
Tax and Women: A Review of the 1929 Owerri Province Insurrections in Colonial Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the causes, course and consequences of the Aba Women revolts in colonial Nigeria (West Africa). Using a combination of primary and secondary historical sources, the study found that a multiplicity of remote and immediate factors were responsible for the revolt. While taxation of men and rumored extension of same to women was the immediate cause of the revolts, the factors such as low price of palm produce/high cost of imported goods, discontent arising from persecution and corruption from native courts system, and change in the method of buying produce (from buying by measure to buying by weight) were also significant. The study revealed that the well organised women's revolts were targeted at the native courts, warrant chiefs and foreign business interests. The study also found that the seat of the revolts was not Aba, but Oloko, and women from many parts of the province participated. Lastly, the study established that the revolts changed the dynamics of colonial administration in Owerri Province as it led to changes in administrative modalities. The study concluded that women were not passive victims of colonial oppression but active collaborators in the resistance to oppressive and repressive colonial policies.

Keywords: *taxation, warrant chiefs, women, indirect rule, Owerri Province.*

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, European countries began to seek for alternative businesses other than the proscribed slave trade. This paved the way for Great Britain to act as the enforcer of the law proscribing slave trade. In doing this, it also became a colonial power by virtue of the 1884/1885 Berlin conference. With the partition and scramble for Africa, the world powers shared the spoils of many African states, and Britain and France were the largest beneficiaries. By 1900, the area which would later be called Nigeria was already under Great Britain.

Following the amalgamation of the northern and southern provinces of colonial Nigeria in 1914, the policy of indirect rule, which had been largely successful in the northern provinces was extended to the southern provinces. In the western provinces, the pre-existing socio-political structure was similar to what existed in the northern provinces. This resemblance made the introduction of indirect rule, especially the introduction of the Native Revenue Ordinance to the western provinces, easy. However, the introduction of direct taxation into the eastern region posed a lot of challenge to the colonial authorities since such idea was not only alien but also unwelcomed (Colonial Government 1930). This is because of the acephalous structure of the people's pre-colonial political organization and also because there was no pre-existing mechanism for direct taxation before the advent of colonialism.

The taxation of men was seamless and did not generate any uproar, so the British colonial authority never expected such confrontation from the women. The trouble they expected from the men did not come, but it came from the women. This is the uprising that has come to be referred to as the 'Aba Women Riots' (Headlines 1973: 5), an insurrection that challenged the power of the British colonial regime. While the introduction of taxation on men in 1928 was performed without much rancor or resistance by the people, it was an effort geared towards a reassessment of 1929 that brought much uproar and violent protests. Indeed, all the five provinces of south-eastern colonial Nigeria, with the exception of Ogoja and *Onitsha* provinces, resisted the introduction of taxation and reassessments, with women providing leadership in the Owerri Province. The Women revolt of 1929, which had its basis on the perceived threat of taxation, added a new dimension to anti-colonial resistance in Nigeria (Shillington 2005: 266).

The resultant women actions against an apparent threat to their economic security and existence did not take the form of 'noncompliance, subtle sabotage, evasion and deception' (Scott 1985: 24–28) as described in James Scott's *Weapon of the Weak*; their resistance was both active and violent. Indeed, it took the British administration in colonial Nigeria persistent efforts to discourage the beleaguered women from their stubborn resistance. Though there is a growing number of studies on this episode (Nwaguru 1973), there is need for a contemporary revisit.

INTRODUCTION OF DIRECT TAXATION TO THE EASTERN REGION

The colonial government was undeterred in its determination to introduce taxation to the region in spite of the oppositions elsewhere in the British Colonies. The government's resolve was hinged on the economic expediency of generating internal revenue for the smooth running and development of the colony. It was also considered convenient for the eastern regions to pay direct tax in conformity with the other provinces of colonial Nigeria. In addition to that, direct taxation was introduced against the backdrop of forced labor, which was acceptable as a substitute for taxation that was considered to be anachronistic, wasteful and burdensome by the colonial authorities (Afigbo 1972: 209–210).

