende divisions. The women, propelled forward by a common vision to be visible and relevant in the economic and political climate of southeastern Nigeria, called themselves the *Ohandum*, a local term that can be translated to mean "the grand collective of mature women or useful mothers of the land" (Matera et al.: 168). When authorities quizzed them during the war as to where they were from, what they were called and why they were protesting, the women would simply respond with *Ohandum*, much to the frustration of British authorities who had little idea about the organizing capabilities or collective institutions of local women. When asked to explain the term before the Commission, Nwachi of Nguru simply responded, "It means all women (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 221)."

Unfortunately, not every District Officer was as willing to listen to the demonstrators or to consider the significance behind the women's demands. Note that the women in Oloko who

approached Emeruwa and Okugo to condemn their actions performed an *egwu* outside of the men's respective houses in line with a practice Van Allen, who studied Igbo women's political institutions, calls "sitting on a man". "To 'sit on' or 'make war on' a man involved gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women's grievances against him and often called his manhood into question... perhaps demolishing his hut or plastering it with mud or roughing him up a bit," she says (Van Allen, 170). Van Allen describes the Women's War of 1929 as a more elaborate version of the typical practice of sitting on or making war on a man who has wronged his wife, female neighbors or other women in his village group and is now being held accountable, except in this instance the women could be seen as sitting on all male leadership, local and especially British. While there is some level of contention as to the extent to which we can draw a parallel between this tradition and the large scale demonstrations that characterize the Women's War, it is possible that the reason local men keep out of the women's way as over 10,000 of them take over much of Owerri and Calabar, demonstrating their displeasure at the possibility of being taxed amongst other things, is because they recognize what the protest has in common with this traditional practice. "(This practice) was considered legitimate and no man would consider intervening," says Van Allen (170). Since the British considered the women to be largely invisible and irrelevant and had no exposure to their collective protest against one or more men, for them to witness mass demonstrations where the women donned traditional outfits, danced and sang, destroyed their property and "roughed them up a bit" was a horrifying experience. They failed to see the parallels between how the women used their bodies to express themselves through dress or dance in the traditional practice of sitting on men as well

as during the war or how the women destroyed what they saw as male property (native courts, British offices, etc.) in both cases because this was part of the process of placing sanctions on men who did them wrong. "Each of (the physical sites that they made) their targets represented a physical instantiation of the more general colonial enclosure faced by southeastern Nigerian women (Matera et al.: 154)." Thus there was logic as well as a long history of precedence behind the women's behavior, even when it may have seemed like rampant destruction of government property to the British who were ironically and willfully unfamiliar with the practices of the people they governed, particularly of local women. Instead, they saw 10,000 rioters, "mobs" spearheaded by "ringleaders" who were out to destroy and kill. "It is surprising that very few people were mishandled by the women, and no one seriously injured either among those whom they singled out for special attack, or those who barred their way, though in numerous cases they had them at their mercy," marvels Perham (Perham: 213), because like the British men in power, she failed to appreciate the traditional practice or understand that sitting on men in no way encompassed a direct threat to any human life. The women who saw themselves as primarily reproductive beings never intended to take the lives they believed they collectively gave birth to. By the end of the war, no European casualties had occurred, just as by the end of a session of sitting on a bothersome man, no physical attack on human life could have been expected. However, 53 unarmed women were shot to death, because the ignorant British officers misread the signs and saw the female demonstrators as rioters, enemies, and threats to human life. I will detail the escalation of the conflict that allowed this violence to occur in the next section.

December 11 – December 15, 1929: The conflict escalates at Aba



Figure 4: Women's War - Dec 11, 1929 to Dec 15, 1929

The events of December 11 marked a sharp change in the nature of the Women's War. As Gailey puts it, an event occurred at the critical trading junction of Aba that changed "the entire nature of the demonstrations throughout the East (Gailey: 119)." District Officer Jackson who oversaw the Aba and Owerinta region telegraphed for reinforcements as they witnessed a change in the women, who were previously only embroiled in a ferocious display of song and dance as well as the destruction of native courts, but on December 11, began recklessly looting British factories as well as a bank, post office and merchant store at Aba.

The change in the protesters' demeanor was widely attributed by the Commission as well as by secondary observers of the conflict (Ifeka-Moller: 132) to be a result of the killing of two women by Dr. Hunter, a medical officer at Aba who, in his attempt to flee the women and "protect" an accompanying female nurse, swerved his vehicle sharply and knocked the women down. "The women were shouting, 'Doctor has killed women of our party, we are annoyed,'" says Gailey (Gailey: 119). The accident resulted in the death of both women.

When asked about the reason he drove so roughly that it brought about the deaths of two female protesters, Dr. Hunter told the Commission he was acting to protect his female companion (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 539-540). His actions solidify the thesis that the British were ignorant of the ways and beliefs of local women. The events of December 3 alone, when women choose to reach out to Captain Hill's wife instead of the officer himself confirmed that they considered other females potential allies and would refrain from bringing harm to another woman. Add to that the fact that the demonstrators traditionally did not attack or take human life and we know that Dr. Hunter's fear that the women were out to "do in" the nurse (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 539-540) were unfounded, if not ludicrous. Dr. Hunter was not alone in considering the local women a threat to foreign women. District Officer Whitman at Opobo also told the Commission that he was absolutely "convinced of it" that were he not to fire and kill several protestors they would have attacked the European women nearby (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 378). In both cases, the men felt fear that was potent enough to cause them to kill local women in order to save British women. At Aba, two Nigerian women died outside the car so that two Europeans inside the car could live, confirming the suspicions of the women who condemned British roads and vehicles as agents of disease and death during the *Nwaobi* of 1925.

District Officer Jackson at Aba denied the possibility of the car accident causing an escalation in the conflict at Aba or elsewhere. When asked to what extent the death of two women caused the rest of the protesters to become more violent, he responded, "Not one iota." He believed

that the accident was made into an excuse so the women could “pursue their campaign of looting and destruction” (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 506). Officer Whitman at Opobo echoed Jackson before the Commission, saying that the women in his region of Opobo “came with the full intention of looting” and were only pretending to be concerned about tax while they gained time, attracted more looters and took over British property and wealth (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 373-374). Women testifying before the commission refuted both officers. One such protester, Lucy Pebble of Opobo, even explained that there were factories closer to their homes than the District Office. If looting were truly the motive, they would have never trekked all the way to the office when they could be at the factories amassing wealth (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 421). It should also be noted that whether at Aba, Opobo or anywhere else, the women did not act greedy for money. In fact, when Nwanyeruwa of Oloko received monetary gifts from other local women for her courage in standing up to the native warrant chief, the protesters in the region collected the money and allocated it towards the travel expenses of women who went to other regions to demonstrate and protest. The Commission later agreed that there was little evidence Nwanyeruwa or her counterparts personally profited from this money (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 9, Mba: 82). It is unlikely that the same *Ohandum* that showed no signs of greed and every sign of financial discipline and control at Oloko would resort to blind looting for the sake of looting a week later at Aba or Opobo. The act of looting is more likely to have occurred as a direct result of the women’s frustration at their companions being knocked to death at Aba, as a means of destroying “male property” as part of a possibly expanded campaign of “sitting on” oppressive men.

As it turned out, the car accident was to be the least deadly of all attacks on the women's lives during the war. Just three days later, 18 women were killed at Utu Etim Ekpo assembled at the District Office to demand they speak to the officers present. Instead of speaking to the women, Officers James and Browning ordered police and military troops to break up the protesters. Frustrated at the lack of acknowledgement of their complaints about the rumor of taxation or the inefficiency of warrant chiefs, the women shouted at the approaching army officers (Matera et al.: 155). Without attempting to communicate with the women, James and Browning ordered their men to fire on the unarmed protesters, killing and injuring the women (Matera et al. 175).

Perham's recounting of the events at Utu pay detailed attention to the way the protesters were dressed, considering their outfits and demeanor to be openly threatening. To Perham and her counterparts at Utu, the women, mostly naked with the exception of some who wore the traditional loincloth, wearing palm fronds, with their faces marked in charcoal, represented an imminent threat to the safety of British lives. Perham acknowledges that "no Europeans understood the exact significance of these symbols" the women were wearing (Perham: 209). Yet, she believes that the women, with their reckless complaints (Perham: 219) and primitive, pagan-looking manner of dress represented danger. District Officer Whitman echoed Perham before the Commission, claiming that the palm fronds the group wore signified "hostile intention" (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 372). The fact that the uniform manner of dress was a means for the protestors to establish their cohesion as the *Ohandum* only seems to justify the violence further. "It was necessary to dispel this dangerous sense of immunity (of the

Ohandum),” Perham claims (Perham: 217). Firing on unarmed women was a measure of dispelling this supposed immunity.

Feminist historians such as Ifeka-Moller have offered a different interpretation of the dress the women adopted at Utu and throughout much of the war. “Young palm leaves and ferns symbolize both fertility and masculine actions such as courage in war, and aggressive defense of the interests of one’s own settlement if threatened by another,” she says (Ifeka-Moller, 147),“(The women were) utilizing the armory of Nature to convey their belief in the life-giving powers of the land with which they associated their own powers of reproduction” (Ifeka-Moller: 144). Local women testifying before the Commission said that the use of palm fronds and leaves was merely a means of communicating with fellow protestors (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 422), perhaps to offer a message of support in common protest or signal solidarity in a shared cause. The communal nudity may also have been a means of strengthening “a common gender position intended to transgress” the norms the British had forced upon local women over the decades (Matera et al.: 158). We should also recall the opposition of the dancers of the *Nwaobiala* to missionized cloth that devalued their own loincloths that they had earned the right to wear via their labor, trade and reproductive activity. The return to traditional near nudity could have signified a rejection of British values, just as the British had rejected local women’s ways by suggesting the possibility of taxation.

December 16, 1929 - January 9, 1930: The violence at Opobo, and the decline of the war



Figure 5: Women's War - Dec 16, 1929 to Jan 6, 1930

On December 16, between 1,000 and 1,500 women converged at the District Office at Consular Beach, Opobo in response to District Officer Whitman's call for a general meeting to address the rumor of taxation. A few spokespeople for the women were taken to Whitman's office where they demanded that their concerns be typed up and distributed among the protesters as proof of the verbal reassurances Whitman offered them. Whitman complied, distributing a document that confirmed among other details that there will be no taxation of women, that they resented taxation of men, and that the spokespeople at Whitman's office represented a vast group of women spanning the Opobo, Bonny and Andoni area. However, before the women could receive due notice of this agreement, a sudden surge in the "mob" assembled

before the District Office startled Whitman (Gailey: 129). Alarmed at what he called a movement in the crowd towards the fence that separated unarmed protestors from armed troops, Whitman ordered his troops to fire two volleys. Explaining his actions to the Commission in 1930, Whitman said, "If they had carried on their action, I have not the slightest doubt that I would not be here today. I am convinced of it" (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 379). Whitman's assertion that the protestors were pressing forward on the fence he considered the only division between his supposedly vulnerable and heavily armed troops and the women who were "worked up to a state of frenzy" (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 379) was contradicted by the first findings of the medical officer who examined dead bodies of women at Opobo. Dr. Crawford, the medical officer at Opobo, stated in his initial report that out of 25 bodies he examined, the majority looked like they were killed while they were trying to flee the scene rather than charge forward as Whitman had claimed (Matera et al.: 184). While we are unable to determine whether the women were truly moving towards the troops as they were shot down, or attempting to run for cover, we do know that 33 women were killed by troops at Opobo. This shooting marked the deadliest incident of the war, and helped the war draw to a close as news of the loss of life reached protestors in other regions.

The Commission's inquiry into the events at Opobo revealed that Whitman failed to follow the required protocol before firing on the protestors. The Commission pointed out that Whitman had used an Igbo interpreter to communicate with a congregation that included Ogoni women who spoke a different language and may not have understood him (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 376). Whitman's only response was to explain that he found the local women of different

tribes indistinguishable, further proof of the shallow knowledge of British officers of their local female subjects. When the Commission asked Whitman why he did not read the riot act to the women before firing, or why he did not follow keep a 50-yard distance between “mobs” and troops as per regulation, Whitman said he did not have enough time or knowledge to do either (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 369, 372). Whitman’s ignorance towards British rules and Nigerian women went largely unaddressed. Meanwhile, his chief defense before the Commission for killing 33 unarmed women and injuring several others was to say that the women were asking to be attacked. “The women were determined from the outset to start trouble sooner or later no matter what happened, short of firing,” he testified (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 374), implying that the women’s actions left him no option but to shoot them. It should be noted that both the incidents at Utu and Opobo incorporated the use of military soldiers as opposed to regular policemen due to a shortage of British personnel in the southeastern provinces. “The soldiers had not been trained in riot control,” explains Gailey. “Thus when they were in a dangerous situation, pressed by crowds of women, their officers reacted by ordering troops to fire” (Gailey: 122). Throughout the demonstrations and the violence, while some local men had supported their participating mothers and wives albeit from the background, several others were content to see the women go unheard and unprotected. “Women do not make wars, that is the business of men. Women are trying to dictate to Government what is to be done in the towns... Government should not listen to them,” said Aboba, a native chief near Umuahia (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 161). In a male-dominated environment where local men could not be trusted to safeguard their interests, the killing of female protesters at Utu and Opobo deprived local women of their

ability to raise their voice. They could no longer protest the actions of men they believed were infringing upon their rights without fearing a loss of female life.

Unsurprisingly, the war drew to a close in the next one to two weeks. Although sporadic demonstrations continued into 1930, none matched those organized by women in 1929 who had less to fear before they saw their companions shot to death.

It is ironic that following the war, those British officers and investigators who were hostile as well as sympathetic towards the plight of the protesting women were in consensus that they did not know enough about local women, in spite of having governed the region closely for at least the past fifteen years. "The gap that lies at present between Africans and the ever-shifting Administrative Officers who represent to them the British Government, can only be bridged by (anthropological) knowledge," said Perham (Perham: 220). Representatives such as Cochrane agreed before the Commission, saying that British officers in southeastern Nigeria were in dire need of an anthropologist to lay down "some general policy" on how to read the local women's language and behavior (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 154). The 1930s saw a profusion of British anthropologists study local women in southeastern Nigeria, including C. K. Meek, Sylvia Leith-Ross and M. M. Green.

