

11 - Women and Authority in West African History

Authority is the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. This chapter explores the political authority of West Africa women and the spiritual female principle in the precolonial and colonial eras. A *longue durée* perspective on gender relations in precolonial West Africa illuminates a history of gender parity and, at times, women's authority over men. This history has been obscured by Western patriarchal ideologies—which imagined West African women as “beasts of burden,” women who were sold to the highest bidder for the productive and reproductive labor; in short, they imagined a West African woman that never was—and more recent historical processes, particularly the integration of West African societies into broader international mercantile networks and the ensuing establishment of formal colonial rule.

The starting premise of this chapter, therefore, is that during these precolonial times, West African women as a whole were never, as some scholars have argued, subjected to patriarchal forces that subjugated and subordinated them to men. Furthermore, West African women were not passive, but active participants in the making of their own histories. They played significant roles in their societies' religious, political, social, and economic processes; exhibiting control over key aspects therein. Indeed, West African women and the spiritual female principle, during the long precolonial period, had the power and right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience; in short, they had authority. Female political leaders were as common as male rulers; and women, and the female political principle, were central to the seamless functioning of their societies. This right, however, would be contested and tested during the colonial period, resulting in the systematic wrenching away of that power—the removal of women and the female spiritual principle from the avenues of power and authority that they had previously occupied. West African women and the female spiritual principle, did not however, take this sitting down. They employed, and evolved their precolonial strategies of enforcing obedience, i.e. precolonial strategies of resistance, into new strategies for fighting for their rights.

The West African World View

In order to appreciate the ways in which West African women wield authority, one must first understand how West Africans conceptualize their worlds, and what it means to exhibit power and authority therein. West African peoples identify two worlds—the human or physical/visible world, and the non-human or spiritual/invisible world. These worlds are not separate; but like two half circles, or two halves of a kolanut, when connected, make up one continuous, complete, and whole West African world. Therefore, one cannot understand the West African world, nor appreciate West African history by focusing exclusively on the human physical realm. To do this would be only to tell one half of West African history. Likewise, one cannot understand, nor appreciate, West African women's or gender history by focusing exclusively on the physical realm.

Indeed, West African cosmological structures—which operate within a cyclical movement of time or a continuum—demand that we engage with them in order to address the totality of West African experience. Thus, any informed study about female political authority in West Africa, must necessarily engage the female political spiritual principle—those unseen forces that are constructed by West Africans as female, such as goddesses, medicines, masked spirits, oracles; as well as women, (read: human beings), who have been endowed with spiritual idiosyncrasies to interpret this unseen spiritual world; and whose authority is personified in the work of priestesses, diviners, spirit mediums, healers, and prophetesses. It must consider the multiplicity of female manifestations in both worlds.

As mentioned earlier, West African people identify two worlds, the human or physical/visible world, which is made up of the heavens, earth, and waters; and the non-human or spiritual/invisible world. The non-human world is the world which we cannot see. These two worlds are not separate, but connected, and make up one continuous, complete and whole West Africa world. The West African world is cyclical, or never- ending. This explains the West African belief in the never-ending cycle of life and in reincarnation. They believe that one is born, grows old, dies, and then is reborn.

The visible world is a world of human beings, of natural forces and phenomena. The invisible world is a world of divine beings, of good and bad spirits, and departed ancestors. The visible and invisible worlds commune and interact with each other.

West Africans believe that there are spirits all around them. These spirits are too many for one to even know. Therefore, West Africans have mediums (diviners, priests, priestesses) to help explain the universe. These are special human beings who are endowed with spiritual idiosyncrasies.