The trouble actually started when the Assistant District Officer (ADO) Bendel Division decided that he needed to have new accurate nominal rolls of men, women, children and live stocks since the earlier assessment conducted was found to have been arbitrarily prepared (Headlines 1973: 5). The Lieutenant-Governor of Nigeria, Lieutenant-Colonel Harry Moorhouse, proposed a scheme to the Governor of colonial Nigeria for the introduction of a poll tax on adult males in the eastern provinces in August 1924. This was to be followed by a sensitization campaign and registration of all male adults in the provinces. Moorhouse exhibited his understanding of the people's objection to the numbering of their women and children, hence, the limitation of his proposal for registration to only the male adults within the provinces. However, the tenure of Sir Hugh Clifford as the Governor of Nigeria at the time was close to termination, hence, his decision to leave the taxation question in the eastern provinces to his successor. Barely few days after the resumption of Sir Graeme Thomson, he ap-

proved the introduction of taxation in the untaxed southern provinces. To this effect, he directed the Lieutenant-Governor of the southern provinces to work out a modality for the taxation of the provinces (Colonial Government 1930: 3).

Major Ruxton, who succeeded Harry Moorhouse as the Lieutenant-Governor of the southern provinces, submitted a taxation scheme that was an offshoot of his predecessor's proposed scheme. However, the new ordinance that he proposed on poll tax in the provinces was based on his assumption that the Native Revenue Ordinance could not be applied in the southern provinces without much resistance. Ruxton believed that the whole basis on which the Native Revenue Ordinance rested in northern Nigeria and Yoruba provinces were completely absent that its wording was 'unmeaning to officers in the eastern provinces' (Afigbo 1972: 216).

By April 4, 1927, the Native Revenue Ordinance (although with slight modifications) became law in the eastern provinces. The Lieutenant-Governor appointed Mr. W. E Hunt to embark on a sensitization campaign on the new law throughout the provinces. Residents were also instructed to estimate the annual value of lands and produce in each community, estimate the annual value of profits from trade, production, office or employment in each community, and estimate the value of all livestock. Based on assessments, each of the officers then proposed a flat rate of 2.5 per cent as tax for all male adults (Colonial Government 1930: 4–5).

In the Lieutenant-Governor's proposal, the imposition of direct taxation on the eastern provinces was to take effect on April 1st, 1928, and in anticipation of possible resistance by the people to its introduction, the Legislative Council was to approve an increase in the Police Force. However, the proposal by the Lieutenant-Governor for a new taxation ordinance for the eastern provinces was rejected and the limitation of the new ordinance to a poll tax was also rejected. The Lieutenant-Governor maintained his position on the Native Revenue Ordinance and was persuaded to support the extension of the Ordinance to the eastern provinces.

In many parts of the eastern provinces, the assessment exercise was not without hitch. The concept of taxation was not only new to the people at the time of its introduction, but its whole idea was contrary to their belief system. An eminent historian, Adiele E. Afigbo noted that taxation was seen by the people

as either 'tax on head' or 'tax on land' which with further amplification meant 'ransom' or 'land rent' respectively. Seen in this light taxation raised the question of how a free man could be required to pay a ransom on his head or how a stranger could ask for rent on land from the sons of the soil. This was a question which nobody could answer but the conservatives were sure that such a demand as taxation which had these implications was irreligious and unethical (Afigbo 1966: 550).

The concept was, therefore, bound to be doubted, if not absolutely resisted by the people. In Aba Division of Owerri Province, the announcement of taxation 'was received with general sullen and obstinate signs of defiance and refusal to accede to the demand' (Afigbo 1972: 226). But the women were under no illusions about the outcome of a direct assault. The Owerri Division was also a tough nut to crack for the assessors because there were oppositions immediately after the purpose of the assessment was announced (Colonial Government 1930: 5). The people adamantly refused to provide information and fled from their compounds at the sight of the assessors and in some cases, threatened and abused any chief or member of their community who assisted the assessors.

Olakwo and Okpala were the center of women's defiance. At Olakwo, the police were assaulted by a group of indigenes. However, after a threat of patrol, the ringleaders of the group were produced for punishment. The primary bone of contention in the areas where the indigenes failed to cooperate with the assessors was the assumption by the people that the exercise was in preparation for the forceful occupation of all lands and palm trees in each community. By and large, 'resistance to the initial taxation was certainly uniform in most of the East but it was a silent, nearly hopeless resistance' (Gailey 1970: 91). Thus, the first year of taxation did not give a clear indication of what was ahead as tax was collected with little or no difficulty. The first year of taxation was such a resounding success that with the exception of *Bende* division, Owerri Province exceeded the estimated tax returns (Afigbo 1972: 235), but this initial success was only transient and it soon morphed into disorderliness and anarchy within the following year.

