

# **Revolutionary African Women: A Review Essay of *The Women's War of 1929: A History of Anti- Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria***

by

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A review essay on *The Women's War of 1929: A History of Anti-Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2011, 914 pp., ISBN 978-1-59460-931-2) by Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock.

There is an Amazonian puzzle in Africana Womanist Studies. The puzzle is that of the extraordinarily disproportionate revolutionary militancy by Africana women in history compared to women from other cultural backgrounds and sometimes compared to the relative subordination of African men to intolerable oppressions that the women rose against en-masse. My doctoral dissertation on *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System* touched upon this puzzle and I wish that a book like this was available to me back then to support my intuitive interpretation of this peculiar puzzle.

History reminds us that the female Amazon warriors of Dahomey in the present-day republic of Benin, used to mock the male soldiers of the defeated slave raiders by ironically chanting that the opposing army was made up of women. Harriet Tubman was not content to escape from slavery the way most individual male escapees did (except for some men who returned to rescue their own families), but she took the repeated risk to conduct thousands of enslaved Africans to freedom even with a hefty bounty placed on her head by the plantocracy. At the height of the power-drunk reign of terror by Shaka Zulu, it was his sister that gave the order for him to be put out of his misery and thereby save the lives of more people who were at the risk of being massacred by him. Fast forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and we encounter the puzzle that British colonial officials were able to impose taxes on Igbo and Ibibio men, but when they attempted to extend the taxation to women, the women declared war on colonialism and its native collaborators.

Similarly Taxation without representation was imposed on Yoruba men but it took women led by Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti to depose one of the autocratic chiefs in opposition to the harassment of women for taxes. Again, Kikuyu men were made to perform forced labor but when the policy was extended to Kikuyu women. The result was an uprising by the women, albeit under the leadership of Mr. Harry Thuku, Chief of Women. The apartheid regime in South Africa relatively succeeded in imposing the dehumanizing pass laws on African men but when they tried to extend it to African women they were told by masses of women that when you strike women, you strike the rock. More recently men in Liberia fought a senseless war for years before the women organized to 'pray the devil back to hell' and helped end the war. In all these cases, African womanism (Hudson-Weems, 1998) was never separatist by simply advocating on behalf of women alone but insisted on advocating for the whole community quite unlike the gender separatism of Western feminism.

Contrary to the suggestion by Isikalu (1988) that the militancy of African women is evidence of the cowardice or complacency of African men in the face of oppression, *The Women's War of 1929* assembles and introduces original archival documents of the testimonies recorded during the commission of enquiry to help future researchers to comprehend that the women's struggles were not isolated but were articulated with the general struggles of the people against an unjust colonial exploitation and oppression as I concluded in my book on *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System: Towards the Decolonisation of Victimisation*. According to Falola and Paddock, the rallying cry of the women in 1929 was Ohadum, a term that the authors mistranslated as 'women of all communities' but which literally means in Igbo, the entire community, not just the women. More on the authenticity of translations of Igbo terms in the book later in this review.

The book is a treasure trove of archival material based on original colonial sources of records capped with insightful introductory, theoretical and methodological discourses that future researchers would be thankful to access in one volume. The main argument of the authors is that the Women's War was not a 'riot' as the colonial officials wanted to belittle it. The events went far beyond Aba contrary to the arrogant or wishful delimitation of the war with the caption 'Aba Riots' by colonial officials. Also the struggle was not only economic but also cultural because the grievances of the women were not only about economic issues but also about the encroachment of colonialism into what Bernard and Agozino (2012) identified as free and inner spaces that the people as a whole resolved to create, defend and expand.

The authors present a blow-by-blow account of how the war was initiated and how the women organized themselves democratically from town to town to mount an unprecedented struggle that astonished the colonial administrators. What is relatively missing is a political economy perspective which could have sharpened the critique of imperialism by the authors instead of leaving the analysis largely at the level of culture and economics.

