

ABA WOMEN'S RIOT OF 1929: A REVOLUTION THAT RESHAPED COLONIAL GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the Aba women's riot of 1929, a revolutionary that reshaped colonial governance in Nigeria. The Women's riot is acknowledged as one of the most pivotal anti-colonial uprisings within Nigeria's historical context, marking a vital turning point in the evolution of indigenous resistance and the enhancement of women's political power. The paper delves into the historical circumstances that precipitated the uprising and examines the reasons for classifying the Aba Women's Riot as a revolution, as well as its effects on the reconfiguration of colonial governance in Nigeria. Employing a historical methodology, this research conducts a qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources. The findings indicate that the riot transcended mere protest, functioning instead as a coordinated socio-political upheaval that forced the colonial administration to reconsider its governance frameworks, taxation systems, and gender dynamics. The paper concludes by asserting that the Aba Women's Riot served as a significant catalyst that exposed the deficiencies of colonial policies and acted as a precursor to subsequent nationalist movements in Nigeria.

Keywords: Women Riots, Revolution, Governance.

Introduction

The Aba Women's Riot of 1929, also referred to as the Women's War, stands as one of the most significant episodes of resistance in Nigeria's colonial history. Sparked in southeastern Nigeria, particularly in the provinces of Owerri and Calabar, this movement was not a spontaneous outburst but a well-organized and coordinated protest by thousands of Igbo and Ibibio women against colonial administrative injustices.¹ The women's uprising was primarily triggered by the rumor that colonial authorities intended to impose direct taxation on women, an extension of the already detested male taxation system introduced in 1928.² However, beneath this immediate cause lay deeper grievances such as the loss of traditional authority structures, the exploitation of rural communities by warrant chiefs, and the disruption of indigenous socio-economic systems under British indirect rule.³

Before the uprising, the British colonial government had introduced a system of administration that relied heavily on warrant chiefs (men handpicked by colonial officers) to act as intermediaries. This alien administrative structure ignored the precolonial political balance in Igbo society, where governance was often decentralized and women played vital roles in local decision-making through institutions like the *Umuada* (women born in the community) and *Umunwayi Obodo* (women of the community).⁴ By relegating women to the background and concentrating authority in male warrant chiefs, colonial rule undermined gender complementarity and created conditions ripe for social unrest.⁵ Thus, the Aba Women's Riot emerged not merely as a protest against taxation but as a broader assertion of women's agency, dignity, and right to participate in governance or decision that will eventually affect them.⁶

While historians often emphasize the Aba Women's Riot economic and gender dimensions, fewer studies have explored its long-term political implications particularly how it forced the colonial administration to reevaluate policies of indirect rule, taxation, and native authority.⁷ In the same vein, numerous studies have investigated this topic, however, there remains a lack of clarity regarding why the Aba Women's Riot is classified as a revolutionary event considering the fact that from 1925 to 1927, the Eastern Nigeria experienced three significant uprisings that reflected the populace's growing discontent with colonial governance. The initial two uprisings which occurred in 1925, were referred to as the Dancing Women Movement and the Calabar Market Riots while the third one known as the Spirit Movement, happened in 1927. Furthermore, there other female-led anti-colonial protests within the period under review, such as the Egba Women's Revolt in 1918 in Abeokuta, the Ijèbú Women's Tax Protest in the early 1920s, and the Warri Women's Protest from 1927 to 1928.⁸ However, none of these protests have attained the same level of notoriety as the Aba Women's Riot of 1929. This paper aims to bridge these knowledge gaps by investigating the Aba Women's Riot of 1929: A Revolution that Reshaped Colonial Governance in Nigeria. In furtherance of the foregoing, the following will be discussed: Historical background of the Aba Women's Riot of 1929, Aba women's riot in the lens of a revolution, recipe for revolution and revolution that reshaped colonial governance.

