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Review of *The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria*

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*The Women's War of 1929: Gender
and Violence in Colonial Nigeria*

By

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Ethnographically focused studies have illustrated the importance of “traditional” discussions and cultural elements in the formulation of anticolonial discourses. Indeed, historical and anthropological research in Africa has shown how indigenous ideologies shaped the framing of political objectives and movements. The 1929 Women's War,

undoubtedly the most significant episode in African-European relations in colonial Nigeria, falls under this category. The revolt was of a nature and extent unprecedented in Nigeria and in any other British territory in colonial West Africa at the time. The women's movement of 1929 has received significant attention from scholars but it has been mainly analyzed as an anticolonial political protest and a rejection of an alien system of administration. Thus, *The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria* by Marc Matera, Misty L. Bastian, and Susan Kingsley Kent, provides the most detailed analysis of the intersection of British colonialism and African resistance in Nigeria. The authors show the process through which Eastern Nigerian women infused indigenous ideology in resistance not just against British imperialism, but also against the changing gender dynamics that increasingly identified women and the majority of ordinary people as subordinate to the British.

Between November and December 1929, large numbers of peasant women protested what they perceived as a prelude to the extension of a direct tax to women. At its peak, rural women obstructed roads, destroyed and damaged native court houses, and looted European trading firms. They attacked the homes of native court personnel and "sat on" numerous warrant chiefs to demand their resignation. The scale of the movement, the organization and the methods employed were formidable, and the impasse created forced colonial troops to fire on the protesters, killing about 50 women and wounding several others. Between late December 1929 and early January 1930, the Commission of Inquiry set up by the British government to investigate the immediate and remote causes of the uprising collected evidence and recommended collective punishment for the communities involved.

The first three chapters focus on the pre-and early-colonial Igbo world, British attempts to understand and pacify Igbo society, and how the pseudoscientific theories of the nineteenth century informed British attitudes and led to the creation of particularly negative stereotypes about the Igbo. The Igbo world the authors show was already in transition before British colonialism. The transformative and significant impact of the Atlantic slave trade, the post-abolition economy that focused on commodity trade, and the collaborative hegemony that came in the wake of missionary and colonial contact were major

impetuses for change. These developments took place within an indigenous cultural milieu defined by a world view and spirituality that was gendered and communal as well as interdependent. Yet the British perceived the Igbo social and political structures as chaotic, disorderly, and uncivilized, which stemmed from their inability to understand Igbo indigenous politics. This perception of the Igbo was important in how the British embarked upon their civilizing mission in the region. Evidently, the British drew upon the prevailing race theories in setting boundaries of racial, sexual, and gender difference. Such ideas were also influenced by the psychological frame of mind of the men who carried out the war against the women of Eastern Nigeria in 1929.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the tradition of social movements beginning with the 1925 *Nwaobiala*, or Dance Movement, and the 1929 Women's War. The rest of the book focuses on British reactions to the 1929 revolts. The 1929 uprising was an expression of the tensions that had been brewing since the introduction of colonial administration in the region. The discontent surrounding the women's movement falls into three main categories. First, the government was caught in a problematic situation emanating from the unpopular Native Revenue Ordinance, which introduced direct taxation in southeastern Nigeria. The perception that the tax could be extended to women provided the political opportunity and impetus for their collective action. Furthermore, the discontent began to extend to another major issue of relevance to rural peoples in Eastern Nigeria—the declining prices of their major export produce—palm oil and kernels, and increasing inflation that pushed the price of imported goods beyond the reach of the local population. In the late 1920s, the entire world economy was in turmoil due to the Great Depression. The period of the depression was by no means the first time rural farmers experienced economic hardship, but it was clearly the worst.

Another source of discontent was the powerful distrust for government found in Eastern Nigeria in 1929 and the laissez-faire attitude of colonial authority. As the authors reveal, the British were out of touch. The protesters called attention to the widespread corruption that existed in the native administration and paralleled the rise of the new political elite with the emergence of moral decay and the widespread exploitation of the local population. Their petitions and testimonies gave voice to what many described as humiliation at the

hands of native court members and warrant chiefs. There was indeed a growing nostalgia for the pre-colonial political and economic order. Women capitalized on past transgressions by the government, especially the warrant chiefs, to articulate and popularize their protest.

The British persistently sought to minimize the actions of women involved in the 1929 revolt. By denying agency to these women, the British authorities revealed their own prejudice against the Igbo, and Igbo women in particular, as well as the Eurocentric and Victorian gender ideology that colored much of their understanding of Igbo society.

The authors do a great job contextualizing the place of the Women's War in the history of Eastern Nigeria. They convincingly illustrate that the conditions that gave rise to the uprising lay in earlier times and that the form of collective organization and militancy expressed during the uprising had its roots in long-established forms of consciousness among women.