

**Abiodun Afolabi**

Department of History and International Studies

University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

 0000-0002-7970-4400

**Oladiti Abiodun Akeem**

Department of History

Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Oyo State, Nigeria

 0000-0001-7058-3174

e-ISSN 2449-8645

HEMISPHERES

No. 37, 2022

## Change and Resistance: A Reflection on the Aba Women Uprising in Colonial Nigeria

### Abstract

This study revisits the resistance of women against the British colonial government's introduction of its taxation system in eastern Nigeria and focuses on the problematized relationship between culture and history. Although historical studies have been carried out to explain why women resisted change and why men were largely absent from the struggle against in the colony of eastern Nigeria, new studies on the subject have provided vital information on how women responded to the colonial imposition of tax and how cultural dynamics spurred the women's revolts. Data adopted for the study were taken from primary sources consisting of archival records, participant observers' reports, as well as information on secondary sources such as journal articles and books, in order to explain the ethnography and culture of the Igbo society. This paper argues that women mainly resisted colonial tax imposition without strong involvement of the men, and expressed their anger against the Native Court and Warrant Chief systems, which were, exclusively, male dominated. It concludes that women were not passive victims of colonial intimidation and oppression, but were vanguards of resistance against a hostile and brutal colonial regime in Eastern Nigeria.

**Keywords:** taxation, warrant chiefs, native authority, indirect rule, women's revolts, ethnographic survey, cultural change, eastern Nigeria.

### Introduction

The Aba women's riot was one of the momentous incidents recorded in the history of southern Nigeria. The primary factor responsible for the introduction of taxation in southern Nigeria was the colonial policy of self-sustenance through the generation of internal revenue from each province of the colony. The success of tax implementation in other provinces of colonial Nigeria heightened the calls for the introduction of taxation. It was thus introduced into south-eastern Nigeria as a replacement for forced labour. Even before the introduction of taxation on women, which directly led to the riots, women also bore the burdens of taxation, which had been introduced on men, as there were already concerns about the management of the taxes paid by men.

