
WOMEN AND POLITICAL MILITANCY IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

Obioma M. Iheduru

Fort Valley State University

"A woman suffers long. A woman is like a pot [sitting on a fire] that at long last boils over and drowns the fire that is making it boil. Ndom went to war...because the proverb says that if the main debtor cannot pay the debt then the person who stood surety for him has to pay it."¹

Women's marginalization in the post independence African state has, in the last two decades, become the subject of intense academic, national, and international discourse. Similarly, various solutions have been proffered at every level. For instance, the international women's conference in Nairobi, Kenya in 1988 recommended, through *The United Nations Forward Looking Strategies Accord of Women*,² that women should have more representation in politics and policy making to reflect not only their numbers in the population but also to reverse decades of "gender discrimination" and "invisibility." In 1994, an international women's conference in Beijing reiterated these points and called for elaborate policies to enhance the status of women. As one observer has suggested, this could be achieved through the demolition of the very "systems of values [in African societies] that perceive women as subordinate to men" and that invariably result in gender stereotyping and negative portrayal of women.³

At the national level, African countries have embarked on policies to elevate the status of women. Countries such as Cameroon, Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya among others have established special "women bureaus" that ostensibly work with women organizations to address gender inequities of the past. In the past decade, therefore, a few more women have been appointed to positions of political responsibility and have come into the limelight in national affairs as ministers, ambassadors, and elected officials in their own right. In Uganda, for instance, after the dictatorship of Idi Amin in 1979, the new administration under the National Resistance Movement addressed the problem of gender inequality along with other social issues that threatened the women's "survivalist strategies" which were in themselves a reaction to Amin's biased and repressive policies.⁴ So while African countries' administrations are now making appreciable efforts to ensure that women are treated equally and fairly, current scholarship on

African, and by implication Nigerian, women tends to be immersed in what has been called "Western oriented discourse on the marginalization of [African] women" that does not take into account the "significant statements about the African woman [expressed] in vernacular cultures and traditions."⁵ These statements are important for at least two reasons. They are made by African women themselves through their writings contrary to the viewpoints of the "outside" observer. Secondly, they derive from a particular world view whose cultural uniqueness sets it apart, and distinguishes it from western ideas of women's emancipation and subordination.

In this article, I use the case of the Aba Women's War of 1929 in southeastern Nigeria to analyze the ways in which women challenged the male-centric nature of the political and economic systems in southeastern Nigerian societies during the colonial period. It will be shown that Nigerian women have, when the need presented itself, taken up the gauntlet to challenge and change the political *status quo* in both the traditional political system and the so-called modern (European) administrative system, of which the British system of Indirect Rule was a scion. The fearless determination of the women of southeastern Nigeria in the face of severe colonial domination and exploitation clearly illustrates Felix Ekechi's apt assertion that "under certain circumstances women have forcefully challenged not only male but also colonial authority, sometimes successfully."⁶ First of all, let us review the gender debate on the African woman and the various forms it has taken. Thereafter, the discussion will focus specifically on the position and role of women in the Igbo and other societies of southeastern Nigeria prior to colonialism. The ways in which colonialism exacerbated these gender inequalities will then be analyzed. The imposition of direct taxation on southeastern Nigeria in 1927, as an outgrowth of colonial rule simply provided the flashpoint for the venting of pent-up grievances that the women of this area had against the colonial administration.

THE WOMEN'S EQUALITY DEBATE

Scholars continue to note that regardless of any gains, African "women (still) are not equal beneficiaries with men of the fruits of [the] so-called modernization and development," and that this makes the prospects for women ominous in most areas outside education, regardless of the official declarations of policy intent and practice.⁷ The peripheralization of women is fostered by the forms of gender inequality in Africa in the colonial and later period of independence which inevitably reflect European influences on the status of African women. This interpretation has resulted in the

(mis)perception that women are indifferent to the political realities around them and hence cannot participate in politics. The empirical evidence available in both the pre-colonial and the colonial periods apparently suggests otherwise and in the process shows that women always participated, albeit inconsistently, in the political affairs of African societies. As April Gordon notes, "some patterns of gender relationships were prevalent, if not universal in Africa before the period of European penetration. Politically, for instance, African women in most societies have been influential political actors in informal ways."⁸

Examples abound in the various monarchies of avenues through which female political behaviors were exercised, but such were clearly absent in the decentralized-state societies of southeastern Nigeria that lacked monarchical governmental systems. Women warriors were said to have fought for the Fon (King) of Dahomey, while in other cases they ruled their own kingdoms as did Queen Nzinga in Angola and Queen Amina in the seven Hausa States. In the 15th century, Amina built many city states of the *Hausa bokwai* (meaning Hausa proper) and the boundaries of her kingdom extended as far south as Nupe on the Niger.⁹ Her kingdom declined in the 19th century under incompetent and harsh male rulers, only to be conquered by the Fulani "messianic" jihadists of that century in northern Nigeria.

Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, it has been noted that women played a prominent part in the coronation and installation of the *oba* (king) and in the overall administration of the affairs of the kingdom. In Old Oyo empire, where the *Alaafin* (the *oba*) ruled, the *iya afin* who was a priestess of the god *Orisa* both in the palace and the town, ranked higher than the *oyomesi*, the next in line to the *Alaafin*. In Egbaland, also a Yoruba kingdom, women were members of the revered *Ogboni* society, which balanced power between the sacred chiefs and the people. From Oyo, where the title of *Iyalode* originated, to Ibadan, Ife, and Abeokuta, where it was later adopted, the title was bestowed on women who made outstanding contributions to the economic, political and military progress of the towns. The case of the second *Iyalode of Ibadan*, named Efunsetan (c. 1867), was particularly significant in that "she was one of the few women in Southern Nigeria before 1900, to have engaged in open political opposition to the indigenous government."¹⁰ Madam Tinubu was, about the same time (c. 1865), elevated as the *iyalode* of all Egbaland, in recognition of her contributions and support in the successful prosecution of the Egba-Dahomey war in 1864.