Although the authors recognized that the Igbo and the Ibibio were far more democratic than the colonial officials who regarded them as primitive gave them credit for, the authors preferred a gendered perspective that saw Igbo society as a patriarchy governed by a gerontocracy of male elders and speculated about the possibility that the women used secret societies to organize their resistance even when the evidence points to open democratic community mobilization in far-from-secret market places. A political economy approach such as that of Walter Rodney deserves to be cited by the authors if only to provide the basic detail that they alluded to repeatedly; that the prices of produce were declining while the prices of manufactures were sky-rocketing in what Rodney characterized as the double-squeeze of imperialism. The authors failed to provide the comparative prices but Rodney did exactly that in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* which I quoted in *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System* in my analysis of the Women's War of 1929 thus:

'Prices of palm products were severely reduced by the UAC and other trading companies in Nigeria in 1929, while the cost of living was rising due to increased charges for imported goods. In 1924 the price for palm oil had been 14/ per gallon. This fell to 7/ in 1928 and to 1/.2d in the following year ...a yard of khaki which was 3/ in pre-war days went up to 16/; a bundle of iron sheets formerly costing 30/ went up to 100/ etc.' (Rodney, 1972: 172-173; quoted in Agozino, 1997: 36).

The book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the Women's War and its consequences with five engaging chapters. The first chapter situates the Women's War in historical debates. Here the authors guide readers to a useful background understanding of the policy of indirect rule that the British Colonial administrators were forced to adopt to cope with the fact that they did not have enough trained British officials who understood the local customs of the people enough to attempt to rule the colonized directly.

Readers interested in this background policy should consult Mahmud Mamdani's new book of Harvard University open lectures, *Define and Rule*, on how the policy of indirect rule was based on the manual, *Ancient Law*, that Henry Sumner Maine wrote for the colonial administration of India and which was later applied to Africa.

However, Mamdani failed to extend his analysis to the Women's War that opposed indirect rule in Nigeria but chose to focus on the work of the radical Nigerian historian, Yusufu Bala Usman, on Northern Nigeria. As Falola and Paddock indicated, Adiele Afigbo delivered the definitive study of *The Warrant Chiefs* in 1972. The authors argue that Lugard saw the Igbo as primitive compared to the Northerners and the Westerners in Nigeria because the Igbo did not have chiefs that would make it easy for them to be subjected to the system of indirect rule. So after the amalgamation of Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria colonies in 1914, Lugard proceeded to attempt to civilize the Igbo by appointing Warrant Chiefs over the radically republican Igbo. Not surprisingly, the individuals who accepted to collaborate with the British colonial project as Warrant Chiefs were those who lacked moral leadership in the community while the people rallied as one to oppose the assault on democracy.

One of the first assignments given to the Warrant Chiefs was to assess the wealth of the people for the purpose of taxation and soon after they enumerated the men, they imposed taxes on them. Then they attempted to count the women and the women refused to be counted partly because it is an affront to the creator God, Chineke, to count people as if they were objects or to count their wealth as if to brag about it or whine about having too little. The authors identified this as the cultural root of the Women's War that combined with economic causes to fuel the struggle. The authors explored whether the term, '*Ogu Umunwany*', translates accurately as Women's War as a European scholar contended or whether the struggle did not have all the characteristics of a war as an Igbo scholar argued. They reached a compromise by adopting the perspective of an Ibibio scholar who characterized the struggles as uprisings. Here is another opportunity that the authors missed by not using oral traditions as a source to complement the primary and secondary sources: asking Igbo speakers to translate *Ogu* as opposed to *Agha* could have revealed that the Igbo scholar had a point when he said that *Ogu*, fight, battle or struggle, is not exactly *Agha* or war in Igbo language. The authors could have asked Ibibio speakers to translate the term their women had used to name the struggle - *Ekong Iban* – to see if it literally means women's war (Isikalu, 1988; Agozino, 1997; Falola and Aderinto, 2010).

