

Navigating the Colonial Terrain through Protest Movements: A Discourse on the Nigerian Women's Motives¹

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Introduction

Between 1898 and 1914, the British government embarked on the establishment and maintenance of a colonial state in Nigeria. In spite of pockets of resistance in such places as the Egba, Igbo and Tiv regions, the British invaders succeeded in the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria in January 1914 under the so-called indirect rule of the Lugardian system of administration. Subsequently, a Native Administration with three administrative systems was introduced in Southern Nigeria. These were the Sole Native Authority (SNA) in the Southwestern Provinces, the Warrant Chief system in South-Eastern Provinces, and a local township government in the colony of Lagos. Under the SNA, indigenous chiefs, kingmakers, Ogboni chiefs and priests including female chiefs, *iyalode*, *erelu* and priestesses lost their power. The female office holders in the indigenous system of government were also denied access to and membership of the native authority councils. The case of Abeokuta SNA administration exemplified the total exclusion of women from the new colonial government.

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Similarly, the Warrant Chief system in southeastern provinces, until after 1929, excluded women from the administration.² Women in these regions lost not only their political power but also their indigenous judicial responsibilities. The activities of the Christian missionaries and the expatriate trading firms reinforced the erosion of women's power under colonialism. The erosion of women's power in the southeastern regions was exacerbated by the actions of some members of the Native Administration. For instance, some warrant chiefs were persons of questionable backgrounds, sometimes, very corrupt, exploitative, extortive and oppressive. As custodians of their cultural heritage and in order to protect their spaces that had been continuously undermined by male-dominated colonial institutions and structures, women in the regions responded in varied and complex ways. While some of them adopted petitions, boycotts, market closure, court actions and peaceful marches, others employed protest demonstrations, verbal abuses, nudity as well as scurrilous songs and dances laden with sexual and ritualistic gestures against the actions and policies of the colonial government, the Christian missionaries, foreign trading companies and their agents which invaded their spaces and threatened their survival.³ Among these policies and actions, the introduction of direct taxation attracted the most widespread and effective female demonstrations in the whole region.

Focusing on the anti-tax demonstrations of 1929—the Women's War in Calabar and Owerri Provinces— and the 1940s Abeokuta women's protests, effort is made to analyze how women employed their collective social power to navigate the harsh and rugged terrain of British colonialism. The central question is how do we conceptualize

² Madam Okwei was made a member of the Onitsha native court in 1912. See Felicia Ekejiuba, "Omu Okwei, The Merchant Queen of Ossomari: A Biographical Sketch," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, 4 (1967): 633-46

³ Gloria Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960*, New York: Routledge, 2005, chapter 7 critically analyzes women's instruments of resistance in great detail.

the use of women's collective social power during the colonial period? The use of women's collective social power in colonial times has been conceptualized by scholars in various ways. While some have placed it within the context of "traditional nationalism" or "colonial nationalism(s)," others have conceptualized it using the paradigms of "female consciousness" and "feminism" or "indigenous feminism."⁴ Were women in solidarity for their survival because they were conscious of their common heritage and experiences, or were it because of their perception of common oppression and marginalization or both? In particular, what was the driving force behind women's anti-tax demonstrations? Was it their spirit of nationalism or feminism or something much more complex?

The guiding hypothesis in conceptualizing the motives behind women's involvement in protest movements in colonial southern Nigeria is that their driving force was so complex and diverse that we could not place it only within the ideology of nationalism or feminist paradigm. Rather, their struggles cut across multifaceted approaches and ideologies, including different forms of nationalism, African feminisms, and the politics of survival and the well-being of the entire society. To sustain this thesis, the chapter uses women's voices expressed through their numerous demands, petitions and testimonies to analyze the motives behind their protest movements which visibly characterized the period of British colonial domination of Nigeria. At this juncture, it is important to examine the condition in Southern Provinces before the introduction of direct taxation and women's protests against it.

⁴ James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* [1958] (Benin City: Broburg & Wistrom., 1986, 169-175); Ekwere O. Akpan & Violetta I. Ekpo, *The Women's War of 1929*, Calabar: The Government Printer, 1988; T. E. Turner and M. O. Oshare, "Women's Uprising against the Nigerian Oil Industry in the 1980s," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 14, 3 (1993): 330; Allison Drew, "Female Consciousness and Feminism in Africa," *Theory and Society* 24 (1995): 1-33

Background to Women's Anti-Taxation Protests

In tune with the new system of Native Administration, the principle of direct taxation was introduced in Southern Nigeria as a means of raising revenue for local development. It was believed that direct taxation would not be a radical departure from the people's indigenous payment of tribute and tolls to the central authority. Backed with heavy use of propaganda, the colonial government instructed the Native authorities to collect an average tax of 5s from every adult male and female in their districts starting from 1917.⁵ The authorities promised that part of the tax revenue would be used to provide amenities, construct roads, schools and court buildings, develop rural communities and take care of other matters of the native administration. Government was also going to abolish the compulsory unpaid labor practice. The imposition was, however, not without serious opposition from the natives. One of such resistance was the Abeokuta revolt of May-July 1918, which has been described as the most widespread rebellion in Nigeria during WW1 and resulted in the death of over 1,000 Egba people.⁶

Introduction of direct taxation was deferred for communities in Eastern and Warri Provinces that had no centralized institutions and therefore, not familiar with the idea of paying regular levies. However, in the interest of equity and uniform standards in

