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Matriarchy, the Colonial Situation, and the Women’s War of 1929 in Southeastern Nigeria

by

Samantha Mallory Kies

Thesis

Submitted to the Department of History and Philosophy
Eastern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
History with a concentration on World History

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Dedication

For Dave Baranski –

For constant encouragement, endless advice, and never-ending patience,

For taking a true interest in my work and never forgetting to ask how it’s going,

Though you’re not here to see it,

I can finally say,

It’s done.
Acknowledgements

This work would not have been written without the guidance, support, and encouragement of Professor Joseph Engwenyu. He started the ball rolling on the Igbo women in an African Women class and followed the path through to the end. For his help and support, I am beyond grateful. To Professors John Knight and Ronald Delph for their input as Thesis Committee Members; their enthusiasm in reading drafts of the work in the spirit of constructive criticism has been truly appreciated and I thank them heartily. And to my family for understanding when my research took more time than anticipated, thank you for your support and patience. It has truly been a wonderful journey.
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Abstract

This study examines the Igbo women of Southeastern Nigeria from the eve of colonial intrusion to the imposition of colonialism, the Women’s War of 1929, and its aftermath. By placing the Women’s War into the context of the stripping away of inherent rights guaranteed them by matriarchy following the imposition of patriarchy upon the society, this study provides a new explanation of the women’s involvement and lack of male participation in the war. Under traditional matriarchal umbrellas, through their networks and social groups and by the banding together of all women, the Igbo Women’s War of 1929 was the beginning of the struggle for the re-gaining of women’s rights in Southeastern Nigeria. Through the examination of primary sources, current historiography, and the voices of the women themselves, this study demonstrates the women’s reasons for rising up, what they lost with the imposition of patriarchy, and what they stood to gain.
Introduction

When looking at the current scholarship on Africa in general, it is evident that much has been written about patriarchy, colonialism, and “leaders.” However, if you narrow the focus to African women, what research has been done has focused mostly on upper class women. It has only been since the early 1990s that more attention has been paid to the grassroots women, the effect of colonialism on their lives, and how they were manipulated by it. The Igbo Women’s War of 1929 itself has had a significant amount of scholarly attention. However, the impact of colonization among the Igbo, specifically the loss of power suffered by women in this matriarchal society, has not been significantly studied. My research will examine Igbo matriarchy before colonialism, what colonialism took from these women of Southeastern Nigeria, and why the impact of colonialism is important when looking at the Igbo Women’s War of 1929.

Professor Ife Amadiume has been the main contributor of ground-breaking studies examining African matriarchy, producing four books on Igbo society that showcase African women and matriarchy and the devastating effect colonialism and the imposition of patriarchy had on Southeastern Nigeria. Her books build on one another, and she works to create a historically accurate picture of Nigerian women by challenging the ideologies
of patriarchy that were imposed upon African women and showcasing the matriarchy that was prevalent prior to colonization.

Her first book, *African Matriarchal Foundations: The Case of Igbo Societies*, focuses on the Igbo people and demonstrates that they were fundamentally matriarchal. Much of the focus is on imposition: the imposition of colonizers upon the people, the imposition of patriarchy by the British colonialists on the culture, and the imposition of the European beliefs at what roles women were allowed to play in society. Prior to the onset of colonialism, their culture had been structured to guarantee women a place in society.

Her next book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, examines the language of the Igbo and what it meant to the women of the society. Amadiume provides numerous explanations of how and why women were able to hold such prominent roles in their society, much of which came from the genderless “third person” that allowed women to play roles that Europeans would not have permitted. Igbo society had a flexibility that allowed a woman to rule a household as a “man” without being “manlike,” giving them significantly more power in their traditional political system than in what would be forced upon them later on. Much of the latter half of this book
focuses on the changes that came with the Europeans and the sex and class inequalities which were supported by rigid gender ideology and constructions. Together, these amounted to a serious change in power previously enjoyed by women. The implications of these changes are laid out: how the members of the Igbo society responded and how women were adversely affected.

In her third book, *Re-Inventing African: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*, she examines the tension between patriarchy and matriarchy by focusing on the biases favoring patriarchy from Europeans who study Africa. This is a very important work in looking at African history in general and the changes that occurred following colonization in particular. Much of the research on Africa has been done by outsiders, especially non-historians who tend to bring views of their own societies and uncritically apply them to the continent. While they may attempt to be nonbiased, growing up in a patriarchal society and frequent insensitivity to historical peculiarities makes it difficult for them to understand a society that was fundamentally matriarchal. The same problem had occurred during colonization: the Europeans could not understand a society that was not fully dominated by men. By critiquing a society different from one’s own, using standards that are based on
another society, views tend to be biased, and a true historical understanding of the society is difficult if not impossible. Dr. Amadiume pushes for a reexamination of scholarship that has already been done to be sure that the facts are not skewed.

Her fourth book, *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism: African Women, Culture, Power and Democracy*, finishes her study on the imposition of patriarchy upon a matriarchal culture by examining the contemporary situation in Nigeria among women and their attempts to regain some of the power that was taken from them. She places this in the broader context of women’s history and shares her disappointment that women have not created a united front for change. Instead, there were obstacles put in place by women of different cultures, just as they were put in place historically by men. She demonstrates that the hierarchy that was imposed upon women, especially in Nigeria, still remains upon them despite their wishes to the contrary and their work towards changing it.

By looking at Igbo matriarchy and examining what changes have occurred and the pressures to conform to the colonial situation following the imposition of patriarchy upon the culture, historians can gain a better understanding of the new culture shock among the Igbo women during the early decades of the 20th century. Dr. Amadiume’s research is incredibly
important to help gain a better understanding of not just how the changes occurred, but why attempts at more serious reforms are becoming increasingly difficult. Some of the current historiography of the Igbo women misses the insights made by Amadiume, partly due to their publishing date falling before her works, while others who published afterwards have simply ignored what she has proposed. Amadiume’s work brought the Igbo women to the forefront by showing how their power was amassed and then eroded. My work stands as a tribute to what she began and will hopefully answer some more questions surrounding these powerful women.

In addition to the work of Dr. Amadiume, there have also been various scholarly works on the history of the Igbo in general, and most of them missed out on the insights brought to the forefront by Amadiume. This began in the 1970s with Elizabeth Isichei’s *A History of the Igbo People*. As one of the pioneering historical studies, this work covered pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independent Igbo history and paved the way for future research. This book covers a broad base of research but is somewhat lacking in depth and analysis, thus making it more suitable for the general reader than the specialist.

Gloria Chuku’s *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960* examines the role of women and
the changes that came with colonialism. This is a more detailed look, specifically at the economic role that women played before colonialism and how men dominated large-scale businesses with the coming of the colonizers. This book also helps debunk the myth of cultural “backwardness” prior to colonization and gives historians a good overview of the economic achievements of Igbo women.

When the British took over Southeastern Nigeria, they imposed a form of administration called Indirect Rule. Embedded in this rule was the construction of a political culture in which the notion of patriarchy and political power was given to carefully selected chiefs collectively known as Warrant Chiefs. These men acted as agents of British policy and were a part of the erosion of the matriarchal power of women. During the Women’s War, they became key targets of the ridicule and violence by Igbo women.

Harry A. Gailey’s *The Road to Aba: A Study of British Administrative Policy in Eastern Nigeria* looks at the establishment of British rule in Nigeria, the imposition of the system of warrant chiefs on the people, and their subsequent rejection of this form of government. Gailey focuses on how the local government that was devised for these villages was completely at odds with the village-based politics which the
people had been following for so long. This work provides a decent overview of the politics at play in Southeastern Nigeria and how the Native Courts, which were designed by the British, attempted to rule until they were forced to change following 1929.

A.E. Afigbo’s *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891-1929* also examines colonial rule in Southeastern Nigeria, tracing the Warrant Chief system from its inception to its fall. Afigbo examines why the attempt at the British colonists’ total conquest through institutional control failed over the three decades that the Warrant Chiefs were in charge and how the imposition of direct taxation brought about their final ruin in 1929. By using official records of the period, Afigbo is able to create a picture of life during colonial administration and explain the end of an era following the uprising of the women during the Igbo Women’s War of 1929.

The Igbo Women’s War of 1929 has itself been studied from a variety of perspectives. In her book *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women’s Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965*, Nina Emma Mba looks at women’s political activity in Southern Nigeria as a whole. She focuses on the important political and economic activities of the women from pre-colonial times through colonialism and into the resistance phase. The core of her book
focuses on what women were doing to combat colonial political and economic changes that were designed to undermine their status. Mba explores the effectiveness of their protest movements and political associations and offers the first extended discussion of Nigerian women’s participation in conventional political parties.

In a similar vein, Judith Van Allen’s article “‘Aba Riots or Igbo Women’s War’?: Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women,” also reviews the political involvement of women during the imposition of colonialism and the traditional ways that women used to fight back. Van Allen focuses on how the women united to resist the imposition of taxes on their crops and managed to unseat a warrant chief by traditional means. The protest was only put down by the intervention of the British colonial military. Van Allen’s focus is on the organization of the indigenous women and how they were able to topple the warrant chief, despite the fact that their protest was put down.

Misty L. Bastian’s “Vultures in the Marketplace”: Southeastern Nigerian Women and Discourse of the Ogu Umunwaanyi (Women’s War) of 1929’ also examines the ways female protestors articulated their grievances to colonial authorities. She reviews their religious, literary, and militant actions during
the Women’s War from the women’s perspectives. By looking closely at the women’s speeches and nonverbal displays at the commission hearings, Bastian is able to explore how women saw themselves as actively participating in their own societies and struggling towards self-emancipation.

Caroline Ifeka-Moller examines the Women’s Revolt of 1929 in her article “Female Militancy and Colonial Revolt: The Women’s War of 1929, Eastern Nigeria.” She studies the actions of women during the Women’s War in a new framework. She focuses on how the colonial situation and the economic changes brought about by shopping undermined women’s power and how the reality of male domination is reflected in the systems of representation that were forced upon women at this time. Using the models of the new dominant group, the warrant chiefs, Ifeka-Moller shows how the women worked to structure themselves in the most effective ways. Women were forced out of their traditional world, and Ifeka-Moller examines their wish to control areas they were inherently a part of, with emphasis on health and reproduction.

Most recently, while this study was in progress, two books were published that examine the war. The Women’s War of 1929: A History of Anti-Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria by Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock studies the events of the war mostly
from the point of view of the African participants. The authors present the historical arguments surrounding the war and then provide a narrative history and evaluation that synthesizes historical events with current cultural knowledge of the time period. Much of the book is composed of primary documents, in particular the witness statements, from the Commissions of Inquiry that were held following the war.

Falola and Paddock have compiled an incredible amount of documentation from the archives in Nigeria and London and put them together for all readers to review. Scholars are given the chance to read the exact line of questioning that was placed before each witness and follow along as the witnesses are led down the path that the colonial officials wanted them to go. Many questions that could have provided much more detailed answers of the society that the colonists had invaded were never asked. Instead, the focus remained only on the “riots,” and much of the information that could have been gleaned from the firsthand knowledge of these witnesses has been lost.

The Women’s War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria is coauthored by Susan Kingsley Kent, Misty L. Bastian, and Marc Matera. This most recent study seems to have been an attempt to synthesize what happened in Southeastern Nigeria with the view from Britain, followed by the view from the Igbo
people. The authors base much of their argument on the combination of political, economic, and social change: how the coming of the British had transformed the society through contact with western/colonial society. The volume also sets out to give the Ogu Umunwaanyi (Women’s War) of 1929 a place within the history of colonial Nigeria and a new understanding to the events and reactions.

The Thrust of this Study

Following in Amadiume’s footsteps, my research uses the idea of matriarchy and what was taken from women when patriarchy was forced upon the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria by the British colonizers. I will be looking at matriarchy as it was on the eve of colonialism, how the people responded to the imposition of patriarchy, and what these cumulatively meant to the Igbo Women’s War of 1929. Also, since the war was strictly a “women’s war,” I will consider why it was only fought by women despite the fact that the men were also oppressed during colonialism. My study also strives to be the first work of synthesis on this subject. Matriarchy, colonialism, the Women’s War, and their effects among the Igbo people have been studied, but generally as separate subjects and certainly not yet synthesized to see how the three forces influenced each other.
By synthesizing the changes occurring within the area under the colonial situation, I hope to determine what kind of effect patriarchy had upon causing the war and what kind of effect matriarchy had upon it as well.

My research is divided into four parts. The first chapter reviews matriarchy as it was before the Igbo were colonized. The umbrellas\(^1\) that made up the society – social, political, economic, religious, and most importantly matriarchal – are used to show how the Igbo women were an integral part of their society and how, from these umbrellas, they had inherent power. The second chapter deals with change: the system that was imposed upon the people with the coming of the British and how the women’s power was eroded. The third chapter focuses on the Women’s War of 1929 and the actions of the women during their months of struggle. The final chapter looks at the aftermath – were the demands of the women met and what changes were actually made following the war?

\(^1\)“Umbrellas,” in this sense, refers to the various aspects of society in which women held a place and piece of control. Aspects of society have been grouped under umbrellas to assist in showcasing the links found between the segments of society – matriarchal, political, social, economic, and religious.
Chapter 1
Matriarchy Among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigerian

Introduction

The women moved down to Umueke-ama singing and shouting and calling out the wives of this part of the village. In a high state of excitement and noise they went in single file down the path to Ng.’s house, saying that they would sleep there till morning if she did not pay them. In the darkness it was not easy to assess numbers, but a considerable proportion of the hundred and eight women of the village was there.

Some surged up to the house dancing and singing and others, also singing, sat down nearby. Everyone was keyed up...Some of the songs were ordinary ones such as would be used at other times. But a number were of this sexual character and would only be used on such an occasion as this. For instance, in order to summon all the women to come there was a song which ran: “Women who will not come out in this place, let millipede go into her sex organs, let earthworm go into her sex organs.”

Such things would be said on no ordinary occasion to a woman, but were used here to induce the women strongly to turn out in force.¹

The intrusion of colonialism on Southeastern Nigeria brought major changes to Igbo society, many negatively impacting the Igbo women. Igbo women enjoyed a great deal of power,
status and authority in pre-colonial\textsuperscript{2} society because this was a matriarchal society. This allowed them to play a dominant role in village politics, village religious life, and Igbo notions of lineage. Inherent within Igbo culture were means that Igbo women could employ to create change. As shown in the introduction, the women used different methods based on the action they were rising against. In the most extreme cases, “sitting on a man” was used to shame the individual who had done the wrong. It was in these cases that the women came out in full force to exert their authority, as will be examined later.

Prior to colonial contract around 1800, Igbo society was structured unlike anything the British had seen before.\textsuperscript{3} Accustomed to a rigid system of patriliny, when the Europeans arrived in this world so different from their own, they immediately placed decisions and definitions on the people that were inappropriate. The Igbo were not a patrilineal people, though male elders and chiefs were important. But so too were the women – the daughters, wives, mothers, and elders were an essential and important part of everyday life and family. Seen

\textsuperscript{2} For the purposes of this study, the period “pre-colonial” refers to the time period up to 1870. The pre-colonial depiction of Igbo traditional society presented in this study reflects the structure of society at around 1800.

\textsuperscript{3} For the purposes of this study, Southeastern Nigeria refers to the Ibo-land and neighboring areas and the political systems of these areas. See Map 1 for the layout of the area.
in many different areas of their society, the importance and power of these Igbo women is staggering.

Map 1: Map of Nigeria
This power has often been cited as a form of matriarchy, which was a social organization in which the mother is head of the family and in which descent is reckoned in the female line, with the children belonging to the mother’s clan. Many scholars have agreed that matriarchy is the most ancient or primordial form of a family and that it is older in Africa than anywhere else in the world.\(^4\) In pre-colonial Igbo society in particular, a man could not achieve any standing without a woman.\(^5\) The idea that a female could have held and wielded political authority and power, equal to or surpassing that of male officials, was unacceptable to European colonists.\(^6\) This chapter documents how Igbo women’s power, status, and authority in pre-colonial society were grounded under a matriarchal protective cover. Moreover, women were empowered by additional political, social, religious, and economic rights also akin to protective “umbrellas.”

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\(^6\) Farrar, “The Queenmother, Matriarchy, and the Question of Female Political Authority,” 584.
Map 2: Major Centers of Igboland and Neighboring Areas

Matriarchal Umbrella

Many times seen as the antithesis to patriarchy, and creating a world completely turned upside down where women are ruthless and petty dictators,\(^7\) matriarchy in the Igbo sense is different. For Igbo women, matriarchy is better viewed as the female power camp, or the female-oriented side of the socio-

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\(^7\) [http://www.answers.com/topic/nigeria](http://www.answers.com/topic/nigeria) Copyright 2012: Answers Corporation

\(^8\) Farrar, “The Queenmother, Matriarchy, and the Question of Female Political Authority,” 581.
cultural system. Women in Igbo society were valued highly: they were an essential element of their culture and played an important role in the running of their society. A specific space was set aside for women where they were heavily involved in cultural production.

