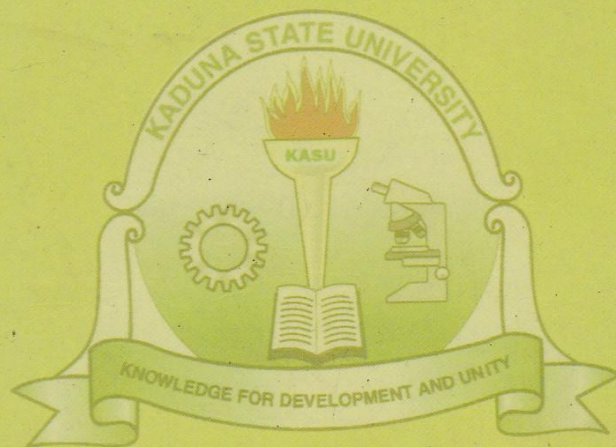


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The 1929 Women's War: Ninety Years After

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Abstract

The history of the Nigerian nationalist movement will leave a yawning gap in its annals if the women's self determination struggles of the 1920s are not given a deserving mention. This is because the women of Eastern Nigeria, in particular, gallantly resisted the colonial establishment with its oppressive policies. In the 1920s, there was a wide popular dissatisfaction with British rule in the country. The corruption and abuse of office by the warrant chiefs and the native court clerks discredited the colonial system. The climax came with the introduction of direct taxation on men and the spread of rumour that women would also be taxed. Protest began in Oloko, Bende Division of Abia State and extended to Aba Township. Violent protests were recorded in Ukam and Essene, in the old Opobo Division (now Ikot Abasi), at Utu Etim Ekpo and Abak areas of Akwa Ibom State. However, the high point of the episode was the massacre of 33 women from Ibibio, Igbo, Andoni and Ogoni at Ikot Abasi by the colonial forces on the 16th of December 1929. This triggered the reforms of the colonial system. Obviously, the uprising took a regional dimension as reflected in its momentum and death toll. This was as a result of centuries of interactions between the people of the Niger Delta region and their neighbours. The war provided the background for the enhanced status of women in the society and deserves to be examined ninety 90 years after its occurrence.

Introduction

The 1929 Women's War, one of the most spontaneous and momentous events in the annals of colonial rule in Nigeria, occurred almost 90 years ago. According to Ikime (1995), it is called the Women's War because, although the men folk of Eastern Nigeria also complained about being taxed, it was the women who organised and led the anti-tax demonstrations. The outburst may be considered as a feeling of insecurity that posed a challenge to their very subsistence in their

natural abode in the late 1920s (Nwachukwu, 1995).

Sir Graeme Thomson, the colonial Governor of Nigeria during the outbreak of the Women's War, considered the idea of extending direct taxation to the untaxed areas of Southern Nigeria, namely: Calabar, Ogoja, Onitsha and Owerri Provinces, as being appropriate. He opined that it was unfair to impose direct taxation on certain areas while in others, the inhabitants escaped scot free. He argued like Lord Fredrick Lugard many years before, that without taxation there would be no native treasury and without native treasury, the Africans could never begin to learn the art of self rule (Ina, 2017).

In pursuit of his desired objectives, direct taxation was introduced in the areas with effect from the 1st of April 1928. The collection of taxes throughout the four Eastern Provinces was accomplished in 1928 without any incident of violent nature. However, during the 1928 exercise, taxes were collected on the basis of voluntary declarations of the number of taxable males. In 1929, the colonial authorities commenced a reassessment in each native administration area. The reassessment involved the inspection of house property. Indeed, among the people who were sometimes easily credulous and who for various reasons had become distrustful of the designs of the colonial administration, there was bound to be resistance. The resistance culminated in the Women's War of 1929.

Women in the Pre-colonial Era

In pre-colonial Nigeria, women participated actively in the politics of their communities mostly as groups or representatives of organisations. A number of women organisations at the time were represented in community matters by their leaders and members of these groups were dynamic and powerful. They were regarded at times as guardians of the village traditions. Though most of them got married outside their communities, they showed concern for development there. They often intervened wherever the village constitution was violated and imposed sanctions on offenders.

