
ABA WOMEN PROTEST AND THE AFTERMATH 1929 TILL 1960

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ABSTRACT

The women's protest of 1929, known among Igbo women as Ogu Umunwanyi, occurred from November 23 to January 10, 1930. It was a resistance movement whereby women in the eastern provinces of the British Colony of Nigeria intended to reverse colonial policies that intruded on their political, economic, and social participation in local communities. Women participants included predominantly Igbo and Ibibio women, however, Ogoni and Andoni women; among others participated. Whereas the British system of indirect rule on paper intended to institute political control with minimal intrusion on African societies, colonial rule in eastern Nigeria significantly contributed to redefining women's position in society, which meant colonialism's political changes led to a range of consequences for women's work and daily lives that extended well beyond politics. In addition, the British colonial government imposed an almost completely alien political system of autocratic warrant chiefs on societies that in the past practiced a political system with diffused political authority shared across several positions, organizations and gender. The aftermath witnessed the re-organization of administrative structure in Bende division.

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after World War I, the British colonial army in eastern Nigeria defeated the last major resistance to colonial rule, the Ekwumeku rebellion. In the ensuing decade, resistance to colonial rule continued, but Africans altered their tactics and women featured prominently in anticolonial resistance when cultural changes tended to disadvantage women. The women's protest of 1929 marked an apex in women's resistance in eastern Nigeria to colonial rule. The protest began in the

rural town of Ahaba Oloko, when Igbo women suspected the colonial government intention to use warrant chiefs and the native court system to implement a new tax on women, which they believed the colonial government planned to add to an existing tax on African men. From the initial outbreak of resistance in Oloko, the women's resistance extended across eastern Nigeria as women joined the movement and demanded either significant changes in or the removal of the colonial government. Thousands of women participated in the resistance and they employed a variety of tactics which included removing the cap of office from warrant chiefs, locking factories, burning down native court buildings, blocking train tracks, cutting telegraph wires, releasing prisoners from colonial jails, and destroying or confiscating colonial property. The British colonial government resorted to lethal force and in the process colonial soldiers shot women at Abak, Utu Etim Ekpo, and Opobo. The most significant loss of life occurred at Opobo and it marked the end of the women's protest except for a few minor instances of resistance.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROTEST

The study of women's protest is a revelation of the material conduction which was brought by the warrant chief's system in the Eastern provinces. The women's protest was an offspring of the socio-economic problems that became common place in the era of warrant chiefs system. The dictionary has explained that protest is the act of making of disapproval; a demonstration.¹

There is a long history of collective action by women in Nigeria. In the 1910s, women in Agbaja (Mbaise) stayed away from their homes for a month because they thought that men were killing pregnant women.² Their collective absence pushed village elders to take action in 1924, 3000 women in Calabar protested to a market toll that was required by the government. In Southwestern Nigeria, where the women's war took place, there were other women organisations such as the Lagos market Women's Association, Nigeria Women's Party, and Abeokuta Women's Union.³ There was also an "elaborate system

of women's market network,"⁴ which the Igbo and Ibibio women used to communicate information to organize the women's war. The two months rebellion broke out when Igbo women from the Bende District Umuahia and other places in eastern Nigeria traveled in their thousands to the town of Oloko to protest against the warrant chiefs and the policies imposed by the British colonial administration in South-eastern Nigeria. The protest actually involved women from six ethnic groups; Ibibio, Ogoni, Bonny, Opobo, Andoni, and Igbo.⁵ It was organized and led by the rural women of Oloko, Owerri, Calabar and Bonny provinces. In the events of the revolts, many warrant chiefs were forced to resign and about sixteen native courts were attacked, most of which were destroyed. Over 50 women lost their lives in the process, as many others were counted among the injured. Diverse views have been offered to explain the causes of the women's protest. One of such is the imposition of direct taxation, and the economic upheaval of the global depression of the 1920s, which saw a drastic fall in the price of palm produce and a high cost of basic foodstuff and imported items. Thus, the women's protest was precipitated in part, by the global depression. The protests occurred when the income women derived from palm produce dropped, while the costs of the imported goods sold in their local markets rose sharply.⁶ For example, from December 28, 1928, to December 29, 1929 the prices of palm oil and kernel in Aba fell by 17 percent and 21 percent respectively, while duties on imported goods like tobacco, cigarettes and gray baft; a form of cloth used to make dresses, increased 33 percent and 100 percent respectively.⁷ The deteriorating terms of trade led to the impoverishment of women, and once the rumor spread that they would be taxed, the women's protest started. Another important cause of the protest was rooted in the political transformation resulting from the British indirect rule policy. The women's protest stems from the military occupation of the Igbo area by the British in the early 1900s and the "Warrant Chiefs" they appointed to administer the various communities. The society's traditional authority holders who feared that they would be punished

