

Women's War of 1929

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The Aba Women's Riot of 1929, as it was named in British colonial records, is more aptly considered a strategically executed anti-colonial revolt organized by women to redress social, political, and economic grievances. The protest encompassed women from six ethnic groups (Ibibio, Andoni, Ogoni, Bonny, Opobo, and Igbo) of southeastern Nigeria and was named by locals *Ogu Umunwanyi* (in Igbo) or *Ekong Iban* (in Ibibio), the "women's war." The confluence of global events in southeastern Nigeria in the late 1920s gave rise to women's dissatisfaction and ultimate action. A worldwide economic depression caused a reduction in the price of palm oil (a chief export of the Nigerian economy), rising unemployment, and increased school fees and prices for goods. The unceasing British demand for forced labor, increased taxation on the local population, corruption by local administrators, trade restrictions, and newly assessed levies and other fees on women, without corresponding benefits, gave rise to frustration and hostility among women's groups. Having no place within the colonial structure to air their grievances, they took to the roads, utilizing precolonial practices and political structures to demand a hearing before a colonial administration that ignored them.

As early as 1925 women were increasingly active in protests and in the anti-colonial struggles that erupted from various quarters. The 1925 market women's riot in Calabar province protested imposed market tolls on commonly owned land, staging anti-government propaganda dances and protest songs to contest taxes and forced labor, while spiritual movements gave women a voice to express dissatisfaction with colonial reality.

In 1928, amidst colonial promises to improve roads, schools, and court buildings and to end forced labor practices, taxes were collected for the first time among the Ibibio, Ibo, and Delta peoples of southeastern Nigeria. People paid the taxes, albeit somewhat reluctantly, assuming this was a one-time fee for the promised improvements. In 1929 when it was realized that tax collection was to be continuous and that women and their personal property were to be counted and taxed, violent protest erupted.

The first outbreaks of violence occurred at Ukam, Opobo Division, when, failing to collect

expected tax revenues, the local administrator, R. K. Floyer, demanded property be reassessed. He ordered farms measured, yam heaps and domestic animals counted, and the number of doors and fireplaces in a man's house calculated. He also directed that women's cooking pots and utensils be counted along with women's belongings, including their clothing. Women considered this counting and recording of their personal belongings an egregious intrusion into their private lives.

On November 23, 1929, after months of preparations and discussion women mobilized against dehumanizing and humiliating behavior enacted upon them by colonial representatives. Women protested by blockading the road from Ikot Abasi Township to Aba. They knocked down telegraph polls and severed wires. Women leaders met with local administrators but when these talks failed, women attacked the Essene Native Court, releasing prisoners detained there. Calling upon the traditional practice of women's protest, all women in the local area participated. Before long, rumors of British taxation of women and protests against it had spread to surrounding towns and countryside.

Colonial administrators, failing to understand women's traditional practices and trade and communication networks, dismissed the first actions as crazy acts by hysterical women. In multiple provinces women set fire to Native Court buildings, some destroyed property, chanted threatening songs, and organized customary "sitting on" to embarrass African warrant chiefs who aided colonial administrations or who were corrupt. They did no physical harm to any persons. Despite police reinforcements and additional troops being called in, the Women's War could not be stopped. On December 13, 1929, a British medical officer, frightened by protesting women, ran over two women in his car and fled. This senseless act of violence angered the women, who damaged his car and chased him into the factory where he had run to hide. Women proceeded to damage local banks, post offices, and merchant stores associated with white foreigners. Within days, groups of women from 400 to 4,000 strong, wearing palm leaves, were attacking government buildings and Native Courts in Ikot Ekpene, Utu Etim Ekpo, Abak, and Opobo. More than 15,000 women in southeastern Nigeria were at war.

British reaction was merciless: soldiers shot protesting women, women were massacred through

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southeastern Nigeria, and entire villages were burned as collective punishment.

SEE ALSO: Nigeria, 20th-Century Protest and Revolution; Women and National Liberation in Africa

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