

PROTEST WITHIN COMPLIANCE IN COLONIAL NIGERIA: RECONSIDERING THE EGBA WOMEN RIOT

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Abstract

What constituted acceptable protest in the colonial Nigeria? Put differently, were there justifiable protests? Addressing these posers, this paper examined the activities of women in colonial Egbaland, against a backdrop of an unfriendly tax regime imposed on them by the British colonial administration. Adopting primary and secondary sources, this study posits that the British parasitic tax impositions on women disrupted the unstable balance between them and traditional authorities. Although taxes were imposed by colonial machineries, exacting the levies was the responsibility of Sole Native Authorities, whose exaction methods were exceedingly demanding for and unacceptable to women. The women revolts showed clearly that the indigenous Egba women, led by Mrs. Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti, refused to be ignored as they stridently and vociferously demanded for their rights from British colonial administration. The paper found out that the immediate post-colonial Nigerian women did not, sadly, build on the modicum of success which was achieved by the indefatigable colonial women. The paper concluded that the colonial government attempts at incorporating the women folks into her taxation policy led to hiccups which, consequently, generated variegated reactions from individuals and women groups in colonial Yorubaland. The women's calculated responses climaxed in concessions, which, though not total, went a long way in ameliorating the socio-economic and political challenges faced by Egba women.

Keywords: Egba women riot, protest within colonial Nigeria, Egba women union, Yorubaland

General Introduction

Through one form of negotiation or another, and in exchange for imperial protection, Governor Sir Gilbert Carter of Lagos, on behalf of the queen of England, signed the 'Treaty of Friendship and Commerce' on the 7th January, 1893 (Webster, Boahen and Idowu, 1972: 105), with three men, who held the reins of Abeokuta government. They were Osundare, the *Nlado*, Ogundeji, the *Mogaji* of Iporo and Sorunke, the *Jagunna* of Igbehin and Balogun of Egba (NAI. C.92/1918). The 1893 'Treaty of Friendship and Commerce', guaranteed the independence of Egbaland, until it was abrogated in 1914, as a result of the "Ijemo incident". However, the remaining parts of Yorubaland, came under British control in piece-meal.

The *Ijemo* incident was actually caused by the face-off between one Chief Sobiye Ponlade in Fidiwo, an Egba village, and some colonial sanitation officers. This incident, which occurred in 1914, led to the massacre of some Egba men, women and children, and it finally culminated in the abrogation of the treaty of 1893, which consequently translated into the deprivation of the Egba government of its independence and constitution as a state. In other words, the 1914 treaty that followed the "incident" led to loss of independence of the Egba people. Thus, the *Alake* and his successors, under the new treaty, became 'the recognized head of Egba people,' and were also to 'carry on the Native Administration of Egbaland subject to the control of the Governor of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria' (NAI. C. 92/1918. Blair, 1938: 268). Before the "Ijemo Incident", Egbaland was practically independent of any politico-economic control from Britain.

The treaty of 1914, *de-facto*, rescinded the treaty of 1893, and it culminated in the withdrawal of self-government from the Egba. Before the abrogation of the 1893's 'Treaty of Friendship and Commerce', the Egba United Government (EUG), usually called for Lagos assistance each time a political crisis arose in Egbaland. Fredrick Lugard, therefore, believed that since the Egba people were incapable of governing themselves without Lagos assistance (Crowder, M. & Abdullahi, G. 1979: 159), Abeokuta's special status had to be discontinued, and she was, consequently, incorporated into the protectorate. Lugard actually felt he needed to rectify the anachronism of the existence of a country

within a country. The British, thus, incorporated the Egba United Government (EUG), by ensuring the total application of the Indirect Rule system to the Egba-Owu people, thereby, finally removing the relics of an independent country within an administration.

When direct taxation was introduced by the British into Western Nigeria in 1918, (Orewa, (1962: 77), a poll tax of five shillings (5/-) per adult male, and two shillings and six pence (2/6d) per adult female was announced in Abeokuta and Ijebu provinces. At this time, the tax that women had to pay was not considered burdensome as it was only two shillings, six pence, (2/-6d) (NAI. Comcol. 1. C.C. 951: 39), which was just half of what the men were required to pay. Even in Egba Division of Abeokuta Province where anti-tax disturbances occurred, not a note of protest was recorded against the taxation of women (Syers, W. C. (1919: 12 - 25).

