

THE LAND HAS CHANGED

History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria

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CHAPTER FOUR

PEASANTS, DEPRESSION, AND RURAL REVOLTS

I never saw women demonstrating in that manner before. I have seen them play many a time but this was obviously entirely different and there was no doubt whatever that they were out for trouble.
– Henry Alexander Miller, *Aba Commission of Inquiry*, 1930

I wish to tell you what made the women move about and remain here for about five days. We do not want women to pay tax and we want the tax on men to be abolished. – 129th witness, *Oguta, Aba Commission of Inquiry Notes of Evidence*, 1930, 278

The market is our strength. When the market is spoiled, we are useless. – Witness, *Aba Commission of Inquiry Notes of Evidence*

James Scott's *Weapon of the Weak* outlines why open peasant revolts have been rare and "everyday forms of resistance make no headlines."¹ According to Scott, peasant actions, where they occur, are often limited in scope and lack a collective consciousness and well-outlined plans for action. They are also characterized by informal structure and a lack of direct confrontation with authority.² Yet, whatever forms of consciousness have developed are rooted in what Scott described in his earlier study in Burma and Vietnam as the "moral economy of the peasant."³ This moral economy, and the system of values that it contains, explains why peasant revolts are irrevocably linked to issues of

peasant subsistence and survival. African peasants have shared values similar to those of their counterparts in other parts of the developing world, even though Goran Hyden claims that the poor sectors of the population in Africa “are much less aware of their exploitation than their counterparts in Asia and Latin America.”⁴ But have African peasants in truth been less conscious of their exploitation than their Asian and Latin American counterparts?

This chapter explores the economic roots and the consequences of these revolts and protests. It traces the responses of the local population to the declining price of palm products and the introduction of direct taxation in 1928 and shows how these events became part of local political discourse. In doing so, the chapter places the economic and social conditions of Igboland in this period within the context of the political restructuring of the indirect rule system and the worldwide depression heralded by the slump in 1929.

Indeed, agrarian concerns remained the major source of rural protest in colonial Africa. Even recent competing claims to the state in contemporary Africa have been linked to rural consciousness. Contrary to the urban-centred model of war proposed by many scholars, Paul Richards has argued that the roots of the recent Liberia and Sierra Leone conflicts, for example, were agrarian and that these conflicts arose from rural poverty.⁵ The Igbo provide an important example of rural people in colonial Africa protesting when their subsistence came under threat from colonial from colonial policies.

Rural Igbo men and women were certainly aware of the impact of state regulations, controlled prices, and market forces on their income. They did something about it by protesting against colonial policies in a variety of ways. From the 1920s onward, and for good reasons, Igbo farmers and petty traders frequently linked their declining fortunes in the palm oil trade to the policies of European officials and the activities of foreign trading firms. Subtle acts of resistance such as adulteration of produce and refusal to pay taxes were employed by rural men and women in Igboland to address their concerns.⁶

But Igbo farmers and traders also adopted strategies that included direct confrontations with colonial authorities. These confrontations, which were mostly organized by women, became very frequent from the mid-1920s onward. The articulation and framing of these protests show that Igbo women were not passive recipients of change but articulated their interests and acted in the interest of their class. Because the actions taken by Igbo women had

long-term political consequences, and because those actions were designed by them to protect their own interests, the women who articulated these movements among the Igbo would emerge as “peasant intellectuals,” in Steven Feierman’s appropriate classification of such groups in his study of Tanzania.⁷

In Nigeria, the rural population did not accept the impacts of colonial policies and the depression on their lives with passive resignation. The major peasant revolts that occurred in Igbo society during the colonial period were directly linked to the oil palm industry. The local way of life, which had been tied to the oil trade, became very precarious due to the depression in the global demand for oil toward the end of the 1920s and the periodic decline in prices that occurred afterward. The centrality of the palm oil trade to the income of many rural households and the consciousness among rural peasants that the colonial state, its agencies, and the European trading firms had means of exerting hegemonic control over their lives and the rural economy led to discontent among rural people.⁸

One important example of the rural protest that occurred was the Women’s War that broke out in Owerri and Calabar provinces in 1929. Although not all of Igboland participated in the 1929 revolt, the economic and sociopolitical conditions that gave rise to it were not limited to the areas that participated in the revolt. The 1929 revolt was the most violent, but it was neither the first nor the last protest directed against the colonial masters that was rooted in the rural agrarian economy.

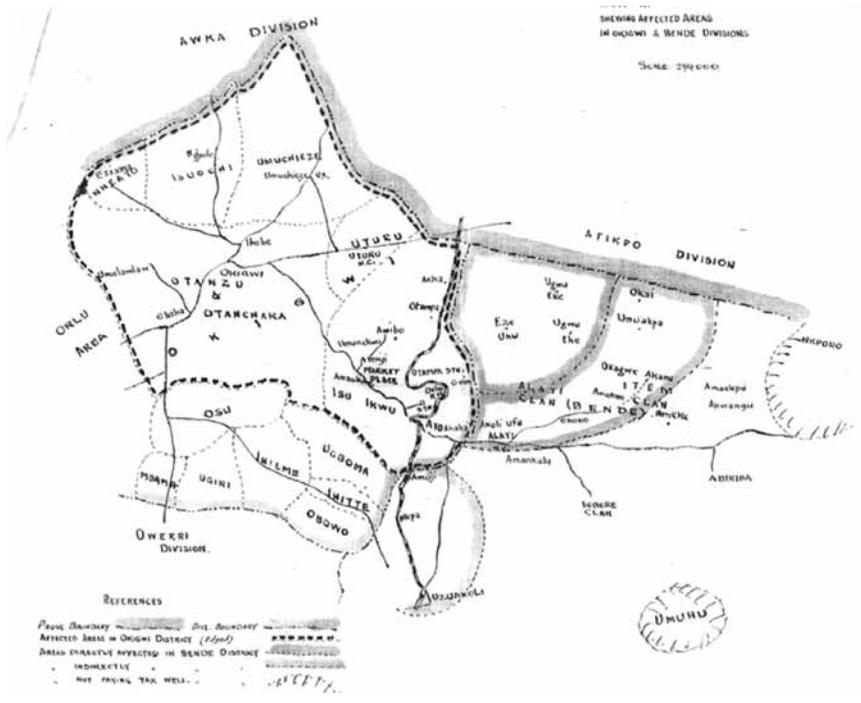
THE 1929 WOMEN’S REVOLT

On 23 November 1929, a remarkable incident occurred at Oloko, a rural community in Bende Division in colonial eastern Nigeria. Nwanyereuwa, a rural peasant woman, challenged the foundation of British authority in Nigeria by her simple act of refusing to be counted for the purpose of an impending colonial tax. The revolt, styled the “Aba Riot” by the British and the “Women’s War” (*Ogu Umunwanyi*) by women, quickly spread to other parts of the Owerri and Calabar provinces, turning into an all-out revolt against all aspects of the political establishment and the European trading companies. Thousands

of ordinary women took matters into their own hands and stormed colonial administrative centres and later, the important commercial city of Aba, which housed several European trading companies. They took on the warrant chiefs appointed by the government, demanding their caps (the most important symbol of their authority).

The impetus for the 1929 Women's Revolt stems from the perceived deficiency of the enumeration exercise in April 1927, upon which the 1928 tax was based. The 1927 assessments had been based on what an Assistant District Officer Captain J. Cook of Bende District described as "incomplete and probably inaccurate" information.⁹ In September 1929, Captain Cooks was sent to take over the Bende division temporarily from the district officer, Mr. Weir, until the return of Captain Hill from leave in November. Upon taking over, Cook found the original nominal rolls for taxation inadequate because they did not include details of the number of wives, children, and livestock in each household. Cook set about to revise the nominal roll, announcing the intent to a few chiefs in Oloko native Court; the counting began on or about 14 October 1929. Although this data was not required for accurate assessment of the tax rate on the men, colonial officials saw this information as necessary for the annual statistics and for accurately "gauging the wealth of the individual and community."¹⁰ Consequently, when in 1929 District Officer Cook proceeded to elicit nominal rolls that would gather such information, instructions were given to the *ezeala* (traditional leaders) in some cases and to members of the native court tribunals to provide suitable individuals for the counting.