In fact, a long line of female *obas* and *bales* (subordinate or provincial chieftains) both within the larger Oyo kingdom and also in the smaller prin-

cipalities such as Epe, has been identified in the kingdoms of the Yorubas.¹¹ This sprinkling of female rulership in most of these Yoruba kingdoms prior to the advent of colonialism suggests other societies might share such political culture and organization. However, this was not the case. In the Benin kingdom women were never considered for high political office except the accidental case of *iyaoba* (queen mother) Idia, who set up her own court at Urelu outside of Benin city contrary to the customs of the time.¹²

However, this recognition of political activity by southern Nigerian women is not un-ambiguous. Nina Mba has suggested that "role differentiation based on sex" existed to varying degrees in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial societies of southeastern Nigeria, but it should be added that gender categorizations must be placed within the context of women's continuing struggle for a role in the political system. On the other hand, women's participation could be interpreted as a meritorious recognition by the menfolk of a woman's political acumen that deserved to be utilized and honored. Nina Mba further argues that "historically, in the period prior to colonialism, women in southeastern Nigeria had been inconsequential in matters of politics in their societies whereas in the monarchist states they had been recognized either as a result of their aristocratic connections or merit."¹³ Historically then, the Igbos and their neighbors had no place in their polities for female participation.

The political role of women of southeastern Nigeria was further diminished with the advent of colonialism with its Victorian biases against women. In the colonial administration, the British appointed only men to overseas service not because Africa, or any other part of the empire, was uncharted territory and thus too dangerous for women. This policy was simply based on the stereotypical perception of women by British society as being unequal to men and therefore incapable of the demands of colonial administration. After all, the same women were in the colonial outposts as wives and scholars. Once in Nigeria, the colonial officers applied the same reasoning and continued the trend of appointing only men as their local intermediaries in the indirect administration of the vast areas they had "pacified." The many indigenous people appointed included warrant chiefs (what the British perceived to be traditional rulers), court clerks, interpreters, and court messengers (corrupted to *kotima* by the natives to demonstrate the strangeness of the new administrative structure). Unlike traditional monarchical African societies, women were completely excluded from the colonial political arena. The political situation of women in southeastern Nigeria became even more marginal. Their roles in society became more repro-

ductive and social and their balancing role in local politics disappeared. Moreover, when cash crops like palm produce (palm oil and palm kernels) were introduced into the area, it was the men who were encouraged to cultivate them, thereby giving them the economic power that later translated into political power. This also followed the patrilineal pattern of inheritance that is prevalent in southeastern Nigeria. Worse still, early education in the colonies was aimed at training only boys for the colonial civil service. Colonial attitudes towards women meshed with "traditionally inhibiting cultural factors"¹⁴ to channel girls into domestic vocations. Nonetheless, as the 1929 women's war reveals women did demonstrate, as in the pre-colonial periods of the African kingdoms that they had the political clout to challenge and modify political arrangements that did not serve them well.

THE POLITICAL MILIEU OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA, PRE-1900

Several scholarly accounts attribute the causes of the Women's War of 1929 to the rumored taxation of women. There were, however, economic and cultural issues that contributed to the war, and which need to be considered for a complete picture of the precipitators of the crisis. The women's war was the logical culmination of pent-up opposition to several injustices and abuses arising from colonial rule, and more immediately Indirect Rule with its warrant chiefs, *kotimas*, and the native court system. It is appropriate here to discuss the background to the Womens' War of 1929 and the characteristics of the British colonial system of Indirect Rule, for the socio-political conditions of southern Nigeria were diametrically different from the new political arrangement that was imposed on Nigeria as a whole after 1900. The variations in the political expectations of the British and the southeastern Nigerians shaped the latter's opposition to Indirect Rule and its many ramifications.

Southeastern Nigeria is peopled by the Igbos, Ibibios, Ogojas, and Ijos. Most of these ethnic groups are organized by clans, and among the Igbos, the largest of the ethnic groups in the area, a popular saying has it that "*Igbo enwe eze*" (literally meaning the Igbos have no kings).¹⁵ The political organization of the Igbos revolves around the *Ohaneze* concept which contends that decision making on public issues is a joint responsibility of the people (the *oha*) and their leader (the *eze*). In order words, whoever was made leader or king was not conferred with absolute authority. While this description fits the mainland Igbos, the riverine Igbos have monarchs. These distinctive politics were determined by geographical and ecological cir-

cumstances rather than ethnic differences, and have been aptly characterized as "democratic village republic" and "constitutional village monarchy" respectively.¹⁶ This structural delineation is invariably associated with the Igbo political philosophy and world view that affects the size of their political units-- village and "town states."¹⁷ Within the Igbo village republics, women had virtually no political role but could out of necessity, form an association of *umuada* consisting of people of the same natal home villages married in a particular village. Crucially, where the 1929 women's war is concerned this allowed the women to maintain a steady contact between the separated villages of marriage and descent. In their marital villages women maintained mutual aid associations (the *ndom alu alu*, or *oha ndom* or *amara nwanne*), membership in which was usually compulsory, to protect their interests in their marital villages, as well as help in the enforcement of village customs and traditions.¹⁸