for resisting the invaders, did not come forward to receive the “Certificates” or “Warrant” the British issued to appointed chiefs. As a result, the majority of warrant chiefs were young men who were not the legitimate authority holders in the indigenous political system. The appointment of warrant chiefs as representatives of the local people was contrary to the political ideology and republican ethos of the Umuahia people.⁸ The appointment of warrant chiefs intensified conflicts in the society, as evidenced by the Native Courts proclamation of 1901, which conferred exclusive judicial functions on the new chiefs in their communities. The village councils were denied their traditional functions, and worse still, cases involving abominations were punished without the ritual propitiations and sacrifices necessary for “Cleansing the earth” and restoring moral equilibrium.⁹ Women were particularly upset by the deserialization of laws, and during the protests they called for the restoration of the old order.

On the other hand, the British appointed warrant chiefs also abused their offices to enrich themselves, in part because they were paid meager allowances that could not sustain their newly acquired prestige and lifestyle. Virtually all of them established a private court in their compounds, where they settle disputes. They also used their headman to collect fines and levies, thus alienating members of their community.

Similarly, the executive functions the warrant chiefs performed for the British government, including the recruitment of men for forced labour to build railways, roads, and government guesthouses, heightened their unpopularity. During the protests, women complained about forced labour, claiming that it increased their workload by depriving them of the services they received from their husbands in farming and the production of palm produce. Women were also concerned about the emerging urban centres, which had become hubs for those engaged in prostitution and other vices that the women believed polluted the land⁹.

Chiefly, the ultimate event that birthed the protest was direct taxation. The British colonial administration had taken measures to enforce the Native Revenue Ordinance in April 1929.¹⁰ The then lieutenant governor of Nigeria Lugard, had consigned a colonial residence- W. E. Hunt, to bring an understanding of the objectives and provision of the new ordinance through explanation to the people of the five provinces in the eastern region. This strategy was used to make clear the path for the direct taxation whose date of arrival was April 1928.¹¹ However, in September, 1929, Captain J. Cook was delegated to take over duties of the Bende Division temporarily from the serving officer Mr. Weir, until the return of Captain Hill from leave. And within few weeks of control, Captain Cook had deemed the originally stated rolls for taxation insufficient, because they did not include details of a number of wives, children and livestock in each household. He decided to revise the existing roll. And it was this unreasonable and vexatious act of Captain Cook that flamed up the two months fire of the Aba women's protest.

ABA WOMEN'S PROTEST

The single road leading to this community that in 1929, produced some heroines of Nigeria's anti-colonial struggle, remains unmotorable¹². Nchara which shares boundaries with the Ngwa people of Abia state on its North-west and the Anangs of Akwa Ibom state, on its Southern part, occupies a pride of place in almost every history book that chronicles the Nigerian political development, at least between 1914 and 1960.

It was from this community which was described by one of its sons as having a "fair topography but a rich soil".¹³ which produces more than a quarter of the food stuff, especially cassava, consumed by Abians, that a group of women, led by very courageous Ikonna, Nwanyiukwu Enyia, confronted their warrant chief, Okeugo who dared to enforce the Obnoxious law then by the colonial masters, that women should start paying taxes, like their husbands. That confrontation led to what

was thereafter referred to in Nigerian history cum political science books, as the Aba Women Protest of 1929.