The spiritual and human worlds are hierarchical. At the zenith of the spiritual world is God. God is neither male nor female. God is a combination and balance of male and female forces. Many West African peoples have different names for God. The Asante and Fanti of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, call God, *Nyame*. The Bambara of Mali, call God, *Jalang*; the Dogon of Burkina Faso and Mali, call the Great God, *Amma*. The Edo of Nigeria, call God, *Osa*. The Ewe of Benin, Ghana, and Togo, call God, *Mawu*. Among the Fon of Benin, God is called, *Mawu-Lisa*. The Ibibio of Nigeria, call God, *Abassi* and *Chuku*. The Igbo of Nigeria, call God, *Chukwu*, *Chineke*, and *Olisa bi n'igwé*. The Kpelle of Liberia, call God, *Yala*. The Mossi of Burkina Faso, call God, *Winnam*. The Nupe of Nigeria, call God, *Soko* and *Waqqa*. The Vai of Liberia, call God, *Kamba*; and the Yoruba of Nigeria call God, *Olodumare*, *Olorun*, or *Olofin-Orun*.



Alusi Ifejioku - The balance of femininity and masculinity of deities and shrines. Photograph by Daderot. Wikipedia. CC0.

God is too great to behold and therefore is assisted by a pantheon of more accessible lesser gods and goddesses. These gods and goddesses are autonomous, yet interdependent. They are personifications of natural phenomena. Thus, West Africans have goddesses of the lands, gods of lightning and thunder; and, goddesses of the streams and rivers. The Yoruba goddess of the waters and love is *oshun*. The Igbo goddess of the lands is *ani*, and the Fon goddesses of fertility and harvests is *legba*.

Moreover, the West African world view is reflective of a balance of male and female principles, meaning that when there is a male god, that male god is served by a female priestess. Likewise, when there is a female goddess, a male priest serves the goddess.

Underneath the gods and goddess are the oracles. Oracles in West Africa can be both male and female. They are forces that explain the past and predict the future. *Ibiniukpabi* also known as the Arochukwu Long Juju by the British was an oracle in whose power was felt throughout the Nigerian Niger Delta region. And so powerful was she that the British ordered a series of patrols to attempt to destroy her.

Ancestors are the dead, who have come back to life. They represent the never-ending cycle of life. When West Africans pour libation, they do so to invite their ancestors to be present during important times. In many West African nations, ancestors assume the physical form of masquerades or masked spirits.

The human West African world is essentially made up of two types of societies—centralized and small-scale societies. Kings and queens (queen mothers) rule over centralized societies; and male and female elders rule over small scale societies. In West Africa men and women take titles to demonstrate their achievement. Warriors in West Africa can be both male and female, including the Amazons warriors from ancient Dahomey kingdom. The work ethic is extremely important in West Africa. All able-bodied men and women work; and as such, there are no stay-at-home West African mothers. Those able-bodied men and women who choose not work in West Africa are considered useless people because they are not contributing to society. So disregarded are they that they feature at the very bottom of societal hierarchy; even more disregarded than West African slaves.

Politics in West Africa: The Precolonial Era

In West Africa, religion and politics have always been interconnected. This is reflected in the fact that most West African rulers—kings, queens, and chiefs—have ruled by divine right. Many are able to trace their ancestry back, through oral histories, to a semi-divine figure. The Nigerian Yoruba for instance believe that Oduduwa began life as a deity and then became the first King, or *Ooni* of Ife.

This section investigates the central and evolving place of West African women, as well as the female spiritual principle in precolonial politics by exploring the complexities of female political action in precolonial West Africa. It does this by dividing male and female politicking in precolonial West Africa into two broad analytical categories, namely, the human political constituency, and spiritual political constituency. The human political constituency is further divided into two complementary categories: female government and male government. Likewise, as discussed above, the spiritual political constituency is also divided into two: female government and male government.

Leadership and power were not alien to West Africa women in pre-colonial society. Their position was complementary, rather than subordinate, to that of men. Political power and authority was divided between West African men and women in what has been described as a dual-sex political system in which each sex managed and controlled their own affairs.

West African societies recognize two political constituencies, the spiritual and the human. The spiritual political constituency in West Africa consists of divinities, male and female functionaries who derived political power from an association with spiritual world. The human political constituency in West Africa is made up of executives who achieve political potential as human actors in physical realm.