The monarchic Igbos on the other hand, retained a political role for the women. The political head of the women was known as the *omu* (queen) in Onitsha, Asaba, Osommari, Illah, and in other cross-Niger or Anioma Igbo areas. The *omu* was usually a woman of great wealth, authority, and 'personality.' In Onitsha, it has been reported that the last *omu*, Nwagboka was a signatory to the treaty of October 9, 1884, between Queen Victoria and Onitsha. In 1886, she challenged the *obi* (Anazonwu) over an unidentified but surely important political issue and won. In anger, the *obi* allowed the title to lapse after Nwakoba's death. A similar political organization existed among the Ibibios and the Ijos though this was to change later with the trans-Atlantic slave trade that led to the development of the house system that was non-lineage based. Yet, women in these areas, like women in republican Igboland lacked political authority or functions and only acted with regard to social and cultural issues.¹⁹

Once colonial administration further removed women from the political arena, the roles that they played during colonialism assumes a highly significant dimension. When warrant chiefs, who had no connections to the established traditional political authority of southeastern Nigerian, were indiscriminately appointed over these largely democratic peoples, the idea of subordinating their direct democracy to the rulership of these new (and alien) organs of government was revolting to the Igbo in general and to women especially. These chiefs evidently acted in flagrant disregard and disrespect of the people's rights and of the institutions of which they were scions. They extorted cash, took bribes, told bare-faced lies to bolster their egos before the local people and enhance their authority before the colonialists. They even snatched women from the local community much

to the consternation of the local towns people. There is the story of a warrant chief in Umuezeala in the Umuduru native court area of Owerri Province who was said to have acquired several of his many wives by simply commanding the women to abandon their husbands and come to live with him. If either the woman or her husband refused or challenged the chief's orders they would be threatened, beaten or falsely accused in the native court and jailed. The chief had to have his way since he was perceived as the local representative of the monarch in England and had the coercive might of the crown behind him. The visor cap that he wore, embossed with the British crown, was his symbol of authority.²⁰ The chiefs were considered to be in an esoteric association with the white colonial officers. Given that they were the ones that had acquired a smattering knowledge of English, the language of administration, their presumed and actual importance and authority simply overwhelmed the local people into submission in most matters. In order to fully understand the corruption, abuse and injustice of the warrant chief administrative system in colonial Nigeria between 1900 and 1960, the British policy of Indirect Rule along with the Warrant Chief and the native court systems that form the basis of its intricate administrative structure need further elaboration.

POLITICAL CHANGES IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA: FROM THE INDIGENOUS TO THE COLONIAL SYSTEM

For the Igbo as well as the other ethnic groups in southeastern Nigeria, the largest political unit was the village. A clan comprised several villages similar to a federation of states. Within this federally structured political system, the subordinate governmental units that comprised the village had the residual political authority. These units, known as wards, were further sub-divided into ward-sections or sub-lineages where individuals could trace their origins to a common ancestor through whom further genealogical roots could be traced down to the founder of the village.²¹ The sub-lineage council, composed of elders, titled men, and other men of opulence and eloquence was the main decision making unit. This meant that within the village, power was diffused within the lineage groups and the delegation of decision making to the elder members of the kinship group along with a sprinkling of merit position holders, ensured the democratic legitimization of decisions. Men of means often found a place in these councils too, but lacked the right to take independent or unilateral action outside the conclave of acknowledged representatives of the people. As Simon Ottenberg has observed, among the Afikpo Igbo "the decision and ultimate authority rest in the hands of the group as a whole."²²

Throughout southeastern Nigeria, great similarities to the Igbo political structure existed and in some cases a uniformity of these units of political organization. For all intents and purposes, the village constituted the political unit while the decentralized political arrangement facilitated decisions being made according to each unit's needs. As Anene has noted, there is a similarity between the "manner in which the I[g]bo communities organized their political life" and that of the other ethnic groups --Ibibios, Ijos, and the Ogojas-- in the area.²³ In more encompassing language, and based on his anthropological studies in this area, Jones corroborates this observation in his findings that "whether in Ogoja, Rivers, I[g]bo, or Ibibio Provinces, the government of every local community consisted of a federation of equivalent segments."²⁴

British colonialism paid scant attention to the implications of superimposing the centralized political institutions of an alien country over these federal arrangements. In what was to later become a handbook of indirect rule, Charles Jefferies in *The Colonial Empire and International Civil Service* distilled the quintessence of the Indirect Rule that generally undergirded the British approach. Succinctly, indirect rule was regarded as more properly native local government, where "the function of the British colonial administrator [was] rather to guide by influence and advice than rule by direct command." Often, and in most administrative manuals, colonial officers were admonished to make a constant effort to seek out and develop the best in the natural institutions of the people themselves.²⁵ The other guiding philosophy behind Indirect Rule was the thinking that the colonies were not a part of Britain, but rather a part of the British Empire. There was an understanding *ab initio* that some day these colonies would be self-governing political entities; hence, whatever policies were adopted were made in the interest of the colonies, or so it was claimed, but regarded nonetheless as temporary. The differences, especially in the scope of interference in extant political arrangements, and hence in the extent of indirect administration, were always country specific. This issue arises because given the authoritarian nature of colonialism, no mechanisms were in place within the colonial administrative structure for handling local reactions to, or the unanticipated consequences of policy changes. Resort to brute force remained the instrument of choice for the suppression of demands for policy change or for anti-colonial backlashes from the local people. In the case of Nigeria, while the British respected the traditional institutions, it considered them irrelevant, and the native people immature and inexperienced, in matters of policy making and implementation. Lacking a handy administrative arrangement for the governance of the south, the British began the

warrant chief system modeled on its success in northern Nigeria.²⁶ Outstanding men within the community, were given "appointment warrants" making them "warrant chiefs," and by virtue of this they automatically qualified to serve on the native courts. The warrant chief system was invariably the handmaiden of Indirect Rule as it linked the indigenous people to the colonial administration. Adiele Afigbo has pointed out the simplicity of this system and yet the enormity of its political ramifications when he writes:

In seeking to apply this policy (of Indirect Rule) to the Igbo and their neighbors, the British selected certain natives who they thought were traditional chiefs and gave them certificates of recognition and authority called warrants. The warrant entitled each of these men to sit in the Native Court from time to time to judge cases. It also empowered him to assume within the community he represented executive and judicial powers which were novel both in degree and territorial scope.²⁷

Since the British neither understood the cultures of the peoples of these parts nor cared for knowledge of their political structure, her officials set about appointing men who appeared to them to possess the ability to lead. The consequence was that the majority of the people appointed had the least claims to political authority among the people. As Obinkaram Echewa has pithily depicted in a fictionalized account of the causes of the women's war of 1929, it was not the best of characters who became chiefs. He contends that the warrant chiefs were: "mostly people who had theft or another form of dishonesty in their nature, but whose dishonest inclinations had been kept in check by the rigid traditions of society, such men welcome the white men and his liberties."²⁸

While this characterization excluded a few, many of the warrant chiefs later proved to fit this mold. The structure of the warrant chief system was not as simple as it initially appeared in that it eliminated the political instruments and processes through which the people had previously ruled themselves. So by a series of colonial pronouncements, the local political institutions were wiped out and replaced by the native courts, the warrant chiefs who sat in them, court messengers, and other new officials. This meant that in contrast to the plurality of opinions that were usually considered in decision making, the warrant chiefs became the spokesmen of the people in matters of politics and in the relationship between the people and the British colonial officials. Under the native court and warrant chief sys-

tem the traditional title societies and age grades lost their executive and judicial responsibilities²⁹ to the warrant chiefs and the colonial administration.

For women the repercussions were even greater. In addition to losing what small roles that they had played under the traditional political arrangement, no woman was appointed to the emergent positions under colonial administration, be it warrant chief, court clerk, court messenger, interpreter, court bailiff, police or military recruit.³⁰ It was after the women's war in 1930, that more women came to be appointed to these positions. What is more, the warrant chiefs held their positions at the pleasure of the provincial commissioner or resident and thereby owed no allegiance to the village or the lineage council elders who would get into trouble were they to challenge the authority of the warrant chiefs. The British had imagined that the chiefs they appointed represented the collective will of the people and compounded their interests. This reasoning, however, was misleading in that the institution of the warrant chiefs nullified the indigenous political arrangements. The very appointment of warrant chiefs defied the age-old traditional precepts by which people of these areas had governed themselves. The process of "pacification" and conquest to bring southeastern Nigeria under British rule, and the subsequent destruction of the guns in every subjugated area had left the people exhausted and powerless.³¹

The Awka (who supplied locally made guns to most of the southeast) and the Aro traders had seized the opportunity of this confusing state of affairs to spread rumors, albeit largely false, about the evil intentions of the "white man" and such was the fear that when either the military or the political officers of the colonial administration entered an area the people took to the surrounding bushes. Usually the brave, the rascal, or the plain unlucky confronted the newcomers and were the ones who eventually got appointed warrant chiefs simply because the British officials thought they had the audacity to stand their ground. These men either led the soldiers to round up villagers or went on their own to convince the villagers that all was well and encouraged them to return for a parley with either the soldiers or the British officials. In consideration of such "positive proof of authority" such individuals were also given the warrant to serve on the native court. Other "outstanding" men, were tall and huge, and their physiques qualified them to be picked from any crowd to receive warrants as chiefs. In sum, most of the first set of warrant chiefs were chosen arbitrarily and haphazardly.³² Given such a wide berth of authority, and the elimination of the hitherto effective traditional checks and balances, by 1927-29 the first generation warrant

chiefs had exploited their positions to their own advantage and become very influential, powerful and wealthy, regardless of their meager allowances. Intoxicated by their new positions and blinded by their new wealth, the warrant chiefs rightly considered themselves above the people's control. For the colonial administration, however, the stress was upon continuity rather than change, and using the warrant chiefs rather than undertaking a painstaking reform."³³ This is in contrast to the position of imperial apologists and latter day revisionists who argue that the British system of administration in southeastern Nigeria was not Indirect Rule if compared to the so-called classical pattern of Indirect Rule as it existed in northern Nigeria. As one commentator has fittingly pointed out, the British Indirect Rule policy was "an attempt to acquire great tracts of uninhabited territory quickly and rule them 'on the cheap' with badly strained resources and a handful of men."³⁴ The use of warrant chiefs was therefore inevitable.

Conflicts and clashes resulted as the colonials desperately tried to preserve the authority of the warrant chiefs.³⁵ This authority was to be buttressed with the establishment of native treasuries. The native councils and native courts each had its own treasury into which all revenues were paid and from which the chiefs themselves received a stipend. The chiefs' involvement in this financial arrangement was supposed to be a practical training in financial accountability and prudence. Native chiefs gained considerable autonomy (or what the British styled "self-rule") and income through their participation. This set the stage for them to be placed in charge of tax collection in 1928, the role that later made them the target of feminine wrath, a year later.³⁶

On April 4, 1927, the Lagos Legislative Council³⁷ enacted the Native Revenue (Amendment) Ordinance to extend taxation to Warri Province and the East-Niger provinces of Onitsha, Owerri, Ogoja, and Calabar. This law was accompanied by the establishment of Native Treasuries aside from the court treasuries. In this way the historical and administrative precepts that Lugard had noted in his memoirs: "without a tax there can be no treasury, and without a treasury no real eventual measure of self-rule"³⁸ were fulfilled. The chiefs were made responsible for the collection of taxes in their authority areas and by the same token became salaried officers; paid from a share of the taxes retained by the tax authority. Crucially, this provided an additional fillip to the enthusiasm of the warrant chiefs to carry out their responsibilities. Though some of the chiefs had only made token opposition to taxation, such opposition was more or less a face-saving device orchestrated to obviate the anger of their people. It is noteworthy that in the process of structuring the bill, the Resident of Kano, Cyril Alexander

had contended that if "non-natives," (meaning Europeans) were taxed they "would soon ask for representation on the local bodies, which controlled the expenditure of such taxes."³⁹ To the colonial administration, it was reasonable to exclude the European traders from taxation in order to eliminate their demands for participation and prevent the incidence of double taxation. As for the Nigerians, the argument was that they had to pay taxes because no one was exempt from doing so in the British empire. Being conquered or "pacified" people, their consent was not required for such an imposition. The enactment of this tax law set the stage for the subsequent conflict that women of southeastern Nigeria were to have with the British administration.