About five towns had been reassessed without incident but then came the incident at Oloko. But the incident that led to the revolt began when Nwanyeruwa, the wife of an Oloko man, was approached by a local school-teacher Mark Emeruwa, who had come to assess her possessions for the purpose of estimating income tax. A quarrel broke out between Nwayereuwa and Mark, who had been appointed by Chief Okugo, the warrant chief of Oloko, to carry out the enumeration exercise. After this incident, the women of Oloko went to Okugo to demand explanations on why women were being assessed for taxation. When Okugo did not give a satisfactory explanation, the women of Oloko and neighbouring towns assembled at Okugo's house on Sunday, 24 November 1929, and employed women's traditional protest



A sketch of the areas affected by the Women's Revolt in Okigwe and Bende Divisions (PRO, CO 583/22).

strategy described as “sitting on a man.”¹¹ This strategy involved gathering in his house, calling out insults, and sometimes exposing their nakedness to humiliate him. Tempers flared when Okugo ordered his servants to drive the women away. The ensuing protest drew thousands of women from different parts of Owerri Province. The women’s protest would come to constitute the most significant challenge to British authority in Nigeria. The protest spread to most of the Owerri and Calabar provinces, stretching from Okigwe in the north to Andoni close to the Kwa Ibo River (in the south), and from Owerri on the west to Umon and Itu on the Cross River (east). The revolt left death and destruction in its wake, including the killing of fifty-three women, the destruction of a large amount of public and private property, and the looting of European-owned companies at Imo River, Aba, Mbawsi, and Amata.¹²

Scholars of Igbo Studies and other commentators have written more on the 1929 Women’s Revolt than on any other single event in the history of

colonial Nigeria. The early writings on the revolt centred on two important elements. The first is the general conditions prevailing in this part of the colony, relative to other parts of colonial Nigeria at the time. The second is the role, place, and condition of women in the colonial context, including the exclusion of women from colonial institutions. Sylvia Leith-Ross's seminal work, *African Women* (1939), addressed the above issues.¹³ Margery Perham, Harry Gailey, and Adiele Afigbo saw the revolt as an early expression of African nationalism. U. C. Onwuteaka, like Afigbo, linked the women's revolt to the implementation of indirect rule in Eastern Nigeria, which they argued was foreign to existing political structures.¹⁴ As I will discuss later in this chapter, as far as rural people were concerned, the impact of the political conditions in Igboland in 1929 was directly related to the economic conditions that gave rise to the revolt.

Feminist scholars have also found the revolt fertile ground for a gendered analysis of the colonial encounter and the visibility of the women of eastern Nigeria. Most have drawn on the revolt to assert women's autonomy and independence in pre-colonial times, the threat that colonialism posed to that autonomy, and the exhibition of female agency, as much as women's resistance to colonialism.¹⁵ One of the early feminist commentators on the 1929 revolt, Judith Van Allen, portrayed the revolt primarily as a political protest in which women employed a feminist method of protest, "sitting on a man," to regain their pre-colonial political roles.¹⁶ Nkiru Nzegwu suggests that the revolt was an attempt by the women to prevent the erosion of their rights and an expression of a female consciousness and solidarity.¹⁷ Women's political consciousness was directed toward the restoration of equitable gender relations, which had been disrupted by the colonial patriarchal social and political order.¹⁸

Scholars have also stressed the exceptionalism of Igbo women in colonial Nigeria. The women who struck back at the colonial authority in 1929, when they feared that their livelihood and lifestyle were in jeopardy, were not led by well-organized political leaders. Their actions were not framed around any major ideology, but their peasant roots informed their consciousness. Indeed, they were ordinary women who led routine lives as peasants, wives, and mothers. Their exceptionalism, in comparison to women elsewhere in colonial Nigeria, can be found in the structures of Igbo society and the significant

social and economic authority that women enjoyed in an area characterized by a high degree of complementarity of male and female roles. Even though the colonial institution did not include women, they were not completely disempowered. Their action in 1929 was perplexing to colonial officials and defied their expectations of women's behaviour. So, in the sixty years of contact between the Igbo and imperial Britain, the 1929 women's rebellion stands as the most notable of the many revolts and confrontations that characterized Anglo-Igbo relations and became important in redefining colonial policy in Nigeria.

While this incident has received considerable attention, we can draw conclusions that have hitherto been neglected, including its roots in the agrarian economy, by re-examining two important questions that are central to a re-evaluation of the incident. What were the causes of the revolt? And to what extent were they rooted in the crisis in the agrarian economy of the Igbo in the 1920s? The following sections will explore these questions, by emphasizing the rebellion's agrarian roots and by linking other political and social grievances raised by the agitators to the economic condition in the rural areas in this period.

THE AGRARIAN ECONOMY AND RURAL PROTEST

Few minor protests related to socio-economic conditions had occurred in Owerri Province prior to the 1929 Women's Revolt. But the declining economy in mid-1920s provided fertile ground for the protests that frequently occurred among the Igbo in this period. One was the 1925 women's "Dance Movement," which called for Europeans to leave. This movement came to be known as the *nwaobia la* (literally, strangers leave) protest. The protest started in Atta, in Okigwe Division of Owerri Province, as a result of a message said to have been received from God.¹⁹ The message included forbidding men from growing cassava, regarded as the women's prerogative. Parts of the demand included banning the use of European coins, fixing prices of foodstuffs in the markets, and regulating the cloth that women and girls wore.²⁰

The protest was anti-European and anti-Christian but its economic root was evident.²¹ The “dancing women” were aggrieved about the high cost of staples in the market. This movement soon affected most parts of Igboland. The women complained about the moral laxity that came in the wake of colonialism and Christianity. Undoubtedly, women regarded colonial administrators, the missionaries, and the European traders as one entity – foreigners whose intervention was responsible for economic and social upheaval. They demanded that there be “no more Government and no more Native Courts” and that there should be a return to “old customs.”²²

Officials like the senior Resident for Onitsha Province were clearly concerned about what the Resident described as bands of women “preaching their own ideas of desirable reforms.”²³ While officials interpreted the women’s movement as a disturbance of the peace and order, they failed to comprehend the level of discontent among the African population as a result of the low price for palm products and the general economic distress in the rural areas, which was also caused by the incessant price increases in basic staples. Despite being framed around traditional values and a rejection of what was seen as European, the 1925 revolt was rooted in the peasant economy.²⁴

Sporadic protests continued for the following two years, mostly related to the produce trade, particularly the introduction of produce inspection and a new system of buying produce by weight. In 1926, women protested against the low prices of palm oil and kernels as well as the new method of buying produce by weight, which replaced the old method of buying by measure. Most upsetting to rural farmers was the steep decline in revenue. In March 1927, palm oil sold for £20 per ton in parts of Owerri Province. By December, it had declined to about £18 per ton, although kernels sold for between £13 and £14 per ton in the same period.²⁵ In Aba District, the price had gone from 7 shillings to 5 shillings. Attempts by the buying agents and the international trading companies to control prices forced producers to demand price stabilization. Groups of women petitioned colonial officials and European firms asking for “fair prices” for palm produce. The demands made by Obowo women in a petition to the district officer of Okigwe District included fixing the price of one tin of palm oil at 10 shillings, and fixing the price of a bushel of palm kernels at 7 shillings. They threatened that “no products [will] be sold if these proposals are not granted.”²⁶

In these lean periods, the colonial authorities introduced new measures to stabilize and sustain the local economy – measures that rural people perceived as a threat to their own survival. The year 1928 also saw the introduction of produce inspection to improve the quality of produce. As the effect of produce inspections was increasingly felt among local producers, the discontent that grew, especially among women, culminated in petitions to colonial officials. Women complained about the inspection, which they regarded as undue interference with their trade.²⁷ In Okigwe Division, women complained about the interference of produce inspectors in local trade.²⁸ Some women suggested strikes and curtailing production of oil and kernels to force concessions and increase prices.²⁹ Certainly, withholding the supply of palm produce on a large scale could have had an impact on prices, since Eastern Nigeria supplied the bulk of the total world output. However, it was unclear how these protest measures could be implemented under a production system dominated by thousands of independent small-scale producers. The geographical spread of producing areas and the lack of rural organizational structure that could represent producers certainly precluded any outright cut in the supply of palm produce.

With their dwindling income, the region's farmers severely felt the impact of the depression years. The situation was probably worse for women because of their role in providing the bulk of household food needs. In subtle and less subtle ways, women in Owerri Province responded to the growing insecurity in the local economy. Caught by the fall in prices and insecure incomes, "women adulterated palm oil and cut back production and mixed palm oil with water to increase the volume," Eliazer Ihediwa remembers.³⁰ Producers partially cracked kernels, and mixed cracked kernels with uncracked ones, to increase the weight. Rural men and women grumbled against government, believing that officials and the European trading companies were responsible for the fall in the price of palm oil. This conviction and the impact of the depression on the local economy ultimately influenced the timing of the 1929 Women's Revolt.