⁵ For British colonial government use of propaganda, see Anthony I. Nwabughuogu, "The Role of Propaganda in the Development of Indirect Rule in Nigeria, 1890-1929," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14, 1 (1981): 65-92. For the use of the same instrument elsewhere in West Africa, see Wendell P. Holbrook, "British Propaganda and the Mobilization of the Gold Coast War Effort, 1939-1945," *Journal of African History* 26, (1985): 347-61

⁶ See John L. Ausman, "The Disturbances in Abeokuta in 1918," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 1 (1971): 45-60; Akinjide Osuntokun, "Disaffection and Revolts in Nigeria during the First World War, 1914-1918," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 5, 2(1971): 171-92; F. D. Lugard, *Political Memoranda, 1913-1918*, Lagos, 1918

generating revenue for the running of the Native Administrations, the Native Revenue Ordinance was amended in April 1927 to introduce direct taxation into the South-Eastern Provinces. Government considered it vital to first assess the people through compilation of nominal rolls of male adults according to compounds and families as well as the fertility of the soils and farm yields before collecting taxes from them. Often times, the nominal rolls of taxable males submitted by the chiefs were fabricated.

The news of imposing direct taxation on every adult male was received with apprehension and discontentment by the natives. Consequently, mass revolts broke out in Warri Province among the Urhobo, Isoko, Ijo, Kwale and Igbo of Aboh. The uprisings were carried out by men in the form of general trade boycott, hostility to and at times, physical assault on the administrative officers, release of prisoners and closure of native courts. The police were used to quell the demonstrations, and collection of tax began in early 1928.⁷ On the contrary, in South-Eastern Provinces of Calabar, Ogoja, Onitsha and Owerri, the 1928 tax collection did not witness serious disturbances other than refusal to pay by some men, running to the bush to hide from tax collectors and occasional show of force.

Meanwhile, the international division of labor which turned the people of southern Nigeria into primary producers of such raw materials as palm oil, palm kernel and cocoa, left local farmers and producers at the mercy of world-wide trade changes, price fluctuations and exploitation by large foreign firms. The 1920s, when taxation was introduced, marked a period of economic instability and depression. It was a time that witnessed escalating prices of imported goods that had become essential for the people's

⁷ Obaro Ikime, "The Anti-Tax Riots in Warri Province, 1927-1928," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, 3 (1966): 559-73

daily survival, and a continuous downward plunge of prices of exports. For instance, in December 1929 at Aba, the price of 50 lb kernel was 4s 6d against the December 1928 price of 5s 9d; a 4-gallon of oil was sold for 5s 10d in 1929 against 6s 10d price in 1928. Simultaneously, the price of cigarette cup of imported salt rose from 3d in February 1928 to 9d in 1929; a packet of matches from ½d to 1½d; and a head of tobacco from 1s to 1s 6d within the same period.⁸ The price disparities between exported produce and imported goods with the concomitant galloping inflation were compounded by the introduction of price control measures and produce inspection. Under this new policy, all produce must pass through the produce inspectors and be approved by them before they were paid for by the foreign trading firms.⁹

The economic instability resulting from the unequal trade relationship between local producers and expatriate trading companies created enormous hardship and had also serious socio-cultural and economic implications on women's ability to meet their familial, community and societal responsibilities.¹⁰ Women were so hard pressed by the economic woes of the time that they called on their European counterparts for help in the following words: "would not white ladies help black ladies with this market and produce palaver? Are not all women the same?"¹¹ Naively believing in the power of sisterhood and the common bond of womanhood and motherhood for unconditional support and loyalty, Nigerian women beckoned on European women in colonial Nigeria (who were mostly missionaries, teachers and health workers) to persuade their men to stop the

⁸ *The Report of the Commission of Inquiry appointed to Inquire into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces, December (1929)*, Lagos: Government Printer, 1930, 102-3; Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation*, 222.

⁹ O. N. Njoku, "Evolution of Produce Inspection in Nigeria up to 1936," *Odu* 19 (1979): 43-57

¹⁰ See Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation*, chapter 7 for a detailed analysis of these implications..

¹¹ Sylvia Leith-Ross, *Stepping-Stones: Memoirs of Colonial Nigeria, 1907-1960*, ed. And Introduction by Michael Crowder, London: Peter Owen, 1983, 95.

hardships they had created in the region. They realized sadly that what concerned them as a colonized group might not and in fact did not necessarily bother resident European women. Thus, all women were and are still not the same. The colonized southern Nigerian women were never the same or under the same condition as their resident European counterparts. Women's economic grievances as the discussion below demonstrates, were therefore, directed against unpopular government economic policies such as the introduction of direct taxation, imposition of arbitrary fees, intervention in export production and price control measures.