The total tax collected yearly in the district was divided between the Egba Native Authority and the British colonial administration. The British authority needed fund to run its administration and thus, thirty percent (30%) of the generated revenue went to the British government, while, seventy percent (70%) of accrued revenue went to the Egba Native Administration (NAI. CSO. 26/3, 1928: 6 - 12). The point to note is that, whereas the obligation of taxation was by 1914 solidly established in Northern Nigeria, direct taxes were not collected in the Western Provinces before 1918; and the delay continued until 1928 in the Eastern Provinces (Tamuno, 1972: 317). Specifically, women agitation and protests generally occurred in the Southern Nigeria during the colonial period.

After the amalgamation of Southern and Northern Protectorates of Nigeria in 1914, the policy of Indirect Rule, which had been successfully foisted on the Northern Provinces from the earliest days of the British conquest, was gradually extended to Yorubaland. In Oyo, Abeokuta, Benin and many other communities, which were already well-organized states/kingdoms, it was fundamentally held by the British authorities that "if there was to be peaceful government ... conducted at an expense that can be borne by local revenue that government must, as regards the interior, be carried on through the instrumentality of the chiefs" (Ikome, 1968: 421). Lugard was, at this point, confronted with the

challenge of how to manage the vast territory, given the shortage of funds and personnel and, he considered it necessary to compensate the Native Chiefs who hitherto traded in slaves. To address the problem, he collected direct taxes in order to both compensate the chiefs for their losses, and provide social services in the protectorate. He believed that the culture of tax payment would inculcate in the people the habit of hard work, and concretize his political settlement and stability (Perham, 1960: 164).

Before the introduction of Lugard's direct taxation, however, extortion was rampant as women and children were secretly seized and held for ransom. In fact, tax gatherers oppressed the people and there was much discontent among the people. The British also recognized that no meaningful progress could be made in the policy of educating people in the art of self-governance unless funds to establish native administration were forthcoming in the shape of direct taxation (Crook, 1903: 3). With the coming of Lugard's new tax policy, the Yoruba chiefs were gradually convinced that cooperating with the British was the appropriate solution to the problem of instability. Consequently, between 1917 and 1920, the various native administrations voluntarily accepted the principle of direct taxation as a means of raising revenue for local development (Ikime, 1968: 459). While in strict theory and practice, the pre-colonial system was ignored, the British, through the Indirect Rule system, as epitomized by Native Authority, created the impression they were upholding the traditional system (Lugard, 1965: 198).

Some commentators on colonial Administration had until recently, erroneously concluded that most protest movements/riots/revolts in Nigeria during the British rule were just anti-tax riots. They held that *Ijemo* incident of 1914, *Iseyin-Okeiho* rising of 1916, the *Adubi* uprising of 1918 and even *Aba* riots of 1929, among others, were oppositions to taxation in the various communities involved (Atanda, 1969: 497). Recent detailed investigation of some of these uprisings have shown that the cause(s) of these riots could certainly not be located in opposition to taxation alone, but could also be traced to the fact that indigenous people were opposed to the changes that came as a result of the impositions of the British rule. British rule, definitely, engendered changes, which conflicted with the socio-political systems of

the Yoruba people of South-Western Nigeria (Atanda, 1969: 497). The causes of these unrests were complex, and it would, therefore, not be justifiable to ascribe any singular motive to them.

However, in order to demonstrate that opposition to colonial taxation caused some of these violent riots noted above, some writers were influenced by the report of the 'officials on the spot', whose knowledge of the local environment were highly valued and respected. But significantly, one should note that these "men on the spot" from whom this erroneous idea probably emanated, had also admitted that it was for "want of proper evidence" (Tamuno, 1972: 106), that they, initially, attributed the cause of some of these riots to taxation. Apparently, the accumulated wisdom of these 'men on the spots' were not brought to bear in resolving the crises that were thrown up in colonial Western Nigeria. There must always be a distinction between the accumulation of wisdom and its proper application.

Although, taxation was a source of finance for developmental endeavours in colonial Nigeria, it provoked serious crises within the polity. The indigenous people saw the imposition of taxes and rates as too burdensome and unpleasant to bear. It was apparent that there was no social equity between the colonial ruler and the ruled. The people became religiously anti-colonial, because they also saw the growing gap between the increasingly affluent indigenous middle class and the peasantry. Peasants were the ones compelled to mortgage their items or properties before they could pay taxes. They were the ones accustomed to passing on the hardship of life to their children as inheritance (Beer, 1976: 41-49), and the women were, mostly, at the butt of the British unfriendly economic policies, as the British colonial government not only attempted to incorporate women into her taxing policy, the women's economic enterprises were also taxed.

Tax revolts thus became very common in the Western Region during the British rule in Nigeria. Indeed, generalization regarding the causes of the various tax riots in Yorubaland, in particular, and the entire southern parts of Nigeria, would be misleading because some of these riots were not caused by issues arising from high taxation. There were certainly other factors.

