



ANATOMICAL RESEARCH OF YORÙBÁ WOMEN'S POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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ABSTRACT: *Not until recent years, given novel branches in Historical Studies—especially the popularisation of global history involving gender history, sexuality and similar fields, the contributions of women in History have often been sparsely discussed compared to the opposite gender. The reasons for this are often classified as multifaceted but mostly championed by patriarchal questions. In light of this gender study, this paper sets to study the Yorùbás, a Southwestern region of Nigeria, examine the systematic operation of Yorùbáland during colonialism, and create an anatomical work on the roles of Yorùbá women in the political sphere of the colonial period championing the role of activism. In essence, this paper's purpose is to identify how Yorùbá women played a major role in the political sphere of the colonial period.*

KEYWORDS: Gender studies, Women, Yorùbá, Sexuality.



INTRODUCTION

The colonial era in Nigeria, particularly in Yorùbáland, marked a significant transition and transformation across the various levels of autochthonous interactions. While much of the historical narrative has focused on the political and economic changes brought about by British colonial rule, it is important to examine a third wheel among the trio levels; thence, this is the impact on social structures, particularly the roles and identification of women in the colonial years—how it intercept this period, challenges they faced, and their feats.

While it has generally been erroneously believed that European interference with African history brought a level of civilisation which to an extent captures the recognition of the female gender, it is important to note that before the advent of colonial rule, Yorùbá women held significant roles in their communities, both in the public and private spheres such as Erelu (the female member of the governing Osugbo society in Ijebu); Iyalode (oftentimes but varies depending on town's culture — the head of the market women); and female regent in places like Ekiti and Ondo. Denzel (1994) noted that Nigerian women, as revealed through oral records, have always actively participated in the social, economic, and political development of their societies. Yorùbá women played significant roles within their families and communities. They occupied a pivotal place in the local and state economy organizing household industries, operating the local market system, and establishing long-distance trade networks. This means that not only did female recognition exist before colonialism, but the female gender also had their own responsibilities saddled with their day-to-day lives. In the political arena, traditions recall that women founded kingdoms like in the case of Ondo (Kolawole, 2006), and communities, occasionally wielded political authority as rulers, acted as regents, sat on the king's councils, held political offices, intrigued in palace politics, helped to make and unmake kings, served as go-betweens in diplomatic relations, and safeguarded their towns when their menfolk waged war elsewhere. They conducted key rituals to maintain the spiritual well-being of kings and kingdoms as well as of their own families and communities (Denzel, 1994).

Understanding the historical context and the nuances of Yorùbá women's experiences during the colonial period requires an exploration of both their traditional roles and the alterations brought about by colonial policies and practices as it will give a glimpse into the changes that occurred across this period. It is pertinent to note that, before colonialism, as stated earlier, Yorùbá women played pivotal roles in various aspects of society, including economic activities, political governance, and religious practices. They were integral to the social fabric, contributing to the prosperity and stability of their communities. This corroborates Johnson's (1982) view stating that apart from women's role in anticolonial activities (which will later be treated in the latter part of this essay), women possessed a long and rich history of collective organisation through which they articulated and protected their interests from precolonial times onward. In Yorùbáland, women's role is an area with a strong urban tradition as well as institutions which prescribed women's participation in government and economics, the most important of which was the office of Ìyálóde. It would be no exaggeration to say that most able-bodied women were either farmers or traders, often both. It was expected that women would trade in the market. While men were responsible for farming in the outlying areas, women were engaged in trading the agricultural produce grown by men as well as craft goods and services. Even where women were farmers, it was usually they, not their husbands, who retailed the farm produce. Their trading activities made them important in the distributive sector and imbued in



them a group consciousness, a solidarity based on mutual interests and needs. These interests were recognized in precolonial societies. As a result, women held important rights in the public domain: the right to discuss public policies, the right to representation in decision-making bodies, and the right to property and inheritance. While this did not mean that women were the social and political equals of men—as the Yorubaland is greatly patriarchal, it did mean that they wielded influence in policy-making and possessed institutional mechanisms for making that influence felt.