According to Professor Amadiume, all females were embraced by or benefited from the solidarity of women, which provided a “matriarchal umbrella.” This protective women’s culture headed by matriarchs included girls in traditional society and was part of the socio-cultural institutions that empowered women. These matriarchs embodied the collective wisdom and power of women in society, and they had a highly developed understanding of culture and politics; they were able to use this knowledge to make gains for their collective group.

One element of matriarchy that was a prevalent part of Igbo culture was that of women’s anger. In traditional society, women’s anger was feared and avoided. Though they, too, could have their own troubles, women as a whole were often united as one. Men knew that to take on one Igbo woman was to take on the

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10 Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, 163.
11 Amadiume, “Bodies, Choices,” 44.
12 Amadiume, “Bodies, Choices,” 44.
13 Amadiume, “Bodies, Choices,” 43.
Igbo women as a whole, and they were anxious to avoid this. This is not to say that men were passive or timid. But Igbo cultural traditions placed a premium on female assertiveness and collectivity, fostering women’s independence. Power was not defined as socially deviant, and Igbo men were accustomed to women being in positions of power and influence, and had a developed respect for their administrative skill. The very way that indigenous structures of governance were set up publicly validated and reinforced women in such a way that their presence in judicial, economic, and political spheres of life was a normal and accepted part of life.\textsuperscript{16}

A second element of matriarchy that afforded women power was that of “sitting on” a man. Any Igbo man who devalued women or any troublemaker ran the risk of being “sat on” or shunned by women.\textsuperscript{17} A man might be “sat on” for mistreating his wife, violating the women’s market rules, or for letting his cows eat the women’s crops.\textsuperscript{18} The women would invoke traditional sanctions to restore normalcy. These “sitting on” demonstrations could take various forms. The women could

\textsuperscript{17} Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 446.
besiege a man in his house and sing vulgar and obscene songs that taunted his manhood. Or the women could rough up the man, or destroy his prized possessions. Other men would hardly ever come to the rescue or defense of one of their own, believing it was the man’s own business or that he had brought the wrath of the women on himself.\(^1\) These men were a part of a society in which women’s political and social power was a fact of life and where women were significant; hence, they could accept their judgment and abide by their rules without shame.\(^2\)

One of the major significant aspects of this form of protest was the acceptance of it by all members of Igbo society. This ability of women shows that Igbo men did not have the sort of patriarchal authority that was attributed to them by European viewers. Women had a powerful check on male excesses in society.\(^3\) “Sitting on a man” or woman along with boycotts and strikes were the women’s main weapons, and they were effective tools.\(^4\) Women could be assured that their views were heard and were adequately factored into policy decisions when required.\(^5\)

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\(^1\) Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 446.
\(^2\) Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 448.
\(^3\) Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 448.
\(^4\) Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 170.
\(^5\) Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 448.
Political Umbrella

Igbo society was a unique structure during pre-colonial times when compared to the rest of Africa and Europe. Rather than following a stratified structure with a royal family and nobles who passed down political offices from generation to generation, Igbo society was segmentary. Stable government was achieved through balance; small equal groups acted as checks on one another, and ties of clanship, marriage, and religious association helped strengthen those ties. This not only made the society different from other parts of Nigeria but also gave special significance to those institutions that kept the society in balance.  

Around 1800 Igbo people were divided into five major cultural groups, which were then sub-divided into clans. Clans were spread out into villages, and wards made up the villages. The wards themselves consisted of sections of extended families. When the village held a meeting, it would be in the main market, which was part of the reason the market was so important. Smaller families tended to combine with other smaller families, while families that became too large would branch off. This branching off of families served as an additional check and

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balance in the society: an individual was not overly keen to make trouble with his or her family.\textsuperscript{25}

Political power in Igbo society was diffuse.\textsuperscript{26} In traditional Igbo society, political power was shared between men and women. Age was respected and elders were deferred to during meetings for their wisdom and guidance. In general, each family group tended to manage and control its own affairs; however, they were complementary rather than subordinate to the other. The very nature of the system allowed for a harmonious, efficient, and effective gender division of labor in the Igbo political structure. Igbo women exercised direct power within arenas viewed as the female province through all-female organizations. Rather than competing with the organizations of men, women’s organizations acted and existed as parallel authority structures. As leaders of women or as heads of women’s organizations, women wielded political power and influence.\textsuperscript{27}

Igbo society did not have specialized bodies or offices in which legitimate power was vested, nor did one person, regardless of status or ritual position, have the authority to issue commands that others were obligated to obey. In addition,

\textsuperscript{25} Webster, HISTORY OF WEST AFRICA, 168-169.
\textsuperscript{26} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 166.
there was no “state” that held a monopoly of legitimate force to ensure that decisions were enforced. Instead, the use of force to protect one’s interests or see that a group decision was carried out was the prerogative of individuals and group action.\textsuperscript{28} The main political body for all adults was the village assembly. Any adult who had something to say on the matter under discussion was entitled to speak, as long as others considered the content worth listening to.\textsuperscript{29}

Women were active participants in the Igbo village assembly, as well as in community life. At village assemblies, women often spoke on matters of direct concern to them.\textsuperscript{30} The socio-political structure of Igbo life required and depended on their active participation. Their views were critical due to the special insight they brought to issues through their spiritual, market, and trading duties, as well as their maternal roles.\textsuperscript{31} While the base of women’s political power lay in their own gatherings,\textsuperscript{32} maintaining a harmonious gender relationship was critical to the well-being of Igbo society.\textsuperscript{33} As Professor Amaduame has stated, a common principle in many traditional African political systems was and remains that all segments of

\textsuperscript{28} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 166.
\textsuperscript{29} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 167.
\textsuperscript{30} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 168.
\textsuperscript{31} Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 446.
\textsuperscript{32} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 169.
\textsuperscript{33} Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 446.
society should have some representation, or voice in the overarching political structures.\textsuperscript{34} Through this, women and men had governing councils that were to deal specifically with their avenues of life, and all were allowed to speak at the village assembly on issues concerning them.

The ultimate indication of wealth and power in traditional Igbo society in pre-colonial times lay in the title system. This system was open to both men and women and was the means of becoming rich through the control over the labor of others by way of polygamy, either by man-to-woman marriages or woman-to-woman marriages.\textsuperscript{35} Though called different things when a man acquired a wife versus a woman, the woman acquired was afforded the same rights as wife, regardless of the biological gender of her husband. These rights allowed the woman acquired to retain power in her own right.\textsuperscript{36} A woman of outstanding conduct, character, and ability, measured in terms of wealth, was selected to lead the women as the Omu (Queen), among the western Igbo. Dressing like a male monarch with her insignia of office and her own palace, the Omu received homage from both the titled men and women as female monarch.\textsuperscript{37} Female title-holders in the highest levels of the political order were a common feature of

\textsuperscript{34} Amadiume, “Bodies, Choices, Globalizing Neocolonial Enchantments,” 593.
\textsuperscript{36} Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 46-47.
\textsuperscript{37} Chuku, Igbo Women and Economic Transformation, 19.
ancient and recent pre-colonial African political systems in general.\textsuperscript{38}

For women as well as men, status was largely achieved, not ascribed. A woman’s status was determined more by her own achievements than by the achievements of her husband.\textsuperscript{39} Women who symbolized Nnobi concepts of womanhood\textsuperscript{40} derived from worship of the goddess were given the title of Agba Ekwe.\textsuperscript{41} These women, seen as the earthly representatives of the goddess Idemili, controlled the Women’s Council.\textsuperscript{42} Acting as something like a queen, the women had the most central political position in all Nnobi and held the vetoing right in the village and general town assemblies.\textsuperscript{43} This title was one of the most prestigious ones a woman could earn and gave Agba Ekwe women significant power, especially in the Women’s Council.

Ruling over all women was the Women’s Council, Inyom Nnobi.\textsuperscript{44} A government into and of itself, the Inyom Nnobi was ruled by Agba Ekwe titled women and elderly matrons, and men had neither power nor control over it.\textsuperscript{45} This council was responsible for the welfare of all women; no decision about

\textsuperscript{38} Farrar, “The Queenmother, Matriarchy, and the Question of Female Political Authority,” 579.
\textsuperscript{39} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 168.
\textsuperscript{40} Nnobi and the importance of the goddess Idemili is described later under the Religious Umbrella.
\textsuperscript{41} Amadiume, African Matriarchal Foundations, 57.
\textsuperscript{42} Amadiume, ”Bodies, Choices, Globalizing Neocolonial Enchantments,” 43-44.
\textsuperscript{43} Amadiume, African Matriarchal Foundations, 57.
\textsuperscript{44} Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 57.
\textsuperscript{45} Amadiume, African Matriarchal Foundations, 57.
women could be made without the council’s knowledge and consent. If a decision was enforced upon the women without the consent of the council, one of the strongest weapons used by the council was the right to order mass strikes and demonstrations by all village women. Women had a strong communication network and used it to their full advantage in times of crisis.\textsuperscript{46} In critical situations, the male village council could meet with the female council for deliberation and consultation.\textsuperscript{47} The \textit{Inyom Nnobi} was the women’s council that overrode all other women’s groups, including the hierarchy of wives and daughters.

\textit{Religious Umbrella}

The roots of female power can be found by tracing back the Idemili religion. Female gender had a prominent place in Igbo myth, religion, and cultural concepts, and the Idemili religion centers around the worship of the goddess Idemili.\textsuperscript{48} The goddess oversaw economic, political, and religious activity, making her the embodiment of female solidarity. Idemili exemplifies economic empowerment, women’s solidarity, and organized power. Seen as a river goddess, Idemili was central to the social structure of Igbo societies, particularly the Nnobi, where she

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\textsuperscript{46} Amadiume, \textit{Male Daughters, Female Husbands}, 66-67.
\textsuperscript{47} Agbasiere, \textit{Women in Igbo Life and Thought}, 39.
\textsuperscript{48} Amadiume, \textit{African Matriarchal Foundations}, 40.
\end{flushright}
integrated economic, political, and religious ideas. Prior to the onset of colonialism and the forced assumption of a god upon the goddess, Idemili empowered the women of Igbo society and generated beneficial relationships.

Beyond the worship of Idemili, indigenous religions in Southeastern Nigeria were also pluralistic. Earth Goddess religion combined with ancestral religion and both were in turn combined with the religions of a variety of gods and goddesses. Divinities were said to inhabit four elements: earth, water, fire and air. The two tasked mainly with creation, earth and water, were said to be female divinities. Women were deemed capable of creating, maintaining, and re-creating the proper environment around them, for taking care of the moral and affective bonds between the visible and invisible beings within the universe. They were the promoters of “creative awareness” of the implications of religious needs or demands and interactions within the community, as religion and politics were seen as inseparable.

Women were also an important element of the ritual of sacrifice. In particular, they were a significant part of seasonal sacrifices made in honor of crop divinities.

50 Amadiume, “Bodies, Choices,” 44.
51 Amadiume, “Bodies, Choices,” 44.
52 Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, 57.
53 Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, 7.
included, for example, the coco-yam rites in honor of the coco-yam divinity Ajoku-ede. In addition to ritual sacrifices, women play a major role in most ritual ceremonies. In almost every sacrifice of public concern, women provide most of the items, including eggs, chicken, and cooked food, for the ceremonies. Women played an active part in Igbo religion, performing rituals and providing essential needs to their ceremonies.

Social Umbrella

From the goddess Idemili came another essential piece of Igbo culture and female power – umunne, children of one mother. The primary kinship unit recognized by the Igbo was that of mother and child – the children of one womb. The concept of umunne bound siblings in love and alliance, for in Igbo vernacular, there were no terms for brother and sister or sisters or brothers. Children were linked by one common bond – their mother.

Special status and privileges given to the children of daughters and their role in linking villages and lineages, shows

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54 Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, 42-43.
57 Amadiume, “Bodies, Choices,” 58.
just how the sentiment of ‘children of one womb’ is epitomized.\(^{58}\)

While a man may have many wives, within the domestic sphere the Igbo women reigned supreme. Each woman owned her own house where she lived with her children until they were grown.\(^{59}\)

Moreover, the concept of *umunne* created a tight bond between a mother and her child. This bond existed regardless of the sex of the child. The mother was expected to feed and educate her child, and guard his or her moral upbringing. As boys grew older, they would begin to follow their father to learn, however, the bond remained. All public and private etiquette teachings fell on the mother for both male and female children, and if they did not measure up, it was usually blamed on the mother. Children for their part were expected to give high respect to their mother and care for her in times of crisis, old age, and illness. Many idioms and proverbs showcase the importance of the mother: *nne bu ihe ukwu* (“motherhood is a very significant thing”), *nne amaka* (“motherhood is beautiful or excellent”) and *nneka* (“motherhood is the highest good”).\(^{60}\)

The traditional Igbo notion of womanhood also encompasses that uniqueness of blood relations. The Igbo women are not just “wife” but also “daughter” and “sister”. This emphasizes the comprehensive nature of traditional Igbo womanhood and gives a

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\(^{59}\) Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 41.

\(^{60}\) Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 85.
clearer image of how important women were to many aspects of society.\textsuperscript{61}

An important aspect of blood relations lies in links made by individuals to their family. While men would often trace their descent line through a male, \textit{nna}, their immediate links were through a woman, \textit{nne}. This derives from the concept of Idemili and the children of one womb. People would designate themselves in terms of their patrilineages, but because of the link between mother and child, the mother formed a center that all who descended from her could focus on.\textsuperscript{62} The woman remained the link between villages; to her mother, and to her children.

Another position women held was due to Igbo society being a gendered one. Roles were not rigidly masculinized or feminized and a flexibility and dynamism of gender roles was inherent. This flexibility allowed women to play male roles while men could take on female roles as well. Individuals were valued for their social duties and responsibilities and, in circumstances where roles were gendered, females were not seen as the antithesis to males. In these cases, a male could assume the status and role of a female, and a female could do the same of a male. In the case of the gender switch, the individual usually enjoyed certain privileges, power, and authority over others by

\textsuperscript{61} Agbasiere, \textit{Women in Igbo Life and Thought}, 6.
\textsuperscript{62} Agbasiere, \textit{Women in Igbo Life and Thought}, 82-83.
playing that particular gender role. These gender positions assumed by individuals determined his or her function in the kin group, as well as within the production unit.\textsuperscript{63}

When an individual took on a role of the opposite gender, one element that allowed this in traditional Igbo society was that of nmadu, the genderless term meaning person/human. This served as a third classificatory system and was based on non-discriminatory matriarchal collectivism, a unifying moral code and fusing of culture.\textsuperscript{64} Women were able to use this concept to take on two roles outside the norm, that of “male daughters” and “female husbands.” In such instances, women were accorded the status of son to continue their father’s line of descent. These women would remain in their father’s household and become the family head after he died; they would marry other women as the family head, and see to duties as the family head as well as their other duties.\textsuperscript{65} As family head was a genderless term, women not only took on the roles and responsibilities of the family head as well as the same name as their male counterparts, but they also shared the same power and respect.\textsuperscript{66}

In the case of “male daughters” and “female husbands,” women ruled their household as the “man”; however, they were not

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\textsuperscript{63} Chuku, Igbo Women and Economic Transformation, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{64} Amadiume, “Bodies, Choices, Globalizing Neocolonial Enchantments,” 43-44.
\textsuperscript{65} Amadiume, African Matriarchal Foundations, 29.
\textsuperscript{66} Amadiume, African Matriarchal Foundations, 30.
expected to be “manlike”.\textsuperscript{67} The semantic system of the Igbo is more flexible than the European one,\textsuperscript{68} and gender was separated from biological sex. This afforded women significantly more power in their traditional political system.\textsuperscript{69} Upon the death of her family, she owned the land and inherited the family property.\textsuperscript{70}

“Female husbands” occurred in many instances, primarily involving barren or childless women, labor recruitment, continuation of a lineage, or as a source of prestige. Here, a woman assumed the social function of a husband to another woman. This relationship did not involve sexual contact between the two, but rather the female husband would contract a man to play the genital role while she played the social role and took on economic responsibility for her wife and children. Children born from these marriages belonged to the female husband, as she had paid the bridewealth. In this case, the female husband also took on the role of female father to her children as well as shouldering economic responsibility for them as they grew.\textsuperscript{71}

This woman-to-woman marriage helped compensate for an unanticipated death in a family or for the lack of male heirs.

\textsuperscript{67} Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 186.
\textsuperscript{68} Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 89.
\textsuperscript{69} Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 15-16.
\textsuperscript{70} Chuku, Igbo Women and Economic Transformation, 9.
\textsuperscript{71} Chuku, Igbo Women and Economic Transformation, 9.
The flexibility of gender relations created a female hierarchy that made certain categories of women superior or inferior to others. Women in general were important to traditional society; however, they also had a hierarchy among themselves. Daughters were superior to wives. Due to the blood ties daughters had with their brothers and fathers, they were regarded as the “males” when compared to wives. This allowed them to take on the role of “male daughter” and “female husband.” This also gave daughters superior authority when compared to that of wives. Lineage daughters, especially, also had formidable power in their birthplace. Because of their lineage, they were given special prestige and respect by townsfolk.