THE DEPRESSION AND AGRARIAN ROOTS OF RURAL PROTEST

The world economy was in a depression toward the end of 1929 because the economic crisis that began with the crash of the American stock market in 1929 had dire effects all over the world. Obviously, as the most severe peacetime economic crisis of the twentieth century in colonial Africa, it hit the majority of rural Africans with great force.³¹ But the depression began much earlier for many in rural Africa. Among the Igbo, rural producers whose livelihood was dependent on the sale of palm produce and who had not enjoyed relatively good prices after the First World War, found themselves struggling to sell their oil and kernels even at very low prices. Although the depression in 1929 was by no means the first time farmers had experienced economic hardship and low prices for agricultural produce, it was clearly the worst period and the effects were more biting than at other bad times.

Even European traders were not spared the changing economic fortunes brought about by the depression. They had been directed by their parent companies in Europe to reduce their purchases of oil palm due to rising unemployment and an economic downturn in Europe. It was without much enthusiasm that the directive was implemented by European traders. Many had come to develop personal relationships with African traders who had dealt with them over time. One such trader who witnessed the social and political changes taking place and who sympathized profoundly with local traders severely affected by the slump and the decline in the demand for oil palm was Raymond Gore Clough. Clough, who had joined the Niger Company a year before the outbreak of the Women's Revolt, wrote in his memoir that "things reached their depth" in the last quarter of 1929. "Merchandise ordered long before," he remembered, "continued on its unhurried way to the beaches of Olomo, at the same time as the traders were taking less and less palm oil."³² The whole process was "bewildering to the Africans who saw the factories bulging with goods which the Whiteman had introduced to them, and which had become a need, and sometimes a craving."³³

Company agents in Eastern Nigeria were left to manage the impending crisis. Clough noted the "sullen looks on the faces of the hitherto friendly ca-

noemen as they went from factory to factory demanding better *Good For's* for their casks of oil.³⁴ Madam Umunna and Madam Osika, who had been regular customers at Megwana trading post at Olomo, expressed the sentiments of many local traders when they spoke to Alexander MacKay, the district agent of the Niger Company at Megwana beach:

Mackay, sah, we come to tell you they be plenty palaver for bush – the people no savvy why *Megwana, Sunflower*, and the other factories say ‘no’ for the palm oil when they done bring am when for long time you and all the Agents give plenty *Good For* [,] for palm oil. The people want salt, cloth and gin, but the factories no fit to give am now, though the people know you all get plenty for store – plenty, plenty!³⁵

The sale of produce was governed by the demand from the commercial companies. Although European agents did their best to explain the worldwide depression in simple terms, local traders did not follow such reasoning or comprehend how events outside their local environment could alter their fortunes drastically within a very short period. Many local traders believed that the slump was a manoeuvre by the traders and was linked to the tax imposed by the government. With the small size of the police presence, many European factories and trading stations were at the mercy of the women. Trading factories were closed as agents waited to see a resolution.

In Nigeria, as in many other colonial territories, the kinds of social programs that ameliorated the effects of the depression in Europe and the United States were lacking.³⁶ The Igbo region, which depended on a single product (palm oil), was even more vulnerable when the depression set in as it was subjected to severe price fluctuation and shortages.³⁷ Basden wrote about the precarious nature of the palm oil trade and local perceptions of the change in the economy during the depression: “The fluctuation of price for this raw product is a very disturbing element. The untaught native does not understand the vagaries of world markets and, when there is a slump, he is puzzled, not to say disgruntled, when he cannot sell his oil, or can only dispose of it at a low price.”³⁸ The depression left producers with “less money to spend, and that means that all prices depreciate proportionately,” Basden observed. At

the same time, “The cost of food has more than doubled” since the beginning of the twentieth century, while “there is a much wider variety of imported foodstuffs on sale.”³⁹ Households faced rising inflation. Consequently, the difficulty of meeting household food requirements increased women’s tasks in both agriculture and trade. The inability of many men to meet colonial tax obligations also increased the burden on women, who often paid taxes for their indigent spouses or sons.⁴⁰ These problems were compounded by the significant fall in produce prices. In fact, from 1929 onward, the value of palm produce trade dropped progressively, declining by over 70 per cent by 1935. This led to a substantial decrease in peasant incomes and government revenue.⁴¹ Thus, the condition was ripe for the revolt that would occur towards the end of 1929. We must then look for the causes of the revolt in 1929 in the economic crisis originating from the severe economic depression of the late 1920s, characterized by falling prices for export goods, especially palm oil and kernels. The tax incident only lit the fire on an already tense situation.

Raymond Clough wrote in his memoir that “By some queer twist of reasoning,” African women “associated the tax and the sudden recession in the trade with each other.”⁴² But their grievance was not an imaginary one. In Umuahia and surrounding districts, the price of mixed oil fell from 6 shillings and 11 pence in January 1929 to 5 shillings and 5 pence in December 1929. The price of edible oil fell from 7 shillings and 4 pence to 5 shillings and 11 pence in the same period. The palm kernel price fell from 5 shillings and 10 pence to 4 shillings and 5 pence in the same period.⁴³ Women’s responses and testimonies further substantiate the agrarian and economic root of the women’s protest. On 4 December 1929, for example, women gathered at Umuahia to discuss the low prices of produce. By this time, the price of a four-gallon tin of palm oil in Umuahia District had fallen from six shillings and eight pence to five shillings.

At the Aba Commission of Inquiry on the women’s revolt, women seized the opportunity whenever they were asked to state their grievances to put forward the low price of produce as one of them.⁴⁴ One women’s leader, Nwanwanyi, during a meeting with company agents at Umuahia said: “We wish to discuss the price of produce. We have no desire or intention of making any trouble but we have fixed a certain price for palm oil and kernels and if we get that we will bring them in. We want 10 shillings a [4 gallon] tin for oil and 9

shillings a bushel for kernels.⁴⁵ This paints a broad picture of the economic dilemma that rural households faced during the 1920s and 1930s as well as their actions to ameliorate their difficulties.

The effects of the slump were felt in some areas more than others. The Mbaise, Etiti, and Obowo areas of Owerri Province suffered the double effects of over-population and poor soil quality.⁴⁶ Intelligence reports from these areas confirmed the widespread dependency on palm oil exports by households and the general level of insecurity that came with the Great Depression.⁴⁷ The assistant district officer for Owerri Division reported that the principal products sold in this area in the 1930s were farm produce, palm produce, native baskets and clay pots, cloths, and other articles bought from European stores. The Ekwerazu and Ahiara clans were so poor in resources that they could not support themselves on foodstuffs produced locally. Yams and cassava were brought from Oratta and Ngwa areas to the south and west to supplement what they produced, noted colonial officials. The only commodities the people of Ekwerazu and Ahiara could offer to sell to the outside world were palm oil and kernels.⁴⁸ The threat to the palm oil economy, their sole means of livelihood, hit them hardest and threatened their very existence. N.A.P.G. MacKenzie, a British assistant district officer, noted the vulnerability of the Obowo clan in Okigwe Division. MacKenzie linked the inability of young men to marry and settle on the land to the poverty in the area. According to him, only half the women of marriageable age had husbands, and only half the men had wives.⁴⁹ MacKenzie's emphasis on marriage, which he saw as critical to the stability of local societies, suggests that the labour of women was very important in household production and economic stability. Women from such parts of Igboland would be active in the 1929 protests for obvious economic and social reasons.

To fully understand the timing of the revolt, however, we must situate it in the context of the political decision made to introduce direct taxation in 1928 and the impact of the taxation on household income.

THE RURAL ECONOMY, TAXATION, AND RURAL UPRISING

Taxes were used everywhere in colonial Africa to force peasants to produce more for the market or sell their labour.⁵⁰ Far from being the sign of humiliating servitude, taxation was seen by colonialists rather as proof that the African was “beginning to rise on the ladder of humanity ... [and had] entered upon the path of civilization.”⁵¹ In Nigeria, the 1917 Revenue Ordinance, which applied originally to the Northern Provinces, was first extended to parts of Southern Nigeria, including the old provinces of Abeokuta, Oyo, and parts of Benin (including Asaba Division), Ondo (1919 and 1920). By 1927, it was extended to the rest of the Southern Provinces.⁵² There was no income tax in eastern Nigeria until 1928. Since the cost of government was underwritten by export taxes, the need to finance government expenditure, including expenditure on public works, was an important reason to extend taxation to the Igbo country. For colonial officials, the answer lay in the introduction of taxes to be paid in European currency.