Chapter two covers the origin of the battles in Oloko town. The Warrant Chief of the town, Okugo, had commissioned a man who attended the same church as he did, an unemployed missionary schoolteacher, to assess women for taxation. His attempt to count the belongings of a woman known as Nwanyeruwa (probably a nick-name like the pseudo-names of most of the women in the official documentation, unknown to the authors and the colonial officials alike despite their suspicion that the women did not reveal everything during the enquiries for fear of retaliation) while she was processing palm oil, resulted in a 'fight' (or assault by the teacher) following which the woman raised an alarm and the women of Oloko town rallied to support her the way they would traditionally 'sit on a man' who beat a woman as part of traditional Igbo social control.

The authors continue this narrative of resistance by covering in chapter three the history of Igbo military resistance to British conquest from 1900 to 1914 especially during the Ekumeku war which the authors attributed to resistance by Western-Niger Igbo slave traders, an ideological claim that Chinweizu, author of *The West and the Rest of Us*, would dismiss in the case of the expedition to destroy the Long Juju in Arochukwu as part of the efforts to control the lucrative trade in palm oil long after the abolition of slave trade but still claimed as an effort to suppress slave trade by the British. Falola and Paddock indirectly suggest that the failure of the military Ekumeku uprising to prevent British colonization of Igbo land is probably part of the reason why the Women's War adopted predominantly non-violent means of struggles.

Chapters four and five record the amazing success of the women in dethroning all the Warrant Chiefs and even having some of them arrested, tried and convicted of assaults on women. Furthermore, the women demanded that neither women nor men should pay taxes or stall levies in the markets, that prices of produce should be raised and prices of imported goods reduced and that they did not want any Warrant Chief to be appointed over their communities unless they are the ones who elect such persons and hold them accountable in line with the traditional democratic system that the British were eager to overturn and contrary to the picture of Igbo society as patriarchal and gerontocratic as painted by the authors.

Here the authors indirectly reveal that the strategy of the Occupy Movement may have been perfected by African women in their war against colonial exploitation and oppression. Like the Occupy Movement, the Women's war was largely non-violent, consisting of mainly camping and singing all night long to invoke the anger of the ancestors against the offenders, until they were attacked and some of their members were arrested, sexually assaulted, injured or killed by the colonial forces. The bravery of the women was tested when they occupied a railway line and forced a train to stop but a similar strategy against the car of a British medical doctor resulted in the crushing of two women to death in Aba which led to the largest battle between the women and colonial forces, ending with lots of what Bob Marley would call burning and looting of colonial shops, Native Courts, Native Authorities, and the homes of Warrant Chiefs.

Chapter five rounds up part one by assessing the end of the Women's War particularly following a very bloody massacre of dozens of women in Opobo which forced the women to admit that they could not end British rule by force. The chapter also covers what the authors called 'collective punishment' of communities that were fined hundreds of pounds by the British to recover damages caused by the women but with no record of punishment or reparations for the 50 women who were killed and many more who were injured. In *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System*, I identified such 'collective punishments' as victimization-as-mere-punishment and called for such to be differentiated from the colonizing concept of punishment and addressed with reparations.

Part two of the book starts with chapter six which is a guide to the methodology of historiography based on original documents. Students will find this chapter very useful as they go about reinterpreting the documents that the authors amassed in the book. They encourage researchers to go beyond finding facts and evaluating documents to attempt a theorization that would give meaning to history the way they attempted in their own book by 'illustrating the relationship between facts, themes, and theories'. It would have been useful for the authors to warn students (as Azikiwe did way back in 1930) that the archives were also the documentation of carefully censored narratives and not just objective 'facts, themes and theories'.

The book then concludes with numerous original memoranda and reports, collective punishment inquiries, proceedings of the commissions of inquiries into disturbances in Calabar and Owerri provinces and enquiries convened in Umudike, Opobo, Aba and Ikot Ekpene. A section covers the protests that continued after 1930. Four appendixes provide the lists of those who testified at the enquiries, lists of those who were killed or injured, Igbo days of the week, and British monetary system.