Female Power in the Spiritual Political Constituency: Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria

The female spiritual political constituency in West Africa of medicines, goddesses, priestesses, masked spirits or masquerades, and diviners figured as political heads in Igbo communities. Female masked spirits featured prominently as judicial courts and judges of

moral conduct. They were the dead who had come back to life in the life of the community. For instance, among the eastern Nigerian Igbo, the female night masquerade, *Abere*, came out only at night and was said to carry all good luck and curses in her market pan. At the dead of night, she moved about acting as a night guard. Her presence was detected by a myriad of gruesome sounds—disagreeable music, screams, screeches and curses—that accompanied her wherever she went. *Abere* often sang an awe-inspiring song that charged Obukpa citizenry to behave themselves for—“*Abere* kills the husband, takes the wife captive and also takes captive the man who marries the woman whom she has taken captive.” She also visited homesteads and openly disclosed and lampooned the nefarious activities of particular community members. No secret was safe from *Abere*. In the precolonial era *Abere* operated as an integral part of the legal system and actively functioned as an agent of social control. She had the power and authority to order humans without challenge and her decrees and punishments were uncontested. She was a strict disciplinarian who handed down tough sentences and visited anyone whose activities were considered a threat to community wholeness with sickness—chronic sores and mental illness—and if necessary, death. *Abere* also functioned as a community court, pronouncing judgments in cases brought before her and collecting retributions from offenders. As an embodiment of a dead woman, *Abere* particularly promoted and protected women’s industry (marketing and trade especially), and men were said to fear her pronouncements.

Female Power in the Human Political Constituency: Queen Mothers in the Government and Politics of Asanteland, Ghana

Government and politics in Asanteland was organized along a complimentary basis between the sexes. Some scholars have called this a dual-sex political system. Therefore, the Asante, had male and female government. Queen mothers were women co-rulers of Asanteland. They derived their power from the matrilineal nature of social organization. The Asante have a saying that “it is woman who gave birth to a man, it is a woman who gave birth to a chief.” Queen mothers determined succession, inheritance, rights, obligations and citizenship.

Governmental Structure

At the very top of the centralized government were the *Asantehemma* or queen mother, and *Asantehene* or king. Under these leaders were the queen mothers and kings of the paramounts, the female, *Ohemaa* and the male, *Omanhene*. The *Ohemaa* was the co-ruler who had joint responsibility with the male chief in all affairs of the state. Under the divisional areas are the towns, which are governed by their own queen mother called *Oba Panin*, and male chief *Odikro*. Under the towns are the eight clans of Asanteland, which are governed by sub female chiefs called, *Abusuapanyin*.

Responsibilities and Obligations of the Queen Mothers

Asante Queen Mothers exercised authority in many domains. The most important duty however was her responsibilities with regards to the king. First and foremost, the Asante Queen Mother elects the king. She is the royal genealogist who determines the legitimacy of all claimants to the vacant stool. When a king's stool becomes vacant, the *Asantehemma* nominates a candidate for the Golden Stool. She has three chances to nominate a candidate who must be approved by the traditional council.



Asante Queen mother's tool. The Children's Museum of Indianapolis. Wikipedia. CC BY-SA 3.0.

The Queen Mother guides and advises the king, in all matters of state, tradition and religion. She ensures that taboos are not breached, and she is the only one who has the right to criticize and rebuke the King in public. She is a member of the governing council or the assembly of state; and the queen mother's presence is required whenever important matters of state are to be decided.

The Queen Mother also had judicial responsibilities. She has her own separate court in her palace where she was assisted by female counselors and functionaries. She hears all judicial cases involving the sacred oaths of the state and has independent jurisdiction over all domestic matters affecting women and members of the royal family. In certain cases, male litigants could apply to have their civil cases transferred from king's court to the queen mother's court. If she accepts them, then her judgment is final.

As Queen Mother, she is in charge of female governance, and brought women together to, for instance, clean the village. She performed important rituals for the community and was

present during important ceremonies like funerals. It was the Queen Mother who performed all initiation rites; and all young women had to be brought to the queen mother once they started menstruating. Unlike most women, the Queen Mother married has right to have affairs with men in the kingdom.