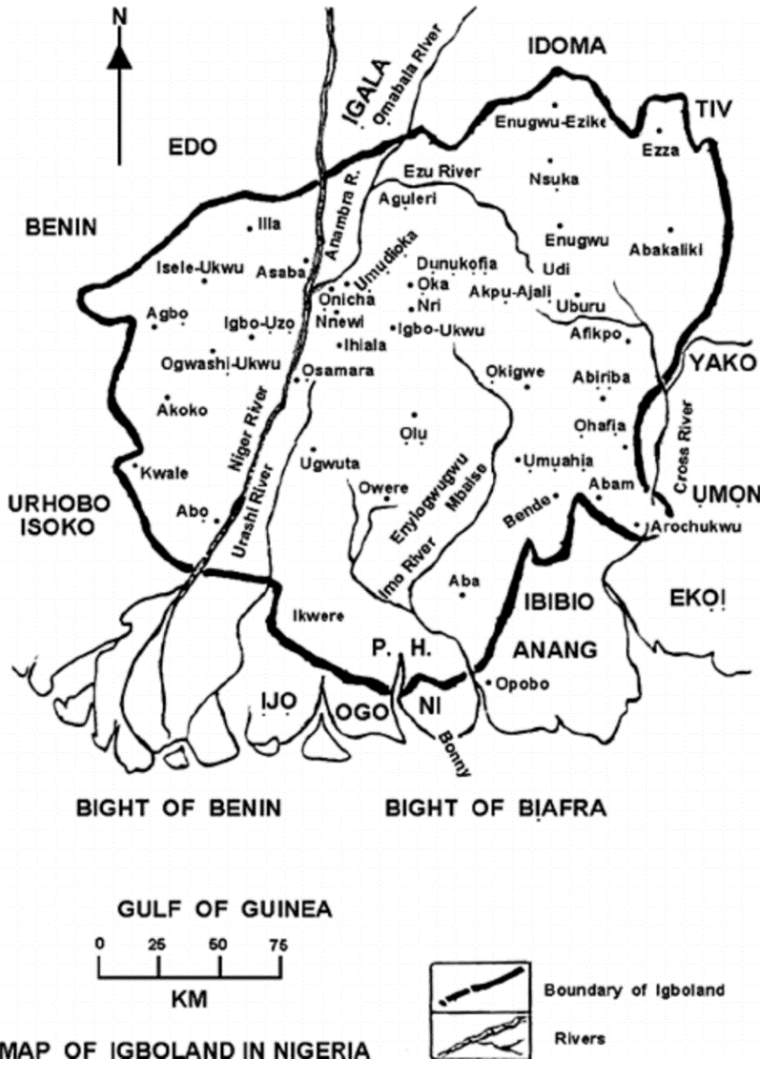
It is important to note that Lord Lugard introduced the Indirect Rule system because he realised the need to centralise the traditional political institutions of south-eastern Nigeria. There were no pre-existing chieftaincy institutions in the Igbo-speaking areas before the introduction of British rule in eastern Nigeria. Hence, at the inception of British rule, willing individuals were appointed among the people and were given warrants to act as local agents of the British colonial government. There was, however, no formal system of taxation in the stateless Igbo societies, hence, the reluctance of pre-existing traditional authorities to embrace the implementation of new colonial taxation policy. The powers given to the chiefs through the native court system was unprecedented in the historical experience of the Igbos. The Warrant Chief system was fathered by the court of equity which came into existence on the initiative of European and African merchants during the “legitimate trade” era. The government adopted it in its bid to centralise the traditional political institutions of south-eastern Nigeria. The women, however, resisted the British colonial government’s attempt to change their social order through cunning imposition of colonial laws in order to effect the tax collection process. They vociferously contended with the appointed colonial warrant chiefs and vehemently refused to be coerced into compliance with the British predatory and hegemonic demands. They unequivocally registered their grievances against the perceived threat to their social, cultural and economic ways of life as they saw the corrupt native courts and their chiefs as the bastions of colonial oppression and destabilisation.

Indeed, the women’s rebellion against the British colonial imposition of taxes on communities rocked the colonial infrastructure in Owerri Province to its foundation. The collection of taxes on farmers, women, traders and landowners was considered by the Igbo as an infringement on their ideology, customs and values that were not extraneous to the people. The Igbo women challenged the British colonial authority, (*NAI, Headlines*, 1973, p. 5). Not surprisingly, all five provinces of south-eastern Nigeria, with the exception of Onitsha and Ogoja, resisted the introduction of taxes. The plausible explanation on why the local women of these two provinces did not join others in the riot was because a centralised administrative structure of government was operative in Onitsha and Ogoja, unlike which was in practice in other parts of Igboland.

### **Ethnographic Consideration**

It is pertinent to provide an ethnographic survey of the Igbo culture and tradition. The Igbo language is mainly spoken by the indigenous people of south-eastern Nigeria. The land covers an area of 40,922 square kilometers

(Fig.1) The rivers of the geological area of the land provided an ecological niche for the people in and around the area to develop early human population in the community (Okpoko and Ibeanu, 2005, p. 191).



**Figure 1.** showing Igboland and other major historical centres  
**Source:** [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Igboland-in-Nigeria\\_Source\\_fig1\\_235720609/download](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Igboland-in-Nigeria_Source_fig1_235720609/download) accessed on 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2022

The people exploited Riverine resources and developed skills in canoe building in the Anambra River Benue and other similar areas. The people of the eastern region of Nigeria engaged in farming and trading as a way of life and speak Igbo as their native language, a language that belongs to the Kwa group of the Niger-Congo family, which had its origin around the Niger-Benue confluence. Farming was the main preoccupation among the people, and they planted yam, which they regarded as the “king of crops”. Most communities in the eastern region deified the *yam* spirit, which is variously referred to as *ifejioku*, *Njokuji* and *Ahajioku* (Okpoko and Ibeanu, 2005, p. 192).