This book is a welcome addition to the well-known fact that Africans are not the objects of history but active agents of history who resisted the injustice of colonial oppression and exploitation directly and indirectly in brave ways. The critique of the book, however, should start with the privileging of the archival methodology by the authors, following the pioneering work of Kenneth Dike. The awe and respect with which historians approach colonial archival documents as original sources should have been subjected to more skepticism by the authors especially given their insightful suspicion that the women were being very discreet in their testimonies at the enquiries possibly to avoid retaliation and their allegation that a British woman probably committed perjury by defending the reckless driving of the British doctor that killed some women in Aba. It is no longer enough for African researchers to excavate the fictions in colonial archives and present them as 'original sources' without evaluating them against the written and oral evidence of Africans (the Igbo would mock such exclusive privileging of the work of Europeans by exclaiming that the white man is an oracle, *Bekee bu agbara*). To the credit of the authors, they expressed doubts about the objectivity of the colonial records but this should have prompted them to include the perspectives of Africans who may have heard their ancestors tell the story from different angles or rely more on Africans who did write about the events while they were taking place.

One such African, who was not mentioned but who wrote an essay denouncing the killing of African women in the journal that W.E.B. Du Bois established and edited for the NAACP, was Ben N. Azikiwe, the legendary leader of the anti-colonial movement in Nigeria who eventually mobilized the country to restore independence by ending British rule a mere 30 years after the Women's War.

Writing in the May 30, 1930, issue of *Crisis*, in an article that Du Bois introduced as a contribution from a Nigerian native studying in America which he took the liberty to correct in some respects and add some explanations of his own, Azikiwe denounced the British for what he called the barbaric act of shooting unarmed women under the title, 'Murdering Women in Nigeria'. That essay surely belongs in a book documenting the Women's War rather than do so only from the perspective of the documents censored by the British conquistadoras. This perspective is also evident in Azikiwe's pioneering books in the 1930s on *Liberia in World Politics* where he castigated the barbaric exploitation and oppression of the natives by the returnees and by the rubber plantations and in his *Renascent Africa* where he cursed the old Africa for blocking progress and sang beatitudes to the youth that would lead the resurgence of Africa. Future researchers may want to go beyond the documents in this book by collecting the news reports that Azikiwe said were censored but still managed to reveal the resistance of the natives to the autocratic rule of the British.

Similarly, the authors could have cited the literary works by Africans that addressed the Women's War or the resistance against Warrant Chiefs if only to demonstrate that the archival materials are no less fictional or literary than dramatic texts that were obviously based on oral traditions by eye witnesses. One such work was by the son of a Warrant Chief whose father was deposed probably in response to the Women's War. Professor Ezenta E. Eze's *The Cassava Ghost: A Play in Three Parts* could possibly tell us more about the Women's War than the sanitized documents in the colonial archives. Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* also documents the resistance of men of character against being forced to become Warrant Chiefs by the British. The use of literary sources is more respected in philosophy and in the social sciences and can be found in the works of Thomas Hobbes, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and in my own work. However, it is true that historians privilege archival materials over creative materials but this need not always be the case especially when the archives were constructed and controlled by partisan activists who had a vested interest in slanting the narratives of history making and whose accounts need to be subverted as much as possible by exploring the testimonies of the colonized.

Along the same lines of critique, the authors erred by not including an author who is literate in Igbo language while waxing authoritative about Igbo concepts that they did not fully understand. For instance, Appendix three makes the strange claim that the Igbo week has eight days made up of market days and big markets. That is really funny because any Igbo person will tell you that the Igbo week is made up of only four days named after market days because of the centrality of commerce in Igbo worldviews. When the Igbo talk about markets and big markets as Professor Victor Uchendu did in his Ahiajoku Lecture, the reference is to a big market that could be found in a town that also has a smaller market in a village on the same day.