The Women's War of 1929

The Women's War of 1929 in southeastern Nigeria is an aspect of Nigerian colonial history that has attracted reasonable scholarly research and discourses. While some scholars have focused on the political aspect of the war, others explore its economic and religious dimensions.¹² The primary concern of this chapter is to use the war as an example of women's protest movements to conceptualize their struggles and survival

¹² Chuku, *Igbo women and Economic Transformation*; Misty L. Bastian, "Vultures of the Marketplace': Southeastern Nigerian Women and Discourses of the Ogu Umunwanyi (Women's War) of 1929," in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, eds. Jean Allman and others, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002, 260-81; Obioma M. Iheduru, "Women and Political Militancy in Southeastern Nigeria," *Journal of the Georgia Association of Historians*, 18(1997): 76-97; P. Chike Dike, ed., *The Women's Revolt of 1929, Proceedings of a National Symposium to Mark the 60th Anniversary of the Women's Uprising in Southeastern Nigeria*, Lagos: Nelag & Co. Ltd, 1995; Koko Ete Ina, "The Tax Crisis of 1929 in Ibibioland," *Transafrican Journal of History* 21(1992): 171-81; T. Obinkaram Echewa, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, New York: Dutton, 1992; Ekwere O. Akpan and Violetta I. Ekpo, *The Women's War of 1929 (Preliminary Study)*, Calabar: Government Printer, 1988; Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965*, Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1982; Judith Van Allen, "'Aba Riots' or Igbo 'Women's War'? Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women," in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin & Edna G. Bay, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976, 59-85, and "'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6, 2(1972): 165-81; Caroline Ifeka-Moller, "Female Militancy and Colonial Revolt: The Women's War of 1929, Eastern Nigeria, in *Perceiving Women*, ed. Shirley Ardener, London: Malaby Press, 1975, 127-57; A. E. Afigbo, "Revolution and Reaction in Eastern Nigeria: 1900-1929 (The Background to the Women's Riot of 1929)," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, 3(1966): 539-51

strategies in the British colonial order. Following a deficit in tax collection marking the end of the fiscal year on March 31, 1929, Native Authorities were instructed to embark on reassessment exercises to obtain more information that would help to improve tax revenue in their respective districts. The census numeration of 1929 required measuring farms and counting heaps of yams, number of domestic animals in the yard and on the field, number of doors in a man's house and number of wives and children in a household. Women's belongings and wearing apparels in their boxes, fire places, cooking pots and utensils, fowls and goats were also counted. Women found this exercise not only offensive, but also a great humiliation and invasion of their privacy. Counting of children was seen as a provocation of the gods and goddesses as well as an exercise that would attract their wrath.

In late September 1929, Captain John Cook, the Acting District Officer of Bende, summoned the warrant chiefs in his district and instructed them to collect more information from every household and that it was not for taxing women. While some of the warrant chiefs carried out the order as instructed, others openly informed their people that the new census was to start the taxation of women. Women were infuriated by the rumor of being taxed and the fear that counting them would result in their death. Previously in 1927, Native Authorities carried out census numerations that were immediately followed up with direct taxation of men. The people felt that they had been deceived before by government and thus did not believe government's explanation that the new census had nothing to do with taxing of women. However, women resolved to wait and watch until someone asked them to pay tax. It was under this tensed situation

that Warrant Chief Okugo of Oloko [Olokoro] sent his agent, Mark Emeruwa, a Christian mission schoolteacher to embark on the new census exercise.

On November 24, 1929, Emeruwa proceeded to count women and domestic animals. He first went to the compound of one Ojim, a native of Olokoro where he encountered one of his wives, Nwanyeruwa. Unfortunately, things did not go well between the two. Nwanyeruwa ran and reported the matter to a meeting of Olokoro women holding at the time thereby arming women with the proof of their impending taxation they were waiting for. Such women leaders as Ikonnia, Nwannedie and Nwugo called a meeting of women at their market square to discuss the next plan of action. They sent out yellow palm fronds—a signal of distress and war—asking women from neighboring villages and towns to assemble at Olokoro to protest against the taxation of women. Using their traditional instrument of power, women marched to Okugo's house, sat on him, demanded his cap of office, deposited leaves and cursed him with the injunction that if his mother and grandmother ever paid tax all would be well with him otherwise, his household must meet with destruction. A powerful deputation of women that went to Bende compelled the District Officer (DO) to punish Okugo for his role. Okugo was arrested, prosecuted, found guilty and sent to two years imprisonment.

From Olokoro, the demonstrations spread to different parts of Owerri Province including Isu, Asa, Obohia, Azumini, Umuakpo, Nguru, Okpuala, Ngor, Onicha, Owerrinta, Mbawsi, Umuaru, Obowo, Ameke, Amuzukwu and Aba. Women destroyed government and mercantile establishments as well as houses and compounds of notorious warrant chiefs and court messengers. Some members of the Native Administration were attacked and caps of corrupt warrant chiefs demanded. Prisoners were also released.

The affected areas in the Calabar Province were Abak, Utu Etim Ekpo, Ikot Ekpene, Uyo, Itu and Opobo. In these places, women attacked the warrant chiefs, native courts, government offices and trading factories and destroyed some of their property. In fact, the women wreaked havoc on any visible signs of colonial domination and exploitation. In addition to using lepers to disperse the crowd of women at Itu, heavy use of force (military and police) was employed to contain the demonstrations in this province, a situation that resulted in the death of 52 women and wounding of many.¹³ This was an official figure that excluded those who drowned at Opobo and those who fled to their villages with gunshot wounds for fear of repercussions.¹⁴ By 20 December 1929, the demonstrations were over but the remaining part of the month witnessed combined military and police patrols of cities and villages, widespread arrests and punishment under the Collective Punishment Ordinance.

