

Gender Studies - A Reader



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40

The role of Women in anti-Imperial and post-Colonial Politics in Nigeria

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Introduction

The uprising or protests at various times by some Nigerian women against the colonial and post colonial administration was a fall-out of oppressive and discriminatory regimes in which women were not regarded in the society. Till the late 1950s and early independence era there were no jobs in the civil service for women in Nigeria. The protests projected women as the first nationalists who protested against the obnoxious colonial policies. In post independence too, women were not still being taken as partners in development; whereas women contributed greatly to the development of colonial and post colonial economy of Nigeria. Besides, it showcased Nigeria's women's first Bill of Rights which the women handed over to the colonial authorities. The chapter uses the survey method in the discussion of the historical facts. It concludes that, exclusion of women in the affairs of the nation may curry wrath. Women are partners in development. The chapter concludes that politics of discrimination against women is anti-development.

Politics is often a difficult concept to explain. People both in developing and developed economies live by it. As a result, there has been varying definitions. Every human being or group activities revolve around it-meaning whether social, economic or religious. Some scholars have defined politics as "the pursuit of the good life", while others define it as "the systematic reflection of power;" indeed "politics is who gets what, when and how". Politics, with good resources, shape the people's advancement (Mohammed, 1985; Alapiki, 2004).

The territory now known as Nigeria until the 20th century did not exist as a nation. It came into existence as a colonial creation. Before the actual colonial incursion, the "area contained different nationalities made up of empires,

kingdoms and city-states" (Uya, 1992). Most of these areas had their unique political systems and language, which were not compromised in the course of their cultural and commercial interactions dating back to many centuries. There was no major attempt to bring them into one nation before the 20th century. These kingdoms include the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Ibibio, Nupe, Efik, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urohobo, Bini etc. However, from 1861 when the Lagos area was annexed by the British crown and made a crown colony, till 1914, when Northern and Southern protectorates and the colony of Lagos were amalgamated, these kingdoms had their autonomy removed and they became subjected to the authority of colonial Nigeria. Indeed, Lord Frederick Lugard became the first Governor-General of Nigeria and ruled the territory through his constitution, Order-in-Council.

The penetration of the British and the imposition of her rule in Nigeria altered the indigenous political system. The British were harsh, her policies and manner of ruling indigenous people were exploitative and ruthless in all spheres. Worst still, was her creation of 'ranks' among the natives to rule the natives-the Warrant Chiefs. In this connection, there were a lot of opposition by the people. For instance in Eastern Nigeria, between 1900 and 1920 there were expeditionary forces (from the Aro, the Ibibio against the colonial rule. In the north, the Nupe and the Ilorin armies resisted the forces of the British headed by Taubman Goldie of the Royal Niger Company (Coleman, 1958). However, these resistances did not feature women prominently, but this did not mean that women showed no resentment to the colonial rule.

The chapter would be on two parts, an aspect would discuss the women resistance to colonial rule and the other, the post-colonial Nigeria. For methodology used, the chapter draws information from books and journals on women political activities of the period using historical survey.

Women in anti-imperial Colonial Politics

The indigenous people resisted against certain colonial policies and practices, particularly taxation. Since the imposition of British rule, the people of Nigeria had been obliged to provide unpaid labour for public works, but had not been taxed, the Native Courts deriving their revenue mostly from court fines. Indeed, the people had no tradition of regular taxation. In 1927, Government decided to impose a tax on able-bodied adult males as a more systematic source of revenue (Abasiattai, Ekpo, Ezebube, 1997).

Tax assessment of each adult male, carried out in the Area in 1927/28, involved the counting of property like food crops, palm produce, crafts and livestock. In the end a flat rate was fixed except in areas such as Ogoni with minor reduction for according to the colonial office, "its resources were

considered underdeveloped and the people poorer ..." There was resistance to the assessment, the tax itself was paid in 1928 without problems (*ibid*). This is the reflection of what was obtained in other parts of Nigeria.