Perspectives on Women Protests in Colonial South-Western Nigeria

From the end of the nineteenth century, women in Yorubaland began to experience periods of expanding opportunities. The penetration of European capital, which led to the growth of towns and development of trade in agricultural exports, also transformed into improved economic positions for them. These led to a redefinition of their relationships with male relations in a way that reduced masculine authority over their labour and lives. Unfortunately, increased opportunities were unstable as a result of colonial taxation policy. The improved economic power of women, however, led them to demand for more rights in the public domain, particularly, the right to partake in discussions on public policies, representations on decision-making bodies, etc.

Economic considerations were also significantly responsible for the 1929 disaster in the Eastern Provinces, where approximately fifty women were killed (Perham, 1960: p. 206) during the face-off between the British colonial government and the Aba women. It was, however, not only in Aba (1929) and Lagos (1932 and 1940) that women constituted a source of challenge to the British colonial authority; there were also significant economic issues in Egbaland in general, during the inter-war years, and the seemingly unending economic instability during the period created conditions that favoured the formation of new associations in Abeokuta. To incorporate the women folks into her taxing policy, British Colonial Authority also taxed women economic enterprises through indirect taxes, such as market fees and market shed fees, both of which began to cause a lot of distress among women traders as early as 1918 in South-Western Nigeria (Byfield, 2003: 250-277).

It is significant to note that the first mass-based women's interest group to recognize the power of collective action in articulating and promoting the rights of women in Western Nigeria, was the Lagos Market Women's Association (LMWA). Apart from the submission of Baker (1974), newspaper reports in the 1930s also indicated that Herbert Macaulay was the moving spirit behind the Lagos Market Women Association, (LMWA), while Madam Alimotu Pelewura was the dynamic leader behind its foundation (Johnson, 1982: 137-157).

Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti, born in Abeokuta around 1900, was a foundation student member and indeed, the first girl to be enrolled

in Abeokuta Grammar School, hence, the popular appellation, *Beere*, as she was the first registered student. She completed her High School at the Anglican Mission School in Abeokuta and was sent to Britain to qualify as a teacher. But the racism she encountered there steered her into developing interest in anti-colonial politics. On her return home in 1922, she organized the Abeokuta Ladies Club (ALC), a fore-runner to the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), which undertook charity work and literacy classes for market women. One of the most important associations that emerged in Abeokuta after World War II, was the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), which was formed to ensure that 'fellow women, in and outside Abeokuta-town, were protected from any lack' (NAI, Abe Prof. 2, ABP, 2519). This was the product of reflections of two different-strands of women organizations – the Market Women Christians and the educated women of Abeokuta Ladies' Club (ALC).

The leaders of Ladies' Club and market women felt the need to form a more broad-based movement that would be less *elite* oriented, and it was this decision that led to the birth of AWU, whose main goal was to unite women in order to defend, protect, preserve and promote their socio-economic and political rights. Although, many educated women were members of the Union, the significant reason behind the successes recorded by the movement was its strong commitment to market women and their involvement in politics of the time (Johnson, 1982: 149). Mrs. Kuti's sincerity and enthusiasm soon infected other Egba women, particularly the market women and traders, who soon became more politically conscious than any other community of women within the rest of the country. By 1948, market women, numbering twenty thousand, constituted a large number of the rank and file of the membership. While *Alake Ademola*, who became a paramount chief of Egbaland in 1914, was the first Patron of the club, Mrs. Ransome Kuti was elected the first President (Byfield, 2003: 265).

Colonialism, through the introduction of the Indirect Rule system in Abeokuta, brought about important changes in government, which were mostly inimical to women's welfare, as well as to the democratic character of leadership. The British colonial government had, through the instrumentality of the Sole Native Authority (SNA) system, created a sub-authority, on which it depended in running its

administration. The Indirect Rule system, which became operative in the entire Southern Nigeria, invested the *Alake* with his power of office and, in 1920, *Alake* Alaiyeoluwa Ademola II, became the first Western-educated *Alake* in Egba land. Complaints arose against him in the early 1930s, charging him with misappropriation of land, and wrongfully leasing it to European firms and agents (NAL, CSO/23610/S.55, Vols. I & 2).

