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The Women's War of 1929: *A Defiant Stand Against Colonial Oppression*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Aba Women Riot, 1929

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The Women's War of 1929: A Defiant Stand Against Colonial Oppression

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In November 2019, the 90th anniversary of the Women's War, known in Igbo as Ògù Ụmùnwaànyị was commemorated. This historic uprising, which took place from 1929 to 1930, remains one of the most significant anti-colonial movements in Nigeria's history. It was not just a protest against economic injustice but a bold declaration of women's political power in the face of colonial oppression.

01

Origins of the Uprising

The Women's War erupted in Oloko, located in the Bende Division of southeastern Nigeria, when British colonial administrators attempted to impose new taxes on women. Traditionally, Igbo women had played significant socio-political roles within their communities, but British indirect rule sought to dismantle these structures, sidelining women in governance. The introduction of direct taxation on women was the final spark that ignited widespread resistance.

02

The Movement Spreads

The uprising quickly spread from Oloko to other parts of the Owerri and Calabar provinces, reaching towns such as Aba, Opobo, and beyond. This region encompassed an estimated population of two million people at the time. What made the Women's War extraordinary was not just its scale but its organization.

Women employed traditional protest tactics such as:

1. **Sitting on a Man:** A form of protest where women gathered around the homes or offices of oppressive leaders, singing, dancing, and mocking them publicly.
2. **Demonstrations and Boycotts:** Thousands of women marched in solidarity, demonstrating against colonial authorities and local collaborators, particularly the warrant chiefs men appointed by the British to enforce colonial rule.
3. **Direct Action:** In several towns, women tore down colonial symbols of power, including the British administrative station in Aba.

03

The Brutal Response

The British colonial government responded with violence. In Aba, over 50 women were shot dead by soldiers during a peaceful protest. Additional killings occurred in other areas, marking one of the bloodiest suppressions of civil resistance in colonial Nigerian history.

04

Legacy and Impact

Though the uprising was met with brutality, it forced the British to reconsider their administrative strategies. The system of warrant chiefs was largely dismantled, replaced by community councils that better reflected indigenous governance systems. More importantly, the Women's War inspired future anti-colonial movements across Nigeria, laying the groundwork for the eventual end of British colonial rule.

The Women's War also highlighted the central role of women in political activism. It served as a powerful reminder that colonial narratives often ignored the critical contributions of women in shaping African history.

05

Cultural Reflection



An Igbo wooden wheeled boat with the figure of an enlarged woman nursing a child surrounded by smaller figures who appear to form her entourage. The carving has been taken out of its original context. Photo: Yale University.

The photograph of the Igbo wooden wheeled boat, featuring an enlarged woman nursing a child surrounded by smaller figures, symbolizes the nurturing yet powerful role of women in Igbo society. Though the artifact has been removed from its original context, its presence in institutions like Yale University speaks to the enduring legacy of Igbo women's leadership and resilience.

Igbafe, P. A. (1979). Western Ibo Society and Its Resistance to British Rule. *The Journal of African History*, 20(3), 427-441.

Van Allen, J. (1972). Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 6(2), 165-181.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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