On the other hand, colonial rule gave no room for women participation in the local administrative and political management in their spheres of influence, whereas, in the traditional African system which colonial rule almost supplanted, women had played definite political roles in the village assemblies, in exclusive women organizations, like Ebre, Iban Isong and even Inam cult among the Ibibio as examples. Besides, women dominated the food, craft-production, petty trade, poultry and goatry farming. With the economic downturn caused by the fall in prices paid by the European firms for African primary products, as a result of the Great Depression, greatly distressed and dislocated them economically. It is also discovered that the prices of imported goods were soaring, and coupled with the injustices, oppression and extortion practiced by the Warrant Chiefs and Native Courts, which alienated and polarized the people from the British rule, the stage was set to "detonate" (Abasiattai, 1997, Ikpe, 2005).

The immediate cause of the women's resistance, however, was the rumour-or rather, according to Abasiattai the "women's reasonable suspicion", based on the counting of women and their property, that government intended to tax women. Such taxation, the women protested, would add to the indirect share of women in the payment of the direct tax on men. Thus the women's war (Ekong Ibaan in Ibibio; Ogu Umu Nwanyi in Igbo) as the women themselves termed their resistance-aimed to forestall taxation of women, and to seek redress for the injustices in the colonial economic, social and political system. On December 15, 1929, the angry women destroyed the buildings of the Native Court, Dispensary and staff quarters with pestles and clubs. The women put it thus - "*ihe putara anyi ge eme* (whatever comes, we damn the consequences)". The aftermath of the protest was that over one hundred women lost their lives (Abasiattai, 1997, Ikpe, 2005). This is what is usually termed the Aba Women's Riot. The so-called Aba Riots were a protest movement of women in Eastern Nigeria in Calabar and Owerri provinces, against obnoxious colonial policies, and were triggered off by news of impending taxation of women. Though the issue of whether the protest actually started at Aba or ended there has been contested severally by many historians and non historians alike. For instance Afigbo (1972: 238) was the first to question this nomenclature when he observed that tagging the movement as "Aba Riot" is misleading and at times had created the impression that the episode was centred in Aba. The Riot did not start at Aba and did not reach its peak there. Noah (1995), opines that this misnomer was "neither Aba in origin nor riot in nature". However that is not the issue.

Whether it started in Aba or not, it spelt the politics of the time. It was a protest by Ibibio women who lost thirty two of their members in the uprising. The movement referred to as Aba Riots was of a wider scale and engulfed the then Calabar province, Opobo, Abak and Utu Etim Ekpo where women predominantly Ibibio and Annang lost their lives.

However, the outcome of the protest projected women as the first group of nationalists who protested against obnoxious colonial policies. Besides, it showcased the Nigerian women's first bill of rights which the women handed over to the colonial authorities. The Bill read:

1. 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 use of common market shed.
5. They ask that licenses for holding plays should not be paid for.
6. They do not want Chief Mark Pepple Jaja to be Head Chief of Opobo Town.
7. The women do not want any man to pay tax.
8. They are speaking for Opobo, Bonny and Andoni Women (Report, 1930) quoted in Abasiattai, 1997).

In 1925, there was a nativistic religious movement in Iboland in response to a miraculous message from Chi-ukwu (God). The message indicated the pollution of land by the Whiteman and their innovations. Following the message was the protest march up and down the villages denouncing such innovations as British currency, native courts and demanding a return to the customs of olden times (Coleman, 1958).

In 1956, Nigerian Women especially those in the urban areas such as Lagos re-started the operations of the foreign or expatriate firms. During the Second World War and even the post war period, hundreds of thousands of petty women traders purchased foods from European firms and resold them in the local markets of the hinterland on very little amounts which sustained the economy: what Coleman called 'penny-penny' basis. During the post-war period the market women were particularly aggrieved over the practice of the firms known as "conditional sales". This implies that the prices of export commodities produced by these women became far cheaper than the imported goods. The women protested especially in Lagos area. The firms, as Coleman put it, as principal purchasers of export products and the principal importers of European goods, were blamed both for low prices paid the producers and for high prices charged the consumers (Coleman, 1958: 86; Crowder, 1978: 212-213).