Historical Background of the Aba Women's Riot of 1929

The origins of the riot can be linked to the British implementation of indirect rule in southeastern Nigeria following the amalgamation of 1914. In contrast to northern Nigeria, which had established centralized emirates, Igbo society functioned through decentralized political structures grounded in kinship relations, age cohorts, and village assemblies. The British authorities introduced the system of warrant chiefs, appointing individuals to chief positions who frequently lacked traditional legitimacy. These warrant chiefs exploited their power, engaging in practices such as excessive taxation, corruption, and manipulation of the judicial system. Consequently, this led to significant discontent among the populace, particularly among women who found themselves excluded from the colonial administrative framework. In the decade of the 1920s, the colonial administration in southeastern Nigeria implemented a system of direct taxation that primarily targeted male inhabitants as a means of generating revenue to support governmental operations. This significant policy change marked a pivotal moment in the colonial relationship between the authorities and the local populace, as it introduced a new fiscal burden on men who were already facing the challenges of colonial rule.⁹

As the years progressed into 1929, unsettling rumors began to circulate among the local communities, suggesting the imminent introduction of a similar tax that would extend to women as well. During the period under review, women in southeastern Nigeria played an indispensable role within both local and regional trade networks, serving as vital economic agents in markets and commerce. Their economic engagement was crucial not only for their families but also for the broader community, as they contributed significantly to the livelihoods and sustenance of their households. The prospect of taxation on women posed a direct threat to their economic autonomy and independence, potentially undermining their ability to participate effectively in these trade networks that had traditionally afforded them a degree of agency and financial stability. Compounding these anxieties were the adverse economic conditions brought about by a global economic downturn that resulted in plummeting prices for palm produce, a staple commodity in the region. This decline in prices created heightened economic strain and exacerbated the already precarious living conditions for many families. As the cost of living increased and the financial viability of local traders diminished, the fear of additional taxation on women, alongside the struggles caused by falling commodity prices, intensified discontent within the community. Consequently, the combination of these factors which includes the introduction of male taxation, the looming threat of additional taxes on women, and the overall economic distress served to elevate tensions among the populace. This environment of fear and discontent laid fertile ground for the emergence of mass protests. These protests would eventually become a significant manifestation of resistance against colonial policies, as the people of southeastern Nigeria sought to assert their rights and preserve their economic independence in the face of oppressive taxation practices.¹⁰

The immediate cause of the riot occurred in November 1929 in Oloko in present day Ikwuano, Abia State. A colonial official named Chief Okego following directives from the British administration began to assess the taxable wealth of the inhabitants of the village, and in the process counted women, children and domestic animals. Rumour quickly spread that the counting of women was the preparation for the taxation of women based on the fact that the poll tax of 1927 had been preceded by a census. A widow, Nwanyeruwa, resisted the counting and challenged the official's authority. Like a wild fire, the rumour about the impending taxation of women spread, and soon the women of Aba and Owerri, Calabar and Opopo Divisions were up in arms against the British Administration and Native Authorities. In the ensuing riot, shops were looted, native courts and their documents were burnt down and the warrant chiefs were attacked. The protest quickly spread through traditional communication networks among women, mobilizing thousands across the region.¹¹ Women employed traditional methods of protest such as sitting on a man, which involved singing, dancing, chanting, and public shaming of officials. Tens of thousands of women participated, demanding the removal of corrupt warrant chiefs and the cancellation of any plans to tax women.¹²

The colonial government responded with force, deploying police and soldiers who opened fire on protesting women and killed many of them and also left many wounded. Despite the repression, the revolt achieved significant outcomes: the proposed taxation of women was abandoned, several warrant chiefs were removed, and reforms were introduced in the Native Court system. The event marked a turning point in anti-colonial resistance and demonstrated the political importance of women in Nigerian history.¹³ After the riot, an official Commission of Inquiry was set up to investigate the causes and make recommendations. Recall that in 1925, similar women protest although not as violent had been organized in almost the same areas. In that protest, bands of women marched up and down denouncing such innovations like British currency, native courts and demanding a return to the custom of the past.

Aba Women's Riot of 1929 in the Lens of a Revolution

A revolution can be defined as a significant and often widespread movement characterized by a collective uprising of individuals or groups who seek to challenge and overthrow existing systems of governance, social order, or economic structures. This phenomenon is typically marked by a rapid and transformative shift that results in profound changes within society. Importantly, revolutions are not merely sporadic outbursts of unrest, they

represent coordinated efforts by large segments of the population striving for fundamental alterations in the political, social, or economic landscape.¹⁴ The defining feature of a revolution lies in its capability to achieve substantial and lasting results within a relatively brief period following its inception. This swift transformation is often driven by a confluence of various factors, including widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, the mobilization of grassroots support, and the emergence of charismatic leadership. As such, revolutions frequently reflect deeply entrenched grievances that have accumulated over time, culminating in a critical mass of dissent that demands immediate action.