The Iyalode in Yoruba (Nigeria) Politics

The *Iyalode*, like the male chiefs of Yorubaland, was a chief in her own right. She had her own special insignia of office which consisted of a necklace of special beads, wide brimmed straw hats, and a shawl. The *Iyalode* had her own personal servants, special drummers, and bell ringers to call the women of the kingdom to attention.

The *Iyalode* title was all embracing. She was given jurisdiction over all women. She was given the title *Eiyelobinrin*, "mother of all women." The *Iyalode* was the chosen representative of all women. Her position was achieved, not inherited.

The *Iyalode* office was an elective office that had to have stamp of popular approval. The most important qualification was the *Iyalode's* proven ability as leader to articulate the feelings of the women of the kingdom. She controlled vast economic resources and was popular. Once appointed, the *Iyalode* became not only voice of women in government, but also, the queen who coordinated their activities.

The *Iyalode* settled quarrels in court, and met with women to determine what women's stand should be on such questions as the declaration of war, opening of new markets, and the administration of women at local levels.

As spokeswoman of the women, the *Iyalode* was given access to all positions of power and authority within the State. She exercised legislative, judicial, and executive powers with male chiefs in their council.

She had her own council of subordinate female chiefs who exercised jurisdiction over all matters that pertained to women. Her council of women chiefs were involved in the settlement of disputes between women, cleanliness of the markets, and other women's concerns. The *Iyalode* also controlled the markets in the kingdom. She was the honorary president-general for all women's societies in town. A great deal of what the *Iyalode* could achieve depended on the qualities of the *Iyalode*, her personality, dynamism, and political astuteness.

Igbo Women in Community Politics

There were two arms of government in the human political constituency in Igboland, the male and the female. Female government in Igboland was further divided into two arms, the *otu umuada* and the *otu iyomdi*.



Igbo ancestral shrine Onica Olona, Northcote Whitridge Thomas (1914), Anthropological report on the Ibo-speaking peoples of Nigeria, Part IV. Harrison and Sons. Wikipedia. Public domain.

The *otu umuada*

The *umuada* included all married, unmarried, divorced, and widowed daughters of the lineage or community. Their meetings were held on rotational basis between the communities in which they married. The result was the creation of communication networks of women throughout Igboland. These networks made solidarity between women from vast areas possible during the Women's War of 1929 or *Ogu Umunwanyi*.

The duties of the *otu umuada* were many:

1. They served as political pressure groups in their natal villages.
2. They created unifying influences between their natal lineages and marital lineages.
3. They settled disputes, intra lineage disputes and disputes between natal villages and villages in which they were married.

4. They performed rites, rituals, and sacrifices for the community, including the final absolution rites for new brides. On the day in question, the bride-to-be would confess all her wrong doings to the *otu umuada* who would then purify her.
5. The *otu umuada* also performed purification rituals for lineage houses and other areas that were considered polluted, so that the gods or goddesses would not leash out their wrath on the people, but instead, provide them with good health, bounty and offspring.
6. The *otu umuada* heard confessions from adulterous wives and performed purification rituals for them.

The *otu inyomdi*

The *otu inyomdi* were wives of the village. Their leader, *anasi*, was the most senior wife in the community. She was the wife who was married longest in the community. The *anasi* was the medium through which the women could voice their concerns and protect their interests as wives, mothers, farmers, and traders.

The duties of the *otu inyomdi* was many:

1. They helped lineage wives in times of stress and illness.
2. They heard and pronounced punishments in cases involving husbands who mistreated their wives.
3. They made sure that the village stream and market place was clean.
4. They made decisions involving the planting and harvesting of crops.
5. They took care of animals that had destroyed their crops.

Women's Assembly

From time to time in the life of the community, the *otu umuada and otu inyomdi* came together as the women's assembly to discuss issues that affected them as women in the community.