In spite of the heavy casualties especially in the massacre that occurred at the Calabar Province (Opobo in particular), women were able to achieve significant success through the war. For the first time, the colonial authority listened to women's voices through the two commissions of inquiry that Governor Thompson set up: Birrel Gray Commission of Inquiry of January 1930, and the Aba Commission of Inquiry of July 1930 to investigate the war. Taxation of women was deferred. Based on the evidence presented at the various hearings by women, government was able to make some policy

¹³ For the official list of the identities of those who died in the Calabar Province, see Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence Taken by the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Inquire into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces, December 1929*, Gazette Extraordinary No. 10 of 7th February 1930, Lagos: Government Printer, 1930, 114-15.

¹⁴ Akpan and Ekpo, *The Women's War*, 43 estimate that over 500 people lost their lives during the protests in the Calabar Province. In Owerri Province, two women, Nwanyioma and Ukwa, died when they were run over by a car driven by Dr. William Hunter, a British medical officer at Aba. The only man who died was Alimi Aromashodu, a Lagosian goldsmith who was accidentally cut up in the fire ignited the colonial forces at Opobo. The massacre of southeastern Nigerian women by the British colonial government was senseless and unnecessary especially when it was evident that the women were harmless and threatened no lives.

changes that somewhat reflected the cultural and political realities of the people. For instance, based on women's testimonies, 18 chiefs were decapped and removed from office. These were the most corrupt and exploitative warrant chiefs. Government also introduced a new administrative system that included women as active participants in the political affairs of the region. Women began to have some influence over the selection of new chiefs. Some of them were elected as members of the newly constituted native courts.¹⁵

Abeokuta Women's Anti-Taxation Demonstrations

As stated earlier, women from Abeokuta and Ijebu Provinces were among the first to pay tax in the whole colony of Nigeria. A flat rate poll tax had been imposed on the people of Abeokuta since 1917. While girls were taxed at the age of 15, boys started paying tax when they turned 16. Wives were taxed separately from their husbands. Women considered the taxation alien, unfair and excessive. They detested the imposition of taxation on them and their daughters, but objected most the methods adopted by tax collectors to enforce its collection. Not only that homes were invaded, but sometimes, women were physically assaulted including stripping them naked in the pretence of assessing the ages to determine their eligibility for taxation. Tax defaulters were jailed until they paid their taxes and accrued fines. While women had the sympathy of some men including institutions that openly criticized the taxation of females, the Alake, Ladipo Ademola, who headed the SNA as well as several Egba chiefs, defended the imposition and the process.¹⁶ For instance, Abeokuta Society of Union and Progress, a

¹⁵ Chuku, *Igbo Women*, 224; Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized*, 96

¹⁶ One can understand the support of women's taxation by these agents of the colonial government whose revenues were mostly derived from women's taxes and levies.

male elite organization headed by Reverend I. O. Ransome-Kuti (the husband of Mrs. Fumnilayo Ransome-Kuti) criticized the method of collecting tax from women and proposed a concomitant increase in men's taxes and elimination of female taxation. Similarly, there were many articles in the *West African Pilot* calling for an end of the collection of taxes from women¹⁷

Abeokuta women also suffered like their counterparts in other southern provinces from economic hardships of the WWII years. Food shortage was one of the greatest problems that faced many Nigerian natives especially those living in the urban centers. The shortages were occasioned by the general insecurity, shipping irregularities, increased freight and insurance charges associated with WWII. In order to ensure self-sufficient in foodstuff supplies, adequate storage and preservation arrangements, reserves for emergencies with priority to military demands, government introduced food price control scheme in 1941 under Captain A. P. Pullen. Quotas were issued to a few traders to market both the local foodstuffs and imported goods. The unlucky ones turned to smuggling as a way to sustain themselves and their families at this very critical period. The use of quotas meant that in most cases, no foodstuffs were sold until government quotas were filled. The result was spiraling prices of goods especially in the cities.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cheryl Johnson-Odim & Nina Emma Mba, *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997, 70-71.

¹⁸ See Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation*; Allistere E. Hinds, "Government Policy and the Nigerian Palm Oil Export Industry, 1939-49," *Journal of African History* 38 (1997): 459-78; Toyin Falola, "'Salt is Gold': The Management of Salt Scarcity in Nigeria during World War II," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 26, 3 (1992): 412-36 and "Cassava Starch for Export in Nigeria during the Second World War," *African Economic History* 18 (1989): 73-98; Cheryl Johnson, "Grass Roots Organizing: Women in Anticolonial Activity in Southwestern Nigeria," *African Studies Review* 25, 2 & 3(1982): 137-57; O. N. Njoku, "Export Production Drive in Nigeria during the Second World War," *Transafrican Journal of History* 10 (1981): 11-27, and "Evolution of Produce Inspection in Nigeria"; Wale Oyemakinde, "The Pullen Marketing Scheme: A Trial in Food Price Control in Nigeria, 1941-1947," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, 4 (1973): 413-23

In 1945, female rice sellers in Abeokuta lodged a complaint with a women's organization—the Abeokuta Ladies Club (ALC)—an elite women's association founded by Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti for seizure of their rice by government agents without compensation. ALC protested on behalf of the female rice sellers by sending delegations to the DO, Assistant District Officer (ADO) and the Egba Native Administration Council. It also held a press conference urging the press to intervene and condemn the colonial price control policy. ALC was also fighting against another government policy called “Conditional sales,” a policy that compelled market women to buy and resell unpopular goods along a few sought-after commodities. An example was forcing them to buy salt (a very high sought-after provision) with cutlasses (which were hard to sell). This policy reduced women's profits or even resulted in trade deficit.