The prestige and social recognition that a man is accorded also depended on the number and sizes of yams in his barn. In other words, the yam was the index of wealth and status. Chieftaincy titles such as *Diji*, and *Ojiji eme* were conferred on individuals who excelled in the number and quality of yams they possessed. Besides, pottery and iron manufacture were also popular vocations among the people. There is considerable evidence that both males and females participated in these two vocations. Igbo woman were renowned potters and produced both utilitarian and ornamental wares in commercial quantities. Politically, power was not centralised, although they had a participatory political system in areas such as Ogoja, Onitsha and Afikpo. For instance, an age-grade system was useful in the management of village affairs. The population participation in the political structure, especially male members, which made it difficult for an individual to claim sole authority (Okpoko and Ibeanu, 2005, p. 192).

It is also important to note that the colonial officials failed to understand the political, social and economic set-up of the people, and that ultimately caused the government much embarrassment. They did not understand that, unlike what was quite common in the then Western world, a wife was not completely dependent on the income of her husband. The women of eastern Nigeria were actively involved in trading and acted as intermediaries in the supply of palm products to Europeans. They also imported items such as tobacco, clothes and sold cigarettes and spirits. They also kept domestic animals, earned and spent money on their families to ease the burden on their husbands. Indeed, their trading activities took them all over the east where there were markets for their merchandise. Through the marketing of goods, there were interactions and exchanges of ideas and views among women on current events. The point to note is that whatever happened in one village was reported in other areas on other market days. There was, thus, in existence an association of women through trade (*NAI, Headlines*, 1973) during the period.

Apart from that, the marital system in the east then was exogamous, a custom that compelled the man to marry outside his village. The wife thus remained in touch with people from her original village, and this facilitated

the flow of information across all the villages. The women also had cultural associations that brought them together at regular intervals. During meetings, they sang, danced and exchanged ideas on a wide variety of topics and had rules that regulated the conduct of members. It was, therefore, not surprising to see the rapidity with which the news of the women's riots spread through the east, and although the riots have come to be prefixed with Aba, they did not start in Aba and were not limited to Aba (*NAI, Headlines, 1973*).

In other parts of the region, like Ogoja and Onitsha, evidence abounds that the community adopted kinship systems that peopled the centralised political institutions, and men who had sufficient economic resources and power constituted themselves into a formal assembly for the purpose of governance. In such instances, membership of the assembly was restricted and limited, while admittance of new members depended on the approval of the council, not on lineage or any other familial groups. In sum, political power in the eastern regions was diffused through a complex system of lineage, council, and monarchical representatives, and the king (*Obi*) did not have the privilege of absolute power. This is the plausible explanation why women decided to rebel against the state colonial order in defence of the indigenous political tradition of the Igbo society in eastern Nigeria.

### **Theory of Culture Change**

This study adopts a theory of cultural change to explain why women resisted the colonial imposition of taxes that were alien to the people's tradition and culture in Igbo society. The impetus behind the resistance to change by the Aba women is a historic and significant turning point in the history of colonialism in Nigeria. This finds illustration in the fact that the cultural change witnessed during this period came from within against British imperialism and its attempt to introduce a new culture of tax payment into the region, a culture that was alien to the people. The deliberate and conscious pressure to impose a tax on the people was met with stiff resistance by the women since it was perceived as an insult to their cultural norms. A significant part of the female population refused to comply with the new colonial tax demand - it was not going to be easy to impose new ideas and cultural norms on the traditional ways of life.

### **Tax and Taxation in the Eastern Province**

The establishment of the British colonial administration and the introduction of the Indirect Rule System attracted opposition and riots in south-eastern Nigeria. The administration inaugurated the Native Revenue Ordinance in order to collect taxes on behalf of the government and created the Warrant

Chief system to administer native courts, which were recognised as the de-facto and de-jure ruler of the Eastern Region. Significantly, no such form of direct taxation was collected from the people in the eastern part of Nigeria before 1929. From among the Igbo people, selected individuals were appointed for special assignments, and they served as administrators, rulers, judges and tax collectors. These warrant chiefs, who were perceived by the women as corrupt ‘miniature tyrants’, were created to fill the leadership position because the Igbos had no chieftaincy system within their socio-cultural groups, unlike the Hausa and Yoruba of Nigeria, who operated a centralised system of government. The Igbo people, instead, ran an egalitarian system of government, which recognised authority as emanating directly from the people.

