

## ON THE NONAGENARY OF THE 1929 ANTI-COLONIAL WOMEN RESISTANCE IN EASTERN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*On the occasion of the nonagenary of the 1929 Anticolonial Women Resistance in Eastern Nigeria, known in colonial lexicon as Aba Women Riot of 1929 this paper interrogates critical specificities of the resistance. The objective of the paper is to identify and analyse the causative and procedural factors of the resistance as well as issues of leadership and key achievements of the resistance. Accordingly, the paper hypothesizes first, that the 1929 Anticolonial Women Resistance in Eastern Nigeria is consequent upon causative and procedural factors; and secondly that there is significant logical relationship between leadership credentials of the activists and achievements of the resistance. Relying essentially on documentary instruments of data generation and textual analytic technique of data analysis, the paper identified four causative factors including introduction and practice of Warrant Chief and the introduction of new taxes combined with the fear that it would be extended to women. The paper also found that protest by sitting on a man and street processions, etc were some the procedural factors; and that there is significant logical relationship between leadership credentials of the activists and achievements of the resistance. An important take of the resistance is the attestation that ethnicities in the area have in-built mechanisms through which women extract and exercise power. Among others it is recommended that the 1929 resistance be accorded more befitting place in the political history and social evolution of Nigeria.*

**Key words:** Aba, anticolonial protest, causative factors, resistance of 1929 and women riot,

### **Introduction**

The 1929 Anticolonial Women Resistance in Eastern Nigeria, known in colonial lexicon as Aba Women Riot of 1929, was the first major anticolonial revolt or collective action by women in the whole of West Africa. It involved mostly rural women of the old Owerri and Calabar provinces, who organised and led the collective action. Records show that while the resistance lasted, many Warrant Chiefs were forced to resign. Further still, while sixteen colonial native courts were either attacked, destroyed or both. Few months after the collective action, the colonial government did not only abolish the system of Warrant

Chiefs, it also appointed women into the Colonial Native Court System. The paper commemorates the nonagenary of the 1929 Anticolonial Women Resistance in Eastern Nigeria, AWREN, for short.

Taking cognisance of the foregoing, it is necessary we pose some anchor questions. Why was it possible for the collective resistance to, within the time frame, achieve multiple laudable goals? What were the causes and goals of the collective resistance? How was the resistance organised and which method did the resistance employ? Who led the protest and which leadership style was employed? What are the implications or lessons to be learned in regard to contemporary politics of political participation, identity politics and pluralism dynamics in Third World social formations such as Nigeria?

In response to the foregoing, this paper is divided into six parts; beginning with this part one which contains brief introduction and exordial issues. The second part is on the conceptual while the third is the methodological issues. The fourth part is on the factors of the 1929 AWREN, while the fifth part is on the leadership character and achievements of the resistance. Part sixth, which is the last part, contains the concluding analysis.

### **Literature and Contextual Discourses**

The 1929 AWREN represents a stage, indeed a maturation phase in the long history of collective action by women in Nigeria. In the preceding decades, particularly in 1910, women in Agbaja area stayed away from their homes for a month on the suspicion that men were killing pregnant women. Their collective absence pushed community elders to address the concerns. Again in 1924, women numbering about three thousand in Calabar protested against market tolls imposed by the government. As a matter of fact, women's protest also occurred in Igboland in 1925, with several minor copy-cat protests taking place throughout Eastern Nigeria until independence was eventually achieved in Nigeria in 1960.

Controversy attends the very definition and categorization of that activism of women of Eastern Nigeria, which raged in last weeks of 1929 and early 1930. Some call it Aba women's riot, ostensibly on the basis of some principles. Others call it Igbo women's riot while others still call it Igbo women's war. Apologists of the colonial regime prefer to call it Aba women's riot, perhaps, to diminish the significance of the resistance while others called it Igbo women's war (*Ogu Umunwayi*) to signify their opposition and resistance to British colonial policies and administration. It would be wrong to some extent to call it any of those. It could not truly be Aba women's riot because the protests started in far-away Oloko (not in Aba) and extended even beyond Opobo. It couldn't also be rightly called Igbo woman's riot or Igbo women's war because many active participants and even leaders of the protests were not Igbo but Ibibio, Ijaw, Ogoni and Opobo women.

