

## Navigating Power and Resistance: Ugbabe Ahebi and the Igbo Women's Uprising Against Colonial Rule 1900-1929

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### Abstract

This paper examines the complex dynamics of gender, power, and resistance among Igbo women of Southeastern Nigeria as the colonial enterprise wore on. The paper describes and analyzes the indigenous matriarchal structures in vogue that was annihilated by the early colonial scavengers, and the resulting women's uprising of the Aba Women's War of 1929. However, the unique case of King Ugbabe Ahebi as the only female warrant chief under the colonial administration, articulates the paradoxical ways colonialism reshaped gender roles. Thus, the paper explores the dynamics of how colonialism was framed to marginalized Igbo women and destroyed existing social Igbo worldview. It is against this backdrop the paper submits that collectivism presents the Aba Women's War as a resistance movement to curb colonial excesses, while the special case of Ugbabe Ahebi's as a warrant chief invalidated the uprising. The paper depended on secondary source of data collection and utilized postcolonial feminist theories to quarry simplistic narratives of precolonial and colonial gender dynamics to analyze the complex, fluid nature of Igbo gender norms and the diverse experiences and marginalized voices of Igbo women to reflect the broader contemporary gender equity and self-determination struggles in postcolonial Nigeria.

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### **Background to the Study**

The study explores the Igbo women of Southeastern Nigeria matriarchal system, the impacts of colonialism and the imposition of patriarchy, and the events leading up to the Women's War of 1929. The study however highlights the social structure of the Igbo traditional matriarchal system, and the influence held by women. The dynamics of this indigenous core was that colonialism brought major changes that negatively impacted Igbo women. Women in indigenous Igbo society held positions of esteem influence rooted in matriarchy, especially, notions of motherhood and feminism enjoyed extensive rights across all spheres of human endeavor prior to colonial subjugation.

This is so especially as women actively participated in assemblies and maintained autonomy over internal affairs through separate women's councils. Igbo notions of achieved status enabled women to hold titles and leadership roles based on their capabilities and accomplishments. The spiritual underpinnings of society also emphasized feminine creativity and the idea of women as representatives of divine forces on earth. Economically as well, Igbo women dominated market trade, which conferred both income and solidarity. While this is realizable in social context, the British colonialism targeted these multifaceted bases of female status across Igbo world to institute patriarchal control. As the colonial era wore on British administrators formally replaced indigenous governance with appointed warrant chiefs, ousting women from political authority and participation.

Over time, the disruption of traditional structures, the imposition of taxes, and the influx of missionaries espousing Eurocentric gender norms combined to undermine Igbo women's influence. Their loss of standing in these realms profoundly threatened both ideological conceptions of "motherhood" and their substantive ability to enact roles as mothers as well as leaders in their own rights catalyzed a unified uprising known as the Women's War of 1929; where thousands mobilized in protest against colonial rule. This seminal event and its antecedents cannot be detached from the wider deterioration of women's dignity, autonomy, livelihoods, and worldviews arising from British colonial dictates.

Thus contextualized, the war represented a revolutionary cry against the forceful denial of matriarchal rights, which had long defined Igbo womanhood yet were continually degraded by externalization and imposition of patriarchy was the driving force that ignited demands for redress. This tends a craving for understanding the specific dynamics of colonialism on Igbo women and the interconnected loss of women's voices and broader socio-economic analyses of the period under survey. Additionally, to articulate a comprehensive analysis of finds and re-examination the paper is divided into four major parts for detailed analysis.

### **Understanding the Problem**

In oral societies especially sub-Saharan Africa, where oral traditions serves as an absolute source of history raises the question of the problem of historicity of the Aba Women War

of 1929. Describing the complex dynamics weaving the story line of a seminal historical discourse must be better understood in light of multidisciplinary dimension, is to interrogate the existing intellectual views on the subject. It is within this context that this current paper aligns itself through the lens of the postcolonial feminist theories to address the existing gap in the Aba Women's War in a wider spectrum to include those voices that were not heard in the historiographical contexts of this timeless history to the fore. This will provide not only a balance account but also dejects the single-story perspective of a whole seminal historical event. This reality, therefore, justifies the need to provide scholarly insight to further x-ray the dynamics of how colonialism reshapes indigenous social structures, especially the matriarchal role of an indigenous Igbo society.