CAUSES OF THE WOMEN REVOLTS

If the processes of tax collection were peaceful and hitch free in 1928 when it was first collected in the Owerri Province, the same cannot be said of the year that followed (1929). In the beginning of 1929, every index seemed to point towards a repeat of the previous year's success and it was this situation that prompted Major C.T Lawrence, the Secretary, Southern Provinces to note that there was no sign of impending disaster as 'nothing in the middle of 1929 pointed to the possibility of an explosion' (Afigbo 1972: 235). It is however significant to note that the success recorded in the first year of taxation did not erase deep-seated issues surrounding the introduction of taxation in the province. The turn of events from October 1929 brought the underlying deep-seated issues to the fore.

As already established, direct taxation of men in the Calabar and Owerri provinces was alien to the people; there was no record of its existence or collection in the tradition of the people before it was introduced by the British colonial regime. With the introduction of taxation, the colonial administrators, who had been credited with adequate understanding of the people over whom they ruled (Tamuno 1972: 108), betrayed their lack of accurate knowledge of the social organization of the people, and owing to the fact that only superficial knowledge existed as regards the organizations in the eastern provinces (Memorandum of the Secretary 1930: par 160/276), the introduction of taxation was more or less an act of putting the cart before the horse. The introduction of taxation was not preceded by the education of the natural rulers of the people. The subordination of the natural leaders by the warrant chiefs robbed the colonial administration of opportunities to closely interact with the people and this made the implementation of colonial policies difficult.

Also, the uniform introduction of taxation in all the hitherto untaxed areas was not in tandem with the level of preparedness of each area. The time decided upon for the introduction of taxation thus met some areas less prepared than others. In the Owerri Province, the people had not evolved a more centralized system of political organization, hence, the expediency of the use of warrant chiefs for the purpose of propaganda and assessments. The conspicuous roles of the chiefs in the introduction of taxation on men made them obvious targets for the women revolts against possible taxation (Colonial Government 1930: 95).

Taxation had a lot of excruciating effect on some men, to the extent that some of them resorted to pawning or borrowing from the warrant chiefs at exorbitant rates (Matera, Bastian and Kent 2012: 105–106). Archdeacon Benson, whose sympathy rested with the people, noted that in many cases, and in order to raise the cash for tax, people resorted to borrowing money that none of them could possibly pay back, and they pawned their children in order to pay their debts (Colonial Government 1930: 95). There were even instances of men who pawned themselves in order to pay tax, and this was indeed a point of strong complaint by the women during the revolts. The excruciating burdens of taxation were borne by women, who made indirect contributions to the payment of their husband's taxes. Touched by the heavy weight of taxation on their husbands, the women took independent initiatives, not only to resist the rumored taxation of women, but the idea of taxation altogether. Akulechula, one of the women leaders, denied the suggestion from certain quarters that men encouraged women to move about, and noted that:

It is against native custom for women to leave their houses without the permission of their husbands but in this case men had been made to pay tax and the rumor that women were going to be taxed spread around. Women became infuriated because they had already felt the burden of the tax on men... We acted according to our own consciences... there is no law ... that women should not move about. The matter did not concern men (Colonial Government 1930: 105).

In same vein, people were curious about the management of the tax proceeds. The uneven development in the provinces made the inhabitants of less developed parts to demand to know what tax collectors were 'going to do with the money' (Colonial Government 1930: 96). While a number of projects were carried out in the Calabar Province by the end of 1929, many parts of the province had no roads, bridges or public buildings.

The Indirect Rule system, which the British favoured, only bred discontent and complaints. Indeed, the women saw the native courts and their chiefs as the bastions of colonial oppression, especially in the introduction of taxation and its rumored extension to women. Corruption was the greatest defect of the native court system. It was a situation where judges took bribe while some people used their con-

nections to enrich themselves and avoided punishment for their crimes. In most cases, the native courts were used not only as tax collection centers, they also served as trial courts for tax defaulters. In addition, the members of native courts were engaged in extortion, persecution, bribery and corruption. They abused their offices by refusing to pay due dowry whenever they took a wife while they wasted no time in demanding for full reimbursement of the amount, which they never paid in the first place, should the woman leave them, not considering the depreciation that must have occurred as a result of the several voluptuous tax burden that the women must have endured while she was married.