Colonialism altered women's position in their societies (Etienne & Leacock, 1980). This is to mean that the advent of British colonial rule introduced new dynamics that disrupted these traditional roles. The British implemented a system of indirect rule that primarily engaged with male chiefs and elders, thereby sidelining the political and social contributions of women. Colonial economic policies favoured cash crop production and large-scale agriculture, which marginalised women's traditional economic activities in local markets and subsistence farming. Additionally, the spread of Christianity and Western education through missionary activities introduced new social norms that often conflicted with Yorùbá cultural practices, further challenging the status and roles of women. Despite these challenges, Yorùbá women exhibited remarkable resilience and adaptability. They engaged in various forms of resistance against colonial policies, organized grassroots movements, and found ways to navigate the new economic and social landscapes. The purpose of this paper is to therefore identify the roles of the Yorùbá women's contribution and roles during colonialism: accounting for their resistance and interest groups.

Women in the Colonial Yorubaland

The colonial period in Yorubaland, like much of Nigeria, was marked by significant upheaval and transformation. For Yorùbá women, this era brought about a series of challenges and changes that altered their traditional roles and statuses.

It is important to note that, during the late nineteenth century, women had to adjust to unsettled political and social conditions as their roles were overturned by the presence of the colonial government. It should be noted that until the 1820s, Oyo retained a dominant power in the West African savannah. The disintegration of the empire and the rise of a new force — colonialism — however led to various forms of dispersals which ultimately affected the women's lives (McIntosh, 2009). Those forces included international capitalism, the arrival of Christianity and Western education, and the establishment of British political rule. Before this period when things fell apart and the centre no longer held, Yoruba women lived within a practical setting shaped by political, demographic, economic, and social factors and within a cosmological and spiritual setting shaped by strongly held religious and cultural beliefs. However, the advent of British colonialism which by impact, led to the introduction of Western education and Western skills in Yorùbá society created a new category of women. Through the establishment of British institutions in Nigeria, Yorùbá women were able to enter “unfamiliar occupations” as teachers, seamstresses, and nurses which became more prevalent in the 1950s. Yorùbá women became defined by these new careers made possible by the colonial system. Which as earlier noted jettisoned the existing systems in the land.

While the colonial government failed to take into account existing communal tenure and system of subsistence production that existed in African societies (Richards, 1983), in colonial



Yorubaland, men became the focus of agricultural development projects such as extension programmes, provision of free seedlings, and cash crop improvements (Shadare, 2020).

The British colonisation of Nigeria began in earnest in the late nineteenth century with the establishment of the Royal Niger Company and the subsequent declaration of protectorates over different economic regions. By 1914, the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates created the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, formalising British control over the territory which had begun in 1900. The primary aim of the colonial administration—however—was to exploit Nigeria's vast resources for the benefit of the British Empire, which necessitated significant changes to existing social and economic structures. Colonial rule was characterised by the implementation of indirect rule, particularly in Yorubaland and other parts of southern Nigeria. The reliance of this system on the existing traditional authorities led to the marginalisation of women's traditional roles and influence as colonial authorities predominantly engaged with male chiefs and elders. Therefore, colonial officials often dismissed female leaders, undermining the matriarchal structures that had existed in many Yorùbá communities. Hence, this marginalization not only diminished women's political power but also altered the dynamics of local governance.

The British centralised administrative structures and introduced bureaucratic governance, which further sidelined women. The new colonial administration was less flexible and less inclusive of women's roles, as it prioritised efficiency and control over traditional participatory practices. This shift led to the erosion of women's formal political influence and their exclusion from key decision-making processes (McIntosh, 2009). Colonial economic policies were designed to extract resources and integrate Nigeria into the global capitalist economy. The British introduced and promoted the cultivation of cash crops such as cocoa, palm oil, and rubber. These crops were primarily grown for export, and the commercialisation of agriculture favoured men, who were often more involved in the production and trade of these crops. Women, who had traditionally engaged in subsistence farming and local trade, found their economic activities marginalised.