Taxation was seen as a corollary to the abolition of the slave trade, the civilizing mission of colonialism, and the uplifting of the dignity of the African population.⁵³ Frederick Lugard, first governor general of colonial Nigeria, and a main architect of British policy in tropical Africa, had also argued that direct taxation was of moral benefit to the people and would stimulate industry and production, promote the circulation of currency, and expand trade.⁵⁴ Another benefit of direct taxation, according to Lugard, was its “great importance as an acknowledgement of British Suzerainty.”⁵⁵ In Lugard’s judgment, contact between Africans and colonialists during the assessment and collection of taxes would bring African “tribes into touch with civilizing influences, and [would promote] confidence and appreciation of the aims of Government.”⁵⁶ The debate around taxation was viewed as a moral crusade and part of the “mission to civilize,” that would create and enforce native authority, lead to the evolution of “tribal” societies, and end internal slavery, which was still prevalent in this period.⁵⁷

When Sir Graeme Thomson became governor of Nigeria in 1925, it was apparent to him that some reorganization was necessary in order to intro-

duce direct taxation to the Colony of Lagos and the five provinces in the south where direct taxation had not been introduced. W.G.A. Ormsby-Gore, parliamentary under-secretary for the colonies, had emphasized the political and financial importance of taxation during his visit to West Africa in 1926:

It is important to remember that the acknowledgement of authority and the rendering of some kind of tax or gift to that authority are inseparable conceptions in the native mind. No African recognizes the authority of the chief to whom he does not pay something in cash, or kind, or in service, and any refusal to pay tax amounts to an actual or potential refusal to obey authority.⁵⁸

The justifications for taxation were contentious from the beginning for several reasons and did not sit well with many Africans who saw it as unwarranted interference in their lives. The local response was generally negative, although not coordinated between different parts of the protectorate. Considerable opposition came from local chiefs and leaders. The government was aware of the potential for conflict. The Legislative Council in Nigeria was asked to increase the police force by 500 men to curb any disturbances if the situation warranted such an action.⁵⁹ However, in Owerri Province, colonial officials reported that “the general attitude throughout the whole Province is most satisfactory.”⁶⁰

Other district officials were less optimistic. “Considerable difficulty is anticipated,” the Resident of Onitsha Province wrote in May 1928.⁶¹ “There is no active opposition, but the measure is very unpopular; escorts may be required for District Officers in the bush at first,” wrote colonial officials from Calabar Province.⁶² Deputy Governor Baddeley noted that there was considerable “agitation against the tax” from Awka.⁶³ However, considerable progress was made in the enumeration exercise in Awka until November 1927, when itinerate Awka blacksmiths began to return to the area. Agitation about the tax began and oaths were sworn in many areas of Awka to “refuse payment of the tax” and “boycott the Awka Native Court.” The agitation at Awka led to reductions in the number of cases brought to the native courts. The district officer for Awka had hoped that chiefs would help in quashing the movements. W. Buchanan Smith, Resident for Onitsha Province reported: “the prospects of obtaining payment from the rest of the Division depend entirely on the payment first by Awka itself; the question of ‘breaking the

oath' is in this instance more important than usual."⁶⁴ Awka agitators began collecting subscriptions from their people to petition the English king. Buchanan has argued that delays in implementing the Native Revenue Amendment Ordinance of 1927 were creating an opportunity for the agitators to line their pockets with the money collected from what Buchanan characterized as "poor deluded people."⁶⁵

It had become sufficiently clear to officials how Africans would respond to the imposition of taxation. W. Buchanan Smith, Resident in Onitsha Province, noted in 1928 that, despite many meetings held by the district officer in Awgu Division to explain his position, and although the temper of the male population was markedly good humoured, the women were less so and made definite attempts to break up some meetings by indulging in unceasing song.⁶⁶ The general attitude of the people from Obubra, Ikom, Ogoja, and Afikpo "seems to be one of acquiescence," although it was unclear what their attitude would be when the "actual demand for payment is made," the Resident of Ogoja Province wrote.⁶⁷ In early 1928, the district officer in Abakiliki Division found it difficult to obtain an accurate count of the adult male population, particularly among some of the Ezzi clans, as people evaded the enumerators. Awareness of the impending taxation was created by people moving between districts as traders or employees of the colonial government. The Ezzi chiefs, in their petition against taxation, seem to have been informed of the impending taxation by persons from Aba and Onitsha districts connected with road construction in the area.⁶⁸ Officials remained pessimistic and "prepared for considerable difficulty in the collection of the tax."⁶⁹ One tactic adopted by the Ezzi to avoid enumeration was to go to the farms, thus avoiding direct conflict with officials, forcing officials to prosecute a number of people before some figures could be obtained.

Perhaps the most frequent means of protest was that of individuals who petitioned colonial officials. Individuals made a great variety of requests and complaints to district officers or Residents, including petitions for exception from taxation or reduction of income tax based on their economic conditions. Native court chiefs in Abakiliki District petitioned the Secretary of State for the colonies in January 1929. In their petition, they noted that people under their jurisdiction were opposed to a poll tax, arguing that "many male adults in Abakiliki District do not at one time possess 7 shillings," obviously a

considerable amount for many rural people.⁷⁰ Thus, many local people sought ways to evade taxes altogether or reduce their tax burden. A. E. Cooks, who served for fifteen years as an administrative officer in colonial Nigeria, recalls in his memoirs: “Tax evasion is a popular pastime, in fact it is hardly an exaggeration to say that each of the three thousand or so family heads in the Division ... is continuously engaged in a grim struggle to effect, by hook or by crook, a reduction in the tax assessment of his family.”⁷¹

Almost all opposed the introduction of direct taxation. For the newly appointed warrant chiefs, the collection of taxes constituted one of their most important functions and symbolized their power over the villages where they reigned. The collaboration of the new powerful indigenous chiefs stemmed the tide of protest in some areas. Chief Onyeama of Enugu was one of those that stood on the side of the administration. As a willing collaborator, Onyeama was responsible for allegedly throwing out some “anti-tax agitators” from Awka.⁷² Onyeama, like many other warrant chiefs, benefited directly from taxation. These chiefs’ salaries and allowances were directly dependent on the amount of tax collected in their areas.

Following the enactment of the Native Revenue Amendment Ordinance, direct taxation was introduced in April 1928 based on 2.5 per cent of personal income, after the careful propaganda of the preceding year.⁷³ A special police unit, which then numbered 417, was used to maintain the peace. An additional 250 were to be recruited for the 1929 and 1930 tax period.⁷⁴ But opposition continued because the tax burden caused a significant amount of stress for the local population and forced many to devise ways of avoiding intimidation by local tax collectors and officials.

Additionally, the imposition of taxation coincided with the slump in palm produce prices, which was the principal source of income used for the assessment of incomes in 1927. The enumeration exercise in Oloko Umuahia, which included the counting of women and livestock, raised suspicions that women would be taxed as the men.⁷⁵ Women expressed the view that the tax on men was already a big burden on the household as some men had been forced to pawn themselves or their children in order to pay taxes.⁷⁶ In Ngwa region, taxation forced communities to collect palm fruit communally, for a period of three months in the year, in order “to give everyone a means of paying tax.”⁷⁷ Indeed, the district officer for Owerri had noted in 1928: “The

amount of petty trade done by women does not appear to warrant separate assessment as it consists largely of sale or barter of farm or palm produce.”⁷⁸ However, the general belief that women were about to be taxed raised a general level of apprehension among them.⁷⁹

Since the historiography is deficient in its treatment of the economic roots of the revolt in relation to the local economy when taxation was introduced, let us turn to the voices of rural women and men as recorded in the “Notes of Evidence” taken by the commission of inquiry set up to examine the causes of the revolt. Their voices allow us to understand the range of their emotions, their motives, and what they believed were their responsibilities to their families and communities and the responsibilities of the colonial government to them. Ikodia, one of the women of Oloko who participated in the revolt, summarized the feeling of women: “We heard that women were being counted by their chiefs. Women became annoyed at this ... as they did not wish to accept it... We, women, therefore held a large meeting at which we decided to wait until we heard definitely from one person that women were to be taxed, in which case we would make trouble, as we did not mind to be killed for doing so.”⁸⁰ Nwakaji, of Ekweli in Oloko, asked: “How could women who have no means themselves to buy food or clothing pay tax?” And Uligbo of Awon Uku, Oloko, asked how women who depended on their husbands could pay tax: “we cannot buy food or clothe ourselves: how shall we get money to pay tax?”⁸¹ Nwanyaifo Obasi, whose mother participated in the revolts in Mbaise, confirmed that women were infuriated by the prospect of new taxation. According to her, “in Igbo tradition women were not required to make cash contributions to community development, but the white people were trying to introduce a new rule and women rejected it.”⁸² Enyidia, another leader of the women’s movement from Oloko, lamented: “What have we women done to warrant our being taxed? We women are like trees, which bear fruit. You should tell us the reason why we who bear seeds should be counted.”⁸³

Women did not expect to be taxed on account of their femininity and reproductive roles. Adiele Afigbo noted that the reference to women as fruit-bearing trees or reproducers of humans and the perception that they would be taxed raised a “very strong moral and psychological dilemma” that “lies at the root of certain aspects of indigenous social and ethical philosophy.”⁸⁴ Thus, just as “one cannot, in the interest of human beings deal lightly with the

survival of fruit-bearing trees, one could not play with the fate of women.”⁸⁵ The contrast between local ideas of taxation of women and British ideas of personal income tax also touched on certain ethical aspects of Igbo society.

