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THE 1929 WOMEN RESISTANCE TO COLONIALISM IN EASTERN NIGERIA AND THE QUEST FOR GENDER EQUITY IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

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Abstract
The problem of disparity, particularly gender disparity in political participation has attracted and held the attention of women, feminists and development agencies for a long time. At this 90th anniversary of the 1929 women's resistance to colonialism in Eastern Nigeria: Aba women's riot of 1929, we reflect on their heroic past and the status of women in modern Nigerian politics. Relying on documentary materials, this paper interrogates the paradox of current marginalization of women, underlines the power of effective organization and solidarity; and opines that Nigerian women do not have to wait until given power by men before they can participate effectively in politics. The paper thus suggests that women can look back on the 1929 protests and learn lessons that can motivate them to move to reverse their decades of marginalization, discrimination and invisibility in Nigerian politics.
Keywords: Aba women, Gender equity, Affirmative action, Colonial policy, Nigerian politics.

Introduction

Women's marginalization in post-independence African states has, of recent become a major subject of academic, national and international discourse. In all, there appears to be agreement that women should nave more representation in politics and policy making to reflect not only their number but also to reverse decades of marginalization, discrimination and invisibility. In 1995, an international women's conference in Beijing, China reiterated this point and called for deliberate policies to enhance the status of women. The call for affirmative action has resonated among women just as many governments have made effort to reserve a reasonable percentage of public offices for women.

At this 90th anniversary of the Igbo women's war with the British colonial administration in Eastern Nigeria, the attempt here is to call the attention of Nigerian

women to the fact that almost centuries ago, women could quite easily achieve a place in politics much more significant than the men are willing to give them today, and to appreciate the lessons to be learnt from the Igbo women's war in the movement for affirmative action.

Ab initio, controversy attends the very definition and categorization of that activism of women of Eastern Nigeria; some call it Aba women's riot, on the basis of some principle. Others call it Igbo women's riot while others still call it Igbo women's war, on the same basis of some principle. Apologists of the colonial regime prefer to call it Aba women's riot, perhaps, to diminish the significance of the event while the protesters themselves 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 couldn't truly be Aba women's riot because the protests started in far-away Oloko (not in Aba) and extended 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.

However, what is certain is that something notable happened in Nigeria in 1929, and that thing was women's movement against British colonial policy in Nigeria as it affected the Eastern part of the country. It was called *Ogu Umunwanyi.* (Women's war), perhaps because firearms were used and lives were lost. Those lives that were lost were the lives of unarmed women protesters who were confronted and shot at by heavily armed colonial soldiers. The women lost 53 of their members, but in the end they achieved some of their objectives under that heavily repressive regime. The warrant chief of Oloko, where the protests started was dethroned and sentenced to two years in prison. The warrant chief system was also substantially modified, the native court system replaced with the native authority system and women were appointed to positions in the administration - a feat that was unprecedented at the time.

The women's war was so organized that the extent of their solidarity perplexed the colonial administration such that the British reasonably suspected that they must have had secret male sponsors. In one protest at Opobo town on 15th December 1929, the angry women destroyed the buildings of the native court, dispensary and staff quarters with pestles and clubs. When the chiefs, including the Venerable MacPepple Jaja, who had voted in the Legislative Council for the imposition of tax (on men) tried to stop them, the women assaulted them, and when the chiefs fled into a house for safety, the women demonstrated round the house for a long time and would not disperse until promised a meeting the next day. Abasiattai (1991) reported that Chief Jaja later characterized the demonstration as "unprecedented; never before had women banded together in such a manner or shown such contempt for the chiefs as the throwing of sand on them signified, while men passively looked on."

An earlier women's protest had occurred in Igboland in 1925, and several minor copy-cat protests continued throughout Eastern Nigeria until independence was eventually achieved. As the traditions of Igbo and Ibibio women as well as the unprecedented protests of 1929 show, the thesis of this paper is that it is not men's role to yield or give power to women. Rather, women can seize it and help themselves.

Status of Women in Pre-Colonial Igbo Society

In Igbo culture, childbirth and child upbringing give women a special place in family and society. Hence, the concept of *umunne* (children of the same mother or the same womb) defines the closest form of ties between and among people in Igbo society. As M. M. Green (1947) pointed out in her study of "Igbo Village Affairs", Igbo women enjoyed a great deal of power, status and authority in traditional Igbo society. This allowed them to play a dominant role in village politics, village religious life and Igbo notions of lineage. Inherent in Igbo culture, therefore, were means that women could employ to create change.