It should be noted therefore that, while women lost a part of their former political authority, they still wielded influence and commanded respect in the development of modern politics. They exploited new opportunities in wholesale and long-distance trade. In the independent churches, they re-established much of the status they had previously enjoyed in traditional religion. Changing marriage and divorce laws from 1863 - 1960, as noted by Olarinde (1989), allowed them greater freedom of choice and new strategies for careers. Although cultural attitudes and government policy restricted access to education, educated girls acquired new skills and expertise in leadership in the new colonial society (Denzel, 1994). As this new society unfolded, two factors gave in for women to emerge a new form of quasi-political and social leadership roles and these factors include religion and sociology.

By impact, Christian and Muslim organisations recognised the importance of women's titles and also used them to promote female solidarity in their congregations. Many Christian denominations employed traditional titles such as Iyalode, Iya Ijo, and Iya Egbe to designate their women leaders. Special and increasingly elaborate chieftaincy ceremonies invested women in their positions as leaders in the church. In addition, the new progressive Muslim brotherhoods - the Ansarudeen and the Ahmadiyya encouraged influential women to assume leadership roles and set up associations among their female members. For example, in Ibadan,



the Isabatudeen Society, founded by wealthy pious women led by the textile merchant, Alhaja Hunmoani Alaga, established a Muslim secondary school for girls in 1964 (Denzel, 1994).

Apart from the religious form, market associations also accommodated Western ideas of organization. The incorporation of Western organisational principles led to the emergence of a new form of leadership among Yorùbá women. Women who were literate and familiar with colonial administrative practices gained prominence within market associations. These women acted as intermediaries between traditional traders and colonial officials, bridging the gap between local practices and the demands of the colonial economy. This new leadership structure allowed women to assert their agency and adapt to the changing socio-political context.

The syncretism of traditional and Western organisational practices in market associations also contributed to the vast socio-political empowerment of Yorùbá women. These associations primarily provided a new overview for women to learn new forms of advocacy and participate more actively in public colonial life. The experience gained within these associations equipped women to engage in broader political and social movements, such as the Abeokuta Women's Union, Lagos Market Women Association, and others which played a significant role in challenging colonial policies and advocating for women's rights. Thus, by the blending of traditional practices with new organizational methods, these novel associations not only preserved their economic significance but also enhanced the social and political agency of women. This transformation can therefore be seen in a new light, as it underscores the resilience and adaptability of Yorùbá women in the face of colonial challenges, highlighting their ability to integrate and innovate within changing contexts to maintain their influence and authority in the new political view of Nigeria and by extension — Yorubaland (Shadare, 2020; McIntosh, 2009). While there is no doubt that colonialism altered the position of women in society, Johnson (1982) noted that it particularly affected their economic roles and ability to participate in local government. Southwestern Nigerian women quickly perceived the nature of the threat to their interests and regrouped their forces in order to preserve their interests. Usually, this centered on organising market women along new lines, utilising both traditional skills and concepts of leadership as well as Western protest actions as seen in Lagos Market Women's Association led by Madam Alimotu Pelewura, Nigeria Women's Party led by Lady Oyinkan Abayomi, and the Abeokuta Women's Union. In subsequent sections, this essay will explore various roles the market women leadership and anticolonial formations took.