Thus *Orie* might be a market day in a small village while *Orie Ukwu* is the big marketplace on the same day at a different location in the same town or nearby. Someone must have told the authors that *Orie Ukwu* is a completely different day of the week but it is absolutely not so. To the credit of the authors, they did name some female Igbo and African Diaspora scholars as consultants for the book who may have advised them to shift from the insulting colonial practice of spelling Igbo as Ibo but glaring errors like the eight-day week could have been avoided if some of those consultants had been included as co-authors from the beginning.

I have already mentioned the mistranslation of *Ohadum* by the authors to mean women of all communities when it simply means the community in entirety (Oha = community; dum = whole). It is a term similar to Ohaneze, the apex Igbo political and cultural organization that exists today in Nigeria, a term that denotes that the community is its own *eze* (king) or that the community is self-governing and so there is no need for a chief or king to be imposed on a democratic people who continue to say proudly that the Igbo know no king. Had the authors explored this concept further through oral traditions, they could have avoided the error of describing traditional Igbo political system as a patriarchy under the domination of male elders. The very history they documented is a challenge to the colonialist reading of Igbo culture that privileged patriarchy in line with the preferred nuclear family structures of Europe but quite alien to the women and the men of Igboland and Ibibioland who would stomach no nonsense from anyone whether he claims to be a patriarch or an elder. It is therefore sickening to read the documents of the interrogation of the dignified elderly women who were forced to answer ‘Yes Sir’ to beardless British youthful officials. As Falola and Aderinto (2010) demonstrated, historical research in Nigeria is deeply indebted to the foundation of the National Archives in 1954 by Professor Kenneth Dike but the work of Afigbo, Onwuejeogwu, Awe, Alagoa and many others signify the importance of going beyond such written sources to triangulate with observations and oral traditions (Falola and Aderinto, 2010).

Nkiru Nzegwu makes a similar point more philosophically and very personally-politically in her compelling interrogation of Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *Family Matters*, in which she denounced attempts by brothers-in-law to dispossess widows of wealthy brothers despite the fact that the right of wives to inherit property was protected by her Onicha custom until the British came to attempt to impose patriarchy. Oyeronke Oyewumi has a similar critique of western gender analysis with respect to the Yoruba about whom it is wrongly asserted that their markets are gendered and controlled by women when in actual fact markets are gender-neutral while relationships are guided by generational privileges rather than by gendered power. Obafemi Awolowo would disagree by suggesting in *The People’s Republic*, that patriarchy is paradoxically the universal basis for the protection of human rights (to the horror of feminists who find patriarchy oppressive).



Back to the Igbo culture specifically, Ifi Amadiume offers the classic explanation that Igbo women are able to marry other women and act as the female husbands or stay at home and have children in the names of their fathers and act as the male daughters in ways that the western concept of patriarchy would miss completely, indicating that colonialism never succeeded completely in defeating the traditional democratic institutions of the Igbo.

Although the authors cited the work of Nwando Achebe on the Northern Igbo to support their gendered interpretation of Igbo culture, the more relevant work of hers would be the one on *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria* which demonstrates that the opposition to the warrant chiefs was not based on patriarchy but on their oppressive and corrupt autocratic rule given that the female king faced stiff opposition from both men and women especially after she started abducting the wives of men the way the British colonial police forces took the wives of men hostage, forcing one man to shoot dead the police officer in self-defense of his wife. He was only convicted of manslaughter and given seven years prison sentence although one on the documents in the book still insisted that it was a case of murder while he pleaded for acquittal on grounds of self-defense. In *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System*, I presented the finding that such victimization-as-mere-punishment of innocent black women who were proximate to suspected black men was a legacy from slavery, lived through colonialism, apartheid, to neocolonialism and to the internal colonies of inner city London where I did my observational fieldwork and also used oral traditions to triangulate with archival materials.