THE WOMEN'S WAR AND POLICY CHANGE

The role of women in various anti-colonial movements has been highlighted in recent scholarly studies.⁴⁰ The emphasis in most of these studies has shifted from the negative connotation the movements bore as "riots" or "rebellions" from the point of view of colonialists to their being examined as anti-colonial revolutions that show evidence of grassroots political organization, hence the Aba women's war. These uprisings are now being characterized as national struggles while their leaders have attained the status of national heroes. For instance, Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru became the "symbol of anti-colonial protest in Kenya"⁴¹ as a result of her leadership in the Harry Thuku incident in 1922. Harry Thuku was one of the foremost Kenyan nationalists opposed to the exactions of forced labor, heavy taxation, lack of representation, and the abuse and exploitation of women by the colonial government and its agents. His strident criticism and opposition to the colonialists and their settler brethren landed him in jail.⁴² The Kenyan men had been incapable of effecting his release from jail and thoroughly disappointed the women. Using traditional Kenyan (African) modes of social protest and repudiation of male authority such as "scratching their buttocks," they mocked and scorned the men and then proceeded to force open the prison doors. Nyanjiru lost her life along with twenty-seven other women from the shots fired at them by the colonial army. This brought to an end the efforts to free Harry Thuku. While unsuccessful in attaining its objective, this action by the women of Kenya subsequently forced a change in the British colonial policy as it affected forced labor and taxation in Kenya.

Similarly, the actions of the women of Owerri and Calabar Provinces in opposition to the taxation policy introduced in southeastern Nigeria in 1928

have been so considered. Frustrated that the men were unable to forestall the imposition of tax the previous year, women were thoroughly irked when rumors began to circulate that they too would be taxed. Again the question of taxation without representation emerged and by implication the absence of the African women's influence in the way the tax monies were to be spent. That the tax issue simply complicated "pre-existing grievances" is borne out in Adiele Afigbo's finding that the "[Oloko women] had made up their minds to resist 'taxation' even prior to the rumor."⁴³ The women realized that they and their husbands had previously been lied to in connection with the tax census of 1927 that resulted in tax burden being placed on them the next year. Moreover, to obviate the social stigma of failure and imprisonment, most women had helped their husbands, sons, and in-laws in paying the tax of 1928. On the economic front, prices of palm produce had slumped on the export market while those of imports were increasing steadily. The mistreatment of the people by the chiefs and their accomplices in the court system were disconcerting to the men and women. Traditional fairness in justice was subverted by bribe-taking court clerks and warrant chiefs. This was most painful given that the warrant chiefs represented none of their interests. The relationship between the colonial administration and the people was pervaded by mutual distrust and suspicion.

The women's war in southeastern Nigeria was therefore a protest looming and waiting to happen any time after 1928. The spark was provided by the overzealousness and bureaucratic bungling in September, 1928, of Captain Cook, the acting Divisional Officer (AgDO) at Bende (Owerri Province). By Cook's estimation, the tax rolls from the previous tax census in that division were "very unsatisfactory." He ordered a recount of the men in his division but this time he asked that their wives, children and domestic animals be counted as basis for tax assessment. In order to allay the fears of the people, he unsuspectingly announced that women would not be taxed in spite of their being counted. During the tax census of 1927, however, the colonial administration had made similar promises to the people, which turned out to be untrue.⁴⁴ The warrant chiefs knew this but were not in the position to dissuade the colonial administration from carrying out its intentions. Realizing the anger that the people felt against taxation, the chiefs in Bende were not eager to proceed with the dirty tax census job that was assigned to them. An ultimatum had to be issued by Captain Cook in October for this census to begin.

In Oloko, the flash point of the Women's War, the local warrant chief, Okugo, in an attempt to evade blame from the people, directed a local

school teacher named Mark Emeruwa to undertake the counting after he had undergone training at Bende divisional headquarters. On November 23, 1929, Emeruwa went to the compound of one Mr. Ojim to count, as he had done in other compounds. Whereupon one of Ojim's wives, Nwanyereuwa clearly embittered about this tax issue, asked Emeruwa if his mother had been counted. An altercation ensued at which Nwanyereuwa was slightly injured. At that point she rushed to a scheduled meeting of the Oloko women being held in another part of the village. The women saw this as a manifestation of what they had suspected all along about women's taxation and a strong reason to show their displeasure to the government. They proceeded to Emeruwa's house and in the traditional Igbo women's way of social protest, "sat on him."⁴⁵ Okugo was next. They went to his house and "sat on him" too, but when they demanded his chieftaincy cap, some of them were assaulted by the chiefs' servants. Enraged and humiliated, they attacked and destroyed Okugo's house. The women decided to spread the news of women's taxation to surrounding villages and seek the help of women there to forestall it. Among the Igbo, the young yellowish "palm leaf is at once a symbol of trouble and a call for help"⁴⁶ when sent from an individual or village to another. On receiving the palm fronds, the surrounding villages passed on the leaves and the message with the required urgency, announcing that women were going to be taxed and that the "*Ogu Umunwanyi*" (that is Women's War) against taxation had started. Women from neighboring divisions were requested to assemble in Oloko as soon as they could for further deliberations and instructions on the course of the war.