The British administrative structure of indirect rule incorporated native *elites* of the eastern region to administer the local justice system and serve as tax collectors. The warrant chief system emanated as a matter of necessity from the lack of a pre-existing chieftaincy institution in some parts of Africa, like the Igbo, Tiv, Jukun and the Idoma societies of central Nigeria (Oladiti and Alao, 2017. p. 42). The British hired willing participants and gave them “warrants” to act as local representatives of the colonial government among the people. The appointment of these *elites* as provincial chief was viewed by the people of the region as a new invention that was alien to the people’s customary practices and traditions. The new powers given to the provincial chiefs was also enhanced by the Native Court system, and this fostered an unprecedented change against the tradition of the people that was operative before the colonial intrusion. These chiefs began to use their privileged position to accumulate wealth. Besides, women were ignored by the colonial officials in their tax collection schemes and had no roles as judges in the native courts. This angered and in part drove women to revolt against the new colonial policy of taxation.

Notwithstanding the challenges envisaged from the introduction of direct taxation in the eastern provinces, the colonial government was undeterred in its determination to introduce taxation to the region. The government’s resolve was based on the economic expediency of generating internal revenue for the smooth running and development of the eastern region. It was also considered convenient for the region to pay direct tax in conformity with the other provinces of colonial Nigeria. In addition, forced labour, which was acceptable as a substitute for taxation, was considered to be anachronistic, wasteful and burdensome by the colonial authorities. Direct taxation was thus seen an alternative to forced labour (Afigbo, 1972, pp. 209– 210).

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 livestock, as the earlier assessment conducted was found

to have been arbitrarily prepared (*NAI, Headlines*, 1973, p. 5). To this end, the Lieutenant-Governor, 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 sensitisation campaign and registration of all male adults in the provinces.

The Lieutenant-Governor showed some understanding of the people's objection to the numbering of their women and children and there was a limitation of his proposal for a 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 a few days after the resumption of Sir Graeme Thomson, he approved 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 plan for taxation of the provinces (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 3).

Major U.F.H. 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 on the southern provinces without a great deal of resistance. Ruxton believed that the whole basis on which the Native Revenue Ordinance rested in Northern Nigeria and Yoruba provinces were completely absent and that its wording was "lacking in meaning to officers in the eastern provinces." (Afigbo, 1972, p. 216). By April 4, 1927, the Native Revenue Ordinance (though with slight modifications) became law in the eastern provinces. The Lieutenant-Governor appointed W.E Hunt to embark on a sensitisation campaign on the new law throughout the provinces. Residents were also instructed to estimate the annual value of land and produce in each community, estimate the annual value of profits from trade, production and employment in each community, and estimate the value of all livestock. Based on these assessments, each of the officers then proposed a flat rate of 2½% as tax for all male adults (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, pp. 4-5).

In the Lieutenant-Governor's proposal, the imposition of direct taxation on the eastern provinces was to take effect on April 1, 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 a hitch; the concept of taxation was not only new to the people at the time of its introduction, its whole idea was contrary to their belief system; an eminent historian succinctly noted the people saw it as “either ‘tax on head’ or ‘tax on land’, which further meant ‘ransom’ or ‘land rent’” respectively. 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 a tax demand with such implications was unethical (Afigbo, 1960, p. 550).

The concept was therefore bound to be met with hesitation, if not absolute resistance by the people. In the 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, p. 266), 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: “as soon as the purpose of the assessment was announced to be taxation, considerable opposition was experienced.” (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry, 1930, p. 5*). The people adamantly refused to provide information and fled from their compounds at the sight of the assessors. They even threatened and abused any chief or member of their community who assisted the assessors.