However, there were other resistances by women in Eastern Nigeria, for instance in 1951 women resisted the introduction of a new technology – the

Pioneer Oil Mill – into the palm oil industry. Traditionally dominated by women, the industry was a regular source of income for women, through the sale of palm kernel and some of the unrefined oil. Women's fear was that such take-over might deprive them of control over the palm oil and kernel extraction and the attendant income. Some women rioted in 1951 at Itu, Abak, Ikot Ekpene, Uyo and attempted to damage the mills (Nwabughuogu, 1983).

In 1953, there were women disturbances at Eket against census and education tax ration; in the process they sought support from Opobo (Ikot Abasi) women. In 1958, Opobo and Andoni women protested against the imposition of school fees in the Universal Primary Education Schools (Abasiattai, 1997).

The post-colonial Politics and Nigerian Women Protest

The post-colonial era coincides with the achievement of independence by the nationalists. It is the least eventful in relation to involvement and participation of women whether positively or otherwise. The Nigerian political scene was at this time completely dominated by the men, no reaction from women. Contributions made by women like Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Mrs. Funmilayo Kuti, Mrs. Emma Brown cannot be forgotten but had no strong foundation to influence politics especially to favour women. And there are no real cases of women's anti post-colonial protests or uprising in Nigeria.

The post colonial Nigeria has not showcased any anti-protest by women, rather the period has witnessed the emergence of women activists like Hajiya Gambo Sawaba of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), Malama Noanusa of the Action Group (AC), Mrs. Funmilayo Kuti, Mrs. Emma Brown, Margaret Ekpo. Emma Brown, for instance was a journalist, she was always anti-government due to government's insensitivities to the plights of common people especially women. She concentrated on writing petitions, criticisms and organizing demonstrations. Those women had one thing in common: their commitment to improving the lot of Nigerian women, and educating them on their rights when and where they are deprived of such rights. Foremost among their aims was to bring about and awareness among women as to their very significant function in society, and how much power they could wield by initiating and influencing policy if they were organized (Yusuf, 1985).

The feature and characteristics of resistance

In the anti-imperial protest or uprising an unusual feature was that the women, all illiterate, not only initiated but also were the only participants in the uprising. The whole episodes were spontaneous and received no support from either the men or the illiterate elements of the provinces. It showed to a large extent an

amazing capacity for organization and united action which did not take into consideration clan or ethnic boundaries. They were highly organized and highly pressed to achieve their aims. Like the 1929 uprising, Chief Jaja later characterized the demonstration as: ... unprecedented, never before had the women banded together in such a manner or shown contempt for the chiefs, as the throwing of sand on them signified, while the men passively looked on (Abasiattai, 1991).

Impact of Women's Agitation or Uprising

The women's uprisings had a tremendous effect on the development of women in Nigeria both during the colonial and post colonial periods. One of such effects was the administrative reforms of the 1930s that replaced the Native Court with the Native Authority System. Others were the attention paid to women education, for instance many Ibibio women were trained in Nursing in Britain beginning from late 1940s. One would think that the inspiration thereafter given to women's self-actualization culminated to the implementation of the Better Life for Rural Women Programme of the early 80s. It can also be mentioned that in decision taking either in government and village assembly women are often considered and or consulted.

However, what is common is that both 1925 and 1929 uprisings were feminist movements, but possessed reactionary undertones. Women of 1925 agitated for a return to customary currency and village councils, the 1929 demanded that "all the white men should go to their country so that the land in their area might remain as it was many years ago before the advent of the white man" (Coleman).

Conclusion

The most important significance of these uprisings was that they were almost exclusively the acts of women, who were able to organize themselves through their age grades to demand for their rights. In addition, these women were pushed on by the poor administrative policies of the colonial government especially by the low prices for their farm products because the economic depression in Europe was having its impact in Nigeria-vis-à-vis Africa. It also showcased women as an organized group capable of achieving something worthwhile if given an opportunity, and can equally influence the policies of government for sustainable development if brought in or consulted. However, as humans they also should not be oppressed by men but taken and accepted as partners in development.

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