Notable organisations of that nature included *Umuada* of the Igbo and *polo ereme* in Kalabari. In Akwa Ibom State, a number of female associations existed to guard the rights of women and control erring persons. The traditional women organisations such as *iban ison* and *ebre* existed parallel to male controlled organs of government. Their strength rested on collective application of the methods of gender consciousness, group pressure and mobilisation (Etim, 1996).

Eastern Nigerian Women in the Colonial Era

The colonial policies had adverse influences on the role definition among people. The colonialists introduced the Victorian concept of womanhood – women should be seen but not heard. This idea emanated from the Medieval Europe and was supported by their educational set-up which only trained women for domestic services and confined them to the home. Their role, though important, restricted their visibility and therefore minimised their public recognition. This position contrasted with the Nigerian concept of the role of women (Etim, 1996).

For Nigerian women, some of them before the colonial era had expansive commercial enterprise and in fact shared family expenses with their husbands. They had a respectable and independent political position before the colonial era. Women achieved economic and political recognition and greatly valued that. As the colonial ideology was to make women non-visible, so their government was shaped in such a way to achieve this objective. Dual gender political system was discouraged and women dropped from all important administrative offices.

According to Etim (1996) and Jaja (1988), women reacted to these unfavourable factors. One of the strategies was to mount a campaign of public demonstration against the regime and possibly destroy it. These demonstration gathered momentum as time went on and climaxed in the 1920s. The colonial administration did not take the demonstrations seriously, until its foundation was threatened in 1929. There were some serious demonstrations in Nigeria between 1925 and 1929 and women were responsible for all of them. The first of these occurred in Calabar in 1925, triggered by the imposition of taxes under the Market Ordinances in some markets. The women refused to pay tolls because they had not been consulted. They assaulted the Europeans and the police; however, the police with great difficulty drove the women away. The women then closed the market and imposed fines of five pounds on any woman who sold food to the Europeans or their hospitals.

In 1925, another protest occurred; although it began at Bonny in Rivers State, it spread to Okigwe where it was a more serious incident. It was known as the Dancing Women's Movement. The inspiration for the movement was supposedly revealed to the people of Bonny and Degema before it spread northwards. The nature of this revelation was not made known to the Europeans, but the women considered it their sacred duty to see to it that the Europeans left the country.

So bands of women went from town to town and made demands on the people and, by implication, on the government.

Political and Administrative Framework by 1929

Modern Nigeria as a united country emerged from what may be described as the climax of successive British administrative measures which began in 1849 (Akpan, 2017). The climax was the amalgamation of the Protectorate of Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914. One of the arrangements occasioned by the amalgamation was Lugard's provincial administrative system based on the Provincial Courts Ordinance which was hitherto applied only in the North. In all, nine provinces were created in the South to replace the three large provinces of 1906-1913 administration. Two of these were: Owerri and Calabar, which were the areas mainly concerned with the Women's War of 1929. Owerri Province, with headquarters then at Owerri, comprised the present Imo, Abia and Rivers State plus Aboh now in Delta State, minus Ogoni, then in Calabar Province and Afikpo, then in Ogoja Province in present-day Cross River State (Nwaguru, 1995).

Calabar Province in 1914 had its headquarters in Calabar (formerly old Calabar), and comprised the present-day Akwa Ibom State and parts of present-day Cross River State, including Opobo now in Rivers State and Obubra and Arochukwu later transferred to the old Ogoja Province and present-day Abia State, respectively. Briefly, this was the administrative framework for the effective prosecution of the British colonial policy of indirect rule in the area under consideration (Nwaguru, 1995).

Colonial Rule and Economic Change

The establishment of colonial rule in South Eastern Nigeria triggered adverse economic changes. The barter trade was replaced by monetary system and the sale of palm produce to the trading firms' agents for exports became the basic method of generating additional income. Palm produce, made up of half the value of the British West African exports and the big European firms, penetrated the hinterland markets, but, protected by European political and military presence, who had also attempted a complete monopoly over the trade and fixing the prices of palm oil and palm kernel (Akpan and Ekpo, 1988).

Nigerians tried to adapt to the new economic realities. The traditional local industries gradually lost the local market, which was flooded with cheap European goods, leaving the sale of export oriented cash-crops as the only source of additional income. Also the Nigerian agricultural economy became tied to the international mar-

ket and was easily affected by its economic fluctuations. The local producers were left at the mercy of world-wide fluctuations and trade changes, and to the machinations of the large expatriate firms who were interested in profit.