The events surrounding re-assessments and rumored taxation of women also coincided with the drastic drop in the price of oil palm and palm kernel, the production of which was largely done by the women. The price of palm kernel per 50lb of kernel dropped from 5s. 9d. in 1928, to 4s. 6d. in 1929. Similarly, the price of four-gallon tin of palm oil dropped from 7s. 0d. in 1928, to 5s. 10d. in 1929 (Memorandum of the Secretary 1930: par 160/276). The reduction in the prices of palm kernel and palm oil had ripples effect on people's daily activities. The importance of the commodity prices made it principal subject of daily discussion at the markets, especially by the women folk, who were the major producers of the commodities. There was an intricate link between taxation and oil prices within the context of the re-assessment of 1929; the assessments of 1927, which formed the basis of the tax flat rate of 7s., was largely based on the proceeds from palm oil sales. There was thus the question of possible over-taxation in the light of the prevailing reduction in palm kernel and palm oil prices in 1929 (Afigbo 1972: 238).

One could say that the agitations for increase in commodity prices and the issue of taxation caused and reinforced each other; low commodity prices agitated the women and predisposed them to protests against the government or its agents who were perceived as culpable for the reduction in commodity prices, whereas the tax revolts offered an opportunity to bring up the issue of commodity prices before the government. The revolt against taxation and the reduction in commodities became so intricate in the women's revolts that whenever the women were asked to state their grievances, they always presented low price of palm produce as one of them.

Significantly, the people's inability or unwillingness to trust the colonial government epitomised the fruit of a seed that was sown in November, 1926 when the computation of adult males commenced in preparation for taxation, as issued by the Resident, Mr. Ingles, to all district officers. The district officers were charged to carry out their tasks clandestinely (Gailey 1970: 80). Between November, 1926 and March, 1927, the count was done with relative ease as the people were not aware of the real purpose of such counts. The fact that the people had been counted before also made them less suspicious of the new counts. However, a severe opposition from the people was triggered the moment they became aware of the commencement of taxation in April, 1927.

Definitely, prior to April, 1927 when Nguru district was assessed through the counting of male adults, it was not announced that the purpose of the enumeration was taxation. But as soon as the purpose of the assessment was announced to be taxation, considerable opposition was experienced (Assessment Reports, Owerri Division Records, page 1, paragraphs 1 and 4). The counting of people without the people knowing the object of the exercise was not only a breach of a fundamental principle of good governance, it laid the background of the people's distrust of the colonial government intentions in the implementation of subsequent tax laws.

More than the introduction of taxation itself, the attempt to re-assess the province for the purpose of taxation laid the background for the women revolts of 1929. While it was never the intention of the colonial government to introduce taxation of women in the Owerri Province, every action of the government pointed in that direction. Since counting preceded the taxation of men, taxation seemed to be the natural consequence of the counting of women (Akpan and Ekpo 1988: 25). The re-assessment was necessitated by the inadequacy of the 1927 assessment; some of the warrant chiefs inflated the number of taxable males in their communities during the counting that preceded the introduction of taxation in 1928. Not knowing that the counting was for the purpose of taxation, the chiefs inflated the figures in order to gain prominence and admission into the Native Court.

However, what immediately triggered the Oloko riots was the September, 1929 decision of Captain John Cook who took over as District Officer of the Bende Division on a temporary basis until the arrival and resumption of Captain Hill from leave in November, 1929

to institute a new system of nominal rolls for male adults on the basis of compounds and families, including the details of the number of wives, children and livestock (Akpan and Ekpo 1988: 25), a development that was informed by the inaccuracy in the existing nominal rolls. The decision of Captain Cook was however fraught with both administrative and logical irregularities. He, being posted on a temporary basis and without prior knowledge of the administrative terrain, acted on his own initiative, without recourse to the history of the division and adequate knowledge of the people. By this miscalculation, he inadvertently added fuel to smoldering fire of distrust of the colonial regime by the people.