Lagos Market Women's Association

The tradition among Yoruba women of urbanisation, autonomy, and economic participation in the market sphere is the historical context in which the Lagos Market Women's Association emerged. It should be noted that the first mass-based women's interest group to recognise the power of collective action in protecting and promoting women's rights in the Western Region of Nigeria during the colonial era was the Lagos Market Women's Association (LMWA). While the exact date of its foundation is not known, by the mid-1920s it was an active movement. The LMWA, conservatively estimated at 8,000 members, was active by the mid-1920s, although there are earlier records of market women in Lagos taking collective action to protest specific policies, such as a 1908 protest over water rate increases. From its initial formation, the LMWA maintained a clear position as an organised pressure group designed to ensure market women's economic interests, not a political party. While Baker (1974) claimed that the formation of this group is tied to Herbert Macaulay who founded the



Nigerian National Democratic Party in 1923, it is important to note that since 1908 market women's groups sometimes combined on an ad hoc basis for specific purposes such as opposing the imposition of water rate (Johnson, 1978).

It cannot be cleared out, however, that LMWA did work closely with nationalist leader Herbert Macaulay of the Nigerian National Democratic Party, the actual impetus for establishing an effective, well-disciplined market women's movement came from the women themselves. (Johnson, 1978). The LMWA was an extension of a long tradition of market self-governance, through specific commodity sellers' associations, and market organisation and maintenance committees led by an Alaga, who was selected by the market women on the basis of personality and leadership skill. Typically, markets would present a united front to other markets and the public, regardless of internal disputes with the Alaga authority well-respected (Kamm, 2016). Madam Alimotu Pelewura, leader of the Lagos Women's Market Association, gained the support of two educated elite women's organizations, the Lagos Women's League (founded 1901) and the Women's Party (founded 1944), in a campaign protesting the imposition of price control measures during the Second World War (Denzel, 1994).

The first test of LMWA's abilities to oppose effectively government measures inimical to women's interests came in 1932 when the rumour spread throughout Lagos that the colonial government intended to levy a tax on Lagosian women. With Pelewura's continual rise to prominence in local politics, she was appointed as a member of the *ilu* committee in 1932 where she served as the spokeswoman for eighty-four market women's representatives for Sixteen markets (Tamuno, 1947) and it was during this period that she also blocked the government's attempt to move Ereko market to a new location (Johnson, 1981). It is important to note however that the global effects of the inter-war years also affected the Yoruba women most importantly via the War-time regulations imposed on Nigeria in 1939 as it proved detrimental to the economic situation of the market women which is seen through the proposition of the Income Tax Ordinances which stipulated a women tax of 50 pounds or more. In light of this change, the LMWA organised mass protests immediately to challenge the income tax law. On December 16, 1940, over a hundred women assembled outside the office of the colonial commissioner in Lagos. When the commissioner appeared, Rabiatsu Alaso Oke, Iyalode of Lagos, stepped forward to protest that several women had received "return of income" forms, reminding him of the government's earlier promise not to tax women. According to the *Daily Times*, on December 18, 1940, on the following day, the women closed the markets and again marched to the office of the commissioner, this time led by Pelewura. The previous day's statements were reiterated on both sides, with the commissioner again emphasizing that only rich women had to pay the tax. Pelewura retorted that past experience had taught that once the principle of female taxation was conceded, all women would eventually be included under the terms of the law. Women therefore would not pay the tax and were prepared to suffer any punishment the government meted out. The Lagos Market Women movement protest did not assume a violent colouration. Their agitation only took the form of protest marches through some streets of Lagos on their way to the Governor's office. The women were careful and methodical in their approach and handling of the taxation issues, and they had many reasons to tread carefully. Realising the unyielding position of the women, the government revised the law. Within a few days, Bourdillon issued a statement that the level of annual taxable income for women was being raised from £50 to £200, an amount that only very few women could make within a year, which means those within the income rate of £50 up to £199 are not allowed to pay any form of income tax (Johnson, 1982). While historians have



regarded this as a limited victory, it should still be noted that the staunch resolution of women in a world of patriarchy led to this resolution.

It is therefore not an assumption to conclude that one of the primary catalysts for the LMWA's protests was the colonial administration's taxation policies. The introduction of direct taxes, particularly targeting market women, sparked widespread discontent. Market women were subjected to multiple forms of taxation, including income tax, market fees, and levies on goods. These taxes were perceived as unjust and discriminatory, disproportionately affecting women who were already economically vulnerable.