During the 1930s and 1940s, colonial governments began to pay greater attention to African women, when it became evident that even female groups could constitute a potential force of resistance in the colonies, a fact which had not been seriously anticipated before that time. As a result of this realization, the colonial authorities were constrained to commission researches, at times, and in places where it was suspected that women would, in some special ways, constitute serious challenge(s) to colonial policies. For instance, Aba Commission of Enquiry was put in place to investigate causes of the riot and find lasting solutions to such occurrences, but the findings and recommendations of the commissions of enquiries were, shockingly kept on the shelves and allowed to gather dusts. The same can also be said of the findings and recommendations of the Commission of Enquiry of the 1927/28 anti-tax riots in Warri. These findings were, sadly, not implemented as the complaints of the women were largely ignored. It was, therefore, not surprising that in 1938, ten thousand enraged people staged a mass demonstration in front of *Alake's* palace in protest against his tax collection methods. Ill-feelings against his regime intensified during the war years as a result of his overenthusiastic interpretation of the colonial government's order, regarding requisitioning of food (*Daily Service*, 22nd Oct. 1938).

At the end of World War II in 1945, the ladies club cooperated with Nigeria Union of Traders (NUT) and provided assistance to women traders, whose rice had been confiscated by the government (*Daily Service*, 12th Nov. 1945). On investigation, Mrs. Kuti found that the *Alake*, the traditional ruler of Abeokuta, was involved in the diversion of governments seized rice to personal stores, selling and pocketing the proceeds. Significantly, up till 1948 when *Alake* was forced to abdicate, women in Abeokuta and Ijebu provinces were the only ones in Nigeria paying Poll Tax (Orewa, 1962: 77) as they were, at times, much more

economically viable than the men. However, the *madan* women were not taxed when the Egba and Ijebu women were taxed. The proximity of the Ijebu and Egba women to the central parts, and the then capital of Nigeria, Lagos, was what enhanced their trading activities. They took active part in the import and export trades (Orewa, 1962: 16). The argument of Mrs. Kuti was that it was unfair for the Ijebu and Egba women to continue to pay poll tax from which their sisters in other parts of Nigeria were exempted.

A major grievance of the Abeokuta women was taxation without representation; indeed, they had no direct representation on the Sole Native Authority (SNA) councils, a situation that was intensely resented. As if this was not enough, the manner in which taxes were collected was also a cause for concern: the tax collectors were often conceited, insolent and violent officials who chased women about the streets and beat them up. In fact, one of the abuses that fueled the women's anger was that some overzealous and arrogant ones among tax officials thought it was acceptable to strip the skirts of young girls, to assess their ages in order to determine whether they were eligible to pay tax, and this was a common practice! For them, the presence of breasts and pubic hair were major considerations in determining whether a girl should be exempted from taxation or not.

Over the years, complaints increased, and finally reached a point where women decided that they needed to redress their grievance through the adoption of (though non-violent) a more militant approach. The women were unhappy and angered that the tax burden fell too heavily on their shoulders. Not only were they paying income taxes and water rate, they were also required to provide money for market supervisors. They argued that this was double taxation and insisted that since the entire community, which included buyers, as well as sellers, used market facility, the entire community should be responsible for defraying the cost of running the market.

This position fell on deaf ears; instead, *Alake* increased tax rate for women in late 1946, which consequently, resulted in the marching of thousands of women to *Alake's* palace in order to protest these increases. *Alake's* response to this was that 'if any woman felt that her taxes were too high, such woman should appeal to him individually since it was "no

group business" (*Daily Service*, 30th Oct. 1946). AWU then resolved to contest the tax level in court through a test case, involving one Janet Asaba, a trader, who believed her annual income tax was excessive. Asaba lost her case when the Resident, E.N. Mylius, refused to accept her income assessment and decided, instead, to raise her taxes (Johnson, 1982: 157-157, *Daily Service*, 7th Nov. 1946).

By 1947, AWU enjoyed the support of the entire society, and it had fully articulated and gone ahead to protest against certain abuses of the *Alake's* power. In fact, the people had a fairly broad front of disapproval (NAL Ije Prof. 1, 4218: 16). The Abeokuta women protest against tax payment was aided by the '*Majeobaje*', (chiefs that ensured the smooth-running of the system), while the male members of the society were opposed to the payment of education rate, which was another form of taxation. Those whose children were of school age, and had registered in government schools, were compelled to pay the education rate. These were some of the vexing challenges that were associated with British colonial government and Sole Native Authority that worked with the British officials. These were part of the issues that the *Beere* condemned, and with the support of the indigenous Egba women, was prepared to fight tooth, nail and fist to ensure the enthronement of positive socio-economic and political changes in Egbaland.

