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The Aba Women’s War of 1929 in Eastern Nigeria as anti-colonial protest

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History reveals that women play significant roles in the development of their society, and this is certainly true of an uprising of women in Nigeria in the early twentieth century. The Aba Women’s War of 1929, recorded in British annals as the Aba Women’s Riot, portrays a “well organized and successful protest against the imperialist unconstitutional imposition of taxation on women in the Eastern part of Nigeria.”¹ The great depression of Europe, which had already manifested in the late 1920s, had severe economic implications for the peasant economy in Eastern Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. This included a register of every male through a 1927 census, followed a year later by direct taxes collected for the first time throughout Eastern Nigeria, then known as the southeastern provinces. The Aba Women’s War took place in those areas in the eastern region that can be described as the palm belt region.

Palm oil production in this region had, to a large extent, been within the orbit of women, even though men owned and controlled the land. Mba asserts:

Most of Igbo and Ibibio land constituted what is known as the “palm belt” area. Until the trade with Europe in palm produce developed in the early 19th century, the production of palm oil was carried out entirely by women and was used principally for immediate household consumption. The women were free to pick palm fruits wherever they found them. However, once palm produce became a major export, it came to be regarded as a man’s product since it could now be exchanged for men’s goods, such as guns and spirits. The ownership of palm trees was vested in the male landowners and harvesting was strictly regulated. The women still largely carried out the actual extraction of the oil and sold the oil in local markets, but the men took over the long-distance and external trade in palm oil.²

The implication is that the taxation of men, which began in 1927, was gradually affecting households that relied on palm oil. This manifested in the gradual decline in palm oil prices beginning from this era. Korieh paints a picture of the development during this era as follows:

Women termed the existing tax policy unfair considering the effects of the depression on local producers. The discontent began to extend to another major issue of relevance to rural peasants – the price of export produce and increasing inflation. In the late 1920s, the entire
world economy was in a slump due to the great depression. The depression caused a myriad of economic problems, including low prices for palm produce.  

Under this economic hardship, women were already resentful. Besides that, they were also involved in the palm kernel business during the colonial period. The economic gains and losses of that season affected them directly and in many ways. On top of this, additional problems emerged following the absence of the district officer of Bende division of Owerri province, A. L. Weir, from his duty post. Weir went on leave and handed his duties over to Captain J. Cook. After reviewing the 1927 census, which he considered to be inaccurate and incomplete, Cook decided to establish nominal rolls to obtain accurate information on the numbers of men, women, children, and livestock in the Oloko native court area. When the women learned of this, they began to suspect that the colonial government would soon begin to tax women. Sylvia Leith-Ross captured the mood of the women as follows: “they were seriously perturbed. We depend on our husbands, we cannot buy food or clothes ourselves and how shall we get money to pay tax.” Notwithstanding these challenges, Captain Cook ordered Chief Okugo (a warrant chief in Oloko) on November 18, 1929, to start counting. Without delay, Chief Okugo employed the services of a schoolteacher, Mark Emeriuwa, who was delighted with the offer. The remainder of this chapter will explore how these incidents unfolded, leading to the Women’s War and the post-independence legacy of that war.

Oloko Census

Chief Okugo knew that conducting a census would receive stiff opposition and thus did not want to be directly involved. Before Emeriuwa embarked on the census exercise in Oloko, one Chief Ananaba of Umuala in Oloko had announced to his village that the government had asked for the enumeration of women to tax them. He reminded his community of how the taxation of men had been preceded by a census the year before. Soon, the women had spread rumors of possible taxation of women in Owerri province and beyond. They then waited for an opportunity to make their grievances known to the colonial government.

On November 23, 1929, Mark Emeriuwa went into the compound of Ojim to conduct a census as directed. He met Nwanyeruwa, a woman of Ngwa ancestry and the wife of the late Ojim. Emeriuwa asked Nwanyeruwa the numbers of her sheep and goats as well as people in her household. This led to an exchange of words between them. Thereafter, Nwanyeruwa attended a meeting of women in session in Oloko and informed them that the plan to tax women had come to reality. Immediately, the women moved to Emeriuwa’s house to ask why women should be counted. Those notified summoned other women by sending fresh-folded palm leaves to them both in Oloko and beyond, requesting them to show solidarity with their struggle against the taxation of women. Furthermore, the women went to Chief Okugo Okezie to make enquiries and were told by the chief, albeit sarcastically, that women should pay tax. He ordered his servants to drive the women away. These events occurred between November 23 and 24, 1929.