During this period also, women witnessed increased taxation. For instance, earlier in 1940, the Alake increased water rate without any explanations. This was followed up with an increase in the flat-rate tax on women in late 1946. Women complained against the triple taxation—income tax, water rates and taxes to pay salaries of market supervisors—imposed on them. They accused some tax collectors, Egba chiefs and the Alake of corruption, embezzlement of tax funds and maladministration. In the same year, the ALC expanded its membership to include any Abeokuta woman interested to join the club. The name of the club was subsequently changed from ALC to Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU).

With a membership of over 100,000, AWU went to war against the Alake and all supporters of the oppressive and exploitative policies of the colonial government. AWU leadership was able to articulate women's grievances against the Alake. These included

his negotiation of land contracts with foreign trading companies without the consent of the proper owners; support of food and price controls; forced eviction of market women from a section of the Itoku market in order to lease the space to a European company; improperly monopolizing salt supplies from foreign companies at the critical period of WWII and reselling to local women traders at inflated prices; as well as profiting from and abusing *dipeomu* system which allowed wives the freedom of leaving their husbands and taking refuge in the Alake's palace.¹⁹

Through the use of both indigenous (songs, sitting-on, protest demonstrations) and alien (petitions, court actions and press conferences) instruments of resistance, Abeokuta women succeeded in forcing Alake Ademola II to abdicate his throne on 3 January 1949. Native Administration Council was replaced with an Egba Interim Council with four women as members. The flat-rate taxes on women, including the water rate, were abolished but men's taxes were increased. Government also reduced the salaries of council members, cut down its capital expenditures and increased fees for certain licenses.²⁰

Conceptualizing Women's Protest Movements Through their own Words

In this section, effort is made to conceptualize women's involvement in protest movements by analyzing their words expressed in their various demands, petitions and

¹⁹ For salt scarcity during the wars, see Chuku, *Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria*, 119-29; Toyin Falola, "Salt is Gold": The Management of Salt Scarcity in Nigeria during World War II," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 26, 3 (1992): 412-36

²⁰ It is important to note that some of these were temporary successes of Abeokuta women because while Alake Ademola was recalled back to his position on December 3, 1950, the water rate tax on women was also reinstated. Moreover, even though it was the Abeokuta women who spearheaded and persistently fought against the Alake, credit should also be given to such male organizations as the Majeobaje Society and the Ogboni chiefs who equally rejected Ademola as the Alake. See Johnson-Odim and Mba, *For Women and the Nation*, 86-91

testimonies. Starting with the Women's War in Calabar Province, we can use their grievances articulated by six women leaders representing Opobo Town, Bonny, Andoni, Kwa/Qua (Ibibio), Ogoni and Nkoro (Igbo) who met with Mr. Arthur Robert Whitman, the DO of Opobo on 16 December and recorded by the latter on the former's order. The demands included:

1. The Government will not tax women,
2. No personal property such as box is to be counted,
3. Any woman who is a known prostitute (not?) to be arrested,
4. Women are not to be charged rent for the use of common market shed,
5. They asked that licenses for holding plays should not be paid for. I promised to bring this complaint to the notice of government,
6. They do not want Chief Mark Pepple Jaja to be head chief of Opobo town. I will so inform the government,
7. The women do not want any man to pay tax. I promise to inform the government, and
8. They are speaking for Opobo, Bonny and Andoni women.²¹

The women insisted on type-written replies on all the demands, to be produced in six copies for Opobo town, Bonny, Andoni, Ibibio, Ogoni and Nkoro, signed and with an official seal. While the demands were being typed, they complained against the attitude of trading firms especially their entry of the retail market.

Below are excerpts from women's testimonies before the various sittings of the Commission of Inquiry. I decide to take the liberty in presenting these testimonies in order to enable us to understand the complexities of women's grievances and also situate the Women's War within the appropriate ideological paradigm.

Emena Okpopo testifying to the violent incident at Utu Etim Ekpo in December 1929 states:

We assembled together that night at Utu Etim Ekpo square to

²¹ Birrell Gray Commission of Inquiry, *Minutes of Evidence Taken by the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Inquire into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces, December 1929*, Lagos: Government Printer, 1930, p.78

march in to District Officer to tell him we were not to pay tax...We heard that we were to pay tax...We remained there the whole night and played and sang songs. In the morning we started to come down here there were many and women did not hold sticks and no gun and suddenly we heard the sound of shots. I was not in front nor in the rear I about the middle, there was no guns, no machetes and no sticks, there were some piccins [children] brought to prevent them crying. I was surprised to see the soldiers fire as we were women we call ourselves vultures as we did not think soldiers would fire at us. Vultures go to market and eat food there and nobody molests them, nobody will kill a vulture even in the market, even if it kills fowls. We only fling sticks at them if they take our chop [food], and so we thought soldiers will not harm us no matter what we may do...It was the women who came from Aba and Izumini [Azumini] who told us we were to pay tax... When the firing took place some women fell on the road and I thought they were playing and I ran into the bush. I ran to the bush and when I went back to my house I found it had been burned. I don't know who burned my house. Men are never called vultures.²²

Nwanyeruwa of Oloko told the Commission of Inquiry that,

Okugo became a rich man because of the money he got from us. If he has not got money from us he would not have been able to provide for himself. On one occasion he called men and women together and told them that the District Officer had ordered that money should be collected for him to build a house. We collected 20 pounds sterling and handed it to him. He made use of the money in conjunction with his women and did not build a house as he had told us he was going to do. On another occasion he told us that the District Officer had been worrying him for a young wife [that the DO wanted a young wife] and that both men and women should collect money to pay the dowry [bridewealth] of a young wife for the DO. We collected the sum of 20 pounds sterling and gave it to him as a dowry for the young women required for the DO...We are sure these three women were not given to the DO.²³

Enyidia of Oloko, one of the women witnesses testified in the following words:

²² Gray Commission, *Minutes of Evidence*, 43.