AWU protested this decision in a letter in which it was charged that the Resident, who was 'the colonial man on the spot', (Tamuno, 1972: 106) was not conversant with the condition the women of Egbaland lived (*Daily Service*, 3rd Feb. 1947), which meant that the 'men on the spot' had no proper understanding of the people they ruled over. Sadly, *Alake* refused to reconsider his decision because he had too much political power, and was exceedingly arrogant and uncompromising to appreciate the challenges that the women faced. It is significant to note, however, that rulers in the pre-colonial setting possessed no such power and, if any ruler attempted to overshoot his socio-economic and political limit in Yorubaland, he was either advised to abdicate the throne or suffer assassination, if he failed to comply promptly.

AWU, on its part, intensified efforts to gain support for an all-out protest movement with three main objectives of ensuring the

abdication of the *Alake*, the abolition of the SNA position and its replacement by a more representative form of government, which will include women representatives, and the abolition of flat rate taxation of women (Johnson, 1982: 157 - 157). When it was abundantly clear that going through the proper channels, such as petitions, test cases in court and publicity in the press produced no acceptable results, the AWU adopted more radical methods such as sit-ins, mass protest, demonstration and outright refusal to pay tax. This new militant approach actually began early in 1947 when Kuti refused to pay her tax and was arrested (*Daily Service*, 29th April, 1947).

When she pleaded not guilty at her arraignment, eight thousand women gathered at the court house to demonstrate their support (*Daily Service*, 29th April, 1947), and at her trial where she pleaded not guilty in the following week, five thousand women conducted a protest demonstration outside the court (*Daily Service*, 8th May, 1947). At the conclusion of the court proceedings, she was fined three pounds or one month imprisonment. She, however, decided that it was politically expedient to pay the fine, since she was scheduled to leave within the week with the NCNC delegation, on a trip to Britain for constitutional talks. Part of the reason for her decision was her belief that this was an excellent opportunity to take the women's issues before the British public (Coleman, 1964: 22 - 38). When she again refused to pay taxes in the following year, she was then well prepared for imprisonment, if necessary, in order to make her points.

The women demonstrations were very effective: although Kuti was banned from *Alake's* palace because of her role in organizing the protest march, *Alake* was forced to reconsider his positions. (*Daily Service*, 2nd March, 1948). Many times throughout January and February, he announced that women should be appointed to positions within the government: two councilors to the central council, an *Iyalode*, two other women chiefs, and representatives to the financial committee (*Daily Service*, 2nd Jan. & 20th Feb. 1948). By April, the AWU and its supporters had decided, and were determined to force the abdication of *Alake* in order to achieve their demands. Kuti, who had refused to pay her tax, was again scheduled to appear in court in April.

AWU planned a massive demonstration but cancelled it because some anonymous person had paid her tax before the trial (*Daily Service*, 2nd April, 1948). The anonymous person in question was probably either *Alake* or a British official, who were unprepared for women premeditated show-down. AWU next presented to the Resident a petition titled *The Women's Union Grievance*, which reiterated their grievances and demands, including the removal of *Alake* from office. They followed this with a five-hour march through the streets of Abeokuta, chanting and vociferously insisting that their demands be met (Mba, 1975: 12-25).

By the end of 1947, the situation had changed; the *Majeobaje* society, an indigenous self-help union, presided over by Rev. Ransome Kuti, offered support. For instance, on the 20th December, 1947, a mass meeting of men was held at Sapon Market Square, where they unanimously endorsed women's efforts in the pursuit of happiness, freedom from oppression and peace of Egbaland (*Daily Service*, 17th Jan. 1948). The editorials in the most important African newspaper in the Western Region also indicated widespread support for the AWU's demands. It was only a matter of time before the Sole Native Authority's government capitulated.

To gain time, *Alake* proceeded on vacation at the beginning of June, and hoped that the stormy situation would cool off in his absence. Before he left, however, he appointed a special committee of men and women to investigate the complaint of the AWU (*Daily Service*, 1st June, 1948). He also announced the suspension of taxation of women, and agreed to women representation on the central committee, but these concessions came a little too late. As result of the unpopularity of the *Alake*, his rule lasted only until the AWU forced his abdication in 1948.

Mrs. Kuti, who spearheaded the AWU movement, was, indeed, a first-class champion of women's rights who rose up to defend women against "alleged unfair taxation... and indiscriminate arrests" in Nigeria. These were issues of injustice and insensitivity, which were prevalent in the country's socio-cultural terrain where the British colonial government operated. It was, therefore, inevitable that the *Beere*, who had been exposed to the British culture and its demands as a result of her sojourn in London, recognized the double standard, which was being played out by the British colonial government. Her resultant reactions

were, therefore, not to be wondered at as it epitomized the innate courage and strength in the '*Beere*' Africanness. She was, indeed, a first-class champion of women's right in Nigeria; an Amazon and a woman activist of international repute; an icon in woman empowerment and a quintessence for all women in education, politics and socio-economic terrain in colonial Nigeria. As earlier said, she was a heroine in the history of nation building in Nigeria, and a first-class champion of women's right, who rose up to defend women against alleged unfair taxation and indiscriminate arrests in Nigeria.