Daughters were able to exercise significant female influence within any Igbo community through the meeting of the umuada or umuokpu, “daughters of the lineage”. This is distinct from the ndinyom or inyomdi, “wives of the lineage”. All women, regardless of social status, were expected to belong to one of these village-based groups. Members of each group held meetings regularly and paid stipulated fees. Women who lived in urban

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72 Chuku, Igbo Women and Economic Transformation, 6-7.
73 Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 57.
74 Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 59.
areas often had to get their mothers or mother-in-laws to go to the meeting in their place.\textsuperscript{75}

The powers of the umuada were extensive. They were to settle quarrels concerning political, economic, and ritual matters that were beyond their male relatives’ power to settle. They also had the right of arbitration within their natal lineage. Igbo women were expected to perform the role of keepers of public morality, and the task of disciplining unruly or disobedient relatives’ wives fell within the domain of the umuada. More importantly, the umuada had the power to ostracize any proven incorrigible male relative in their lineage. Because the services of the umuada were regarded as indispensable in the funeral of a relative, the boycotting of the funeral of the incorrigible man initiated a ritual crisis. If the umuada were not at the funeral, full rites could not be performed and the male’s afterlife was put into question. Following predetermined norms, the umuada also determined how any particular widow mourned the death of her husband.\textsuperscript{76}

In addition to the spiritual world, Igbo women also played a key role throughout society. As with political circles, the social spheres of the Igbo were separated between men and women and each was generally highly organized. Though separate, these

\textsuperscript{75} Agbasiere, \textit{Women in Igbo Life and Thought}, 40.
\textsuperscript{76} Agbasiere, \textit{Women in Igbo Life and Thought}, 39-41.
spheres overlapped at various points, and the political structures necessary to govern the society as a whole exerted authority over both spheres.\textsuperscript{77} Farming and trading were divided somewhat evenly between the men and women, though women alone looked after the house, prepared the food, and were not allowed certain jobs during the colonial period.\textsuperscript{78}

Interestingly, Igbo representations of the social structure were female-orientated in pre-colonial times.\textsuperscript{79} The women played an influential part in their society, not only by custom, but also because of their inherent vitality, their independence of views, their courage and self-confidence, and their desire for gain and worthy standing. Igbo women, more than men, had and have an ability to cooperate and stand together in difficulties and follow a common aim.\textsuperscript{80} Powerful in so many ways, women had social safeguards in the customs surrounding them, the weight of feminine opinion, independence due to economic abilities, and power from the fact that they wielded and held the pestle and cooking-pots.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{77} Amadiume, “Bodies, Choices, Globalizing Neocolonial Enchantments,” 592.
\textsuperscript{79} Agbasiere, \textit{Women in Igbo Life and Thought}, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{80} Leith-Ross, \textit{African Women}, 22.
\textsuperscript{81} Leith-Ross, \textit{African Women}, 21.
Igbo women played a crucial role in maintaining and expressing the values surrounding marriage as well. For Igbo women, marriage carried a chain of responsibilities that covered the major spheres of human interaction, in the economic, social, political, and ritualistic spheres. The ritual of marriage itself and the actual status change is predominantly female oriented. The essence of the office of marriage for the Igbo woman lay in the nurturing and preservation of the family honor and name and passing that name down to their children. When the women married, they became members of two towns: that of their husbands’, in which they lived, and that of their parents’, which they often visited.

Through networks built via trade and political influence, through ties to their family lineage and through their marriages, women were connected to each other in a variety of ways. These ties brought them together in times of trouble and crisis, and were used to getting their views heard. These ties would also be used later to express their displeasure with the new colonial situation forced upon them.

Along with their authority through the Women’s Council, Igbo women of southeast Nigeria held considerable power through

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82 Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, 37.
83 Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, 115.
84 Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, 94.
85 Leith-Ross, African Women, 22.
their mikiri or mitiri, their “meetings.” 86 Held whenever there was a need, mikiri provided women with a forum where they could develop their political talents in a more egalitarian group than the village assembly. Here, women could discuss their particular interests as traders, farmers, wives, and mothers. 87 Also, a woman could bring complaints about her husband to the mikiri. The women would collectively support the wife if they agreed that the husband was at fault. A spokeswoman might be sent to tell the husband to apologize and give his wife a present and if he was uncooperative, they might “sit on” him. The mikiri would also act to protect the rights of wives; through mikiri women acted to force a resolution of their individual and collective grievances. 88

Economic Umbrella

One of the most important functions of the mikiri was that of a market association. The market associations worked together to promote and regulate the major activity of women: trade. Prices were set at these discussions, rules were established about market attendance and fines were fixed for those who violated the rules or did not contribute to market

86 Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 165.
rituals. Rules were also made that applied to men. Rowdy behavior on the part of young men was forbidden and husbands and elders were asked to control the young men. If their requests were ignored, women could deal with the matter by launching a boycott or strike to force the men to police themselves, or they might simply “sit on” the individual offender.\(^8^9\)

Igbo women dominated the local market. It was here that they exchanged the products of their farms, their loom and their other crafts, as well as products from their domestic industries. Not only did they sell and buy goods at the market, this venue also served as the epic center of a massive network of contacts and the sharing of information, as well as a center for the celebration of events such as childbirth.\(^9^0\) Crafts were popular items bought and sold, and many were controlled by guilds, which represented one or more households. These guilds exercised control over the methods and standards of production, as well as prices and entry into the industry. The membership was usually inherited from mother to daughter.\(^9^1\) Through trade, women were able to achieve significant wealth, political power and influence in pre-colonial Igbo society.

Much of what the women sold at market outside of crafts were crops. Crop tending was one of the women’s duties and the

\(^{89}\) Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 170.
yields were considered the women’s own property. The crops were primarily used for their family’s subsistence, but anything left over from household needs could be sold at the market. The money earned from the sale of these crops was kept by the woman, who was free to spend it as she pleased, potentially on something for herself or her children, but usually on goods or foodstuffs that she could buy cheaply in one market and sell at a profit in another. Knowledge of various markets was essential in this case, as well as the price of goods. Even a seemingly small profit was cause for great joy for the woman.  

Besides their tremendous political power and social influence, women had a central place in subsistence economy. Not only were they crucial, they had a guaranteed place and men could only seek authority of economic matters through ritual specialization and ritual control. Women controlled the processing, sale, storage, and preservation of all foodstuffs exclusively, giving them a step up over the men. Men made their mark in the economy by controlling the circulation of yams, the major staple. Yet women, through their control and successful management of the subsistence economy as a whole, as well as

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93 Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 27.  
94 Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 37.
their effective organization around it, were able to derive more prestige and power for themselves.95

Wealth for women lay in “livestock, fowls, dogs, rich yields in farm and garden crops, lots of daughters, who would bring in-laws and presents, and many wealthy and influential sons.”96 They were not handed power and allowed to keep it, instead they fought to achieve prestige and power and then continued to struggle to maintain it. To retain their power, they would use all means available to them, from peaceful demonstrations to mass women’s walk-outs, exodus, and even total war if necessary.97

They were guaranteed the right to refuse a suitor and had the protection for their agricultural produce and domestic animals.98 As the main providers for their families and households, women were the “gift” embodied, for their work was purposeful and was seen as means of enhancing the individual.99 As an essential part to keeping their families fed, the women also used their extra money for gifts for their family.

95 Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 30.
96 Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 31.
97 Amadiume, Re-Inventing Africa, 104.
98 Van Allen, “‘Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?,” 71.
99 Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, 6-7.
Conclusion

Prior to the onset of colonization, Igbo women in Southeastern Nigeria had combined economic power with autonomous organizations and these powers were an inherent part of their culture. They were respected members of their society and their participation in society was accepted and needed. The women were further empowered by protective matriarchal, political, religious, and social “umbrellas,” all of which enhanced their positions in authority in society. The erosion of women’s power and authority following the intrusion of British colonialism in Southeastern Nigeria is the subject of the next chapter.

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Chapter 2
Matriarchy and the Colonial Situation:
Background to the Igbo Women’s War

Introduction

Effective about 1870, British imperialism and colonialism began gradually challenging traditional Igbo culture and social institutions in three significant ways. First, a new and unpopular form of administration known as Indirect Rule run by government appointed “Warrant Chiefs” was imposed upon the people. Second, the activities of Christian Missionaries and the introduction of Christianity began to take place at a disruptingly rapid rate. Finally, the colonial government in the late 1920s began imposing income taxes on the people. These developments were not only a cultural shock to the Igbo traditional society, they also attacked and eroded female lines (umbrellas) of power documented in Chapter 1. This chapter will show that Igbo women’s responses to these pressures constituted the road to 1929.

Indirect Rule, the Warrant Chief System and the Plight of Women

When the British arrived in Southeastern Nigeria during the 1870s and 1880s, military force was primarily used to implement colonial rule. Britain had, prior to this point, been known for
flexibility when handling problems with subject races or independent nations; however, when they arrived in Southeastern Nigeria, an inflexible system of “native administration” was used on the Igbo people. Unjust, unpopular, and often autocratic “chiefs” were created and sustained and sometimes used to stifle popular institutions.¹ No flexibility was shown, even when it became apparent that the mode of administration chosen was not the best fit for the area.

Prior to advancing into Southeastern Nigeria the British government assumed that African traditional institutions were equivalent throughout Africa. These institutions were supposed to consist of a ruler, in this case, the chief, whose people reported to him and obeyed him unequivocally. This followed the traditional view of a monarchical society that the British believed exemplified the proper mode of political progress and it was in line with what had been encountered in Northern Nigeria, as well as in most other parts of Africa. The British believed that these chieftaincy institutions brought order, organization and a progressive stage of African evolution; without this, the people could only be surviving in a stage of disorder and mean primitive life.²

² Nwabughuogu, “The Role of Propaganda,” 74.
Direct British rule was not feasible at this time as there was neither the money, staff, communications, nor the knowledge of the people that an effective administration required. Instead, indirect rule was the form of government decided upon, where the British colonial government appointed a “chief” to whom they gave warrants or “certificates of recognition,” making them the sole executive heads of their local communities, the so-called Warrant Chiefs. In time of cases requiring trials, these chiefs could be called upon to participate at the Native Courts that the colonial administration also established under this system.

The assumptions of the colonial administration led to the imposition of a new form of legal system as well. A dual system of laws was established in the colonies, which followed English common law and local “customary” law. Judicial authority lay mostly in European hands; the colonizers used the new system of courts to establish and maintain law and order. Colonial peace was the primary goal, while “customary” law was to be used to sustain “traditional” hierarchies that were endorsed by the colonial authorities. The colonial administration used the rule of law to support the colonial structure even though this

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created many new problems.\textsuperscript{5} The idea behind indirect rule was not just recognition of native law and custom but also the recognition of native law courts and facilitating the functions of local government.\textsuperscript{6}

The goal of this type of administration was to incorporate native institutions into a single system of government and subject it to the continuous guidance and supervision of European officers.\textsuperscript{7} The intent was to have the natives learn from the Europeans, and synthesize European and African culture. This objective was also one of the big problems with indirect rule.\textsuperscript{8}

Warrant chiefs among the Igbo were selected haphazardly and were rarely true leaders in their villages. Rather, they tended to be those men whom the colonial administration had incorrectly identified as a leader or individuals who were looking at the broader picture and realized that by working with the colonial government, they could exploit the new opportunities provided. These Igbo chiefs, along with the Native Court clerks who served as their principal aides, depended on the British district and provincial officers to retain their power. These individuals

\textsuperscript{8} Smith, “Indirect Rule in Nigeria: Miss Perham’s Great Book,” 373.
had helped the British colonial authority when they had first entered the area and expected a return for their help by receiving aid in keeping their authority.\textsuperscript{9}

The first weakness that appeared in this new system was the choice of chiefs. These men chosen had not been traditional leaders and the natives in many cases did not agree with how they worked. However, the Igbo were unaware of what the colonial government had in mind for the chiefs and were unwilling to put forward their true leaders in case they were exposed to unknown danger. Instead, those who wished to have power or had been mistakenly chosen were named chiefs, yet in many cases they were incompetent and corrupt, exploiting their new position to benefit themselves.\textsuperscript{10} The British colonial administration seemed to be aware of the corruption early on but was convinced that the mode of government implemented was correct. The administration believed that using the natives as rulers would make enforcing the law much easier in the long run.

Another weakness was with the very concept of a warrant chief itself. It violated traditional concepts by having only one man represent an entire village. Pre-colonial Igbo society functioned in such a way that there were numerous checks and balances on leaders. Those leaders sat together on councils to


\textsuperscript{10} Gailey, \textit{The Road to Aba}, 6.
make decisions about village life and there existed councils specifically comprised of women to assist with balanced decisions. In contrast the colonial government put in place a system with one man acting as ruler and expecting the people to follow his orders. In some cases, those chosen as warrant chiefs were leaders in their community, but this was rare and it was even more of a violation of native tradition to have one man giving orders to the rest of the village.\textsuperscript{11} As this new system removed most power from native groups, women lost their traditional roles and no new ones were put in place to give them power and influence.

These warrant chiefs depended upon the colonial government for their power. In many instances, their duties were physically demanding and they were unable to complete them. They were distinguished by their red fez-like caps, and when given a task from a higher authority, they were expected to carry it out, despite the hardships involved. The villages were often spread far apart and the task of journeying from one village to another could take hours if not days, and many of the chiefs simply did not have the stamina or ability to go that far or that long.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Van Allen, “’Sitting on a Man’,“ 172.
\textsuperscript{12} Gailey, \textit{The Road to Aba}, 64.
These rulers had been set up to be and act as true chiefs, not to just be a figurehead. The colonial government felt that by implementing this system of indirect rule, the administration would better control the people: “a native rule of the same colour and religion as the ruled is a convenient buffer for the Central Government and makes the easier the enforcement of Law and Order by the Central Government.”¹³ These men were to act as watchdogs as well as endear their people to the British administration for enabling the natives to settle things in a more civilized manner than before. The corruption that existed was conveniently left out of the conversation at this point in time.

After successfully implementing colonial rule in northern Nigeria, Sir Frederick Lugard was dispatched again in 1912, tasked with the duty of amalgamating the Colony and Protectorate of southern Nigeria with the Protectorate of northern Nigeria. Lugard came in with a very distinct image of the people he was to rule. As he put it: “The typical African…is a happy, thriftless, excitable person, lacking in self control, discipline and foresight, naturally courageous, and naturally courteous and polite, full of personal vanity, with little sense of veracity…in brief, the citrus and defects of this race-type

¹³ Afigbo, The Warrant Chiefs, 35-47.
are those of attractive children.”\textsuperscript{14} He viewed the colonial
system in southern Nigeria as needing a significant amount of
work and saw himself as the most likely candidate to implement a
new system. He attempted to dismantle the local government that
had been put in place by his predecessors and instead put in
place a new government that was more in line with how he felt
the native affairs should be run.

To do this, he instigated the same form of rule that he had
introduced in the north for the emirates, indirect rule. “The
system [of Indirect Rule],” he argued, “may thus be said to have
worked with good results in the north, and I desired to
introduce its principles in the south.”\textsuperscript{15} Using the northern
model, Lugard worked to create effective chiefs in the east,
giving power to select individuals with the hope that it would
eventually lead to their becoming paramount chiefs. His goal
was to weld closer together the executive and judicial powers.
Lugard believed that for Nigeria to be truly united, uniformity
should exist between the laws, political structures and taxing
procedures throughout all parts of the territory.\textsuperscript{16}

Lugard along with his predecessors and followers was either
oblivious or ignored the fact that the southeast was unlike any

\textsuperscript{15} Cited from: Afigbo, \textit{The Warrant Chiefs}, 118.
\textsuperscript{16} Gailey, \textit{The Road to Aba}, 70-75.
area they had previously ruled. This area “presented administrative problems which, in their difficulty, are unique in Nigeria if not all British Africa.”\textsuperscript{17} When Lugard took over, he focused solely on implementing indirect rule, feeling that it was the best choice for the area. He ignored the existing structure of rule and strove to make governing the south identical to the north. His plan was to transform select Warrant Chiefs into paramount chiefs, giving them additional powers and responsibilities. He envisioned a situation much like in the north with the Emirs, making these paramount chiefs into “Native Authorities” who would run the country on behalf of the British administration.\textsuperscript{18}

One of Lugard’s main faults was that he failed to see the corruption that was prevalent within the new administration and how the situation continued to worsen during his rule. He continued to push for changes in the south like he had created in northern Nigeria, many of which were accepted by the colonial administration. However, when he began to push harder to implement additional taxes, the British government felt that the area was not ready for a change of that magnitude and Lugard’s proposal was rejected. Soon after, he was dispatched elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{17} Smith, “Indirect Rule in Nigeria: Miss Perham’s Great Book,” 376.
\textsuperscript{18} Misty L. Bastian, “’Useful Women and the Good of the Land’: The Igbo Women’s War of 1929.” (M.A. Thesis) University of Chicago, 1985: 7.
When Lord Lugard left Nigeria in 1919, he was succeeded by Sir Hugh Clifford. A distinguished colonial administrator, Clifford arrived after serving as governor of the Gold Coast for seven years. Clifford wanted to spread modern European ideas and methods throughout the territory and focused on primary education for all children.\(^{19}\) Making a complete turn from Lugard’s policies, Clifford felt that the administration should not shield the indigenous societies from European influence. Instead, Clifford felt that “in the direction of general administration (sic), the Government of the northern provinces has rather conspicuously failed...The maintenance of the status quo, the perpetuation of more or less medieval conditions by the aid of every natural and artificial expedient, the staving off of innovations, and the successful effort to preserve untouched and unimproved the intellectual and material standards of culture to which a primitive people had already attained when first they came under alien influence – these things are not ordinarily regarded in any of Great Britain’s Tropical Dependencies as the legitimate aims of the efficient administrator.”\(^{20}\) Clifford wanted to deliberately allow these societies to be permeated by western ideas, regardless of the wishes and disruption to native society.


