

The Women's War of 1929

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A History of Anti-Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria*
Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock

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*A History of Anti-Colonial
Resistance in Eastern Nigeria*

Toyin Falola

Adam Paddock

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*To
Gloria Emeagwali, Gloria Chuku, and Anene Ejikeme
for their contributions to gender and Nigerian studies*

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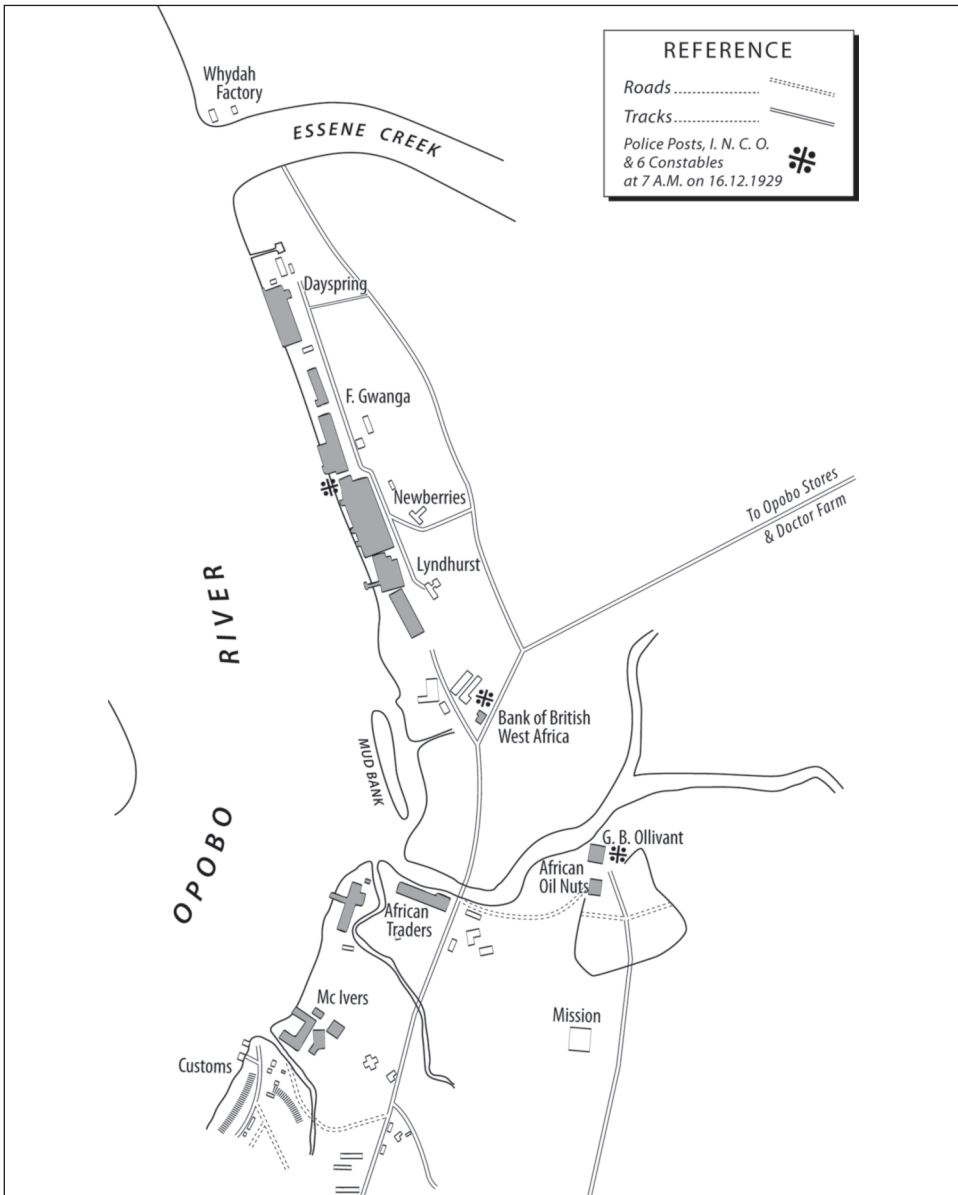
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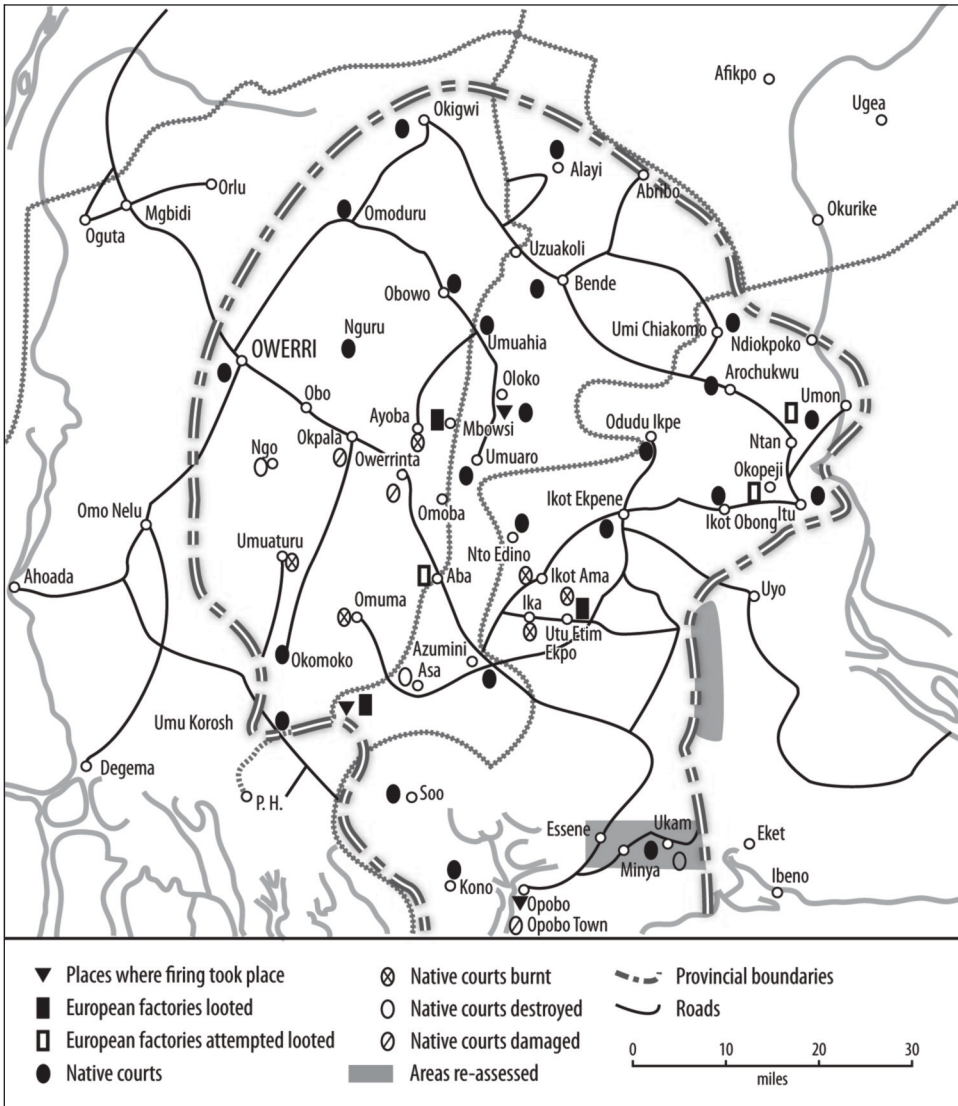
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Series Editor's Preface