The Abeokuta Women's Union, which was affiliated to the worldwide Women's International Democratic Federation, with its headquarters in France, challenged the philosophical basis of taxation in colonial Nigeria, where taxation was not connected with expanding political participation when compared with the roles played by the *Iyalode* during the pre-colonial period. The women, under Mrs. Kuti, felt politically marginalized under colonialism and, therefore, insisted that taxation without representation in the local political structure was no longer acceptable (Byfield, 2003: 250 - 277).

The AWU had its tentacles spread beyond South-Western Nigeria, and eventually metamorphosed into the Federation of Nigerian Women Societies (FNWS) in 1953. Since it was political in character and content, it called for political participation and direct representation of women in all legislative houses (Democracy in Nigeria: 2000, 110). The anti-colonial struggle saw women protesting strongly against traditional rulers, who were not conforming to the traditions of the land, and, against colonial authorities who were found to be insensitive to the plight of the people they ruled over. The women movement epitomized another opportunity for women to militantly question the character of governance in colonial Nigeria; the 'authoritarianism of the men on the spot' (Tamuno, 1972: 106), and the arbitrary nature of decision-making by the Sole Native Authority (SNA) were called to question by the Egba women.

The leadership provided by the *Beere* for the Union enabled the Egba women to leave their children, farms, stalls, shops, and petty affairs to congregate in the palace of *Aloke* Ladapo Ademola II, in order to protest against unfriendly practices by trade chiefs in the markets, as well

as proposed tax increase. The women of Abeokuta came to say 'enough is enough to taxation without representation' (Soyinka, 1981: 208), and other social vices that permeated the Egbaland in the colonial period. Significantly, it was at a time when African women were trying to recover from the hardship imposed by the inter-war depression and the 2nd World War, that the *Beere* took a stand and led women against colonial oppression and intimidation, thus proving to women across the world that the war against British colonial rule could also be fought and won without resort to violence and in compliance with the colonial law.

Significantly, one could aver that it was the Sole Native Authority structure that allowed the *Alake* the latitude to exercise power arbitrarily, and this, consequently, led to deterioration of the position of women in Abeokuta under the British colonial rule. On the contrary, the pre-colonial society allowed the participation of women in politics as they were represented by the *Iyalode*, whose duty it was to protect and promote women's interest on state councils (Awe, 1974: 10 - 30). Then, a system of check and balances, which hitherto prevailed, prevented the *Alake* from becoming extremely powerful and despotic. Under colonial rule, however, this check and balances did not function effectively. The British colonial system actually provided too much protection for the *Alake*, and this allowed him the prerogative to exercise power far beyond those allowed under traditional customs.

The *Alake*'s taxation policies and methods of collection during the war presented a huge burden on the women, who were the main producers and distributors of food items. *Alake* police characteristically set up road blocks at strategic points along the Ibadan, Lagos and Ijebu-ode roads, in order to examine women loads, seizing chickens, yam, Garri and rice from the women traders. And whenever there was any protest, the *Alake* curtly dismissed such with the statement that, nobody should eat until enough food was collected for the soldiers. The women often received no compensation for seized produce, or when they did, it was at a rate lower than that set by the administration. These angry women charged that the *Alake* pocketed the profit he made in selling the produce to the government at the price above the legally specified (Byfield, 2003: 250-277).

The Egba women tax movement had several distinctive features; first, it combined modern and traditional methods of protest, a situation and an occasion when women congregated in the compound of the traditional chief and the Sole Native Authority, *Alake* Ademola, singing abusive songs and sending petitions and letters to the press. It was one of the longest sustained protests by women (9 months), which relied on multi-class and rural-urban coalition. Though it was forged out of political circumstances, the women did not limit themselves to the local arena; they influenced the broader nationalist movement in Nigeria, and organized women in other parts of the country.

The women movement radically called to question the character and nature of colonial administration; they questioned the dictatorial nature of the British officers, stationed in the colony who strictly demanded political obedience, and the arbitrary nature of decision-making by the Sole Native Authority. In fact, the AWU, which had branches at Ijebu-Ode, Aba and a few other towns in Nigeria, and boasted of a membership of eighty thousand adult females, successfully fought against a constituted predatory and parasitic government, that had outlived its usefulness in terms of service to the host community it was meant to serve. The Union spearheaded a protest against the payment of tax in Egbaland, and through uncompromising militancy and the evocation of cultural threats, such as the baring of their bodies at the *Oba*'s palace, they succeeded in laying the foundations for women's emancipation in a movement that culminated in the exile of the then *Alake* of Egbaland, *Oba* Ladapo Ademola II to Osogbo (22nd Lisabi Day Celebration, 2008: 12).