Consequently, by November 25, 1929, women began to “sit on” Okugo, demanding his resignation as warrant chief. “Sitting on a man,” as demonstrated by Allen, was a strategy used by women to compel men to give in to the decision of the women. It followed this pattern: scantily clad adult women armed with palm fronds or green leaves, such as cassava leaves, would assemble in the premises of the person they had issues with. Comfortably seated, they would start to sing songs that expressed their grievances and demands, as well as others that ridiculed their target. This continued until their demands were met, sometimes after a day.
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or two or more. Should this exceed one day, the women might disperse late at night and reconverge early the next morning. The sheer number of scantily clad adult women assembled against any man or group of men, as the case might be, was unnerving. For as long as women were sitting on a man, they simultaneously did not continue with their family and marital functions. This would put pressure on other men as well and indirectly force them to wade into the conflict. The men, thus mobilized, would throw in their weight to get the offender to acquiesce to the demands of the women. Once satisfied, the women would disperse to their homes. “Sitting on a man” was women’s soft-power diplomacy against patriarchy in precolonial and colonial Igboland.

Thus, the following day, a deputation of women came to Bende, led by Ikonnia and Nwannedia of Umuigwu in Oloko, to demand the immediate removal of Chief Okugo. On November 27, another deputation of women from Oloko came to Bende. These female emissaries from Aba, Owerri, and Ikot Ekpene assembled in Okugo’s house. Meanwhile, on November 26, 1929, in an attempt to drive the women away from Okugo’s square to the market place, a policeman, Obasi Ogu, was knocked down and received a blow on the arm. Finding himself on the ground, he fired his rifle in the air, supposedly in self-defense.14 When Captain J. Cook visited Oloko on November 27, 1929, he met about 1000 women in Oloko market place. According to him, the women came from Oloko, Ayaba, and Umuaja court areas. Meanwhile, he visited Ezeala Amongwu and the compound heads, Wolu and Wakama. Cook observed that Chief Okugo had not consulted these authorities before initiating the counting. He thus ordered the arrest of Chief Okugo, who was charged to court accordingly. By November 29, 1929, when he left Oloko, the women had not dispersed.15

J. N. Hill took over from Cook as district officer of Bende Division, Owerri province, in the first week of December 1929. He thus inherited the responsibility of controlling the women’s group. Indeed, the colonial government blamed Cook for fueling the crisis, which he had triggered through Chief Okugo. The official report reads:

I think Capt. J. Cook acted very unwisely when he sent a message that nominal rolls should be prepared, giving the names of adult males by families, the number of wives possessed by each male, the number of children, goats and sheep.16

Hill gave the leadership of the women’s group a fair hearing and encouraged them to articulate their grievances. This they did, listing among other things the illegal collection of money for dowry and building a house as directed by the district officer, extortion in terms of collecting yam seedlings on behalf of the district officer only for him to plant them himself, and other illegalities.17 The litigation against Chief Okugo lasted for several days. This probably encouraged the spread of the revolt, since the women were generally not sure of the outcome of the court judgment and were not prepared to exercise patience any longer. On December 3, 1929, Okugo was found guilty of two charges: spreading news likely to cause alarm and physical assault on women demonstrators. He was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment, while Emeriuwa, on February 27, 1930, was sentenced to three months.18

Hill, to a large extent, understood the problems of the women demonstrators from working closely with their leaders – Nwanyeruwa, Ikonnia, Nwannedia, and Nwugo. Without any formal education, these women leaders were intelligent, diplomatic, and brave.19 Okugo’s conviction did not end the protests. In Umuahia, on December 4, 1929, women pressed on against low prices for palm produce. The Oloko women leaders disassociated themselves from this, promising Hill that they would help to stop it. Ikonnia and Nwannedia convinced Umuahia women that protests were not the best solution for controlling prices. Both the
police commissioner, Mr. King, and Hill, the district officer, were impressed with the women leaders’ efforts. The results these women leaders achieved earned them recognition as apostles of non-violent struggle.