Olakwo and Okpala were at the centre of the 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 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, p. 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. In fact, Owerri Province exceeded the estimated tax returns (Afigbo, 1972, p. 235), but this initial success was only transient and it soon morphed into disorderliness and anarchy the following year.



## **Investigating the Foundations of the Owerri Women's Insurrection**

If the processes of tax collection were peaceful and hitch-free in 1928 when it was first undertaken in the Owerri province, the same cannot be said of the year that followed. At 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 of the 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, p. 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 after 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 the existence of its 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 increasing understanding of the people over whom they ruled (Tamuno, 1972, p. 102), betrayed their lack of accurate knowledge of the social organisation of the people, and owing to the fact that only superficial knowledge existed as regards the organisations in the eastern provinces (Memorandum of the Secretary, Southern Provinces, on the Origin and Causes of the Disturbances in the Owerri and Calabar provinces, paragraphs 160 and 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 education of the de facto rulers of the people. The subordination of these 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 any level of preparation of each area. The time decided upon for the introduction of taxation thus found some areas less prepared than others. In the Owerri Province, the people had not evolved a more centralised system of political organisation, 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's revolts against possible taxation (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 95).

Taxation had an excruciating effect on some men, to the extent that some of them resorted to pawning or borrowing from warrant chiefs at exorbitant rates (Matera *et al*, 2012, pp.105–106 ). Archdeacon Benson, whose sympathy

rested with the people, noted that in many cases, in order to raise the cash for tax, people resorted to borrowing money that none of them could possibly pay back, some even pawning their children in order to pay their debts (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 96). There were even instances of men who pawned themselves in order to pay tax, and this was a point of severe complaint by the women during the revolts. The heavy burdens of taxation were not only borne by men, but also by women, who made indirect contributions to the payment of their husband's taxes.

Hit by the heavy weight of taxation on their husbands, the women took independent initiatives, not only to resist the rumoured 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 ... men had been made to pay tax and the rumour that women were going to be taxed spread around... Women became infuriated because they had already felt the burden of the tax on men...". They "acted according to their consciences and there was no law made by men that women should not move about (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 105).

In the same vein, the 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." (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 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 rumoured extension to women. Corruption was the greatest defect of the Native Court system. It was a situation where judges took bribes while some people used their connections to enrich themselves and avoided punishment for their crimes. The Native Courts were not only, in most cases, used as tax collection centres, they also served as trial courts for tax defaulters. In addition, members of the 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 full reimbursement of amounts that they never even paid in the first place, should the woman leave them, not considering the depreciation that must have occurred as a result of the tax burden the women must have endured before marriage.

The events surrounding re-assessments and rumoured 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 a four-gallon tin of palm oil dropped from 7s. 0d. in 1928, to 5s. 10d. in 1929 (Memorandum of Secretary, Southern Provinces, 1929, Paragraph 81). The reduction in the prices of palm kernel and palm oil had a ripple effect on the daily activities of the people. The importance of the prices of the commodities made it a principal subject of daily discussion at the markets, especially by the women, 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, p. 238).

One could say that the agitations for an increase in commodity prices and the issue of taxation caused and reinforced each other: low commodity prices agitated the women and predisposed them to protest against the government or its agents, who were perceived as culpable for the reduction in commodity prices, while 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 embedded in the women's revolts that whenever the women were asked to state their grievances, they always presented the low price of palm produce as one of them.

Significantly, the inability or unwillingness of the people to trust the colonial government was the fruit of a seed 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 with carrying out their tasks clandestinely (Gailey, 1970, p. 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, strong 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, 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, there was considerable opposition (*Assessment Reports*, Owerri Division Records, p. 1, paragraphs 1 and 4). The counting of the people without the people knowing

the object of the exercise was not only a breach of a fundamental principle of good governance, it also created the background of the people's distrust of the colonial government and its intentions in the implementation of subsequent tax laws.

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 et al, 1988, p. 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.