Through the lens of historical analysis, one can observe that revolutions have played a pivotal role in shaping human civilization, as they often herald the onset of new ideologies, governance structures, and societal norms. A notable example is the French Revolution, which not only upended monarchy and established republican ideals, but also inspired democratic movements worldwide. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that revolutions are not only a response to current conditions but also an expression of the collective aspirations for a more equitable and just society.

The uprising involved women from different part of the eastern region. It was not a local disturbance but a coordinated grassroots movement involving Igbo, Ibibio, and other women's networks.¹⁵ In view of this, the Aba Women Riot is seen as a revolutionary event due to the rapid and significant alterations it prompted in colonial policies within a short period. This uprising, serves as a striking illustration of the power exerted by a collective grassroots movement, particularly among women, in challenging the existing colonial framework.¹⁶ The swift transformation of policies following the riot reflects not only the immediate response of colonial authorities to the insistent demands of the protesters but also highlights the broader socio-political contexts of the time. Women's participation in this revolt was driven by a convergence of long-standing grievances, including oppressive taxation and the imposition of indirect rule that undermined traditional leadership structures. The efficacy of the protests can be attributed to the organized nature of the women's groups involved, who displayed remarkable solidarity and determination in their quest for justice.

Thus, the Aba Women Riot stands as a significant milestone in the history of anti-colonial movements, revealing the profound impact that localized disputes can have on the trajectory of colonial governance. It underscores the capabilities of marginalized groups, particularly women, to mobilize effectively against systemic oppression and to demand substantial reforms in policies that directly affect their lives. The subsequent changes in colonial administration following the uprising illustrate the potential for revolution born from grassroots activism, marking a pivotal moment in the struggle against colonial rule in Nigeria.¹⁷ The Aba Women's as a revolution because it transformed colonial administrative structures, reasserted indigenous political traditions, and redefined women's political position in Nigeria. It was not simply a riot but a revolutionary moment that reshaped colonial governance and gender politics in Eastern Nigeria. This is because a revolution must achieve far-reaching and fundamental changes in socio-economic landscape within a short time. In the light of this the women uprising aligns with the fundamental principles that define a revolution.

Recipe for Revolution

The British colonial administration in Nigeria predominantly implemented a governance model known as indirect rule, a system that is intricately linked to the policies and theories of Lord Frederick Lugard, the British colonial administrator who played a crucial role in shaping Nigeria's colonial governance policies. This particular system of governance operated by leveraging existing traditional authorities, enabling colonial officials to maintain control over vast territories with a limited direct intervention. This approach, however, encountered significant challenges when applied to the diverse sociopolitical structures within Nigerian society. In northern Nigeria, the structure of society was characterized by centralized emirates, wherein power and authority were consolidated under singular leadership, facilitating the effective implementation of indirect rule. In stark contrast, the societal organization of the Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria was fundamentally decentralized. The Igbo social framework was composed of village assemblies, councils of elders, lineage heads, and age-grade institutions, each possessing distinct and autonomous authority. This decentralized nature of Igbo society posed a significant challenge to the British colonial administration, which was accustomed to dealing with more hierarchical structures.

To exert control over the Igbo population and to attempt to replicate the success of the indirect rule system observed in the north, colonial officials introduced a contentious mechanism known as the warrant chief system. Under this framework, colonial authorities appointed individuals as chiefs who often lacked genuine traditional legitimacy and community support. These warrant chiefs were usually individuals who were selected for their compliance with colonial interests rather than their outstanding or acceptability within their communities. The resultant power dynamics were fraught with complications, as many of these appointed leaders became notorious for the abuse of their authority. They imposed excessive fines, engaged in judicial corruption, and enacted policies that were unpopular and detrimental to their constituents' welfare.