A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE REVOLTS

The revolts that later engulfed most parts of the *Owerri* Province was sparked when the introduction of the new system of nominal rolls for tax collection was announced to some chiefs and counting began on October, 14th 1929 (Colonial Government 1930: 11). The women resistance, which gradually became active, developed and fragmented into an unequal contest between the womenfolk and the British colonial government. It was a violent struggle of a large number of history losers against perceived injustice and oppression of an unfriendly government. Although the chiefs were clearly informed that the new system had nothing to do with the taxation of women, the fact that women were to be counted invoked the memory of the previous deception by Resident Ingles. The women therefore considered the new count as precursor to the taxation of women. Chief Oparaocha, who strongly believed that the women had been pushed to the brink, explained the women suspicion in the following words:

You have deceived us about men not going to pay tax but afterwards they paid tax... First of all, the counting of the men was done and nobody told them the object of it, but some time afterwards they were told they were to pay tax (Colonial Government 1930: 11).

Women within the district (especially the Oloko women) discussed the taxation question at every opportunity and were unanimous in their opposition to the new count. By the time counting began at Oloko around November 20th 1929, the community was already precariously balanced on a keg of gun powder and only a little spark was

needed to ignite an explosion. Being aware of his people's defiant position on the new count, Chief Okugo of Oloko vacillated on the nomination of an enumerator until he was warned on November 18th, 1929 that the counting must be concluded within the next eight days. He then, unenthusiastically, nominated Mark Emeruwa, who commenced his counting from the Okugo's compound, and on Saturday, November 23rd, 1929, he proceeded to the compound of one Ojim. Nwanyewura, one of Ojim's wife had an altercation with Emeruwa, who reported her to *Okugo*, who, in turn, threatened to report her to the District Officer.

The next day (Sunday), Nwanyewura joined a meeting of Oloko women, led by Ikonnia, Nwannedie and Nwugo. At the meeting, Nwanyewura told the women that Emeruwa had approached her to count her people. The testimony of Nwanyewura was a breaking point in the women's struggle as her account was clear evidence that women were already being approached directly for the count. Before Nwanyewura's account, information about women was obtained through their husbands. Armed with the account of Nwanyewura, the women stormed *Emeruwa's* residence, asking why he had said that women should pay tax (Allen 1972: 173).

For the women, counting was synonymous with taxation. They therefore sent a palm leaf, which symbolised a call for all women to converge at Oloko, and within the twinkle of an eye, women from far and near trooped in. The congregation of women marched in a procession to the Niger Delta Pastorate Mission, which housed Emeruwa to 'sit on' him (Colonial Government 1930: 14). The women marched from there to Okugo's house to demand an explanation from him on why he ordered women to pay tax. Okugo's reaction was not only rude but abusive and the women responded by sitting on him too. The women also sent a delegation, led by Ikonnia, Nwannedie, to the District Head. The women delegation recounted to the District Head how Okugo's men injured many of the women in an attempt to drive them away, and how (although without verifiable proof), Okugo shot a pregnant woman.

The District Officer admitted that although the counting was initiated by him, it was not intended as tax document since women's names were not noted on paper. Dissatisfied, the women demanded the surrender of Okugo's judicial cap, which was resisted by his stick-wielding servants, who attempted to chase the women away. In the altercation that ensued, Okugo was mobbed by the enraged women

and was only rescued by a police officer. However, not before the women had damaged a part of Okugo's house and he was forced to take refuge at the Native Court compound (Report of Mr. Cook, District Officer, Bende, of 28th November, 1929).

On 27th of November, 1929, the District Officer met about one thousand (1,000) women from Aba, Bende and Owerri divisions at Oloko, and reassured them that they would not be taxed. However, the women demanded a written assurance from the District Officer as they articulated thus, 'It was in the same manner that men were made to pay tax. After the men were counted they were made to pay tax, and eventually after the women have been counted they will be made to pay tax' (Colonial Government 1930: 13). Although he issued them a written assurance, but he refused to accede to their request for the release of Okugo, whom he arrested and had charged for assault.

Following the resumption of Captain Hill as the new District Officer on December 2nd 1929, the women were still unrelenting in their calls for the trial of Okugo. The new District Officer, on one hand, promised to throw Okugo's cap of office to the women. The next day, the latter was tried, convicted of spreading false news and assault, and was sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Emeruwa, on the other hand, was convicted of assault and sentenced to three month's imprisonment (Afigbo 1972: 241–242).