### **The Women's Rebellion in the Owerri Province**

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 14, 1929 (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 11). The women's 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 between a large number of locals 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, that the women were to be counted invoked the memory of the previous deception by Resident Ingles. The women therefore considered the new count as a precursor to the taxation of women. Chief Oparaocha, who strongly believed that the women had been pushed to the brink, explained: "the women had been deceived... but afterwards they paid tax... First, ...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" (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 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 20, 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 a counter until he was warned on November 18, 1929 that the count must be concluded within the next eight days. He then, unenthusiastically, nominated

Mark Emeruwa, who commenced his counting from Okugo's compound and on Saturday, November 23, 1929 he proceeded to the compound of Ojim Nwanyewura, where one of Ojim's wives 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 had been 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 (Van Allen, 1972, p. 173).

For the women, counting was synonymous with taxation. They therefore sent a palm leaf, which symbolised the call for all women to converge at Oloko, a town district 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 (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 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's delegation recounted to the District Head how Okugo's men injured many of them in an attempt to drive them away, and how (though without verifiable proof) Okugo shot a pregnant woman.

The District Officer (DO) henceforth admitted that although the counting had been initiated by him, it was not intended as a tax document since the 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, from November 29, 1929).

On November 27, 1929, the DO met about 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, saying that "it was in the same manner that men were made to pay tax

... after the women have been counted they will be made to pay tax (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 14). Although the DO issued them a written assurance, he, however, 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 2, 1929, the women's calls for the trial of Okugo were unrelenting. The new DO, on one hand, promised to throw Okugo's cap of office to the women, and the next day he 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, p. 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 the women's demands. In fact, in spite of the return of relative peace to Oloko, the women's 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, other women desired more far reaching changes than the mere convictions of Okugo and Emeruwa. The 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 to the ground. The women's leaders directed members to work towards the idea of 'de-capping' Court Members' and disallowing them from hearing cases anywhere, and that anyone that patronised the Native Court was to be sanctioned (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 36).

Significantly, the revolts at Oloko had ripples effect in 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 December 9, 1929, women from the Okpala, Nguru, Ayaba and Oloko areas converged at Owerriinta, where they decided that their chiefs be stripped of their caps, as had been done by the Oloko women (Bastian, 2002, p. 261). The women then marched to the Native Court and disrupted the proceedings by assaulting the chiefs in a calculated attempt to strip them of their caps. Some of the women broke into the prison cells and released eight prisoners. They proceeded to Okpala, where the DO, Ferguson's presence did not even deter them from besieging the Native Court in an attempt to pull it down. Afterwards they 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 reduced. Not only that, the tax on men too was to be significantly reduced, a demand which the women later refocused to a total abolition of all forms of taxation.

The DO made his way to Owerinta on December 10, 1929. There he met around 3,000 to 4,000 women from the Oloko and Ayaba districts in the Bende Division, Ngor and Okpala Districts in the Owerri Division and other towns in the Owerinta district. The women bitterly complained to the DO about the rumours of women's taxation and low produce prices, which the DO denied. He went on to arrange a meeting with agents, who provided an explanation about the produce prices. The women insisted on meeting the DO at Aba five days later 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, sticks and yams at his lorry and placed a six-foot long log of wood across the road. A large number of women invaded the Ngor Native Court and freed six prisoners. The women tore up the Court books, pulled down the Court house and destroyed every building in the compound (*Report of Mr. Matthews*, 1929, p. 1). Also, about 3,000 women marched to the Nguru Native Court to see a note that had been issued by the DO the previous day that noted women would not be taxed, a copy of which was given to Chief Nwaturocha, and which many towns insisted on having a copy of.

The women insisted that not only should men be excused from taxation, but also that the tax already paid should be returned. They 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 demanded the judicial caps of warrant chiefs and destroyed 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 the same fate in the Ngor and Okpala areas, respectively (*Report of Mr. Cook*, paragraph 48).