The Igbos were not strictly a patrilineal people, though male elders and chiefs were important. But so too were the women - the daughters, wives, mothers and female elders were an essential and important part of everyday life and family. Most often, the power of Igbo women was inherent in their ability to organize for social action. Hence, their solidarity was rooted in established institutional arrangements like the *umuada, umuopku, inyomdi, ndinyom,* etc. and all females were embraced by and benefited from this solidarity. Ultimately, a man could not achieve any standing without a woman and an unmarried man could not be taken seriously in any leadership issue.

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 (Agbasiere, 2000). A specific space was set aside for women where they were heavily involved in cultural production (Amadiume, 2000); hence they had a highly developed understanding of culture as well as politics. One prevalent aspect of Igbo culture, for instance, was that of women's anger. In Igbo society, women's anger was dreaded and avoided as they often united as one to show it. This is as Igbo cultural traditions placed a premium on female assertiveness and collectivity which foster their independence. Igbo men were also accustomed to women being in positions of power and influence and had developed respect for their administrative skills. The very way that indigenous structures of governance were set up, publicly, validated and reinforced women in such a way that their presence in religious, economic, judicial and political spheres of life was a normal and accepted part of life.

The religious life of the Igbos was governed by goddess worship and ancestral worship and the female gender had a prominent place in that system. Divinity was said to inhabit four elements - earth, water, fire and air; the two tasked mainly with creation - earth and water - were understood to be female divinities and were considered to be superior deities.

Moreover, women played an active part in Igbo religion, performing rituals as priests and chief priests in some cases, and providing essential needs (such as food and meat) for religious ceremonies.

On the economic sphere, in the division of labour in Igbo traditional society, women were responsible for crop farming, other than the tedious tasks of, say, yam cultivation or palm wine tapping. They also dominated the local market where they exchanged the products of their farms as well as products of their domestic craft. Women controlled the processing, sale, storage and preservation of foodstuff, including palm produce and livestock, and this put them ahead of men in economic matters, especially as it concerns the local market. The ultimate indication of wealth and power in Igbo society lay in the title system and the title system was open to both men and women. Hence women could sometimes become wealthier and more prominent than their husbands, though that would not diminish the duty of female submissiveness and respect for their husbands.

On the judicial sphere, there were specific structural and institutional arrangements that placed some judicial responsibilities on women in Igbo traditional society. The powers of the *umuada*, for instance, were quite extensive. They settled disputes concerning political, economic and ritual matters. They also had the right of arbitration and they performed the role of keepers of public morality as well as of disciplining unruly or disobedient relatives or relative's wives (the boycott of the funeral of an incorrigible relative often generated a ritual crisis). In their meetings, the women made rules that applied to both women and men. Rowdy behaviour on the part of young men may be 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 (Van Allen, 1972).

Finally, a common principle of Igbo traditional political system was that all segments of the society should have some representation or voice in the overarching political structures (Amadiume, 2002). Women were active participants in the village assembly as well as in community life. At village assemblies, they often spoke on matters of direct concern to them, and their views were crucial due to the specific insights they brought to issues through their spiritual, market and trading experiences as well as their maternal roles. No decision about women could be made without the women's council's (*inyom*) knowledge and consent ... In crucial situations, the male village council would meet with the female council for deliberation and consultation. In some cases, a woman of outstanding conduct, character and ability was selected to lead the women as *omu* (queen). Dressed like a male monarch with her insignia of office and her own palace, the *omu* received homage from both titled men and women, as the female monarch.

The Igbo society was therefore like no other that the European had known. 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 their relationships.

Colonialism and Gender Disparity in Political Participation Among the Igbos

The Southeast Nigeria was the last to be brought under full colonial control, the Europeans having been fiercely resisted by the Aros and their long juju oracle. The Igbos of the Southeast were also the most difficult and troublesome to control. Upon arrival, the British expected to find the traditional system of monarchical society consisting of a ruler whose people reported to him and obeyed him unequivocally. This is what they had experienced elsewhere in Africa and other parts of the world, and they had utilized this pre-colonial authority structure to ease the burden of governance and enhance the efficiency of the indirect rule system.