\(^{20}\) Clifford to Milner, 25 Jun. 1920, CO 583/89.
Clifford recognized some incongruities in the indirect rule system that had been established and was opposed to the extension of the system of the emirates indiscriminately among the Igbo people. He viewed the study of the indigenous political systems essential to developing the best form of local administration for each locality, rather than the blanket indirect rule. The warrant chief system and the extensive judicial power granted to these individuals worried him and he pushed for the use of local authority bearers for trials of minor offenses, preferring instead that political officers exercise direct rule.\(^\text{21}\) However, opposition by the colonial office gave his efforts limited success. The policies that he was advocating were perceived by many to be in opposition to those implemented by Lord Lugard and while Lugard may have fallen out of favor, his political system had been fully backed by the same administration Clifford was asking to change it. The organization Lugard had put into place had shown some usefulness and few were willing to alter it wholesale.\(^\text{22}\)

Unlike Lugard who had focused on the present, Clifford was focused more on the future. Clifford believed that if the colonial government wanted more than an amalgamated country, as he said, if the administration was looking for “a united

\(^{21}\) Cookey, “Sir Hugh Clifford,” 536.
\(^{22}\) Cookey, “Sir Hugh Clifford,” 537-538.
Nigeria, it is essential that the coordination of all administrative work, political and non-political alike, should be directed from a single centre.”  

There were no central records when Clifford took office. The departments were all distinct and coordination of policies was difficult if not impossible. Clifford wanted to make serious changes in the administration and consolidate roles and departments but was met with hostile criticism by the colonial administration. Some of his ideas would later shape the future Nigeria, but at this time, they were either mostly ignored or shot down. In 1925, he was appointed Governor of Ceylon and yet another bureaucrat took over as Governor of Nigeria.

After serving as Governor of British Guiana since 1922, Sir Graeme Thomson succeeded Sir Hugh Clifford as Governor of Nigeria in 1925. Thomson believed that Lugard’s policies in northern Nigeria were just what the natives needed for their government: “I think that the most important thing that has happened during my brief term of office is the Secretary of State’s approval for the extension of this system of Native Administration which I have described to the hitherto untaxed provinces of southern Nigeria...All these provinces are now to be taxed, and a share of the proceeds of such taxation will be

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applied to the development by groups of petty chiefs upon the
advice of administrative officers of their own local concerns.
The educative process is bound to be slow and will at first
throw a heavy burden on the administrative officer, who must
constantly stand by to give his advice, but I feel confident
that the system will justify itself even in these primitive
districts as it has elsewhere."24 In particular, he saw the use
of taxation as essential and useful and was fully prepared to
extend that policy into the untaxed parts of southern Nigeria
including Igboland. He saw this as vital to self-government:
“unless the people are given an opportunity of taking an
interest in, and assuming the management of, their own local
affairs, there is no chance of any measure of eventual self-
government.”25

It was this focus on the introduction of taxation into
southern Nigeria that Thomson is most well-known for, mostly
because this event led to the immediate uprising of the women in
what came to be known as the Women’s War of 1929. While Thomson
had other ideas for Southeastern Nigeria when he was brought in,
particularly promoting changes in education, healthcare, land
use, transportation and planting more crops; his role in the

24 Graeme Thomson, “Some Problems of Administration and Development in
Women’s War stands out paramount. His confidence that the northern model of taxation was what was needed for the rest of Nigeria and the role of individuals who served under him in implementing that model, would lead to the first major uprising of women in Southeastern Nigeria and bring about change for the whole country.\textsuperscript{26}

Predictably, the Warrant Chief system introduced a number of problems and abuses. The local people did not always see the establishment of a Native Court the same way the colonial government did; instead, the locals focused on what it could do for them. There are numerous examples of individuals who used the new institution for their own gain, trying cases illegally, imposing heavy fines, charging exorbitant fees, and forcing people to come to their courts to hear their cases.\textsuperscript{27}

Another issue that arose early on was the boundaries of the courts themselves. Rather than following traditional boundaries, lines were arbitrarily drawn to create provinces, districts, and native Courts. These new borders did not take into account ethnic and cultural boundaries and groupings. This led to groups being lumped together that were not similar and should not have been combined. Native traditions were ignored, and because of the mutual suspicion, ignorance, and fear, problems

\textsuperscript{26} For a more detailed look at the changes that Sir Graeme Thomson proposed, see his work “Some Problems of Administration and Development in Nigeria.”

\textsuperscript{27} Afigbo, The Warrant Chiefs, 57-58.
that could have been addressed early were put on hold until they came to a boiling point.\textsuperscript{28}

The imposition of colonial administration on the Igbo in Southeastern Nigeria in effect, rendered women invisible, undermining the women’s social umbrella discussed in Chapter One. Indirect rule meant that officers dealt with African male chiefs and bureaucratic officials, not the women. Even in roles that had traditionally been occupied by women, the marketplace, trading, and traditional women’s groups, the administration saw these as dependent upon and subordinate to men. If the women spoke up, they were identified as a “problem.” The colonial administrators could not identify with a culture so unlike their own; they projected the gender representations found in their own society upon the Igbo of Nigeria and were unwilling to see the actual contours of Igbo tribal society. This influenced the shaping of the new social, economic, and political structures to come.\textsuperscript{29}

Colonialism is at times credited with bringing western education, expansion of international trade, export production, increased urbanization, improved transportation, new technologies, and more food crops to the Igbo. What has often been ignored, however, was the role that it played in

\textsuperscript{28} Afigbo, The Warrant Chiefs, 58-66.
undermining Igbo women’s status. The traditional roles that women had played in Igbo society and politics were lost to them. Colonial policies favored men over women; men were appointed to the role of Warrant Chiefs, members of the Native Courts, market administrators, and were recognized as heads of household.\textsuperscript{30} These changes also led to women losing their control over the economic life of the village, including the market and trading activities. With time and backing by the colonial administration and foreign trading companies, men pushed the majority of women to the background and took over a dominant role in the control of the marketplace, and in wholesale and retail trades as well.\textsuperscript{31}

Colonial administration also brought an increase in the burden of labor that Igbo women bore. Moreover, a struggle began for the women to maintain their households as the men began to earn money in sales traditionally controlled by women. Their responsibility to provide for their families did not allow them the chance to become a part of the new ranks of retail traders. These women relied on their income from produce sales and the loss of this money as the men took over their trade adversely affected them. As prices began to seriously fluctuate and retail pricing did not offset that, Igbo women were seriously hindered. Other traders’ actions restricted the

\textsuperscript{31} Chuku, \textit{Igbo Women and Economic Transformation}, 79.
women’s incomes and limited their autonomy within the sphere of trade. Women also discovered that they could not trust the colonial administration to leave women’s central sphere of food production and domestic spending alone; their frustration and anger would later culminate in the Women’s War.  

The Missionary Factor

Christian missionaries arrived in the Nigerian territories prior to the onslaught of colonialism, in some areas as early as the 1840’s. Various groups began to come into the area in the late 1880s in larger numbers, spreading their teachings, and working to convert people to their religion. Some of the units were part of a larger missionary force that had begun sweeping into Africa, including the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Niger Mission, the Holy Ghost Fathers (Catholics), and Presbyterians. These missionaries were looking for a foothold in the country to teach their religion to the Igbo people and ignored the indigenous religion of the area.

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34 Bastian, “‘Useful Women and the Good of the Land’,“ 10.
At first, the missionaries gained few converts, though their converts were particularly strong among women, children, the poor, the needy, and the rejected.\textsuperscript{35} Christian missionaries and their religion appealed to these groups because of their campaigns against the Osu caste, human sacrifices, and twin murder. Mothers of twins, women accused of witchcraft, individuals suffering from abdominal distension (swollen stomach), leprosy, and other diseases, saw Christianity as an alternative to traditional methods of approach towards these conditions.\textsuperscript{36}

In 1902, the missionaries and their religion began to spread even more rapidly among the people of Southeastern Nigeria. It was at this time that the “Long Ju-Ju” oracle at Aro-Chukwu was destroyed and the missionaries saw a chance to spread their word.\textsuperscript{37} This shrine had been controlled by the Aro, the Igbo deity Chuku’s judge. The shrine was seen by the colonial government as a recruitment center for slaves (the British had banned slavery in 1833), and as an area of alleged cannibalism. These two events brought outrage to the British public and an expedition to attack and destroy the oracle had been planned since 1899. The British regarded this site as the source of Aro influence and sought to destroy it, thereby

\textsuperscript{35} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 179.
\textsuperscript{36} Chuku, \textit{Igbo Women and Economic Transformation}, 82.
\textsuperscript{37} Bastian, “‘Useful Women and the Good of the Land’,” 10.
terminating the Aro’s base of power, in the hopes that they could more easily dominate the area.

Following the destruction of the shrine by the British, the missionaries boosted their efforts to appeal to the people by increasingly preaching against what the missionaries saw as disturbing and wrong. Much of what they addressed were the very topics that had originally appealed to some of the converts to Christianity prior to this incident. An increasing number of natives turned to Christianity by actions or in word alone, believing that there might be something better for them in colonial religions. However, despite these conversions, inadequacies and biases were apparent from the start.

Christian missionaries brought with them preconceived notions about people, much like colonial administrators had done. The missionaries saw the role of women being within the home and imposed their views of marriage on the Igbo, leading to a concept of education that was gender-biased against women. Missionaries propped a program of education that completely ignored the powerful social, political, and economic roles that women had occupied. Instead, the education given to women prepared them for domestic services and a life confined to the home. The traditional tasks that women performed in the village were ignored. Boys and young men, by contrast, were trained in
science and new technologies which helped to prepare them to take up positions in the bureaucracies that were coming with colonial administration. Women became much less visible with this new educational program and in their traditional roles as the emphasis was given to teaching them how to be good Christian wives and mothers, sexually attractive to men, meek, gentle, obedient, content, selfless, and submissive.38

The religious umbrella that had provided women specific roles in the worship of Idemili was also undermined. The roles they had played spiritually during funerals and in the worship of the goddess, as outlined in Chapter 1, were taken away from them as well as they fell under missionary influences. To attend the schools provided by the missionaries, natives had to “become Christians” and profess their Christianity. Christian education seemed to act as a vehicle to promote colonialism.

To remain in good standing with the missionaries, individuals had to obey the rules and avoid “pagan” rituals, which included for women not attending mikiri (market) because traditional rituals were performed there or money was collected for them there. Their social and economic spheres were no longer supposed to be areas of proof of their power; instead they were to remain at home. Women and girls were increasingly

38 Chuku, Igbo Women and Economic Transformation, 83.
taught European domestic skills and the Bible, and their matriarchal power groups were discouraged more and more.\textsuperscript{39} While at first attracted to the missionary way of life as an area outside the economic sphere controlled by senior men, women soon realized that their power centers were falling fast.\textsuperscript{40} The numerous spheres that they had occupied and held a coveted role in were quickly disappearing. It is against this background that the women's early stirring, the Nwaobiala of 1925, can be fully appreciated.

The Nwaobiala of 1925\textsuperscript{41}

One of the first widespread demonstrations of women's anger at the loss of their traditional power and roles occurred between October and December 1925. Many names have been given to the undertaking, some by the colonial officials, like the "Dancing Women's Movement," the "Women's Purity Campaign," the "Market Riots," and the "Anti-Government Propaganda," while the women involved called the movement "Nwaobiala" and "Obanjili."\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{39} Van Allen, "Sitting on a Man," 179-180.
\textsuperscript{40} Martin, Palm Oil and Protest, 67.
\textsuperscript{41} For a more detailed look at the Nwaobiala, see Misty Bastian's work in "Wicked" Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa and her collaborative work with Marc Matera and Susan Kingsley Kent, The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria.
The evidence existing for this occasion leaves some gaps, but much of the event has been pieced together by Misty L. Bastian. Most scholars agree that the Nwaobiala began either with a "miraculous" or "monstrous" birth, depending on the source of the information. Professor A.E. Afigbo termed the birth monstrous, indicating that a child had been born that was either physically deformed or marked in some fashion to indicate that the child had been sent from the earth deity Ala to the people to alert them of her unhappiness. Using this interpretation, he took the term for the event and divided it into three separate words – nwa obi ala, which can mean “child from the heart/center of Ala (the land)” or “child from the compound of Ala.” What is certain from Afigbo’s interpretation is that a child was born that was of the land, not of one individual person.43

The women viewed this birth as an expression of Ala’s anger with the people. Ala is a female earth deity and one of the two most important Igbo deities. She played an important role in Igbo society and women followed their traditional roles to serve her. The message came to the women through Chineke (God) to spread to their men and to make changes. To help appease Ala and Chineke, the women began to cleanse their villages, one at a time. They took to the streets of neighboring

villages and began sweeping, following their traditional practice of making _egwu_.

_Egwu_ was an important part of female public discourse, a part of the traditional concept of “sitting on” a man. The women performers represented a key aspect of the Igbo women’s lives, using this dancing and singing to shame male authorities and to share women’s grievances and demands with their community. As with “sitting on” a man, men generally did not take part and the women often developed and practiced the songs and dances during their women-only meetings, showing them to men and women of other villages at the market, town festivals or other public events.⁴⁴

In this instance of use, the movement passed through the southern Okigwe and Bende districts and reached towns as far north as Abakaliki, Nnobi and Enugu. Igbo women would appear suddenly in a neighboring town’s most central women’s public space and announce their presence by beginning a ritualized and prolonged sweeping of the public spaces. They used brooms that took them close to the ground, linking them with Ala, the female earth deity that their song and dance physically represented. As they were sweeping, they gathered information about the important male elders, warrant chiefs, and other men who were

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associated with the colonial administration. After their prolonged sweep of the central spaces, they would then move into the private arenas, the areas associated specifically with individuals’ homes, focusing on the homes of those men identified.\(^45\)

When the movement came to an end at the end of 1925, the women presented their demands to colonial authorities. Their lists, as outlined below, explained not just why they had risen together to cleanse the area, but also what changes needed to occur to correct the problems that had caused this monstrous birth and keep it from occurring again. The following can be seen as the most extensive list of demands and complaints of the women:

1. That they were sent by Chineke (God) to deliver this message and that it would help women to bear children.
2. That no dirt was to be allowed in houses and compounds and more sanitary cleanliness to be observed.
3. That no nuisance should be committed in compound or under breadfruit trees or palm tree lest the falling fruit be contaminated.
4. That all the old roads were to be cleaned and reopened.
5. That old customs should be observed and not allowed to lapse.
6. That no girls or young married women should wear cloth until they were with first child, but go naked as in old days. At Achi the “dancers” had actually torn the cloths off some girls they met.
7. That men should not plant cassava but leave this as women’s prerequisite and that cassava should not be mixed with yams in the farms and that Aro coco yams (the

big pointed leaved colocasia) should not be planted at all.

8. That women with child should not eat coco yams[,] cassava or stock fish as these resulted in birth of twins.

9. That poor men were often punished in native courts at instance of rich men, all cases in which poor men were concerned as defendants should be tried at chief’s [sic] houses and only taken to native court if unsatisfactory. (It was obvious that people were not clear as to what this meant.)


11. In paying dowries for wives the amount should not be too much but brass rods or other native currency should be used for the first payment in preference to cash money.

12. More honesty should be shown in dowry disputes when stating amounts paid or claimed (very desirable).

13. Women should not charge too much for their services as prostitutes (from Lokpanta via Ngoda and Amuda in Okigwe district) and married women should be allowed to have intercourse with other men without being liable to be taken from the Native Courts.

14. That the message should be passed on at once to four other chiefs always in a Northerly direction.

15. That all chiefs visited must expect to be called to Okigwe soon to interview “Chineke” (God) personally.

16. The chiefs visited to dash the women dancers a goat or 10/-.

17. Fowls and cassava eggs and other native produce to be sold in markets at fixed price (The price fixed varied from 3d. [for] fowls at Achi to 1/6 in other places, usually being lower than current market prices).

This list was supplemented with the following sent to the district officer of Onitsha, Milne:

1. Brushing market-places and ones compound, the owner of the compound will only present them some yams[,] goats or fowl.