Unfortunately, the trial and conviction of Okugo and Emeruwa, and the assurances by the British colonial government that women would not be taxed did not lead to the total suspension of women's demands. In fact, in spite of the return of relative peace to Oloko, the women protests did not abate as their meetings continued, using the Oloko example as both inspiration and template for further demands from the British government.

This is because, on one hand, some of the women did not trust the sincerity of the government in keeping its word that women would not be taxed while on the other hand, some other women desired more far reaching changes than the mere conviction of Okugo and Emeruwa. The Aba women were even more radical and uncompromising in their demands as they wanted all the Court members in Owerri Province sacked and all Native Courts razed down. During a meeting that held at Omuna Native Court area (Aba), their leader directed members to work towards the idea of 'de-capping' Court members and disallowing them from hearing cases anywhere. Instruction was also issued

that anyone that patronised the Native Court was to be sanctioned (Colonial Government 1930: 36).

Significantly, the revolts at Oloko had ripples effect on other parts of the province as women went on a rampage against all instruments of taxation; the chiefs and the native courts. The women followed the established model of pulling down court buildings, destroying court records and freeing prisoners at Ayaba, Asa, Azumini and Obohia areas, and on the 9th of December, 1929, women from Okpala, Nguru, Ayaba and Oloko areas converged at Owerrinta, where they decided that their chiefs be stripped off their caps, as was done by the Oloko women (Bastian 2002: 261).

The women then marched to the native court and disrupted the proceedings by assaulting the chiefs in a calculated attempt to strip them off their caps. Some of the women broke into the prisons cells and released eight prisoners. They proceeded to Okpala, where the District Officer, Mr. Ferguson's presence did not even deter them from besieging the Native Court in an attempt to pull it down. They, afterwards, demanded from the DO that women should not be taxed, and that the prices of local produce should be increased while those of imported goods were to be reduced. More than that, the tax on men should also be significantly reduced, a demand which the women later refocused to a total abolition of all forms of taxation.

The District Officer made his way to Owerrinta on the 10th of December, 1929. There he met around three to four thousand women from Oloko and Ayaba districts in the Bende Division, Ngor and Okpala districts in the Owerri Division and other towns in the Owerrinta District. The women bitterly complained to the DO about the rumor of women taxation and low produce prices which the DO denied and he went on to arrange a meeting with agents, who provided explanation on the produce prices. The women insisted on meeting the DO at Aba in five days in order to officially place their grievances before him.

On the same day, the women attacked the lorry of Mr. Matthews, the Assistant Commissioner of Police, on his way back from Aba. They threw missiles, stone, sticks and yams at his lorry and placed a six-foot long log of wood across the road. On the same day, a large number of women invaded the Ngor Native Court and freed six prisoners. The women tore the Court books, pulled down the Court house and destroyed every building in the compound (Report of Mr. Matthews, Assistant Commissioner of Police, of 24th December, 1929: 1).

Also, about three thousand women marched to the Nguru Native Court to see a note that had been issued by the DO on the previous day that women would not be taxed, a copy of which was given to Chief Nwaturocha; yet, many towns also insisted on having a copy. The women insisted not only that should men be excused from taxation, the tax already paid should be returned. They went ahead and released all prisoners in the cells, tore the Court records to shreds, looted properties within the premises and destroyed all the buildings, with the exception of the rest house.

In the Okpala, Ngor and Nguru areas, groups of women went about demanding the judicial caps of warrant chiefs and destroying the houses of those who refused. In the riots, twenty-one members of the Nguru Native Court were either assaulted or had their properties destroyed, with fourteen and sixteen Native Court members suffering same fate in the Ngor and Okpala areas respectively (Report of Mr. Cook, District Officer, Owerri, paragraph 48).

From available records, one could affirm that Aba was relatively peaceful until the 10th of December, 1929, when women gathered at the market square in protests. According to a Court messenger, the women complained that:

They had heard the women at Owerinta were making noise and demonstrating and they too should demonstrate because if it was true that women were to be taxed it would affect them... They said there would be more along in the morning and they would come to fight about this statement that women were to pay tax (Colonial Government 1930: 36).