Direct British rule was not feasible as there were neither the money, staff, communication nor the knowledge of the people that an effective administration required (Smith, 1937). Hence Lord Fredrick Lugard established the indirect rule system which was working effectively in Northern Nigeria at the time. However, in the Southeast, the British had to 'create' chiefs to whom they gave warrants or certificates of recognition. The warrant chief then became the sole spokesman for the natives and was given all the executive power and some judicial responsibilities as well. The colonial administration hoped to enlist the cooperation of the natives by governing them through their fellow natives, hence colonial peace was of paramount importance.

The first weakness that appeared in this new system was the choice of chiefs. The men chosen had not been traditional leaders and the natives did not agree with how they worked. Unaware of what the colonial government had in mind for the chiefs, the Igbos were unwilling to put forward their true leaders and, in many cases, those who emerged as warrant chiefs were renegades, incompetent and corrupt.

As warrant chiefs who had no connection to the established traditional political authority were indiscriminately appointed over these largely democratic people, the idea of subordinating their direct democracy to the rulership of these new (alien) organs of government was repulsive to the Igbos. The chiefs also acted in flagrant disregard and disrespect of the people and institutions of society. They extorted the people, took bribes, abused them and told bare-faced lies in order to bolster their ego before the local people and enhance their image before the white man.

A Story is told of a warrant chief in Umuezeala in the Umuduru native court in Owerri province, who was said to have acquired several of his many wives simply by commanding the woman to abandon her husband and come to live with him. If either the woman or her husband refused or challenged the chief, they would be threatened, beaten or falsely accused in the native court and jailed. The chief had to have his way since he was

perceived as the local representative of the monarch in England and had the coercive might of the crown behind him (Iheduru, 1997).

The warrant chiefs had their positions at the pleasure of the provincial commissioner or resident and, thereby, owed no allegiance to the village or lineage council of elders. The institution of warrant chief thus nullified all the indigenous political arrangements the people had been used to. The system meant that in contrast to the plurality of opinions that were usually considered in decision making, the warrant chief became the spokesman of the people on all matters while the traditional title societies and age grades lost their executive and judicial powers and responsibilities… On their part, women were completely left out in the colonial government. No woman was appointed to any of the emergent positions - warrant chief, court clerk, interpreter, court messenger, court bailiff, police or military recruits. Even the spheres where they used to make their mark in pre-colonial times (farming, trading, correction, etc.) were taken away. Thus the marginalization and invisibility of women in politics started.

The marginalization of women in Nigerian politics and the idea, generally, that man is superior to woman was embedded in Western political thought, such that when Aristotle suggested that the polis was the sovereign, final and perfect of associations and that the political was both supreme good and 'not household', 'not woman', he was actually advocating the exclusion of women from political activity. Also Rousseau's will was intricately intertwined with power and, in 'Emile', he educated young Emile to an uncorrupt appreciation of natural virtue and a capacity to give law to himself while educating Sophie to be Emile's wife, that is, to obey. Hence his post-revolutionary republican mother stayed at home to prepare her sons for republican virtue rather than contaminate the public stage (Goodin et al, 2007).

From those early moments, the subsequent enterprise of political philosophy which looked to the political for the culmination of human development continued to define the political in explicit contraindication to the realm of woman (Goodin et al, 2007). Even when Kant suggested that only duty based on reason had true moral worth, there was misogyny running through that thought, facilitated by the dichotomy between reason and emotion (male and female), as he also emphatically declared that the fair sex (woman) was incapable of principle (Kant,1963). Also, as radically liberal as he was, even Mill assumed that most women would freely choose a domestic life in which political participation was sharply curtailed.

According to one notable feminist, ours is a man's world. Men's physiology defines most sports, their needs define insurance coverage, their socially designed biographies define workplace expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit, their objectification of life defines art, their military service defines citizenship, their presence

defines family, their inability to get along with each other - their wars and rulerships - define history, their image defines god and their genitals define sex (MacKinnon, 1987).

In English and many other tongues, language itself encodes the message of male as norm and female as other. Even the physical act of speaking which creates or precludes political possibility is gendered. In the United States, for instance, women are more likely to adopt linguistic usages that connote uncertainty. Men are more likely to interrupt. Women tend to speak less than men when men are present, both in private and in public, including in democratic public assemblies. Even women legislators, on the average, speak less often than their male counterparts… But in spite of a woman's curtailed and discounted speech, throughout the world proverbs discipline women for talking too much, hence it is said that the tongue is the sword of a woman and she never lets it become rusty (Mansbridge, 1993; Kathlene, 1998).