The *Carolina Academic Press African World Series*, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve both as reference works and as readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies will address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series intends to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

Toyin Falola
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Preface and Acknowledgments

The Women's War of 1929 holds an iconic place in the history of the Igbo and Ibibio people of southeastern Nigeria. It has been a focal point for gender studies, nationalism, resistance, and anthropology. Owing to the violent confrontations associated with the Women's War and the widespread opposition of the women to colonial rule, the aftermath spawned both a change in the political system (in 1933) and an immediate influx of anthropologists to study a region that appeared to evade the understanding of British officials. Gender studies related to the peoples of southeastern Nigeria owe much to this early generation of researchers. The themes of resistance and nationalism produced an extensive bibliography; however, the Women's War of 1929 stands out as a special event, as it dramatically portrays widespread and organized opposition to colonialism at an early period of imperial governance.

The Women's War occupies a prominent position in the historiography of Nigeria, and has led to much discussion of its meaning, causes, intentions, and outcomes. Chapter 1 deals with the historical arguments in some detail. The chapters that follow seek to achieve several general objectives. Whereas there are a few books and numerous articles on the Women's War, a synthesis of the arguments is needed. The narratives written by early researchers including A. E. Afigbo and Harry Gailey need to be reconciled with the later focus on the cultural and social context in which the women lived and acted. In addition, most accounts of the Women's War tend to evaluate rather than narrate the events, deferring to the narrative account published by the British government in 1930; however, this report is not readily available to the general reader, lacks historical and cultural context, and recounts the events from a non-African perspective. Therefore the chapters that follow offer both a narrative history and an evaluation that synthesizes historical narrative with current cultural knowledge of the time period.

This volume advances research on the Women's War in three ways. First, the initial chapters denote a trend of social change but also continuity in women's opposition to imperialism. Whereas the Women's War may represent an apex of women's organized opposition, it was by no means the end of their actions. Chapter 5 examines how women in eastern Nigeria in later decades not only persisted in their opposition, but they demanded many of the same changes women sought during the Women's War of 1929. Second, whereas several scholars have noted the symbolic meaning of specific practices employed during the events, the symbolism of the women's actions also reinforces the argument that women sought to remove the British from political power. The symbolic or coded messages women sent to British officials are reflected in the chapter titles but are also evaluated in some detail with regard to specific and repeated actions by women during the movement. The third main argument in the book relates to how historians have evaluated the primary sources. The primary sources are products of specific events that followed the termination of the Women's War in January 1930, and must be understood in that historical context. Political maneuverings by Igbo and Ibibio leaders along with

local communities having prior knowledge to the purpose for the Commission of Inquiry (a commission established to determine the cause of the Women's War) led to important information gathering concerning the meaning of the Women's War and its immediate aftermath.

The book is divided into two parts. The first includes a narrative overview and evaluation of the Women's War that addresses African and British perspectives of the events. Relaying both perspectives on the events illustrates how viewpoint influences historical narratives but more importantly, it explains the extent of British misunderstandings of the Women's War. The second part begins with an overview of the primary documents and how the documents have been used to write narratives. A specific emphasis is placed on the Women's War documents and several important problems the sources pose to the researcher. This is followed by a selection of documents and excerpts. Also included is a series of helpful appendices. They include lists of casualties, information on participants in the Commission of Inquiry, and a list of the Igbo days of the week.

The first chapter focuses on historical debates related to the Women's War as well as general theories associated with imperial historiography. The focus on taxation during the events of 1929 opens up a discussion on the role of imperialism in terms of economic motivations—a long-running debate that thrived in the 1970s and 1980s. Theories regarding resistance, collaboration, social change, gender, and nationalism each receive attention. Chapter 2 provides important background information concerning women and concepts of gender in precolonial southeastern Nigeria. This information contextualizes why Igbo women opposed colonialism and explains to some extent why women opposed colonial authority the way that they did. The chapter also narrates, from the perspective of Igbo women, the confrontation at Oloko that most historians consider to be the beginning of the Women's War. The chapter shifts between the narrative at Oloko and specific relevant cultural information.

The third chapter, in a flashback format, begins with a background to British colonial conquest in southeastern Nigeria. This chapter explains the developments from a British perspective along with an interpretation of the confrontation at Oloko from the view of colonial administrators. The chapter places the Women's War in the context of general challenges that faced the colonial administration in terms of financing and governance as well as the decision to merge three regions in West Africa into one political entity, the present nation of Nigeria. The chapter also relays the development of the warrant chief system, the role of forced labor in the colonial arrangement, and how early tax assessments influenced the actions of women in 1929.

Chapter 4 narrates the events of the Women's War in some detail with a focus on the Bende, Owerri, and Opobo regions. It also introduces one of the central debates concerning the Women's War: does the label "Women's War" or the British term "Aba Riots" better describe what happened, and why do Igbo women and British colonial officers label the event differently? Chapter 4 suggests that whereas Igbo women across regions supported each other in the attacks, they might have done so for a variety of reasons or in reaction to a variety of effects of colonial rule on their lives. It also deals with several themes in the Women's War and some problems the primary documents pose for the interpretation of the women's motivations.