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Chapter three:

After the Women's War of 1929 - Continuing the fight for visibility, 1929-1960

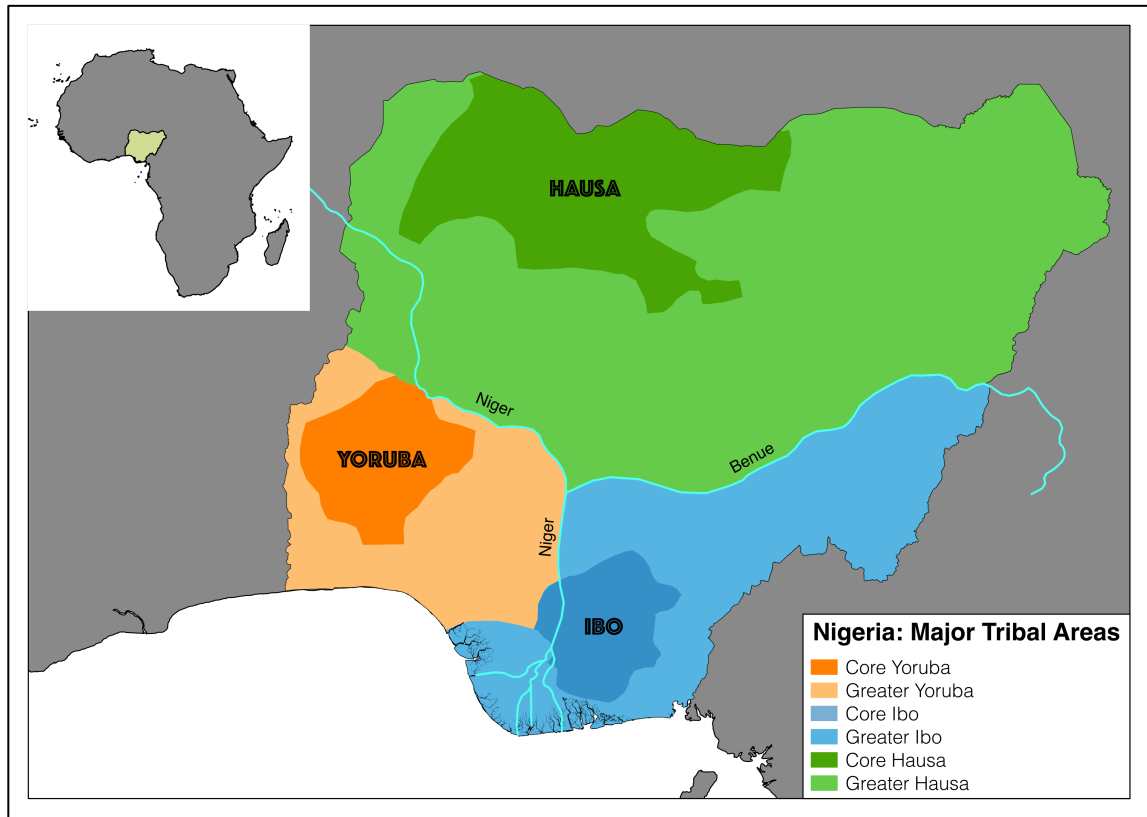


Figure 6: Tripartite division of Nigeria according to ethnic lines

Section one: Introduction

I have previously argued that the Women's War was a gendered conflict, when indigenous Igbo and Ibibio women of southeastern Nigeria came together to represent their collective

frustration with the system of colonial, male-centric indirect rule that rendered their concerns invisible to British male authorities and irrelevant to local male authorities.

Now, I want to discuss how the Women's War marked a critical turning point in British perception and implementation of indirect rule in Nigeria and beyond. I believe that the war triggered waves of change that were enabled by women and sustained by women, who remained relevant and visible following the war. I hope to evaluate feminist historian Judith Van Allen's counter assertion that the Women's War marked the peak of women's influence in society, and they were never to regain similar visibility in Igbo political life again.

I believe the war was responsible for inciting critical revisions of policies used by British colonial decision-makers in Nigeria and beyond, since it was one of the first instances to indicate the failings inherent in the system of indirect rule. Moreover, the war was one of the earliest and most memorable political campaigns to emphasize Igbo political ideals of egalitarianism and decentralization. Adherence to these concepts was seminal in enabling Nigeria's transition away from British trusteeship towards British-Nigerian partnership. It eventually paved the way for Nigerian self-government in the decades that followed the war.

Central Idea

In this chapter, I will discuss the short-term reforms implemented as a direct response to the war beginning in 1933, the renewed protests and continued criticism of indirect rule that

marked the late 1930s to late 1940s and the deliberate moves towards Nigerian self-government that began in 1951.

The aftermath of the Women's War saw a rapid reformation of British policy in southeastern Nigeria. Not only that, it pushed British colonial authorities to realize that the objective of trusteeship that supposedly undergirded indirect rule was not being satisfied by the system in place. Local representatives the British had recognized as indigenous authorities were widely rejected by Igbo and Ibibio masses. The British had found centralized rule expedient to set up and convenient to supervise. However, this system was irrevocably incompatible with the decentralized and fragmented political set up of southeastern Nigeria. The illusion that effective indirect rule through emirs in the North could be replicated in the South of Nigeria was shattered, and with it any conviction the British had in their knowledge of the traditions, institutions and lifestyles of the "natives" in the region. Even as they sought to come to terms with these structural problems in their administration of the region, the British were bewildered by recollections of the gendered, female-led protest. "Mobs of frenzied Amazons, sometimes numbering 10,000" had successfully and inexplicably, "offered active opposition to armed bodies of government" (Meek, 332). This occurred mere months after the British had downsized the police, convinced that the first incidence of taxation in 1928 had gone smoothly and threats of anti-tax rioting had been averted (Gailey, 96). Simply put, the Women's War of 1929 represented a strike against the logic of indirect rule. The British had considered themselves "teachers and trustees" (Meek, 327) pedagogically coaching the native men of southeastern Nigeria in the art of self-government, only to find thousands of local women at

their doorstep, protesting that their system had faltered and destroying colonial offices that had been put in place by the British to mark their (indirect) dominion over the region.

As a result, both the Commissions of Inquiry set up to investigate the war in 1929 issued urgent calls for deeper study of native institutions in the region, with a particular focus on the political influence of women. “Old Nigeria hands” (Matera et al., 231) like C. K. Meek, Sylvia Leith-Ross and M.M. Green flocked to small villages in southeastern Nigeria to observe how locals really managed their political, economic and social affairs.

However, instead of finding a system of chaos and anarchy in the most “lawless part of Nigeria” (Meek, xi) the researchers discovered a unique Igbo democracy. According to Green, this democracy worked through several juxtaposed groups that were regulated by an internal system of checks and balances. Unlike English democracy, it did rely on a unitary or hierarchical principle (Green, 145). The researchers lamented that the system had failed thus far to consider indigenous women and expressed a dire need to include them in subsequent educational and governing efforts. Leith-Ross, for instance, framed the question explicitly (337): “What use will be made of this rare and invaluable force, thousands upon thousands of ambitious, courageous, self-reliant, independent, hardworking women?” Of course, the women’s efforts had already triggered lasting impact. Since the Women’s War alerted the British of the need to revisit their knowledge of native institutions in southeastern Nigeria, it triggered the rise of colonial anthropology. Detailed studies of colonial subjects were conducted with the “purely practical motive of bettering the administration” (Meek, xv). This deeper understanding of local

institutions made cooperation with colonial subjects and partnership with local leaders more likely.

While the British were trying to improve the system of indirect rule and understand their subjects better, local men and women were coming to realize that they had the ability to openly protest a broken British system that did not serve them well. Subsequent years saw numerous protests with similar aims of pushing British administrators and their local stooges to adapt systems of governance more closely to the needs of the masses. There were constant calls to include local citizens, i.e. “common” men and women as equals in decision-making processes.

I will document here two such instances of protest. The first instance is the anti-tax demonstrations of 1938 initiated by both men and women of Okigwe and Bende in Owerri province, but carried forward specifically by women after male perpetrators had been arrested. The second instance is the 1948 revolt against British Pioneer Oil Mills (POM) that was led exclusively by women - understandably so since the POM mills deprived local women of their revenue from palm oil sales. Both instances represented a newly empowered Nigerian subject, who could no longer stomach being left out of policy-making processes.

The local fight for inclusion intersected with a British introspective critique of indirect rule, just as international criticism of British imperialism peaked following the Second World War. By 1951, the fight for partnership had turned into a fight for self-government amid global calls for

the British to deliver on their promises of allowing the trustee self-governance. Yet, even in this rapidly evolving political arena, the lessons of the Women's War of 1929 were just as relevant.

The 1950s saw two new political parties form and rise to fame, led respectively by Nnamdi Azikiwe of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) and Obafemi Awolowo of the Action Group (AG). Azikiwe won the popular vote to become the first premier when Nigeria was recognized as an independent entity in 1960. The grassroots movements for self-government, particularly as Azikiwe promoted it, embodied the ideas of egalitarianism Igbo and Ibibio women had emphasized in 1929. The women moved as a united, monolith group, repeatedly referring to themselves as the "Ohandum" or "spirit of womanhood" every time a British officer asked them for individual identification (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 20) and demanding that their court members be chosen at town meetings open to all, instead of being handpicked by the British (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 105). The argument for decentralized rule, where various cultures are able to follow their own unique and separate sets of rules could also be traced back to 1929. The British decided to make room for local cultural affiliations in drawing administrative boundaries after the Women's War. They traded a system of centralized authority for one based on fragmented, decentralized village and clan court areas (Matera et al., 230). Two decades later, the British introduced a more coherent, less fragmented regionalism, where the Hausa in the North, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East could all retain their own respective systems of governance.

As I work my way through the developments that rippled through Nigeria after the Women's War of 1929, I will consider how the Women's War was portrayed in the spoken and written rhetoric of critical leaders on either side of the movement. This includes Margery Perham, who advocated for the transition from paternalistic trusteeship to mutual partnership between the British and Nigerians in government. Perham served as the official biographer of former Governor-General of Nigeria, Lord Lugard, documented native administration in Nigeria and curated the colonial history curriculum at Oxford University. This exercise also includes nationalist leader Nnamdi Azikiwe and Pan-Africanist historian C. L. R. James. James authored texts like *The Black Jacobins (1938)* and *A History of Negro Revolt (first published in 1938, later published as "A History of Pan-African Revolt" in 1969)* that are considered seminal to colonial and post-colonial literature on the African diaspora. He pioneered the study of African revolt by focusing on grassroots movements. Together, leaders like Azikiwe and James helped mobilize a mass rejection of the British system of trusteeship in Nigeria as well as within the larger African continent.

Scholars such as Van Allen have long argued that the Women's War represented a peak in the visibility of the indigenous woman, followed by a long hiatus from political life. Van Allen believes the women's "brief visibility was insufficient" (181). As soon as the disturbances were suppressed in early 1930, the women and their demands were once again irrelevant to British policymakers and local male authorities. It is true that the war marked a new zenith of female visibility in Igbo political development. However, its impact reverberated through Nigerian politics as well as colonial policy for years to come. In fact, the war marked "one of the earliest

instances of the limitations of British indirect rule” (Matera et al., 233). Lord Passfield, the Colonial Secretary described the large and unexpected revolt led exclusively by women as one that was truly unlike anything he had seen “in the history of the British Empire” (Gailey, 143). Its lessons were to resonate with British policymakers up until the decline of British colonial rule in Africa. Its values were to be espoused by nationalists and Pan-Africanists who, at least partially enabled this decline. Moreover, the fluid Igbo gender constructs that enabled the war, continued to empower future generations of Nigerian women. Thus, the Women’s War did not retreat into irrelevance, nor were its organizers and participants invisible as soon as demonstrations dwindled in 1930. To the contrary, its significance was evident for decades to come.

Section two: Justifying the loss of Igbo women’s lives between 1929-1933

The war was immediately followed by mass punishments inflicted by British officers on entire villages to penalize them for their participation in disturbances. Punishments took the form of “exorbitant fines” (Matera et al., 218) and village burning. By the time the second Commission of Inquiry sat down to investigate the occurrences of the previous few months, several villages had been razed and fines amounting to six times the annual tax assessment had been collected often on notices of 24 hours or less. The second commission of inquiry eventually concluded that “the amount of burning was excessive” (Gailey, 135-137) and that several measures taken were “unnecessarily drastic” (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 120), albeit months after the

offenses had already occurred. Recall that the punishments came days after 53 women had been shot dead during the conflict. No British lives were lost.

The stigma of the shootings coupled with these radical punishments induced a kind of “mass neurosis” among Igbo women, a hyper memory of the conflict that perhaps served them well for years to come (Leith-Ross, 176). “The riots are ever-present in the women’s minds, and the memory of them is compounded by fear and anger,” said Leith-Ross (176). Meek, Leith-Ross and Green were each to find that women were unwilling to discuss the war in explicit detail.

Initial media coverage

British media coverage of the Women’s War in the days immediately after December 1929 glazed over the demands of the warring women. The first few weeks’ worth of newspapers instead focused on the “assault” on European lives (13 December 1929) and property and the “unfounded fears” (16 December 1929) that caused the conflict. The fact that the conflict was a gendered one led solely by women was also largely ignored. It was nearly two months before *The Times* in London would mention that women waged the war. Even when they did finally recognize that “women were the actual aggressors” (31 January 1930, 14) it did not occur to correspondents that this might have been because women held a legitimate place in mainstream political organization, or that they may have been speaking for several male *and* female members of their communities. “Men urged women to plunder, on the ground that the authorities never fired on women,” they explained (24 December 1929, 13), chalking down the

gender of the protestors to a ruse that minimized the threat to local lives even as European lives were endangered. Another theory that was put forward was that the men and women were working in collaboration not for suffragette but for greed induced loot and plunder. “Women were to rush the officials into offices and the men were then to loot the factories,” said *The Times* (24 December 1929, 11). It was months before the British reconsidered the view that men had planned the war.

If we are to limit our observations to the coverage of the war in British media immediately after the war, we could almost concede to Van Allen’s theory that the end of the war marked erasure of the women and their interests from mainstream political discussion. In fact, Van Allen’s concept of visibility and invisibility of the women acquires a new complexity. We can say that even when the women were most visible, their agency and collective organization was invisible to British newsmakers. Power belonged to men, so men must have organized a powerful conflict.

Perhaps even more troubling was the assertion by popular media that the shooting and killing of 53 unarmed protesters was justified, even laudable. *The Times* spoke of the imperative need for attacking the women shortly after 18 women had been killed at Opobo. “The troops had to fire on the crowd, which was forcing them back against the walls of the station and snatching at their rifles,” (20 February 1929, 13). The idea that any casualties occurred because of the unarmed women’s own intransigence lasted well beyond the initial phase of investigation, even after the second Commission of Inquiry had condemned what they considered unnecessary

violence. Fifteen months later, Colonial Secretary Passfield announced that officers were forced to fire because no one could have possibly anticipated “hundreds, even thousands of native women (waging) definite attacks on the property of Government and in some cases threatening life” (*The Times*, 13 February 1931). In short, the women, by protesting against the system of indirect rule and the burden of taxation, were asking to be killed.