The spatial location of the epicentre of the 1929 AWREN is essentially within the confines of the administrative boundary of the defunct old Owerri and Calabar provinces.

Broadly, it covers the whole or parts of the present-day states of Abia, Akwaibom, Cross River, Imo and Rivers. A closer look shows that the city of Aba is almost at the centre of the entire action area. It is perhaps, also necessary to contextualize the events of the collective action as having occurred within a specific timeframe. In this regard, it makes sense to align the 1929 AWREN as chain of events that occurred with a period of ninety days, from the mid-November 1929 to mid-January 1930.

#### **Methodological and Propositional Considerations.**

This paper relies largely on techniques for the analysis of data from documentary sources especially public documentary and internet sources. This entails the use of library materials, internet sources, journals and books for the generation of relevant data. The generated data were analysed by examining and interpreting critical issues in documents or written records. General analytic technique enabled us to analyse gathered data closely alongside inductive and textual analytic techniques.

Putting the foregoing in perspective, it is now necessary to set out two interrelated preposition.to guide the study. Accordingly, we hypothesize, first, that the 1929 AWREN is consequent upon causative and procedural factors. Secondly, that there is significant logical relationship between leadership credential of the activists and achievements of the resistance. Let us first explore the causative and procedural factors of the resistance, thereafter and the logical relationship between leadership credential of the activists and achievements of the resistance.

#### **Causative and Procedural Factors of the Resistance.**

The 1929 AWREN is associated or traced to some factors. Broadly, the factors are causative and procedural. As the name suggests, while causative factors focus on the factors that gave rise to the collective action, the procedural factors dwell on the issues, methods and activities that not only sustained the resistance, but that were fillips to the goals and achievements of the resistance.

The first causative factor of the 1929 AWREN borders on the combined effect of systemic peripherization of the colonies by the colonizing powers, which involved outer or centre propelled disarticulation and the attendant peripherization trauma. The resistance by women of Eastern Nigeria is rooted in the absurdities associated with the enterprise of colonial domination and imperialism in a population that hitherto have no memory of being dominated and no social psychology of subservience to external domination. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914 by Fredrick Lugard and its consequences or effects on the people did not help matter.

The Great Depression of August 1929 and March 1927, which came after roughly a decade after the First World War, July 1914 and November 1918, was also a major causative factor in the 1929 AWREN. The post First World War depression was a severe worldwide

economic depression that affected various segments of peoples' economic life. In particular, the depression in the colonies was accompanied by low prices of agricultural produce. The resistance took place within the first six months of the Great Depression.

Thirdly, the introduction and practice of Warrant Chief in some largely acephalous social formations in the old Owerri and Calabar provinces was a major factor that gave rise to the 1929 AWREN. The practice of Warrant Chief, an important component of Indirect Rule was a convenient device that enabled the colonial authorities to govern their new territories at the least cost. Indirect Rule meant that the colonialists administer their colonial possessions through the existing or traditional administrative structures on ground. Beside administrative convenience, indirect rule provided decent channel or process by which the colonialists could raise money at the least cost. Worse still, the Warrant Chief system effectively short women out of political power. It was clearly an error of judgement to believe that the area was hitherto essentially patriarchal, and as such, that women have no political role, and should not be given any in the emerging colonial dispensation.