Chapter 5 deals with the conclusion of the Women's War and the response of colonial authorities to the events. The narrative continues with an analysis of the post-Women's War period in which the British government issued a series of collective punishment

inquiries and also a region-wide commission of inquiry. It also addresses the legacy of the war in terms of protests that occurred in the 1930s. This chapter illustrates how the testimony of the women has to be interpreted with caution because the circumstances in which they testified did not offer a great deal of freedom. It does this by showing how the women's tactics may have changed from one period to another. They had to consider how their testimonies would be understood by colonial officials as well as their communities, and different conditions required different strategies to achieve the best possible outcomes.

The historiography of the Women's War of 1929 owes much to the work of cultural studies, without which our understanding of the events would be superficial at best. Yet the documents related to the Women's War can also be a source for a better understanding of life under colonial rule and the ways in which culture and society were experiencing dynamic changes. Women discussed a wide range of topics, especially at the Commission of Inquiry, including economics, religion, education, and politics. They expressed concerns about the future of their children, the limited benefits of education and unjust practices related to marriage and bride price. As much as the Women's War was an isolated incident in one region of the Nigerian Protectorate, global themes abound, such as the worldwide economic depression, the role of education and religion in colonial Africa, and the effects of imperial conquest.

Chapter 6 opens the second part of the volume and deals with some broad issues related to interpreting primary sources and writing historical narratives. It is meant as a guide for students, and mirrors some of the guidelines included at the beginning of most document collections; however, it includes information specific to the documents that follow. The chapter offers some basic information about written sources as well as an overview of some of the techniques historians use to evaluate sources. The chapter also gives a brief overview of some theories historians use and why they are important to history. Or, in other words, beyond the basic narrative, why history and historical debate are important to our understanding of the past and how that understanding relates to the present. It accomplishes these goals by illustrating the relationship between facts, themes, and theories.

The documents in the second part are divided into four groups. The first group is comprised of messages sent between colonial officials regarding the events of the Women's War as they unfolded. These documents are mostly military or administrative reports from district officers. The second group of documents contains testimonies from a variety of collective inquiries the colonial government used to determine punishments for villages or Native Court districts, with the goal of preventing additional movements. The third group of documents is the largest, and includes excerpts from the Commission of Inquiry held in the spring of 1930. The final group of documents comes from colonial correspondence related to post-1930 disturbances; these documents show some of the lasting effects of the Women's War on the colonial administration and continued protests by women. The introduction preceding the document collection explains how the documents were chosen as well as how they have been organized. It is important to remember that the documents have been preserved in their original form. All grammatical and spelling errors have been carefully maintained from the original. These errors in many ways reflect the conditions under which the documents were hastily produced in 1929 and 1930.

Documents related to the Women's War of 1929 are quite voluminous in terms of the total number of pages. The documents included in the second part of this volume are

meant to represent the full scope of the issues and major events related to the Women's War. Whereas the documents are too many to include in full, they were selected so as to represent all of the relevant themes. Excerpts from the Commission of Inquiry were specifically selected to reflect the voices of the women and illustrate the large number of themes related to the Women's War. An introduction to the collection of documents explains some of the specific criteria governing their selection. The documents possess value beyond the historical narrative of the Women's War. They portray the broad issues at stake in the early part of the twentieth century but whenever possible the individual voices of the women reflect individual concerns about how imperialism affected their lives. It is these individual snapshots that illuminate the lived experiences of the women and men involved.

Some usage of terms may at first appear haphazard or inconsistent; however, terminology in part illustrates the difficulties in drawing definitive lines between ethnic groups. Whenever possible we delineate the ethnic group involved in specific events during the Women's War. More often than not, these labels should be taken as representative of the majority. When the term *Ibibio* is used, it generally reflects the women living in the vicinity of *Opobo* and the neighboring ethnic groups. Trying to distinguish between each ethnic group becomes a tedious and unwieldy process and in some respects does not accurately portray the common complaints of women in the region. When the term "women" is used, it refers to all women indigenous to the region. In the few instances where European women are involved, it is clearly stated. Because the documents used to write the Women's War were written by British officers, the term *Igbo* women reflects how the British categorized the group of women and it is possible women of other ethnic groups participated in the activities or held the same opinions.

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Editor's Note:

All documents have been reproduced exactly as the originals. The editors intentionally reproduced the grammatical errors and typos found in the original documents without making corrections.