Ironically, *The Times* portrayed the use of violence as an act of mercy. “Officers on the spot are satisfied that to open fire was the only possible course to save life and property,” (24 December 1929, 11). Note here that the assertion that opening fire was a means of saving lives is not paradoxical - it merely signifies that it was imperative to intimidate and maim black female protesters to save white male and female lives. This analysis is backed by District Officer Whitman’s testimony before the second Commission of Inquiry. When asked whether he would have ordered his troops to fire upon a protesting crowd at Opobo if the protestors were the suffragettes of England demanding political rights, and not the women of Nigeria asking for colonial accountability, Whitman’s answer was crystal clear. “There is no comparison,” he said (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 379). *The Times* echoed his sentiments, chronicling the threat to “European ladies” (30 December 1929, 9) at Aba during the riots without emphasizing the hit and run killing of Igbo female protesters.

Even more troubling was the discussion on the moral gains from the killing protesters.

Lieutenant Browning who had ordered his troops to fire upon women outside Utu Etim Ekpo spoke of the “moral effect” of using machine guns in civil protests. He was backed by Captain

Alfred McCullagh, who insisted that he could vouch for the curative effects of machine guns since he had walked up to one and fired it upon protesters (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 306 and 867). The belief in violence as a preventative tool was echoed in the British destruction of participant villages immediately after the war.

The Commissions of Inquiry

Recall that the Women's War in Nigeria occurred little more than a decade after the Amritsar Massacre in India, when over 350 unarmed protesters were shot dead. The Colonial Office was quick to see parallels. In both cases, unarmed women had been killed. In both cases, a massive collective protest was overwhelmed by armed British troops. In both cases, exemplary violence had served a "moral purpose" and potentially dissuaded further protest. In both cases, military troops had fired upon civilian protesters. In fact, officers on the ground at Amritsar in April 1919 as well as during the Women's War connected the two experiences. "Lieutenant Browning was emblematic in justifying his actions on the basis of his experiences with "mobs" in India and Ireland," explain Matera, Bastian and Kent (214). Fearing a public backlash in Britain similar to the one that followed the Amritsar Massacre, the Colonial Office went through two rounds of investigations for the incident.

After the first Commission of Inquiry met with local backlash due to a dearth of Nigerian representatives, a second Commission that included two Nigerian barristers began work in March 1930. It published a comprehensive report in July of the same year. Unlike the first

Commission, the second found that the killing of women had been avoidable and their opposition to taxation justified. The Commission vehemently demanded more research be conducted to address corruption in native courts (Matera et al., 219). Unfortunately, charges of corruption against the courts were to continue well into the 1950s, all the way up to Nigerian independence.

The publishing of the report by the second Commission marked a turn in the rhetoric used by the media in Britain. The Commission's report explicitly recognized the agency of Igbo and Ibibio women. "This was essentially a women's movement, organized, developed, and carried out by the women of the country without either the help or permission of their menfolk, though probably with their tacit sympathy," it said. Causes of the disturbances were revised as well. The reason for the war was no longer "unfounded fears" of female taxation but instead legitimate discontent about taxation of men, corruption in courts and price decreases for exports (*The Times*, 25 August 1930, 9). Perhaps the most important finding of the commission, however, centered around British ignorance. "Comparatively little is known, even now, of large portions of the southeastern provinces," the Commission lamented. Scholars like Perham backed this idea. The Women's War made clear that the system the British had perfected over 30 to 40 years was wanting due to "the unusual lack of understanding between the Government and the people," she said (*The Times*, 30 December 1932, 11). The findings of the Commission pushed the British to conduct colonial research projects spanning Igbo communities in Owerri and Calabar.

It is frustrating but not unusual that this lack of understanding between ruler and subject was only brought to light after over scores of women had been shot dead. “Only in cases of large-scale insurrection in the colonies or of gross maladministration” did the British generally alter colonial policies to address problems, explains Speers (307). As Perham pointed out, this particular problem of a dearth of knowledge of the subject in southeastern Nigeria had existed for four decades. Yet, 53 women had to, quite literally, chew bullets before it was apparent to men in power. Whether in Amritsar or Opobo, it seems that mass demonstration and the killing of unarmed protesters was a grotesque but effective galvanizing force for reform in the British Empire.

Section three: Critique of indirect rule in the early to late 1930s

The report of the second Commission of Inquiry put in place to investigate the Women’s War of 1929 led to the launch of an extensive campaign of inquiry in southeastern Nigeria. By 1933, there were 144 “intelligence reports” underway to better understand the inner workings of the Igbo civic system (Matera et al., 231). Among these 144 investigators, the most widely cited and the dearest to governmental authorities were studies by Meek, Leith-Ross and Green, mentioned earlier in this chapter.

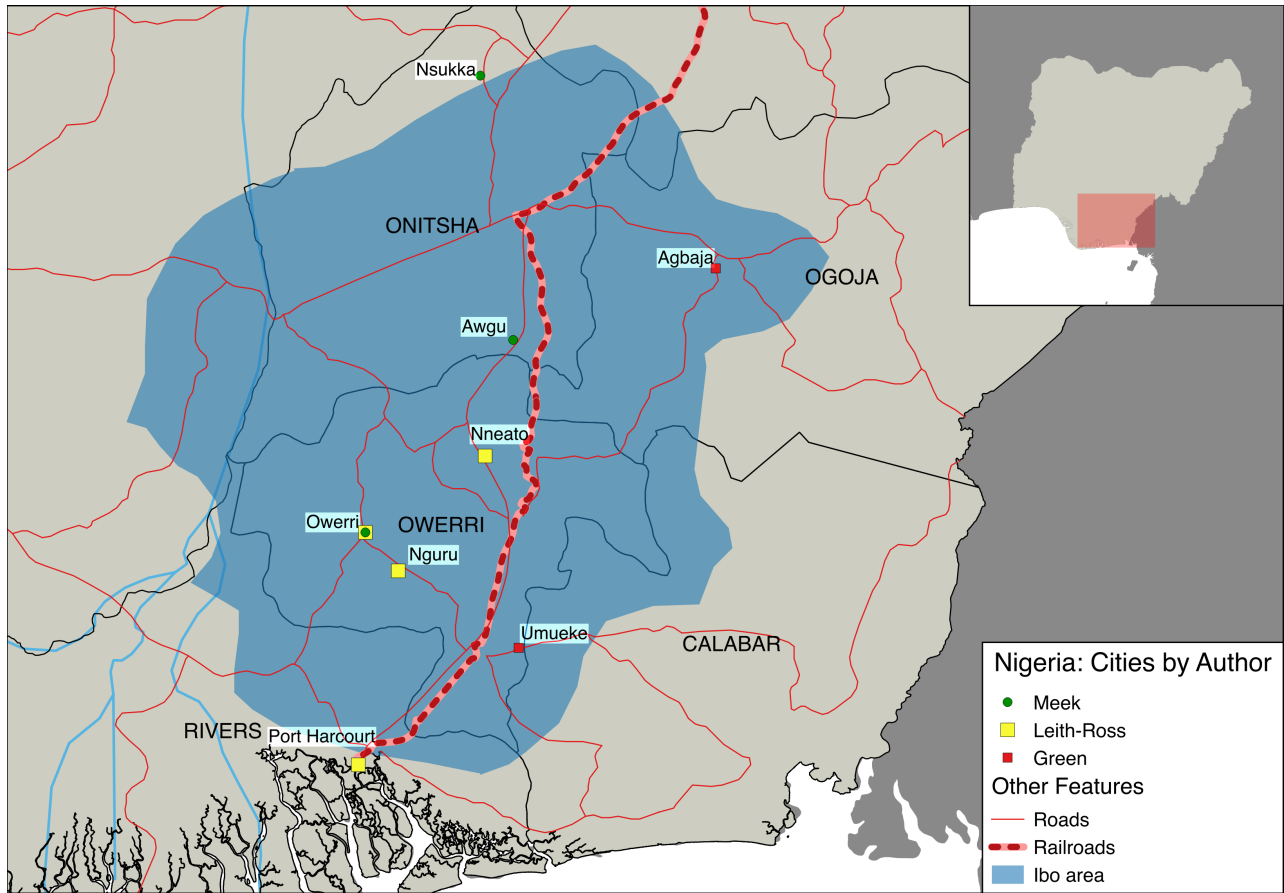


Figure 7: Igbo towns that Meek, Leith-Ross and Green studied in the 1930s

Meek was a popular British scholar who served as Government Anthropologist under Lugard’s governorship of Nigeria, and published one of the most critical and extensive studies of Igbo society in 1938. Lord Lugard, who penned the foreword, lauded his work titled *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*. However, Meek’s work alone could not bridge the years of ignorance that had created deep animosity between the paternalistic British officer and his resentful Igbo subject, particularly in light of a recent, gendered, female-led war. “Meek could not glean from local women the knowledge they (officers) felt they needed to implement indirect rule,” say Matera, Bastian and Kent (231). Note also that Meek, in spite of serving as

the foremost scholar and anthropologist in the region could do next to nothing when it came to understanding the intricacies of Igbo language. “Few possessed the language skills to carry out meaningful investigations” (Matera et al., 231). Hence, Sylvia Leith-Ross and M.M. Green stepped up, both receiving the prestigious Leverhulme Research Fellowships to study lives of Igbo women. While Leith-Ross knew barely any more of the Igbo language than Meek, Green was fluent. Leith-Ross’ work titled *African Women* followed Meek in 1939, after she spent two years living with Igbo women. Green’s text *Igbo Village Affairs* was not published until 1947, although the majority of her research appears to have been conducted between 1934 and 1937. Note that in addition to these three monumental texts, I will also reference an anthropological study of the Igbo written by V. Uchendu, an Igbo scholar who chronicled the beliefs and lifestyles of his community to respond to studies done previously by British scholars. Unfortunately, Uchendu’s work was not published until 1965. Nevertheless, it serves as a check and balance on the previously published studies, allowing us to compare an Igbo scholar’s perception of his native society with the narratives presented in colonial anthropology.

I find it important to highlight here that the basis of these studies was not some sort of purist desire for knowledge. Nor were these investigations meant to serve as amends or apology for the previous ignorance of administrators, or bolster the native’s ego. “The government of Nigeria was not actuated by any academic or antiquarian interest but by the purely practical motive of bettering the administration,” explained Meek (xv). “(We wanted to acquire) data, which would help government to make the fullest use of native institutions as instruments of local administration.” Thus, the driving force behind the large-scale campaign of

anthropological and sociological inquiry was a desperate need to retain effective control of southeastern Nigeria.

Again, I find myself revisiting Van Allen's contention that the women were invisible as soon as the war ended. 144 reports later, researchers like Meek, Leith-Ross and Green had managed "to professionalize anthropology as a science that could be rendered useful to colonial administration" (Matera et al., 231). They had pushed the mammoth machine of British colonialism to take a deep look at their ideas about the "native" and decide that getting to know him or her better to mold indirect rule to existing local institutions was the first corrective step towards effective control. This anthropological study of the Igbo, with a focus on women's political representation in turn sparked courses on Native Administration at Oxford, where Margery Perham, with one leg in Nigeria and the other in England, was curating a southeastern Nigeria heavy curriculum on colonial history (Matera et al., 232). The women's revolt had thus cleared the way for a flow of knowledge. British men and women in Nigeria were living in local villages to understand them better. British men and women in Oxford University were learning of the war and facilitating the resulting ascent of colonial anthropology. Here, the women were not invisible. They were prominent and they had pushed not just the white male ruler in close proximity to change his ways, but also the colonial machine to take a deep and careful look at indirect rule, designed to conform to native institutions but in reality, at least in Igbo society, fundamentally undermining principles of local political practice.

Anthropological findings

The second Commission of Inquiry provided a blueprint of sorts for researchers like Meek, Leith-Ross and Green to follow in their investigations. This included a desire to look into the egalitarian nature of Igbo democracy. Researchers were told to investigate the fragmentation of political authority in Igbo society where each small village and village group had its own set of dynamic leaders. They were further asked to dig deeper into women's political influence, particularly their networks for collective organization that had enabled the war in the first place. The three studies of Igbo society I cover here, each focuses on these principles, namely egalitarian democracy, decentralized authority and women's political clout. We will see that these principles were carried forward in the nationalist struggle that eventually enabled Nigerian independence.

Each anthropologist was quick to say that their findings did not speak for the entirety of the Igbo community. "No statement can be made unless it is immediately qualified by a warning that this statement may probably only be true as regards one family and one village" said Leith-Ross (50) about the inherent heterogeneity of Igbo society. It was difficult to say whether any one work could encompass the hundreds of variations across different village groups.

Consequently, the largest political grouping that was recommended by the anthropologists was a simple commune or a small group of contiguous villages (Meek, 3). Any political unit in excess of that might be forcing communities that did not recognize each other's leadership or customs to redraw their boundaries. This measure had already been proven unsuccessful.

Within each commune or village group, there were some similarities in the nature of leadership. Each village group tended to have some variation of a “household head” for each small family unit. The head of the household served as a material provider, spiritual guardian and familial representative (Meek, 98). A community leader, commonly called the Okpara, chaired a group of household heads. According to Uchendu, the Okpara was regarded as the middleman between his living lineage members and his spiritual ancestors (40). He was considered the “elder brother of the group” and the holder of each group of households’ sacred symbol called the Ofo (Meek, 104). The Okpara often shared his authority over a group of households with a material head called the Onyisi, who tended to be a rich and generous man able to finance wars and pass equitable judgments on village conflicts (Meek, 111). While this system of groups of household heads chaired by a duo of material head and spiritual head served as a general blueprint for political structure within different village groups, it was by no means the standard for Igbo society, because the system was thoroughly decentralized. Authority was fragmented and distributed between several different groups of leaders who each looked after their own compound, clan or commune.