The fourth and most immediate cause of the 1929 AWREN was the introduction of new taxes and the fear that it will be extended to women, who ordinarily were exempted from regular direct taxation in precolonial political economy. Twelve months before direct taxation on men, which was introduced in 1928 came into effect, there was careful 'propaganda' to explain the provisions and objects of the Native Revenue Amendment Ordinance to the people in the five provinces of Eastern Region of Nigeria at that time. Incidentally, in September 1929:

Captain J. Cook, an assistant District Officer, was sent to take over the Bende division temporarily, from the serving officer ... Upon taking over, Cook found the original nominal rolls for taxation purposes inadequate because they did not include details of the number of wives, children, and livestock in each household. He set about revising the nominal roll. The exercise brought the colonial authorities into direct conflict with women in Eastern Nigeria and was the catalyst for fundamental change in the local administration (Women's War: 3)

As it turned out, the announcement of Cook's intention was made to a few chiefs in Oloko Native Court. The counting began about 14 October 1929. The women in Oloko suspected that the enumeration exercise was simply a prelude to the extension of direct taxation to women. With no political power or channel to vent their dissatisfaction, they utilized collective action to communicate how they feel. In communicating how they feel, lives were lost: the lives of unarmed women protesters who were confronted and shot at by heavily armed colonial soldiers. Altogether, the women lost 55 of their members, but in the end they achieved some of their objectives under that heavily repressive regime.

The procedural factors refer to the means, major tactics, strategies or methods adopted or used in the protest. In the case of the 1929 AWREN, the women employed a range of tactics in carrying out their collective action or protests. The most outstanding tactics or methods of the protests include, but not limited to (a) Protest by sitting or sitting on a man. This is a long held traditional practice which enables women facing injustice in the society to wage war on men by gathering and surrounding the house of the man in question, sitting and dancing around the house for long with intermittent and sporadic songs that detail the grievances of the women against the man. All these were more likely to be irritating than not. (b) Protest by disturbance which involves following the target everywhere and anywhere. In addition to singing and dancing around the target houses and offices, the protesting women extracted attention by invading the space of the targets and following their every move. In addition, extending the disturbance on the wives of the Warrant Chiefs often meant that they too also mount pressure on their husbands to listen and hid to the demands of the protesting women. (c) Protesting in the streets. This involved processions holding leave branches and chanting sings on major roads. (d) Protests by networking. The protest gained so much stamina through networking, reaching out and acting in concert with other women in the two colonial provinces.

#### **Leadership and Achievements of the Resistance**

The 1929 protest by women was so organized that their solidarity perplexed the colonial administration, to the extent that the British reasonably suspected that they must have had secret male sponsors. Despite the suspicion, it is on record that the achievements associated with the 1929 AWREN were not only outstanding but anchored on leadership credentials of some women associated with the resistance. The success of the collective action revolved by and large on some notable women figures who provided leadership for thousands of women that partook in the collective action.

Records indicate that the role of Nwanyeruwa, a widower and an Oloko by marriage to Ojim and an Ngwa by birth, was clearly outstanding. This is largely on account of the fact that Nwanyeruwa's courage in the altercation with the colonial authorities gave serious impetus to the collective protest. After the brawl she had with one Emeruwa, a census enumerator for the colonialists, Nwanyeruwa went to the town square she narrated her experience and charged the women for definite action on the issue of taxing women. Based largely on her account and admonitions, Oloko women were convinced that that should not be taxed. This stance was followed up by inviting and networking with women from other areas in Bende district and Umuahia and Ngwa areas. Through the mass action Nwanyeruwa preached and initiated thousands of women gathered and protested at the office of the Warrant Chief of the area: Chief Okugo, asking him to resign. Nwanyeruwa was already advanced in age and was also known to have played active role in keeping the protest largely non-violent. Based on her advice, the collective action or protest

consisted mainly of songs and dances, sitting on the Warrant Chiefs until they surrendered their insignia of office and resigned. This pattern was with time replicated in many parts of the old Owerri and Calabar provinces. Under Nwanyeruwa, the resolve was clear and simple: “women will not pay tax till the world ends [and] chiefs were not to exist anymore” (Women’s War: 5)

Three other women: Ikonna, Nwannedia and Nwugo, also known as Oloko trio, were also part of the leadership for the activism associated with the 1929 AWREN. As a matter of fact, “the three were known for their persuasion, intelligence and passion. When the protest became tense, it was often these three who were able to deescalate the situation, prevent violence” (Women’s War: 5). Unfortunately, it was only when two women were killed, while protesting, that the trio were unable to calm the situation.