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2. That English money should do away with entirely and that cowries must come more for use.
3. Fowls to be bought for 3d.
4. To pay only one bag of cowries for marrying young girls, and half bag for marrying a woman.
5. That roads made by English people should be destroyed[;] that the roads brought or causes death.
6. Calling men bull dogs.
7. That men must not go to market but women, that women must not do farm works but for men, and that cocoa yams should be cut off and no more in use.
8. That women must be kept naked so that privates must be kept warm by the sun.
9. When saluted, the answer will be, that Chineke got salutations.\footnote{Memo M.P. No. 18/1926, dated 9 March 1926.}

Using this information, the colonial officials pieced together an interpretation of the event that they felt the dancers were trying to convey, as well as what they thought the intent behind the Nwaobiala uprising was.\footnote{Matera, The Women’s War of 1929, 118.}

The colonial government believed that the women had started the Nwaobiala because they were unhappy with the sanitation of the area, the prevalent prostitution that was rampant, and the women’s wish to go back to a more conservative society. The actions of the group were interpreted literally by the colonial authorities; things that the indigenous people saw symbolically and what they interpreted beyond the physical actions were either ignored by the administration or simply not understood at all.
It was no coincidence that during the sweeping that the women moved from their traditionally occupied market sphere to the home of the warrant chief and the compounds of the other colonial authorities. They saw the changes and abuses of this imposed system as the reason Chineke was upset and why Ala had caused this miraculous/monstrous birth to occur. After cleansing their markets of the “filth” of colonial rule, they moved to the sources of the issue and worked to cleanse that area as well. Their action was more symbolic than actual cleansing – they were sweeping dirt that could never be made to go away – but they were making a point. To fix the wrong that Chineke and Ala were warning them about, they believed they needed to get rid of the colonial administration and this was one of their first outbursts of that decision.

Most of the women that took part in this movement were older women and they protested against the onslaught of the colonial administration and the imposition of a new form of rule that ignored traditional roles. These women resented the changes that had come to their community and the way that many of the younger women were embracing aspects of colonialism. The women involved in the movement showed their displeasure with the younger women by removing physical pieces of their acceptance of colonial rule, such as clothing. In many towns, they would take
the clothes off the unmarried girls walking down the street. It was not uncommon to see unmarried girls walking nude down the street, but in this case, the act of taking the clothes off the girls was seen as stripping away the colonial changes. The women were angered by what the colonial government had done by imposing European beliefs on the social sphere traditionally dominated by the women. The colonial state had taken women’s power away from their elders, who, seeing their younger generation adopt the new changes, forced the women to take a stand.

Part of the reason the women took the clothes off the unmarried women was their belief that without the sun warming their bare loins, the women would not be fertile.⁴⁹ By stripping these girls of the European idea that women must remain clothed to be proper, the elders were trying to put back into practice the traditions that had been stolen from them. Their goal displayed through the Nwaobiala - completely missed by the colonial officials - was to reinstall their power by reinstating their traditional roles. They used the saying “we are the trees that bear fruit” here and later during the women’s war.⁵⁰ They were asking for the colonial government to respect their institutions and traditions and not dump anything else on them

⁴⁹ Matera, The Women’s War of 1929, 122-123.
⁵⁰ Matera, The Women’s War of 1929, 121.
for fear it would stifle their ability to grow – to literally, bear fruit.

When the colonial administration began making changes in the Igbo homeland, one of the challenges was the building of new roads. Traditionally, Igbo women had created and maintained paths between the various villages and markets and they resented these new roads with their fast cars and unblessed trails. The women felt a close relationship with their earth deities and that was shown in the care and effort that went into the pathways they created and kept. These routes linked the women’s economic and social spheres across villages. Colonizers built new roads that made it easier for government officials to travel, but made it dangerous for the women walking to market. When they began their egwu, the women were reacting against the colonial authorities taking away their paths by creating new roads and demanded their return.

Another grievance that was aired during the Nwaobiala was with regards to the changing economy. The colonial government had brought a change to the accepted currency by requiring the Igbo to use British money rather than their traditional currencies. This affected trade in palm oil products, and took away women’s avenues of revenue while introducing more male intruders into the marketplace. Thus women sadly watched their
paths to earn more money and support their families get eroded. Many females had turned to prostitution as it was an effective way to get British money. Others demanded that prices charged by these prostitutes be kept low so men would bring home more money, rather than spend it all on the prostitutes.

Additionally most women did not want market prices set, despite colonial beliefs. A mark of a good market woman was her ability to haggle. By putting a price on all goods, they would no longer be able to showcase their skills as good hagglers. They also resented the women making significant money and buying clothes that were traditionally a symbol of a well-to-do market woman, gained only after many years of hard work. The women wanted control of the market returned to them so these abuses brought on by colonial administration could be dealt with and halted completely.

Many Igbo people believed that just as the colonial government had displaced indigenous government, so too would indigenous religious practices be displaced by the coming of the missionaries. They saw individuals turning to Christianity as a way to become part of the new administration and forgetting their own traditional beliefs and ways in the meantime. The Igbo resented this and demanded a return to the old ways. The monstrous/miraculous birth, it was believed, had only occurred
because the people had turned away from their beliefs and the way to correct this beyond the sweeping/cleaning they had already done was to go back to the old ways.

It is possible to argue that the Nwaobiala of 1925 was the first stirring of later uprisings, in particular, the Ogu Umunwaanyi of 1929. But, while women involved in these two revolts were upset about many of the same things, to say the first was a precursor to the second somewhat limits the impact of each event. The Nwaobiala occurred because of a monstrous birth. The women who took part in the Nwaobiala were focused on cleansing their towns and returning to their old ways, prior to colonization. The Ogu Umunwaanyi that occurred four years later accepted the presence of the warrant chiefs in Igbo society and the women did not ask for a complete return to the old ways. Rather, the Igbo women asked for the rampant corruption of the position to be corrected and for women to regain their authority within spheres directly connected to and influencing their lives. If the Nwaobiala had been successful, perhaps the Ogu Umunwaanyi may not have happened. However, if the Nwaobiala had not happened, a similar comparable uprising to Ogu Umunwaanyi might easily have happened at the turn of the decade.

Men were almost completely absent and did not participate during the campaign of 1925. This is not to say that they did
not support or care to participate; rather, this was a women’s movement and part of their traditional roles. As detailed in Chapter 1, women had extraordinary power in being able to express their displeasure with someone or a group and not have to fear retribution. It was accepted as part of their power and part of their role in society. This instance, and the one to follow, was a demonstration of their traditional power and for the men to interfere in them was taboo. The women did not fear that their actions would lead to violence because traditionally it had not. The men however, could expect the full power of the colonial government to come down on them if they were to demonstrate as the women had done and hence they let the women have their roles and carry out their demonstrations according to tradition.

**Taxation**

As mentioned above, Lord Lugard (1912-1918) had proposed introducing taxation to Southeastern Nigeria. He had intended to build up a store of money to be used for maintaining the country. After his proposal was turned down and he was replaced as governor by Hugh Clifford, the focus turned to education and taxation was not a prominent concern.
It was around this time that World War I broke out and attention was subsequently transferred to financing Great Britain’s war efforts. Great Britain emerged victorious from the war but in financial need. The belief that the revenues gained from taxing the colonies would help the United Kingdom recover from the war brought the issue of taxation back to the forefront of policies in Southeastern Nigeria. When Sir Graeme Thomson (1919-1925) took over, his belief in Lugard’s policies and feelings towards taxation became a major part of his administration for the area.

In May 1927, Sir Thomson delivered an address concerning taxation at a dinner of the African Society. He explained Lugard’s vision and the benefits taxation had brought to the people of Northern Nigeria and what he saw as the advantages of taking this system of taxation and introducing it into southern Nigeria. After stating that these provinces hitherto untaxed were to be taxed, he went on to discuss health, education, industry, and transport, but did not mention taxation during this speech again.\textsuperscript{51} It was soon after this that an ill-fated counting (i.e. census) began.

The colonial administration’s beliefs in the taxation of the people and the benefits it would bring, not only to their

coffers, but also to the people of the area, had one underlying flaw. Taxation, as viewed by the British administration in Nigeria, was a concept unfamiliar to the Igbo and most other Southeastern Nigerians. Not only was it a new perception to the people, but the idea behind taxation went counter to their beliefs. Land was not something that could be alienated, so why should the people be paying for it, especially when that payment was made to strangers that the people believed could never be truly connected to the land as they were? 52

Professor Afigbo has noted that the Igbo-speaking people viewed the notion of taxation as either ‘tax on head’ or ‘tax on land’ which with further amplification meant ‘ransom’ or ‘land rent’ respectively. Seen in this light taxation raised the question of how a free man could be required to pay a ransom on his head or how a stranger could ask for rent on land from the sons of the soil. This was a question which nobody could answer but the conservatives were sure that such a demand as taxation which had these implications was irreligious and unethical. 53

Taxation did not fit into the beliefs of the people and the introduction of such taxation was bound to be met with some hesitance, if not resistance. This did not deter the colonial authorities. They were unaware of the depth of misunderstanding that lay behind the very idea of taxation, convinced that the

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52 Matera, The Women’s War of 1929, 104.
good taxation would bring would outweigh the minor incongruities encountered. As Professor Afigbo has pointed out, colonial authorities believed that, “taxation forced the people to work thereby stimulating industry and production which benefited the people with the ‘moral tonic’ of industry and increased colonial income from export.”\textsuperscript{54} The colonial administration decided in 1928 that the men of Southeastern Nigeria would be taxed.

In order to impose a tax on the people some sort of census data was required. As there were no official records of the number of men in the area, or in each area ruled by a warrant chief, some counting would have to occur to gain these numbers. The people rejected the idea of direct taxation on this concept of counting alone. Many of the Igbo believed that counting humans brought death, explaining why the natives took the count much more seriously than colonial administration would have thought.\textsuperscript{55} Professor Afigbo has explained this belief among the Igbo, “Counting, it was believed, reminded evil spirits that a particular kin-group had multiplied beyond a certain point and that the time had come to prune it.”\textsuperscript{56}

The natives understood counting when it came to the reckoning of debts, possessing a complex, indigenous numeral system that included a phrase for “infinity.” What was dreaded

\textsuperscript{54} Matera, \textit{The Women’s War of 1929}, 104.
\textsuperscript{55} Matera, \textit{The Women’s War of 1929}, 105.
\textsuperscript{56} Cited from: Matera, \textit{The Women’s War of 1929}, 105.
was the counting of human beings. Additionally, what the colonial administration was proposing amounted to a head tax on the Igbo people, seen as somehow paying a ransom for living on the land that was historically theirs, their lineage’s or their clan’s. All of the native reluctances and beliefs were ignored and the colonial authorities proceeded with counting the people despite their resistance. They were not able to get an overly accurate count, however, because people resisted in a covert way. But, a count was made under pressure of a deadline, utilizing a lot of guesswork on the part of colonial administrators and in 1928, taxation was implemented for the first time in Southeastern Nigeria.

Using the numbers found during their compilation of the census, authorities compiled tax rolls to use for the implementation of taxation. Higher officials saw the tax of five shillings a fair price, but did not take into account what they were expecting from the natives. To the Igbo men forced to pay the tax, five shillings was a difficult sum to produce. The colonial administration did not reckon with the money required to provide for their family, nor take into account the money that the men were actually making. As Harry Gailey expressed: “Resistance to the initial taxation was certainly uniform in

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most of the East but it was a silent, nearly hopeless resistance.”

One main limitation was that colonial collectors would only accept British currency. The indigenous people had limited access to British currency. Other forms of currency that the people were accustomed to using for barter and trade, cowries, manilas or brass rods, were not accepted. This requirement led some men to borrow sterling from warrant chiefs at exorbitant rates of interest, or to pawn members of their families to get cash. Most Igbo men were adverse to both options and the taxation brought many households close to impoverishment. In addition to this, the impact on the women was severely underestimated.

The colonial administration either was unaware or ignored what imposing taxation on the men meant to the women of each village. The women were not directly taxed, nor were their children or their property at this time, but they were affected by this imposition. As stated above, many times the men could not afford to pay their tax and the women were forced to contribute to the monies collected to help pay the men’s taxes. They used the money they collected from their traditional roles in the marketplace to save their family members from being sold.

58 Gailey, The Road to Aba, 91.
and to combat what borrowing from the warrant chiefs would do to their families. Many of the women who were called upon to help their families were involved in trade that would give them some access to outside currency and numerous times widows were asked to help their unmarried sons pay the tax. This increase in the amount of revenue they were required to come up with severely burdened the women.

Conclusion

As has been shown, the coming of colonial authorities had ruthlessly undermined the role women played in the various spheres of society. This increased demand on their resources and the fact that their contributions were invisible to the colonial administration angered them. The women had demonstrated once before, as shown earlier in 1925 with the Nwaobiala, when they were unhappy with the way they were being treated. The colonial administration was unaware of just what the women were capable of, though they would become well acquainted with it in the following year, as shown in the next chapter.
Chapter 3
Matriarchy and the Women’s War:
The Course of the War

Introduction

This chapter presents a documentary narrative and analysis of the Ogu Umunwaanyi (Women’s War) of 1929. Evidently, warning signs for the confrontation abound. A census of counts of Igbo men and their property was conducted in 1925 and again in 1927. In 1928, direct taxes were imposed on Igbo men for the first time. Moreover, in mid-October 1929 rumors began to spread that Igbo women would be taxed too. The Women’s War itself spanned from early to late December 1929. It culminated into the appointment of two Commissions of Inquiries set up to examine the causes of the disturbances: the first in January 1930 and the second one in March 1930.

Prelude to 1929

Chiefs are oppressing us and taking all our money. Our children are taxed and we have no money to pay for them. We women are the mothers of Europeans and Chiefs, and we don’t wish women to be oppressed. We want peace in the land.

Testimony of Mary Onumaere

As European firms and officials gained more power at the local level, Igbo women began to feel the sting of loss of

1 CE/K5A. “Proceedings before the Commission of Inquiry into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces,” March 25, 1930, 238-240.
economic opportunities. Direct taxation and produce inspection were implemented by the colonial administration and a shift was seen in trading credit terms to favor the Europeans. The British traders were developing a monopoly on trade and on power.\(^2\) Palm oil prices were constantly fluctuating, the prices of goods were rising and in the midst of this, direct taxation was imposed.\(^3\)

In 1925, the colonial government approved plans to begin conducting a census of Igbo males. The people were told that they were not to be taxed, yet the intention behind the census was to tax the Eastern Provinces of Southern Nigeria.\(^4\) The summer of 1926 was spent drafting a tax ordinance for the area, following many revisions during the fall and winter months.\(^5\) It was finally decided that Native Treasuries would be created in each of the provinces by October 1927, while taxation would begin in April 1928.\(^6\) However, as the census data was being collected, the officials continued to deny that their intent was taxation. By misleading the people, Igbo women would be suspicious of the activities of the colonial government soon to come.

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\(^2\) Martin. \textit{Palm Oil and Protest}, 138.
\(^3\) Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War of 1929}, 15.
\(^4\) Gailey, \textit{The Road to Aba}, 80.
\(^5\) Gailey, \textit{The Road to Aba}, 80-84.
\(^6\) Gailey, \textit{The Road to Aba}, 84-86.
At this time, prices in the palm oil trade were high. As such, the tax set on adult males was set accordingly. Besides some “tax riots” in Warri Province in 1927, the taxes were collected with little trouble in the West up to 1929.\(^7\) The taxes were collected for the first time in the Eastern Provinces in 1928, with the help of the Warrant Chiefs and an enlarged police force.\(^8\) Women were not taxed and the men appeared to accept the inevitable; there was no visible resistance to the taxation.\(^9\) However, by 1929, the price of palm oil had fallen and the paying of the tax set high a few years before had become much harder. Igbo women, while not officially taxed, had borne the burden of helping their men folk pay the taxes. Already taxed with providing the household needs, women were against increased taxation for the men and were vehemently opposed to taxes being spread into their realm.

The first uprising of women occurred in Calabar in 1925. This was a revolt of market women, sparked by an attempt to impose market tolls in the two main markets of Calabar town. The colonial government had not consulted the market women adequately on the matter and they wanted their grievances known. Their main objection was that the market tolls were being introduced by the authorities for the use of land. This land

\(^7\) Van Allen, “'Aba Riots' or Igbo 'Women’s War'?” 71.  
\(^8\) Akpan, The Women’s War, 16.  
\(^9\) Martin, Palm Oil and Protest, 113.
was not government owned and should not have been taxed. Their other objection was that tolls were being introduced for the use of dilapidated sheds, which were built and maintained by the women themselves.\(^\text{10}\)

The women’s opposition failed and on April 1, 1925, posters were put up announcing payment of the new tolls and fees; toll-collectors and fence construction workers were also put in place. The women reacted violently, driving the government employees away and pulling down the fences. The crowd cried to the spirits of their ancestors and when that did not give immediate results, the women poured through the trading area, forcing stores and shops to close and all the women marched on the Resident’s House on Government Hill. The foreign and European traders were chased away and the Native Court buildings were taken over.\(^\text{11}\)

Into the struggle, the Commissioner ordered the Riot Act to be read and policemen charged the women, dispersing them. Forty women were injured by the charge, one later died from the injuries, though there was no official report of the event. Rather the official reports paid more attention to the five Europeans who were assaulted. The women’s leader, Mrs. Afiong Edem Archibong explained the women’s grievances to the Resident.