Ogbo associations or Age Grade associations

Age grades were groups of women of same age, who came together in order to provide incentives toward ambition and hard work. They performed religious, social and political functions within the community; provided training for young people in group life; and provided avenues for socialization and companionship which were very useful and integrative factors in society. In Igboland, unmarried lineage daughters formed themselves into various *ogbo* associations. One of them was the *okpo ntu* and their duties included cleaning and maintaining the village latrines and garbage dumps; performing communal labor services such as house building and associated tasks; and, organizing themselves into

dance groups, which provided forums where girls could build strong and lasting relationships with other girls in the group.

Title Taking

In Igbo land status was achieved, not ascribed and a woman's status was determined by her own achievements, not those of her husband. Igbo women could improve their social standing by taking titles. These titles included the *ikenga*, *inachi* and *inwene*. Titled women were accorded a lot of respect and those who showed leadership capabilities could often hold political office.

The omu and her cabinet

The *omu* and her cabinet of titled women councilors, *ilogu*, were charged with take care of the female section of the community. The market place was the Igbo woman's domain. It was held every four days. The *omu* and her cabinet oversaw the market and defined its rules and regulations. The *omu* and her cabinet fixed the prices of market goods and defined market prohibitions. They acted as a court in the judging of cases and persecuting of wrong doers. The *omu* appointed a police woman called the *awo*. The *awo* implemented the fixed price regulations in the markets. She made sure market taboos were observed, and arrested wrongdoers and brought them before the *omu* court. Market taboos included, no fighting in the market, palm produce should not to be sold in bunches, but separated first; and last but not least, peppers should be boiled first before being sold.

Strategies of female resistance in precolonial West Africa

In the precolonial era, West African women gathered together to vocalize their feelings about situations that affected them. These meeting grounds also served as support networks that women could depend upon to exact punishment of offending men.

What exactly would women do? First, they would request that whatever objectionable behavior stop. If it did not, the women's groups would serve as 'pressure groups' which would exact punishments on the guilty party or parties. West African women's group tactics included: the use of strikes, boycotts, force, nudity as protest, and "making war" or "sitting on a man." "Making war" or "sitting on a man," was the toughest measure that West African women employed for punishing wrongdoers and enforcing compliance to their rules and regulations.

Strikes and boycotts often meant that West African women would ignore their household or marital responsibilities. For instance, West African women could "boycott" or abstain from sexual intercourse with their husbands. J. S. Harris reports on a case when a community of Igbo women repeatedly asked their clansmen to clear the paths leading to the market.

When they did not, all the women in the village refused to cook for their husbands until they did. The boycott worked because all the women of the village cooperated. Husbands could not ask their mothers or sisters for food.

A West African woman could enlist the support of other women in “making war” on an individual in a number of ways. The aggrieved woman could lodge a complaint at the market place or at one of the women’s gatherings. They could let out a traditional cry of grievance which would echo the village over. All the village women would gather at a common ground, the market place or the village square. Palm twigs would be passed around from woman to woman a symbol of the war to come. The women would dress in war gear, their heads bound with ferns and their faces smeared with ashes. They would then move with war-like precision, and gather at the offender’s compound. Once there, they would dance and sing derisive songs that outlined their grievances. Some of the songs called the manhood of the offender into question. They would bang on the offender’s door with their cooking pestles. Then they would skirt the offender’s compound and cover it with mud. On some occasions the women would destroy the house. They would pull the wrongdoer out and rough him up. They would surround him and then take turns in symbolically “sitting on” him.

A man thus reprimanded, stood humiliated in the presence of all his peers. He could be so punished if he repeatedly mistreated his wife, violated market rules, or allowed his animals to destroy women’s crops.

Effect of Colonialism on West African Women’s Political Structures

Colonialism in West Africa allowed a foreign power to rule West African people without their permission. The European colonialists were able to take over West African land through military conquest. Colonialism did not value the world of the colonized. It divided the colonized society and rendered all its members weak.