At around 10 p.m. on the same day, between three hundred to four hundred women marched to Mr. Toovey's house, which formerly housed the DO. They threw stones, hauled sticks at the house and damaged some parts of the building. Mr. Toovey attempt to dissuade the women from the window was rebuffed as some of them climbed the staircases of the building and even attempted to break the door with their sticks. Mr. Toovey shots, which were fired into the air, eventually dispersed the women (Colonial Government 1930: 36).

The next morning, a large number of women flocked into Aba to attend the women meeting at *Eke Akpara*. Women from Aba itself had already left the town for the meeting, but other women from farther distances trooped in as they got the notice of meeting; hence, they

marched through the entrance in batches. A group of the women assaulted Mr. Logius, an agent of a foreign company (Messrs. Ollivants) and proceeded to the compound of Mr. Henderson, the Area supervisor of United Africa Company, Aba, where they chased laborers out and took the machete of one of the fleeing grass cutting laborers. The women broke all the windows of the house and proceeded to Owerinta road while some sat on the bank at the roadside. Unfortunately, two of the women that were by the roadside lost their lives during an altercation with Dr. Hunter, who knocked down two of the women (Nwanyioma and Ukwa) while trying to dodge the women who stood in front of his moving car (Bastian 2002: 265).

In retaliation, the women destroyed the Doctor's car and invaded the premises of Barclays bank after which they proceeded to the premises of the United Africa Company. The women approached the entrance of the company with shouts that 'Doctor has killed women of our party' (Colonial Government 1930: 46). The women, earlier dispersed by the police, reconvened in large numbers after about thirty minutes. Some of the women, who had gone beyond Aba for the meeting returned to town when they learnt about the accident. An Inspector and three other officers who attempted to disperse the women noted that:

We struggled with these women from the Colonial Bank through the new factory road up to the Government offices. When we got to the offices the women started breaking the Post Office... and after that they went to the Survey Office (Report of Mr. Toovey, Station Magistrate, Aba, of 23rd December, 1929, paragraph 9).

THE BRITISH COLONIAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE WOMEN REBELLION

The Resident's efforts to sway the aggrieved women to sheath their swords were met with physical assaults on him; the women knocked off his helmet and poked his back with sticks. Some of the women proceeded to the house of Mr. Toovey in an attempt to bring down his wife, but were prevented from gaining access to the house. The Resident ordered his orderly and Mr. Toovey to 'fire over the heads of the rampaging crowd' (Report of Mr. Toovey, Station Magistrate, Aba, of 23rd December, 1929, paragraph 9), but one woman was inadvertently took a bullet on her leg. The women regrouped at Eke Akpara and returned to Aba to state their grievances. There, Mr. Jackson advised

the women to return to their villages and send delegates to express their grievances. This further infuriated the women, who were now joined by hundreds more women from the Omuna area. However, at about 7 p.m., a large majority of the women returned to their villages only to return in the morning of the next day, determined to enter Aba, but were repelled.

Troops of the Third Battalion of the Nigeria Regiment arrived at Aba at 7:30 a.m. and aided the dispersion of the women. At noon, about four to five thousand women were rough-handled by the police following the reading of the Riot Proclamation to the women. Four of the women suffered varying degree of injuries, but were undeterred as they reconvened after about an hour later. At this point, a more determined government force finally broke their resolve as no further attempt was made to enter the town (Colonial Government 1930: 48–49).

The colonial government adopted the threat of a one-year imprisonment and the issuance of notices against gatherings within a one-mile radius of merchandise stores. Special constables were also recruited and European traders, missionaries, court messengers, government laborers and co-operative youths were also mobilized to curb the spread of the uprisings. Not only that, the troops that were drafted in demanded food and other necessities from the local inhabitants and those places that refused to meet such demands were burnt down. The use of armed forces and razing of homes, and sometimes, whole compounds, became tools used by the British colonial administration to restore law and order and bring ‘pressure to bear upon a recalcitrant primitive community’ (Akpan and Ekpo 1988: 25). Damages were also levied on towns where government properties were damaged while soldiers seized property in lieu of unpaid damages. Following the suppression of the revolts, the government appointed two commissions of enquiry to investigate the causes of the women revolts.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE WOMEN'S WAR

The revolts had far-reaching effect on the political organization of colonial Eastern Province (Falola and Paddock 2011: xix) and Nigeria in general. It had the immediate effect of the suspension of assessment and tax collection in the Province. In some parts of the Province, tax was not collected for many years as the government had to wait until total restoration of calm before taxation was gradually reintroduced.