### **Theoretical Postulation for Analysis**

Postcolonial feminist theories (liberal feminism, socialist feminism and radical feminism) provides the framework of this paper. The perspective is a form of feminism that developed as a response to feminism focusing wholly on the experiences of women around the globe. The framework originated in the 1980s as a critique of feminist theorists in western enclaves pointing out the universalizing tendencies of mainstreaming feminist ideas and argues that women living in non-western societies are misrepresented, evaluating how externalization have impacted the way particular cultures view themselves. This viewpoint of course promotes wider complex layers of the oppression that exist within any given society. The theorists further analyze why the framework fails to address issues of feminism in “third world women”, and that freedom does not mean the same to all the women of the world. The synthesis of this framework for analysis shows that it is misleading to assume those variables that are tenable elsewhere are working in other climes, especially in the Igbo society of Nigeria. This is as one scholar adduces “Third World women as a composite, singular construction that is arbitrary and limiting...as victims of masculine control and of traditional culture without incorporating information about historical context and cultural differences with the Third World...against which the situation in the developing world is evaluated”.<sup>1</sup>

They argued that the framework spends too much time for ideological “nit-picking” instead of formulating strategies to forms of acquiring land or to forms of social, discursive, political, and economic enslavement in social spaces.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the theories allows tendency for re-examination of intersections of gender, age, class among others in shaping Igbo women diverse experiences and those voices unheard of to be heard under colonial domination. These theories also provide nuanced understanding of how Igbo women navigated the turbulent waters of colonialism and appreciated the multi-vocal stance of Igbo women's world, and forms of resistance, rather than simply viewing them as passive victims of colonial oppression.

### **Reality of the dynamics of Women's Role in Precolonial Igbo Society**

A historiographical synthesis furnishes a groundswell background information on precolonial Igbo matriarchy, including women's arrays of influence and ritual status. While materials centered on the colonial era offer external analysis. Nigerian perspectives

regarding the warrant chief system, missionary efforts, taxation, and other disruptive forces that combined to shatter Igbo women's social structures are in the backwoods of history. The available literatures digested the enduring impacts of the 1929 Igbo Women's War with attendant levity. Driven by the hermeneutical approach guides the analysis to identify key themes regarding changing gender norms and women's-imposed hardships in all facets of life. Oral testimony and petitions offer Igbo women's sentiments, conveying the depth of the damages they faced under colonialism.

The synthesis of constructs provides the web of oppressions, shattering political, economic, and social pillars that had upheld Igbo womanhood. Resulting in the escalation from initial impositions degrading female dignity through explosions of violent defense seeking to restore matriarchal rights. The reality of patriarchy, the colonial situation, and the Women's War of 1929 in Southeastern Nigeria is a complex historical trajectory that has been explored by various scholars from different perspectives. This survey delves into the key themes and debates surrounding this historical event and its broader coverage.

Thus, patriarchy and gender dynamics in Igbo society has been enriched, which challenge Western conceptions of gender and explore the complexities of gender roles and power structures in Igbo and other African societies.<sup>3</sup> While scholar provides valuable insights into the socio-cultural context that influenced the Women's War, there is a need for more nuanced examinations of the intersections between gender, age, class, and other social identities within Igbo communities. The diversity of women's experiences and the complexities of power relations within patriarchal structures have not been fully unpacked.

The historiography on colonial policies and economic exploitation has shed light on the broader political and economic factors that contributed to the discontent among Igbo women. However, the dynamics of specific impact of colonialism were ignored, which could further elucidate the motivations behind the Women's War. Although the literature has extensively analyzed the organizational strategies, tactics, and motivations of the Igbo women who participated in the Women's War, there are also those voices who did not actively participate or who opposed the protest movement. Exploring these diverse viewpoints could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities and internal dynamics within Igbo communities during this period.

The application of postcolonial feminist framework has been valuable in situating the event within broader discussions of gender, race, and colonialism. However, there is a need for more interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate perspectives from fields such as ethnography, political ecology, and indigenous knowledge systems, which could offer new insights into the interconnections between women's resistance, land rights, and sustainable livelihoods.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the legacy and contemporary relevance of the Women's War have been acknowledged, there is a lack of comparative studies that examine similar instances of women's resistance and collective action in other parts of

colonial Africa or in other colonial contexts. Such comparative analyses could shed light on the shared experiences, strategies, and challenges faced by women in different regions and time periods, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of resistance.<sup>5</sup>

On the whole, the history is rich and diverse, for further exploration. Addressing this lens through comparative studies could deepen our understanding of this pivotal event and its broader implications for gender, resistance, and social change.<sup>6</sup> This is especially so as the Southeast is replete with varied resistance movements, provides nuanced examinations of the fluidity and socially constructed nature of gender identities and roles within African contexts,<sup>7</sup> offer valuable understanding into the intersections of gender, sexuality, and colonialism. The organizational strategies and tactics employed by the Igbo women during the Women's War, highlights the significance of collective action and resilience,<sup>8</sup> as a living asset of the contemporary Igbo world.