Indeed the Native Revenue Amendment Ordinance was introduced with a comparatively small knowledge base on the social organizations of the southeastern provinces.⁸⁶ In Owerri Province, for example, the extended family or village group formed the responsible units, and the emphasis on “individual responsibility” challenged communal responsibility and the sort of communal humane living that defined Igbo social relations. S. M. Jacob, former government statistician, wrote that English law as applied to Nigeria did not admit “communal responsibility for tax payment.”⁸⁷ The Aba Commission confirmed that:

It was the expressed intention of the Government in extending direct taxation to these Provinces to fix and make definitely known the liability of the individual and the doctrine that the individual’s default is to be made good by the community collectively seems to us a misinterpretation of the declared policy.⁸⁸

The method of assessment, *West Africa* noted, was a cause for uneasiness. The newspaper noted that some members of the local population had become suspicious due to interference with their land tenure by the Department of Agriculture in order to “establish small palmeries.” When the enumeration exercise of 1926 was carried out, the Resident of Owerri was not open about why the enumeration was being carried out; the people felt deceived when taxation was later introduced. There was complete loss of popular faith, both in the administration and in those chiefs who sought to carry out its orders. This popular mistrust reached what *West Africa* termed a “dangerous level” three years later when the acting district officer for Bende, on his own initiative tried to update the tax system.⁸⁹

The timing of the revolt, therefore, has to be linked to the frustration of the local population, who associated the introduction of taxation to the economic conditions of the time, particularly the fall in the price of palm produce.⁹⁰ The low price of palm produce and the high price for imported commodities, now out of the reach of many households, offer some perspectives on what fuelled women’s anger in 1929, the reasons for their hostility to the

colonial state, to European firms, and to the firms' representatives.⁹¹ Because the colonial administration failed to recognize the interdependent nature of the domestic and formal economy, the officials had the false impression that men were better off than women. But the women's response suggested otherwise. Hence, the women's demand extended to the abolition of taxation on males, an increase in prices of produce (palm oil and kernels), and a decrease in the prices of imported goods.⁹²

There were also other factors responsible for the revolt. Beyond the economic factors was the deep distrust for the new political institutions introduced under colonialism, especially the indirect rule system imposed on the Igbo.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ROOTS OF THE REVOLT

The political and class divisions created by the imposition of colonial rule had deepened by the late 1920s. The Igbo were antagonistic to the warrant chief system and the political and economic privileges the warrant chiefs enjoyed under the new dispensation. The emerging political elite with economic and political interests to protect clearly sided the British as indicated earlier. In response, local people openly expressed detestation for the warrant chiefs, who acted in a manner contrary to local political ethic. Besides, their methods of dispensing justice under the new administrative system drained the people's resources. The testimony of many people at the Aba Commission of Inquiry reflected this antagonistic relationship between the chiefs and local people. Nwanyeruwa of Oloko told the commission: "Okugo became a rich man because of the money he got from us. If he had not got money from us, he would not have been able to provide for himself."⁹³ In addition, some warrant chiefs were noted for their ability to exploit their subjects with impunity. Okugo, for example, was said to have imposed levies on the entire community in the pretext that he had the mandate of the district officer. Nwanyeruwa narrated such incidents to the commission. On one occasion, Okugo had called both men and women together and told them that the district officer had ordered that

money should be collected for him to build a house. The villagers contributed 20 pounds towards this project. On another occasion, Okugo told villagers that the district officer “had been worrying him for a young wife and that both men and women should collect money to pay the dowry of a young wife for the District Officer. We collected the sum of 20 pounds sterling and gave it to him.... We are sure these women were not given to the District Officer.”⁹⁴ Although most villagers were aware that European officials were not responsible for these levies, many could not speak out for fear of reprisals. These practices were common among warrant chiefs and members of the native courts.

In the memories of those who lived through the era, native court members were worse than many European officials. They were often bribed by litigants and many grew rich and powerful in the process. The warrant chief of my own town, Philip Eluwa, was illiterate, yet he, like many others, sat as a judge of civil and criminal cases. The warrant chiefs learned on the job, Eze Enyeribe Onuoha remembered, and soon became “experts” in “handling cases.”⁹⁵ “I wish to say something about Chiefs,” Ahudi, a female witness from Nsidimo, told the Aba Commission of Inquiry.

Women are very much annoyed. If I had a case with another in the Native Courts, that case would not be heard until I kept borrowing money, about £10 in all. If I do not borrow money, the case would be kept waiting for six months. That is what Chiefs do.... I want to tell you that these disturbances will go on perhaps for fifteen years unless these Chiefs are decapped.... Otherwise the trouble will go on.⁹⁶

These testimonies were worded in such a manner as to demand change and not to attract sympathy. Initially, the women had directed their attacks against the warrant chiefs and their courts, but the revolt soon was directed against the colonial administration and the factories of European traders. Until this point, how to attack the native authority system was a perplexing problem for the local people. It appears also that the colonial authorities in Eastern Nigeria were remarkably ignorant of the level of corruption in the native authority system. During the rebellion, Native courts were destroyed or damaged and the chiefs were challenged because the native courts were seen as the outward symbol of the colonial government. The warrant chiefs, as a class



A court-house destroyed during the Women's Revolt. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.) RH, Mss Afr. s. 1000, Edward Morris Falk papers.



Villagers gather at a court-house destroyed during the Women's Revolt. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.) RH, Mss Afr. s. 1000, Edward Morris Falk papers.



Group of villagers standing near a court-house during the revolt. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.) RH, Mss Afr. s. 1000, Edward Morris Falk papers.



Colonial troops used to suppress the revolt. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.) RH, Mss Afr. s. 1000, Edward Morris Falk papers.

and as members of the local administrative system, were seen as the instruments of a European government. "The Court Members whether customary heads or not were assaulted or had property damaged without discrimination," the Resident for Owerri Province wrote in a memo to the secretary of the Southern Provinces. "Of approximately 150 Court Members in the Division the members who escaped some form of indignity could be counted on both hands," he remarked.⁹⁷ The women "only attacked houses belonging to court officials and people connected in some way with the court," the district officer for Ahoada wrote. "About 31 court members suffered damage," he concluded. And in Okigwe, the district officer related that several court members were attacked and their houses looted.⁹⁸

Many chiefs were unjust. Overwhelming evidence was provided at the commission's hearings regarding the "persecution, extortion, bribery and corruption in the native courts."⁹⁹ The commission rightly believed that political discontent over the "persecution, extortion and corruption by the native court members (Warrant Chiefs) was [a] principal contributory cause."¹⁰⁰ The commission concluded that "although allegations of corruption and bribery were of a general nature, we heard enough to be satisfied that persecution by native courts members and corruption in the native courts are a source of very considerable discontent among the people."¹⁰¹

Overall, the immediate cause of the revolt has to be located in the economic conditions of eastern Nigeria, the depression in the economy from the beginning of the 1920s, the agrarian economy and link to a capitalist world market, which directly affected the lives of Igbo peasants. Indeed, the political grievances articulated by the peasants during the revolt were deeply rooted in the economic stress in the rural society in the 1920s. Although colonial officials admitted the existence of widespread economic distress due to the introduction of tax and the slump in produce prices,¹⁰² they were not sympathetic to the communities that engaged in the revolt. For the colonial government, the imposition of a collective punishment would deter future revolts and perhaps teach the men a lesson or prevent their wives from engaging in such acts in the future.