²³Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 24-30.

We said, ‘What have we, women done to warrant our being taxed? We women are like trees which bear fruit. You should tell us the reason why women who bear seeds should be counted.’ Don’t you agree that the world depends upon women – that it is the women who multiply the population of the world? We suffer at the hands of the Chiefs. They do many evil things and want to place the responsibility therefore upon women. We are not prepared to accept it. Our desire is that all the old Chiefs should be deposed and their caps taken away from them. Don’t you all [addressing fellow women at the hall] agree with what I have just said? [All the women in the hall shouted in approval]. The chiefs do not give justice in the cases they try in the Native Courts. They do not try them properly. We want them all to put down their caps. That is all I have to say.”²⁴

When asked who did women want to try cases? She answered “select new men, the old ones should be put aside.” She was asked by Mr. Graham Paul if she wanted women to be selected and she said “No. We want you to change the old chiefs... Counting in order to tax women...Such useful women are now asked to pay tax. That is our grievance.”

Akpamgbo of Mbaobuba, another female witness stated:

We have come to tell you about what has led to the great unrest among men and women in these areas...It was said that women were to pay tax. We objected to this inasmuch as our husbands and sons are paying tax. “How are we women to pay it?” That was our grievance and we made the demonstration to make you [government] feel that we were aggrieved. Another matter was price of produce paid at Mbawasi, which was not satisfactory—we were not content with it. A kerosene tin of oil to the factories was 5s., a tin of kerosene was sold to us for 9s. We made no profit. Kernels sold for 3s....We will be glad if government would take steps with produce. We don’t want chiefs stay longer—old chiefs.²⁵

When asked whom she/women wanted to be made chiefs, she answered: “It is not for us to say that or to appoint chiefs, nor do we women expect to be appointed chiefs.” Her reason to change the chiefs was due to the injustice and exploitation of the warrant chiefs.

²⁴ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 80

²⁵ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 82-3

She continued, “If a man had a case in Oloko Native Court claiming .. £5, and it was decided in his favour, all he was able to take home was about £2.”²⁶

Ahudi of Nsidimo’s testimony reads:

I wish to say something about Chiefs. Women are very much annoyed. If I had a case with another in the Native Court, that case would not be heard until I kept borrowing money, about £10 in all. If I do not borrow money, the case would be kept waiting for six months. That is what Chiefs do. If I had a daughter and a Chief came to me to say he wanted to marry my daughter, he would pay only £5. He would not complete the proper dowry. If he fell out with his wife, for this £5 he paid, he would make another man pay £20. Caps are given to Chiefs by Government, but before they receive the caps they go to the poor men and say they must collect money for them because they are now capped Chiefs. Is it right that the poor should collect money for the Chiefs? I want to tell you that these disturbances will go on perhaps for fifteen years unless these Chiefs are decapped... We are not armed with guns or machetes. We came in peace to ask you to make good Chiefs and give us peace. We did not go to Umuahia to break shops. We ask you to bring peace in the land... We never made demonstrations in this manner, but we do so now in order to show you that women are annoyed... We shall continue fighting until all the Chiefs have been got rid of, but until then the matter will not be settled.²⁷

In the western part of the colony, Abeokuta women, through their organizations and under the able leadership of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, were able to articulate their demands. These included the following:

The ALC List of Demands

1. Establish health clinics and playgrounds at schools
2. Sanitation improvement
3. Financial aid to increase adult literacy
4. Provision of safe water supply
5. Government to end control of trade

²⁶ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 83

²⁷ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 114-15.

6. No increase in taxation on women²⁸

AWU Comprehensive List of Demands

1. Complete abolition of the flat-rate taxation of women
2. Alake's abdication because he was corrupt
3. Elimination of the SNA system and institution of a more representative system of government (that would include women)
4. Increase taxes on expatriate firms and abolish women's taxes
5. "No taxation without representation"²⁹

From the women's demands and testimonies above, it is obvious that their grievances were many. However, the bone of contention was the rumor and the actual imposition of taxation on them. For the women who organized the Women's War and who had not been taxed, they demanded that government should not impose any taxation on them.

According to Nwakaji, an elderly woman from Ekweli,

We said "How could women, who have no means themselves to buy food or clothing, afford to pay tax?" ... "We said, what is all this for?" Why should the Chiefs kill us?