Aba and the battle

Noah argues for the need to dismantle colonial stereotypes because the British-styled “riot” was indeed a war; moreover, he insists that the event should be named after a town, either the town where the event originated or the one that had the highest casualties. In his words:

The terminology surrounding the events of the Aba riots has been wrongly perpetuated that a revisit is compelling. For it should be stated that the Aba Riot is a misnomer … The “Aba Women’s Riot” was a phenomenon which was neither Aba in origin nor in nature. It was a well-planned uprising by women with known and identifiable goals and leaders. As noted by earlier writers on the subject, a riot suggests an uncontrolled, irrational action, involving violence to property or persons or both. This is why this pejorative term must be changed because it has now become clear that the women’s war was better organized and executed beyond the level of a riot.

Umoren agrees, arguing that the incident was not confined to Aba. Indeed, the disturbance was greater in the Annang and Ibibio villages of Utu Etim Ekpo, Ika, Ikot Ekpene, Abak, Itu, Ikono, Okopedi, and Egwanga. These were the real theaters of war, where about 58 women died, with 50 wounded, whereas in Aba, only two died. He puts forward that the event should more appropriately be called “Annang-Ibibio Women’s War,” as indigenes of those areas called it; they still refer to it as Ekong Iban (Women’s War).

Notwithstanding these views, scholars have attempted to justify the use of the nomenclature “Aba Women’s War of 1929.” Leith-Ross privileged Aba because it was an important trading center on the rail line. To Gailey,

Aba in 1929 was a moderately large town, remarkably well served by communication links. Four major roads, one each from Owerri, Ikot-Ekpene, Opobo, and Asa led into Aba. Besides, it was on the railroad that connects Port Harcourt with the north. Therefore, Aba acted as a lodestone for rumours and was easily accessible to people from all over Owerri Province.

From December 8, 1929, women began to assemble in Aba. An estimated 10,000 women from Aba township, Ngwa, Ndoki, and Asa villages, scantily dressed, girded with green leaves and carrying sticks, gathered and satirized chiefs, court clerks, and court messengers with songs. Ferguson’s eyewitness account shows that the riot in Aba started on December 10, 1929, at about 5:30 p.m. British colonial officials – Messrs F.H. Woodrow, Bullock, and Lendrum – were attacked on their way back from Umuahia. Around 11:00 p.m. that night, women attacked European quarters but were dispersed by four rounds of revolver gunshots.

The following day, December 11, 1929, women resumed their attack on European quarters until Mr. Trovey fired a shot. Ferguson recalls that by December 12, 1929, the number of women demonstrators had increased to about 12,000. According to him, women destroyed government offices and station magistrates and were on the lookout for European women to harm, since they alleged that these women did not pay tax. Continuing his testimony, Ferguson reported that a peaceful protest was scheduled at Ekeopara Square, Aba, on December 13, 1929. However,
Dr. Hunter, a medical officer, was returning to the African Hospital with a nurse, Miss Buist, when he met a crowd of women who threw sticks and stones at them. In trying to avoid them, he knocked down two women. This heightened the fury of the mob, leading to the wounding of Miss Buist.

The crowd broke into Barclays Bank, where they tore all the papers. In the absence of troops, they looted the bank, and efforts by colonial officials to pacify the crowd failed. 

Nwaguru recorded that the riot proclamation was read first at Aba Bridge to some 4000–5000 women, and after a reasonable interval, the police with the butts of their rifles, assisted by a dozen Europeans, drove the women for about a mile up the Ogbor Hill. The women re-assembled an hour later but were again dispersed by a more determined charge from security officials. Similar action was taken on the Aba and Owerri roads with little resistance from the women. On December 14, 1929, normalcy returned to Aba.

Operations outside Aba

The incident in Aba triggered a series of protests in other locations among women who could not travel to Aba. While the protest occurred at Aba, there were similar revolts in the Imo River, Okpala, Owerrinta, Nguru Ngor, Mbawsi, and Ayaba court areas. Their grievances were similar to those earlier listed by leaders of the revolt: taxation on women, low prices of produce, hatred for court members, abuses by agents of the Eastern Nigeria Marketing Board, and high taxation of the men. On December 13, 1929, Captain Nunns, with a European inspector and 16 police constables, went to Imo River. On their way back, they discovered men looting in Omoba, armed with machetes. They fired at them, wounding one.