For the next three days, women arrived in large numbers from the surrounding divisions. On September 26, they demanded and got from the AgDO a written undertaking that women would not be taxed. But this did not placate them. They demanded that Chief Okugo be tried for assault and de-capped, that is, removed as a warrant chief. On December 22, Okugo was tried and unjustly sentenced to two years imprisonment for assault and "spreading news likely to create alarm," merely as a gesture to the women rather than as a carriage of justice. In the meantime, the war had spread like wild fire. The women moved to Nbawsi, Omoba, and Aba, which are commercial centers on the railway line. From Aba the revolt moved north and south along the railway. On December 12, the women invaded Nguru, Okpuala, and Ngor. From the Umuahia flank, they moved to Abak, Utu Etim Ekpo, Abak, and later to Opobo in Calabar Province. In each place they attempted to or actually destroyed the court building, the warrant chief's house, and clerk's quarters. They beat up court messengers and dared the

soldiers that had been drafted to keep the peace. They also vented their spleen on European factories and stores in Aba, Opobo, Umuahia, Itu, Imo River, and Oguta and thereby unleashed widespread looting. The women wreaked havoc on visible signs of colonialism, domination and exploitation symbolized by the chiefs, native courts and court officials and the government buildings. The women reasoned that many tax defaulters and many other innocent persons opposed to colonial rule had been unjustly imprisoned, so they broke into prisons and set them free. The women's war songs underlined their disdain for these institutions and what they represented.

The women's war did not pass without fatalities. At Abak three women were slaughtered at point blank range on December 16 by colonial soldiers. The next day at Utu Etim Ekpo, soldiers opened fire on protesting women there, killing the leader along with seventeen other women and injuring nineteen others. On December 18 at Opobo, thirty-one women and a man were shot dead and another thirty-two were injured.⁴⁷ The colonial administration did not anticipate the enormity of this uprising. The reaction of the British administration was the predictable show of force of an occupation army. Regiments of the Nigerian colonial army were called in from various parts of the southeast. Plans were also made to draft troops from Lagos and the Northern Provinces if the revolt escalated further. In all, ten native court houses were burned down, three destroyed, and a number of others damaged while a total of fifty-five women were shot to death.⁴⁸ Scores of native government officials' quarters and chiefs' houses were either damaged or destroyed.

By January 10, 1930, the war had lost its punch. The report of the fatalities had taken its toll on the revolt and the presence of soldiers was making it difficult for the war to spread further afield. News from home was spreading within the women's ranks that their husbands were being arrested and thrown into jail. The colonial administration was at a loss to fathom how an otherwise pliant group of women could plan and carry out such a massive uprising without male assistance. Since spontaneity was the moving factor in the war, women who showed some extemporaneous leadership qualities found immediate following. Such women were identified as ring leaders and arrested. Though the women imagined that they could have inflicted more havoc on the colonial setup, they had to surrender to the coercive powers of the colonial administration. In the end, the women's grievances had been satisfied, at least psychologically at first, by the damage they had done to the institutions--the native courts, warrant chiefs--that had been so oppressive of them. At last they had had an opportunity to call attention to their grievances. At the Birrel-Gray Commission of Inquiry of

January 1930 and the Aba Commission of Inquiry of July 1930 (the date of the Report), they testified that their war was essentially political and a manifestation of their disgust with colonialism, oppression, and the imperial government. Nina Mba has succinctly noted that "in 1929 the women were rejecting not the system of administration but the whole colonial order."⁴⁹ The British were suddenly alerted to the tensions that their various policies had created in the political institutions of these societies. The women's evidence presented at the various hearings formed the basis for policy change to reflect the cultural and political conditions of the peoples of southeastern Nigeria.

Several policy changes came into effect as a result of this war. It became obvious to the British that there was a great and an immediate need for administrative reforms in the local government structure in southeastern Nigeria. The period of blind and despotic rule by the British had virtually come to an end, but before it did so it had torn apart the local political and social systems on which it was superimposed. The women's war was a rude awakening to the British colonial administration and called for policy reversals of a momentous nature as well as attention to the grievances of the indigenous peoples. Though the system of Indirect Rule persisted, official policy began to shift away from the institution of chiefs as intermediaries to "village or clan assemblies." This new mood was captured in the Lieutenant Governor of the Southern Provinces, C.W. Alexander's comment on that year's residents' reports to him, that "all officers must get out of their head the idea that the pursuance of a policy of native administration is possible only where there are ruling potentates, that is, paramount chiefs."⁵⁰ This change reflected the charges made by the women at the Aba Commission of Inquiry that the chiefs "instead of coming home to consult women, they generally agreed with the district officer straight away."⁵¹ Women demanded that the institution of chieftaincy be done away with. At the Aba inquiry Nnenda Nwoji profoundly drove home the women's point. On behalf of Umukoroshe women, in the Ahoada division she explained: "we demanded the [Chiefs] caps. We told the Chiefs that we did not want them to be Chiefs any longer." Based on this and similar evidence in this area, eighteen chiefs were de-capped and their caps symbolically handed back to the District Officer at Umukoroshe in February 1930.⁵² Some women even went further, arguing that if chiefs must be appointed that they, along with the men, be placed in a position to confirm those appointments and even veto the chiefs' actions while they were in office. The war thus inaugurated a change in methods that generated a need to study the extant political systems of the Igbo, Ibibio, Ijo, and the Ogoja peoples as a basis for the

introduction of new policies, a process that had hitherto been ignored.