As I stated earlier, the authors erred by almost completely ignoring political economy interpretations of the Women's War of 1929. Apart from the neglected but revealing examples of the relevant comments of Walter Rodney, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Nnamdi Azikiwe already mentioned above, the authors took a narrow empiricist and positivistic approach to this history especially in Section Four where they covered protests after 1930. Instead of simply enumerating isolated 'disturbances', protests in certain forests and separate tax resistance cases or the 'murder' of a police officer (turned out to be manslaughter rather than murder), it is amazing that the authors did not make more links between the Women's War and the Nationalist Movement that built on the resistance demonstrated by the women to win back independence for Nigeria, the way that Falola and Aderinto (2010) did but with a limited reference to the autobiography of Azikiwe, *My Odyssey*. Future researchers will need to make this link clearer from a political economy orientation lest we fail to see the forests for the trees. For instance, the powerful statement by Walter Rodney that under the colonial situation, 'the maintenance of law and order' meant 'the maintenance of conditions most favorable to the expansion of capitalism and the plunder of Africa' could have been deployed to deepen the theorization of the documents in the book (Rodney, 1972: 179).

Finally, readers of the book will come out with the impression that the women failed in their struggle especially because the struggle was divorced from the nationalist movement in the analysis. But even when we focus on the struggle against taxation without representation, it is obvious that the women won a resounding victory because the British Officials immediately surrendered and promised that women will not be taxed. And up till today, women are not assessed for taxation in Nigeria (unless they are civil servants who pay as they earn) and tax collectors do not chase them about the way they chase after men. Similarly, the British beat a retreat in their efforts to impose Warrant Chiefs on the democratic Igbo and instead appointed councilors chosen by the communities to represent them. Thus the Nigerian colonial constitutions had Houses of Assemblies and Houses of Natural Rulers in both Northern and Western Nigeria as Awolowo documented in *The People's Republic*, while the Eastern Region only had a unicameral legislature made up of elected House of Assembly. The East could have been given a second chamber of elected Senators to make for equity in the paid officials of the regional governments but the British were probably still sulking from the butt-kicking that they got from Igbo and Ibibio women during the Women's War.

Sadly, after the Biafra War (1967-1970) in which an estimated three million (mostly Igbo) died in 30 months, largely thanks to the use of 'starvation as a legitimate weapon of war' by Nigeria, General Olusegun Obasanjo eventually managed to complete the undermining of Igbo democratic traditions by decreeing in 1976 that every community in Nigeria must have a 'traditional ruler', thereby forcing the radically republican Igbo to engage in chieftaincy struggles and local despotism unknown in their traditional democracy characterized by morality and competitive meritocracy. Interestingly, Chinua Achebe testified to the fact that part of the reasons why the Igbo survived the genocidal Biafra war was due to the ingenuity of Igbo women who risked being bombed in improvised market places to conjure up food for their families, run improvised schools for the children, control traffic in the midst of seas of refugees, hide their underage daughters from rampaging drunken enemy troops, and support the resistance efforts any way they could as documented in his new instant classic, *There Was a Country*. The authors of *The Women's War of 1929* could not have cited that new book by Achebe but future researchers must not ignore it on the topic of contemporary relevance of the revolutionary African women who employed the legendary African philosophy of non-violence that Mahatma Gandhi said that he learned from Zulu warriors to oppose imperialist hubris.

Perhaps, a policy implication of the book that was not spelled out by the authors is that gender equity in public service at all levels throughout Africa remains a goal to be articulated fully by advocates and implemented by the people to ensure that the heroism of our women will continue to produce astonishing results for our people.

The African Union Parliament is a model of such equitable representation of men and women (50-50) and the parliament of Rwanda even has more women than men. Equal representation of men and women in legislative, executive, and judicial arms of government across Africa would allow us to reap the full benefits of the demonstrated revolutionary potentials of African women.

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