Colonialism marked beginning of end of any equality between sexes in village and politics. Women suffered the greatest loss of power. They were relegated to the background and could no longer take part in decision making. In non-centralized societies, opportunistic young men who befriended colonial masters were chosen to fill leadership positions as warrant chiefs, and the cases that previously went before women’s organizations, were now taken to the colonial courts. Except for Ahebi Ugbabe of colonial Nigeria, there were no women warrant chiefs, or members of courts. Women were not made court messengers, interpreters, clerks, or police women.

The warrant chiefs were very corrupt. They constantly helped themselves to women’s agricultural produce and animals; and forced Igbo women into marriage without allowing them the customary right to refuse them.

Women's political organization lost prestige and members as their political and religious functions were replaced by colonial rule and Christianity. Clinics and foreign drugs replaced the need for rituals and sacrifices that women's organizations undertook for welfare of village.

The colonial governments banned self-help and the use of force by individuals or groups to bring wrong doers to justice. They also banned "sitting on a man." The colonial environment did not allow for group solidarity amongst women, nor did it provide provision for dispersed leadership or shared power.

The colonial masters laid claim to African land, privatizing and commercializing it, thus obstructing the traditional system of communal land ownership. They introduced crown grants which allowed men who wanted to purchase or own land to do so. The system not only made women's ownership of land impossible, but restricted access to it for farming purposes.

Colonialism eroded many of the economic avenues women had in traditional society. With the introduction of cash cropping for world markets, men were increasingly employed to work on farms, overlooking women, traditional cultivators, in the process. Colonialism brought about the importation of European goods, thus ruining traditional price fixing systems, another woman-controlled sector.

With colonialism came Christianity and the introduction of western ideas and culture. The new faith attracted only a few converts to begin with. When West African women realized that western education was the key to political leadership, many more joined, so that their children would be allowed to attend missionary school.

Church and school were synonymous, with classes held in church building. Girls had less access than boys to missionary education. These schools generally provided opportunities for education in vocations that were considered male, like carpentry and printing, thus excluding women in the process. The few girls that did attend missionary school were confined entirely to the private life of family. They were taught cooking, cleaning, child care, and sewing—the necessary domestic skills for Christian marriage and motherhood in their minds. This, unlike preparation which enabled them in pre-colonial culture to be involved in both private and public domains.

Prejudices against West African women by the missionaries was in keeping with the Victorian ideology that a woman's place was in home. They believed that women were frail minded and incapable of mastering the so-called masculine subjects. Moreover, Christian marriage introduced the title of "Mrs." Which replaced the tradition of West African women going by their mother's first name, further diffusing the validation of women.

The Effect Colonialism on Igbo Women—The Women's War or Ogu Umunwanyi of 1929

Women "made war" in 1929 to call attention to a number of situations that adversely affected their interests as women.

1. They believed that the British colonial government would institute direct taxation on them. In 1927, the British had instituted direct taxation on men. It was rumored that women would be taxed next.
2. They “made war” in reaction to dramatic falling of palm oil prices due to the world depression. Food pricing was an Igbo woman-controlled venture; and before the institution of direct taxation on men in 1927, the official price of palm oil was between 12 and 13 shillings. The official price of mixed oil was between 9 and 10 shillings for a four-gallon tin. The official price of palm kernels was between 7 and 8 shillings for 50 pounds. In 1928, the price of palm oil fell to 7 shillings 5 pence. By 1929, the price fell some more to 5 shillings 11 pence

What did the women do? They decided to negotiate, which is a method that the women employed in pre-colonial times to right any wrong done them. Therefore, on December 30, 1929, Igbo women held a mass meeting. They met with the District Officer and representatives of United Africa Company, John Holt, Russell’s etc. They demand a higher price for palm oil and kernels: “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 tin for oil and 9 shillings a bushel for kernels.”

3. They “made war” because of the high price of imported goods. In 1928, the duty on tobacco rose from 1 shilling 6 pence to 2 shillings in 1929.
4. They “made war” because of the change in the method of purchase from measure to weight instituted by the colonial government. Igbo women were convinced that they were being cheated.
5. Igbo women “made war” because the government had introduced an inspection of the women’s produce.
6. Igbo women were enraged at the persecutions, extortions and corruption of the warrant chiefs and Native Court members.

