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### Women in Africa

In many parts of Africa, there is a large discrepancy in who controlled the resources, access to the economy, individual autonomy and central voice in the government between the men and the women. African men, for the most part, have the largest say in the activities of the country. When issues of concern arise, "men's issues" usually became the issues of national concern, and those issues pertinent to women go to the back of everyone's mind. Women are forced to accept the results of men's actions, and usually nothing gets accomplished that benefits them. Because women continually were overlooked, they began to come together and protest. If one examines the following women's protests and their outcomes: A.E. Afigbo's *The Warrant Chiefs*, Sylvia Leith-Ross' *African Women*, Jean Allman's "Rounding Up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante", and Irene Staunton's *Mothers of the Revolution*, several questions arise. What were women seeking and how did this differ from what men wanted? Did women attain their goals, and if not, why not? If women were not successful in getting their concerns at the forefront of national interest, at what, if anything, were they successful?

In several instances women became so angered by their lack of voice, that they were moved to act. In some of these cases, women were relatively successful in organizing and mobilizing. The story of the Aba Riots, which is discussed in both *The Warrant Chiefs* and *African Women*, proves this point well. In Nigeria, in the late 1920's, the Warrant Chiefs wanted to impose a system of annual taxation. What was so displeasing to the people about the tax was that it involved a census, and that the money went towards no specific project. The concept of counting free people was a foreign one to the Igbo. This notion went contrary to custom, and it was believed to bring about death (Afigbo, 229). The people of the Eastern Provinces felt that because they were being counted, the colonial government was enslaving them or that they were out to destroy them. Also objectionable to these people was the fact that the collected money went towards "'development'" (Afigbo, 228), something for which these communities had not asked.

The first year of tax collection went surprisingly well; except for a few isolated incidents. The first year was rather non-violent for two reasons: "It needed the shock of the first payment for people to realize what taxation meant in practical terms" and the second reason was the large police presence and prosecutions of opponents to the tax (Afigbo, 233). These two factors allowed for a relatively peaceful tax collection.

However, when year two arrived, so did the resistance. In September 1929, Captain John Cook was sent to Bende as the Acting District Officer, where he was disappointed with the male roll counts. He instructed his Warrant Chiefs to conduct new counts, and "added that the exercise had nothing to do with a tax on women" (Afigbo, 236). The mere mention of "women" and "tax" in the same statement sparked immediate disapproval. Rumors began to fly that the government had ordered a tax on women. Suddenly, the women reacted and agreed to resist by the end of October, 1929.

Captain Cook did not want to conduct the count himself, so he sent a mission school teacher to administer the count. When he arrived he asked a woman whom he met outside to go and count "'her people'" (Afigbo, 237). Within hours, women in mass numbers had gathered to discuss the tax, and went from there to the mission teacher's home to ask them why they were being taxed. The women equated being counted with taxation. "They also sent messengers 'armed' with fresh folded palm leaves to women of neighboring villages inviting them to come to Oloko" (Afigbo, 238). The women traveled on foot to ask other women for support, and the women they approached in their villages would go and rally their peers and bring the idea

to their attention. From there, the women would decide if they would join the movement and what action, if any, would be taken.

The mere fact that women were able to organize themselves to act in such a short time was a definite success. Thousands of women from the Eastern Provinces participated in different activities; some of which were organized, and some of which were not. The women disturbed court proceedings repeatedly, decapitated chiefs, looted court officials' homes, burned and vandalized court houses, even looted European factories and shops. Their actions definitely attracted the immediate attention of the colonial government.

Sylvia Leith-Ross describes how well the women were organized. In some of the interviews that she conducted with participants and viewers, people were amazed at the women's solidarity. This text relays how the men in these areas had no large part in the Aba Riots. It was said that the men basically "stood completely on one side, passive, if consenting parties, to the extraordinary behavior of their wives" (Leith-Ross, 30). This kind of activity was unthinkable to men and women in other regions, but Igbo women were determined not to be taxed. From one portion of the text, it almost sounds as if the men might have taken care of the children while the women were out protesting. Some women who were bystanders and were forced to participate in the riots, commented on how they saw the women marching towards them and "they had no children with them" (Leith-Ross, 32). This implies that the men were the caretakers of the children during this period, because all of the women were involved in the riots. There was nowhere else to leave the children. It is amazing to see the opposite roles that men and women took in the Aba Riots.

However, the women did have some problems staying focused. There was an incident when two of the women were hit by a medical vehicle, which sparked the other women to participate in aimless looting. The women became so enraged at the doctor who hit the two women, that they followed him into a factory and began looting the European factories and shops, which was not the original goal of the riots. Another fault of the women was their inability to gain widespread support across the region. The method of carrying the palm leaf by foot to neighboring regions inefficient. These women could not reach remote or distant compounds. Any attempts that were made to get support from other women were quickly thwarted by government officials, because they had the luxury of transportation. The lack of modern transportation was no fault of the women, but it caused a failure in their efforts.

The women's reasons for revolting were purely economic. Women were concerned first and foremost with their family's subsistence. The men had already been taxed the year before, so family resources were low. In addition the economy was in a deep depression, so money that was being made had far less value than before. Therefore, the women knew that they could not afford to be taxed, and still have enough money to support their families. Their concerns were local and practical. The men were concerned with their autonomy being threatened by the colonial officials. True the men knew that they would be in a worse economic situation if their wives were taxed too, but they were more concerned with being taken over by the government. The fear of enslavement was more threatening than poverty. Because they did have different aims, it is truly amazing that the women took the lead and made their voices heard.