The world-wide economic depression of the 1930s, accompanied by a fall of the export prices and the rising inflation in the cost of imported goods, generated the dissatisfaction with the colonial agents and their policies. The economic crisis, which caused inflation, unemployment and bankruptcy among industrialised nations, had effects on the export-oriented Nigerian economy. As prices of scarce industrial goods soared, small firms and shops closed, retail trade was greatly reduced as well as the previously booming trading ports in Calabar, Eket and Opobo Rivers which became deserted and resulted in general retrenchment of staff by both mercantile and government establishment.

According to Akpan and Ekpo:

The bulk of the population in South-Eastern Nigeria were farmers and agricultural (palm) produce dealers, who were worst hit by the price collapse of agricultural produce and the rising cost of living. For instance, the official price by the major agricultural trading commodity, palm oil in Ibekwe, Opobo (now Ikot Abasi), a gallon tin of palm oil, which during the boom period used to sell for 10 Shillings, could only get 10 Pence. At the same time, prices of imported goods rose: a head of tobacco, from 6 pence, and VH gin, from 11 Shillings a box to between 15 Shillings for schnapps, and one Pound 12 Shillings for whisky. Soap and cloth went up in price in nearly the same proportions, but worse affected was the cost of building materials, tools and machinery (Akpan and Ekpo, 1988: 18).

Nwaguru (1995) notes that in, 1927, native administration was for the first time, introduced in South Eastern Nigeria based on clan groupings with Treasuries located at the Divisional centres. In view of the economic hardship, the colonial government badly needed additional revenue for the implementation of its policies. Direct taxation in the form of Poll or Capitation Tax for the Southern Provinces had been proposed by Lord Lugard since 1914. On the 1st of April 1928, direct taxation was introduced in the South-Eastern Provinces in accordance with the provisions of the Native Revenue Ordinance of 1927 (Ina, 2017). Before then, the District Officers through the Warrant Chiefs usually compelled the "native" male population to provide labour for

public works and transportation of government materials. Taxation was considered by the colonial administration as indispensable for the creation of Native Treasuries under the new native administration arrangements.

The government's policy involved careful assessment of the income levels for an area with the cooperation of the local warrant chief, who was usually informed in advance by the Divisional Officer about the date on which his village would be visited for the conduct of a census of the inhabitants – counting of men, goats, boys and girls. On the appointed day, the enumeration officer and his team would check the figures in the presence of the people gathered in the village square. Usually, many of the villagers suspicious of the government officials ran away whenever the enumerators appeared.

Regular taxation was unknown in the traditional Ibibio society and other parts of South Eastern Nigeria. Occasional levies and emergency contributions, the collection and use of which were determined by the people themselves, were the only levies paid by the farming communities along occasional communal labour. The coastal chiefs were used to receiving *comey*, Subsidy from the European traders themselves, while regular contributions were considered to be the tribute of a vassal to his superior. The whiteman was still regarded as a stranger and interloper, who had monopolised the trade and constituted himself in administrative nuisance. The imposition of regular taxation, in order to support foreign rule, and the counting of personal properties for evaluation was regarded as an outrageous imposition (Akpan, 2004).

In 1928, taxes were collected for the first time throughout Eastern Nigeria with the aid of the warrant chiefs and in the presence of an enlarged police force. There were some difficulties, refusals from some chiefs to be part of the collection exercise, a lot of disappearances in the bush, and an occasional show of force, displayed in some areas, but there were no serious disturbances. Most of the people were not aware that tax collection was not a once-and-for-all levy. Promised amenities were desired by each community, and the Ibibio refused the mental tokens, opting for properly written receipts for their contributions. They definitely objected to financial support, a repressive colonial administration, which they wished should go away. When it was realised in 1929 that the tax collection would be a regular annual event, which meant an additional burden, it was vehemently rejected (Afigbo, 1972; Akpan, 1995).