Since no generalizations were ever fully possible because the Igbo, as Leith-Ross put it, “abhors a definition” (356). In addition, leadership was often in flux. If a particular head failed to fulfill his responsibilities and needed to be replaced by someone more capable to serve the people, change was inevitable. No spiritual head retained his Ofo if he failed to use it for the advancement of his community’s interests. No material wealth could amass enough wealth to buy public loyalty if he wasn’t able to dedicate it explicitly to the protection and welfare of his

people. "Privilege entails responsibilities and if the head of a kindred or even of a household fails to fulfill his responsibilities, he would lose the allegiance of the members of the family group," said Meek (106). Uchendu later agreed with ideas Meek had put forward, repeatedly emphasizing that leaders in Igbo society were expected to give maximum return in honor of their recognition as senior members of the community (20-21). He pointed out that for his Igbo community, "beneficial reciprocity" marked the interconnectedness of all men and women. Human interconnectedness was the pinnacle of Igbo philosophy, "the greatest of all values" for the community (14). It is understandable why, amid this system of interconnected reciprocity and unquestionable accountability, the selection of non traditional, non democratically elected warrant chiefs for indefinite periods of times was considered an abomination. If their unwarranted rise to power was not enough to incite local disdain, the women cited instances of chiefs' ineptitude and corruption throughout the second Commission of Inquiry.

In addition to reciprocity and accountability, Igbo ideas of leadership also emphasized the importance of plurality of authority figures. In a society where reciprocity was critical to peaceful existence, equality served as the ideal. Domination by a handful of disproportionately powerful men was deeply resented (Uchendu, 15). Government was never government by the lone man in possession of lasting chieftaincy, because no single individual could attain a position of superior, irrevocable, abusive leadership. Instead, there was "government by an informal body which had no resemblance to the warrant chiefs or native courts" prevalent across the region in 1929 (Meek, 129). Lawmakers served as mediators to the community (Meek, 130). Any Igbo man could climb the societal ladder and apply to be included in the

informal mediating body. Uchendu seconded this idea, citing the Igbo saying: “no one knows the womb that bears the chief” (84). Chieftaincy was never singular and always plural. It was never unconditional and always in need of constant validation. It was never the sole property of the rich or old or powerful and always the rightful status of anyone who was up to the task of serving his way to leadership. Hence, no one man was the sole decision maker of his village group’s fate and government was every person’s concern.

Once we have established the egalitarian nature of Igbo leadership, it becomes critical to question whether this access to societal leadership extended to women. Could women be the Okpara or the Onyisi? Could they too serve their way up societal ladders to become influential leaders?

The answer is yes and no. Women in Igbo society served critical economic, political and social roles but their leadership looked different than traditional male leadership. While Meek found evidence of senior women called Umada who exercised considerable authority as titleholders, women did not seem to serve as household or compound heads the way men did. Their influence was subtler, more confusing, harder to probe. They were at home caring for children but also in the marketplaces haggling and trading. They were in their kitchens cooking and feeding but also in the fields planting and harvesting. They served their husbands and tended to their offspring even as they ran gendered women’s councils, common funds and town meetings. Leith-Ross summed up these paradoxes aptly. “One hears the European talking of these matriarchies of West Africa. On the other hand, we have the dutiful and obedient wife

story put forward. The observer on the spot finds elements of both accounts in the actual situation” (169). It is not surprising that the British found it difficult to stomach that the warring, boisterous protester in 1929 was the pacific homemaker they had seen in Igbo villages. But perhaps it is from this astonishing duality that the women derived the bulk of their power.

Women in Owerri and Calabar had unmistakable economic power. For one, they owned the bulk of food supply, planting and reaping staple food crops such as cocoyam, cassava and banana as well as vegetables grown for relish (Green, 36). This meant that a displeased wife had no qualms withholding food from an offensive husband. In fact, in times of gendered tensions between men and women, women came together to “mass withdraw” food resources from men until they had been “brought to their knees.” The men were thus forced to present viable solutions to any source of tension in order to please the women who fed them (Green, 172). British control of the region may have wreaked havoc on the system of palm growth and trade but it did little to alter this imbalance of power centered on everyday food resources. “(The administration) did nothing at all to promote or improve the cultivation of those crops which formed the bulk of the food eaten by the Igbo,” says Afigbo. “The Botanical Gardens and the Departments of Agriculture concerned themselves (only) with experimentation in the growing of cash crops” (335). As a result, Igbo women “held their families’ stomachs” (Chuku, 115) through the colonial period. With British attention dedicated solely to commercial cultivation, women retained their stronghold over food supply as well as the economic and political clout it allowed them. In addition, they served as chief traders, dominating the retail trade disproportionately (Uchendu, 29). Green, describing a typical day at the market,

documented that “men sat together drinking and chatting while women did the lion’s share of buying and selling” (37). The income from trading activity women conducted on their own was spent by their own discretion. As a result, many wives were richer than their husbands and served as primary breadwinners (Meek, 203). Thus, women retained control of the bulk of food supply and majority of retail activity. With full discretion over their earnings, they often surpassed their husbands’ wealth. In fact, Leith-Ross described the relationship between a wife and a husband as similar to that of business partners (230). She painted a picture comparing the economic partnership of a husband and wife in Igboland with that of a married couple in England. “Here in Igboland it is no question of a long envelope laid by master’s plate at the breakfast table and quietly slipped into his pocket while the mistress asks with detached interest: ‘Have they put up income-tax again this year,’” she explained, “The (Igbo) wife has to calculate quickly: ‘Is it better to sell the new yams or pull some of my cassava or shall I try to get my husband to cut down some more banga so that I may make another tin of palm oil?’” (285). This description is fitting, when we recall the women’s opposition to taxation of men because it took away from their own hard-earned incomes and added to their farming and trading responsibilities.

If the women exercised unmistakable economic influence, their political finesse was no less relevant. Thanks to the Igbo policy of exogamy, married women had political ties to villages they were born in, as well as villages they lived in after marriage (Green, 178). As a result, they were a critical link between several villages, enabling intergroup economic barter and political collaboration (Green, 157). They remained part of women’s councils in their natal villages, even

after they had officially joined councils in the villages of their husbands. Leith-Ross, who studied such councils in the Nneato area, explained that men had full knowledge of the existence of these councils. Not only did they support this activity, they resorted to utilizing it for intergroup mediation or other pacific matters, considering women's to "have a greater sense of abstract justice" than men (Leith-Ross, 107). Scholars like Van Allen have long spoken of women's traditional meetings called the mikiri. Green documented the nature of the mikiri in detail, explaining that it was a common fund for members' benefit, as well as a judicial body where women could try their own cases or discuss public concerns. Every few weeks, there was a "shuttle-like movement of women backwards and forwards across the countryside" as they explained their needs and concerns to fellow mikiri members, chimed in on judicial matters and offered a portion of their income towards collective funds (Green, 219). Recall that the councils and meetings were in addition to existing market networks that were strengthened by exogamy. Besides voicing their ideas at the mikiri or council meeting every few weeks, women could also connect with one another at weekly markets. "One hears over and over again the remark: "I will speak of it in the market," exactly as we would say: "I will take this telegram to the post office," said Leith-Ross (87-88). It was these market networks coupled with the intra-council solidarity and mikiri meetings that enabled women to organize themselves in protest expediently in 1929. Since the British had little knowledge of such networks, the scale of the disturbances came as a massive shock.

By no means however, was the Women's War of 1929, or even the Nwaobiala of 1925 the first or only instance of collective organization by women. Green documented numerous highly

synchronized political campaigns waged by women to coerce men into serving their interests. This includes an instance when male-owned cattle repeatedly grazed on female owned crops, women led the process to draft new legislation that stated that any straying animal must be reported to its owner immediately. If the owner was slow in resolving the hassle, the animal would be slaughtered and its meat distributed among the women (Green, 214). Green suspected that the women's collective silence about the disturbances of 1929 was a result of such a collective oath, where they had all sworn not to divulge details to British researchers or administrators, perhaps because they were mourning the loss of life, or wary of further attacks (209-211). Therefore, collective campaigns led by women's organizations to secure rights from male organizations were a part of everyday political life.

It is not hard to understand that women who bore the brunt of taxation by British male officers and assault by local male chiefs took it upon themselves to utilize their female dominated networks and councils. These networks had enabled them to achieve political gains in the past. They were a part of the makeup of their cultural DNA, a critical component of political life, as they had known it before the British came up with ideas of patriarchal indirect rule.

As a result of this research, several reforms were enacted in Igbo society starting in 1933. 18 chiefs were recognized as the most "corrupt and exploitative" based on overwhelming evidence presented before the Commission, and consequently removed from office (Chuku, 224). Household and family heads were recognized as the rightful collectors of any public taxation (Mba, 99). Eventually, warrant chiefs were replaced altogether by "massed benches" where

multiple judges and leaders held collective power (Van Allen, 177), thus reducing the likelihood of Igbo and Ibibio women suffering at the hands of corrupt or greedy chiefs who refused to pay bride wealth. Boundaries of Native Court Areas were rearranged to conform to natural clan or village group divisions (Van Allen, 177). This may have been a direct response to Meek's insistence that British administration could only have a "real basis" (Meek, 335-6) in native institutions if it built its system off of the village-group. Interestingly, while the women of 1929 succeeded in dismantling the much despised warrant chief system to safeguard future interests of fellow women and the larger community, "they did not win greater long-term representation for women in local government" (Mba, 298). Both Green and Leith-Ross had called for gender specific measures to bolster the political influence of women. These included entrusting women with municipal organization (Leith-Ross, 350), "training" them in affairs of everyday life that included agriculture (Meek, 353) and utilizing the "surprising organization" of their existing councils and meeting groups for political administration (Leith-Ross, 316). However, even as the testimonies of women in court and anthropological studies were taken into account in designing reform, women were not explicitly put in power as chiefs or judges, nor were their collective societies given official jurisdiction. The system around them was rearranged, but the wave of political change did not explicitly employ their unique political agency.

It is here that Van Allen's theory of female invisibility following the Women's War of 1929 appears most ambivalent. Were the women highly visible because their protest had enabled extensive reform? Or were they invisible because they were not explicitly allowed chieftaincy or judgeship in courts?

In light of the overwhelming change in the direction of colonial policy in southeastern Nigeria and beyond that followed the war in 1929, I choose to stick to the former argument. While explicit grants of chieftaincy or absolute recognition of women's councils as political organizations would have been a clear case for female visibility, I feel that the criticism of indirect rule that followed the war, as well as the longevity of ideas of decentralization and egalitarianism the women founded their demonstrations on, prevented them from ever falling into a rut of invisibility. They remained relevant because they set a precedent for effective collective protest against ineffective colonial policies. They triggered a sharp turn in colonial policy. In subsequent years, game-changing politicians and scholars like Perham, Azikiwe and James cited their movement and recycled their ideas to advocate partnership, nationalism and Pan-Africanism respectively.

Contradictions in indirect rule

With the publication of Leith-Ross and Meek's work in 1938-39, criticism of indirect rule in Nigeria became more strident. Margery Perham, who had published her work *Native Administration in Nigeria* in 1937, explaining the intricacies of indirect rule in Northern as well as Southern Nigeria, began writing numerous columns for *The Times* criticizing the immediate British response to the Women's War, as well as the nature of indirect rule in Southeastern Nigeria as well as the larger continent of Africa. Before I delve into her criticism, let us revisit the definitions previously used for terms like "indirect rule" and "trusteeship."

A useful definition of indirect rule was provided by Donald Cameron, central secretary under Lugard, and later the governor and commander-in-chief of Nigeria between 1931 and 1935. “The system... is designed to adapt for purposes of local government the tribal institutions which the native peoples have evolved for themselves, so the latter may develop, *in a constitutional manner*, from their own past, guided and restrained by the traditions and sanctions which they have inherited, molded or modified... on the advice of British Officers” (Cameron, 1). Cameron believed that “advising” native people on the very traditions and customs they had chosen for themselves before the advent of British rule could enable them to progress more *constitutionally* towards eventual self-government. Were the Igbo to concede to the colonizer’s “advice”, even the most “lawless part of Nigeria” (Meek, xi) could aspire to legitimate constitutional progress. Indirect rule was seen as a system that respected the ways of the native and allowed organic political development. “The controlling power encourages among its dependent people the fullest possible use of their own dynamic institutions as instruments of self-government on lines consistent with modern requirements,” detailed Meek (327). I find irony in the fact that his definition juxtaposes terms like “controlling power” and “dependent peoples” with aspirations of “self-government”. Meek was adamant that if the child-like native listens to the British paternalistic colonizer long enough, his (faulty) nature, and his (inferior) institutions could be transformed into something legitimate and lasting. This pedagogical relationship was called “trusteeship”. The colonial teacher augmented his subjects’ political knowledge teaching them something they already seemed to know and practice. Igbo democracy, which comprised of a system where government was everyone’s concern, was

replaced by colonial authoritarianism so the people who were already democratic could progress “constitutionally” towards a democracy that fit British standards.

The contradictions inherent in these definitions of indirect rule and trusteeship were to create several problems over the next two decades, as nationalist leaders, international governments and even colonial scholars themselves realized the difficulties of fostering democratic self-government under an authoritarian, coercive colonial regime. Criticism of indirect rule and British trusteeship was to only escalate in coming years, thanks to leaders like Azikiwe and James whose work resonated with anti-colonial nationalists across the African continent. While these “educated Africans, Pan-Africanists and anti-colonial critics” were in no way the masterminds behind the Women’s War of 1929 as Resident of Calabar Edward Falk and his wife seemed to believe, they were loud proponents of the women’s movement in 1929 (Matera et al., 228). These leaders considered the Women’s War in 1929 an example of successful collective organizing against the colonizer.

Azikiwe’s perception of the Women’s War

Nnamdi Azikiwe aptly summed up the barely concealed imbalance of power between the teacher and trustee. “On the iron hand of British Power is the velvet glove of a native chieftaincy,” he said (“Murdering Women in Nigeria”, 164). While the influence of nationalists like Azikiwe or Pan-Africanists like James was to peak decades later in the latter half of the

twentieth century, they were already writing about the women's war and its significance for grassroots movements in Africa in the 1930s.

Nnamdi Azikiwe, previously Benjamin Azikiwe, is most frequently remembered as the first president of Nigeria and one of the earliest, most persistent and most effective leaders of the nationalist movement in West Africa. He was born to an Igbo civil servant and raised in mission schools. After working as a government clerk, he decided to go to the United States (US) for higher education, attending schools such as Lincoln University and Howard University before getting his postgraduate degrees in journalism and anthropology from Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania respectively. In 1937, he made his way back to Nigeria to launch a new newspaper called the *West African Pilot* (Ezera, 53). Azikiwe's newspaper became a critical rallying platform for his supporters in the nationalist movement.