From this, it can be deduced that women did not carry out the operations alone but rather, received help from men. However, in an attempt to discredit the women's agency, one of the reports claimed as follows: "An interesting feature of the Owerri District officers report was that the movement was being fostered by men in women's cloth." This development, according to the report, was more pronounced in the Okpala, Nguru, and Ngor areas, where there was heavy looting and destruction of courthouses. There was a report of women who mugged Ihube women on their way to Okegwe market. Meanwhile, in Mbawsi, 19 looters were arrested and relieved of the items they had looted. There was also a report of an attack by women on Chief Oparacheke of Olakwo for not supporting their protest. After failed attempts, the women recruited armed men to Oparacheke's house, but two military platoons led by Captain Nunny were already on the ground to defend him. Four men were killed during the attack.

Military patrols were dispatched to turbulent areas: the northern patrol went to Nguru, two platoons to Umukonshe, and the southern patrol to Umuopara, Eberi, and Azumini, among others. The military dimension of the women's war came with the resolution of the Lieutenant-General of the Southern Provinces, Mr. C.W. Alexander, with residents of Owerri and Calabar provinces, and Lieutenant Colonel Currant, the commander of the troops in the disturbed area, to declare a Peace Preservation Ordinance in Owerri province from December 13 and Calabar from December 14, 1929. This was followed by the Collective Punishment Ordinance. Under the Peace Preservation Ordinance, district officers and police officials utilized powers they did not ordinarily possess to deal with individuals and village groups involved in the protest against the British colonial government. The Collective Punishment Ordinance was described as follows:

Under the Collective Punishment Ordinance, levied on village inhabitants who may have had nothing to do with the disturbances, authorities imposed exorbitant fines amounting...
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to six times the annual tax assessment of a given settlement on villages, expecting them to be paid within 24 hours; failure to make the payment might result in the razing of the village. So disproportionate were the punishments meted out that the members of the second commission of inquiry protested that “the amount of burning was excessive.” British efforts, which entailed killing and wounding Igbo men and women who persisted in their protests, only brought sufficient peace to the southeastern territories that the British felt they could retract the Peace Preservation Ordinance a year later, on February 1931.36

Colonial rule was military rule in the real sense, and thus, the developments concerning women’s protests that had spread to the Ibibio and Annang areas invited military solutions. The revolts in Aba between December 14 and 16, 1929, spread like wildfire to Abak, Utu Etim Ekpo, Ikot Ekpene, Uzo Usu, and Opobo.37 Immediately, the colonial officials began a sensitization of the people, most importantly women, whom they assured that they would not be taxed. Not sure what their fate would be, the colonial government removed valuables, including money, from the native courts at Ika, Utu Etim Ekpo, and Ukanafun. Women succeeded in cutting the telephone lines connecting Itu and Ikot Ekpere, while in Utu Etim Ekpo native court area, they burned the government buildings, houses belonging to court clerks, and the factory of the Nigeria Produce Company Limited.38 At Abak, police and military detachments, led by Captain Ford, commissioner of police, and the district officer for Abak, asked women not to cross the line drawn by the police. An attempt to do so resulted in the deaths of about six women. It was actually claimed that more than six women died in that confrontation, since about 12 rounds of bullets were fired.39 Still, in Itu district, on December 15, 1929, about 1000 women blocked the road. After pleading with them to no avail, Reverend James Ballantyne convinced the district officer to send out about 200 leprosy patients to disperse them. In a bid to avoid being infected, the protesting women fled.40

On December 16, 1929, women numbering over 2000 converged at Egwanga Beach (also called Opobo and recently, Ikot Abasi) with women leaders from Opobo, Bonny, Andoni, Kwa, Ogoni, and Nkoro present. Lieutenant J. N. Hill had arrived earlier with an army platoon from the 3rd Battalion, a machine gun, and about 32 policemen. Women who were becoming impatient while waiting for documents that would indicate the colonial government’s unwillingness to tax women and acquiescence with their other demands started beating their pestles on the bamboo fence of the district officer’s residence. Some even attempted to climb it. Enraged, Hill shot one of the leaders, Adiaha Edem, and commanded the troops to open fire. Twenty-six women were killed, 8 drowned, and 31 were wounded.41