The Escalation of the Crisis

In late September 1929, the acting District Officer of Bende District, John Cook, decided to compile a more detailed nominal roll for future taxation, collecting additional information about each taxable male in the division – his ward, the number of wives, children, farms, yams and domestic animals. He had just taken over from the District Officer, Mr. Weir, who had proceeded on leave. On the 29th of September, Cook summoned the warrant chiefs from his division and asked them to supply the needed information, adding that the exercise had nothing to do with taxation of women. This immediately raised suspicion, as only few years previously, the District Officer had told them that the counting had nothing to do with taxation of men, but taxes had been introduced immediately after that. Some warrant chiefs openly told their communities that they had been ordered to count women and domestic animals, so that women would be taxed Noah, 1985; (Osuji, 1995).

On the 23rd of November 1929 at Oloko – Bende District, one Mark Emeruwa, a teacher in one of the mission's schools, on instruction of the Warrant Chief, Chief Okugo Ekuma Okozie, went to conduct a new count in the village. The first and only compound where the census was conducted that day was the Ojim's, where the teacher was confronted by one of Ojim's wives, Nwayeruwa. After some exchange of insults, a scuffle resulted. Nwayeruwa ran out to report to the women. An Urgent meeting was held and the traditional practice of sending palm leaves as summons to nearby villages was adopted (Akpan, 1988).

The episode triggered demonstrations by the angry women in Oloko and other parts of Bende Court Area. The women demanded that the warrant chief be deposed. Eventually, the warrant chief was sentenced at the Bende District Court to a two-year imprisonment for spreading news likely to cause alarm. As the news spread, congratulatory messages and money were sent in by women. Some of the money was used in sending out delegates to the neighbouring areas. In many places, attempts were made by the women to get rid of the hateful warrant chiefs and their Native Courts. Buoyed by initial success, the women's resistance spread and by the 12th of December, native court buildings and records were burnt at Nguru and then Okpula Ngor. At Azumini, the women from Opobo, Bonny and nearby Ibibio towns demanded the caps of the Native Court members. When this was rejected, they set fire to all buildings in the compound, chanting threatening songs. Some of them proceeded to Aba to join the protest (Akpan and Ikpo, 1988). Within the same period the movement had enveloped women of Ngwa land, Mbano and Mbaise (Osuji, 1995).

It is reported that more than 10,000 angry women undertook a protest march round Aba Township after they had held their meeting at Eke Opara. The women were described as noisy, some of whom carried sticks as if ready to fight. Later, a large number of the women concentrated near government offices where riots broke out resulting in the looting of Barclays Bank and the post office, the Survey Office and the store of the West African merchants (Udoma, 1987).

According to Udoma (1987), on learning of what had transpired, the leadership of the Ibibio Union and some leading *mbong* Ibibio at an emergency meeting decided that a team of prominent members of the Ibibio Union be assigned the duty of undertaking a tour to some parts of Ibibio Mainland territory of Calabar Province to dissuade Ibibio women from participating in such an act. Accordingly, the tour was undertaken and the team succeeded in restraining women by means of vigorous campaigns from taking part in the projected uprising in some parts of Ibibio mainland. The campaign appeared to have been very effective in Uyo, Ikot Ekpene, Eket, Itu and the mainland part of the township of Ikot Abasi (Opobo) District and won commendation of the Resident in Calabar.

In some other parts, the team arrived rather too late to be effective. In Abak District, the team interviewed the District Officer, Captain H.P. James, who assured them that he was not anticipating any trouble and that in any case at Utu Etim Ekpo and Ika-Annang Native Courts he had removed all valuable properties including money in the custody of the courts. Because of that assurance, the team left Abak and concentrated at Ikot Ekpene, where they were joined by Rev. Groves of the Methodist Missionary Society in appealing to the women not to take part in any demonstration likely to result in violence (Brown 2008).

Upon receiving the news of the destruction at Utu Etim Ekpo, on the 14th of December, Captain James contacted the Resident then on a visit to Uyo and arrangements were made for a platoon of troops under Lieutenant Browning to proceed to Utu Etim Ekpo to restore order. The troops arrived and in the following morning, they were confronted by a group of women estimated at about 500 and advancing towards the camp. A line was drawn on the road which the women were dared to cross. But the women kept pressing and crossed the line whereby Captain James and the Assistant Commissioner of Police fired their revolvers on the ground in front of the women, apparently without any injury (Noah, 1985).