A POUND OF FLESH: THE COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT

In connection with the disturbances generally, I think a bit too much fuss has been raised by the fact that the victims were of the gentler sex. We are liable to forget that the Kings of Dahomey's Amazon bodyguard was not a fiction, but an unpleasant fact, and if a howling mob of excited female savages who would be quite ready to tear a man in pieces with their hands is about the place, the only thing to do is to take strong action. It is quite easy for us to criticize them here, but I wonder what anyone in this Office would do in a similar situation – *Colonial Office, London, 1930, PRO, CO 583/176/9*

The position of the Colonial Office, as expressed above, was probably shared by many officials in the colony. The protest was seen by British officials as a threat to authority and a disruption of economic and political life. Europeans in the colony had hoped that the revolt would end quickly. Mrs. Falk, whose husband was the district officer for Calabar, wrote in her journal on 8 December 1929 that steps were taken as soon as the outbreak of violence occurred “to frighten all the other grumblers sufficiently to keep the peace.” The troops, she wrote, were “simply dying to be called in.... A few of the young officers ... are itching to go and get a chance to shoot. They fervently hope that the political officers will not be able to settle the affair with the help of the police only.”¹⁰³ However, things got worse. A. B. Henderson, supervising agent of the United Africa Company noted that the attitude of the revolting women “was far from peaceful.” According to R. L. Attwood of West African Motors, Aba, “the women were all in very aggressive mood, right from the start, and most of them were armed with heavy sticks, which they did not hesitate to use to damage property.”¹⁰⁴ The assistant district officer for Bende, J. Cook, told the commission of inquiry that there was determined attitude of hostility towards Okugo as more and more women from distant towns gathered at Oloko market.¹⁰⁵

As such, the government took drastic measures to suppress the revolt. The police and a detachment of the army were used at various hot spots to

disperse the women. This became inevitable after the looting and destruction of European trading posts at Mbawsi and Aba and the threat of extending the rampage to the coastal trading stations. The colonial Resident addressed the European traders at Olomo about an impending attack on the trading posts in the Delta and the measures being taken to safeguard life and property. "Some show of force makes it clear that we shall have to take drastic measures to halt the spread of this astonishing hysteria," he noted. "We have information that the women are massing several thousand strong at various villages and markets in the forest behind this creek. So far, everything has been done to avoid conflict, but now the Government in Lagos has instructed us that a firm stand, with the use of force if necessary, must be made to bring the chaotic position to an end."¹⁰⁶

The impact of the revolt was felt by all within the affected areas. The British made sure that the local population paid for the damages in cash. The revolt was estimated to have led to the destruction of goods and infrastructure valued at £60,000.¹⁰⁷ Estimates were based on the claims submitted by firms and private individuals and testimonies of witnesses and the value of the loot taken by each village was estimated by "dividing the total amount amongst the total number of women in proportion of each village incriminated."¹⁰⁸ This is perhaps an under-estimation, considering the destruction of personal property and the large number of police and army members that were transported and fed while the revolt lasted.

Throughout the affected areas, huge sums of money were collected by local district officers as compensation for aiding the revolt or for personal and government property destroyed by the rebels. The British idea of male complicity meant that men directly bore the cost of the revolt. In doing so, the British were hoping to teach the men a lesson and make them do a better job of controlling their wives in the future.

The Igbo have an adage, which says: *Otu aka ruta nmanu, ya ezuo ibe ya* (When one finger is dipped into palm oil, it smears the other fingers). The collective punishment imposed by the British on participating communities was their "pound of flesh," and as in the Igbo adage, it smeared all fingers. The amount collected from each community was based on the adult male population and a percentage of the tax rate and on the level of participation. The amounts imposed varied from a few pounds for communities that did

Table 4.1. Collective fines on Nguru area, Owerri Division.

TOWN	FINE IMPOSED		
	£	S	D
Inyogugu	626	11	3
Umunama Town	94	5	0
Nguru	774	1	3
Onicha	25	1	0
Umuhu	218	15	0
Lagwa	218	8	9
Avuvu Town	275	0	0
Ibeku Town	186	10	6
Azaraegbelu	10	6	3
Udo	96	8	6
Ahiara Town (Nguru Area)	1,000	0	0
Amuzi	171	12	11
Umuokrika	160	0	0
Amumara	420	0	0
Itu	258	2	0
Obizi	351	5	3
Eziborgu	150	8	9
Oboama	193	18	9
Ahiara	43	0	0
Akaba (Nguru)	79	1	3
Ihitte	280	0	0
Ogtuama	44	1	3
Eziudo	417	0	0
Ugiri	60	6	3
Amumara	50	0	0
Okpofe	215	0	0
Mpam	294	0	0
IhitteAfuku	320	0	0
Total	7,033	3	11

Source: NAE, UMPROF, file no. C.53/1929, vol. 26.

Table 4.2. Statement of deposits taken from towns.

TOWN	DEPOSIT (£)	INCIDENCE (S/D)	AREA	REASON
Nguru	250	1/8	Nguru	Deposit taken by Captain Wauton, reason not known.
Umuhu	30	2/-	Nguru	Took active part in disturbances hence incidence* 3/- more than 25% of tax incidence.
Ime Onicha	475	7/-	Nguru	Took active part in disturbances, truculent and a murder was committed in this town hence 5/3 over 25% of tax incidence.
Onicha Ama	375	7/-	Nguru	Same as in Ime Onicha.
Ngor	50	1/6	Ngor	Deposit taken by Captain Wauton; reason for incidence not known.
Ntu	30	1/-	Ngor	Same as in Ngor.
Obokwe	10	1/4	Ngor	Took no active part, hence -/5 under 25% of Tax incidence.
Umukabia	20	2/-	Ngor	Same as in Umuhu.
Nguru	50	1/4	Ngor	Took no active part, hence -/5 under 25% of Tax incidence.
Obike	80	1/4	Ngor	Took no active part, hence -/5 under 25% of Tax incidence.
Emweinwe	95	1/4	Ngor	Took no active part, hence -/5 under 25% of Tax incidence.
Umukam	50	1/4	Ngor	Same as above.
Orisa Eze	20	1/4	Ngor	Same as above.
Muokoro	5	1/4	Ngor	Same as above.
Elelma	25	1/4	Ngor	Same as above.
Ngwoma	30	2/6	Ngor	Took part in attack on Olakwo on 21/12/29 and in demonstration against Troops on 22/12/29 hence -/9 over 25% of Tax incidence.

Table 4.2. (cont'd)

TOWN	DEPOSIT (£)	INCIDENCE (S/D)	AREA	REASON
Loghara	90	2/6	Ngor	Same as in Ngwoma.
Umohiagu	100	2/6	Ngor	Same as above.
Umowa	60	3/-	Ngor	Took active part in closing main Owerri-Aba road, hence 1/3 over 25% of Tax incidence.
Ihitte	65	3/-	Ngor	Same as Umowa.
Isubiangu	120	3/2	Ngor	Lead attack on Olakwo on 21/12/29 and had demonstration against troops on 22/12/29 hence 1/5 over Tax incidence.
Obokwe	30	2/8	Ok-pala	Took active part in disturbances hence -/11.
Norio	55	2/6	Ok-pala	Took active part in disturbances, hence more than 25% of Tax incidence.
Eziama	300	3/9	Ok-pala	Spread disturbances area and thence into Ngor hence 2/- more than 25% Tax incidence.
Oboro	24	2/9	Ok-pala	Took active part in disturbances, hence 1/- more than 25% of Tax incidence.

Source: NAE, UMPROF 1/5/21, file no. C.53/1929, Vol. 21, district officer, Owerri, to Resident, Owerri Province, 19 January 1930.

*Incidence is probably the normal tax rate for the community.

Table 4.3. Obowo Court Area reasons for detailed statements of deposits.