However, Azikiwe was critically evaluating the loopholes in British indirect administration of Nigeria well before he explicitly launched his political campaign. In 1930, while still a student in the US, he published a piece on the Women's War of 1929 with the provocative title "Murdering Women in Nigeria." Azikiwe rejected British claims that the loss of life was merely a consequence of legitimate self-defense. He made no qualms about his opinion that the shooting of protesters in Owerri and Calabar was cold-blooded murder. It is not clear whether he had a chance to return to Nigeria and observe the situation first-hand at any point between the beginning of the war in November 1929, and the publishing of his piece in mid 1930. However, he seemed to have a reasonable grasp of the sequence of events. He characterized

taxation and corruption of artificial chiefs as the primary causes behind the war. Taxation was still being touted by the British as a means of allowing the native administrator greater ability to self-determine his community's trajectory by having a viable deposit of money for public service projects. Yet, to Azikiwe, it signified "the domination of Great Britain over many tribes who for one thousand years have been their own masters and maintained great states" ("Murdering Women in Nigeria", 164). In addition, when discussing the origins of the conflict, he blamed the women's lack of suffrage ("Murdering Women in Nigeria", 178). He believed the inability for local women to access a political outlet or participate as legitimate partners in communal decision-making was at fault for the massive scale of the conflict.

In addition, unlike the British who seemed to employ a selective amnesia towards previous women's movements such as the Nwaobiata of 1925 and the Spirit Movement of 1927, Azikiwe recalled women's former protests. "If the people of Great Britain had known the circumstances of (these) riots, the Opobo barbarity might have been prevented," he said ("Murdering Women in Nigeria", 164). Note that in his language here, he characterized the violence as explicitly brutal and exploitative, even as media outlets around him were justifying British officers shooting Igbo women through the first six months following the war. It was not until the latter half of 1930 that the first suggestions that British violence was excessive were to be made by the second Commission of Inquiry. He also made sure he referred to colonial authorities as "people of Great Britain", instead of acknowledging their status as "the government of Nigeria." Already, he seemed convinced that the presence of British men on Nigerian soil was an anomaly.

Azikiwe's brief piece managed to chronicle what he saw as critical failings of the system of indirect rule. Besides recognizing the irony of how Igbo democratic institutions were put to use by a British authoritarian government, he spoke of the incompetence of British staff as well as the interpreters they employed to communicate with the Igbo. He was dissatisfied with the lack of adequate education or training he perceived in the majority of British civil officers. He also doubted the ability and motives of language interpreters hired by the British thanks to a startling dearth of fluent Igbo language speakers in the British ranks. As a former government employee and the son of a civil servant, Azikiwe believed that there was a grave problem with the caliber of British civic institutions. "(The war occurred) due to the poorly qualified officers of the Civil Service and the lack of any chance of conference and understanding between the mass of people and the British rulers," he said ("Murdering Women in Nigeria", 164). In a way, he was predicting the report by the second Commission of Inquiry, published two months later, that called for an urgent study of the native people. He was also forecasting the findings of anthropological researchers like Meek and Leith-Ross who both lamented their inability to communicate in the Igbo language in spite of how critical their evaluation of Igbo society was to British administration.

Thus, it is not hard to imagine that the Women's War held considerable significance for Azikiwe. The war not only highlighted the faults of British indirect administration but also suggested how the system could be improved through better communication, suffrage for men and women alike and partnership with local leaders in political decision-making. Finally, it provided Azikiwe,

who was to become Nigeria's rallying cry for independence, an early example of what a successful anti-colonial protest looks.

James' perception of the Women's War

Azikiwe was not the only critical West African leader who captured the importance of the Women's War in his writing. In 1938, historian, journalist, social theorist and political activist C. L. R James who is well known for documenting the history of the Haitian Revolution in his book *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and pioneering post-colonial literature in West Africa, decided to include the war in a history of monumental black movements meant to empower nationalist and Pan-Africanist leaders at the time. Note that his writing was hailed for decades to come as a "testament to the streams of radical thought that converged in London's cafes, libraries, and under heated flats where young Africans and West Indians gathered during the 1930s" (Introduction to James, 3). James repeatedly spoke of the importance of black civil movements for white civil movements and stressed that revolutionaries in the West needed African activists to be successful.

Titled *A History of Negro Revolt*, James' work was unique for its time, since it put black people from all over the world at the center of historical events.⁸ His book included descriptions of black liberation movements from the rebellion at San Domingo to nationalism at the Gold Coast and the American Civil War. Among these examples of powerful black revolt, James included

⁸ James' text was re-published in 1969 under the title *A History of Pan-African Revolt*.

the Women's War of 1929. He called the movement "extraordinary" and applauded its "strength and vigor" (75-76). He described women's objections to female-specific taxation as well as their central role in the market. He even wrote about a rejection of the first Commission of Inquiry's findings and the subsequent inclusion of two Nigerians on the second Commission set up to probe deeper for reasons for the conflict (76). James was convinced that British leaders on the ground in southeastern Nigeria had deliberately "suppressed" true evidence from the conflict because they feared a consequent backlash (75). In spite of this, it seemed that James was eager to include whatever little was known of the true nature of the war in his text chronicling seminal black civil movements from the past several decades.

James is commonly hailed as one of the most distinguished West Indians of modern times. His writing is considered relevant to even contemporary black activism. It is a testament to Igbo women's political organization that he included the Women's War in what he considered a book about the most important grassroots movements in black history. James believed that African masses such as the women enabling the war of 1929 were the most critical tool for the eventual dismantling of European imperialism (Introduction to James, 11). Clearly, he considered the organizers and participants of the Women's War to be revolutionaries, striving for an alternate world order where black life and black interests mattered.

Leaders such as Azikiwe and James who spearheaded civil movements for self-government in West Africa hailed the Women's War as a characteristic example of anti-colonial revolt. It is thus hard to say that the women's message lost all relevance and their efforts lost all visibility

as soon as the war ended. Azikiwe and James mobilized movements for African independence that lasted for decades, and the war was an early and critical incident contributing to their understanding of the fight ahead of them in the 1930s. Even if the women were to have no other political contribution for the next few decades, this fact alone makes it hard for us to characterize them as invisible to future decision-makers. As we will soon find out however, the war was just one instance of successful protest they organized during the period.

Section four: Transition towards partnership from late 1930s to late 1940s

The decade between 1920 and 1930 marked the “greatest number of women’s protest demonstrations and wars against men” in the Igbo region (Chuku, 115) precisely because of a deep and pervasive marginalization of women’s economic and political influence. According to Chuku, the war of 1929 was merely the last among a series of movements led by women to have their interests be heeded by local chiefs as well as foreign officers. Perham was adamant that the British considered any revolt to have a potential basis in “maladministration on the part of the rulers” and were quick to move towards expedient and corrective reforms. This was not quite the case after 1929.

Continuation of protests by local women

While the war did yield definite results, including anthropological inquiry and political reform, it did not restore complete equilibrium to the local women’s lives. Even after members of the

commission of inquiry as well as anthropological researchers had called for reassessment of taxation for the Igbo, and better inclusion of the women in political life, these issues continued to persist in southeastern Nigeria. Protests thus continued into the 1930s and 1940s, bolstered by the lessons of 1929. Communication networks based on marketplaces and trading routes, along with women's collective organizations such as the mikiri continued to play a critical role in future demonstrations (Chuku, 236). Such protests marked not only the tenacity of the local female demonstrator, but also her insistence on staying visible and relevant to male decision-makers.

One significant instance of protest occurred in 1938, when men and women in the Okigwe and Bende divisions of Owerri Province organized a collective campaign against taxation across over five hundred square miles (Mba, 98). There were strong parallels between grievances put forward in 1938 and those that had been voiced in 1929. Protesters' complaints included both economic strife and opposition to inefficient and manipulative civil servants. Men and women protested a continuous fall in prices of produce, high costs of imports that had created inflationary pressure and corrupt tax collectors who overcharged families for tax on minors and pocketed money themselves instead of pouring it into government treasuries (Chuku, 227). Members of the two divisions refused to pay any more tax in conditions of economic paucity. When police representatives were sent in to enforce collection, male demonstrators were arrested. "The men were faced with harassment, so the women took up the anti-tax campaign and began their campaign," says Mba (100-1). "They showed the same coordination and control as in 1929." Thus, by carrying forward the campaign in the absence of male

counterparts, the women were not only serving their own gendered interests, but the dual interests of both men and women in local society. They acted as chief spokespeople in the absence of their fathers, husbands and brothers.

Another significant incident of protest occurred in 1948, this time solely organized by women and for women. In spite of the emphasis laid after 1929 on better understanding and including women's political and economic alliances and interests, a major overhaul of the palm produce industry in Nigeria was carried out in the late 1940s without taking women in consultation. The British introduced Pioneer Oil Mills to mechanize the palm produce industry and compete effectively with similar products from the East Indies. This innovation was unacceptable to the women of the Owerri, Calabar and Onitsha Provinces, not because they were explicitly against mechanization but because they relied on palm oil and palm kernels for a significant chunk of their incomes and feared that their produce would be replaced for that from the Mills (Mba, 113).

Protests began as early as 1946 in Onitsha. The real escalation in the conflict, however, did not occur until January 5, 1948 when a woman cried to her female counterparts that her cassava farm had been destroyed in order to make room for the installation of a new mill. Women from villages in Bende flocked together to declare mass protests and began burning native courts (Chuku, 230). As they demonstrated their frustration with being left out of yet another policy move that would impact their lives, they chanted slogans of feminist solidarity. According to Mba, they repeatedly sang, "We are strong as men, and we cannot be bent" (109). A month

later, the Secretary for Eastern Nigeria circulated a message to British officers, asking them to pay particular attention to the “possibilities of unfavorable reaction on the part of the women” and asking them to not only consult local men when making critical decisions such as the installation of POMs, but also consult local women (Chuku, 231). As a result, the women’s “agitation against the oil mills” reminded the British yet again that it was crucial to pay attention to their opinions and concerns (Mba, 298). In Calabar, for instance, district officers were told to “consult the leaders of the women, comment on their reactions and have the names of the women’s leaders in the area” (Mba, 113). Women were recognized as viable trustees, even partners in the palm industry.

The protests of 1938 and 1948 both called for the British to do a better job of explaining the rationale for various economic processes to local farmers and traders, and include them in making decisions such as mechanization and taxation that impact the local economy. This was a continuation of the women’s demands in 1929, when they spoke not only of animosity towards the practice of taxation, but also a deep suspicion towards seemingly trivial changes in economic policy. For instance, the women resented the decision of the British to only buy their produce in hastily erected, boxy factories instead of the open air markets that the women so loved, as well as the new policy of buying palm oil according to weight instead of measure (Matera et al., 140). While these issues seemed minor to the British, they ended up having a significant impact on the business environment as well as income levels for women.

In addition, prices of palm products kept plummeting as the great depression deepened, but the women, cut off from any end-consumers by British companies, had no way of knowing global economic occurrences. Native traders and farmers were not offered any formal economic education, and were not in much of a position to understand fluctuations in the international market. They only saw the British buyer, who some days offered half of what he had previously paid for the same product, perhaps a few months or years ago. “They could not be sure that what they were told was trade depression was not government’s secret form of punishment,” explained Leith-Ross (179). Uchendu, in documenting the economic atmosphere he inhabited in the 1920s, spoke of being engulfed by “a poverty that the Igbo could not understand” (5). As changes persisted in this inscrutable and depressing economic environment, women who had historically dominated most trading activity were especially disturbed.

By the early 1950s, several other POMs had sprung up throughout the region, albeit “in consultation” with local women. As further proof of their economic dynamism and business acumen, the women conceded palm oil sales to the mills. Instead, they began to dedicate any spare resources to the palm kernel business, as well as diversified trading activity and cultivation of profitable farm products like cassava. While some large palm produce traders lost their economic clout, several others were able to continue to amass wealth in spite of upheavals in the industry (Chuku 232). Although the palm industry was to continue undergoing changes, by 1952 opposition to the POMs had largely subsided.

While the palm protests of 1948 continued the trend of resilient protest by the women of southeastern Nigeria, and yielded a somewhat positive outcome, it was regrettable that hundreds of women had to once again mobilize their communities and demand inclusion, barely two decades after the mammoth Women's War of 1929. As Chuku mentioned, the protests could have been avoided altogether "had the government made some effort to investigate the workings, social structure and gender relations in the indigenous oil palm industry" (234). Regardless, we can rest assured that in light of the women's agency during the palm protests, as well as the campaigns preceding the events of 1948, they remained visible. They were able to negotiate a role in economic and political decision-making in spite of a male-dominated system that had to be probed and prodded time and again to consult the women's most pertinent interests.

Clinging to trusteeship for dear life

Igbo women were not the only ones doubting the integrity and effectiveness of British administration during this period of time. The 1940s marked an escalation in international criticism of British imperialism, even as British officers insisted that their policy of trusteeship was the best means of empowering their subjects. It seemed as if trusteeship was the last justification for retaining control of land and resources in West Africa, the one idea that could enable Britain's supposedly humanitarian politics to not be at complete odds with colonial occupation of regions like Nigeria.

Speaking of the criticism of British trusteeship emanating from the German government during the late 1930s, right before the onslaught of the Second World War, Perham said, "Herr Hitler (has) derided our policy of trusteeship as a "weak conception" and a "pacifist idea." However, it is the only policy which can justify Britain to herself, to most of their world, and to her own subjects in retaining present control of such large areas" (*The Times*, 12 February 1936, 15). Therefore, while Nazi Germany found trusteeship to be a sign of British feebleness, colonial authorities like Perham considered it perhaps the most significant legacy of British colonialism.

The United States of America was also critical of British colonial administration. However, it was not quite the policy of trusteeship that they resented. On the contrary, it was the very continuation of British colonialism beyond the Second World War that represented a grave international issue to the U.S. and led to "several direct and subtle attacks on colonialism from American high quarters" (Ezera 40).

Even before the War ended, American Presidential candidate Wendell Willkie had stood before a Chinese delegation and declared that the war would have been in vain if they did not put "an end to the empire of nations over nations" (Ezera 40). Criticism continued past the war, with "subtle attacks on the British Empire from other highly placed Americans' like President Roosevelt himself (Ezera 40). On February 4, 1944, President Roosevelt called the British presence in Africa pure manipulation of the local people. He described the conditions of the Gambian people as "the most horrible thing" he had ever seen, and blamed it squarely on the British. "I looked it up, with a little study, and I got to the point of view that for every dollar that

the British, who have been there for two hundred years, have put into Gambia, they have taken out ten,” said Roosevelt (Louis, 356-7). Of Britain’s insistence that they were present in Africa so they could educate the native in the art of self-government, Roosevelt said: “(Trusteeship) is just plain exploitation of those people. There is no education whatsoever.”