However, the women kept pressing. At this juncture, Lieutenant Browning with his platoon of 26 men readied his Lewis gun and ordered one burst of seven rounds. Poorly targeted, the first round had no effect and the second burst was equally ineffective but the third burst found the mark. Sixteen women were killed. But the women regrouped and charged. This equally invited another burst of the Lewis gun which left two women dead. The women were scattered and the soldiers engaged in indiscriminate burning and looting of houses (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Inquire into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces, December, 1929*).

Udoma (1987) recalls that another violent outburst in Akwa Ibom took place at Ukam, Opobo Division, where an over-zealous young administrative officer, R.K. Floyer, attempted to re-assess the area for the purpose of improving the tax revenue. He and his newly employed African assistants started measuring farms and counting the yam heaps on them; recorded the number of domestic animals in the yards and on the fields; counted the women's utensils and the number of fire places in each compound; they also counted the number of doors in a man's house. Even the number of women's belongings and the pieces of apparel (cloth) in their boxes were recorded. The team was vehemently opposed by the Ibibio women at Ukam, an important market town, especially at Ikot Obio Itong. As the protest took a violent turn, the administrative officer had to flee.

At Ikot Abasi (Opobo), a very serious situation had developed in the township area involving Opobo Town, Andoni and Ogoni areas on the opposite bank of Ikot Abasi River. There, the District Officer, Mr. A.R. Whitman had summoned the women to meet him at the District Office. On the 16th of December 1929, the women from the urban area of the District and Opobo Town assembled at the District office situated on or near the right bank of Ikot Abasi River (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Inquire into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces, December, 1929*).

Before the meeting took place, a contingent of soldiers of the Nigerian Regiment under the command of Lieutenant J.N. Hill had taken position by the District Office. In consequence of the persistent protest by the women against the imposition of tax on the women, the District Officer invited six prominent women who were the leaders of the women and acted as their spokespersons to come forward to meet him. The six women leaders met with Mr. A.R. Whitman outside the verandah of the District Office. The District Officer assured the six leaders of the women that women would not be called upon to pay tax. The women who were suspicious insisted that the assurances on

all the points agreed be committed to writing by the District officer (Udoma, 1987; Brown, 2008).

A document was accordingly prepared containing the following information:

- 1 That the Government will not tax women;
- 2 No personal property, such as boxes, is to be counted;
- 3 Any one woman who is a known prostitute is (not) to be arrested;
- 4 Women are not to be charged rent for the use of common market shed;
- 5 Licenses for holding women plays should not be paid for;
- 6 Chief Mark People should be removed as head Chief of Opobo Town;
- 7 The women do not want any man to pay tax.

The women made it clear that they were speaking also for the Opobo, Bonny and Andoni women. They were not satisfied with the assurances of the District Officer, that women would not be taxed, but insisted on getting typed written replies on all the points put up by them. The women leaders also requested that the document be prepared in six copies to be distributed among the various groups assembled on the beach. The District Officer, Mr. Whitman, grew angry and lost his composure. Under the pretext of having the document signed, he re-entered his office. Lieutenant Hill who was standing by his troops noticed that the District Officer was disturbed. Just at that time, more women, also unarmed, from Ogoni and Andoni areas of Opobo arrived the scene in several canoes in answer to the District Officer's invitation and joined the agitated crowd of women already assembled by the District Office. Some of the new-comers unaware of what was going on in front of them started beating their pestles on the District Office bamboo fence. In customary women's practice, this was a sign of growing impatience and a pressuring tactics for quick settlement of the issue at hand (Udoma, 1987; Akpan, 1995).

Lieutenant Hill took the beating of the fence as a signal he had been waiting for. He ordered his troops to open fire on the women who were peacefully assembled in front of the District Office. The soldiers who were armed with rifles opened fire on the women only after Lieutenant Hill had himself personally fired at, and shot dead, the leading woman, Madam Adiaha Edem (the mother of a renowned Jurist, Sir Udo Udoma) (Brown, 2008).

As the leaders in front moved down, the noisy crowd behind, not realising what was happening, continued to press forward. There were more volleys of shooting and machine gun fire at the assembled women from a direct distance of six or seven yards. A melee followed, with everybody trying to get away, trampling those, who stumbled or fell underfoot. Many were pushed down from the steep cliff into the river and others jumped into the murky waters to try to swim away. Some 250 canoes on the river scampered for safety, a number of them overturning in mid-stream (Udoma 1987).