The disciplinary action taken on Okugo came as a victory for the women and was to serve as a warning to other chiefs during the war. The women hoped that the brazen behavior of officialdom would come to an end. An example of this was on December 11, 1929, when an egotistic Warrant Chief Nwatu of Owerinta, full of importance in his chiefly regalia and with a shotgun to complement it, defiantly tried to ride his bicycle through a group of militant women. The women descended on him, tore his clothes in shreds, seized his bicycle and chased him into the bush.⁵³ What is more, because the inquiries by the government were misperceived by women as trials of the chiefs, the women became very frank and candid in their statements in order to punish the chiefs even more. Whatever its shortcomings, the inquiries afforded the women in particular, and Nigerians in general, an opportunity to air their grievances against colonial rule.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that the women had fought against the lack of representation, the high-handedness of the Warrant Chiefs, and the corruption of the judicial system. The colonial administration proceeded thereafter to remove and prosecute those chiefs that were tarnishing the image of the British administration. A total of seventeen prosecutions and eight convictions occurred in Aba, Bende, and Okigwe divisions in 1930 alone.⁵⁴ A thorough review of the system facilitated the identification of the *ezeala* (the traditional chiefs who governed according to local customs) who ruled the village systems before British colonial rule was imposed. The colonial administration now made every effort to consider these *ezealas* when new warrant chiefs were appointed. As has been aptly observed in a recent study, the colonialists reverted to seeking the "the remnants of traditional organization which would be recognized by the people"⁵⁵ as a further concession to the women's demand for representation and for a voice in the choice of their leaders.

The women's war was significant in several ways given the critical tendencies that have emerged in certain feminist circles concerning women in Africa. The argument that African women have always been marginalized appears not to be corroborated by historical facts. The women's war demonstrates that women could exercise independent political action and in very demanding circumstances, if they had to do so. Women of southeastern Nigeria were able to force the issues so that much needed reforms in the local government structure were made, eventually providing women with

political access. Nwanyereuwa became a household name in the anti-colonial movement across the South. After 1930, a lot more women were appointed to the Native Courts. Most importantly, the women prevented the colonial administration from extending taxation to them. In the final analysis, the Women's War became the high water mark of women's solidarity setting the subsequent standards for women's political protest movements in Nigeria.

The other very important outcome of the women's war was that it occurred in the republican village communities of southeastern Nigeria where women lacked traditional political roles. As far as the women were concerned, traditional institutions were not a limiting factor once the target had been identified, contrary to the claims of some scholars. It further demonstrated that the apparently formidable force of domination that the British portended could be challenged and forced to accept changes. The success of the women's war was to prove very useful in subsequent nationalist movement activities in Nigeria.

Notes

¹ See T. Obinkaram Echewa, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* (New York 1993), 29. There are two proverbs here. The first deals with a philosophical justification for, and the impact of the women's war on the colonial institution of the warrant chiefs. The second can be interpreted to mean that the women were acting because the "white man" had disarmed the men during the so-called pacification and occupation, emasculating the "main debtor." In the tradition of the people of southeastern Nigeria a man owes it to his family to defend it against intruders, but in the case of the Aba Women's War the women acted on behalf of the men.

² United Nations, "Forward Looking Strategies Accord for Women," NY: United Nations, 1988. The China conference was officially titled Fourth World Conference on Women (WCW), Beijing, 1995.

³ Patricia Made, *Africa's Invisible Women*. UNESCO Courier, No. 9, September 1995, 21 and Fatima Meer, *The Future for Women*. UNESCO Courier, No. 2, February 1992, 30-32.

⁴ Florence Wakoko and Linda Lobao, "Reconceptualizing Gender and Reconstructing Social Life: Uganda Women and the Path to National Development," *Africa Today*, 43 (1996): 307-322.

⁵ Anthonia C. Kalu, "Women and the Social Construction of Gender in African Development," *Africa Today* 43 (1996): 269-288.

⁶ Felix K. Ekechi, "Perceiving Women as Catalysts," *Africa Today*, 43 (1996): 235-250.

⁷ April A. Gordon, "Women and Development," in *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, ed. by April A. Gordon and Donald L. Gordon (Boulder/London, 1996), 249-272.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁹ Annie M.D. Lebeuf, "The Role of Women in the Political Organization of African Societies," in *Women of Tropical Africa*, ed. by Denise Paulme (Berkeley, 1971), 94-95.

¹⁰ Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965* (Berkeley, 1982), 7-13.

¹¹ R. S. Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (London, 1969).

¹² Mba, 16. In the Benin empire it was an abomination for a mother to set her eyes on her son after he had been crowned. To avoid that happening, she was usually put to death as her son was being crowned.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ Further evidence is becoming available to show that the inconspicuous role of the woman in African society and politics was not due entirely to cultural factors. For instance Mercy Oduyoye's "Calling the Church to Account," *Eccumenical Review*, 47 (October 1995): 479-489 blames it on the European concept of the middle class housewife foisted on African societies where this class structure was non-existent. Susan Gardner in "The World of Flora Nwapa," *Women's Review of Books*, 11 (March 1994): 9-10 contends that "appropriate gender roles were imposed on the Nigerian youth" which for women were "professions regarded as extensions of (Western) female roles" and fostered through "brainwashing" in the colonial educational system.

¹⁵ One must point out, however, that this Igbo republicanism is limited to the hinterland Igbos, since their riverine counterparts had kings known as *obi* among the Onitsha, Asaba, Illah, Aboh, Osommari and as *ezeigwe* in the Oguta community.

¹⁶ Adiele E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (New York, 1972), see especially 15-17.

¹⁷ A. Charles Jeffries, *The Colonial Empire and Its Civil Service* (Cambridge, 1938), 134.

¹⁸ Information based on author's experience in dealing with customary and traditional dispute resolution; and as Chair of the Umualighi ward council of Mbeke, Imo State in Nigeria, between 1984 and 1988.

¹⁹ G.I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers* (London, 1963). See also Mba, 25-26.