Even after the *Alake* returned from exile, the Women Union still forwarded a petition to the Lieutenant Governor of Western Region, accusing *Oba* Ademola II of victimizing those who disagreed with his administration. It was even alleged that during the first meeting of Egba Central Council, which he attended on his return, the *Majeobaje* Society was banned, while the Egba Appeal Court, where one Mr. Adegunle Soetan was president, was abolished. These actions were taken to harass and intimidate both *Majeobaje* Society and Mr. Soetan. As also noted by one Mr. C. C. A. A. Titcombe, who was a member of the Central Council, the law against drumming was made to prevent the *Majeobaje*

from convening their meetings during a meeting that was attended by Oba Ademola II (*Southern Nigeria Defender*, 19th June, 1952).

The Egba Women Union: A Prognosis of its Accomplishments

As the case was in Aba in the early days of colonialism, there were also arbitrariness, favoritism and prejudice associated with the newly imposed taxes in Abeokuta, and the entire Yorubaland. For instance, if one had a clash with a councilor or one seduced a wife from a councilor's family, one was sure to be heavily taxed. On the other hand, if one was a friend to any of the councilors or traditional chiefs, one was sure to be lightly taxed (Martin, 1978: 16 - 28). Above all, these government agents paid no tax at all, whether flat rate or income tax.

With the Beere eminent presence in the socio-economic and political life of Egbaland, there was no more room for oppression for the Egba women; Mrs Kuti was their mouthpiece, as well as teacher. She succeeded in putting an end to a regime of oppression and misery. Her London education, instead of changing her to a Nigerian "London lady", made her adaptable and unassuming. The anti-tax and the anti-*Alake* agitation of Egba women in 1948 was a peaceful "sit in" that received far less attention than the Aba riots, probably because it was against traditional, rather than the colonial authority. Significantly, the Egba Women's Riots remained relatively "peaceful" because the police were not forcefully involved (Peil, 1976: 170). Mrs. Kuti stayed with women in front of the *Ake* palace for three days as they demonstrated against alleged unjust arrests and women taxation in Abeokuta (*University Herald*, Dec. 1950: 17).

Their (Egba Women Union) role in the Abeokuta tax riots is significant in this country because it marked the biggest first step towards the emancipation of women in Nigeria. It was one of the longest sustained protests by women (9 months and) and it relied on multi-class and rural/urban coalition. They succeeded in putting an end to a regime of oppression and misery.

The British and Sole Native Authorities Concessions: Victory for the Women Movement?

The achievement of the women's movement in the political sphere was astounding; taxes levied on women were abolished, while the representation of women in the Egba Central Council was guaranteed through the allocation of four seats to women. Beyond that, in 1949 when the new Governor, Sir John McPherson, called for regional and all Nigerian constitutional conference, to discuss the promulgation of a new constitution, Mrs Kuti was the only woman representative at the Western Regional Conference in Ibadan (*University Herald*, Dec. 1950: 17). Although, not all the issues for which women agitated were accomplished, they succeeded in making the British colonial government to begin to pay greater attention to women's affairs. It became evident that they too, like the Aba women, had the capacity to affect the level of stability within the polity. The women's movement thus resulted in a temporary abolition of the flat rate tax on women, a temporary abdication of the *Alake*, changes in the Sole Native Authority system and the entrance of women into the local council.

On the 21st of May 1954, an instruction was issued that all persons who received taxable income should pay tax, whatever their sex. It was also observed that discrimination against one particular class of women was unfair. The Native Authority was advised that if they actually intended to assess all women, including traders known or believed to be in receipt of a taxable income, and that if the income was unknown, a return could be called for, from the person to be assessed (NAI, Oyo Prof. I. 1927, Vol. VIII). Apparently, the situation that was prevalent in Abeokuta also obtained in other parts of Yorubaland, and the British Colonial Authority was determined to address the issue as a result of the 1948 experience.

A decade earlier, however, the reasons advanced by Native Authorities who were consulted on the taxation of women income was that they were "all petty traders" who were not "wealthy enough to be subjected to pay income tax" (NAI, Ondo Prof. I/1, No. 665). Up to 1960, the position was that throughout Western Nigeria, all women whose income fell below 50 pounds per annum should not pay the

proportional income rate, although in some places, they paid some special rates for such services as education and water (Orewa, 1962: 81).