TOWN	MALE POPULATION	AMOUNT DEPOSITED (POUNDS)	INCIDENCE/(PENCE)
Amumi	393	20	12.2
Alike	821	40	11.69
Okwohia	330	5	3.6
Avutu	657	30	11.0
Umuoke	472	10	5.1
Umilogro	276	5	4.3
Umunachi	365	5	3.3
Ehume	376	5	3.19
Odenkume	305	5	3.9
Umuarian	747	10	3.2
Atchara	151	3	8.0
Umuosochie	228	5	5.26
Umungwa	188	5	6.4
Amanze	216	5	5.5
Umuegehu	416	7	4.0
Amakohia	713	10	3.3
Nkumato	336	5	3.57
Umuihi	510	10	4.7
Amainyi	748	10	3.2
Umunakano	1,143	10	2.1
Lowa Onicha	645	10	3.7
Ikperejere	395	5	3.0
Abeke-uku	586	10	4.1
Nsu	1,346	10	1.78
Total	12,363	240	

Source: NAE, UMPROF, 1/5/21, file no. C.53/1929, vol. 21, Resident, Owerri Province, to the Secretary, Southern Provinces, 20 January 1930.

not take an active part in the revolt to £2000 for the hardest hit areas. In Nguru Court Area, Captain Wauton collected £1130 from Nguru, Umuhu, Ime Onicha, and Onicha Ama for “taking active part in the disturbances” and other unknown reasons.¹⁰⁹ The Obowo Court Area, with an adult male population of 12,363, provided £240. Obohia Native Tribunal Area, which colonial officials described as inhabited by sophisticated and comparatively wealthy individuals, was expected to pay a substantial amount of money into the colonial treasury. Women in these towns aided by the young men were said to have set colonial courts and native administration buildings on fire and rescued fourteen convicted prisoners after the Peace Preservation Order had been proclaimed. Houses belonging to members of the native courts were attacked and looted. Damage to property was estimated at £200, and property worth £550 was looted. For their severe crime, the towns of Akwete, Ohamble, Obako, Obanko, Obohia, Ohanko, Ohuru, Ohanso, Obunku, Mkpoboro, and Umuosi in the Obohia Native Tribunal Area paid a combined sum of £2,942. The fine imposed on each community was based on 25 per cent of the normal tax rate (7/-) plus or minus a varying amount depending on the degree of culpability of the town in the revolt.

The 1929 revolt has been presented as gender-specific and has often been portrayed as an anomaly. Why was the revolt dominated by women? What role did men play? What impact did it have on men, women, and the communities involved? If we consider the 1929 revolt as a feminist revolt, as some scholars have presented it, we overlook critically important dimensions of rural political activism, their gendered nature, and the broader context in which the women placed their demands with regard to the British colonial authorities and the few African men who served in local administration. Admittedly, women drew upon traditional forms of political language and discourse to articulate their demands. They used female-specific ideology in framing their actions, but they did not act in the interest of women alone. As one colonial official acknowledged, women suggested that even men “should not be taxed.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, the women’s revolt reflects the collective experience of the rural population as a social group or class rather than experience along gender lines.¹¹¹

Although opportunities for women remained limited, women did not often question the existence of the empire, as they had accepted it as an

inevitable part of their lives by the 1920s. “We wish relations between us and government to be as cordial as those existing between us and the Reverend Fathers,” a group of women wrote in a petition to the government. “If there is co-operation between us and government we shall be able to select new men to take the place of those chiefs who have been oppressing us.”¹¹² So, the revolt was a struggle triggered by conflicts deeply rooted in the colonial extraction of peasant resources and declining incomes. A combination of economic concerns existed: the perceived unfairness of colonial trading patterns, price controls, and rising inflation underscored the revolt as a peasant protest that had significance in relation to subsistence and survival.

Women’s domination of the revolt was a mark of their importance in the economy in general and the produce trade in particular. The women were fighting for the survival of the household. The comment of the district officer for Owerri reflects this view:

The introduction of Tax and the consequent necessity of providing ready money has resulted in women having more work to do in preparation of produce. The fact that the fall in prices of produce has resulted in less money being forthcoming from this extra work than would have been the case had prices been maintained at their former level, has caused discontent among the women.¹¹³

Onwatugo of Akabo in Owerri Division told the commission that “we have no money to maintain our children, how much more then can we afford to pay tax? If a woman has four or five children, the first thing she does in the morning is to get money to buy food to feed the children.”¹¹⁴

While we clearly hear the voices of the women who planned and took part in the uprising, it was the view of many officials that men helped the revolt actively through craven inaction. Colonial officials blamed the men for pushing the women into the open while lying low in the background. The Colonial Office concluded that there was apparently no seditious goal to “arouse the women to action; it was simply a case of the movement growing beyond the powers of the leaders to control the worst sections.”¹¹⁵ While African men remained aloof during the protest movement, where their loyalty lay was not in doubt. The domination of these protests by women raised a serious ideological dilemma for the British administration. Some officials propounded

pseudo-scientific theories to explain the women's reaction. The secretary of the Southern Provinces in a memorandum opined: "In the dry season women are in a more neurotic condition than other seasons and consequently are more liable to break out in disorder."¹¹⁶

Although men had dominated the earlier conflicts and resistance to colonialism, the women saw this fight as their own. Indeed the British had curtailed men's ability to protest on a large scale by the time the women's revolt broke out in 1929. The brute force of previous British military expeditions was still fresh in the minds of many Igbo people. In the areas that became Mbaise, an important site of the women's revolt, for example, the Ahiara massacre of 1905 was fresh in the memory of many. The British expeditionary force had massacred many villagers for killing a white man, J. F. Stewart. In the area affected by the revolt of 1929, many other communities had witnessed the military power of the British during the pacification period. But there was a widespread perception, according to Onyegbule Korieh, "that the colonial officials would not use such force against women."¹¹⁷ Apparently this perception was wrong, considering the number of women killed during the 1929 revolt.

Overall, Ogu Umunwayi bore a classic resemblance to social movements elsewhere. Sociologist Clifton A. Marsh has argued that "Economic inequality, denial of a voice in the political process, and a subordinate social status ... are breeding grounds for social conflict."¹¹⁸ Yet the event of 1929 was defined by its agrarian roots and its mobilization of women that would irrevocably change British administration in Nigeria and the lives of many ordinary people. Frustrated by the low prices of palm produce and the treatment they received at the hands of the British-appointed native chiefs, peasant women turned their anger against political institutions in the effort to secure their rights. These women represented a new voice and a vanguard that would eventually force the colonial administration to rethink its administrative philosophy toward the Igbo people, whom most of the British administrators had come to regard as the most intractable of all Nigerian groups.

The character of the revolt and its widespread appeal to women over most of Owerri Province and Opobo exposed the growing chasm between local people and the colonial authority symbolized by the native administration system, which excluded the majority of the local people and their voices. But the dispute at Oloko and the wider crisis that followed had their roots in the

structure of the colonial economy and the further integration of the Igbo into the world market. The local economy was under enormous stress during the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The roots of the conflict in the economic decline of the late 1920s and the colonial government's imposition of direct taxation are underscored by numerous references to the low price of palm produce in the testimonies of men and women, some of whom had participated in the protests.¹¹⁹ The event at Oloko revealed the tenuous nature of African-European relations under colonial rule and the attempt by rural farmers and traders to protect a local economy that had come to depend on the palm produce trade. The revolt in 1929 shared certain basic aims: economic emancipation, social freedom, and an improvement in conditions. Yet its agricultural roots, ideology, and domination by women set it apart from any previous social movements in colonial Nigeria.

Igbo peasants did not often achieve all of their objectives, but their actions ultimately forced reforms. Given the dozens of complainants from witnesses at the Aba Commission of Inquiry, colonial officials knew that allegations of judicial corruption could not be swept under the carpet. The response was drastic and came in the form of suspension from native courts, withdrawal of warrants, imprisonment, or all of these. Warrant chiefs like Ezewuro of Ahiara, Iwuala of Akpoku, Chiaka of Umunama, Chiaka of Umuokirika, Wachuku of Mbutu, Wachuku of Obokiri, Nwankwo of Aluru, Wigwe of Ife, Ihekoronye of Uvuru, Njoku of Oburu, and Nwachukueze of Umudimoka were suspended in February and March 1930 for various offenses including judicial corruption. Some like Ezewuro, Iwuala, and Chiaka of Umunama were imprisoned for six months.¹²⁰ The warrants of Chief Ezima of Ihie, Chief Ochinga of Obegu, and Chief Nwalozie of Umuaro, among many others, were cancelled for alleged misconduct during the disturbances.¹²¹

Major administrative reforms followed the revolt. The arbitrary appointment of warrant chiefs without consultation with the local people was scrapped. Local authority holders or *ezeala* were appointed to replace the warrant chiefs following the administrative reforms that were introduced in the 1930s. For the first time, women were appointed members of the native courts in Nguru Mbaise, Umuakpo, and Okpala.¹²² Among the most prominent of these women was Ahebi Ugbabe of Enugu-Ezike, popularly called "Agamega" or "The Female Leopard."¹²³

Although the reforms that followed the 1929 revolt have been seen as dramatic, they did not do much to calm official apprehensions about the African population or the agitation of the local people. Nothing could more clearly show that the British attempt to calm the Igbo did not succeed than the protests that continued in Owerri Province soon after the 1929 revolt. Like other protests before them, the rural protests that took place in the 1930s were defined by their economic/agrarian roots.