The viewpoint is that feminism has drawn connections to contemporary issues of gender equality, environmental justice, and grassroots activism in Nigeria and beyond. However, there remains understanding the diverse voices and experiences of those who did not participate in the Women's War can only be heard in a multidisciplinary studies that incorporate perspectives that interconnect varying women's views on sustainable livelihoods.<sup>9</sup> The groundswell of scholarships have clarified the relative autonomy of women popularly called "female husbands" as a demonstration of economic power enjoyed by Igbo women in precolonial era challenged Western notions of gender roles and power dynamics,<sup>10</sup> explains away deeper complexities of gender identities and the fluidity of gender roles within Igbo society. However, understanding these gender dynamics have evolved and adapted in the face of globalization and changing socio-economic realities,<sup>11</sup> underpinned the unique position of Igbo women, understanding the intersections of gender social identities such as age, class, and lineage.

The experiences and voices of women from different socio-economic backgrounds and age groups within the matriarchal is a quintessential task to be fully addressed in current realities. Furthermore, the diversity of perspectives and lived experiences within Igbo communities, including those that may challenge or deviate from the dominant narratives of patriarchy, remain underrepresented.<sup>12</sup> The imposition of patriarchy upon a matriarchal culture by examining the contemporary situation in Nigeria among women and their attempts to regain some of the power that was taken from them places broader context of women's history and shares the disappointment that women have not created a united front for change. This shows the obstacles imposed upon women, especially in Nigeria, still remains upon them despite their wishes to the contrary and their struggle towards changing the situation. By looking at Igbo matriarchy and examining what changes have occurred and the pressures to conform to the colonial situation following the imposition of patriarchy upon the culture, a better understanding of the new culture shock among the Igbo women in postcolonial Nigeria.<sup>13</sup>

When the British took over Southeastern Nigeria, they imposed a form of administration called Indirect Rule. Embedded in this rule was the construction of a political culture in which the notion of patriarchy and political power was given to carefully selected chiefs collectively known as Warrant Chiefs. These men acted as agents of British policy and were a part of the erosion of the matriarchal power of women. During the Women's War, they became key targets of the ridicule and violence by Igbo women.<sup>14</sup> Although there was a woman warrant chief called Ugbabe Ahebi in Southeastern Nigeria. She was a king before her appointment as warrant chief of Enugu Ezike in 1918. She advanced colonial policies. She collected tax and carried out census as instructed by the colonial authority. This was frowned at by the people, hence she was resented by her people.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the story of King Ugbabe Ahebi, a female warrant chief in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Nigeria, offers a compelling window into the complex and often contradictory dynamics of gender, power, and resistance under colonial rule.

As a woman who achieved the unprecedented position of "king" in her community, Ugbabe Ahebi navigated the intersections of traditional Igbo culture and the imposition of British colonial authority with remarkable skill and adaptability<sup>16</sup>, is a remarkable feat of colonial history. Yet Ahebi's rise to power also placed her in opposition to the broader Igbo women's movement, particularly the Aba Women's War of 1929, which protested the very colonial systems that had elevated her status. This tension highlights the multifaceted and sometimes paradoxical ways in which colonialism reshaped gender roles and power structures in Igbo society.<sup>17</sup> This unfolding historical enigma as well as contemporary postcolonial feminist analysis, justifies Ugbabe Ahebi's complex legacy as both a pioneer female leader and a collaborator with the colonial regime. Thus, drawing from above the Igbo women's uprisings against the warrant chief system and colonial taxation policies, situating these events within the broader disruption of traditional gender norms under colonial rule<sup>18</sup>, as well as providing a nuance for re-examination of the women's war of 1929.