Just as Britain received such explicit criticism from its chief war ally, nationalist leaders of Nigeria were chiming in with their own cries for change. Nigerian leader Awolowo, in his nationalist text *Path to Nigerian Freedom* called Britain out for political hypocrisy, demanding that the British adhere to the principles of trusteeship they had set for themselves. Awolowo insisted that Britain needed to try much harder to include natives in decision-making, if it were to abide by principles of trusteeship “enunciated by the Late League of Nations and confirmed by the present Charter of United Nations” (60). He was adamant that in situations where Nigerian interests clashed with British interests, the former should prevail by Britain’s own promises about trusteeship.

In 1929, the women of southeastern Nigeria had called the British out for the duplicity of their claims that they were governing the region in a manner true to its indigenous political culture. Although the British hastened to speed-learn Igbo culture, by the 1940s it was clear that the problem went beyond a mere dearth of knowledge. It seemed as if the system of indirect rule that rested on a hollow definition of trusteeship was ridden with more holes than the British had first anticipated.

The movement towards partnership

The British response to criticism from both colonial subjects and international powers seemed to be an insistence that indirect rule was the surest means of redemption. While they may have been at fault previously for “nineteenth century complacency about the universal superiority of their own ideas and institutions” (*The Times*, 11 February 1936, 15), the system of trusteeship was trying to put these past mistakes right. Previous justifications of indirect rule had centered on enabling trustees to realize British conceptions of “happiness and progress” (Lugard, 5). In 1922, Lugard had claimed in *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* that his policies of indirect rule and trusteeship enabled the British to deliver upon this task of civilization. The system in Lugard’s eyes could “inculcate in the natives a sense of individual responsibility, of liberty, and of justice” (5). Lugard had predicted that “the verdict of history will award high praise to the efforts and achievements of Great Britain” based on these lofty ideals (5). Unfortunately, his prediction did not quite define the future. Less than two decades after *The Dual Mandate* was first published, Perham, his own biographer, was advocating for the need to enervate this kind of “over-paternalism” of indirect rule. The language of trusteeship faded into the background as she emphasized “cooperation” and “partnership” instead.

Here, let us recall the female protesters in the Women’s War of 1929 who asked that their chiefs be selected by the mutual consent of local Igbo men and women. The women were proposing a system of partnership with British policymakers. As Matera, Bastian and Kent put it: “The events of late 1929 in southeastern Nigeria contributed to a dramatic shift in colonial

policy... from indirect rule and trusteeship to colonial development and partnership” (233). I believe that the women’s commitment to such a policy shift lasted well beyond 1929. Female protesters who organized anti-tax disturbances in 1938, for instance, demanded that their villages be consulted in the determination of tax rates in the crumbling, depressed economy. Women demonstrators in 1948 organized a collective demonstration to remind the government to consult them in decisions concerning the palm industry they had historically dominated. It is clear that Igbo women had hence pushed the British for decades to consider them legitimate partners who were included in the process of colonial decision-making in Nigeria. Even before words like partnership and cooperation entered colonial discourse, these women had made it clear that they were not content with being voiceless. Again, with their demands for inclusion as political partners resonating across the empire, one cannot say that Igbo women retreated into invisibility after 1929. Whether the gendered conceptions of power allowed the British to see this reality or not, demands for partnership emanated, perhaps even originated from bands of brave and resilient women decades before the formal move towards partnership.

Note that not all criticism of the policies of trusteeship came from parties outside Britain’s borders. Some of the most stringent critique of the policies of indirect rule rose directly from the Labor Party, before their rise to power in 1945. Labor insisted that the Conservative leadership moved excruciatingly slow when it came to fulfilling its promises of political independence in colonies. As Speers describes it: “Having once agreed in principle to eventual independence for her colonies, Great Britain was in no great hurry to make that independence

an actuality” (306-7). According to the proposed colonial policy of the Labor Party, the work of preparing for independence required immediacy. Putting it off any longer under the premise that colonies like Nigeria may not be fully ready was no longer viable. Unsurprisingly, the victory of Labor in 1945 was followed by a string of constitutional changes in colonies. Constitutions were put into effect in Aden, Ceylon, Malta, the Gold Coast, India, Pakistan and the Malay States between 1946 and 1947. Meanwhile, Nigeria had its own share of constitutional upheavals beginning in 1944 and lasting up to 1963. In fact, constitutional conferences were held approximately every 3 years during the 1950s.

By 1944, the demands for partnership to take the place of the paternalistic trusteeship of the past had yielded some noticeable results in the Nigerian colony. Sir Arthur Richards, the governor of Nigeria at the time, drew up a new constitution for Nigeria for the first time since the last constitution was introduced in 1922. Richards claimed his objectives were to promote unity, provide for diverse elements in the country and secure “greater participation by Africans in the discussion of their own affairs” (Ezera, 67). Ironically, he began the process by drafting constitutional proposals for review of the 1922 constitution “without consulting public opinion or even letting the public know what he was intending to do” (Ezera, 66). His process for making the constitution more inclusive towards Nigerians did not begin with speaking with said Nigerians. Both Awolowo and Azikiwe heavily criticized the drafted constitution. This was primarily because the new constitution only allowed “discussion” and instead of “participation” in the running of the country’s affairs (Ezera, 75). Mere consultation, the sort that was promised to Igbo women in 1948 to regulate palm produce, was no longer sufficient. Azikiwe

announced during a speech in New York on June 27, 1947: “We (Nigerians) cannot be satisfied with just the ‘discussion’ of our own affairs by the Richards Constitution” (“Zik”, 154). Nigerian nationalists wanted to be included as equal partners in constitutional deliberation.

While the process of constitution making failed to be inclusive of Nigerian political representatives, the constitution did revisit the principle of decentralized governance that was emphasized by the second Commission of Inquiry, as well as colonial anthropologists after the Women’s War. A link to the values women advocated for in 1929 persisted. The suggestion of political fragmentation or decentralization was now touted under terms like federation or regionalism. “The concept of regionalism (was included) to encourage the regions to develop each along its characteristic lines,” said Ezera (68-74). This argument for culture in governance was to continue all the way up to the inauguration of Nigerian self-government in 1960.

Section five: Slow progression towards self-government, 1951 – 1960

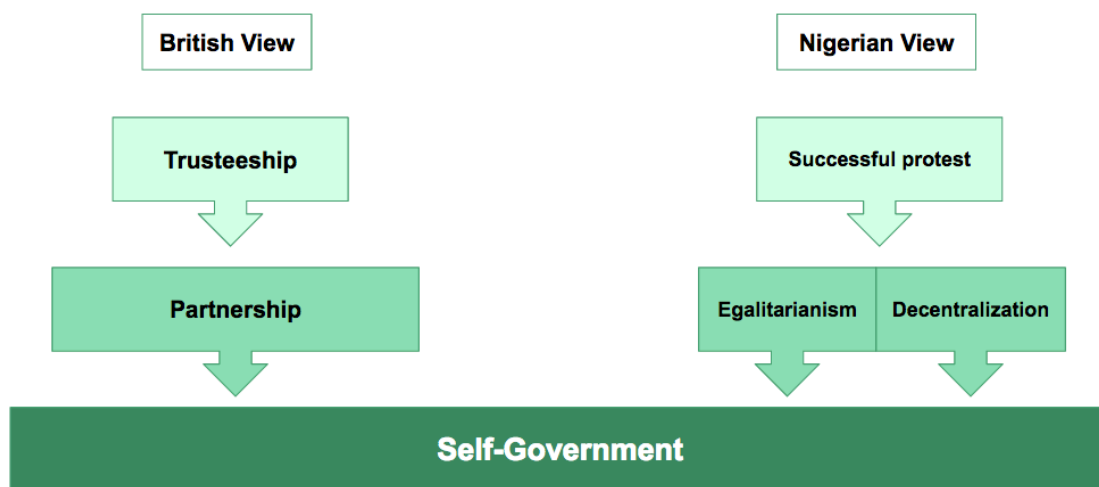


Figure 8: The transition from trusteeship to self-government

By 1951, a gradual political polarization had transformed the political situation in Nigeria. On one side were Awolowo and his Action Group, heavily supported by the Yorubas in the west. On the other side stood Azikiwe and his National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) with predominantly Igbo support in the east. Awolowo was a stickler for a small government concentrated in the hands of a few intellectuals, professionals and traditionalists supposedly destined to rule the country (Awolowo, 64). Meanwhile, Azikiwe wanted the “unstinting support of the ‘common man’” in order to mobilize the “mental emancipation of Nigerians from a servile colonial mentality” (Ezera, 101). He pledged to stand for all common people, referring to them as “the masses”. According to his ideology, the masses held “the key to the future” and were capable of making or unmaking a movement for the national cause (Zik, Azikiwe, 166). Azikiwe, who had lauded the organizers of the Women’s War 18 years ago for mobilizing thousands for a single cause, now brought the women’s principles of collective self-determination to the NCNC. His ideas were reminiscent of the egalitarianism anthropologists documented during sociological studies of Igbo society following the war. Meek had referred to the society women protestors of 1929 inhabited as “a republic in the true sense of that term” (Meek, 130). More than 30 years after the war, it was this equalitarian republic Azikiwe wanted to recreate albeit on a much larger scale. Thus, ideological ties between female protestors of 1929 and the Nigerian movement for self-government remained consistent.

Besides the solidifying of political parties, 1951 also marked the introduction of the Macpherson Constitution, launched by the newly inaugurated governor Sir John Macpherson.

Macpherson decided to begin drafting a new constitution well before the 1944 constitution had run its expected course, thanks to widespread rejection of the document as well as an upsurge in nationalism across Nigeria (Ezera, 126). Macpherson was wary not to repeat the mistake of excluding Nigerian leaders from the constitution drafting process this time around. In fact, he decided to conduct the first level of constitutional research at “village and district meetings” (Ezera, 107) in order to get to know the views of people at the grassroots level. Again, we can trace this logic all the way back to the period of anthropological study, which immediately followed the Women’s War. Anthropologists then were advocating for all administrative measures to begin at the village group level in order to have true legitimacy among the locals (Meek, 335-6). Macpherson followed up on these village level meetings with provincial and regional conferences, eventually producing a revised constitution that built upon the previous one but included suffrage for tax-paying men, regional legislatures and a national electoral system (Mba, 234). Like its predecessor, the Macpherson constitution offered a tripartite division of Nigeria along cultural lines of Yoruba in the west, Igbo in the east and Hausa in the north (Awolowo, 39). British support for decentralized government in Nigeria still prevailed.

Interestingly, Azikiwe wanted to escalate this proposed regionalism, which he believed relied on artificial lines. He advocated for a further decentralization along ethnic and linguistic lines allowing each smaller group its own cultural autonomy (Azikiwe, “Zik”, 18). His propositions were in line with demands made during the war of 1929, when women protested large, artificially cordoned Native Court areas that forced disparate groups to adhere to a single court.

Constitutional conferences occurred incessantly between 1951 and 1960, and it is important to note a few key developments during the period. Conferences occurred at London and Lagos in 1953 and 1954 respectively, leading to the passing of the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954. This constitution allowed regional governments to become more powerful. The groundwork for a federation had now been laid fully and calls for partnership in lawmaking that had emanated from Igbo as well as other Nigerian circles incessantly for at least the previous two decades were finally answered (Ezera, 196). By 1955, Macpherson had declared a commitment to “see Nigeria governing herself at the earliest possible moment” (Ezera, 227). However it took 3 more years for an independence date to emerge, and another 3 for official detachment from Britain to be established. Nigerian constitutional debaters consoled themselves by looking at how constitutional developments in other former colonies had taken much longer than in Nigeria. “If some members of the House should think that the pace is too slow, let them remember that India had nearly two centuries of British Rule before it took over its own destinies; in the Gold Coast the first Legislative Council was set up in 1850 - more than a century ago,” said one representative at a constitutional debate in 1959 (Debate in 1957, 46). Thankfully, by the end of the 1958 London conference there was unanimous agreement on an Independence Day for Nigeria - October 1, 1960. Note that this marked only partial independence from the British government (Ezera, 255). The Nigerian republic as a fully independent entity was not established until October 1, 1963, with Nnamdi Azikiwe as its first president.

While there has been significant discussion of the ideological connections between the women who waged war in 1929, and the Nigerian nationalists who trudged slowly towards

independence in the 1950s, it is important to note that this was not the only contribution of Igbo women to the constitutional process. In fact, the decade before independence saw explicit political activism by Igbo women. I will discuss below some of their key contributions to Azikiwe's NCNC which rose to national power upon independence.

Women in Azikiwe's party

While there were few women nationalists whose popularity rivaled that of leaders like Azikiwe and Awolowo, there were hundreds and thousands of women in the membership ranks of each party. Women's contributions often occurred through specific women's and youth associations. Mba notes that Awolowo's Action Group did not explicitly include a constitutional provision for women's or youth organizations, since "militant groups of extra-parliamentary nationalists (were) never as important in the Action Group as they had been within the folds of the NCNC" (258). On the contrary, the NCNC mandated participation of women's associations in several ways.

For instance, within the NCNC it was required that presidents and secretaries of all women's and youth associations attend national conventions as representatives (Mba, 236). This was significant, since there was a rapid increase in the number of women's groups supporting the NCNC during the decade prior to independence. Between 1950 and 1953, Onitsha, Port Harcourt and Calabar each formed their own NCNC women's association. By 1955, there was at least one in each division of Eastern Nigeria. The ubiquity of these women's political bodies was

reminiscent of the pervasive *mikiri* meeting groups and women's councils that had enabled the Women's War in 1929 to spread throughout the region. The persistence of women's groups of some form or the other in Igbo society ensured that their age old roles were not marginalized by an oblivious British administration or male-dominated local governance. Note that many women's wings of the NCNC were founded by female traders who had amassed wealth through years of trade (Chuku 197-199). They were now ready to utilize these resources to mobilize women in politics.

Moreover, delegations sent to the multiple constitutional conferences of the 1950s included female representatives. Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, for instance, served as an adviser to the 1953 as well as the 1958 constitutional delegations and swore to fight tooth and nail for the "political and social emancipation of women" from the colonial regime (Mba, 238). This trend of including a smattering of women in government seemed to continue after the (partial) independent in 1960. In fact, by 1963, twelve Provincial Secretaries were helping govern the eastern region.