Though the heroic struggle of madam Ikonna and her compatriots which led to the abrogation of that unfair piece of law, not only in Igbo land but in other parts of colonial Nigeria, was only given a footnote in most books that record it, the efforts of these heroines of the peoples war have never been adequately honoured by the Nigerian state. More painful too, was the fact that historians or chroniclers of that part of our National history have never taken time to correct the several distortions that have been associated with the Nchara/Ahaha Oloko women's confrontation of the dreaded warrant chief and the district Head for instance, that act of valour by Madam Ikonna and her colleagues continues to wear the wrong tag, "Aba Women Riot" when the scene of action was never in Aba.¹⁴ Again, no effort has been made to record for generations unborn, other struggles waged by Nchara/Oloko women under the leadership of Ikonna, nor is there any account of the historical background of the lady warrior and up till now, nothing has been done either by Ikwuano local government Area, the Abia state or federal governments of Nigeria to honour or immortalize these great women whose patriotic zeal, courage and acts of valour must have inspired and influenced such other female Nationalists as Margaret Ekpo, Chief Mrs. Funmilayo Ransom Kuti, Hajia Gambo Sawaba, among others, who came after her, to join the struggle against socio political and economic oppressors in Nigeria.¹⁵ Madam Ikonna, born in 1877, into the family of Mazi Orji Onwuama Onyeukwu from Oloko village but got married to the family of Enyia, Ndiokpolu Akanu Achara in Oloko clan of the old Bende division of what is now known as Abia State. A very beautiful woman in her youth, Ikonna was said to have been so loved by her father that he gave her the name (Ikonna), meaning her father's heart throb, because she had so much resemblance with him. Again, her beauty, strength and fearlessness, became for her, as a young girl, sources of disadvantage going by the believe then that the Whiteman's education was meant for only lazy male children, coupled with the fact that her

no nonsense attitude could lead her into trouble that may result in her being sold into slavery, forced her parents to allow her venture into acquiring what she herself was later to tag the “white man’s staff” (western education).¹⁶

Be that as it may, Ikonna’s educational disadvantage did not prevent her from getting married to Mazi Enyia Mgbudu of Umu Okengogegbe Obewon Amahia, both in Nchara Oloko in Ikwuano Umuahia area of now Abia state. The marriage was blessed with four children, a girl and three boys. As a young woman, Ikonna had both the leadership qualities and militant disposition to organize the women of Nchara, Oloko clan for positive action against societal ills. So in 1929 when Chief Okeugo, the warrant chief of Oloko, in obedience to the wishes of the colonial masters broke the sad news that women should start paying tax, Ikonna mobilized the women folk to confront the authorities.

She went beyond her immediate Nchara community to Umugo, Ahaba, Usaka, Eleogu, Azuiyi, Obohia, Amizi and Awomukwu, all neighbouring communities within Oloko clan, to mobilize women for a protest march against the tax law and that protest was said to have taken the women who were in nudity, except the local Akori leaf, they used in covering their womanhood. At chief Okugo’s house, Ikonna was said to have personally charged at the man pushing him around and removing his cap. Also at the District Head’s house, Ikonna and her protesting colleagues also had a brush with the guard (Kotima) who they subdued.¹⁷

Record has it that on the morning of 18 November, 1929, a man named Mark Emeruwa who was conducting census (the census was in relation to taxation) on the people living in the village of Oloko, upon the instruction of the warrant chief - Okeugo entered the compound of a widow named Nwanyiukwu and instructed her to “count her livestock and people living with her.”¹⁸ Knowing fully well what this meant, you would be taxed based on the number of the outcome. Nwanyiukwu became embittered; and in replying, she said, “was your widowed mother counted?” This simply means that women were not

supposed to pay tax in Igbo society. Anger was however, expressed with words, by the two of them. Thus, the widow proceeded to the town square to find other women who were already deliberating on the tax issue and explained to them her sad experience.

Nwanyiukwu account prompted the women to invite other women with the aid of palm leaves from other areas of the Bende district. Approximately ten thousand women gathered, and a protestation insisting on the removal and trial of the warrant chief was staged.

Fearing that the situation might get out of hand, especially as the protests spread to Umuahia, where factories and government offices were located, the British district officer acceded to the women's demands and jailed Okeugo for two years. Generally, the protest in Bende Division ended peacefully, and the district officer effectively used the leaders of the women to curtail future protests.