From available records, one could affirm that Aba was relatively peaceful until December 10, 1929, when women gathered in the market square in protests. According to a Court messenger, the women complained that the "... the women at Owerinta were... demonstrating... because if it was true that women were to be taxed it would affect them..." (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 36). At around 10 p.m. on the same day, between 300 to 400 women marched to Mr. Toovey's house, which formerly housed the DO. They threw stones and 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 down the door with sticks. Mr. Toovey's shots, which were fired into the air, eventually dispersed the women (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 36).

On the morning of the next day, a large number of women flocked into Aba to attend a women's 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 the meeting. 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 the United Africa Company, Aba, where they chased labourers out and took machete off one of the fleeing grass cutting labourers. 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 who stayed at the roadside were killed during an altercation with Dr. Hunter, both knocked down (named Nwanyioma and Ukwa) while trying to dodge the women who stood in front of his moving car (Bastian, 2002, p. 265).

The women, in retaliation, 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 "the doctor has killed women of our party" (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, p. 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 they "struggled with these women from the Colonial Bank through the new factory road up to the Government offices" (*Report of Mr. Toovey*, Station Magistrate, Aba, December 23, 1929, paragraph 9).

### **The British Colonial Response and the Consequences of the Women's Rebellion**

The Resident's efforts to persuade the aggrieved women to sheath their swords was 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, December 23, 1929, paragraph 9), but one woman received a gunshot wound in 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 in Aba at 7:30 a.m. and aided the dispersion of the women. At noon, about 4,000 to 5,000 women were rough-handled by the police following the reading of the Riot Proclamation to them. Four of the women suffered varying degree of injuries, but were undeterred as they reconvened 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 (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1930, pp. 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 labourers and co-operative youths were also mobilised 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, 2002, p. 33). 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.

The revolts had a far-reaching effect on the political organisation of colonial eastern provinces (Falola, 2011, p. xix). 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. That the women’s absolute opposition and demand for an immediate holistic and radical change to the Warrant Chief institution was echoed by one of the women during a sitting of the first commission of inquiry when she noted that “...these disturbances will go on perhaps for fifteen years... until all the Chiefs have been got rid of, but until then the matter will not be settled.” (Bastian, 2002, pp. 263–264).

The immediate changes that attended the revolts was not as radical as the women wanted, but they were significant. 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's revolts, the appointment of Native Court members was subjected to a unanimous decision of the people at town meetings. 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's 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's 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 acts, which, amongst other things, eradicated the Warrant Chief system and replaced it with more traditional institutions and authorities (Matera, 2012, p. 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, 200 Intelligence Reports had been produced (Nwabara, 1972, p. 201). These reports served the purpose of correcting the errors of the past, when policies were imposed on the people without recourse to the social context. One of such endeavours was C.K Meek's *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe, A Study in Indirect Rule*, which served as a framework for reforms within the province. The colonial authorities also commissioned Sylvia Leith-Ross and Margaret Green to study the lives of Igbo women. Leith-Ross published *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* in 1939, while Green published *Ibo Village Affairs* in 1947 (Matera, 2012, p. 130). The women's 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, p. 108).

## **Conclusions**

This study revisited the women's revolts of 1929 and located it within the context of change and resistance during British colonial rule in Nigeria. The study concluded that while the immediate cause of the revolts was the taxation of men and the rumoured taxation of women, the crux of the revolts can be located within the political-economic background of women and British colonialism's aggressive nature. Indeed, colonialism in eastern Nigeria altered the balance of power between men and women by giving more power to masculine-oriented institutions as symbolised by the Warrant Chief institution. That was not the situation before the advent of colonialism.

The circumstances that induced the large-scale women's revolt had been almost totally absent in Nigeria during the British rule in Nigeria, and when it 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 to deter the British government, which was prepared to crush whatever opposition that may be sparked.

The Aba Women's uprising 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 too disorganised to achieve any lasting result. It was an impatient, loud struggle, stubbornly pursued by both rural and urban dwellers in 1929 and which could not have accomplished many gains. It was in effect a flash in the pan, a short movement that was unceremoniously crushed by the British colonial hegemonic regime.