As a result of the women's rioting significant changes came about in colonial Nigeria. The riot "caused a change of policy as regards the basis of local administration in the Eastern Provinces" (Afigbo, 247). The people also witnessed an intense investigation into their political system, which had never been done to that extent before. Essentially, "the policy and system of local rule through chiefs came to an end with the women's Riot" (Afigbo, 248).

There was another historic example of women's successful attempts to protest which is seen in "Rounding Up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante." In this instance, women were again very instrumental in changing a situation which was disagreeable to them. They also went about their protests in an organized fashion. The occurrences of rounding up young unmarried women took place in Ghana during the late 1920's and the early 1930's.

During this time there was a high rate of venereal disease spreading across the region, and the Asante Chiefs were under the impression that all unmarried girls over the age of fifteen were loose and needed to find a husband. If a girl or woman was caught without a husband, she was sent to jail. The Chiefs argued that they were trying to prevent prostitution by forcing young girls to be married as their justification. The Asante chiefs gave several reasons why they wanted to round up the young girls, but probably the largest reason for the crisis was the different definitions of marriage held by men and women. Men viewed marriage as "a fact, a state of being, recognized by the court as non-negotiable" (Allman, 201). Furthermore, the men believed that once money was exchanged from the groom to the bride's family, marriage began, and the man had exclusive sexual rights over his wife. Many women, on the other hand believed marriage to be something very different. One woman in particular, Afuah Buo, thought marriage was "'a process. . .tenuous and fluid in nature'" (Allman, 201). It was obvious from the women's responses to their arrests, that they also felt that marriage was something that could be easily moved in and out of; which was equated to prostitution by the chiefs.

Therefore, because "chiefs and elders were articulating a new definition of marriage that upheld the husband's exclusive sexual rights over his wife, while minimizing or discounting completely the husband's reciprocal obligations toward that wife", women stopped marrying (Allman, 201-201). It is not true that all of the women had the same reaction toward the changing definition of marriage. Some women purposefully chose not to marry because they feared getting a venereal disease, other women could support themselves better without a husband, and others were simply unlucky. The women outnumbered the men during this time, so some women had no choice but to be single.

Because the women stopped marrying, the colonial chiefs responded the way they did, arresting the women. However, the women had made arrangements to get around the government's plans. When women were arrested, they were all taken to jail, where they had to wait for a man to come to get them. The women had to mention the name of a man that they intended to marry and have him come and pay a fee, in order to be released. Most women had arranged to have male relatives or friends to come and profess their plans to marry her. After the fee was paid, the girl was free to go. Then she would go back to supporting herself by farming or other means.

Women were so disgusted by the fact that men were no longer fulfilling their basic marital duty, providing the bare necessities for their wives. Men were no longer doing so because of the order made by Effiduasihene, which "undercut one of the fundamental obligations of marriage, that a husband must maintain his wife" (Allman, 205). As a result women began "assert[ing] a great deal of autonomy and independence - much of it linked to the establishment of cocoa farms or to engagement in foodstuffs trade" (Allman, 204).

Women during this period were extremely successful at avoiding marriage, if they chose to do so, by supporting themselves and each other. They outsmarted the system in mass numbers and many went into business for themselves. Women who were unhappy with their present situation either divorced their husbands, went to court to challenge "matrilineal inheritance" (Allman, 210), or avoided marriage altogether. G. Clark's work on Kumasi market women shows that this was the "period during which women moved in dramatic numbers into trading, especially in previously male-dominated commodities" (Allman, 209). Although it is not definite, it is suggested that these women better survived the severe economic decline of the 1930's than many of their male peers.

In this account it is easy to see the difference in what men and women wanted. Men wanted total control of the women. The colonial chiefs felt that they were losing authority over the women, so they wanted to tighten their reigns. Fond memories were recounted by the chiefs of "'the good old days. . .[when] no girl or woman dared to resist when given away in marriage to a suitor by her parents and relatives as is the case now'" (Allman, 199-200). Women's uncontrollability had grown too large for the men not to act. The chiefs felt as

if their respect by women and the colonial government would diminish if they could not control their own women.

The Asante women fought back because they wanted exclusive authority of their productive and reproductive rights. Women were angry, rightfully so, at the fact that men no longer provided them "chop money." Also, when slavery was abolished, men began pawning their wives and exploiting them for use on their cocoa farms. The women became so enraged at their subjugation by men, that they reacted, successfully. Allman affirms that these women were successful when she says that "this particular form of coercion was unsuccessful in even minimally facilitating the exploitation of women's unpaid labour and one important reason for its failure was that the capture of unmarried women did not get the backing of the colonial government" (Allman, 212). In this particular instance, women were able to "shape actively the emerging colonial world" (Allman, 213). The only thing that the chiefs succeeded in doing was making the arrest of women a profit-making venture; because every time a woman was released from jail, she or the man had to pay the fine. Unfortunately, this was not their goal, so they were ultimately unsuccessful. Women's productive and reproductive rights remained under their control.