On the other hand, in another development, from Aba Division of Owerri province, the women protest however, took on a more violent form. It was from there that the protest spread to parts of Owerri, Ikot Ekpene, and Abak divisions. The protest began in Owerrinta after the enumerator (census taker) of warrant Chief Njoku Alaribe, knocked down a pregnant woman during a scuffle, leading to the eventual termination of her pregnancy. The news of her assault shocked local women, who on December 9, 1929 protested against what they regarded as an "act of abomination".¹⁹ The masses in Njoku's compound, and during an encounter with armed police, two women were killed and many others were wounded. Their leader was whisked off to the city of Aba, where she was detained in prison.

Owerrinta women then summoned a general assembly of all Ngwa women at Eke Okpara on December 11, 1929, to recount their sad experiences. The meeting attracted thousands of women including those from neighbouring Igbo areas. They resolved to carry their protests to Aba. As the women arrived on Factory Road in Aba, a British medical Officer driving accidentally injured two of the women, who eventually died. The other women, in anger, raided the nearby Barclays Bank and the prison to release their leader. They also

destroyed the native court building, European factories and other establishments. No one knows how many women that died in Aba, but according to T. Obinkaram Echewa's compilation of oral accounts of women participating in the protest, about one hundred women were killed by soldiers and policemen.²⁰

The protest then spread to Ikot Ekpene and Abak divisions of Calabar province, taking a violent and deadly turn at Utu-Etim-Ekpo, where government buildings were burned on December 14 and a factory was looted, leaving some eighteen women dead and nineteen wounded. More casualties were recorded at Ikot Abasi near Opobo, also in Calabar province, where on December 16, thirty-one women and one man were reportedly killed and thirty-one others wounded.

In 1957, that is 28 years after the Aba women protest, Ikonna, Nwanyiukwu led yet another women protest against the Eastern Nigerian Government led by late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. This time, it was against the government policy of excessive taxation against the men. Ikonna and her colleagues had reasoned then that self-rule having been achieved by the Eastern region, the indigenous government had no business imposing excessive taxes on the citizens. The government saw reasons with her and relaxed the tax law, but not before warning her not to lead any women unrest again, before she left Dr. Azikiwe's office in Enugu.²¹

Two years later, in 1959, the women were again up in protest. The eastern Nigerian government had shared a certain food formula among school children which claimed the lives of some of them. Ikonna again, led another delegation of women to Enugu, where she demonstrated against the government policy. She was of course arrested and detained for a couple of days but released because the government feared that her continued detention could spark off another women protest.

As a consequence, the British government authorized Civil and Military Officers to suppress the disturbances and district officers were granted the right to impose fines in the disaffected areas as compensation for damages to property and as a deterrent against

future protest. On January 2, 1930, the government also appointed a commission of inquiry to investigate the roots of the disturbances in Calabar province.²²

The commission submitted a short report on January 27, 1930, but due to the report's limited scope, the government appointed a second commission on February 7, 1930 to cover Owerri and Calabar provinces.²³ The commission began its work at Aba on March 10, 1930, and submitted its report on July 21. The report convinced the government to carry out many administrative reforms, including the abolition of warrant chief system, the rapid pace of social change, and the fear that they would be taxed. Their solidarity was reinforced by their common religious ideas and values and the moral revulsion they expressed over acts of sacrilege.

Although the government suppressed the protests ruthlessly to avoid future disturbances, Igbo women mounted similar protests during the 1930s and 1940s against the introduction of oil mills and the mechanization of palm production, which undermined their economic interests. A discussion of the Igbo women's protest provides a broad picture of British colonialism in Africa, the difficulties involved in imposing a foreign administration on indigenous peoples and the crucial role women played in a primary resistance movement before the emergence of modern Nigerian nationalism.²⁴

In addition, the positions of women in society were greatly improved as women were appointed to serve as Native court members. The administration for the first time in its history, appointed a few influential leaders of the women's revolt to serve as Native Court members, including Chinwe, the only female member out of the 13 members of the Nguru Mbaise Native Court. Also in Umuakpo Native court area, 3 out of 30 members were women, while one out of 9 members of the Okpuala Native Court was a woman.²⁵

Also realizing how powerful the trio was; the Oloko trio: Ikonna, Nwannedia and Nwugo, the District Officer used them to prevent violence in other areas.²⁶ In Umuahia for example women had massed in the town to begin protest against the warrant chiefs. As the D. O.

feared that the protest might get out of control and endanger European factories and government establishments, he quickly contacted the trio to dissuade the women from embarking on their protest. The trio addressed the women, and to the amazement of the D. O., the protest march did not take place.