Women's participation in the NCNC was more likely, since the party's following comprised largely of Igbo tribesmen and tribeswomen. Recall that Leith-Ross had stated as early as 1939 that women in Igbo society were esteemed "in a way so original and so modern that Europeans had just begun to think of it" (231). The parity between genders she discussed was an indicator of what Chuku calls "the flexibility of gender construct" for the Igbo. She says: "Igbo society had always maintained a flexibility of gender construct... that made it possible for women to occupy

positions of importance in society through their wealth and connections” (197-9). This idea is in contrast to Van Allen’s assertion, that women were more or less invisible immediately following the war of 1929. It nevertheless indicates that women continued to be not only visible and relevant but also critical in the transition from trusteeship to partnership and eventually self-government in Nigeria. I continue to believe that women were not only a part of the mammoth mission for self-government, but active catalysts who enabled decision-makers on either side of the colonial machine to reach an agreement, not to mention who enabled the first premier of Nigeria to ascend to power. “(Women’s support was why) Zik became the first President of Nigeria and his party won almost all the seats in the Eastern House of Assembly,” says Chuku (197-9). Hence, women’s economic activity, political ideology, collective organizing and resilient protest propelled Igbo society, and later larger Nigerian society towards self-government.

Future outlook on Nigeria

It is tempting to imagine the hour of independence for Nigeria as a kind of nirvana. We may think of it as the ultimate perfect political condition thousands had vied for through the decades between the Women’s War of 1929 and the official independence date in 1960. However, in reality, the moment was fraught with uncertainty.

Nigeria had been under a British colonial regime since at least 1900. No matter how stringently the British stressed their policies of trusteeship and their commitment to native institutions, the truth of the matter was that any colonial regime, even one that calls itself “a school for

democracy” retains some sort of “authoritarian sanctions in its reserve” (*The Times*, 23 January 1957, 9). Colonies are thus fundamentally founded on a system of authoritarianism. Even if administrators consider themselves “indirect” authorities, they retain ultimate veto powers over all decisions and policies, and are capable of pulling the rug out from under the native’s feet at any given point of time. For a region under authoritarian or dictatorial control for sixty years or more to make its way forward as a federation and democracy was no easy feat.

In addition, there were several examples of post-colonial strife in former colonies that had painstakingly acquired self-government in the years before Nigerian independence. The air was thus thick with warnings not to follow in the footsteps of these fledglings that had barely enough time to get used to being an independent country before they fell once again into some form of political suffering. “If regional self-government will mean a rehearsal of what occurred in Pakistan and India (during the armed conflict) in 1947, we must be very careful; if it will mean that those in authority will be placed in a position to trample on the rights of minorities, as happened in Sudan, it will be very necessary for all our leaders to come together,” determined one participant in the 1957 debate on self-government (33). Constitutional debates, even as Nigeria stood right at the brink of self-government, seemed to comprise of as many cautionary remarks as congratulatory announcements.

The one beacon of light, it seems, was that egalitarian democracy without the pedagogical gaze of the British officer was not an alien concept to Igbo leaders in Azikiwe’s government. “The Ibos and Ibibios of Eastern Nigeria were and still are great believers in government by

discussion,” said Ezeru, as he contemplated the prospects for a prosperous Nigeria in 1960 (259). It was these ideas of government by discussion, decentralization and egalitarianism that were firstly, guarded through 60 years of authoritarian rule by women, and secondly, responsible for allowing women to achieve prominence in Igbo and eventually Nigerian political society.

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Conclusion:

The Legacy of the British Empire - Reflections on Gender and Ethnicity in Politics

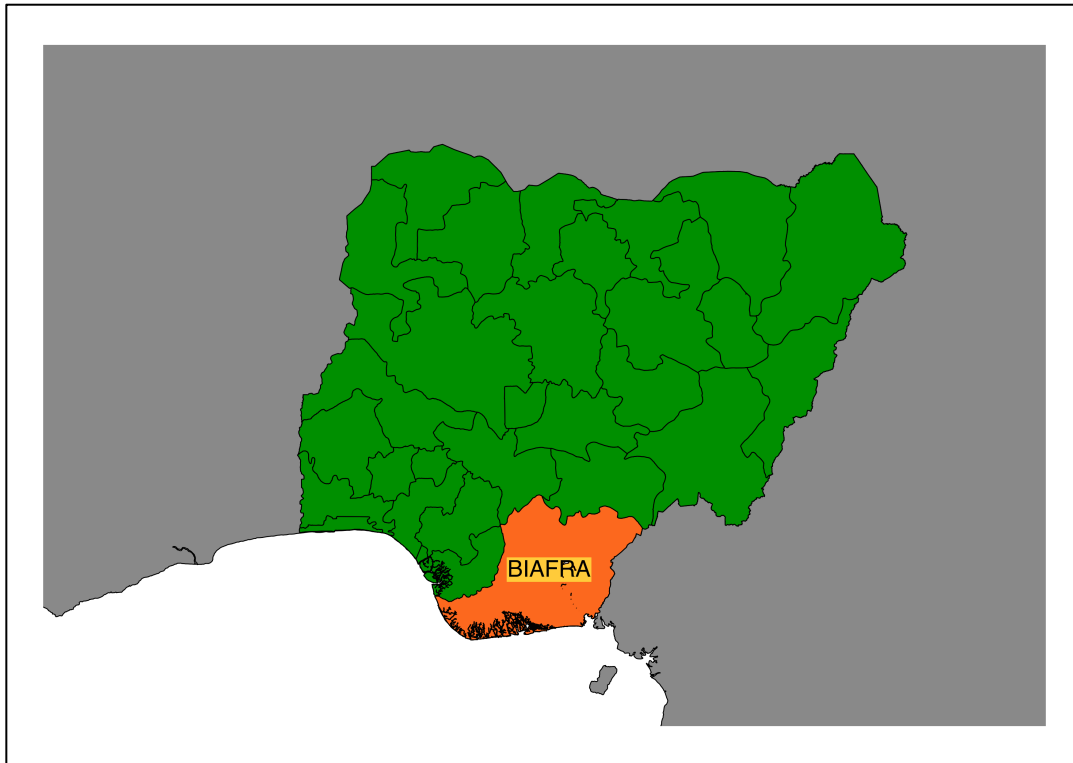


Figure 9: The southeastern provinces that seceded to form the Republic of Biafra in 1967

Over the last six months, I have tried to get to know the women who waged the Women's War of 1929 in the Owerri and Calabar provinces of Nigeria. In trying to understand them, I have tried to understand how the concerns of these women are relevant to the world I inhabit today. This includes the role of gender in political society as well as the legacy of British indirect rule as it lives on, unperturbed, in the post-colonial nation-state.

Section one: Gender in politics, then and today

Gender and southeastern Nigeria in the early twentieth century

This essay has claimed time and again that women were effective political actors, economic agents and social figures in the British colony of Southeastern Nigeria. They left their natal homes in their early teens to embrace towns they were married into. Through this exogamy, village groups that were otherwise in rivalry, forged familial and eventually economic ties. They produced the bulk of the food supply, farming multiple staples to feed their families and villages while men focused almost exclusively on growing yam crops. They trekked miles to inter-village markets to buy and sell imported or local goods, driving hard bargains and exchanging local news. They mediated village conflicts as pacific arbitrators for all. The list can go on and on. Instead of one set of domestic duties, they seemed to have endless responsibilities. They were farmers, traders, political leaders and legal judges even as they labored as mothers and wives. They would check and double check that those around them were well fed, safe and sociable.

If I had to determine what the central tenet of the women's lives was, I would say it was a need to protect their communities. Green called the Igbo women she studied communal "watchdogs". She said: "Women are to some extent the watchdogs of the community, the people who try to restore equilibrium when anti-social behavior is on the increase" (101). No

matter how diverse women's duties seemed to be, each obligation was rooted in a deep need to protect their own people.

With so many commitments, it is unsurprising that women shouldered their responsibilities as a collective entity, rather than as individuals. Every duty, from farming to trading to religious rituals seemed to occur in collusion with other women. If we are to think of these women as watchdogs, remember that they always operated in packs.

In 1929, many British officers were baffled by the female protesters' refusal to disclose their individual identity. When asked who they were, they answered with one word, *Ohandum*, roughly translatable to Womanhood. *Ohandum* did not signify an exclusive clique that differentiated between Igbo and Ibibio, pagan and Christian, young and old. The women's councils and mikiri meetings that consolidated female agency were open to any and every woman. The sex solidarity displayed in 1929 united Igbo with Ibibio, Annang with Ogoni women (Mba, 91). "I had the advantage of being a woman. Black or white, we were secretly leagued together," said Leith-Ross (45) of her time with Nigerian women. Evidently, this gendered unity could be extended to incorporate white women too.

In fact, I find it powerful that Nigerian women championing the war in 1929 saw links between their own interests and those of white, British women. British officers insisted that there was "no comparison" between the women organizers in Nigeria and the suffragettes of England (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 379). But the demonstrators expressed a desire to

collaborate with white women in their gendered struggle. As Ahudi, a testifying witness put it to the second Commission of Inquiry: “No doubt women like us are in your country. If need be we will write to them to help us. We shall continue fighting” (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 115). In 1929, these women were prepared to ask for help across racial divides to augment local women’s visibility. In 2016, we are still working on deciphering the way that exclusion of women from power structures is consistent across racial or class boundaries.

This gender solidarity was not a women-only secret but a political, economic and social reality widely acknowledged by men as well. Recall here, the collective campaigns waged by women to protect their economic interests or domestic freedoms. Suffice it to say that men accepted women, perhaps grudgingly, as not only visible and relevant to the economic, political and social orders, but indispensable members of society who explicitly enriched their surroundings.

Yet, in spite of the space women were allowed to take up in society, local women organized their own council meetings and collective funds rather than join male-dominated institutions. It is hard to know whether these gendered efforts existed because of the dearth of women in many traditional leadership bodies. After all, there were not many female chiefs. There were not many women on village councils. Were women’s political organizations a means of bridging this gap? Or was it because bodies of political consequence governed exclusively by women were thriving, that women opted out of groups of chiefs and council members? Did they prefer to operate not as individual spokeswomen but as massive collective bodies of political actors?

I believe the answer is a little bit of both. It is quite probable that women were excluded from chieftaincy or councils as they so often have been from political leadership through history in nearly every part of the world. In a society that relied explicitly on the bodies and minds of women, however, they could not be completely left out. Women's collective groups may thus have emerged, as partner as well as rival organizations to male-heavy political leadership. Whatever the case, the detailed anthropological studies by Leith-Ross, Green, and their counterparts as well as the far-reaching and lasting legacy of the Women's War meant that the women were visible, prominent and critical to Southeastern Nigeria before and during British colonial rule in the region, up to the establishment of the Nigerian republic in 1960 and independence in 1963.

Gender and the British

It is no secret that in setting up "native institutions" to enable the system of indirect rule in Nigeria and beyond, the British consulted local men and not local women. This was not so much a malicious attempt at sidelining women. Perhaps more alarmingly, it was simple oversight. The British had yet to associate political agency or economic significance with women at home or abroad. It was unfathomable for the British who were opposing basic suffrage for women in England, to consider that African society was more advanced in its gender equity.

The Women's War of 1929 raised a hue and cry in colonial quarters not just because it marked a massive critique of indirect rule or an unexpected civilian revolt, but also because it was

waged predominantly by women. For British colonizers to feel threatened by a massive collective demonstration of native colonized people was unsettling. For these challengers to be women, however, was unthinkable.

Narratives painted by British witnesses at the second Commission of Inquiry in 1930 offer some explanations the British came up with, in light of their inability to see women as actual political agents. They called the unarmed female protesters, overly emotional, obscene and disrespectful (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 63), described them as hostile (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 372) and blamed the root of the conflict on the women's "state of frenzy" (Aba Commission of Inquiry 1930, 379). Some witnesses went so far as to call the protesters prostitutes. One officer deployed in a district called Doctor's Farm testified: "I heard shouting from the direction of Doctor's Farm. The women there are prostitutes... Doctor's Farm village has an evil reputation in the district for the number of prostitutes who live there" (Matera et al., 179-180). Women who had discarded domestic duties to wear traditional protester's gear of palm fronds and demand political visibility through collective demonstration were thus labeled overly sexual, out of control beings. When women did not raise their voice, they were ignored. When they did raise their voice, they were disparaged, relegated to the status of prostitutes, typically regarded as belonging to the lowest strata of society even in native circles.

Years later, this view of the protesting women was revisited. Scholars like Green, Meek and Leith-Ross wrote raving reviews of their "vigor and special savor" (Leith-Ross, 352). However, in spite of the insistence of colonial anthropologists that local women be included in governing

Southeastern Nigeria, the women continued to have to fight for political visibility. Ironically, the women's demands that natural leaders of the land be recognized as official leaders were heeded, but the means of collective organization employed by the female demonstrators remained peripheral to structures of indirect rule. Women's gendered councils or mikiri organizations were never given official political recognition.

Gender and us today

The events of 1929 inspired by a female-led rejection of colonial policy were not only critical in the rise of Pan-Africanism and Nigerian nationalism; they are also highly relevant to our world today.

Recall that it was years before the true motivations of the protesters became evident to British authorities. The skepticism that characterized British perception of female protesters' ingenuity was a specific form of gendered oppression that persists to date and is evident in the current U.S. Presidential campaign. Just as British officers called female protesters "hysterical" in 1930 for being unyielding in their political demands, we label female politicians "hysterical" today for impassioned political expression.⁹ Just as British authorities blamed women for being too sentimental in expressing their distaste for policies that were affecting their well-being, we continue to brand women as overly emotional, if they insisting upon asking tough questions. We continue to go as far as to suggest that such emotion towards political outcomes stems

⁹ Media Matters 5/2/16 <http://mediamatters.org/research/2016/02/05/a-comprehensive-guide-to-sexist-attacks-on-hill/199700#emotions>

from women's biological makeup, rather than real political concern.¹⁰ Women's fight for visibility in the public arena is now defined by different umbrella terms. In 1929, they asked to be explicitly included as equals in economic decision-making. In 2016, we continue to ask for the same gender inclusivity, albeit under the guise of terms such as "wage gap" and "glass ceiling". In 1929, women's decision to express their solidarity in political protest through modes of dress British men found sexually provocative undermined their credibility. In 2016, we continue to ostracize women for how they dress or what they choose to do with their bodies, albeit under the guise of terms like "rape culture" and "pro-life". In 1929, women were part of a mission to make their social system more conducive to not merely female interests but all communal interests. In 2016, the feminist movement is still arguing gender inclusivity is good for men as well as women. When women express political agency, demand economic inclusion or lead social activism, we are still, at best uncomfortable, and at worst, bigoted.