The culmination of these tensions was vividly illustrated during the Women's War of 1929, an event that highlighted the contradictions inherent in the application of centralized authority over a society fundamentally organized around decentralized governance. The Women's War was initiated in response to the grievances surrounding the warrant chief system and the imposition of unjust taxation and policies that disregarded traditional norms. This significant uprising underscored the vulnerabilities and failures of the indirect rule approach, particularly in southeastern Nigeria, where the deep-rooted customs and institutional structures of the Igbo people resisted foreign imposition. The British colonial strategy of indirect rule, while initially perceived as an effective means of governance, ultimately revealed its inadequacies when faced with the complexities of Nigeria's diverse ethnic and social landscapes. The experiences of the Igbo people, characterized by resistance to imposed authority and the consequences of maladministration, serve as a critical lens through which the limitations of colonial rule in the region can be examined.¹⁸

By the late 1920s, the economic landscape was increasingly characterized by hardship and adversity, a trend that was markedly exacerbated by the plummeting prices of palm produce, which were fundamentally affected by the prevailing global economic depression. This period of financial instability not only strained the livelihoods of many individuals but also placed considerable pressure on the existing colonial government. In response to the burgeoning fiscal crisis, the colonial authorities had already implemented a system of direct taxation aimed primarily at men, and were actively investigating additional potential sources of revenue, indicative of their urgent need to stabilize the colonial economy. Amidst these developments, unsettling rumors began to circulate, suggesting that the colonial government was contemplating imposing taxation on women. This prospect was particularly alarming given that women played a dominant role in local and regional trade, serving as essential agents in the economic fabric of their communities. The fear that taxation would extend to women not only threatened their economic autonomy but also jeopardized the intricate trading networks that they had meticulously established over time. In the context of Igbo political culture, the imposition of taxes without prior consultation was perceived as a profound symbol of political oppression and subjugation. This sentiment resonated deeply with women, who were acutely aware that such fiscal measures could significantly impact their livelihoods and diminish their autonomy within the economic sphere. As a direct response to these oppressive fiscal policies, women began to engage in acts of economic resistance, which subsequently evolved into a broader form of political protest. In doing so, they expressed their dissent against colonial rule and asserted their rights to both participate in and influence the economic and political systems that governed their lives.¹⁹

Revolution that Reshaped Colonial Governance

The inciting event that precipitated significant social unrest within the region of Oloko can be traced back to a specific incident involving a widow named Nwanyeruwa. This incident occurred when Nwanyeruwa actively resisted the attempts of a census official who sought to enumerate her property. Her refusal was not merely an act of personal defiance but was widely interpreted by the local community as a prelude to an impending taxation system that would disproportionately burden the already vulnerable members of society, particularly women and the economically disadvantaged.

In response to this perceived threat, a wave of mobilization transpired, uniting women across the broader geographical regions of Aba, Owerri, and Calabar. The women uprising spread across Owerri, Calabar, Opobo, Umuhia, Aba, and other parts of Eastern Nigeria, mobilizing over 10,000 women. This rapid coalition was propelled by existing market networks and kinship ties, demonstrating the ways in which social structures can be leveraged for collective action. The women employed traditional protest methods that had deep cultural roots in their society, most notably the practice known as 'sitting on a man.' This form of protest not only involved the use of songs and ridicule aimed at the officials who represented the oppressive structures but also included the strategic encirclement of the homes and offices of these authorities. Such tactics were emblematic of a recognized pre-colonial sanction directed at male figures who transgressed established communal norms and guidelines. Importantly, the revolt that emerged from these actions should not be misconstrued as an unsystematic or chaotic uprising. Rather, it was firmly anchored in the indigenous political culture of the time, which provided both the rationale and the framework for collective dissent. This incident reflects a nuanced understanding of power dynamics and resistance that exists within various cultural contexts, emphasizing that such movements are often deeply rooted in historical and societal precedents rather than arising from mere spontaneity or disorder. Thus, it becomes evident that the actions taken by Nwanyeruwa and her compatriots were a direct manifestation of a long-standing tradition of resistance and communal solidarity, illustrating the complexities of social movements in pre-colonial societies.²⁰