\(^{10}\) Akpan, *The Women’s War*, 18-19.
\(^{11}\) Akpan, *The Women’s War*, 19.
She told him that “the women shared equally with the men in matters that concern the welfare of this country, but the women had never been asked their opinion regarding the market tolls that concerned them principally.”

This event led to the closure and boycotting of two markets by the women of Calabar, making life difficult for the Europeans and their servants. The women turned to new markets that opened on the outskirts of town that often led to the owners of land being fined by the British. In neighboring town, Oron, women sympathized with what was going on in Calabar and did not want tolls introduced in their market. Their resident district officer, F.N. Ashley, promised them that no tolls were to be introduced. Other towns were also concerned about the potential of market tolls; numerous petitions and individual telegrams were sent to the government. They requested a public enquiry into the “unlawful outrage against defenseless women by fully armed police, charging with bayonets and butts.” Their request was ignored and though the Resident reported that the market women’s revolt was organized, had its leaders and was directed against all tolls by the Government, nothing came of

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12 Akpan, The Women’s War, 19.
13 Akpan, The Women’s War, 19.
it. The lessons of 1925 were hardly heeded by the colonial administration, as would be evident later.¹⁵

In 1927, Calabar and Owerri Provinces were under perusal by the British administration again. This palm belt area was most affected by the international economy and it was here that the incidence of taxation was highest.¹⁶ The administration had decided to do a reassessment for the tax deficit, causing disaffection among the people. The repressive methods used by the administration, the thoroughness of the exercise and the counting of women and their personal effects started the rumor that the women would be taxed.¹⁷ As testified at the Commission of Inquiry by one witness, Ikodia:

> About four months ago we heard that women were being counted by their chiefs. Women became annoyed at this and decided to ask who gave the order, as they did not wish to accept it. As we went to various markets we asked other women whether they, too, had heard the rumour about the counting of women. They replied that they had heard it too.¹⁸

The women were mostly upset by how the re-assessment exercise was conducted; they were subjected to the unprecedented, in their traditions, humiliation and invasion of

¹⁸ CE/K5A, March 14, 1930, 81-82.
privacy by strangers. These individuals poked in their boxes and belongings, counted their pots and utensils, and their hens and goats. During this exercise, even the wives and children were counted and written down, something that even the women’s husbands would never take such liberties with their wives property. It was this counting, as they had seen before done to the men, that led to the spread of the rumor that the women were to be taxed.\textsuperscript{19}

The first violent outburst against the new tax occurred in Ukam, 1928. There, a young administrative officer, R.K. Floyer, tried to re-assess Ukam, in Opobo Division, to improve the tax revenue. To do this, he and his team began measuring farms and counting yam heaps. They recorded the number of domestic animals that were in yards and fields and counted the women’s cooking pots, utensils, and number of fireplaces in each compound. They counted the number of doors in a man’s house and even counted the number of women’s belongings and pieces of apparel (cloth) kept in their boxes. These activities were vehemently opposed by the women and when the protest turned violent, Mr. Floyer had to flee for his life. The angry women

\textsuperscript{19} Akpan, The Women’s War, 21.
began blocking the road in protest and disrupted all activities in the area.\textsuperscript{20}

From the rumor that had begun in the Calabar and Owerri provinces, the counting of cooking pots, and utensils was seen as the precursor to the imposition of taxes on the women. The women moved from blocking the road to destroying the Essene Native Court and releasing its prisoners. Some of these individuals had been imprisoned due to their initial actions in disrupting the activities in the area and the women felt justified in releasing them. The outburst could have lasted much longer, but was put down with the arrival of additional police force and order was restored with little fuss.\textsuperscript{21}

Following the restoration of order, the officials began searching for the leaders of the outburst. During this search, many people were arrested and detained for months. The Ibibio Union at Uyo, newly formed on April 28, 1928, met and discussed the issue, criticizing the activities of some British officials in connection with the direct imposition of taxation. The union realized that resentment was growing and that open hostilities against the government had the potential to erupt at any time. This outburst was also the prelude to the Ibibio women’s participation in the war of 1929, as well as the first serious

\textsuperscript{20} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 21.  
\textsuperscript{21} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 22.
warning of the growing resistance to the activities of the British colonial officials in most of Southeastern Nigeria as a whole. This event also foreshadowed the leadership role that the women were to assume in the protest and movements to come.\textsuperscript{22}

In September 1929, the Acting District Officer of Bende District, John Cook, took it upon himself to update his records. He decided to compile a more detailed nominal roll for future taxation, beyond the number of adult males in each district. He wished to have a counting of each taxable male’s ward, the number of his wives, his children, his farms, his yams, and his domestic animals. He summoned the warrant chiefs from his division on September 29 and told them his wishes. He asked them to supply the information and added that this had nothing to do with the taxation of women.\textsuperscript{23}

Suspicions arose from the beginning at this request for information. It had only been a few years that the District Officer had first said the counting of adult males had nothing to do with taxation, yet taxes had been introduced immediately after counting. When some warrant chiefs went to their communities, they openly said they had been ordered to count women and domestic animals, “so that women would be taxed.”\textsuperscript{24}

The rumor that had begun two years ago in Calabar and Owerri was

\textsuperscript{22} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 22.  
\textsuperscript{23} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 25.  
\textsuperscript{24} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 25.
apparently coming to fruition. However, the women decided that until one of their own was asked for information they would do nothing. They were willing to wait for clear evidence of their impending taxation before they retaliated.\textsuperscript{25} At this point, the colonial government could have intervened and avoided later casualties, yet they remained stubborn in their belief that the event would not escalate.

The evidence the women needed came at the end of November, in the Oloko Native Court area of Owerri Province. The Warrant Chief Okugo had taken the District Officers request and was making a reassessment of the taxable wealth of the people in his district. To do this, he was going to count the women, children, and domestic animals.\textsuperscript{26} On November 23\textsuperscript{rd}, Okugo sent his assessor, Mark Emeruwa, out to get these figures. Emeruwa entered a compound and approached a married woman, Nwanyeruwa Ojim, telling her to count her goats and sheep. To this, she retorted angrily, “Was your mother counted?” Insults were exchanged and then, “they closed, seizing each other by the throat” and a scuffle ensued.\textsuperscript{27} Nwanyeruwa refused to permit an assessment of her property, as had been determined by the women’s group and this incident became the catalyst for the rumor.

\textsuperscript{25} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 173.
\textsuperscript{26} Leith-Ross, \textit{African Women}, 24.
\textsuperscript{27} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 173.
As Emeruwa and Nwanyeruwa grappled, alarm was sounded and other women came to the scene. As the testimony of Rosanah Ogwe indicated, the women came despite not knowing what the alarm was about: “I know that an alarm was raised and all women came out. If an alarm is raised in the town summoning people to come and see what is happening, everyone is supposed to come out.” The women were convinced they were going to be taxed and messengers were sent to neighboring areas immediately. The day after the scuffle between Emeruwa and Nwanyeruwa, the women went to the Mission House to ask Emeruwa why he wanted to count women. Emeruwa told them to ask Chief Okugo as he had sent Emeruwa to count them. The women then turned and marched to the compound of the warrant chief to get an explanation on the matter of taxation and to get retribution for their assaulted sister, Nwanyeruwa. As described by Nwakaji, their journey took them to many chiefs:

...We had heard that Chiefs were counting women. We wondered why women were being counted. We went to the house of Chief Oleka of Oloka and asked why women should be counted. He said that he did so in accordance with the District Officer’s instructions that women should be counted. We asked him, “Why are you counting women?” He replied that the District Officer had said that women should pay tax, and that, if we liked to do so, we could go to Chief Ezima of Neoru and ask him about it. We went to Ezima,

28 CE/KSA, April 22, 1930, 732-741.
29 Akpan, The Women’s War, 26.
and he told us that he too had counted women, and that he was not satisfied that women should pay tax while men were paying. We were also told to go to Chief Oboro’s house at Omosu. We did so. He too said that the order that women should pay tax came from the District Officer. Oboro said that we should go to Ngadi’s house and tell him about it. We went to him and asked him whether he had heard about this rumour. He replied that he had heard about it, and that the District Officer had said that women should pay tax. We were very much surprised at this.³⁰

After the verbal confirmation that they were to be taxed, the women took action. Using their traditional power, the women proceeded to “sit on” Chief Okugo and the assessor.³¹ After several days of protesting the women were given written assurances that they were not to be taxed and Okugo was arrested, tried, and convicted of physically assaulting women. He was also accused of spreading news that could cause alarm and was sentenced to two years imprisonment.³² Though Chief Okugo was deposed and the women had written papers saying they would not to be taxed, the women remembered they had been told before that their men would not be taxed. These two reassurances did not convince the women.

³¹ Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 449.
The War: “Ogu Umunwaanyi,” December 1929

Due to the extensive communication network that existed among the women in the region, rumors of the introduction of taxation spread quickly.\(^{33}\) The women were understandably upset as they had been watching the prices of their palm-produce fall and new customs duties introduced that had increased the cost of numerous imported articles for daily use. The women came together and went to the houses of the chiefs and “each admitted counting his people.”\(^{34}\) This, together with the occurrences at Oloko, decided the course of action for the women. The women revolted in what they called “Ogu Umunwaanyi,” the Women’s War.

The revolt spread from Oloko through Ngwa and neighboring regions. These groups of singing, dancing, and militant women moved about the eastern countryside, converging on the Native Administration centers. Here, the women chanted, danced, sang songs of ridicule and demanded the caps of office of the Warrant Chiefs that were so important to their status.\(^{35}\) The initial eruption was quickly dismissed as a local nuisance by the British authorities - a “frenzied outburst” of “demented women.”\(^{36}\) However, as the revolt began to spread, colonial administrators became alarmed.

\(^{35}\) Van Allen, “’Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 60.
On December 2nd, demonstrations were occurring at Ukam; by the 9th, it had moved to Owerrinta and by the 12th, women’s resistance had spread to Nguru, Okpuala [Okpala] and Ngor [Ngo]. At some of the locations, the women broke into prisons and released the prisoners. In most cases, they demanded the caps of the Warrant Chiefs, and after getting them, they levied a fine, verbally abused the compound inhabitants who were threatening them with taxation and then left, adding the newly obtained cap to their collection. These caps would be given to district officers by the women to make a statement; the women did not wish to overthrow the colonial rule as it was, but rather to be consulted on the selection of the Native Affairs officials and during the formulation of policies. The women demanded that all existing oppressive and corrupt chiefs and court clerks be prosecuted with the evidence they had. To prevent this from happening again, the women wanted limited terms of office for the chiefs and to always be consulted on the appointment of the chiefs. And, above all, they wanted tax

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37 Akpan, The Women’s War, 27.
38 Van Allen, “‘Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 60.
exemption for the women, and for this, they were willing to fight.\textsuperscript{40}

On December 13\textsuperscript{th}, the war had arrived at Aba. Here the women converged at the Native Court and the Company of African Merchants Store and the Niger Company compound. On the road, they attacked cars, lorries, and trains. It was here that just two days prior, a woman had been knocked down by accident and killed by a European’s car, part of the reason the worst of the destruction occurred here.\textsuperscript{41} In general, the demonstrations were considered peaceful as the women did not carry arms, but only palm fronds and bare hands and bodies. The British forces, on the other hand, were armed with everything from sticks and whips to rifles and Lewis guns.\textsuperscript{42}

By mid-December, the women were convinced they were to be taxed and any attempt to dissuade them from their war path went unheeded. As one of them testified:

Our grievances are about this tax – taxation generally women were annoyed. They said that they did not like it at all. That was our grievance. We said that if we demonstrated and made a noise people would hear about it and ask us why we were making the noise. We never thought or intended to fight white men. We demonstrated so that we might be asked what our grievances were. Then we would ventilate them. Our main grievance is that we are not so happy as

\textsuperscript{40} Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 449.
\textsuperscript{41} Martin, \textit{Palm Oil and Protest}, 114.
\textsuperscript{42} Bastian, “‘Vultures of the Marketplace,’” 260-261.
we were before. That is, the world is not peaceful to us as it was before.

Testimony of Ejiatu

During the middle of December, sporadic incidents occurred at Abak (located to the south between Ikot Ekpene and Uyo), Ikot-Ekpene, Opobo, Itu, and Aro Chuku. Military forces were quickly called in by the colonial officials to respond to the women’s attacks on property. The women demanded caps of warrant chiefs and destroyed their personal property. While inconvenient and embarrassing to colonial officials, the authorities were more concerned when the women assaulted the colonial symbols of warrant chief power – the native court buildings and European trading centers. As the women made their anger known during the war, the colonial administration took drastic steps to stop them.

On December 15, the women marched in Utu Etim Ekpo. It was here that the colonial government ordered some of the first shots that brought heavy casualties to the women. As the women marched, they burned the Native Court and sacked and looted the “factory” (European store) as well as the clerks’ houses. The security forces shot at the women in defense of property and because of misinterpretation of the women’s actions. The women had arrived in their sackcloths, with charcoal smeared faces,

44 Perham, Native Administration, 209.
sticks in their hands and heads bound with young ferns, traditionally symbols of war for the women, but not violent war. The colonial administration brought in police and troops. As the women ran towards the troops, yelling their traditional war cry, the police and troops opened fire, killing eighteen women and wounding nineteen. The women made noise to be heard, but they were not enticing fire, nor did they expect to be shot at.

On December 16, six women leaders met with the District Officer at Opobo. The women were there as representatives of various towns and wanted their demands not only to be heard, but also typed out. The demands fell in line with what they had been revolting for up until this point – no taxation for women, no counting of personal property, no arresting women, no charging women rent, no fees for licenses to hold plays, removal of corrupt chiefs, and, one they had wanted for years, no taxation of men. As the District Officer seemed to be getting distressed, impatient newcomers joined the crowd of women surrounding the compound and began beating their pestles at the fence. This was customarily used as a pressuring tactic to speed up negotiations. However, the British army commanding officer on site was unaware of this and saw this as the beginning of a demolition riot. When the fence gave way, the commanding officer pulled his revolver and ordered the women to
back up. When they did not, he panicked and ordered his soldiers to face the crowd and shoot.45

When the women at the front of the group attempted to move back, the heavy crowd prevented them from retreating. Some women began to flee as the soldiers fired two volleys at them. Some ran towards the town while others ran towards the river trying to get away from the shooting. Many of the women fell where they were shot; others were found lying in front of the post office and along the river.46

The exact number wounded, killed or who died as a result of injuries can never be known.47 Reportedly, twenty-eight women were shot dead on the spot, eight drowned, and an additional thirty-one were wounded, three of whom died at the hospital.48 Official records report fifty dead and fifty wounded during the entire period of the women’s revolt before order could be restored.49 Other estimates put the loss well in the realm of five hundred.50 These numbers are so drastically different due to the circumstances that may have surrounded the women’s death. Eyewitness accounts acknowledge official estimates but add to it

45 Akpan, The Women’s War, 42.
46 Falola, The Women’s War of 1929: 68.
47 Akpan, The Women’s War, 43.
48 Akpan, The Women’s War, 42.
49 Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 449.
50 Akpan, The Women’s War, 43.
the number of women who were not noticed during the struggle, but subsequently could not be found following the revolt.

The massacre at Opobo marked the highest point of the women’s war, as well as the end.\textsuperscript{51} In all, sixteen Native Courts were attacked, most broken up or burned. This area of revolt was six thousand square miles, containing about two million people. The actual number of women involved will probably never be known, but has been estimated in the tens of thousands.

Throughout the approximately one month of revolt, no British or European was seriously injured; nearly all casualties were on the side of the women.\textsuperscript{52} The following table is an amalgamation of tables found in the Commission of Inquiry reports that was constructed by Misty Bastian and first published in her article, “’Vultures of the Marketplace’: Southeastern Nigerian Women and Discourses of the Ogu Umunwaanyi (Women’s War) of 1929.”\textsuperscript{53} As the table shows, only one man is listed as dying from this fight; this was truly a “women’s” war. The table and names helps provide a guiding reference to those women who lost their lives fighting for their place. Map 3 depicts key centers of turmoil and complements Table 1.