She submitted a petition where women complained of abuse of justice in the courts, extortion, demanding of bribes, and holding courts in private. She continued, "We had previous grievances but this matter of paying tax made the whole matter worse." [All the women in the hall shouted in approval of this statement].³⁰ The burden of taxation on men was weighing heavily on women and therefore, they could not stand the idea of being taxed. Some of them who testified before the Aba Commission of Inquiry wanted the abolition of taxation on men too. Abeokuta women, however, under the umbrella of the ALC demanded that government should not increase taxation on them. This implies that they were ready to continue paying the 5s flat-rate tax. Few years after, under a much

²⁸ Johnson-Odim & Mba, *For Women and the Nations*, 67

²⁹ Johnson-Odim and Mba, *For Women and the Nation*, 73-74

³⁰ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 84-85.

wider AWU, the women changed their minds and demanded complete abolition of taxation on women. They cited the American revolutionary slogan of “no taxation without representation.”

While the Abeokuta women demanded to be part of the political process and be included in the decision-making process of the government as taxpayers, their counterparts from Calabar and Owerri Provinces on one hand did not want to be included in political process, as Akpangbo testified, “It is not for us to say that or to appoint chiefs, nor do we women expect to be appointed chiefs.” But on the other hand, they wanted to be part of the process. For example, Ahudi of Nsidimo stated that women wanted old chiefs to be deposed and that they would like to be included in the process of appointing new ones. “Women are not claiming to be made Chiefs. New men should be appointed. If a new man is appointed then all the women should be present and all the men should be present and both should approve his appointment.”³¹

Women from both regions detested the oppressive and exploitative tendencies of the local authorities and agents and therefore fought against them. While Abeokuta women focused their energies on unseating Ladipo Ademola as the Alake of Egba and on the dissolution of the entire SNA for a more representative system of government that would include women, the southeastern Nigerian women attacked the warrant chiefs and court messengers. The opinion of Abeokuta women regarding whether the British administrators should leave or stay was not very explicit. But, in a 1975 interview, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti clarified some perception on why she attacked Ademola II in the following words: “I didn’t really attack Ademola, I attacked imperialism. Those

³¹ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 115

Europeans were using him against his people...I was attacking Europeans indirectly and they know it.”³²

As Johnson-Odim and Mba aptly stated, AWU was able to articulate “not only an anti-colonial position but one that sought to democratize government and establish women’s equality (especially giving women the franchise).” Quoting the aims and objectives of AWU under which umbrella Abeokuta women waged their numerous protests, they listed the following: “to unit women; to defend, protect, preserve and promote social, economic, and political rights and interests of women; and to cooperate with all organizations seeking and fighting genuinely and selflessly for the economic and political freedom and independence of the people.”³³

On the other hand, southeastern Nigerian women were not hesitant in declaring their favor for British colonial officers. For instance, Mary Onumaere of Nguru, one of the female witnesses had this to say:

We said that we wished the relations between us and the government to be so cordial as those existing between us and the Reverend Fathers...We have not been treated well. We wish to be treated just as Europeans treat their women in their country. We don’t want to be oppressed by our menfolk.³⁴

Another female witness, Nwanyieke of Ahiara, testified that “We did not come to fight but simply to tell government that the chiefs have been oppressing us.”³⁵ Ejiatu testified that women preferred white officers to warrant chiefs in trying their cases. She states: “Why we ask that our cases be heard by white men is that we have been oppressed a great deal as regards Court cases.”³⁶ Women had no problem with white government and

³² Johnson-Odim & Mba, *For Women and the Nation*, 72 quoting *New Breed* magazine.

³³ Johnson-Odim & Mba, *For Women and the Nation*, 73 quoting *The Constitution, Rules and Regulations for the Women’s Union*, Abeokuta, 1948.

³⁴ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 239 and 805.

³⁵ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 620

³⁶ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 803

therefore was not fighting against it because they knew or rather thought that government was on their side. In Ogbodia of Olokoro's testimony, she stated that "We only know about Okugo's case and the white man. Otherwise the government is on our side. We have no dispute with government."³⁷

AWU's aims and objectives above indicate women's commitment to improving their condition and status in society, a commitment that was synonymous with feminism or a more appropriate African feminism. Similarly, women from Calabar and Owerri Provinces were conscious of their importance in society as useful women who through their productive and reproductive roles ensured the survival of their families and societies. As Enyidia reminded the colonial and colonized men in the region, the world depended on women who multiplied its population. As mothers of the land and the world, they should be respected and their worth appreciated. Thus, after being asked several times why she did not obtain permission from her husband before leaving her home to join the women's protest demonstrations in the Obowo area of Owerri Province, Akulechula angrily questioned the Commissioner: "Is not your mother a woman? Were you not born by a women?"³⁸ Lieutenant Richard Hill testifying about his encounter with women at Opobo (where the largest number of casualties occurred) said that he was abused by women and that one of them took off her loin cloth and called him the son of a pig not of a woman.³⁹ Similarly, when a British DO shouted on Mrs. Ransome-Kuti to be quiet, she replied: "You may have been born but you were not bred! Would you speak to your mother like that?" Other women around threatened to "cut off his [DO's] genitals and post them to his mother."⁴⁰

³⁷Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 254.

³⁸Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 176

³⁹ Gray Commission, *Minutes of Evidence*, 7.6

⁴⁰ Johnson-Odim & Mba, *For Women and the Nation*, 84.