In response to the escalating unrest, the colonial administration opted to employ military force as a means of suppressing the dissenting protests. Reports indicate that both local police forces and military troops were dispatched to the scenes, where they confronted the demonstrators with lethal measures. According to official statistics, this violent confrontation that lasted for two months resulted in the tragic deaths of fifty five women while 50 women were wounded²¹ but unofficial report estimated that the death tolls were in thousands including children and men, highlighting the severe implications of the administration's coercive tactics. The ensuing chaos

and loss of life spurred the authorities to establish a Commission of Inquiry, aimed at comprehensively investigating the events that led to such profound societal turmoil.²² The findings of this investigative body revealed a multifaceted picture of unrest, pointing to the significant role played by abuses perpetrated by warrant chiefs who exercised considerable power within the colonial framework. Furthermore, the Inquiry concluded that the insensitivity of administrative policies, which failed to consider the interests and grievances of the local populace, exacerbated the tensions and contributed to the outbreak of violence.²³ This acknowledgment marked a critical moment in the colonial administration's approach, as it underscored the need for a more nuanced understanding of the underlying issues that had fueled the conflict, prompting a re-evaluation of governance and community relations in the colonial context.²⁴

It led to administrative reforms and governance restructuring. The Women's War, a significant event in the history of colonial governance, brought about a series of transformative reforms that had lasting implications on the structures of power and authority within the affected communities. First of all the Commission of enquiry condemned the indirect rule and recommended a reorganization of the system to base more closely on the custom of the people. Consequently, this led to the anthropological survey of the area and the reorganization which followed was based on the natural social organization of the people. Another notable change was the removal or substantial weakening of various warrant chiefs, individuals who had previously held considerable influence and power within the local governance system. In conjunction with this reconfiguration of leadership, there was a systematic reorganization and increased oversight of Native Courts, which had often functioned with a degree of autonomy that was not always emblematic of the interests of the local women or communities. The restructuring of these courts aimed to enhance their fairness and impartiality, ensuring that the voices of women, who had been historically marginalized in legal proceedings, were heard and considered in judicial matters.²⁵

Moreover, the Women's War led to the suspension of previously proposed plans to impose taxes on women. This shift in fiscal policy reflected a growing recognition of the economic contributions of women and highlighted the importance of not further burdening a demographic that had already been subjected to significant hardships. The cessation of these tax plans was, therefore, not merely a financial decision but also recognition of women's rights within the colonial context. In response to the unfolding social dynamics, there was also the introduction of more representative advisory structures, which sought to bring diverse voices into the decision-making processes that affected women's lives. These structures aimed to provide a platform for women's concerns and needs, thereby facilitating a more inclusive approach to governance that allowed for the incorporation of perspectives that had previously been overlooked.²⁶

The Women's revolution resulted in greater oversight by colonial officers, who recognized the necessity for more direct engagement with local communities in order to maintain order and alleviate the tensions that had arisen. This increased oversight was indicative of a shift towards a more participatory form of colonial administration, which acknowledged the complexities of local governance and the importance of addressing the grievances of the populace. The reforms instigated by the Women's War not only altered the immediate political landscape but also paved the way for a re-evaluation of women's roles within the broader societal framework. These changes reflected a critical juncture in colonial governance, where the authority of traditional leaders was contested, legal systems were scrutinized for their fairness, and a more representative and engaged form of administration began to emerge. Although colonial rule continued, governance in southeastern Nigeria became more cautious and bureaucratically supervised. The revolt thus reshaped the operation of indirect rule and forced the British administration to adapt its methods.²⁷

Conclusion

This study analyzed the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 as a pivotal movement that transformed colonial governance in southeastern Nigeria. It delved into the historical backdrop of the uprising, highlighting the implementation of indirect rule, the enforcement of warrant chiefs, and the increasing economic pressures stemming from taxation. The research further explored the immediate triggers of the protest along with the indigenous mobilization strategies employed by women, demonstrating that the movement was organized, strategic, and deeply rooted in established political customs. Furthermore, the paper assessed the colonial authorities' response, which involved repression, the formation of commissions of inquiry, and subsequent administrative reforms. Through evaluating both the short-term and long-lasting effects of the revolt, the study concluded that the Aba Women's Riot was not merely a protest against taxation, but rather a revolutionary shift that redefined women's political agency and highlighted the fundamental weaknesses of colonial governance in Nigeria. The findings suggest that a revolution is necessary to achieve substantial and fundamental change in the socio-economic landscape within a relatively short period. Importantly, the women's riot met all the criteria to be recognized as a revolution. The Aba women's riot to a reasonable extent inspired the nationalistic movements that contributed immensely in hastening Nigeria's independence.

Endnotes

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