CONTINUITY OF RURAL PROTEST

F. B. Carr, colonial Resident in Owerri Province in the 1930s, wrote in his memoir that eastern Nigeria “had always been the trouble spot of Nigeria.” Even though there was no major disturbance after the 1929 Women’s War,¹²⁴ the unpopularity of tax and discontent remained high in the countryside more than a year afterward. This was particularly so in parts of Owerri Province. The police report in 1931 noted that all the inhabitants of most of the division in Owerri Province were “against both the rate and principles of tax,” despite the propaganda promoting the benefits of taxation. Although the rate of income tax was reduced from 7/- for an adult male to 5/- in Nguru area and 6/- in the Isu area of Owerri Division, the people remained unsatisfied and demanded further reductions.¹²⁵ The report noted that the people in Nguru area “are very poor” and suffered from considerable hardship even in paying the 5/- demanded as income tax.¹²⁶

Grievances remained. A police report in February 1931 warned: “On the surface the Division is quiet, underneath there is considerable unrest and discontent.” A considerable police presence was required to maintain order and collect tax. In fact, F. W. Tristram, the assistant commissioner of police in charge of Okpala in Owerri, wrote in a memo on 15 February 1931 that the local native administration “exists in name only.” The newly appointed chiefs “have as a rule, no authority whatever,” and as a link between the district officer and the people “they are useless, as they neither pass on the messages sent out by the D.O. for the benefits of the people nor do they report matters of interest to the D.O.”¹²⁷

The “feelings of women against the old Court members is still high,” a former official noted in the 1930s.¹²⁸ The same can be said of the endemic corruption and bribery within the native courts. While things had been generally brought under control by 1930, there was still, in the opinion of some officials, the danger of a general movement by women, and a significant increase in surveillance was implemented to monitor the activities of women. Meetings of women, aside from burials, marriages, and similar gatherings, the police advised, “Should not be ignored.”¹²⁹ Officials were aware that real troubles could arise from small meetings, as the police observed:

The women are just as determined as ever that tax must be abolished and the old court members removed... The Organization of women known as ‘OHANDUM’ is well established in the Nguru, Ngor, Okpala and Isu areas of the [Owerri] division and if they receive recognition or encouragement in any way the work of building up a Native Administration may be seriously impeded or even rendered impossible.¹³⁰

Post-1929 revolts were also rooted in the peasant economy. Some of the protests that continued sporadically in the 1930s came to centre on the introduction of produce inspection, although taxation continued to be an issue of concern for the rest of the colonial period. One such protest occurred in 1930 when a new system of testing palm oil, known as the “one-shilling test,” was introduced.¹³¹ In May and June 1930, the United Africa Company (UAC) complained that some shipments of palm oil to New York from Opobo had been shown to contain as much as 3.9 to 5.5 per cent of extraneous matter.¹³² The UAC’s complaints prompted the introduction of produce inspectors and a more rigorous inspection procedure. This was a departure from the guesswork that had characterized the previous inspection procedures. Overzealous produce inspectors introduced the “shilling test” in an attempt to remove the inconsistencies in palm oil inspection. Inspectors conceived the test as a process of determining whether palm oil contained as much as 2 per cent of impurities. Oil would be rejected if the residue covered a shilling piece.¹³³ The shilling test was introduced in Oguta after the UAC’s complaints, but the issue

of inspection had already emerged in the women's protest of the previous year. Many traders chastised produce inspectors for interfering in local trade.

The new inspection procedure, which one official described as an "unwise and unwarrantable action," had a significant impact on supplies. The effect, he argued, "has been not only to cause a drop in the quantity of palm oil brought at Oguta from about 200 tons in the week ending 20th September to nothing at the present time." He was concerned that the policy had started the women's movement again, as women were barricading trade routes and holding up trucks to exact tolls. He noted that the policy had "created widespread alarm in the Onitsha and Owerri Provinces" and necessitated the calling in of more police to the area and generally "added to the anxieties of an already sufficiently harassed administrative staff."¹³⁴ The shilling test was abolished on 7 December 1930, but disagreements continued over other regulations, including the rules governing the drying of palm kernels.

The problems that confronted the Nigerian oil palm industry in this period did not arise out of the depression alone. By the 1930s, the oil industry was facing increasing competition from the well-established plantations of Sumatra and Malaya. In 1933, the United Africa Company (UAC) wrote to the governor of Nigeria from London, stressing the need to improve production by adopting the plantation model. The UAC maintained that "the future of the Nigerian palm oil industry appears to us to be gravely compromised by the development of the industry in Sumatra and Malaya ... unless the African can be induced and enabled to adapt his methods of cultivation to modern methods the natural palm industry of Nigeria is in serious danger." Years of research and cultivation of selected varieties of palm had led to the expansion in production in Asia. The UAC was convinced that the "immediate future of the palm industry in Nigeria lies in the development of plantings of oil palm trees from selected seed properly cultivated and maintained."¹³⁵

The unrest that occurred in 1938 in Okigwe Division was a constant reminder that the effects of the introduction of taxes were still felt in the countryside. Early in December 1938, crowds of men numbering about 400 in each case gathered at Isuikwato and Eluama, southwest of Okigwe, to express their grievances against high taxation and low prices for produce. A few days later, a crowd of women gathered at Okigwe demanding a reduction in tax. The women, according to the governor, dispersed after indulging in

“frenzied outbursts of singing and dancing.” However, armed with sticks, the crowd increased the next day at Isuikwato and threatened to destroy the livestock of those who paid their tax and to destroy the properties of the tax collectors.¹³⁶ The protest covered an area of approximately 545 square miles, including the Isukwuato, Uturu, Nneato, Isuochi, Umuchieze, Otanzu, and Otanchara communities of Okigwe Division and reaching the Alayi, Item, and Umuimenyi communities of Bende Division, attracting approximately 127,000 people. There was passive resistance to demands for tax payment in the affected area. A month after collection should have commenced in the area, the colonial governor reported that “no payment had been made and attempts by the administrative staff to reason with the people and persuade them to pay were unsuccessful.”¹³⁷

Aside from the issue of taxation, an important cause of the disturbance was the belief that the low prices offered for produce were artificially controlled. Although the government concluded that the tax rate was reasonable, it believed that the system of tax assessment and marketing of produce needed modification. While the scale and extent of this protest pale in comparison with the 1929 revolt, it nevertheless represented a familiar trend among peasants across much of southeastern Nigeria. As with previous revolts, the roots of the 1938 revolt lay in the peasant economy that continued to be under stress.¹³⁸ Indeed, the acting secretary of the Southern Provinces conceded that the administration was not able to make proper allowance for the effects of trade decline in adjusting taxes. In his view, “the assessment of the flat rate should be more scientific than it is now.”¹³⁹

Peasant protests continued in the 1940s in response to the introduction of innovations in the oil palm industry. Attempts were made in this period to introduce palm oil mills in eastern Nigeria. This was followed by widespread protests in parts of Owerri and Calabar provinces. Women were the most vocal opponents of the mills for a number of reasons. The introduction of the mills would and did certainly shift production from the household to the mills. There was a feeling among women that their husbands would sell palm fruits directly to the mills, thereby depriving the women of the income they derived from palm kernels.¹⁴⁰ Others perceived the introduction of these mills as a prelude to the takeover of their land and palm trees by the government.¹⁴¹

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that there is considerable agreement on the origin of these revolts in the extension of the Native Revenue Ordinance into this part of the Southern Provinces, yet its agrarian roots have been under-estimated. Far from being a feminist revolt fed by female consciousness, the 1929 Women's Revolt and the others that followed emerged from genuine peasant consciousness in which women, as part of the peasant class, spearheaded the revolt and its framing. The chapter also restores women to their rightful place, reveals their human agency, and challenges the view expressed by officials like C. H. Ward, who argued that women in Owerri Province customarily "have no authority in their towns."¹⁴² While the tax issue helped to shape the nature and scope of the rural response, the revolt itself was a synthesis of many factors. The decline in the price of palm produce played a significant role in the timing of the revolt. In addition, the fact that the focus of the debate often shifted from the tax issue to the native administration system and the blatant corruption of the African political class highlights the multifaceted factors that led to the revolt. Overall, the historical analysis presented in this chapter exposes the role of violence in maintaining colonial domination and provides important insights into the gender relations of production in an otherwise patriarchal colonial setting and into the rural agrarian roots of the revolt of 1929.