And last, but not least,

7. Igbo women felt totally disregarded and disrespected by the colonial officials.

It was these factors that fueled Igbo women’s anger, presenting a need to put the British colonialists in order.

What happened? In Oloko area of Bende Division, the acting District Officer Mr. Cook asks warrant chief, Okogu to start counting adult males, females, children and animals. Warrant chief Okogu assigns this task to Emeruwa, who is his messenger. On November 23, 1929, Emeruwa goes to Nwanyereuwa’s house to ask her for this count. An angry Nwanyereuwa screams to him: “was your mother counted?” They seize each other by the throats, and a scuffle ensues. Nwanyereuwa raises an alarm. Coincidentally the women meeting at the market, to discuss this tax rumor. Nwanyereuwa bursts in and tells them what happened. This is an overt sign that they are indeed going to be taxed. Women thus send word to other women by sending palm twigs to women in neighboring villages asking them to come to Oloko. The significance of this action represented the war to come. These women in turn send palm fronds to other women.

On November 24, the Oloko market is filled with women from far and near:

One Sunday an alarm was raised, our attention was called to the fact the case had occurred, that is to say, what we had been anticipating had occurred. We all started that night for Oloko to see what had happened there.

Once gathered, the women trooped to Niger Delta Pastorate Mission to demonstrate against Emeruwa:

they danced and danced outside the Mission compound all night, eating and drinking palm wine and singing that Nwanyereuwa had been told to count her goats, sheep and people.

From the Mission, they marched to Okogu's compound, to ask him to explain why he had ordered them to pay tax. They ended up storming his compound, looting his property, and attacking his wives and servants. The method that the women employed was the method that they employed in the precolonial area to "make war," or "sit on a man."

On November 26, the women went to Bende Divisional Headquarters to report the assault on Nwanyereuwa. The next day, Igbo women of Bende, Aba and Owerri Division assembled at Oloko, and refused to disperse until the acting District Officer Cook informed them that they would not be taxed. The women also insist that Okogu is arrested and removed as warrant chief.

According to District Officer Captain Hill who had just returned from leave:

The women numbering over 10,000 were shouting and yelling round the office in a frenzy. They demanded his cap of office, which I threw to them and it met the same fate as a fox's carcass thrown to a pack of hounds. The station between the office and the Epsom and just round the office resembled Epsom Downs on Derby Day. The crowd extended right away through Bende Village and the pandemonium was beyond all belief. It took me two hours to get an opportunity of sending the wire asking for more police.

The women left with written declaration that they will not be taxed. Okogu was arrested and sentenced to 2 years in prison.

The colonial government thought that women would be appeased by this arrest. The reverse, however, occurred. News of Okogu's imprisonment encouraged women who believed that they had scored a victory, and as a result, they stormed village after village.

On December 12, they invaded Nguru, Okpuala, and Ngor and destroyed colonial court buildings and burnt all records. To prevent further destruction, the British colonial government deployed a mobile striking force. On December 13, colonial government sent dispatches out to Aba, Port Harcourt, Mbosi and Owerri. In Calabar Province, Ikot Ekpene, Abak and Opobo were attacked. Fire was opened and there were a number of casualties.

All in all, over fifty women are killed and fifty were wounded. The effects were not positive for women. Politically, the British outlawed the warrant chief system and replace it with the

“massed bench” system, which put a number of judges in power instead of one. The British also outlawed self-help and “making war” or “sitting on a man”

Additionally, the colonial government sent a slew of anthropologists and ethnographers into the field to study Igbo political systems in order to make sure that nothing like the Women’s war ever happened again. The British sent colonial government anthropologists like C. K. Meek, Sylvia Leith-Ross, Margaret Green, and Ida Woods to study the Igbo. Thus, by the end of 1934, over 200 intelligence reports had been published.

Nwando Achebe