Suffice it to mention Madam Mary Okezie, who clearly emerged as the most famous leader of Ngwa a leading exponent of women's rights calling for better health facilities for women, and their involvement in governance. Her influence towered in 1948, when she founded the Ngwa women's Association to promote the education and welfare of women.²⁷

The women protest is seen as the historical dividing point in British colonial administration in Nigeria, with far reaching implications. The protest was also instrumental in marking the rise of gender ideology, offering women who were not married to the elites, the opportunity to engage in social actions.

AFTERMATH: ADMINISTRATIVE REORGANIZATION IN THE POST ABA WOMEN PROTEST ERA

The situation created by the Aba Women's protest of 1929 demanded urgent political reform throughout Southeastern Nigeria. Since this was not a manifestation of the unsuitability of the economic and local government structure in the area, it then became necessary to devise a new structure that was based as nearly as possible on the traditional system of government and procedure in vogue among the indigenous people prior to the advent of British colonial government.²⁸

The re-organization of the administrative structure in Bende Division, as in other areas of South Eastern Nigeria, was based on the Intelligence Reports compiled by British administrative officers between 1930 and 1937. In Mr. Allen's report on the Ngwa clan, he recommended' the union of all Ngwa that were in Aba and Bende Division into one Division. Since the Ngwa were in the majority in Aba Division, the few Ngwa towns in Bende Division were allowed

to join those in Aba Division. Thus, in April 1934, the Ngwa towns of Ngwa Ukwu, Nsulu, Ntigha, and Nvosi, hitherto in Bende Division were merged with their kith and kin in Aba Division.²⁹ Subsequently, south western boundary of Bende Division now moved in a north eastern direction for about 10.36 kilometres between the villages of Akanu Nchara and Otoro Nchara in Bende Division and Ama Achi, Aro Achara and Ohuhu in Aba Division.³⁰ In other words, the south-western boundary between the two division between the villages of Akanu Nchara and Otoro Nchara.

The remaining clans were re-organized into administrative and court divisions. As was the policy in Owerri Province, these Divisions were, wherever possible, based on community divisions.³¹ Thus, the village and the village group councils became the units of administration with each of the seventeen clans in Bende. The village became the lowest political administrative authority in the community. The elders of each “Ezi” or “Onumara” (kindred) were members of the Council. However, in areas like Ohafia, Abiriba, Item, Uzuakoli, Ubakala and Ohuhu where there were recognized village heads, those also became members of the council. The village group council comprised all the villages in the clan. The council was recognized as the Native Authority, and the village council was subordinate to it. The members of the clan council were the same members of the village council.

The Native Courts were equally re-organized. Prior to this re-organization, there were only five Native Courts in Bende Division. These were Bende (1905), Oloko (1905), Ohafia (1907), Alayi (1923) and Ayaba (1923) Native Courts.³² Each of these had a grade ‘B’ Native Court (lower court) jurisdiction status which means that lesser cases can be heard in the court.³³ But with this re-organization, each of the clans had one court with grade ‘D’ status. The exception was Isuogu which had two.³⁴ It is not stated why Isuogu was given two Native Courts. This may be to the dispersed nature of settlement in the area, since the clan covered a large land area. This conclusion is drawn because being immediate neighbours of the Ngwa and Annang

in Ikot-Ekpene who were known to have dispersed settlement patterns, it then stands that the Isuogu settlement pattern would resemble that of their neighbours. The District Officer Bende, in his 1945-50 annual report testified to this when he wrote that, "...Ibere, Oboro, Isuogu are of a different character from the rest of the Division, and are similar to their neighbours in Aba and Ikot-Ekpene"³⁵