The actual number of deaths from the Aba Women’s War is still subject to intense demographic scrutiny. Isichei gave the official list as 55 women killed, 32 of them at Opobo, and 50 wounded, 31 at Opobo.42 Crowther suggests 32 people killed and 31 wounded. With respect to Calabar province, Afigbo summarized the casualties as follows: 32 killed in Opobo and 31 wounded; 3 killed in Abak, none wounded; 18 killed in Utu Etim Ekpo and 19 wounded.43

The colonial government’s record of casualties, presented by Orugbani, claims that 32 women died: 12 from Opobo, 9 from Nkoro, 5 from Ogoni, and 2 from Andoni. Additional casualties were from Lagos (1) and Annang (2).44 To Orugbani, this means that all but three women on the official casualty list were from the coastal section of Eastern Nigeria. No other area suffered so much, yet the incident is popularly called the Aba Women’s War. It was argued that with a casualty list of 31 wounded – Opobo (13), Andoni (1), Bonny (1), Nkoro (8), and Ogoni (5) – it is most likely that the number of women killed in the entire struggle that occurred in the palm belt region of Eastern Nigeria would have comprised a far higher casualty figure than reported,
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perhaps in the hundreds.\(^4\) Even by this period in Nigeria’s history, usage of official casualty records was politicized because of its strong impact on shaping public opinion.

Whatever else, the women’s protest that turned into a war against the colonial institution attracted inquiry into the obnoxious practices inherent in the warrant chief system in colonial Eastern Nigeria. Incidentally, the first commission of inquiry to investigate the loss of lives was led by the administrator of the Colony of Lagos, Mr. Gray, and the crown counsel, Mr. Birrel. This commission exonerated those responsible for the fatalities recorded among protesting women.\(^4\) Dissatisfaction with the outcome of the work of this commission led to the setting up of another committee in February 1930. Members of the committee included the Chief Justice, Sir Donald Kingdom (as chairman), Mr. W. E. Hunt, a senior resident, Mr. Graham Paul, an unofficial European lawyer, Sir Kitoyi Ajaka, and Mr. Eric Moore – both African barristers – and Mr. Osborne. Messrs A. E. F. Murray and F. B. Carr were the secretaries.\(^4\) The outcome of their report led to the reforms that brought about the native administration to replace the village assemblies. This incapacitated women, because it encouraged excessive masculine domination. An estimated £60,000 worth of property was reportedly destroyed, and this was repaid through taxation.\(^4\) In effect, in conceding to the demands of women, the colonial administration did not abandon their original plan to tax their subjects but found a convenient way to implement it in the short term. Eventually, formal taxation of women commenced in 1956.\(^4\)

Conclusion

The Aba Women’s War, one of a series of anti-colonial demonstrations by women in Southern Nigeria, was among the early manifestations of twentieth-century proto-feminist movements in Africa. It demonstrated women’s indirect but active participation in the colonial experiment. Women’s agency, until then ignored by British colonial officials, was thereafter acknowledged. And in spite of the punitive measures enacted to moderate women, their efforts in that struggle forced open the doors of local administration to female colonial citizens of Eastern Nigeria. Some were admitted as members of the new native courts. In Umuakpo native court, for instance, 3 women were incorporated amidst 27 male members; while in Nguru Mbaise native court, 1 woman joined 13 men. Similar concessionary appointments were made across the region. Not ending there, the Aba Women’s War became a reference point used to rally women in Southern Nigeria during the anti-colonial struggle of the 1940s and 1950s as well as in the struggles for women’s rights in post-independence Nigeria.\(^5\) In all, the Women’s War remains a significant landmark event in the fight against masculine oppression in Nigeria. It cleared the path for a post-independent feminist movement in the country.

Notes


15 NAE, “Women’s Movement in Oloko.”

16 NAE, “Disturbances by Females in Bende Division.”

17 NAE, “Disturbances by Females in Bende Division.”

18 Gailey, *The Road to Aba*, 111.


20 NAE, The District Officer Bende to the Resident Aba “Women’s Movement Owerri Province” 20 December 1929, C./53/1929, Umprof 1/5/5.


26 Gailey, *The Road to Aba*, 117.


31 NAE, “Report on Events and Happenings.”

32 NAE, “Report on Events and Happenings.”

33 NAE, “Report on Events and Happenings.”


38 Akpan and Ekpo, *The Women’s War of 1929*, 34.


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48 Oriji, “Igbo Women from 1929–1960.”

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