²⁰ This account of the second generation Umuezeala warrant chief was given in 1974 by Lawrence U. Iheduru, the author's father who was a young boy at the time (c. 1924-35). This was confirmed in 1983, by Mr. Daniel Chinaka, a retired

road overseer from Mbeke.

²¹ C.K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (Oxford, 1937), 88-97. See also Afigbo, 17-23; and Elechukwu N. Njaka, *Igbo Political Culture* (Evanston, IL, 1974), 3-16 for additional discussions of the federalist and republican nature of the Igbo political system.

²² Simon Ottenberg, *The System of Authority of the Afikpo Ibo*, Ph.D. Thesis, (Northwestern University 1957), quoted in Afigbo, 27.

²³ J.C. Anene, *Southern Nigeria in Transition, 1885-1906* (Cambridge, 1966), 13-14.

²⁴ Jones, 4. The Oil Rivers Provinces referred to in Dr. Jones' study is made of the Ijos (corrupted to "Ijaws" by the British) and invariably refer to the same ethnic group.

²⁵ Charles Jeffries, *The Colonial Service and International Civil Service* (Cambridge, 1938), 134.

²⁶ The British had learned from the experience of the Royal Niger Company when the former charter-ruled the "Oil Rivers," later to become Southern Nigeria that the people of the area resented the imposition of foreign authority over them without their involvement. In order to elicit this involvement and going by their experience in Northern Nigeria where indirect rule had been very successful, the warrant chief system was invented as the instrument of indirect rule.

²⁷ Afigbo, 1-7.

²⁸ Echewa, 34.

²⁹ Mba 34.

³⁰ The reported exception to this rule was Madam Okwei who was made a member of the Onitsha native court in 1912 (see F. Ekejuba, "Omu-Okwei- the Merchant Queen of Osommari, a Biographical Sketch." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3 (June, 1967): 633-46.

³¹ The colonial practice whereby military expeditionary forces occupied a village or town and held the traditional ruler hostage until the people surrendered their guns as indemnity broke the resistance to British occupation. In such circumstances, new persons were appointed warrant chiefs.

³² It should be noted, however, that it was not until 1922, after Major Sealy-King's report on complaints regarding the imposition of warrant chiefs that villages were consulted in the selection of warrant chiefs. Even that was limited to the Ndialichi, Aro, and the Enyong (Calabar province). Political expediency, European arrogance coupled with disdain for the natives allowed arbitrary appointments to continue.

³³ Prosser Gifford, "Indirect Rule: Touchstone or Tombstone for Colonial Policy," in P. Gifford, and William Roger Louis, eds., *Britain and Germany in Africa*, (New Haven, 1967), 351-352.

³⁴ Ibid., 352.

³⁵ Lord Lugard, *Political Memorandum* No. 9, paragraph 40.

³⁶ It should be noted that following the extension of taxation to the southwestern Nigeria in 1916, various attempts were made to impose taxation in the southeast without success. Notable was the Grier commission under Governor Hugh Clifford which failed to recommend taxation. The alternative of a poll tax suggested by Governor Henry Moorhouse was also dropped. Major Ruxton was to succeed Moorhouse and it was under his watch that direct taxation was pushed through for Warri and the then four southeastern provinces.

³⁷ The Lagos Legislative Council had earlier been established by the Hugh Clifford Constitution of 1922 to which only four Nigerians were actually elected. The other 42 members were either unofficial or appointed by the colonial government.

³⁸ Lord Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa*, (Edinburgh, 1922), 219.

³⁹ Afigbo, 219.

⁴⁰ Ekechi, 236-246; Obioma Nnaemeka, "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and her Compatriots" *Research in African Literatures*, 26 (1995): 80-113.

⁴¹ Ekechi, 240.

⁴² For a more detailed discussion of the Harry Thuku incident and his role in Kenyan nationalist politics, especially his struggles against the oppression of women, see Audrey Wipper, "Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances: Some Uniformities of Female Militancy," *Africa* 59 (1989): 383.

⁴³ Mba, 78-9; Ekechi, 244.

⁴⁴ Captain Cook admitted to the commission of inquiry into the incident that in the course of the initial enumeration the people of Okigwe and Orlu were not informed as to the purpose of the exercise though it turned out to be for taxation. See *Aba Commission of Inquiry Notes of Evidence*, 1930, 4.

⁴⁵ Margery Perham, "The Aba Market Women's Riot in Nigeria, 1929," in Wilfred Cartey and Martin Kilson, eds., *The Africa Reader: Colonial Africa* (New York, 1970), 164-165.

⁴⁶ Perham, 164.

⁴⁷ There are varying accounts of the number of fatalities at these centers. The most reliable so far is that by Afigbo, see 240-1.

⁴⁸ Mba, 77; Afigbo, 242.

⁴⁹ Mba, 78.

⁵⁰ Annual Report, Calabar Province. See minute by C.W. Alexander enclosed in Memo. SP 1139/vol. viii/26 dated March 5, 1930. Quoted in Afigbo, 246-7.

⁵¹ This statement is credited to Olenga, a woman witness from Umuakpara (Aba district) to buttress her contention that the people did not want chiefs. See *Aba Commission of Inquiry Notes of Evidence*, 664.

⁵² Ibid., 745-747.

⁵³ Afigbo, 242; and the *Aba Commission of Inquiry Notes of Evidence* para. 3434, and the *Aba Commission of Inquiry Report*, 55-6.

⁵⁴ See *Owerri Province Annual Reports, 1930*, Owerri Divisional Office (Nigeria).

⁵⁵ See Felix K. Ekechi, *Tradition and Transformation in Eastern Nigeria: A Sociopolitical History of Owerri and Its Hinterland, 1902-1947* (Kent, Ohio 1989), 77.