The most outstanding primary source for the study of the 1929 AWREN today is the Report of the Aba commission of Inquiry. Incidentally, a major source on the details of the collective action by women came from Mary Okezie, at the time, a twenty-three-year-old lady teacher at the Anglican Mission at Umuocham Aba when the protest broke out. Easily one of the first Igbo women to gain western education, Mary Okezie was very sympathetic to the cause of the women, though she did not participate in the protest proper. Her contribution to the 1929 AWREN hinges on the fact that she was the only women that articulated and submitted a memo stating women’s grievances to the Aba Commission of Inquiry set up in 1930 to investigate the protest and make recommendation. It is worthwhile to note that after the resistance, Mary Okezie transformed into a founder and leader of Ngwa Women’s Association, and devoted her life to support women’s right in Nigeria. Other major women figure in leadership of the protest were Mary Ogu Ndem and Ihejilembi Ibe of Umuokirika village.

By the time 1929 AWREN ended in January 1930, and given the follow-ups, it was certain that the resistance attained some laudable goals. It is particularly interesting to observe that the Warrant Chief of Oloko, where the protests started was dethroned and sentenced to two years in prison, and that the warrant chief system was also substantially modified, the native court system was replaced with the native authority system and women were appointed to positions in the administration These were unprecedented feats, that was at the time.

Among the most notable achievements of the resistance were: (a) The protest led to ending of the Warrant Chief system in 1930 (b) It also led to the replacement of the Warrant Chiefs (c) Clan heads were appointed by the indigenous people, rather than the British colonialists (d) Women were also appointed to serve in the native courts (e) It generated circumstance or prelude to the emergence of mass and popular anti-colonialism. (f) The women were able to able, through the resistance to transform traditional methods for expressing approval cum disapproval, and networking into powerful mechanism that

successfully challenged and disrupted the local colonial administration. (g) Position of women in the society was greatly improved on account of the 1929 AWREN.

### **Concluding Analysis**

In this paper the main focus has been on the causative and procedural factors that impacted on and gave rise to or sustained the 1929 AWREN. Our findings show that the factors are systemic peripheralization of the colonies, the Great Depression of August 1929 and March 1937, the introduction and practice of Warrant Chief and very importantly, the introduction of new taxes in the region and the fear that it will be extended to women. The paper also identified protest by sitting or sitting on a man and street processions, etc as some procedural factors that affected the resistance.

As in every conflictual reality groups were involved in the resistance. Here we identified two broad groups. On one hand is the women of the old Owerri and Calabar provinces, on the other is the Warrant Chief / customary authorities and colonial administration. The study found that leadership was a major factor in the prosecution of the resistance. Accordingly, the study identified some lead women figures in the resistance. Putting the achievements of all those who participated in the collective activism in perspective there is no doubt that the activists deserve due recognitions for their uncommon activism.

Very important lessons of the unprecedented protests and resistance of 1929 and its achievements was that it showed that by their cultural credentials and practices; Igbo, Ibibio and other ethnicities, have in built mechanisms by which women extract and exercise power. This clearly attests that it is not really men's role to yield or give power to women. The 1929 experience confirms that rather than wait for power to be yielded, women can and do help themselves. They can seize it by being active. On a parting note, it is not out of place to submit that there is need to accord the 1929 AWREN a more befitting place in the evolution and political history of Nigeria. There is no doubt that, among others, setting aside 18 November every year for the commemoration of the 1929 AWREN is a right line of action.

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