The 1930-38 re-organizations created eighteen native courts in the division. It was the community's council (village group) members who were the bench members of the courts. The court members were now called judges as against the warrant chiefs of the pre-women protest era.³⁶ The financial system was equally reorganized. The introduction of direct taxation in 1928 was followed by the opening of a Divisional treasury at Bende. This meant that all the revenue derived through taxation was kept at the Divisional treasury. This period witnessed the opening of separate clan treasuries with their own estimates in some areas of the Division. These were at Umuimenyi, Oboro, Item, Ozuitem, Ibeku, Ohafia and Abam.³⁷ The re-organisation exercise had some advantages. In the first place, the courts cited within each clan solved the problem of the court members having to go long distances as hitherto was the practice. Besides, it brought the judicial system nearer to the people so that anyone with grievance could have easy access to the court members who were now found in every family.

However, these advantages should not make one to lose sight of the fact that the arrangement had many flaws. Firstly, because this re-organization was based on the unlimited representation of extended families at village or village group council meeting.³⁸ It rendered such courts or councils unwieldy. It also encouraged family disputes as a result of envy against selected members. Moreover since representation based on one being his family's eldest member, it meant that the younger men, especially those with education were excluded from participating in the affairs of their village in an age when British colonialism had already undermined the Indigenous system it was trying to prop up. There was also the fact that citing of

the Native Courts in some areas enhanced the feeling of superiority which some groups had over their neighbours. A case in point was the establishment of the Native Court at the Nkwoegwu market, Okaiuga in the Ohuhu clan.

The Umuopara and Okaiuga village groups of Ohuhu had traditions of mutual jealousies and hostility in the period before colonial rule and even after. The Okaiuga group constantly encroached on Umuopara land which the latter regarded as harassment. The new arrangement meant, therefore, the enhancement of the feeling of superiority which the Okaiuga had over their neighbours. The Umuopara, on their part, refused to attend the Nkwoegwu Native Court for some months after its establishment. However, the Umuopara were coerced into attending the court by the appointment of one of their sons, Nwononiwu, as a member of the Nkwoegwu court.³⁹

The corrupt practices in the Native Courts were neither removed nor curtailed by this re-organization. Mayne lamented that, "...corruption of the injurious type is far more prevalent than under the warrant chief system."⁴⁰ To what then do we attribute this increase in corruption in the Native Courts? This might be due to the fact that the increased number of Native Courts in the Division made it impossible for the administrative officers to have closer supervision of all the courts. We know that this was even impossible during the period of the Warrant Chief system. Thus, the court members were left more to themselves, the result of which was the ruthless exploitation of the poor masses; A case in point occurred in the Ibere Native Court in 1938. Court clerk, Kalu Ndukwe, of the Ibere Native Court got "fifteen shillings" from one man who wanted to file a case. In the receipt which he gave to the man, he entered fifteen shillings. But in the counterfoil kept by him, he entered seven shillings and sixpence which was the fee the man was supposed to pay. Unfortunately for the court clerk, the day this man decided to withdraw his case was the day the District Officer chose to visit the Ibere court. Since the man's money was to be refunded, he was paid back 7/6 pounds by the District Officer. The

man protested that he paid 15 shillings and brought out his receipt to support his claim. The receipt and the counter foil read different amounts and Kalu Ndukwe, the court clerk was subsequently charged to court and fined five pounds.⁴¹ The re-organization resulted in a very large number of native authorities and courts which by comparison with others were “untidy” for effective and efficient administrative purposes. This made the administrative and judicial system much more confusing and difficult to manage. There was therefore, an attempt at further re-organization in both systems.

CONCLUSION

The tactics and scope of the women’s protest, confounded colonial authorities because even though they extensively assured women they would not be taxed, participation in the resistance increased and spread across the region. Eventually, the women’s protest caused the British to abandon the warrant chief/system and establish village council; however, generally women were excluded from political participation. More importantly, the women protest of 1929 marks the beginning of a transition in eastern Nigeria, from predominantly localized ethnic-based opposition to British imperialism, to resistance movements that transcended ethnicity and class.

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