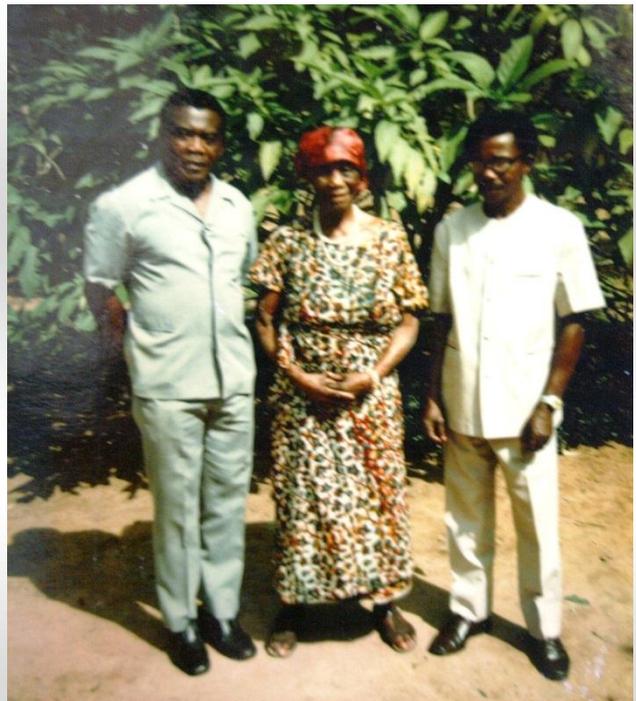


1929 and 1946: Nigerian Women Resist Colonial Laws

In 1929, thousands of southeastern Nigerian women handed the British colonial administration its first major challenge when they organized a massive revolt against taxation policies imposed on market women. The rebellion was a prime instance of feminist and anti-colonial crusades several years before such rhetoric became a part of common parlance. Gathering in large numbers at various administrative offices, the women questioned the new tax laws and confronted power-crazed “warrant chiefs” that had been appointed to serve as local agents of the British through the system of indirect rule. Effectively using song and dance as vehicles of ridicule and denunciation, they forced some of the chiefs to resign. As the protests gathered momentum, the women became more aggressive, attacking and looting European owned stores and banks as well as native courts managed by British officials, some of which they burned to the ground. The colonial police were eventually called in to intervene and fired shots into the crowds, killing several women. It is estimated that about 25,000 women participated in this revolt, which compelled colonial authorities to revoke their intended imposition of taxes and to significantly clip the powers of the warrant chiefs.



Late 1970s, Mma Elizabeth Effiong is flanked by her two sons, Mr. Michael Effiong (older son) on her left and Major General Philip Effiong on her right. She participated in the 1929 southeastern women’s revolt.

Many documents and reports on this insurrection by southeastern Nigerian women erroneously refer to the event as having been spearheaded and carried out by Ibo women, particularly Aba women. The truth is that women from various, non-Ibo, ethnic groups across this region of Nigeria played key roles in planning, organizing and executing the operation.

But even after the rebellion was over, the colonial administration, with the cooperation of its Nigerian cohorts, went on a widespread campaign aimed at hunting down and subjecting the women activists to various forms of punishment and victimization. So virulent was this reprisal that my grandfather, John Effiong, fearing the safety of his family, eventually fled Aba, an Ibo city where the women protesters had been especially active, and relocated his family to Ikot-Ekpene in present Akwa Ibom State. His decision was informed by the fact that his wife, Elizabeth Effiong (my grandmother) had played a prominent role in the uprising.

17 years later, in 1946, a similar uprising began in Abeokuta in western Nigeria (Egbaland), when market women objected to arbitrary colonial taxes and the apparent failure of their traditional rulers to address their grievances. Some of the methods allegedly adopted to force women to pay taxes were degrading and entailed beating them up and searching their houses. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a teacher and mother of celebrated musician, Fela, subsequently established the highly effective, Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) – estimated to be 20,000 members strong – which organized massive, protracted anti-tax demonstrations, some of which were held outside the palace of the Egba King (Alake of Egbaland), Oba Ademola II. In spite of being challenged by a police force that utilized teargas among other aggressive methods, the women remained steadfast and in the end their demands were met, leading to the abdication of the King in 1949.

These uprisings were among the earliest campaigns against British rule in Nigeria and West Africa during the colonial era. The women were armed with their conviction, united by their determination and motivated by a sense of dignity and justice. Otherwise, they were technically powerless since they were still deemed socially inferior and subservient to their menfolk. A significant number of them were not formally educated and did not have the privilege of engaging the colonial master diplomatically, whether at home or abroad. Still, these women were trailblazers in resisting colonial domination and are rarely recognized in historical accounts that continue to glorify men whose later impacts, though noble, were heavily facilitated by education, status and gender.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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