Significantly, Mrs. Kuti's role in the Abeokuta Tax Riots marked the biggest first step towards the emancipation of women in Nigeria. The spectacle of a band of women who rose and spoke in one voice to confront perceived oppression was a most remarkable demonstration of gallantry by women. Under the leadership of the *Beere*, the women fearlessly confronted the *Alake*, who was well fitted into the colonial administrative structure of Indirect Rule. She led women on a protest against the payment of tax in Egbaland, and through uncompromising militancy, and the evocation of cultural threats such as the baring of their bodies at the *Oba's* palace, they succeeded in laying the foundations for women's emancipation in Nigeria.

Significantly, one could aver that women who were politically marginalized during the colonial period remembered the political roles played by the *Iyalode* in the pre-colonial period, and insisted that there should be no taxation without representation. Colonial state, however, defined political space to be exclusively male dominated and thus, women participation in the Nigerian government and politics in the colonial period was far below those of the men. In spite of that, women gave their support, whenever it was needed, by working with the men in order to achieve the common societal interests, such as the attainment of independence for Nigeria. But sadly, the immediate post-colonial Nigeria women did not build on the modicum of success achieved through the efforts of such great heroines as Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti, Gambo Sawaba, etc. who sacrificed time and money for the good of Nigeria. The post-colonial women involvement in politics between 1960 and 1999 was very discouraging and unprofitably low as a result of the insincerity of the men, the major stake-holder, who did not provide the needed politico-governmental empowerment by bringing women into the mainstream of political activities.

Although, admittedly, women like Sarah Jubril, Okonjo Iweala, Dora Akunyili, Obi Ezekwesili, etc. made their marks, within their limited power and influence, by breaking into the centre of governmental affairs, their efforts only warranted scant attention as they have not really made much resounding impact in their respective spheres. The

insincerity of the men, who had generally treated women with disdain in their empowerment programmes, within the politico-economic environments, has been responsible for the ill and less that have characterized the Nigerian woman's involvement in politico-governmental affairs since 1960. Women's involvement in politics, however, got better with the second coming of former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999. It is hoped that the post-colonial Nigerian women would again rise up to the occasion as they did in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, and play significant roles that can lead to the positive transformation of the entire Nigerian society and even beyond.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that women, being acutely aware of the threat which colonial policies posed to their social status, organized themselves through their political organization, utilizing traditional mechanism, to coordinate women's society to fight women's battle to preserve and protect their economic right. The Yoruba women also recognized the utility of modern western style techniques and skills in political and economic organization in carrying on their struggle against the colonial authorities. Significantly, in the 1940s, they increasingly linked their particular objectives with the wider objectives of total self-government, and were an important source of support for the nationalist movement which developed during the war.

The anti-colonial struggle saw women protesting strongly against traditional rulers, who were not conforming to the traditions of the land and against other colonial authorities, who were found to be insensitive to the plight of the people over whom they ruled. The women movement not only succeeded in laying the foundations for women's emancipation, their activities also culminated in the exile of the then *Alake* of Egbaland, *Oba Ladapo Ademola* [1] to Osoogbo. The *Beere's* struggle for justice and fairness was essentially directed against an *Alake* who was found to be corrupt and a colonial administration that was insensitive to the plight of the people.

Gambo Sawaba and Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti were clear cases of solo feminine powers, who mobilized others to fight corruption

and unwarranted desecration of traditions held in awe. Significantly, one could say that during British rule in Nigeria, the Nigerian women's search for relevance and actualization, at both the local and international domains, were largely successful. They were able to articulate and bring their issues to global attention, thus, attracting popular support and sympathy for their modest and justifiable demands. The women revolts showed clearly that the colonial administrators misaligned tax policies with implementation in an age of extreme economic hardship, occasioned by the world wars and the fall in the world market price of cocoa.

Significantly, the roles played by Mrs. Kuti in the struggle against colonial economic policies, which had no human faces, were simply amazing, as well as commendable. The Beere was a great woman activist of international repute, an icon in woman empowerment, and a quintessence for all women in education and politics in colonial Nigeria. She was, indeed, a heroine in the history of nation building, who largely influenced the broader nationalist movement in Nigeria and organized women in other parts of the country in order to rid the country of socio-economic and political imbalances that pervaded the entire political landscape. Sadly, she died on the 13th of April, 1978 at age 78, following injuries she sustained at 'kalakuta Republic' as a result of the invasion by the 'unknown Soldiers' (22nd Lisabi Day Celebration, March, 2008: 15).

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