The result was the death of 33 women. Also 31 women were wounded. But as the shooting took place near the river, it was unknown how many women were drowned as Ikot Abasi was the only route of escape. A Yoruba goldsmith, Balogun, was caught in the cross fire in front of the Post Office and was killed. Many others fled away to their villages with bullet wounds and no reports were made of their casualties for fear of repercussions (Akpan, 1988).

The List of the Slain Women at Opobo

Names	Place of Origin
1. Alemi Aromea	Lagos
2. Mary Nsekwe	Opobo
3. Oruba	Opobo
4. Eka	Opobo
5. Regina Gookey	Opobo
6. Lege jaja	Opobo
7. Oromi jaja	Opobo
8. Mbakwe Uranta	Opobo
9. Sui Dappa	Opobo
10. Josephine Jaja	Opobo
11. Virginia Ubani	Opobo
12. Adeline Toby	Opobo
13. Mary Tatare	Opobo
14. Elizabeth Black	Opobo
15. Adeline Black	Opobo
16. Esther Strongface	Opobo
17. Nwa nwa Waribo	Opobo
18. Abigail Minima	Opobo
19. Adiaha Ukonya	Ikot Obong
20. Rebecca Thompson	Ikot Obong
21. Adiaha Ogbanake	Andoni
22. Arimie Nte	Andoni
23. Nwapa	Andoni

24. Adiaha Obot	Andoni
25. Umko	Ogoni
26. Abigail Ibiagbam	
27. Adiaha Udo	Ikot Obio Itong
28. Victoria Green	Bonny
29. Adiaha Edem	(mother of Justice Udo Udoma)
30. Ada Igbi	
31. Mary Okonkwo	
32. Virginia Chagwa	Nkoro
33. Ndada Ronny	

Immediately after the shooting, a dusk to dawn curfew was clamped on the area. Two warships were immediately dispatched from Lagos to the river. They were moored in the river fitted with flares and search lights, while the naval landing party crossed over Ibibio land and the whole area involved, gripped in sorrow and fear. The area was declared a disaffected area and the provisions of the Collective Punishment Ordinance were immediately applied, a state of emergency was also declared. The Resident, on his way to Abak from Calabar, arrived with 60 policemen and Captain Blackburne came down from Abak with another 20 men. Two other police detachments of 60 men also arrived (Udoma, 1987).

Given the intensity of the protest and the organisational ability of the women, the whole colonial establishment in Nigeria was shaken. Fear became palpable and contagious to the extent that telegram exchanges occurred throughout Nigeria to alert all colonial administrators. Contingents of colonial forces were moved to Aba from Okigwe, Enugu and Kaduna and from Calabar and Uyo to Utu Etim Ekpo and Opobo. All these were in readiness for the protracted violent protest by women where every government property assessable to women was vandalised.

The events at Ukam and Oloko happened spontaneously. The geographical distance between these villages and the means of communication available to the women at the time did not hamper the collaboration. As shown, the women traders of Ibibio, Igbo, Ogoni, Andoni, Bonny, Kalabari ethnic groups mixed freely, using rivers (Cross River and Imo), their tributaries and creeks as their routes. They also used the few newly opened roads in the region. Thus, a communication network existed among the women of the region with the women traders as agents in the market towns and ports. The incident at Oloko was not the cause of the war, rather, it was a confirmation of the women's fears and, therefore, the catalyst of the outburst. The organi-

zation of the Women's War was based on an efficient communication system through the use of traditional symbols and communication channels. As soon as the events started at Oloko, the women leaders sent out emissaries carrying folded leaves, to all surrounding areas to inform all women that the struggle against Women's taxation had started (Akpan, 1955).

Akpan and Ekpo (1988) have identified one of the most striking features of the Women's War, which really lends credence to the pan culture of Eastern Nigeria. The protesting women everywhere wore similar "war outfit", a short loin cloth, used in more vigorous activities such as farming, domestic work, etc., draped in ferns and palm leaves. At Utu Etim Ekpo, many of the women were reportedly dressed in sack cloths, denoting sorrow and grief. In many places, faces smeared with coloured chalk, charcoal or ashes and their heads were bound with young ferns.