\textsuperscript{51} Akpan, The Women’s War, 43.
\textsuperscript{52} Van Allen, “’Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 60.
\textsuperscript{53} Bastian, “Vultures of the Marketplace,” 273-274.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Town/Ethnic Origin</th>
<th>Where Killed</th>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Lagos</td>
<td>Opobo</td>
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<td>2. Mary Nzekwe</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>3. Mark Okoronkwo Jaja</td>
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<td>5. Regina Cookey</td>
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<td>30. Danuna</td>
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<td>31. Alale (Alali)</td>
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<td>32. Mary Tatare</td>
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<td>33. Mary Udo Ekpo</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Utu</td>
<td>Uta Etim Ekpo</td>
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<td>Unwa Atai</td>
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<td>49</td>
<td>Adiaha Ama</td>
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<td>Umo Udo Nta</td>
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<td>52</td>
<td>Unidentified Ngwa (Owerri area)</td>
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<td>Unknown/Igbo</td>
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Map 3: The Women’s War of 1929

Falola, The Women’s War of 1929, x.
Suppression and Repression

The colonial government had only just finished the successful implementation of direct taxation on men when they were faced with the anger of rioting Igbo women.\textsuperscript{55} How quickly the women reacted and mobilized en masse frightened many officials; in response, means were employed to quell the resistance that would not have normally been sanctioned.\textsuperscript{56} Notices were issued forbidding gatherings within a one mile radius of merchandise stores, on the threat of a one year imprisonment. Special constables were immediately recruited and European traders, missionaries, court messengers, government laborers, and co-operative youths were also mobilized to help stop additional uprisings from occurring.\textsuperscript{57}

The troops that were recruited lived off the areas they guarded, demanding food and other necessities from the local inhabitants. Those places that refused to provide supplies were burnt down by the troops. The use of armed forces and burning down houses and sometimes whole compounds became tools used by the colonial administration as the means of “restoring law and order and bringing pressure to bear upon a recalcitrant primitive community.”\textsuperscript{58} Fines were levied on towns to pay for

\textsuperscript{55} Leith-Ross, African Women, 23.
\textsuperscript{56} Akpan, The Women’s War, 33.
\textsuperscript{57} Akpan, The Women’s War, 47.
\textsuperscript{58} Akpan, The Women’s War, 46.
damages from looting and a number of people were arrested and interrogated as the search for the leaders was occurring.\textsuperscript{59} Soldiers confiscated property as payment when the unreasonably high taxes could not be paid. Some areas suspended head counting and tax collection to avoid additional protest, though they would be reintroduced later on.

From the beginning of colonial rule, the colonial government had been blind to the political institutions of the Igbo women and the traditional power they held.\textsuperscript{60} They violated the autonomy of villages by lumping together unrelated villages under one Native Court Area. They developed policies that violated Igbo concepts by appointing one man to represent the whole village and went further by having him give orders to everyone else.\textsuperscript{61} And beyond all the direct violations, the colonial administration refused to accept Igbo women’s groups as legitimate organizations and avoided consulting with them on matters that concerned them.

Despite the numerous warning signs, the colonial government remained oblivious to just how deep the frustration and resentment was that was driving the women.\textsuperscript{62} Even after seeing it firsthand, the Women’s War is generally seen by the British

\textsuperscript{59} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 46-47.
\textsuperscript{60} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 172-173.
\textsuperscript{61} Van Allen, "’Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?" 70-71.
\textsuperscript{62} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 34-36.
as “irrational” and called a series of “riots.”

Calling it a series of riots is misleading. A riot conveys an uncontrolled, irrational action that involves violence to property or persons or both. This is not what the 1929 Women’s War was. This was an organized event, using traditional means, employed by the women to express their grievances and to get results. If it had truly been a riot, the organization of the women would have been unheard of; rather, by looking at the women’s networking, a much clearer picture develops.

The depth of women’s traditional power can be seen by looking at their actions during the women’s war. They used the traditional method of “sitting on a man” to show their discontent and to get some recognition of their outrage. Traditionally, this would have been interpreted very differently as the native men were aware and understood the women’s tactics and would not dare to interfere. Because their grievances were directed at the colonial government and the colonial authorities did not know what to do with these noisy, stamping women making preposterous threats and destroying huts, they reacted with violence.

The spread of the war itself was due to the traditional women’s market mikiri network. The costs of food and other

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63 Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 174-175.
64 Van Allen, “’Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 60.
necessities were paid for by the women; the participants were overwhelmingly women and the leadership was clearly held by women.\textsuperscript{65} The women used traditional symbols and channels to communicate efficiently and the speed of response left the colonial government shaken.\textsuperscript{66} Without a matriarchal solidarity by the women, a mobilization of this size, this quick, and this organized and disciplined would not have been possible.

The women themselves viewed the events as a symbolic war.\textsuperscript{67} Their actions were aimed at paralyzing the government’s normal activities and purging it of evil practices and intentions towards women.\textsuperscript{68} Though they were willing to, and many did die for their cause, traditionally it was unheard of, women being challenged or brutalized, let alone killed, for their actions when “sitting on a man.” As is evident in their societal structure examined in Chapter One, the rights afforded the Igbo women prior to colonization exempted them from retaliation when they “sat on a man” because they only employed the use of this demonstration when it was absolutely necessary. The fact that they saw the \textit{Ogu Umunwaanyi} as an instance of “sitting on a man” on a much larger scale was ignored or simply dismissed by the colonial government and many women paid with their lives.

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\textsuperscript{65} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 175.
\textsuperscript{66} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 54.
\textsuperscript{67} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 3.
\textsuperscript{68} Akpan, \textit{The Women’s War}, 57.
\end{flushright}
Commissions of Inquiry

The Chairman: All these things you are telling us, did they happen since you have had Warrant Chiefs, or when you had your own natural rulers?
Witness: They started when Warrant Chiefs were created. They were never done in the old days.

Testimony of Nwachi

Following the suppression of the revolt, the Government appointed two separate Commissions of Inquiries to examine the causes of the women’s revolts. The Commission Report taken at the end of December 1929 decreed that the use of force had been employed correctly and attempted to justify the use of machine guns against the women. The Governor, facing pressure from home and abroad, and somewhat uneasy about the findings, appointed the first Commission of Inquiry. Small in numbers, these members were to amplify the inquest proceedings and report further on the circumstances. The second Commission came at the insistence of the African representatives in the Nigerian legislative council and from British public opinion pressure. A much larger representation than the first commission, this group was mandated “to enquire into all the circumstances connected with the disturbances, including the causes thereof” and make recommendations, as well as inquire into the responsibility that existed, if any, for the deaths of the women.

69 CE/K5A, March 25, 1930, 221-224.
70 Akpan, The Women’s War, 48-50.
The women were asked to come forward and voice their complaints. Some common complaints were repeated: “We said that we thought the white man come to bring peace to the land;” “Our grievance is that we are not so happy as we were before;” “Our grievance is that the land is changed - we are all dying.”

Many women spoke specifically regarding their upset about produce prices: “Trade was bad and that was why women moved about;” “Market is our main strength. It is the only trade we have. When market is spoiled, we are useless...In my town we have no palm trees that we can prepare and sell and make money. We have no kernels either that we can sell and make money.” And a concern that had surfaced earlier came forward even more vividly now:

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.

Though their demands would later include no taxation for men, at this time, women had enough burdens and felt the addition of taxes was unjust and unwarranted.

Many changes had come to the land with the onset of colonialism. They had a new religion introduced and had been told that theirs’ was not the “correct” one. Their political

72 Martin, Palm Oil and Produce, 115-116.
73 CE/K5A, April 22, 1930, 741-742.
74 Martin, Palm Oil and Product, 115-116.
system had been ignored and inherent rights had been scrapped for a model that did not fit with their societal structure.

Taxes had been introduced already and they had been lied to about it: “Chief Oparaocha (Nguru): ‘The women said: ‘You have deceived us about men not going to pay tax but afterwards they paid tax...First of all the counting of men was done and nobody told them the object of it, but some time afterwards they were told they were to pay tax’...That is a fact.’” 75 Now, additional taxes were expected, and when they found out that the taxes to be imposed upon them were not a once-and-for-all levy, that these would continue and closer scrutiny would be taken and women would be taxed, they were fed up. 76 There seemed to be no “peace to the land” in the horizon:

Our object in coming here is because the news we heard last year has never been heard before. That is what we sang about. We sang so that you might ask us what our grievances were. We had cause for grievances before the taxation was introduced. It is a long time since the Chiefs and the people who know book and the Nkwerre people have been oppressing us. We said that we thought that white men came to bring peace to the land. We were annoyed because men are born by women and they marry women. All the towns were opened so that people might enjoy peace and you now suggest that tax should be paid...We meet you here so that we might settle matters. We are telling you that we have been oppressed. If this oppression continues, how are we to praise you? 77

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76 Akpan, The Women’s War, 17.
These women who came forward to testify freely admitted to knowledge concerning the Women’s War. Many had taken part, knew someone who had taken part, or had come to the hearings to settle scores with warrant chiefs and colonial officials. While a few were required to give testimony, like Nwayeruwa, the majority came to speak to those they believed were in a position of authority. They hoped that by bringing forth their problems, they would have a chance to see a favorable result. “We don’t want women to be taxed and we want the tax on men to be abolished...Since the white man came, our oil does not fetch money. Our kernals do not fetch money. If we take goods or yams to market to sell, Court Messengers who wear a uniform take these things from me.”

The women wanted change. They wanted the Chiefs to be gone altogether or for the women to be given a voice in choosing new chiefs. They wanted all fees removed, women to be left alone physically and economically and the counting of personal effects and foodstuffs halted immediately. While they had come together under the issue of taxation, their grievances spread to all they had been subjected to under colonial rule: a native court system that produced corrupt and arrogant chiefs and

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79 Martin, Palm Oil and Protest, 116.
80 Akpan, The Women’s War, 59.
workers, prices for their goods that continued to drop, constant
demands of a foreign government, threats, fines, imprisonment of
their menfolk, taxation of their men, dealing with court members
who operated by bribes – there was only so much the women could
physically and emotionally cope with. Finally able to express
their problems, and believing these Commissions of Inquiry would
have some effect, the women brought forward the abuses that
affected them directly and primarily – they expressed the abuses
that occurred as well as solutions they were hoping for.

The matriarchal society that the Igbo woman had grown up
with and had participated in prior to warrant chief rule, was
the same society they were forced to watch violated by the
imposition of colonial rule. The women saw the umbrellas they
had traditionally ruled removed from their power, their worship
of Idemili outlawed, their part of the political system ignored
and not allowed to meet, their title system and the power with
it taken from them, their social status and privileges removed
and no longer allowed, and their economic power encroached upon.
As they watched everything they held dear to them forcibly taken
away, traditional boundaries could only be ignored by the
colonial government at their own risk.

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81 Akpan, The Women’s War, 20.
82 Nina Emma Mba. Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women’s Political Activity in
Evidence from the testimonies show a cross section of women was involved in the Women’s War. Rural and urban women can all be seen participating by looking at the data casualties, as well as reading their statements from the Commission of Inquiries. As shown in Chapter 1, the mikiri crossed over to all women. The market and market economy were an integral part of all women’s lives and livelihoods. When it came time to fight for it, all the women banded together and fought together.

The first Commission of Inquiry saw the main cause of the rioting/war as the belief that spread quickly that the women were to be taxed by the Government. The Second Commission went slightly farther by giving the event three causes: 1) discontent caused by the tax placed on men; 2) discontent from the persecution, extortion and overall corruption practiced by the Warrant Chiefs and Native Court members; and 3) the low prices to be got from items to sell and the corresponding high prices of imported goods. The commission felt that the Igbo as a whole were unhappy with the general system of administration that had been pressed upon them; the women were just expressing it.

One controversial finding that came out of the first Commission involved the firing on the women. The first meeting

83 Leith-Ross, African Women, 35.
84 Akpan, The Women’s War, 50.
85 Van Allen, “‘Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 61.
exonerated the soldiers who fired on the women, focusing on the “savage passions” of the “mobs”; one soldier went so far to say that “he had never seen crowds in such a state of frenzy.”\textsuperscript{86} However, even with this testimony, the colonial authorities found it surprising that these “frenzied mobs” injured no one seriously.\textsuperscript{87} The authorities did not understand that the women were engaged in a traditional practice, following their traditional rules and limitations, only they carried it out on a much larger scale than they had ever done before.\textsuperscript{88}

The Second Commission however, clearly stated that there was no justification for opening fire on the women. The use of a machine gun against women who had injured no one beyond “a bruise, a scratch, or, in one case only, a cut on the arm” was seen as ruthless and probable to leave “bitter memories” against the British administration.\textsuperscript{89} Despite this, all the officials concerned were commended for their handling of the situation. And while they may not have agreed with how Captain Cook dealt with the situation, they also did not persecute him either:

> Now it is far from our desire to condemn zeal and initiative but both can be misplaced, and we regard it as unwise for an acting officer, temporarily posted to a Division which was new to him, to have inaugurated at once a new system before he had had adequate opportunity of

\textsuperscript{86} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 175.
\textsuperscript{87} Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 175.
\textsuperscript{88} Van Allen, “Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 74.
\textsuperscript{89} Akpan, The Women’s War, 50.
learning the past history of the Division and of getting into close touch with the people. At least, if he started the new count at all, he should have done it personally so that he could have gauged its effect. At the same time Captain Cook was unlucky in choosing for the commencement of the new count the very area in which a conscious feeling of distrust had been instilled in the minds of the people by the dissimulation practiced on them nearly three years before.  

Due to the British view of the war as simply a “riot,” many questions that should have been asked were not. The Commission discovered that the rumor of impending taxation had been spread by the use of a market network and left it at that. They did not dig deeper into the actions of the women, their leadership, how they came to agreement on what their demands would be or how they managed to show up at the native administration centers wearing the same thing and adorned with the same decorations. They were unaware that their short loincloth, charcoal smeared faces, fern bound heads and sticks wreathed with palm fronds was the dress and adornment of “war” and they did not inquire into it.

It might be viewed that the absence of men from the war indicates their lack of support. The women were adamant when testifying that the men were not involved because the women were using traditional tactics to express their displeasure, as the

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90 Aba Commission of Inquiry, Notes of Evidence, 11.
91 Van Allen, “’Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 73.
92 Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 174-175.
93 Van Allen, “’Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 73.
testimony of Mbele indicates: “I want to make it quite clear that there was no fight on the part of the women. Men did not accompany women when they went to demand the caps of Chiefs.”

However, the men generally approved and, as the women also believed, they were under the assumption that the women could not be fired upon. The men remembered the original colonial conquest of the land and how resisting men had been slaughtered, leaving no illusions of immunity for their own lives. The women labeled it the Women’s War to show the extension of the traditional methods they were following. They themselves saw their actions as following the traditionally sanctioned methods of “sitting on” or “making war” on a man.

Conclusion

The Women’s War of 1929 had an important impact on the history of women in Southeastern Nigeria as a whole in challenging the invisibility imposed upon them by colonialism and fighting their devaluation. More than that, the war established as fact that women’s independence was an equivocal part of women’s life prior to colonialism and that the traditions were still there to be called upon by the women. The war and the way the women responded showed that not only did the

94 CE/K5A, March 27, 1930, 286-289.
95 Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” 175-176.
Igbo women have political roles and rights, but that the institutions themselves were a part of political tradition. The women’s actions showed how intricate their networks were developed, how quickly they were able to respond to the situation at hand and quickly develop strategies.\textsuperscript{96}

For those on the outside, the \textit{Ogu Umunwaanyi} can be seen as a contradictory event. The women went to war to make peace. Many Europeans saw the war as “frivolous,” nonsense or a nuisance particularly when it interfered with their money or caused them inconvenience. Yet the lack of deaths on the side of the Europeans and the heavy casualties inflicted on the women gives little credence to the name “riot” as the British still consider the uprising.\textsuperscript{97} By using this name, the presence and significance of women is lost. By calling it “making war,” the women were using the institutionalized form of punishment controlled by the women to make men and miscreants mend their ways.\textsuperscript{98} Despite their major undertaking, the women were only briefly visible and once the uprising was put down, they went back to being informally visible.

\textsuperscript{96} Nzegwu, “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 450.
\textsuperscript{97} Bastian, “Vultures of the Marketplace,” 272.
\textsuperscript{98} Van Allen, “’Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 61-62.
Chapter 4
The Aftermath of the Women’s War: Colonial Authority Reformed and Reasserted, 1929-1939

Introduction

The years following the Women’s War saw some changes to policies in Southeastern Nigeria, though not to the extent that the women had hoped for when they chose to revolt. Some of the corruption that had become strikingly clear to the colonial government was dealt with, though many of the new institutions that were put in place gave way to the same type of corruption again. In fact, many of the changes that were implemented in the years following 1929 continued to undermine women’s powers. This chapter documents the post-1929 reform process. The evidence presented shows that both Igbo men and especially women were not entirely silenced by the persistent lingering abuses as the revolts of 1934 and 1938-39 attest.

The Reform Process, 1929-1933

The most immediate change that came about was the ceasing of head-counting and tax collection. The Government did not want further revolts and some places would not see taxes for many years. The colonial administration waited for the provinces to calm down and then gradually introduced the taxes back in.
The Second Commission of Inquiry noted that many women, “if not all believed, still believe and will always believe, that government did intend to tax women, but abandoned the intention as a result of their mass action.”

Though subdued for a moment, the issue of taxation would come back again to haunt the colonial government as taxes were subsequently reintroduced. Though the government still referred to the event as simply a riot, they were baffled by the energy and purposeful initiative taken by the women, and on such a large scale. The Commission of Inquiry noted that, “No one, listening to the evidence given before us, could have failed to be impressed by the intelligence, the power of exposition, the directness, and the mother-wit, which some of the leaders exhibited in setting forth their grievances.”