Southeastern Nigerian women also wanted to be treated just as white women as the testimony of Olenga of Umuakpara indicates, “In your own country your women dictate to you, but we women in this country, should we not dictate?”⁴¹ In the principle of sisterhood and womanhood, women threatened to invite their white counterparts from Europe to assist them. According to Ahudi of Nsidimo, “No doubt there are women like ourselves in your own country. If need be we shall write to them to help us. We shall continue fighting...”⁴²

Another major grievance of women was related to trade and the control of the marketplace. Women lamented over decreasing prices of their produce and skyrocketing prices of imported goods. They protested the intervention of government and foreign trading companies in women’s domain. In addition to usurping women’s position as retail traders, the expatriate trading firms adopted stringent and unfair grading system of produce that lowered export prices. Government imposed price control measures and trade restrictions especially during the WWII years that created enormous hardship on local traders. In collaboration with local authorities, government also introduced market store fees and entrusted the day-to-day running of marketplaces on the care of market administrators with near total exclusion of women. Thus, two witnesses who testified before the Aba Commission of Inquiry never hesitated in letting the Commission and the government know that women were very angry. According to Rosanah Ogwe of Azumini,

...We had five markets from time immemorial and they were going well but to-day none of those markets are functioning. If articles are taken to the market for sale, Court messengers would only throw 4d. on the ground for an article which

⁴¹Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 664

⁴² Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 114-15.

should fetch, say 3s. and go away with that article. If the owner resists or talks in any way about the matter he is assaulted by the court messengers.⁴³

To clarify and reinforce Rosanah's testimony, Rachel Nenenta angrily stated:

...Market is our main strength. It is the only trade we have. When market is spoiled, we are useless...All those five markets have been closed on account of Government employees, Court messengers. If you have property...and you take it to the market for sale, it is seized by Court messengers and taken away without payment...If a woman is strong enough to catch hold of the Court Messengers and say, "Let us go to the Chief in order that I may report to him what you are doing," all that the Chief will say when they go to him is "Go away, I cannot do anything in the matter."...You cannot get redress even if you take out a summons against the Court Messengers. If your case is heard in the Court and you are not satisfied with the judgment and you ask for a review or appeal, the case is left for the District Officer to review it. When the District Officer comes to review the case, he will not ask you what you have to say in the matter but he will simply say "Let the judgment of the Chiefs stand."⁴⁴

Another woman, Ikodia of Ugbebile, emphasized how women used the marketplace as a means of communication. They held most of their meetings in the marketplace and disseminate information concerning them and the land, and at this time, they used the marketplace to spread the news about the war. She threatened that women were ready to make trouble because they "did not mind being killed for doing so...If it is a question of fighting, we will send for more women to come, as there are many in the country, in order that we may all submit to being killed."⁴⁵ Women were ready to die because they had seen things that they were not accustomed with. Things had started falling apart; the fabrics of their society were disintegrating and they were losing the

⁴³ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 740

⁴⁴ Aba Commission of Inquiry *Notes of Evidence*, 742.

⁴⁵ Aba Commission of Inquiry *Notes of Evidence*, 81.

ingredients of their cultural heritage and their existence. It was worth dying in the struggle to protect their spaces and their land.

As Nwoto of Okpuala put it:

Our grievances are that the land is changed—we are all dying ...It is a long time since the Chiefs and the people who know book [Western educated] and the Nkwerre people have been oppressing us...All the towns were opened so that people might enjoy peace and you now suggest that tax should be paid...We are telling you that we have been oppressed. If this oppression continues, how are we to praise you?⁴⁶

In the above quotation of Nwoto, southeastern Nigerian women felt threatened by the products of Western education—“those who know book.” Majority of the women was illiterate including their leaders. Court messengers, interpreters and the warrant chiefs took advantage of the limited literacy of women and exploited them. However, the situation was slightly different in Abeokuta. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti and the entire leadership of the ALC and AWU were literate even though illiterate market women dominated the membership of these two organizations. The relatively higher literacy of Abeokuta women explained why they used in addition to their traditional instruments of resistance such alien strategies as court actions, press conferences, petitions and letters to the editors of major newspapers. Thus, one of their demands was “financial aid to increase adult literacy.”

It is also important to note that difference in time or period these demonstrations occurred as well as the colonial conditions in these regions partly influenced women’s choice of strategies and instruments of resistance. For instance, while the Women’s War took place in the 1920s when not many Nigerians were formally educated, the Abeokuta

⁴⁶ Aba Commission of Inquiry: *Notes of Evidence*, 805.

women's protests occurred in the 1940s with slight increase in the number of literate Nigerians.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can conclude that it is problematic to adopt a single paradigm to explain the complex experience of Nigerian women under colonialism. This is because colonialism engendered complex and multiple socioeconomic and political forces that had contradictory effects on Nigerians in general and women in particular. Therefore, to navigate the complex colonial terrain, Nigerian women had to adopt diverse strategies in order to achieve positive results. Thus, women's protest movements in colonial Nigeria had multifaceted elements which included the consciousness of their common heritage, experiences and oppression. It is a history that was characterized by self-conscious struggles by southern Nigerian women to protect their spaces and promote their interests and identities. Women did not fight only for their own survival but also for their families and the liberation of their land and communities from European rule and hegemony. On these notes, it is apt to say that they were both African feminists and colonial nationalists.

Ironically, various independent African states and governments have not been able to harness adequately the resources of women and the various instruments they employed during the colonial period for meaningful and sustainable development. The combination of African and Western patriarchal practices prevalent in modern African states has continuously marginalized African women. For this reason, it is important that governments in Africa should adopt a more pragmatic policy of gender equity and

inclusiveness in order to harness women's resources for development and nation-building.

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