They carried sticks, cudgels, pestles for pounding soup ingredients and, in some cases, machete, wreathed in palm frond. Young fern leaves known as *seiaginella* plant called *mkipatat* in Ibibio and *akoro* in Igbo, were locally believed to possess the power of protection against evil spirits. The young palm leaves of *elais guineensis*, called *eyei* in Ibibio and *onwu nkwu* in Igbo, were traditional symbols of peace, used by war-time messengers and village elders, attempting to stamp out bad practices in their community. The use of these plants by the women during the 1929 Women's War, was an attempt to employ traditional prohibitive methods for driving away evil spirits (in this case, the European administrators, police and traders) and eliminating obnoxious practices.

The Oloko women deposited their ferns at Chief Okugo's compound and cursed him, an act that was strongly believed to have brought about his sudden death. At Utu Etim Ekpo, the women, wearing *mkipatat* leaves around their heads, meant to convey that they had a very distinct grievance and had some right to obtain a proper hearing. Pestles were regarded as traditional symbols of womanhood and were believed to be the means of invoking the powers of female ancestors. Traditionally, therefore, the women were trying to obtain the protection of the ancestors' spirit in the process.

The wearing of white or yellow chalk, charcoal and ashes was also a traditional method of protection and purification when dealing with spirits, and the black colour specifically represented grief and portrayed women's sadness with the unfavourable socio-economic situation. The use of colourants as stated by witnesses at the government inquiry was also employed in an attempt of the protesting women to

present themselves as vultures – messengers of the gods in the traditional Ibibio belief, which according to custom could not be harmed (Akpan and Ekpo, 1988; Akpan, 2017).

Akpan and Ekpo also note that:

The Women's War tactics consisted of an organised advance on the administrative centres, blocking the approach roads and paralysing all government activities. All women in the surrounding settlements reached *en mass* to the pre-arranged signal and marched on the appointed area from different directions...organised women group siege of a particular compound was traditionally referred to in Ibibio land as *ufik ntie* (putting pressure on), and in Igbo land as "sitting on" or "making war" on its owner. It involved occupation of the compound by the women, dancing and chanting of demands, cursing the owner and directing scurrilous songs at him, detailing the women's grievances in the process. It was an acceptable custom of Ibibio and Igbo women's societies for seeking redress for injustices done to their members. It had basically harmless, but nevertheless, potentially dangerous character. A "siege situation" by a crowd of angry women, decorated with fern leaves and palm fronds and brandishing pestles, was a rare but dreaded sight in any Ibibio and Igbo communities. It constituted the ultimate sanction, available to the women under the aegis of the collective women's societies, for obtaining redress from men. The practice was usually invoked, when a man persistently maltreated his wife or wives, violated the women's market rules or allowed his livestock to feed on the women's crops (Akpan and Ekpo, 1988: 26).

The "sitting on" unwanted chiefs and other foreign colonial institutions, the blocking of government roads and taking over of the compounds of government stations were, therefore, an extension of traditional women societies' methods into the colonial environment. These acts were regarded by the participants as declaring of women's war on the government, aimed at paralysing its normal activities and purging it of evil practices and intentions towards women. According to tradition, it was unheard of women being challenged or brutalised while engaging in such collective demonstrations.

The Aftermath of the Women's War

Two commissions of inquiry were set up to look at the remote causes of the war. The second commission of inquiry came on the insistence of

the African representatives in the Nigerian Legislative Council and under British public opinion pressure. It was made of a larger representation and was inaugurated by the Governor on the 7th of February 1930, under the chairmanship of Sir Donald Kingdom, the Chief Justice of Nigeria (Akpan, 2004).

The findings of the commission of inquiry indicted some colonial officers and they were subsequently recalled. These included the District Officer for Opobo, A.R. Whiteman, the Resident of Calabar Province, E.M. Falk and the Governor of Nigeria, Sir G. Thompson. In Nigeria, the warrant chief system was immediately abolished and replaced with the Native Authority system. Indeed, the whole paraphernalia of indirect rule was reformed (Brown, 2008).

Furthermore, the British government was highly critical of the structure of the tax regime that was introduced by her officers in Nigeria. One beneficial outcome of this self-criticism was the conscious effort to know more about the Nigerian communities or groups. This led to the commissioning of anthropological research in the Nigerian social system, with a view to studying the social, cultural, political and economic institutions of clans in Nigeria. The results of their findings came in form of intelligence reports, which were compiled from 1931 in Southern Provinces (Akpan, 2004).