Since the enlightenment reification of men, therefore, the peripherialisation of women in politics reflects European influences on the status of women, and it is assumed that women are indifferent to the political realities around them and, as such, lack the capacity and zeal to participate actively in politics. Hence in the colonial administration, the British appointed only men to their oversea services and in their colonial service in Nigeria, they appointed only local men into public office in the indirect rule system.

Role differentiation based on sex was also enhanced by Christian missionary activities in the colonies, where boys and men were trained for colonial service in public bureaucracies whereas girls and women were socialized in the churches and schools to be good Christians and good housewives. This form of role differentiation was embedded in the psyche of Nigerians in politics during the colonial period and has been largely sustained ever since.

Women's Reaction to Colonial Policies and Aba Women's Protest

The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates and the subsequent introduction of indirect rule in the South as it had been in the North signified the intent of the British to prepare the natives for self-rule. Indirect rule in the East was operated through the warrant chiefs. As we earlier noted, there was a fundamental problem with the manner in which the warrant chiefs were selected, and the men who emerged as warrant chiefs were, in most cases, not true leaders of the people. The way they worked was also not acceptable to the people due to the endemic corruption that was prevalent.

Moreover, self-rule required domestic financing and as such the British sought to complement the warrant chief system with a taxation policy which required the natives to pay a certain amount of 'modern' money as tax, the proceeds of which would constitute the revenue base of the Native Authority. Taxation was unknown to the natives of Eastern Nigeria before colonialism and, naturally did not go down well with them. When, therefore, a census was conducted in 1927 following the enactment of the Native Revenue

(Amendment) Ordinance by the Lagos Legislative Council for the purpose of extending taxation to the provinces of Warri, Onitsha, Owerri, Ogoja and Calabar, the people braced up for a fight. They were however assured by their warrant chiefs that the purpose of the census was not for taxation. Yet the men were taxed afterwards, and the women helped the men in paying the tax.

It was another (revised and more elaborate) census of 1929 that sparked the Igbo women's war. Captain John Cook, the Assistant District Officer for Owerri, called a meeting of local warrant chiefs on October 14, 1929, asking them to revisit the tax information they had gathered in 1927 for the purposes of the first incidence of tax in 1928 that was based on an estimation of the number and incomes of Nigerian men. Cook decided the information previously gathered was insufficient, and a recount was in order, especially one that paid greater attention to the number of women and children, as well as to the property and produce associated with the women of the land. One of the Chiefs, Chief Okugo of Oloko informed the elders of his village that the government had ordered him to count women and domestic animals 'so that they would be taxed' (Afigbo 1972).

In an attempt to conduct the census, an assistant of the chief, one Emeruwa encountered resistance in the house of a local woman, Nwanyeruwa. They got into a fight and the woman ran to the market (venue of an on-going women's meeting) to seek help. After reporting to the women, they went on the rampage. So started the famous Igbo women's war. The ostensible and immediate causes were economic. The year of the Wall Street crash, 1929, saw the worst slump in the palm produce trade since the beginning of British rule, this trade being a mainstay of the cash economy, and predominately in the hands of women. A lesser slump had occurred in 1927, just at the time when taxation of males had been introduced. Women, as major cash earners, were already contributing to their husbands' and sons' taxes. Now the rumours of taxation for the women had become an immediate problem. This coupled with the complete marginalization of women in the colonial administration as well as the corruption and ineptitude of the native authority had been sources of frustration and anger to the women, much like an accident waiting to happen. The war thus spread like wide fire; from Oloko to Mbawsi, to Omoba and Aba, to Nguru, Okpuala and Ngor to Imo River, Oguta, Owerrinta and Umuahia, then to Abak, Itu, Utu, Etim Ekpo down to Port-Harcourt, Opobo, Bonny, Andoni, etc. Tens of thousands of women were mobilized in action over an area of some 6,000 square miles, containing some 2,000,000 inhabitants. When the character of the protests is reviewed, wrote Margery Perham in 1937, the overwhelming impression is of the vigour and solidarity of the women. Even daughters and wives of warrant chiefs became active in the movement, maintaining solidarity with their sex.