### **The Warrant Chief System and the Rise of Ugbabe Ahebi**

The institution of warrant chief was the cornerstone of the British system of indirect rule in Nigeria. These locally appointed leaders were tasked with serving as intermediaries between the colonial government and the indigenous population, implementing colonial policies and maintaining order at the community level. Traditionally, these positions of authority had been the exclusive domain of men. However, the colonial administration saw an opportunity to further their control by disrupting traditional power structures and elevating select individuals, regardless of gender, who they believed would be compliant with their rule,<sup>19</sup> it was within this context that Ugbabe Ahebi of Enugu Ezike, emerged as a remarkable and unprecedented figure. Forced to flee her community as a young woman due to a dispute involving her father, Ahebi spent time living among the Igala people, where she gained valuable insights into different political and cultural systems. Upon her return to Enugu Ezike, Ugbabe Ahebi leveraged her newfound knowledge and connections to position herself as a valuable intermediary between her people and the colonial authorities. Her fluency in multiple languages, including Igbo,

Igala, and Pidgin English, made her an indispensable asset to the British administrators who often struggled with communication barriers.<sup>20</sup>

King Ugbabe Ahebi's political acumen and personal charisma further cemented her value to the colonial regime. She demonstrated a keen understanding of both traditional Igbo power structures and the new colonial systems, allowing her to navigate these complex dynamics with remarkable skill. The British, eager to extend their influence in the region, saw in her an opportunity to disrupt traditional hierarchies and installed her as a warrant chief,<sup>21</sup> her appointment as a warrant chief was highly unusual, as this position had previously been reserved exclusively for men. However, the colonial authorities recognized that elevating a woman to this role could serve their interests in several ways. First, it allowed them to further weaken the traditional power structures that posed a threat to their control. Second, it provided them with a female intermediary who could potentially appeal to and influence the local women, a demographic balance the colonial regime often struggled to engage.<sup>22</sup>

Ugbabe Ahebi's rise to power was not without controversy, as her ascension to the position of "king" or "Igwe" of Enugu Ezike was seen by many as a violation of traditional gender norms. To legitimize her rule, she underwent rituals and adopted male attributes, effectively "transforming" herself into a male figure in the eyes of her people. Her reign as king was marked by a series of innovations and reforms, as well as ongoing resistance from those who saw her as an illegitimate usurper of male authority. She introduced new masquerades, typically a male prerogative, and sought to reshape certain traditional values and practices. However, she maintained her position through a combination of colonial support, personal charisma, and strategic alliances.<sup>23</sup>

### **Ugbabe Ahebi's Role in the Aba Women War**

The Ogu Umunwanyi War or Aba Women's War of 1929, was a significant anti-colonial protest movement led by Igbo women in Southeastern Nigeria. The primary targets of the women's ire were the colonial taxation policies and the warrant chief system, which they saw as corrupt and oppressive. Ugbabe Ahebi's position on the Aba Women's War was complex and, in many ways, contradictory to the goals of the protesting women. As a warrant chief and a beneficiary of the colonial system, she found herself in direct confrontation to the women's action. There were several reasons are adduced for her opposition to the Aba Women's War. First and foremost, her own power and authority were directly tied to the colonial system that the women were protesting against. Supporting the protest would have undermined her own position and the privileges she had accumulated under colonial rule. She had also cultivated a relationship of trust with the British colonial administration, and opposing the women's war was a way for her to demonstrate her loyalty to the colonial government.

Additionally, her approach to female empowerment was more individualistic than the collective movement represented by the Aba Women's war. She had achieved her position by working within and manipulating the existing power structures, rather than

directly challenging them.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, as a warrant chief, Ugbabe Ahebi was responsible for maintaining law and order in her area. The protests and unrest associated with the Aba Women's War were seen as a threat to this order, and she cooperated with colonial authorities in their efforts to quell the uprising, providing information and helping to implement strategies to contain the protest movement. The women's movement, on the other hand, represented a collective effort to challenge the colonial system and reclaim their traditional power and autonomy. Unlike Ugbabe Ahebi, who had achieved individual success within the colonial framework, the Aba Women's War participants saw the need for a more fundamental transformation of the political and social structures,<sup>25</sup> imposed by the British colonial rulers.

The Aba Women's War was rooted in the women's resentment of the colonial administration's taxation policies and the warrant chief system, which they believed had undermined their economic and social standing. By protesting and disrupting the colonial order, the women sought to restore their traditional roles and reassert their authority in their communities. Of a truth, Ugbabe Ahebi's opposition to the Aba Women's War, therefore, highlighted the complex and often contradictory ways in which colonial rule reshaped gender dynamics in Igbo society. While her rise to power as a female leader was unprecedented, her collaboration with the colonial regime placed her at odds with the broader women's movement that sought to challenge the very system that had empowered her.