The colonial administration realized that something had to be done regarding their administration of the people. This realization led the government to encourage the study of the indigenous society and people. This was done by administrative officers gathering any information they could about the people, which they compiled into intelligence reports. By 1934, around 200 of these reports had been compiled.

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1 Akpan, The Women’s War, 47.
2 Akpan, The Women’s War, 55.
The purpose of these intelligence reports was to gain an understanding of the people so that when they went about instituting reforms, they would be most appropriate to the area. Though it had been suggested many years before now, the colonial authorities realized that they needed to reconstruct the court system they had imposed upon the people. They were leery of repeating the same mistake of lumping diverse groups of people together for judicial purposes. To avoid this, the idea of the Native Authority system of Indirect Rule was implemented with the Native Court Ordinance of 1933.

The Native Court Ordinance of 1933 reorganized the courts and provided for the establishment of courts by Warrant which had to specify, along with other things, the composition and powers of the courts. Part of the aim of the new structure was to eliminate the corruption that had been inherent in the Warrant Chief System. The colonial authorities envisioned mass participation of the populace under this new form of rule. They hoped that when the Native Authorities realized how expensive it was to have all members of the village councils of all the villages in the clan sit as members on the authorities, they

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5 Noah, “After the Warrant Chiefs,” 87.
6 Martin. Palm Oil and Protest, 121.
would converge into something similar to what had been set up in Northern Nigeria through voluntary amalgamations.\textsuperscript{7}

This new system was comprised of a group of officially recognized village elders who sat in rotation. Native Treasuries were put in charge of fiscal matters, under the supervision of professional officers. Though the new system allowed for increased indigenous participation and natives were "trained" in "how to rule themselves," there were a couple small catches.\textsuperscript{8} Just as the warrant chief members had been handpicked, so too were these members. They were selected by the British Resident on recommendation of the administrative officers and required the approval of the Lieutenant-Governor. Furthermore, the real power of the court was held by the white British official, who visited the court at will and tended to "interfere" with the court proceedings. Beyond that, the court was socially disruptive; much of the authority of the elders had been lost and the new courts acted as a disruptive agent on the social structure.\textsuperscript{9}

The main goal of the 1933 reforms was to address many of grievances that were brought forth during the Commissions of Inquiry following the Women’s War. The Igbo women brought many issues to light and some consideration was given to their

\textsuperscript{7} Noah, "After the Warrant Chiefs," 81.  
\textsuperscript{8} Akpan, The Women’s War, 51.  
\textsuperscript{9} Nwabara, Iboland, 206.
concerns. The number of Native Court Areas grew significantly and their boundaries changed as well. The Intelligence Reports had contained data concerning group boundaries, cultural relationships and associations, as well as historical data on the area and these were used to help determine the new boundaries. Though some changes were made, the Igbo women did not regain power within the new administration. In fact, many changes came at the expense of the women.

Though they had instigated and fought for change, women were not even present at the dealings between the British and the village leaders. Beyond their participation in the Commissions of Inquiry, the women were excluded from the discussion of changes and many of the reforms implemented had negative consequences on them. The newly reformed Native Administration took over many functions of the village assemblies, seriously affecting women’s political participation. No longer did discussions on policy include any adult who could “speak well;” it was now limited to members of the native courts. While men who were not members were also excluded from these meetings, their views and interests were well represented. They also had some opportunity to become members of these native

10 Van Allen, ‘‘Sitting on a Man,’’ 177.
11 Akpan, The Women’s War, 51.
administrations; very few women were given this opportunity and little of their interests were represented.\textsuperscript{13}

Prior to colonialism the participation and power of women in the political sphere lay in the diffuseness of political power and authority that was an inherent part of Igbo society. This was not a part of the imposed British Western models of political institutions. Rather, in these new institutions, participation was based on individual achievement. By implementing this sort of structure, group solidarity had no place and, in fact, it became illegal in the new structure. This left very little place for the women, as their methods of group solidarity had been the backbone of their power and their check on society.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1901, the British had declared all judicial institutions illegal, with the exception of the Native Courts. However, it was not until 1933 that the Native Administration government became effective enough to make the declaration meaningful and began enforcing the decree. With this enforcement, the \textit{mikiri} lost vitality. No longer was it acceptable for the women to use their networks for political functions. What little functioning they were able to maintain was on a small scale and compared to

\textsuperscript{13} Van Allen, "'Sitting on a Man'," 177.
\textsuperscript{14} Van Allen, "'Sitting on a Man'," 177-178.
their previous abilities, they were able to influence very little.\textsuperscript{15}

The base of women’s power lay in their ability to collectively act against a wrong, whether the wrong was done by one individual or by a whole group.\textsuperscript{16} However, this type of power was seen by the colonial government as “self-help” – the use of force by individuals or groups to protect their own interests by punishing wrongdoers. The authorities proceeded to outlaw this, unaware that they were banning “sitting on a man” and depriving the women of one of their best weapons to protect wives from husbands, markets from rowdies, or coco yams from cows. The authorities only saw their ban on the use of “illegitimate force” and their interference with the traditional balance of power effectively eliminated the women’s ability to protect their own interests, making them dependent on men for protection against men.\textsuperscript{17}

One omission on the part of the colonial government during the Commissions of Inquiry came in the form of questioning; they failed to ask the questions that needed to be answered, whether intentionally or not. The colonial authorities saw the Women’s War as a Riot and therefore did not inquire into the traditional roles of the women. The women, on the other hand, were

\textsuperscript{15} Van Allen, “‘Sitting on a Man’,” 178.  
\textsuperscript{16} Van Allen. “’Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 75.  
\textsuperscript{17} Van Allen, “‘Sitting on a Man’,” 178.
suspicious of the colonial government and saw the investigation that followed the revolt as an attempt to punish those who were involved; because of this they volunteered little additional information into the depth of their organizations. If the colonial authorities had viewed the war as a collective response to the decimation of their rights, potentially they may have asked if the women had a role in traditional society that should be incorporated into the colonial government institutions they were planning.

However, many of the District Officers, despite the evidence presented to them, were unable to fully believe that the women had been able to pull together an uprising of this sort; they were convinced that the men had secretly organized it and were directing them as well. When the women demanded that the Native Courts no longer hear cases, or that women should be allowed to serve on these Native Courts and also be appointed District Officer, the colonial authorities thought of them as irrational and ridiculous.\(^{18}\) The women had simply been attempting to gain back some of their traditional power, but it was not to be.

The reforms instituted following the Women’s War took little account of the women’s traditional roles. Some

\(^{18}\) Van Allen, “’Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 74.
adjustments were made to traditional Igbo male and male-dominated political forms, but once again, the women were shoved to the background. Small positive changes occurred: the number of Native Court areas grew dramatically and traditional divisions were used as boundaries rather than arbitrary ones as before. The Native Authority system of “massed benches” replaced the Warrant Chief system and some of the corruption was initially removed. From this new system came some security for the person and property of the women, but at the expense of their real base of power, that of collective action.\textsuperscript{19}

One thing that came out of the War of 1929 was that when women demanded to be heard, the Government should have responded in a way that assisted them in getting their demands clear. This could have helped to remove the mistrust that, in the case of 1929, was clearly felt between the two groups. Another lesson that came from the War was the reorganization of the administration in Southeastern Nigeria; if the women had not demanded to be heard, these changes would not have been implemented.\textsuperscript{20} As changes had been suggested before and not implemented, it was a tribute to Igbo women who stood up and

\textsuperscript{19} Van Allen, “‘Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?” 74-75.
demanded change, though the end result wasn’t quite what they had expected when they began.

Beyond just demanding change, these women also showed what kind of change they wanted to see, evident in how they organized their own movement. The Warrant Chiefs either were or pretended to be ignorant of the structure of the communities they controlled and their use of age-grades for organization. This went against what the colonial authorities had implemented with the use of one individual with executive authority and following the war, they realized this mode of rule would not work. The women forced the colonial administration to take into account the traditional authority and see what kind of role it had played and somehow incorporate it into their new form of indirect rule if they were ever to make their administration successful among the Igbo.\textsuperscript{21}

The war was also the beginning of the Nigerian road to independence that may not have happened if these women had not “blazed the trail for nationalism and gave impetus to others to carry on the struggle, which led to Nigerian nationhood.”\textsuperscript{22} These events paved the way for a future nationalist revolt during the anti-colonialism movement. The women who participated in the 1929 Women’s War started a trend towards fighting for a

\textsuperscript{21} Dike, The Women’s Revolt of 1929, 8.
\textsuperscript{22} Akpan, The Women’s War, 60-61.
voice that would be used later by other groups. Until provoked, the women became background voices, pushing for change through informal means. Often cited as a failure on the women’s part, the Women’s War of 1929 became the stepping block for future revolts and the basis for many later uprisings.

The Revolts of 1934 and 1938-39

During the 1930s, additional uprisings occurred intermittently in various localities. In 1934, a group consisting primarily of women in the Obuba Division rose up on several occasions to protest the demarcation of the Ukpon Forest Reserve. The colonial administration had spent much of November 1933 demarcating the boundaries of the enclaves that lay in the Obuba Division and met with no resistance until December. At that time, five cement pillars were uprooted by women of the village. Additional protests began to spread throughout the area that had been marked. The women’s complaints stemmed from the fact that much of their farm land had been included in the Reserve and what was left was insufficient for their needs. The colonial administration met the protests with a police force, picked out the ring leaders of the protest and sent the other women home. These women, along with chief participants, were arrested and the demarcation of the reserve was completed. Over
one hundred individuals were charged in the Provincial Court and while some were acquitted or issued only a warning, the majority received either hard labor or imprisonment. Additional uprisings involving the demarcation of enclaves occurred in Ekonako village as well at this time.

The most pronounced revolts occurred between November 1938 and January 1939 in the Okigwe and Bende Divisions of Owerri Province. As had occurred in 1929, this uprising was centered on a tax-related grievance. In this case, the communities in the western part of Bende Division stopped paying taxes. They believed that the government had signed an agreement that the people would only be required to pay tax for seven years. Any taxes that were over-collected would be returned to the people.

A decision had been made at this time that rather than having one lump tax sum of ten percent, the colonial administration would turn to demanding monthly taxes. As the District Officer indicated in his correspondence with the Home Office, this was not acceptable to the people: “This payment met with strong opposition by the people, who had been accustomed to regard the ten per cent payment as a rebate of tax in which all tax payers were entitled to share. The new system was

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24 Nannen. “‘You Are Demanding Tax from the Dead’,” 80.
misunderstood and a rumour spread that the Court Members had sold the land to the Government, [and that] the payment based on forty-five per cent [was] the first installment of this transaction.”25 Just like 1929, the rumor gained ground and the people expressed their displeasure once again with the colonial government.

During this time, tax collectors were assaulted, the protesting crowd freed those individuals who had been arrested for their lack of payment, and people throughout the district gathered together to air their grievances. One village even claimed that their headman had called together a mass meeting and administered an oath that forbade anyone from paying taxes. Added to this was another rumor that Nigeria was going to be handed over to Germany, which fuelled the fire and helped spark the uprisings as well.26 As had happened before, the people revolted against what was not a part of their lives and again they were suppressed and ignored.

Conclusion

While some changes were made in Southeastern Nigeria following the Women’s War of 1929, the results were not what the

25 CSO 2626208 VOL II, No. S. P. 3696/64/10, “Disturbance at Item, Bende Division, Owerri Province,” From Secretary Southern Provinces to Chief Secretary to the Government, Lagos, April 18, 1935.
26 Nannen, “‘You Are Demanding Tax from the Dead’,” 81-82.
women had been hoping for when they first rose up. The changes that were put in place did not curb the corruption and took away even more of the women’s limited powers. The women had led the battle, yet they did not see the rewards. After the Women’s War, additional uprisings occurred leading up to World War II, many times on the same issues that the war of 1929 had fought against. Igbo women and men refused to be silenced and continued to promote their causes following the new reforms put in place by the colonial government.
Conclusion

This study assigns special significance to the dynamics between matriarchy and the introduction of colonialism. The study examines structure and dynamics of society and the role of Igbo women in Southeastern Nigeria before British colonialism; the changes that occurred following the arrival of the British and, specifically their imposition of patriarchy in the region. The causes, nature, and immediate aftermath of the Women’s War of 1929 and the subsequent losses suffered (despite few gains) by the women during the years that followed the war are also covered.

Prior to the onset of colonialism, the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria depended on a matriarchal structure that had places for both men and women. No one person held total authority and as a community, the people were able to solve problems and implement resolutions. If individuals or groups got out of line, the women banded together and “sat on” them, forcing them to realize that what they had been doing was neither going to be accepted nor tolerated. Other men would not dare interfere with the ruling of the women or their councils or come to the aid of one who was being “sat on” for they had been around these institutions and recognized the value and importance they brought to the community.
The inherent matriarchal values of this society allowed women a place and a purpose. Through their economic umbrella, the women took care of themselves and their children, many times becoming more financially sound than their husbands could be. Their social umbrella allowed them access to networks that spread throughout the land. This also gave them the opportunity to be “male daughters” and “female husbands,” taking on traditional roles as required to grow and maintain their family. Their religious umbrella afforded them a high place in the worship of Idemili and gave them purpose and a place within their religion. Finally, their political umbrella afforded them a guaranteed place within the society that allowed them to coexist with male political groups and jointly rule their people. This pre-colonial dynamic of traditional Igbo society is captured in Chapter 1 of the study.

Chapter 2 shows the link between the erosion of women’s power and the onset of British imperialism and colonialism. With the coming of the colonial administration, a new form of government was implemented that did not take into account the traditional hierarchy of the Igbo people and their group solidarity. New rules were put in place that took away much of the women’s power and ability to curtail male excessiveness. No
longer did women rule jointly with the men, they were expected to act like European women.

The Warrant Chiefs became corrupt and oppressive. Women were systematically stripped of their power and forced to abide by colonial rule and law, no matter how unjust. Colonial power was only open to men who were willing to conform to the new government’s laws. These men took advantage of the situation and made the environment even worse for the women. While some Igbo women tried to initiate changes and curtail this unrestrained behavior, the British colonial administration kept this form of government in place until 1929.

Called Riots, War, Uprisings, Revolt and more, the Ogu Umunwaanyi of 1929 was a coming together of women against the colonial authority and this is the subject of Chapter 3 of the study. Started by the rumor of taxation placed on women and aggravated by the counting of women’s goods, the women used their traditional means to show their displeasure. They proceeded to “sit on” various Warrant Chiefs and Native Courts symbols.

The colonial authorities, overwhelmed and lacking knowledge of this kind of revolt, responded with weapons and deadly force. Means were employed to stop the women, inflicting many casualties and injuries on them. Unaccustomed to this sort of
response during their revolts, the women continued their struggle only for a few months before abandoning their overt demonstration in the face of the colonial authority’s show of force. By the end of the year, the women had been subdued and the administration was more aware of the problem facing them.

The colonial administration responded fast and harshly to the uprisings, using excessive force to curtail the rebellion. The Commissions of Inquiry that were established expressed the women’s grievances and implemented some change. The women were asked to come forward and share narratives of the corruptions they had been subject to under the native rule and showcase their requests.

The Native Courts became Native Authorities and Warrant Chiefs were replaced by groups of men acting as leaders. However, as before, these individuals had to be accepted by the British officers and the original corruption in the administration was not completely eliminated. Though the tax and head-counting was curtailed for a moment, it soon would return. And the issue of taxation would lead to additional uprisings and revolts. This roller coaster reform process and the continuity of Igbo women’s resistance within it is covered in Chapter 4. The Women’s War became the stepping stone for future uprisings and the women began using informal tactics to
be heard, influencing decisions in the background, rather than placing themselves at the forefront of the fray as they had done during 1929.

**Overall Conclusions of the Study**

The imposition of colonialism on a society that was not built to handle the aspects of Western political formulation that accompanied that colonialism, severely limited and destroyed much of Igbo women’s power. Many of the institutions that had given women power were destroyed with the onset of the Warrant Chief system; even the convergence to the Native Authority system did not relieve this and in some ways took more power from the women. The Women’s War showed the strength of women and just how ingrained matriarchy was in their society. While the war has been considered a failure by many, it has been cited as the stimulus to numerous later nationalist uprisings and revolts. The women were not silenced, but rather changed tactics. They turned to informal tactics and worked to make changes in the background, rather than in the foreground.

Some female-centered groups were able to survive only because of their adaptability and resilience, yet their power is no-where near that of the pre-colonial times. These Women’s Councils have survived due to their continuous organizational
reviews, re-evaluation of policies, timely critical responses and adaptability to changing social conditions. Their well-developed chain of command and sensitivity to accountability has also earned them respect and credibility to date.\(^1\) It is intriguing to speculate on what might have happened if the institutions of Igbo women were nourished instead of undermined by the colonial situation. Sadly we shall never know and can only hope that the fights for women’s rights and independence have not been done in vain.

\(^{1}\) Nzegwu. “Recovering Igbo Traditions,” 455-458.
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