The Nigerian Women's Party (NWP)

The fourth aim of the NWP is:

To work for the amelioration of the condition of the women of Nigeria not merely by sympathy for their aspirations but by recognition of their equal status with men.

(From the private papers of Mrs. T. Dedeke, Johnson 1982)

The Nigerian Women's Party (NWP) was founded in 1944 by Oyinkan Abayomi, a prominent social activist and leader in Nigeria. The formation of the NWP was a significant milestone in the political mobilization of Nigerian women during the colonial period. The party emerged as part of a broader movement aimed at addressing the socio-political and economic challenges faced by women, and it sought to ensure that women's voices were heard in the political sphere.

At its inception, the NWP aimed to secure equal rights and opportunities for women in all aspects of life, including education, employment, and political participation. The party emphasised the importance of women's empowerment and sought to dismantle the structural barriers that limited women's advancement. Similarly, NWP focused on increasing women's participation in politics. This included advocating for women's suffrage, encouraging women to run for political office, and ensuring that women's interests were represented in legislative processes.

It should be noted that membership in the party was limited to women of African descent, but patrons could be adults of any nationality at home or abroad who supported the party's objectives. Although the NWP's intention was to establish branches throughout Nigeria in order "to make the organization as representative as possible", its efforts in this direction were not successful and its activities were essentially confined to Lagos. Part of the NWP's lack of success was its inability to compete with the more militant Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) organized by Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti (formerly Ransome-Kuti). Though the active membership was small when compared, for instance, to an LMWA active membership of 8,000, NWP influence extended well beyond the bounds of the group of identifiable members. Depending on the issue, the NWP could mobilize huge demonstrations of women, often numbering in the thousands (Johnson, 1982). This, by impact, states the common ground in which women's organisations organised themselves—forming alliances—towards reaching the same goal which was principally gender equality.

The Nigerian Women's Party (NWP) championed several key issues to promote women's rights and social justice during the colonial period. They focused on girls' education, advocating for



more schools and broader curricula to offer girls opportunities beyond teaching, which was the predominant profession for Western-educated women. The NWP also called for government scholarships for Muslim girls, more vocational schools, and adult education for illiterate women. In 1945, they initiated free literacy classes, although detailed records of these classes' impact are sparse.

Employment of women in the civil service was another significant issue for the NWP. Building on earlier efforts by the Lagos Women's League, the party fought for equal pay and opportunities for women in government roles. Despite some successes, such as the hiring of women in civil service positions, disparities persisted, including a significant wage gap between male and female teachers and a preference for European women in nursing and secretarial roles. The NWP's activism highlighted these injustices and pushed for more equitable employment practices.

The NWP also addressed issues related to women's trading rights. They protested the Children and Young Persons Ordinance of 1946, which restricted young girls' participation in street trading, a traditional practice essential for economic education. The NWP, alongside other women's groups, organised protests and petitions, leading to the suspension of arrests under this ordinance. Additionally, the NWP worked to protect market women's rights against unfair colonial practices, such as the Pullen Price Control Scheme and conditional sales imposed by European wholesalers. Their efforts underscored the importance of women's economic contributions and sought to preserve traditional market practices.

In a nutshell, the Nigerian Women's Party (NWP) was instrumental in expanding women's rights and tackling socioeconomic difficulties during Nigeria's colonial period. The NWP's focus on girls' education, equitable employment in the civil service, the right of female minors to trade, and the protection of market women's rights highlighted women's systemic inequalities. Their activism highlighted the effectiveness of organised, collective action in opposing colonial policies and fighting for a more just and equitable society (Awosusi, 2023).