According to Akpan (2004), the history of the Women's War is an epoch by itself, a vital part of the beginning of the Nigerian journey to independence; it "blazed the trail for nationalism and gave impetus to others on the struggle, which led to Nigerian nationhood". The heroic participants in the Women's War, who rose to together in a collective display of utmost patriotism and self-sacrifice deserve recognition, as "architects" of nationalism in Nigeria and, perhaps, in Africa.

The 1929 Women's War: The Correct Nomenclature

The reference to this epochal event to "Aba Women Riots" is misleading and creates the impression that the episode was at Aba. It was a well planned and co-ordinated uprising by the women of several distinct ethnic groups, viz: Ibibio, Annang, Igbo, Opobo (Umani), Ijaw, Ogoni and Obolo (Andoni). There were mere protests at Aba, but no lives were lost. However, it was within the present Akwa Ibom State that the full impact of the protests was obvious. The colonial authorities tried to down play the importance and extent of the events and justify the use of brutal force against the women by presenting the event as localised "riot" by "frenzied women" or an organised mob action" (Abasiattai, 2003).

The name which the women gave the movement was *ogu umunwanyi* (Igbo) and *ekong iban* (Ibibio), meaning Women's War. The war need not be named after a particular group, it was a collective fight of all the women groups. Indeed a pan reaction against injustice by people with shared cultural values.

The Nigerian Women in Contemporary Nigeria

The impact of the 1929 Women's War helped to sharpen the consciousness of women such as Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Mrs. Ema Brown, Mrs. Hannah Etudoh; etc. These women among others kept pressing for the inclusion of women in governance. In 1958, the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) was formed to champion the cause of women. Nigerian women also collaborated with women from other parts of the world for the improved condition of women. The effort resulted in the first world conference on women held in Mexico in 1975. The second conference took place in Beijing, China, where extensive decisions on gender equality were taken under the auspices of the United Nations.

Following the return of the country to democratic governance in 1999, a full fledged Ministry of Women Affairs was created at the federal level, while state governments were also enjoined to replicate same in their domains. At the local government level, women are more involved in governance than before. Substantial legal instruments have been put in place for the betterment of women. In fact, women folk now enjoy visible positions in the public domain that before.

Conclusion

About 90 years ago, women within the palm belt region of South Eastern Nigeria rose in revolt against British colonial rule in Nigeria. The action was a rejection of unfavourable policies perpetrated by the colonialists. For instance, the warrant chieftaincy encouraged extortion and usurpation of the authority of the traditional rulers. Also the Great Depression resulted in the sharp fall in the price of palm produce which was the basis of cash economy of the area. The fall in export earnings was not matched by a corresponding fall in the prices of imported goods. Indeed, the adverse economic conditions worsened the burden of direct taxation and made it more difficult for the people to bear (Akpan and Ekpo, 1988).

The colonial authorities attempted to re-assess the people of the area for the purpose of improving the tax revenue. The exercise involved measuring farms and counting the yam heaps on them, recording of the number of domestic animals in the compound, and the

counting of women's utensils and the number of fire places in each compound. Even the number of women's belongings such as pieces of apparel in their boxes were recorded. This heightened the rumour that taxation would soon be imposed on the women. The tax direct taxation imposed on the men which was paid for the first time in 1928, tended to have heightened the tension among the women folk.

The scenario sparked trouble first in Oloko, Bende Division of Abia State. The protest spread to many parts of Akwa Ibom State such as Itu, Ikot Ekpene, Abak, Utu Etim Ekpo, where 18 women were murdered by the colonial army on the 14th of December, and Ikot Abasi where about 33 women were murdered on the 16th of December 1929 also by the colonial army.

This resulted in the composition of a panel of inquiry which indicted many colonial officers and brought an end to the warrant chieftaincy. The event also triggered Nigerian nationalism and an irreversible march towards Nigerian independence. From the above, it is obvious that the Nigerian women were crucial vanguards of Nigerian nationalism. The women struggle for gender balance and equality has not abated in the post-colonial era. Indeed, the status of women in Nigeria has improved. This consciousness of women is significantly traceable to the epochal 1929 Women's War.

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