According to American historian Joan Scott, any massive political upheaval naturally throws old orders of power and gender into chaos while searching for new forms of legitimation (1073). If we consider the introduction of British indirect rule in Nigeria to be such an upheaval, the marginalization of women in public space seems like a natural side effect of an all-encompassing revision of the political order. Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani calls the treatment of women at the hands of the British Empire the "world historic defeat of the female gender", a phenomenon that occurred in sync with the consolidation of the colonial state (41). Mamdani believes that the autonomous space women had claimed in traditional society was

¹⁰ NY Times 3/18/16 <http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/03/18/fox-news-slams-donald-trump-for-sick-obsession-with-megyn-kelly/>

“uniformly destroyed” by indirect rule. The question to ask now is whether we ever reclaim the lost autonomous space.

Women continued to be outnumbered by men up to Nigerian self-government in the 1960s.

Women continue to make less money, hold less power and have less political agency than men perhaps in most of the world outside of Nigeria to date. If women’s marginalization was indeed an unfortunate side effect of nineteenth or twentieth century change in the structures of political power, why was the side effect never reversed? If the consolidation of the British Empire erased women’s agency, why did the retreat of the British from Nigeria or other former colonies not signal a massive return of women’s agency?

Perhaps because discrimination based on sex or gender did not begin with the British Empire.

Neither did it subside with British decline. As Scott puts it, we must treat the imbalance of power between men and women as a constant problem, something that is “contextually defined, repeatedly constructed.” She demands that we examine closely not just arguments that explicitly invoke gender, but also arguments where “implicit understandings of gender are being invoked and inscribed” (1075). The Women’s War of 1929 and its long-lasting impact push us to recognize that women were critical to the establishment as well as the rejection of British rule. It compels us to reconsider what we know of Nigeria’s path to self-government, and in doing so, it creates a precedent for reconsidering, Scott might say, much of what we know of history, since “history was enacted on the field of gender” (1075).

Of course, the Women's War also begs us to reject the post-colonial tendency to associate female agency with Western influence. It provides an explicit case where women were undermined, not empowered by the advent of European systems of governance. The reason to revisit the Women's War, however, is not limited to attributing blame to Nigeria or Britain, the East or the West for the struggles women have faced through time. It is to recognize the longevity of gendered imbalances in power, imbalances that have lasted for decades if not centuries, imbalances that have transcended race, class, ethnicity, religion and any other distinction we might want to draw.

Section two: The legacy of British indirect rule

As discussed previously, the Women's War of 1929 allowed local men and women to latch on to the classical Igbo principles of egalitarianism and decentralization in their subsequent demands for political reforms. It was these principles that Nigerian leaders emphasized in their gradual journey towards self-government. Sadly, no discussion of Nigerian independence can glaze over the Civil War that began barely four years after.

If we establish a degree of critical distance to the Women's War, we find that the lasting impact it generated has negative connotations too. Just like Nigeria's slow march to independence, the issues that plagued Nigeria immediately after independence and spiraled out of control during the Biafran secession are inextricably linked to principles like egalitarianism and decentralization that defined the Women's War.

The secession of the Igbo dominated southeast from the Hausa heavy North has been widely described as a war fought not by lone militaries but by the masses. According to John de St. Jorre, an English journalist covering the Biafra war for the *Observer*, the war reached down to the grassroots and produced a people's war, not only among the Igbo (or "Biafrans") but also among the Hausa (or "Nigerians"). "It is impossible not to accept that Igbo masses were behind the war. So were, I believe, the Nigerians," St. Jorre said (376). The same kind of egalitarian principles that previously undergirded Azikiwe's demands for representative government by the masses had now produced a war fought by the masses.

The argument for ethnic divisions

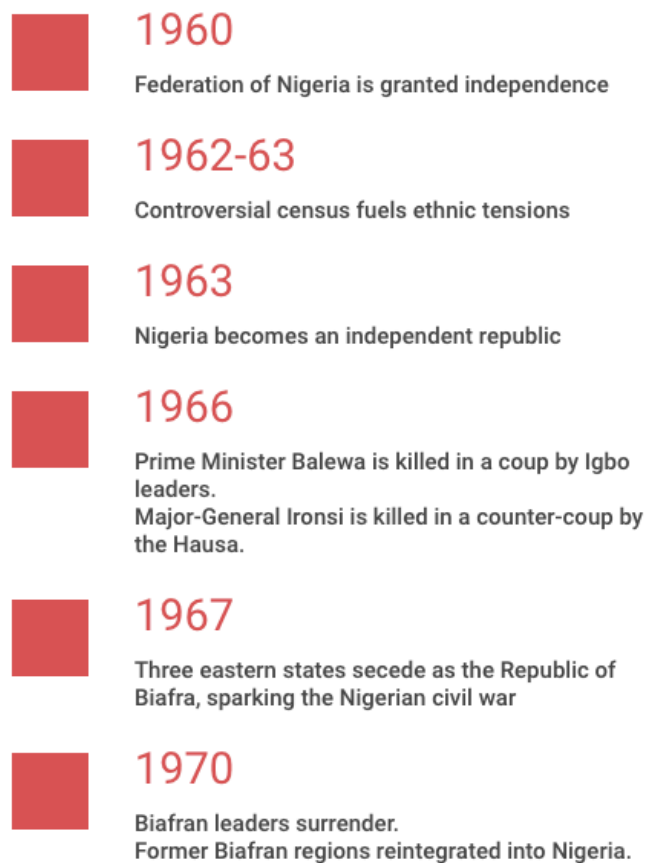


Figure 10: The decade after Nigerian independence

The tripartite federation where the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba could govern their own affairs looked shaky mere days after Nigeria attained full independence in 1963. Census counts from 1962 were rejected in a Hausa versus Igbo power play where each side vied for numerical superiority. Another headcount was ordered in 1963 to establish which group constituted a majority and hence had a greater claim to power. By 1966, military coups and counter-coups had resulted in assassination of political leaders on either side. Thus, the subsequent secession of southeastern Nigeria and the formation of the Igbo state of Biafra in 1967 were far from surprising. I believe the Biafran secession was the culmination of tensions that marked the previous decade, tensions rooted firmly in a need for decentralization of government along ethnic lines.

Awolowo had predicted these sentiments. Ironically, he was neither Igbo nor Hausa but of Yoruba origin. In 1947, he had said, "It would be disastrous to effect a change among the Hausas, simply because the Yorubas and Igbos demand it." He believed that each ethnic group should be steered only by leaders of its own origin who were "qualified by natural rights to lead their fellow nationals into higher political development" (64). If each group was not allowed its own unique administration, Awolowo predicted surplus energy from leaders whose intellect and drive were not being put to use. "Such surplus energy would not be allowed to run to waste. It may be employed to cultivate intense nationalism which knows no moderation," he said (134). Between 1967 and 1970, the overwhelming nationalism he cautioned against had split into two and was being championed on either side by the Igbo and the Hausa. It killed half

a million to a million people (St. Jorre, 412). I believe it was driven by the insecurities Awolowo had articulated twenty years before the advent of the war.

I find it important to determine where these ethnic divides and insecurities first originated. Colonial historians like Perham may argue that they were simply a part of the “pathological condition” that plagued Africans (218). Writing in 1970, Perham argued that the war was caused by the Nigerian inability to be loyal to the core Nigerian state as opposed to a tribe. “The leaders may have designed their own constitution, but the unity and authority upon which it rested had been drawn from Britain... Their loyalty was to the tribe” (232). According to Perham, any illusion of unity across tribes was a product of British mediation. When the British left, Nigeria broke apart predictably.

I feel that ethnic strife was certainly predictable, but not for the reasons Perham put forward. The disintegration of Nigeria was not inevitable because of some innate nature of a native Nigerian. It was the heart-wrenchingly predictable outcome of nearly a century of authoritarian colonial rule enabled by politically enforced ethnic divisions. Any analysis of the Nigerian civil war must begin with a critique of British indirect rule via “customary laws” and “native institutions”.

The utility of ethnic divides for British authorities

The “tribal loyalty” Perham believed to be a distinctly African or Nigerian characteristic, was in fact the artificially erected backbone of British indirect rule. Administrators like Lugard and historians like Perham may have liked to believe that the British Empire was a “school for democracy” for the fragmented tribal simpletons of Nigeria. But let us question that, by rephrasing the terms British administrators liked to use. Let us substitute tribal for “customary” in *customary law*, and tribal for “native” in *native institutions*.¹¹ In actuality, trusteeship relied on (superficial) *tribal laws* enforced through (inefficient) *tribal institutions*. After eighty-five years of constructing and using the concept of the *tribe* to enable indirect rule, the British now conveniently rejected it as an African oddity.

Mamdani has argued that ethnic strife was a critical legacy of the British Empire. He believes that the expulsion of the British from colonies like Nigeria indeed marked a “deracialization” of society. That is, white male men no longer explicitly controlled black or brown masses.

However, deracialization did not equal democracy. In order to be democratic, Mamdani argues that we must “detrribalize”. “Racial domination (was) actually mediated through a variety of ethnically organized local powers,” he explains (8). Note that even as Nigeria attained self-government, Awolowo wanted the Yoruba to be ruled only by the Yoruba, and the Igbo and Hausa wanted numerical majority so they could be the dominant force. These are examples, Mamdani might say, of how “ethnicity was a dimension of both power and resistance, of both

¹¹ Any reference to “tribe” seems to me conceptually similar to any reference to “native authority”, “decentralized government” or “ethnic divisions”. These terms are deeply linked, perhaps even interchangeable.

the problem and the solution” (8). The British politicized these lines to create many fragmented groups so they would not have to deal with an oppressed majority. These groups pushed for deracialization from within their own artificial, “tribal” pockets. They did not transcend ethnic boundaries the British had legitimized for political use.

I feel that Mamdani, in juxtaposing “deracialization” with “detrribalization”, helps us understand the fragility of the newly independent Nigerian state in 1963. I would argue further and say that the failure to democratize Nigeria was rooted not only in the inability to “detrribalize” but also in the tendency to glorify authoritarian government.

The British had chopped up large swaths of land into ethnic divisions in Nigeria and they had done so under the guise of trusteeship. According to the British, the longevity of their stay in Nigeria had to do with an imperative need to teach natives how to self-govern. The assumption was that the authoritarian stranglehold of the British center could coexist harmoniously with lessons of democracy. In January 1957, *The Times* expressed skepticism as to whether African leaders could sustain these teachings (23 January 1957). In doing so, they explicitly acknowledged the aforementioned assumption. “A colonial regime is authoritarian in essence, even though it may be acting as a school for democracy,” they said. “Will British forms of democracy be able to survive in Africa after the British have left?” Twenty years earlier, James had answered their question with a refutation of their assumption that an authoritarian empire can co-exist with any notion of democracy. Speaking of his homeland, James said, “Within a West Indian Island, the old (British) colonial system and democracy are incompatible; one has

to go” (406). In Nigeria, (and any other colony governed by “trusteeship”) the odds were in favor of despotic and not democratic rule. When British despots who were governing Nigeria through ethnic fragmentation departed, Nigerians resorted to searching for a new despot. Federations do not benefit from using evidence of census majority as justification of their existence. Nor do democracies. Authoritarian regimes do. The search for a legitimate center for self-government was thus a search for a new despot, as seen in the “seesaw movement between civilian and military regimes” (Mamdani, 25). Nigeria fell apart when two groups simultaneously decided to seize the center.

Thus, following Nigerian independence in 1963, decentralized government was sidelined as the Igbo and Hausa each strove to replace the British despots with their own ethnic leadership. Egalitarianism meanwhile, seemed of importance only within ethnic groups. The Igbo could be egalitarian in fighting their war against the Hausa and vice versa. Nigerian women in 1929 may have been able to transcend religious and ethnic lines. Nigerian leaders of the 1960s were not as successful.

Where the past and the present collide

Historians and political theorists repeatedly speak of the need to understand the past in order to make better sense of the present, even if the past is painful to revisit. This essay began with the Women’s War of 1929 and ended with the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-70. My journey was ridden with regret for the loss of life that marked each violent epoch. But if our choice is

between analyzing the logic that drives such loss, and remaining oblivious to the ways that the past predicts, defines and perpetuates the present, we might have to choose the former. “The violent conflicts of our age enable our vision to see into the very bones of previous revolutions more easily than heretofore,” said James, writing in 1938 about the Haitian revolution. Seventy-eight years later, his present is serving as our past, but the “revolutions” since appear very fragile. Just as the Women’s War should have led to the full restoration of women’s political inclusion, Nigeria’s movement from colonization to self-government should have marked a radical departure from ethnic divides and authoritarianism. It was a moment of hope that stands in stark contrast to the despair that marked Biafran secession a few years later. Instead of experiencing a radical dawn of democracy, however, Nigeria stayed divided and despotic.

Meanwhile, this was not the only thing that remained constant between the era prior to Nigerian self-government and the era that followed. Although those wielding political power in Nigeria were “deracialized” by the time the civil war occurred, the bullets they were firing still came from Britain. In fact, medical supplies from Britain were still patching up the wounds these bullets enabled. St. Jorre who was in Nigeria during the war explained: “We have had the strange situation in which British weapons were destroying Biafran lives, while British food and medical supplies were being dangerously flown in to preserve them” (241). Psychological trauma that Nigerians associated with British weapons also outlasted the physical presence of colonial authorities in the region. “To be hit by a British bullet or chased away from one’s home by a British shell, produced a deep and lasting psychological wound which often appears to cause more pain than the physical hurt itself,” described St. Jorre (410). I find it important to

acknowledge that the violence of 1929 and of 1967-1970 shared the same brand of weapon and the same psychological trauma, because it symbolizes how the process of decolonization requires so much more than merely expelling physically the colonizer from one's home. To move away from colonial, authoritarian exclusivity, towards democratic, egalitarian inclusivity means recognizing the ways in which we continue to perpetuate colonial principles of government.

The world we live in today may seem like a very different place as compared to what existed in 1929 or 1970 when these wars ended and their final death tolls were collated. But the creation of post-colonial nation-states is a recent phenomenon. As Cooper puts it, most of the states that exist today are creations of the last sixty to seventy years (91). It may feel natural for the legacy of a coercive empire that lasted centuries to remain latent among us, considering the recentness of our modern international order. But that is no reason to be slow or complacent in our rejection of overwhelmingly negative colonial legacies. The things that changed between 1929 and 1963, or for that matter, between 1963 and 2016 should not be our greatest concern. What matter the most are the things that stayed the same and continued to hurt us. These are the latent demons we have yet to recognize and discard.

Bibliography for the conclusion

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