The study established that violence or the threat of violence against women always have the potential to constrain their choices and hopes. They sap woman's energy, compromise their physical and mental health and erode their self-esteem. The damage in turn carries a cumulative cost to society, since abused and injured women are less able to work, care for their children, or become active citizens. One can only imagine the social, economic and mental agony that these women went through in the hands of an insensitive British administration whose violent and exploitative enterprise left many of their colonial possessions badly battered and bruised long after the people had regained their independence.

## References

### Archival Documents

- *Assessment Reports*, Owerri Division Records, page 1, paragraphs 1 and 4.
- *Memorandum of Secretary, Southern Provinces*, No. S. P6659/ Vol. III 24th of December, 1929, paragraph 81.
- *Memorandum of the Secretary, Southern Provinces, on the Origin and Causes of the Disturbances in the Owerri and Calabar Provinces of 16th January, 1930*, paragraphs 160 and 276.
- *NAI, Headlines*. No. 8, November 1973.
- *Report of Mr. Cook*, District Officer, Bende, 28th November, 1929.
- *Report of Mr. Matthews*, Assistant Commissioner of Police, 24th December, 1929.
- *Report of Mr. Toovey*, Station Magistrate, Aba, of 23rd December, 1929, paragraph 9.
- *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Inquire into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces*, December, 1929. Lagos: The Government Printer, 1930.
- *Report of the Commission of Inquiry appointed to Inquire into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces*, December, 1929. Lagos: The Government Printer, 1930, p. 14.

### Books

- Afigbo, A.E. 1972. *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891-1929*. London: Longman.
- Akpan, E. Otu and Ekpo, V.I. 1988. *The Women's War of 1929 (Preliminary Study): A Popular Uprising in South Eastern Nigeria*. Calabar: Government Printer.
- Falola, Toyin and Paddock, Adam. 2011. *The Women's War of 1929: A History of Anti Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria*. North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press.
- Gailey, H.A. 1970. *The Road to Aba: A Study of British Administrative Policy in Eastern Nigeria*. New York: New York University Press.
- Matera, Marc; Bastian, Misty and Kingsley, Susan, 2012. *The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Nwabara S.N. 1972. *Iboland: A Century of Contact with Britain, 1860-1960*. New Jersey: Humanities Press.
- Nwaguru, J.E.N. (1973). *Aba and British Rule: The Evolution and Administrative Development of the Old Aba Division of Igbo land, 1896-1960*. Enugu, Nigeria: Santana Press and Publishing Co.
- Scott, James C. 1985, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

- Tamuno, T.N. 1972. *The Evolution of Nigeria State: The Southern Phase, 1898-1914*, London: Longman Group Limited.

### **Book Chapters**

- Bastian, M.L. 2002. “‘Vultures of the Marketplace’”: Southeastern Nigerian Women and Discourses of the *Ogu Umumwaanyi* (Women’s War) of 1929’, in: Allman, Jean; Geiger, Susan and Musisi, Nakanyike (eds.). *Women in African Colonial Histories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 260–281.
- Okpoko, A.I and Ibeanu A.M. 2005. ‘Igbo Civilization: An Archaeological and Historical Ethnographic Profile’, in: Ogundiran, Akin (ed.). *Pre-colonial Nigeria. Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola*. Trenton: Africa World Press, pp. 187–202.

### **Edited Volumes**

- Shillington, Kevin (ed). 2005. *Encyclopedia of African History, Vol. 1, A-G*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn.

### **Journal Articles**

- Afigbo, A.E. 1966. ‘Revolution and Reaction in Eastern Nigeria, 1900- 1929, The Background of the Women’s Riot of 1929’. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3 (3), pp. 551 – 621.
- Van Allen, Judith. 1972. “‘Sitting on a Man.’ Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women’. *Canadian Journal of African Studies* VI(II), p. 173.
- Oladiti, A. A. and Alao, A. 2017. ‘The Interaction of Law and Religion in Central Nigerian Societies’. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 10 (5), pp. 42–65.