Abeokuta Women's Union

Òbò Àtùpà ló d'íjà s'ilẹ̀ - Atupa's vagina started the strife

Aláké olókó ẹṣẹ - Aláké with penis of a poison tat

(See Wole Soyinka's Memoir, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, 1983)

The Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) played a significant role in advocating for women's rights and addressing their grievances during the colonial period in Nigeria. The AWU emerged in 1947, amidst economic crises and societal changes following World War II, reflecting the combined efforts of market women and the Christian-educated women of the Abeokuta Ladies Club (ALC). Initially, the AWU focused on uniting women across various social and economic strata in Egbaland. It aimed to protect and promote women's social, economic, cultural, and political rights, and to encourage mass education among women. Unlike the selective and elite ALC, the AWU was inclusive, open to all women in Egbaland, and emphasised equality and cooperation among its members (Byfield, 2003).

One of the most important activities conducted by the AWU was the 1947 tax revolt against the colonial government's taxing practices, which disproportionately affected the economic life



of the female traders. This taxation, which apart from the regular taxes, was enforced on the market women under the name of "Special Tax" which went to the Market Supervisor or "Pàràkòyí" (in native term) became a reason of vexation for the women thence escalated to the protest stage. However, it is important to note that prior to this period, Aláké Ademola II, King of Egbaland, had enforced differential tax laws which were first introduced in 1918, conniving with the British colonial government, the women were severely punished, in some instances, they were stripped naked or arrested if they could not pay their taxes. As a result of this suffering, a group of women, estimated around 10,000 led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, marched to the palace of the King, in November 1947, to protest against the tax law. The same protest also was held in Aba, the Eastern part of Nigeria in 1922. The protest, the Aba Women Riot, was rooted in the British colonial appointment of Warrant Chiefs as well as Women Taxation. The success of the protest, however, could have been said to have influenced the Ègbá Women Protest in 1947. After the adoption of a new name, Abeokuta Women's Union in 1946, the organisation demonstrated another protest against the unlawfulness of the colonial legal system, denouncement of women arrests, and the corruption of the land. In addition, the women called for the abdication of the King, Aláké Ademola II (Awosusi, 2023)

Through its advocacy, the AWU not only challenged unfair economic policies but also addressed broader issues such as the marginalization of women in political decision-making processes. The union's constitution reflected a commitment to democratic principles and the empowerment of women across different classes, making it a pioneering organization in the fight for women's rights during the colonial era.

The legacy of the AWU is profound, as it provided a blueprint for subsequent generations of women's rights activists in Nigeria even after the colonial period. Their achievements underscore the importance of collective action and the need for persistent advocacy to achieve gender equality and social justice. The AWU's contributions during the colonial period remain a pivotal chapter in the history of Nigerian women's resistance and empowerment, offering enduring lessons on the power of solidarity and the impact of organized struggle against systemic oppression.

CONCLUSION

The colonial period in Yorùbáland was marked by significant challenges and transformations, particularly for women who were able to navigate and reshape their roles within this changing landscape. Yorùbá women demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, leveraging both traditional structures and newly introduced colonial frameworks to assert their socio-political agency. Their active participation in market associations, religious groups, and various socio-political movements not only preserved their economic significance but also enhanced their leadership roles within the community.

The integration of traditional practices with Western organizational methods facilitated the emergence of new forms of advocacy and public engagement among Yorùbá women. This blending of old and new allowed them to effectively challenge colonial policies and advocate for their rights, as seen in the notable examples of the Lagos Market Women's Association and the Abeokuta Women's Union. These organizations played crucial roles in resisting economic



policies detrimental to women and in mobilizing collective action to protect and promote women's interests.

In essence, the colonial era underscored the ability of Yorùbá women to maintain and even expand their influence despite the restrictive colonial policies. Their contributions during this period highlight the importance of recognizing the dynamic and integral role of women in the socio-political development of Yorùbáland. As such, the study of Yorùbá women's political contributions during the colonial period not only enriches our understanding of Nigerian history but also provides valuable insights into the broader discourse of gender and power in colonial and post-colonial contexts.

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