It was at Aba that the protests turned violent after the vehicle of a British killed two of the women and they responded by burning houses, office buildings and businesses including banks, post offices and marketing companies belonging to Europeans as well as

local chiefs' houses. The administration responded by ordering troops to shoot at the women. Hence, at Aba, Utu, Etim Ekpo and Opobo the casualty station continued to pile up - two dead at Aba, eighteen at Utu and Thirty-three at Opobo. It was only after the Opobo massacre on 16 December, 1929 that the war drew to a close as news of the colossal loss of lives reached protesters in other regions.

In all, the fact that the women raised the stakes from their immediate anti-tax protests to attack the native courts and other colonial establishments reveals the revolutionary, political and anti-colonialist nature of their cause. Their objective became the overthrow of the entire system of native administration, a system perceived by them, given the democratic, power sharing basis of their own society, to be manifestly unjust.

Significance of the Igbo Women's War in the Quest for 'Affirmative Action' for Women

In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China. The conference developed a Platform for Action which offered a global framework for enhancing the status of women by closing the gender gap between men and women in twelve critical areas including health, education, employment, political participation and human rights (Butward and Onyekwelu, 2007). One of the resolutions of the women was that in various countries, at least 30 percent of positions in public office should be reserved for women.

The Beijing conference and its product, the Platform for Action, have strengthened international attention in women affairs and the status of women in politics. Various countries have made policy efforts to enhance the participation of women in politics. In this regard, Africa holds the record of 48.5 percent seats in the parliament in Rwanda. However, Nigerian women are still struggling for visibility and voice in public life. This is obviously a result of years of marginalization under colonial rule and male-dominated post-independence politics.

In this struggle, Nigerian women have rich lessons to learn from the Igbo women's war. First, the fact that the protests were run by women from diverse walks of life: 'pagan' and Christian; young and old; Igbo, Ibibio, Ogoni, Ijaw, etc; traditional leaders and newly chosen spokespersons shows that there is a system of careful, collective organization, not to mention an efficient communication system that spans towns in large provinces from Oloko to Umuahia and from Aba to Opobo. This was no coincidence as women's organisations were prevalent across the Southeast. Female governed markets, for instance, were used as a locus for the announcement of news and grievances. The lesson here is that in the quest for enhanced participation in politics, Igbo women can easily rely on this traditional capacity of women to organize themselves for social action.

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. They also had

become used to having their own social organisations (meetings) in a more egalitarian form than the village assembly, where they discussed matters of particular interest to them as traders, farmers, wives and mothers (Van Allen, 1976). These networks were employed to enhance the cohesiveness of the women when they expressed their displeasure with the colonial situation.

No one actually discredited the possibility that the British were intending to introduce a tax on women, but thought better of it in light of the women's resistance. That resistance may have stopped the tax; it certainly saw to the demise of the warrant chief system….In their subsequent history under British rule and male Nigerian rule, Igbo women's organisations have continued to show that there is a place for group solidarity action. But in an institutionalized system of electoral politics, the female collectivity has tended to be subsumed in male-dominated groupings and denied the autonomy of the traditional dual sex system. In the light of the above, one cannot but wonder why Nigerian women, particularly Igbo women, cannot appreciate the fact that they do not have to wait for male leaders to give them quotas in politics and public office, but rather that they have the capacity, with their number and organizational capabilities to take power and make change happen.

Conclusion

The Igbo women's war of 1929 was a gendered demonstration that attacked male institution of authority and countered not only foreign authority but also local authority, that is, men in power who marginalized women. It was not just an anti-tax protest but a movement of women to protect their economic and political interests that had been endangered by taxation, the economic crisis and actions of the warrant chiefs, and it was chiefly aimed at making the womenfolk visible and relevant to British colonial administration in Nigeria. That aim was accomplished to a large extent.

If the women could achieve the much they could under that repressive colonial regime, they can achieve even more under today's democratic regime of indigenous men. Looking back, women can learn that the men couldn't and wouldn't stand in their way if they were assertive enough to claim their rightful place in public life. They should therefore not wait for the men in power to give them their 30 percent quota in politics and public office. Rather, they can utilize their innate advantages of number, cohesiveness and assertiveness to take whatever they can from Nigerian politics.

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