### **The Disruption of Igbo Gender Norms under Colonial Rule**

The colonial presence in Nigeria had profound and multifaceted impact on traditional Igbo gender norms and power structures. The imposition of new political, economic, and social systems by the British fundamentally disrupted the complementary, yet often fluid, roles and spheres of influence that had previously existed between men and women in Igbo society. Prior to colonization, Igbo women had maintained significant autonomy and authority within their own social, economic, and spiritual domains. They played crucial roles in the village marketplace, trade networks, and the veneration of deities like the earth goddess Ala. Women also held important positions in the traditional political system, with their voices and actions carrying significant weight in community decision-making processes.<sup>26</sup>

However, the introduction of the warrant chief system and its associated policies effectively marginalized Igbo women, relegating them to increasingly narrow and inferior roles. The appointment of male warrant chiefs, who were tasked with implementing colonial directives, undermined the traditional power and influence of women in the public sphere. Additionally, the colonial authorities' preference for dealing with male intermediaries and their disregard for the significant social, political, and economic roles of women in Igbo society further eroded women's standing. The colonial education system, which was heavily influenced by Christian missionary ideologies, also contributed to the devaluation of women's traditional knowledge and responsibilities, instead emphasizing a vision of womanhood centered on domesticity and subservience.<sup>27</sup>

The disruption of Igbo gender norms under colonial rule was not merely a top-down imposition, however. It also involved complex negotiations and adaptations by Igbo men and women as they grappled with the changing social, political, and economic realities. Some women, like Ugbabe Ahebi, was able to leverage the new colonial structures to carve out positions of power and influence. Others, particularly the participants in the Aba Women's War, resisted the erosion of their traditional authority and sought to reassert their roles and autonomy.

### **Postcolonial Feminist Voices and Trends of Globalization**

While the historical accounts of Igbo women's experiences under colonial rule offer valuable insights, it is important to critically examine these narratives through a contemporary postcolonial feminist style. This approach aims at deconstruction of the colonial framing, challenge the monolithic portrayals of "traditional" Igbo society, and re-center the diverse epistemologies and philosophies of Igbo women world. One key issue surrendering the existing corpus of historical accounts is the tendency to create overly simplistic dichotomies between "traditional" and "modern" gender norms, often implying a radical rupture brought about by colonialism. However, a postcolonial feminist perspective recognizes that precolonial Igbo societies exhibited complex as well as constantly evolving gender dynamics, shaped by factors such as migration, trade, and social changes,<sup>28</sup> in diverse ways.

Moreover, globalization encourages us to be cautious of reifying colonial "traditions" as static and ahistorical. The gender norms and power structures that existed prior to colonization were likely more fluid and contested than the historical narratives suggest. Women's authority, while real, was often contingent and negotiated in various contexts, rather than a straightforward dichotomy of male and female spheres. Additionally, a postcolonial feminist and trends of globalization analysis highlights the need to examine the intersections of gender, age, class, marital status, and other identities in shaping Igbo women's diverse experiences and relationships to colonial domination. Trends of globalization challenges the tendency to present Igbo women as a monolithic group and instead recognizes the complex and heterogeneous nature of the lived experiences by employing a postcolonial feminist framework, to galvanize and gain more nuanced understanding of how Igbo women navigated the turbulent waters of colonialism. This perspective allows us to appreciate the multivocality of Igbo women's lived experiences, struggles, and forms of resistance, rather than simply viewing them as passive victims of colonial oppression.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Igbo women's uprisings against colonial rule offer a compelling and complex window into the dynamics of gender, power, and resistance under colonialism. Ugbabe Ahebi's rise to the unprecedented position of female warrant chief and "king" highlights the ways in which the colonial administration sought to disrupt traditional power structures and elevate select individuals, regardless of gender, who they believed would be compliant with their rule. However, the contradictory role she played against Aba

Women's War, which protested the very systems that had empowered her, underscores the multifaceted and sometimes paradoxical ways in which colonialism reshaped gender norms and social relations in Igbo society. The women's uprisings, in turn, demonstrated the resilience and collective determination of Igbo women to challenge the colonial order and reassert their traditional roles and autonomy.

Thus, the re-examination of such historical events through a postcolonial feminist lens encourages us to move beyond simplistic narratives and provides complex, nuanced, and constantly evolving realities of gender dynamics in precolonial and colonial Igbo societies. By doing so, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the epistemologies and diverse forms of resistance exhibited by Igbo women as they navigated the turbulent waters of colonial rule, which were merely transformed into postcolonial challenges. This is that the Igbo women's movements against colonial domination serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggles for gender equity and self-determination in the face of oppressive systems, both historical and contemporary. As we continue to grapple with the legacies of colonialism, offers valuable insights amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized communities in postcolonial Nigeria, as has been demonstrated in this paper.

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