The immediate changes that attended the revolts were not as radical as the women wanted, but they were significant. The women's absolute opposition and demand for an immediate, holistic and radical change to the Warrant Chief institution was echoed by one of them during a sitting of the first commission of inquiry:

I want to tell you that these disturbances will go on perhaps for fifteen years unless these Chiefs are decapped. All the Chiefs ...say all sorts of things to impress you that they are good men. ... New Chiefs whom the women say are good men, such are the people we want. ... We ask you to bring peace to the land. You may take evidence for many days, but unless you come to a conclusion which will satisfy the women, we will follow you wherever you go. Formerly we never made demonstrations in this manner, but we do so now in order to show you that women are annoyed. ... No doubt there are women like ourselves in your own country. If need be we will write to them to help us. We will continue fighting until all the Chiefs have been got rid of, but until then the matter will not be settled (Bastian 2002: 263–264).

Some warrant chiefs were deposed during the course of the riots and the colonial government endorsed the removal of all unpopular warrant chiefs. As a result of the women revolts, the appointment of Native Court members was subjected to a unanimous decision of the people at a town meeting. Similarly, the commission of inquiry on the women revolts recommended that Native Court members whose positions were not hereditary should be limited to a term of years instead of a life-time appointment as demanded by the women. While the women revolts did not immediately result in the abolition of the warrant chief institution, it questioned the effectiveness of the institution and initiated the process of its eventual abolition.

The second commission of enquiry made far reaching recommendations towards solving the problems that preceded the women revolts. The report convinced British authorities to undertake a new orientation of policy in the governance of the region. This culminated in the 1933 Native Authority Ordinance and the 1934 Courts and Native Legislation Authority which, amongst others, eradicated the Warrant Chief system and replaced it with more traditional institutions and authorities (Matera *et al.* 2012: 130).

The revolts also compelled the colonial administration to embark on a rigorous study of the indigenous society and people of the Province. Consequently, administrative officers gathered relevant information that were compiled into Intelligence Reports on people over whom they ruled, and by 1934, two hundred (200) Intelligence Reports had been produced (Nwabara 1972: 201) as well as some ethnographic studies of the Ibo people and other ethnic groups (Meek and Arnett 1938; Leith-Ross 1939; Green 1947). The women revolts underscored the incompatibility of the Indirect Rule system with the pre-existing socio-political structure of the people and forced the colonial authority to rely more on expert opinions drawn from rigorous investigations than on the spot assessments by the 'men on the spot' who had the benefit of 'stored wisdom,' but whose knowledge of the people over whom they ruled was, unfortunately, grossly exaggerated (Tamuno 1972: 108).

CONCLUSION

This study revisited the women revolts of 1929 and located them within the context of change and resistance during the British colonial rule in Nigeria. The study concluded that while the immediate cause of the revolts was taxation of men and the rumored taxation of women, the crux of the revolts was the political-economy of women subjugation by colonialism. Indeed, colonialism in Eastern Nigeria altered the balance of power between men and women in by giving more power to masculine-oriented institutions as symbolized by the Warrant Chief institution. That was not the situation before the advent of colonialism.

Secondly, the study also found that the circumstances that would favour large-scale women revolution were comparatively rare and almost totally absent in Nigeria during the British rule; so when such situation appeared in 1928/29 in the Owerri Province, the revolt that developed was instantly crushed by the British government. Although the weapons of the weak, which included propaganda, false compliance, slander, arson, sabotage etc. were adopted by the women at various stages during the crises, these were grossly insufficient arsenals that could not deter the British government that was prepared to crush whatever opposition that may be sparked.

Thirdly, the Aba Women uprising apparently epitomised a history of normal exploitation and normal resistance. Indeed, the women were

‘invariably doomed to defeat and eventual massacre’ as the great insurrection was altogether too disorganized to achieve any lasting result. It was an impatient, loud struggle, stubbornly pursued by both the rural and urban dwellers in 1929, and it could not have accomplished much gains. On the whole, it was not just a struggle of a group of history losers, but a mere flash in the pan, a short movement that was unceremoniously crushed by the British colonial hegemonic regime.

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